

bands. During the next seven weeks, as sales shifted to off-premise, consumers showed a willingness to spend a little more. Chardonnay priced below \$11 ceded share to Chardonnay in the \$11-\$19.99 price bands, which now represent nearly 34% of the variety's sales. Meanwhile, the \$25-plus segment's share of sales hasn't changed.

DtC shipments of Chardonnay increased 9% in the 12 months ended April, according to Wines Vines Analytics/Sovos ShipCompliant, exceeding \$257 million. Wines less than \$20 a bottle were the most significant contributors to the growth.

This being said, a market exists if wineries know how to reach it. Work, who brought a background in the tech sector to his winemaking venture, stepped back when COVID-19 hit and reevaluated his marketing plans. High-end wine collectors were not likely among the one-quarter of U.S. workers who have sought unemployment benefits over the past two months. But the decline in on-premise demand required action, and efforts on social media, with virtual tastings here and in Denmark and discounts to restaurants preparing to reopen have worked.

"Suddenly our online sales went up between six and 10 times," he said of the impact of virtual tastings. "Now that we know that on-premise is going to be coming back slow, we're doing some special deals just to start getting our wines into restaurants as they open up. And I think that's been the ticket, and we're doing fine right now."

— *Peter Mitham*

## The Evolving Styles of Chardonnay

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A Chardonnay vineyard in the Los Carneros AVA. California's top winegrape by tonnage is often described as offering a blank canvas for a winemaker. (Photo: Scott Summers)

California Chardonnay evolved through winemaking influence and consumer preferences.

The use of malolactic fermentation has been key in changing styles.

In recent years, crisper Chardonnays from cooler, coastal vineyards have earned acclaim.

A plethora of stylistic expression has helped Chardonnay maintain its prominence.

Often described as being the most “plastic” of grape varieties and one that relies on winemaking for its complexity, Chardonnay has been called “tofu” and a “blank slate” by winemakers who know it well.

California Chardonnay has had its ups and down over the last 60 years, but it has clearly been a cash cow for many producers whose styles have evolved to keep pace with the introduction of new clonal material, winemaking technology or farming practices, while remaining a hallmark for others whose style has not changed significantly for decades.

*Purple Pages* A timeline of the evolution of Chardonnay in California, excerpted from wine writer Elaine Chukan Brown’s four-part series written for the in 2018, provides context for exploring the handful of styles that are being sold today. While California Chardonnay has indeed contributed mightily to the world of wine, in its present-day iteration the finest examples are closer in style to their Burgundian predecessors than ever before.

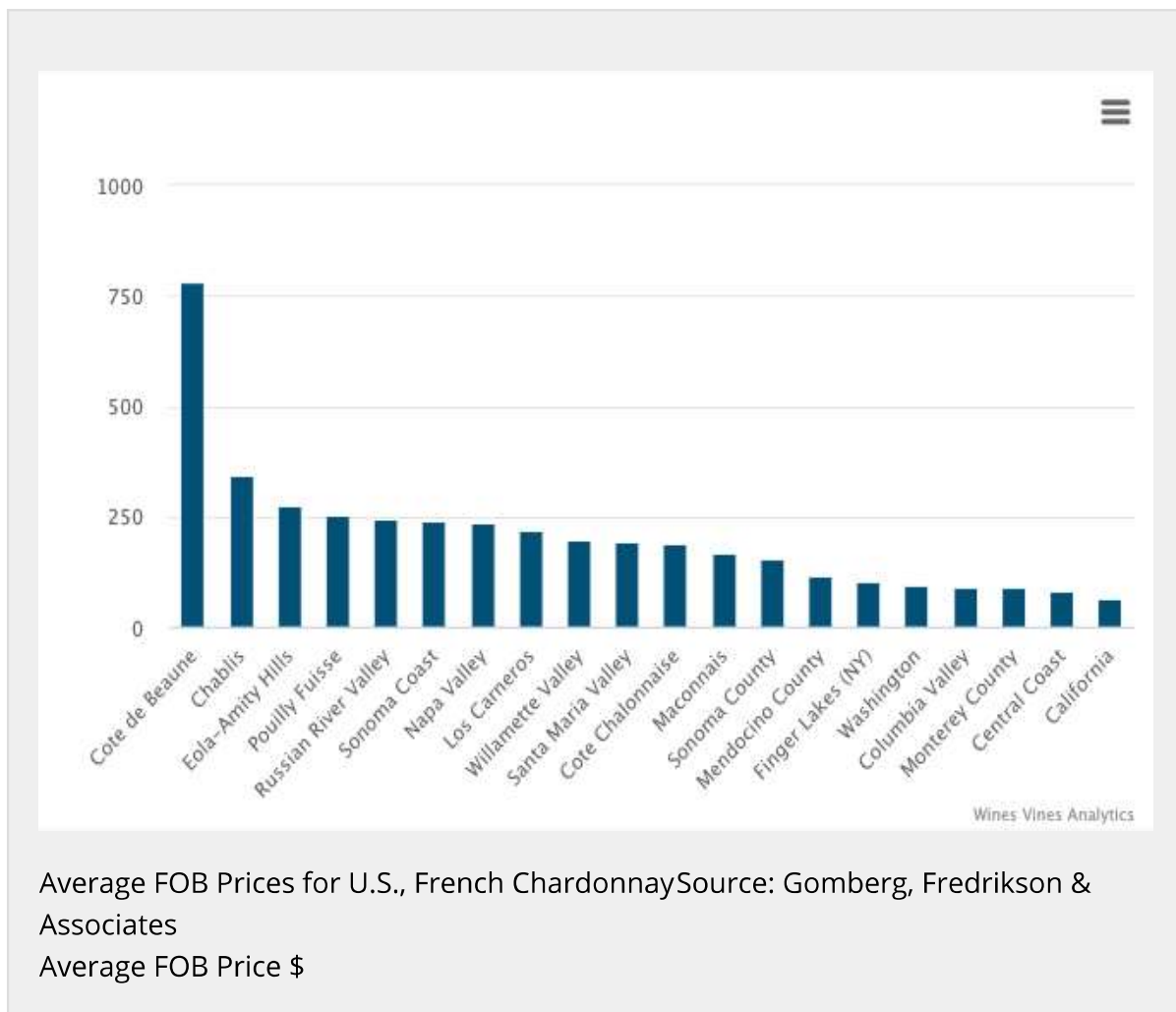
According to Brown, Chardonnay production didn’t reach a tipping point in California until the late 1960s and early 1970s, when grape prices surpassed the cost of farming and small parcels came to market. During the 1980s, plantings were expanded statewide in response to consumer demand, and by 2000 it was the state’s most-planted variety. Plantings peaked in 2014 and are generally on the decline; Chardonnay has now been edged out for the top spot by a mere 100 acres by Cabernet Sauvignon. By tonnage, however, Chardonnay remains California’s top wine grape.

Unlike many grape varieties, Chardonnay has never suffered from being a fad. Although its reputation has taken a few hits, its commercial success has never faltered; the variety remains the nation’s (and the world’s) top-selling white wine. Its meteoric rise and overwhelming consumer appeal are attributed largely to Jess Jackson’s Kendall-Jackson Vintner’s Reserve Chardonnay, which was made with Lake County fruit and introduced in 1982.

The evolution of Chardonnay in California traces decades-long trends that are very much alive and well. Producers like Wente, Paul Masson, Martin Ray, Stony Hill and Hanzell, among others, were seminal in establishing and propagating the original clonal material.

Success during those early experimental years was isolated, and it wasn't until the 1970s that a winemaking style began to emerge.

Marked by the absence of malolactic (ML) fermentation and driven by phenolics, California Chardonnay in the 1970s relied on skin contact, stainless steel fermentation, cultured yeast and barrel aging. The result was a powerful style that delivered immediate gratification and moderate alcohol. This style of no or low amounts of ML still exists, and there many iconic producers including Grgich Hills Estate, Stony Hill, Chateau Montelena, Far Niente and Trefethen who prefer to prevent ML. But changes brought about by the Burgundian influence of the 1980s were afoot.



End of interactive chart.

The famed Chardonnays of Burgundy's Cote de Beaune dominate by price, but the top appellations in California and Oregon do rival some of the other notable French regions. (FOB prices are for 9L cases of wine and do not include markups for sales from the distributor to final point of sale.)

### **The triumph of the Burgundian method**

Before the 1980s, Chardonnay typically didn't go through ML because of the use of significantly more sulfur dioxide and sterile filtration early in the winemaking process. The 1980s ushered in the era of ML, which created a style widely recognized today as "classic." The introduction of ML resulted in wines that were lighter-bodied with plenty of freshness because of less intervention in the cellar.

. In what winemaker David Ramey refers to as "the triumph of the Burgundian method," he points out that all white Burgundy goes through ML. Ramey and the winemakers who graduated with him from the University of California, Davis made their mark with Chardonnay during this decade by adopting whole-cluster pressing, a return to barrel fermentation, lees aging and ML for what Ramey describes as the goal of making the red wine of whites. During this decade, California Chardonnay became one of the most compelling and interesting white wines in the world.



Winemaker David Ramey is the owner of Ramey Wine Cellars in Healdsburg, Calif., and has worked with Chardonnay for four decades. (Photo: Ramey Wine Cellars)

By 1991, Ramey had gone solely to native fermentations, which in many ways completed his integration of Burgundian winemaking practices. "There have been little tweaks here and there over the years," he said. "But after 42 vintages, I've got it dialed in."

The wine styles that emerged in the 1990s are those that in many ways took their cue from Jackson's Vintner's Reserve Chardonnay, a style that was introduced a decade earlier and continued to resonate with consumers. Characterized by higher alcohol and pH with noticeable residual sugar, "blockbuster" Chardonnay arrived on the scene. It was further amplified by winemaking that employed lactic acid bacteria in combination with citric acid to produce diacetyl, the compound associated with the buttery, creamy flavors that when combined with barrel fermentation or oak aging are reminiscent of buttered toast.

This style was in many ways the white wine counterpoint to the Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignons that had captured popular opinion and 100-point ratings. The popularity of the "butter bomb" was epitomized by Rombauer Chardonnay, introduced in 1990 and made from Carneros AVA fruit. It held sway for three decades, but not without pushback. Rombauer has pulled back from the extremes of the '90s and makes several

Chardonnays, most of which are sourced from its estate vineyards in the cooler appellation of Los Carneros and spend eight or nine months in 35% to 80% new American and French barrels.

The current poster child of the oaky, buttery style is JaM Cellars, which makes a Chardonnay called Butter. The brand was launched in 2010 with 1,000

cases and exceeded 10 million bottles in 2018, priced at \$16 retail. The company recently sued The Wine Group for trademark infringement over the use of the words “bold and jammy” in a packaging redesign of Franzia wines.

During the first decade of the 2000s, producers who were committed to their pursuit of more restrained styles occupied a high-end niche. The industry’s response to the butter bomb was the Anything But Chardonnay (ABC) movement that led consumers to explore other white grape varieties (and surely benefited them) but failed to make a significant impact on Chardonnay’s popularity or profitability.

### **A steady march to the coast**

“The most significant change we’ve seen in the evolution of California Chardonnay is where winemakers are growing and sourcing fruit. It’s been a steady march to the coast,” Ramey said. Winemakers have abandoned Chardonnay from warmer valley floor sites and sought cooler growing areas in Russian River Valley, the Sonoma Coast and Central Coast regions. “The needle has swung back to wine styles that are under 14% alcohol by volume and using significantly less new oak.”

This typifies the style of Chardonnay made by Matt Dees, winemaker since 2004 for The Hilt and Jonata in the Sta. Rita Hills AVA. Dees began his winemaking journey as an advocate of the ABC movement but came back to Chardonnay, and this convert now farms the grape on one of the most extreme wine-growing sites on the Central Coast.

Dees oversaw planting Dijon clones on a 100-acre property in the southernmost part of the Sta. Rita Hills, just a few miles from the Pacific Ocean. Owned by The Hilt winery, the Radian Vineyard is part of the sprawling 3,600-acre Rancho Salsipuedes and is defined by steeply sloped expositions of diatomaceous earth soils and an almost hostile maritime climate with steady winds reaching 50 miles per hour and temperatures that rarely exceed 80° F. “Not a fun place for people but a great place



Matt Dees is the winemaker for The Hilt, Jonata and The Pairing and works with some of the best Chardonnay vineyards in California’s Central Coast. (Photo: The Pairing)

for vines,” Dees said. These Chardonnays “crunch” with an almost electric acidity that tops out at a whopping 8.5 grams per liter and are aged in 30% to 40% new French oak. Alcohols hover at 13.2% to 13.4%.

Some of the highest-rated and most sought-after California Chardonnays currently include those produced by Aubert Wines, Marcassin and Peter Michael. The highest-priced Chardonnay wines continue to be sourced from Napa and Sonoma counties, but the Central Coast is home to cult producers such as Sine Qua Non and well-established vineyards such as Bien Nacido in Santa Barbara County.

Burgundian influence in Napa Valley is epitomized by Burgundy native Stephane Vivier, who has been winemaker for Napa Valley winery Hyde de Villaine (HdV) since 2002. HdV was founded by Aubert de Villaine, who is co-owner of Burgundy icon Domaine de La Romanée-Conti, and California Chardonnay legend Larry Hyde.

Vivier’s point of view is one of no extremes but working constantly toward ripeness and balance in the wines. “When the vineyards are young, we use a cooler ferment (61° F to 64° F), and for mature vines we prefer a few degrees warmer.” Picking decision is key for Vivier, as is a long and soft pressing to maintain the feeling of energy in the wines by not flushing out the potassium ions.

“We’ve never made massive styles,” he said, preferring instead to fine-tune the vineyard. He rejected stainless steel fermenters because they “lack layers,” and he’s also been experimenting with large-format oak foudres (520 liters) for better oak integration at HdV.

In 2020, Vivier will undertake his second vintage at Stony Hill. As for changes at this benchmark estate, which was acquired by Long Meadow Ranch from the McCrea family in 2019, Vivier said, “I’ve refreshed the pool of neutral barrels in the cellar, but otherwise, my focus is on the vineyard.”

Vivier noted that “style” is a word he’s only learned to use here in California. “It’s not a word that is used in Burgundy.”

Vivier also has a thriving consulting practice, where he uses a combination of fermentation vessels including concrete eggs, stainless steel and oak. “I mix and match the vessels to find the right identity for each client,” he said. “Thanks to the ABC movement, there are more choices now.” This points to the variety of expression he can coax from Chardonnay as a result. “I always want a wine that will be difficult to describe, one that will evolve and change in the glass.”



Stephane Vivier, a native of Burgundy, is has taken over winemaking at Napa Valley’s Stony Hill and continues to be the winemaker at HdV, which is also in Napa. (Photo: Long Meadow Ranch)

California Chardonnay has evolved many styles over the last 60 years, and they are all still present and accounted for in the marketplace. With this “something for everyone” polyglot of choices, consumers are more likely to stick with the variety, which continues to be fine-tuned in the vineyard versus in the cellar.

— *Deborah Parker Wong*

Deborah Parker Wong, DWSET teaches, writes and speaks about wine. She lectures in the wine studies programs at several local colleges and offers certifications through her Wine & Spirit Education Trust school.

## NW Wineries Seek Chardonnay Niche



Oregon winemakers such as Vince Vidrine, winemaker at Irvine & Roberts Vineyards, seen here inspecting a bin of Chardonnay grapes are striving to create a new style of the varietal that speaks to Northwestern terroir. (Photo: Andrew Adams)