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New Stars of California Chardonnay

With the consecutive release of stellar vintage bottlings, these producers have shown they have the talent and tenacity to offer Chardonnays of class and character.

BY STEVE HEIMOFF



California has great Chardonnay producers who have been around long enough, and produced wines of consistent excellence, to dub them “veterans.” Au Bon Climat, Brewer-Clifton, Chateau St. Jean, Dutton-Goldfield, Failla, Hartford Court, Morgan, Qupé, Rusack, Stonestreet, Talley and Williams Selyem belong on that list, among others. Such is the nature of the Golden State, however, that the new is constantly conspiring to supplant the old. Each of the seven relatively new Chardonnay producers on these pages has released great wines for at least two vintages in a row, and all have the stuff to be the superstars of tomorrow. Chardonnay remains California’s most widely planted white grape variety by far—90,000 acres, a number that’s held remarkably steady over the last decade. Though it’s regarded as one of the least finicky wine grapes, making a quality wine from it isn’t easy; it takes a cool climate and a deft approach to winemaking. But when done with precision, California Chardonnay ranks among the world’s great white wines. Here are seven to keep on your wine-retail radar; all featured wines are current releases.



Knights Bridge

The 2007 West Block Chardonnay was this winery's inaugural release, made then and now by 38-year-old Jeff Ames (above), who has also made wine at Rex Hill, with Helen Turley and is owner of his own brand, Rudius. Knights Bridge also produces a Beresini Vineyard Chardonnay.

West Block is in the Knights Valley AVA, which spans the Mayacamas between Russian River Valley and Napa Valley; the vineyard is owned by the winery. It dates to the 1980s and is planted to Clone 4, the Wente clone of Chardonnay. Fruit from the Beresini Vineyard, which is on the Napa side of Carneros, is purchased.

Yields at West Block are low, but are positively miserly at Beresini due to dry farming. "We're lucky to get a ton per acre," Ames notes. He crafts both wines identically: whole cluster pressing, mixing all lots early for consistency, barrel fermenting in 70% new French oak, *sur lie*. Ames attempts to allow spontaneous fermentation, "which usually happens," but he always puts the wines through malolactic fermentation. After 12–15 months in barrel, the Chardonnay is bottled and released at least six months later.

Both Chardonnays are complex and balanced. "I like big, rich Chardonnays, but I don't want them to be overbearing," Ames says. Knightsbridgewinery.com

93 Knights Bridge 2008 West Block Chardonnay (Knights Valley); \$65. Awesomely rich, showing fine acidity and a stony minerality that ground and anchor it, but really notable for the explosive tropical fruit, apricot, pear and buttery oak flavors that are so opulent.

92 Knights Bridge 2008 Beresini Chardonnay (Carneros); \$65. A beautiful wine that must surely be near the top of the pile of Carneros Chardonnays. Shows brisk acidity and tangy minerality, with oak-inspired, superripe green apple, Meyer lemon and pear fruit flavors that are wrapped into a creamy texture. Drink now.

Jeff Ames' favorite food with these wines is mahi mahi, grilled in tin foil with a little extra-virgin olive oil. "Very plain and simple," Ames says.



Pfendler Vineyards

The late Peter Pfendler developed his vineyard at the limit of Chardonnay's ability to ripen: in the chilly Petaluma Gap area, south of Russian River Valley on the road to San Francisco. His wife, Kimberly (right), now manages the company. From Pfendler's inaugural 2007 vintage, the wines were made by Greg Bjornstad (Bjornstad Cellars, and formerly of Tandem). He left in the summer of 2010, replaced by John Raytek (above), who was previously assistant winemaker at Copain.

Bjornstad describes the small estate vineyard as "really cold [and] incredibly promising. We get great flavors while preserving acidity." Wines from the vineyard made earlier than 2007 were bottled under the Copeland Creek brand. "I was hired...to make a stylistic change," Bjornstad allows, adding, "They wanted me to kick things up." He had been making Tandem's Chardonnay from a vineyard right across the street from Pfendler, and he knew how good the area could be.

The regimen is classic: low yielding vines, hand-sorting at the winery, barrel fermentation in 50% new French oak, indigenous yeast, *sur lie* aging, malolactic fermentation, bottled unfiltered and unfiltered after 11 months. Production averages only a few hundred cases annually. Pfendlervineyards.com

93 Pfendler Vineyards 2008 Estate Grown Chardonnay (Sonoma Coast), \$38. Not for fans of rich Chardonnays, this is a very dry, acidic bottling. It's more about clean mouthfeel than hedonism. What fruit there is suggests limes, pears and brisk minerals, while smoky oak and lees contribute toasty, buttery, creamy notes. A distinguished and elegant wine that defines cool-climate coastal conditions. Grows more complex and interesting as it warms in the glass.



Kimberly Pfendler has a tradition of preparing a lobster and corn on the cob dinner paired with her Chardonnay every June. She also recommends a cheese plate, which includes Bellwether Farms Carmody, hazelnut flatbread and fig cake. Gougères, French-style popovers traditionally made with Gruyère, is another favorite.

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Krutz Family

Sleepy Hollow vineyard has long provided fruit for Central Coast wineries. It's located in one of the coolest regions of Monterey County. "I like acidity," says Patrick Krutz (above, center, with Cole, Rebecca and the future), the winemaker for the Sonoma based family winery. "I don't want to say Napa [Chardonnay] is flabby, but they're richer than I prefer."

The Krutz brothers, Patrick and Cole, have sourced from Sleepy Hollow since 2006, but after the 2009 vintage, no more. "The owners told me they needed to replant the 45-year-old vines," says Patrick. Starting this year, Krutz Family's Chardonnay will come from a vineyard in the southern Russian River Valley, where the weather is nearly as cool, but not quite, as at Sleepy Hollow.

The wines are barrel fermented in 50% new French oak, put through malolactic fermentation, and then rested on their heavy lees for six months, with stirring every few weeks. In an unusual step, Krutz blends in a small percentage of Madera County Viognier, "to give the wine a little more tropical lift."

Krutz, who has no formal education in winemaking, moved to California in 2002 and worked in a wine and cheese shop in Carmel, which he calls "my graduate school for what I'm doing. And I picked up a lot from books." Krutzfamilycellars.com

Patrick Krutz's ideal Chardonnay-food pairing is pan-fried redfish in olive oil, with penne and herbs, in a lemon-butter sauce. "Or, strangely enough, French toast with maple syrup and butter."

PHOTO OF KRUTZ FAMILY ED AIONA PHOTOGRAPHY

92 Krutz Family 2008 Sleepy Hollow Vineyard Chardonnay (Santa Lucia Highlands); \$38. A big, powerful and fruity Chardonnay, made in the classic style of this cool-climate vineyard. It's massive in pineapple, kumquat, buttered toast, vanilla cream and cinnamon spice flavors, brightened with crisp acidity. Should develop mineral, nut and dried fruit notes over the years, if you like an older Chardonnay.

Kessler-Haak

The estate vineyard is in one of the most prestigious areas of the Sta. Rita Hills AVA, on the Highway 246 corridor close to Babcock, Clos Pepe and Melville. Here, Chardonnay (and Pinot Noir) gets ripe while maintaining acidity. There is a purity of fruit that testifies to the cool climate and mineral soils.

Dan Kessler (above; Haak is his wife's maiden name) started as a home winemaker. He purchased the property and planted vines in 2005. The first vintage was the 2008, a fine Chardonnay that earned 92 points on *Wine Enthusiast's* 100-point scale. The wines are made at the nearby Lafond Winery.

Techniques include barrel fermentation in older wood, 100% malolactic fermentation, *sur lie* aging and up to 10 months in barrel before bottling. Production has yet to exceed 100 cases. "This year [2010], I'm doing some experimenting, using some new barrels," Kessler says. That should bring added richness to the wines; the 2008 was a little raw, which new wood should ameliorate. Kesslerhaakwine.com

88 Kessler-Haak 2009 Chardonnay (Santa Rita Hills); \$29. Bone dry and complex, with terroir-infused mineral, citrus, pear and sweet green mint flavors. A streamlined, layered wine, although it's just a bit hot in alcohol.

For the perfect food match, Dan Kessler suggests Alaskan king crab, with lemon and drawn butter, and some seasoning (Old Bay) "to spice it up a little bit."





Suacci Carciere Wines

Suacci Carciere has its own estate vineyard planted to Pinot Noir, but, wishing to release a Chardonnay as well, the winery turned to the well-known Heintz vineyard on the Sonoma Coast, near Green Valley. Chardonnay grown here more often than not shows an intensity and opulence accompanied by Goldridge-soil-driven minerality that makes the wines compelling.

Winemaker Ryan Zepaltas (above) has been with Carciere since the inaugural 2006 vintage; he also has his own brand, Zepaltas, and he is the assistant winemaker at Siduri.

Primary fermentation occurs in stainless steel, using a mix of yeast strains. When primary is almost finished, Zepaltas partially racks to barrels, one-third of which are new, with the remainder neutral; but a portion of the wine remains unwooded. "I don't want all my eggs in one basket," Zepaltas explains. "Chardonnay wants oak, but I don't want to overdo it. I'm not trying to make a butter bomb."

He's not. The 2008, a classic, is exceptionally rich, but acidity and minerals ground it. The 2008 actually came in below 14% alcohol. So will the 2009. suacciarciere.com

93 **Suacci Carciere 2008 Heintz Vineyard Chardonnay (Russian River Valley); \$45.** Another beautiful Chardonnay from this fine vineyard and winery. The wine is drier than past vintages, but rich in acidity and

Ryan Zepaltas suggests pairing his Chard with roast chicken. His absolute ideal? Thomas Keller's Simple Roast Chicken, as prepared at Bouchon.

minerals, with a complex array of pineapple, lime and Meyer lemon citrus flavor. Fermenting half the wine in stainless steel and the balance in oak, a third of which was new, seems to be the perfect approach.



Townley Wines

Townley owner/winemaker Randal Townley Bennett (above) had been a management consultant, but had a yearning to do something else. A wine lover, he landed a gig as assistant winemaker at Sojourn Cellars, which is still his day job. When he was setting up Townley Wines, he remembered being impressed by Patz & Hall's bottling, sourced from Alder Springs. "I like the fruit profile, with a touch of minerality, and the way the wine retains acidity. So when I got the opportunity [for grapes], I decided to go for it."

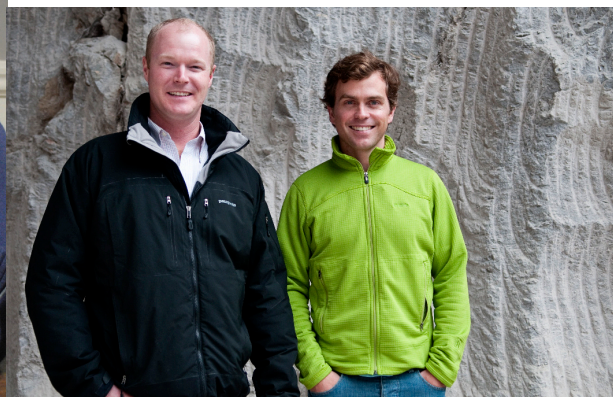
Bennett ferments the grapes in once-used French oak, using natural yeasts, although he does inoculate for malolactic fermentation "to make sure it happens." After 10 months on the lees, the wine is bottled. Annual production amounts to only about 100 cases.

The Chardonnays have been modest in alcohol, but "I'm intending to pick even a little earlier [than in the past]," Bennett asserts, explaining, "I'm looking for ways to get more richness in mouthfeel through acidity, not alcohol." Richness through acidity? "When there's nice acidity, there's nice balance," Townley asserts. Townleywines.com

93 **Townley 2009 Alder Springs Chardonnay (Mendocino); \$38.** A worthy followup to the dramatic '08. Bone dry and zesty in cool-climate acidity, it shows bracing

For the perfect food pairing, Randal Townley Bennett recommends sea scallops seared in butter and finished with a white wine sauce.

flavors of steely minerals, Meyer lemons, limes and buttered toast. A terrifically complex, Chablis-style wine made for upscale fare, and should develop bottle complexity over the next six years.



Hunnicutt Wines

Hunnicutt's first Chardonnay was the 2008, made by Winemaker Kirk Venge (above left), who has crafted the brand's wines since the inaugural 2001 Cabernet Sauvignon. The winery is owned by Justin Hunnicutt Stephens (above right), whose family also owns the D.R. Stephens winery.

Stephens studied business in college, and then worked in real estate. "But I'd wake up every morning thinking it was such a grind going to the office, and would be for the next 30 years," he says. "So I decided to do something in the wine business." He did stints as a cellar rat at Miner and Saddleback, where he and Venge produced that first Hunnicutt wine.

Purchased grapes for the Chardonnay come from the Rancho Sarco vineyard in the Coombsville area of Napa, which Hunnicutt calls "cooler than St. Helena but warmer than Carneros." Grapes from the low-yielding vines are barrel fermented in 25% new French oak, using half wild yeast and half commercial Montrachet. Malolactic fermentation has averaged 25%, but in the chilly 2010 vintage, Venge upped it to 75%.

Both the '08 and '09 are rich, unctuous wines, brimming with fine acidity. Hunnicuttwines.com

93 **Hunnicutt 2009 Chardonnay (Napa Valley); \$38.** This is a terrific Chardonnay, one of the best from Napa Valley,

Justin Stephens' recommended entrée with the Hunnicutt Chardonnay is rock shrimp with gnocchi in a light butter, tarragon, caper and garlic sauce.

and it happens to be from the cool Coombsville area. It's dry and crisp in acidity, which nicely balances the flamboyantly oaked peach, green apple and herb flavors that are beautifully wrapped into a buttery, creamy texture. 🍷