



A few California chardonnays worth their price

By: Pamela S. Busch | Special To The Examiner | 07/21/11 8:30 PM

I was in my local wine store recently and the buyer asked me if I knew of any good California chardonnays. The one that instantly came to mind he already carried. I know that they exist, but it took me a minute to come up with other producers whose chardonnay might still fit into a similar price range.

I won't go as far as to say I became obsessed — after all, the Women's World Cup has been a greater preoccupation for the better part of the week — but I haven't forgotten about this wine quagmire either.

Even in other chardonnay-producing areas, finding decent wines in this price range has become more of a challenge. Bourgogne Blanc, the intro level in Burgundy starts at about \$20 these days, and most hover closer to the \$25 to \$30 range. Australian chardonnay has gone up too, though some of the bigger companies have inexpensive yet often inconsistent wines. Same thing with Chile.

So back where we started, in California, is there anything a chardonnay drinker who is on a budget can drink without sacrificing quality? I realize that many people are still hesitant to pay much more than \$15, but if you can go to \$20 there are more options. Keep in mind: The three mentioned here are not buttery or oaky ... just really well-balanced, fruity-driven wines.

Skylark Chardonnay, Alondra Middleranch Vineyard, 2009 (Mendocino County):

Skylark is a venture between Boulevard wine directors John Larkin and Roberts Perkins. Founded in 2002, they have made quite a few really tasty wines, the Alondra chardonnay being among my favorites. A nonmalolactic, stainless-steel-fermented wine, it has clean, pure fruit flavors of green apples and pears with hints of strawberries, citrus and floral aromatics.

Suggested retail: \$15

Navarro Chardonnay, 2009 (Mendocino County): The problem with the Navarro is that the only way to buy the wine retail is through its website. However, it is one of the top producers in the state of a number of different types of grapes. One of two chardonnays it makes, the Mendocino bottling has grapes from both the cool Anderson Valley and the warmer Potter Valley. Stainless-steel-fermented, this wine has an array of green apple, pear, mango and citrus fruits with a crisp backbone of acidity. **Suggested retail:** \$17

Saintsbury Chardonnay, Carneros, 2009 (Carneros): Hands down, Saintsbury is one of the most-reliable producers in California. Known for its pinot noir lineup, chardonnay has nonetheless been a staple since its founding in 1981. Unlike the other two wines mentioned,

this wine underwent malolactic fermentation and fermented in French oak barrels, yet the fruit retains a vibrant character. Medium-bodied with banana, apple, lemon meringue and slight traces of minerals and oak, it is tried and true, vintage after vintage. **Suggested retail: \$19.99**

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Vibrant character: Saintsbury is one of the most reliable producers of chardonnay in California. (Courtesy photo)

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