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# Rediscover Chardonnay

*California's versatile white-wine grape is escaping its syrupy reputation with lighter, brighter varieties untouched by oak*



By LETTIE TEAGUE



Illustration by Marc Rosenthal for The Wall Street Journal

**IT'S GOOD.** It's bad. It's out. It's in. Is there any grape whose fortunes have risen and fallen more often than those of Chardonnay—particularly Chardonnay from California? I'm convinced this is thanks, in part, to the grape's chameleon nature. Chardonnay can be oaky or steely, fruity or flinty, depending on where it's grown and the style that the winemaker wants to produce. Indeed, style is key when describing this most malleable grape.

Less oak and more steel is the style that's in vogue for a growing number of winemakers. It's appealing not only to the anything-but-Chardonnay crowd but to a new generation of drinkers as well.

A new generation was the target audience for Avant, the Kendall-Jackson Chardonnay that debuted in late 2010. "Jess wanted a new wine that would appeal to a new generation of wine drinkers," said Caroline Shaw, executive vice president at Jackson Family Wines, who explained that Jess Jackson, the late Kendall-Jackson founder, came up with the idea in 2008.

When the producer of one of the country's more popular Chardonnays (the decidedly oakier Vintner's Reserve) decides to produce a largely unoaked Chardonnay, it seems like a good indication that something bigger may be afoot. And while Avant is produced in tiny amounts (130,000 cases) compared with the millions of cases of Vintner's Reserve, Ms. Shaw said there was "real growth potential" with Avant.

That potential has already been realized with the Chamisal Stainless Chardonnay from the Central Coast, which debuted in 2006 at 1,000 cases and is now up to 30,000 cases—making it the winery's best-selling wine. "Stainless" refers to the stainless-steel fermentation tanks used to make the wine.

**Oenophile: Unoaked California Chardonnays Worth Drinking**

Chamisal winemaker Fintan du Fresne—who hails from New Zealand, where unoaked Chardonnay is quite commonplace—said he thinks today's U.S. wine drinkers



F. Martin Ramin for The Wall Street Journal

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get what the Stainless name means. For his part, Mr. du Fresne said, he'd had a particularly hard time comprehending California Chardonnay when he arrived in the U.S., in 2006. "I was trying to wrap my brain around California Chardonnay—the level of oak, the richness, the viscosity, the Rombauer-esque nature," Mr. du Fresne said. (Rombauer Chardonnay is considered the epitome of the oaky Chardonnay style.) "My first question to the winery's owner was, 'Can we make a stainless Chardonnay?' " The owner told Mr. du Fresne he was crazy, but six months later he said, "Sure."

Did Mr. du Fresne think that oak-free Chardonnay was a winemaker-led change? "I think there has been a push by winemakers for a leaner, less oaky style," he replied. But as Mr. du Fresne pointed out, this wasn't just about taking out oak but "a complete reconstruction of Chardonnay."

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According to Mr. du Fresne, the making of a stainless-steel-fermented Chardonnay requires different grape clones, different fermentation techniques, cooler fermentation temperatures and, often, forgoing malolactic fermentation. (Malolactic fermentation converts the tart malic acid to the softer lactic acid, making a softer, richer, more buttery wine.)

One of the top California Chardonnay producers, David Ramey, refers to his style as "neo-Burgundian" and notes that it can be achieved with less new oak and by picking earlier, when the grapes are less ripe. Mr. Ramey is doing both—not in response to the market but to his own palate. "It's my own development—a reaction to my own wines," he said. "I wanted the oak to be less present."

Mr. Ramey's two "basic" Chardonnays (he makes seven Chardonnays altogether) were among the 17 wines I tasted recently with friends—most of whom said they

rarely drank California Chardonnay because it had too much oak, too much sweetness and too little acidity. I assured them the Chardonnays we were tasting were different.

Of course, oak or its absence alone doesn't make a wine good. When the wines that we tasted were in balance, the quality of the fruit shone through. But when the fruit wasn't great or the winemaking less than perfect, the wines came off as insipid and dilute. (These might have been helped by a little "make-up" of oak.)

Thankfully, there were many more successes than failures. In no particular order, our favorites included the fresh and citrusy 2011 Paul Hobbs CrossBarn Sonoma Coast, the lively 2011 Chamisal Stainless Central Coast, the complex 2010 Ramey Russian River Valley as well as the elegant 2010 Etude Carneros, the 2011 Williams Selyem Unoaked Chardonnay and the 2011 Mer Soleil Silver. The last was a soft, lush and ripe wine made even more memorable by its packaging (a gray ceramic bottle that one friend said "looked like a bomb that you'd light with a fuse and throw"—making perhaps the first unoaked Chardonnay Molotov cocktail).

Best of all, perhaps, were the prices. Since there was little to no expensive new oak used, the wines were affordably priced. None cost more than \$33, and most were \$15 to \$22. That helped to win over even the least Chardonnay-friendly friend: "These are better values than white Burgundy," he proclaimed. "You get more flavor and satisfaction with these wines than you would with most \$23 white Burgundies."

California Chardonnay is back—yet again.

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