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Top 100 Wines 2014

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Chardonnay

Talking about Chardonnay these days has become complicated, mostly because of the lingering aftereffects of what we'll call its Baroque era. That era of excess butter and oak — with its many lovers and many haters — still lingers in the mind, even though the state of the art with this grape has moved on.

And yet great American Chardonnay is ever more manifest today — wines that are neither overwrought nor anemic, that show a bounty of fruit (especially in the 2012 and 2013 vintages) and, at their best, the mark of terroir. They come from special, typically marginal corners of the coast all the way from Santa Barbara up through the Northwest.

The New Chardonnays are confident, complex wines that command their own place in the wine realm — and leave in their dust those wines still following the tired old formulas.

2011 Au Bon Climat Sanford & Benedict Vineyard Sta. Rita Hills Chardonnay (\$30, 13.5% alcohol): Jim Clendenen has worked with this vineyard long enough to find its full expression even in a notably cold year. A bit more wood here (around half new) and still full of tension even three years after harvest, with a great acidity and tactile, tangy fruit.

2012 Bethel Heights Estate Eola-Amity Hills Chardonnay (\$28, 13.5%): A property better known for its Pinot, but cousins Ben and Mimi Casteel have also put forward one of Oregon's best Chardonnay examples, from plantings that include own-rooted Wente clones dating to 1977. Fermented in mostly old oak, it's graceful and tangy, and shows a terrific breadth: lime peel, quince, casaba melon, wet stones, plus a classic juiciness.

2012 Evening Land Vineyards Sonoma County Chardonnay (\$27.50, 13.4%): This ambitious project continues to go through growing pains of ownership and winemaking. I found the most charm in the simpler "blue label" bottles among its current roster, including this fine example of (mostly Russian River Valley) Chardonnay, aged in neutral oak. There's key lime, ripe pear, blanched almond and a bright, firm acidity. It's not unlike what Burgundy's Maconnais wines offer: no flourish, just the clarity of fruit that is modern Chardonnay's best play.

2012 Hanzell Sonoma Valley Chardonnay (\$78, 14.5%): Hanzell has been on a clear upswing in recent years under winemaker Michael McNeill, and this vintage shows the full abilities of this historic Sonoma estate. (This wine's little sister, the 2012 Sebella, made a splash in last year's Top 100.) From parcels averaging more than 30 years old, this is this Chardonnay's usual powerful self — showing a bit of oak and less a creaminess than a gloss to the texture, plus salty mineral and dried pineapple accents to intense pear and quince fruit. The wine at its most regal.

2012 Hamacher Cuvee Forets Diverses Willamette Valley Chardonnay (\$48, 13.4%): Eric Hamacher has long been one of Oregon's talents with this grape, and a wine like this is precisely why. A bit of caramel and oak sweetness is matched by full-bore citrus intensity and an apple-skin texture. Lots of power, not a lick of fat.

2012 Hirsch Estate Sonoma Coast Chardonnay (\$55, 13.5%): Winemaker Ros Cobb has perfectly tuned a style that makes the best of David Hirsch's extreme coastal site outside Cazadero. Barrel fermentation and aging in mostly older oak, with a final stay in steel to tighten the wine. The result is both

sharp-edged and limpid: yellow raspberries, pippin apple, hazelnut and the intense mineral signature found in all wines from the Hirsch land.

2012 Lioco Estero Russian River Valley Chardonnay (\$35, 13.5%): This new effort from Lioco finds a place between its more basic Chardonnay and its single-vineyard bottles. Winemaker John Raytek fermented fruit from four Sonoma sites in old barrels, for a result that's sinewed and fruit-focused — with Fuji apple and tangerine balancing a marjoram accent and a stony mineral side. Raytek is a master of texture, and the subtle richness — think untoasted macademia nuts — helps match a pleasant waterfall of acidity.

2012 Liquid Farm Golden Slope Sta. Rita Hills Chardonnay (\$50, 14.2%): This is the more opulent of the wines from this project by Nikki and Jeff Nelson, with one-quarter new oak on fruit from a quintet of top Santa Rita sites. It demonstrates how to achieve refinement in that style, with the wood perfectly integrated as a hint of butterscotch amid intense citrus, fresh chervil and savory puffed wheat.

2012 Sandhi Sanford & Benedict Sta. Rita Hills Chardonnay (\$55, 12.9%): Sandhi's 2012s were strong across the board, but there's still no beating this effort from the 61-year-old Sanford & Benedict plot — a reminder that it's arguably among the top handful of sites for Chardonnay in the New World. Winemaker Sashi Moorman found a herbal focus to the deeply textured tree-fruit flavors, with citrus pith and of course that bright, shocking white mineral pizance this vineyard brings forward.

2012 Stuhlmuller Vineyards Estate Alexander Valley Chardonnay (\$24, 14.1%): Another vintage of this exceptional wine from an improbable spot — at the edge of the Russian River area, just moderate enough for Chardonnay. The Stuhlmullers and winemaker Leo Hansen brought out the best in great fruit with a winning seamlessness: pear and apple flesh, a lemon-oil tang, a touch of savory wood, and a fine balance of creamy and tart.

2011 Wenzlau Estate Sta. Rita Hills Chardonnay (\$45, 13.5%): The Wenzlau family's biodynamic estate in the south valley of the Santa Rita Hills is in the heart of an impressive neighborhood: Mount Carmel right nearby, Sanford & Benedict across the way. Winemaker Justin Willett has a way with Chardonnay for his own label (Tyler), and this is built with similar colled tension: ripe nectar fruit, a whiff of savory oak, pitch-perfect acidity.

