

A NEW CLASS OF

CHARDONNAY



Winemaker Anthony
Avila, Santa Maria Valley

STARS

10 OUTSTANDING WINEMAKERS HELPING SHAPE THE CALIFORNIA LANDSCAPE

BY MARYANN WOROBIEC

It's an exciting time for California Chardonnay. A modern style successfully balances power and elegance and the wines are fresher and juicier than ever, as winemakers back off heavy oak influence and/or candied ripeness and let the grape and *terroir* shine through.

Since I took over our coverage in 2022, I've been diving into what puts the category where it is today. I explored the "Legends of California Chardonnay" (July 31, 2022), the winemakers who helped pave the way. I also kicked the dirt in "California's Greatest Chardonnay Vineyards" (July 31, 2023) finding a deep connection between meticulous farming and terrific wines.

The more I study, the more I believe that Chardonnay is indeed a "winemaker's wine;" the grape largely provides a blank canvas to showcase the decisions a vintner makes—or doesn't make—in the vineyard and cellar. The best vineyard managers farm with precision and collaborate with winemakers to deliver the best possible grapes. But once the grapes leave the vine, there are myriad decisions a winemaker is faced with in the cellar.

In this year's tasting report, you'll see dozens of winemakers making terrific wines in every corner of the state. But for this story, I've picked a small sampling of winemakers who are solidifying the dynamism of the category, inspiring enthusiasm about Chardonnay and committed to its future. I focused on a group that despite their talent and track records of outstanding scores are in my estimation flying under the radar and deserve more attention.

There's a quiet confidence among these winemakers. The fact that many of them are stewarding existing, heralded wineries isn't lost on them—they realize there's a balance between making loyal customers happy and making improvements as they see fit. They are also continuing the science of the generation of winemakers before them. Moreover, they feel a clear connection to their vineyard sources, are outspoken about green initiatives and have a sense of responsibility to keep the land healthy for generations to come.

Some of these winemakers are working on the edges, where the vineyards meet the wilderness. Others are taking over multi-generation family businesses, or essentially starting Chardonnay programs from scratch. There's something special about this generation of Chardonnay makers, and their wines are worth seeking out.

MACDUFF EVERTON



FLECHA AZUL

TEQUILA AÑEJO
CRISTALINO

AGED **18** MONTHS

AMERICAN OAK BARRELS

Triple-Charcoal filtered, Añejo Cristalino is made from fully mature agave hand-harvested in the lowlands of Jalisco, Mexico.



ANTHONY AVILA

BIEN NACIDO & SOLOMON HILLS VINEYARDS

Winemaker Anthony Avila works with one of the most famous and desired vineyards in California—Santa Maria Valley’s Bien Nacido Vineyard in Santa Barbara, along with Solomon Hills, just 8 miles away, both farmed by the Miller family. This absolutely dictates his winemaking focus.

“My winemaking style is very farming and vineyard focused, with low intervention in the cellar,” says Avila, 38. “The goal is to make wines that taste like the vineyard, so I concentrate on making sure the right things get done at the right times out in the field so that when the grapes finally arrive at the winery I stay out of the way as much as possible.”

Part of his interpretation is to work with native fermentations. “Usually the only thing I add to the wines is sulfur dioxide and I keep the new oak percentage low. All of that is to highlight the vineyards themselves instead of overshadowing them with cellar technique.”

Unlike winemakers in warmer regions, Avila works with a high natural acidity in Santa Maria Valley. His decision is to harvest Chardonnay slightly riper and use a little bit more new French oak. “I like the midpalate richness that I am seeing with these changes.”

Q&A | Favorite Chardonnay and food pairing? Pan-seared scallops. The brininess of the scallops, the butter, the fruit components and acid in the Chardonnay work really well together.

What is the most important thing you’ve learned about making Chardonnay? Chardonnay is all about finding the balance between acidity and flavor development. Getting those two things to line up is part art and part luck, having great vineyards like Bien Nacido and Solomon Hills to work with helps a lot.

What do you like about working with Chardonnay? I really love the process of barrel-fermenting Chardonnay. It makes an enormous mess, but it adds so much to the wines in terms of texture and complexity.

What is your biggest challenge when it comes to Chardonnay? Good Chardonnay does not like to finish primary or malolactic fermentation. So, getting the wines through both of those can be quite challenging and it takes a lot of patience and temperature control.

What would be your advice to a new winemaker starting to work with Chardonnay? I would say to stick with barrel fermenting if the resources are available and keep an eye on that intersection of flavor development and acidity at harvest.

RECENT RELEASES

93 BIEN NACIDO Chardonnay Santa Maria Valley Bien Nacido Vineyard 2021	\$50
93 SOLOMON HILLS Chardonnay Santa Maria Valley Solomon Hills Vineyard Belle of the Ball 2021	\$100
92 SOLOMON HILLS Chardonnay Santa Maria Valley 2021	\$50



“THERE IS something unique and worth highlighting in each of the vineyards we partner with, and it is worth the extra attention in detail.”

—HEIDI BRIDENHAGEN

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MACROSTIE WINERY

Winemaker Heidi Bridenhagen hails from Wisconsin, and knew her detailed and technical mind would fit in a career in science or research. Then, in her twenties, she took money she earned while waitressing and treated herself to a trip to Europe. That travel taught her that she was more independent, strong and curious than she originally thought. And she brought back a life-changing observation. “Every town had a special treat and a special drink that was their way of sharing their culture with you,” she recalls.

That idea that places can project something special is the thread running through her winemaking now. “I am an innate individualist,” explains Bridenhagen, 40. “I believe there is something unique, different and worth highlighting in each of the vineyards we partner with, and it is worth the extra attention in detail and effort to showcase what makes each site so special.”

MacRostie wines focus on cooler-climate vineyards, taking advantage of natural acidity, which Bridenhagen believes leads to increased aromatic expressions. Fermenting wine at lower temperatures is another way she preserves aromatics.

Bridenhagen also makes blends from different AVAs, including the Sonoma Coast, Russian River Valley and the Petaluma Gap. “When I am determining which vineyards to work with, I think about soil, microclimate, clone material, age of the vineyard, and more. I like diversity and the different attributes from all of these different factors.” Bridenhagen adds that she regularly asks herself what is the goal in any decision. It’s usually to make something with complexity and focus. “I make decisions that will set us up for success down the road.”

As only the third winemaker at MacRostie, carrying the winemaking torch forward doesn't give Bridenhagen any extra pressure. "I am confident in how I come to my winemaking decisions," she says. "I collect knowledge and ideas, I experiment and run trials, and I have a great team of amazing people working with me. I may be the winemaker for MacRostie but I couldn't do this by myself. From the vineyard to cellar and beyond, it is a collaboration."

Q&A | **Favorite Chardonnay and food pairing?** A 5-year or older Chardonnay, with an assortment of cheeses and my father's honey.

What is the most important thing you've learned about making Chardonnay? It can be incredibly forgiving and is capable of producing a unique and beautiful wine using many different growing and cellar conditions.

What do you like about working with Chardonnay? Chardonnay can surprise you. It may not look beautiful in the vineyard, or ferment under ideal conditions, and suddenly "poof," what's in the fruit shines through and creates a fantastic wine.

What is your biggest challenge when it comes to Chardonnay? I love picking our grapes when their pH is still very low, so getting my Chardonnay to go through malolactic fermentation is always challenging.

What would be your advice to a new winemaker starting to work with Chardonnay? Taste a lot of them! There are so many different styles of Chardonnay. Find examples that you really enjoy or are inspired to create. Then figure out who the winemaker was, what vineyards they used, and ask questions! It never hurts to ask and it is a great way to establish a starting point or baseline. Then you can evolve your technique over the course of different growing seasons.

"WHEN WALKING the vineyards, we found ourselves saying, 'We should really bring in a geologist.'"

—CHANTAL FORTHUN



the Pacific Ocean. "We are farming in the middle of the forest and its eco-system," explains Forthun.

Forthun, 42, describes her job as making wines true to place and vintage. "Our wines are coastal; there's always been a nice backbone of acidity, and a freshness that carries through aromatically from the botanical nature of the coastal forests and natural vegetation that surround our remote, rocky vineyards."

Only 10% of the 700 total acres in land is planted to grapes, with 600 acres been preserved as a natural coastal habitat, dense with forests and vibrant ecosystems that make it an unlikely spot for stunning wines. But Forthun explains the high elevation also provides incredible texture in Chardonnay by way of soil quality—or rather, dearth of soil—that exists on those windswept ridgetops. Over millennia, she says, the soil has all-but eroded from the steep and exposed ridges, leaving bedrock as the *terroir*. The result is Chardonnay with harmonious tension, fresh and vibrant yet richly textured.

Geology has always been the defining character the estate vineyards. But in 2018 the team recognized their appetite for deeper scientific knowledge of the estates. "When walking the vineyards, we often found ourselves saying, 'We should really bring in a geologist,'" explains Forthun.

So they dug deep into their site—literally. First they hired a soil expert who mapped the electro-conductivity of almost every single vine row in the estate. Then they worked with a geologist to dig an extensive range of soil pits. Forthun says the findings gave her an "aha" moment.

"Previously, we adapted farming by block, but the grapes were

RECENT RELEASES

94	MACROSTIE Chardonnay Sonoma Coast The Key 2021	\$75
92	MACROSTIE Chardonnay Carneros Sangiacomo Vineyard 2022	\$52
92	MACROSTIE Chardonnay Petaluma Gap Nightwing Vineyard 2022	\$66
92	MACROSTIE Chardonnay Russian River Valley 2022	\$40
91	MACROSTIE Chardonnay Russian River Valley Mirabelle Vineyard 2022	\$52
90	MACROSTIE Chardonnay Sonoma Coast 2022	\$28

CHANTAL FORTHUN FLOWERS VINEYARD & WINERY

Visiting Flowers's Camp Meeting Ridge estate vineyard makes clear Chantal Forthun is practicing wilderness winemaking. It's a long, windy drive to this steep spot, surrounded by dense evergreen woods and lying 1,400 feet up, and above the fog line, only 2 miles from



CALIFORNIA CHARDONNAY

Get scores and prices for all wines reviewed for our annual report at [WineSpectator.com/ChardonnayAlpha073124](https://www.winespectator.com/ChardonnayAlpha073124)