



# FOOD & WINE

**Chardonnay's New Turn** From golden apple and spice to flint-on-steel flavors, there's more to these California whites than you might imagine. By Ray Isle August 2019

California Chardonnay is at a strange crossroads right now. There's no question it's popular—Chardonnay maintains its status as the most popular wine in the United States, a position it's had for decades now. At the same time, particularly when I talk to wine drinkers who are younger than 30 or so, there's no question that California Chardonnay isn't at the top of the list when it comes to what's cool; it's considered the mom grape. Yet the terms people tend to use to define it—buttery, oaky, rich, unctuous—are actually becoming less and less applicable to most California Chardonnays. So when it comes to Chardonnay, what exactly is going on?



The answer is simple: Lots. I'd argue that California Chardonnay right now offers a greater range of styles than practically any other grape variety from the state. Fancy a razor-sharp, low-alcohol, cool-climate white that will snap you to attention with your platter of oysters? What about a bottle that can age in a cellar for 10 or 20 years, no less than a classic Cabernet? Or a single-vineyard wine that speaks transparently of the place it was grown? You can have any of those. Or you can have good old Cali Chard, luscious and full-bodied, with vanilla notes from oak and ripely tropical fruit flavors, if you like. All of those wines are out there.

The truth is that Chardonnay—more than, say, Pinot Noir or Cabernet—is extraordinarily flexible. It grows well in a remarkably broad range of climates and soils, and it adapts well to any number of winemaking approaches. California winemakers know this, and, freed from many years of a market that demanded only ultra-unctuous, oaked-to-the-max whites, they're striking out in every possible stylistic direction. Now is the time to follow their explorations.

## Medium-Bodied & Elegant

**2016 Ramey Russian River Valley Chardonnay (\$42)** David Ramey is one of California's acknowledged masters of Chardonnay. His single-vineyard bottlings are exquisite, and even his more widely

available regional wines, like this focused, pear-scented bottling, have the ability to age in a cellar for years.