

California's Finest Chardonnays (2013)

By Howard Kaplan, Executive Wine Seminars

As it always does, our 2013 version of "California's Finest Chardonnays" showcased a stellar group of chardonnays representing the state-of-the-art from the Golden State. The premise behind this blind tasting was simple. We gathered 14 chardonnays released within the past few years that had very high ratings, were loved by the wine critics, and/or were long time favorites of EWS.

This tasting presented a unique opportunity to check out the new releases of high end California chardonnay in the most pleasurable way, as our luscious lineup contained nothing but killers with no fillers. Many of our selections were made in miniscule quantities, are quite hard to find, and very expensive. But passionate California chardonnay lovers made it to the tasting to crown a winner. That goal was accomplished.

For the second year in a row, Scherrer's Russian River Valley Chardonnay from Helfer Vineyard dazzled us. The 2009 finished in third place last year in the 2012 version of this tasting. This year, the 2010 Scherrer "Helfer Vineyard" chardonnay won the whole shooting match, quite an achievement in the company of many perceived superstars.

While Scherrer stole the show, a few other chardonnays won our hearts including the defending champion, Paul Hobbs "Ulises Valdez Vineyard." Last year, the 2009 finished first and this year, the 2010 finished second. Everyone had four or five wines that they really liked, but in truth, this tasting was somewhat disappointing. Too many wines were merely very good but failed to get us truly excited. And too many wines that showed excessive alcohol bothered us. We're old school, and got into the wine trade when alcohol levels were usually 12.5% to 13.5%. So it's hard for us to adapt to levels over 15%. Keep that in mind as you read this report.

The following are consensus tasting notes, written to share commentary, descriptors, and convey the overall impression our group had for each wine. Rating reflects the quality of the wine and the enthusiasm (or lack thereof) displayed by our group of 17 attendees during our in-depth discussions. Rating is also more reflective of the "here and now" rather than future development.

Wines were poured in three flights from numbered bags (1 - 14) and are listed below in the order they were poured. Participants were asked to vote (by number) for their three favorite wines. We award three points for every first place vote, two for every second place vote, and one point for every third, allowing for ties. Data is based on 17 voters. Voting tallies: 1st/2nd/3rd

1) 2010 J. Rochioli "Rachael's Vineyard" (Russian River Valley) - \$100 - 3 points (0/1/1) - 91+ rating

Light straw color. Nice clean nose is not totally forthcoming, offering only hints of oak, pineapple and mint tea. Big, rich, and buttery on entry, with decent acidity and excellent structure. This chardonnay is not a blockbuster, but we admire the wine's balance, except for a tad too much alcohol showing. There's plenty of ripe apple flavors and peachy penetration leading into a long and lively finish. Probably will benefit from a little time in the cellar to round out.

2) 2009 Morlet Family Vineyards “Ma Douce” (Sonoma Coast) - \$85 - 3 points (0/0/3) - 91 rating

Medium yellow-tinged color. Rich, penetrating, spicy nose displays lots of caramel, butterscotch, and candied apple. Tasty, ripe fruits on the palate recall cooked pineapple. There’s a lot of intensity, richness, and density. But there’s plenty of alcohol here too, and we hear a complaint that it’s not complex enough and not well integrated. The oak influence is obvious. Ultimately, very good but not great.

3) 2009 Kistler “Trenton Road House” (Sonoma Coast) - \$85 - 13 points (2/1/5) - 94 rating

Light straw color. Gorgeous nose features lots of toasty oak and spice with scents that recall lemon cream and seemingly Burgundian terroir. Keeps getting better as it opens in the glass. Very big on the palate with outstanding grip and thrust; really makes its presence felt. Has more character of Puligny-Montrachet than Sonoma chardonnay. Delicious, spicy, and balanced, with lots of energy. Flavors of earth, minerals, spice, and soft lush fruit. Extremely long finish. Everybody loves #3!

4) 2008 Marcassin “Marcassin Vineyard” (Sonoma Coast) - \$450 - 0 points - 90 rating

Light straw color; cloudy. Soft, pleasant, buttery, modern bouquet offers notes of sweet butterscotch and smoky wood with a hint of furniture polish. Good intensity and concentration in the mouth, but it sits heavy on the palate with some residual sugar and butterscotch flavor. Attendees are not fans of #4, and we hear comments like “it’s manipulated and microbial,” and “there’s not enough acid.” Ultimately, just good, not great, and clearly disappointing given this wine’s lofty price.

5) 2009 Aubert “Larry Hyde & Sons” (Carneros) - \$150 - 5 points (1/1/0) - 92 rating

Light straw color. Beautiful, open nose suggests campfire, white peach, and green pears, with hints of pine and herbs. It reminded some of Burgundy. In the mouth, wine #5 has excellent acidity and “attack.” It’s a complex wine with a core of sweet fennel seed and minty white bread. Not particularly rich, we suspect that it would pair nicely with food. Keeps getting better as it opens in the glass. Impressive.

6) 2009 Peter Michael “Cuvée Indigene” (Sonoma County) - \$175 - 0 points - 88 rating

Light straw color. Introverted, refined, tropical fruit nose with an herbal, medicinal Band-Aid quality in the background. Sweet on entry; one of the sweetest wines in the tasting. Wine #6 has a nice brioche flavor, decent acidity, and average weight. It showed a lot of alcohol and didn’t have much staying power from the mid-palate on. Turns dry toward the end. Nobody really liked this wine, which could simply be in an awkward phase?

7) 2008 Stonestreet “Upper Barn” (Alexander Valley) - \$65 - 0 points - 90 rating

Light straw color. Clean, bright, sweet, and oaky nose recalls buttered popcorn, licorice, and papaya. The wood doesn’t overpower the other scents. On the palate, this is an elegant, lighter bodied chardonnay that is tasty, fresh and youthful. The fruit here is very good. On the other hand, it’s a bit high in alcohol, not particularly complex, a little low in acid, and offers no sense of terroir. Some liked it more than others.

8) 2009 Pahlmeyer (Napa Valley) - \$70 - 3 points (1/0/0) - 90 rating

Medium-light straw color. Restrained, soft feminine nose offers hints of sweet tropical fruit: guava, pineapple, and lychee. Big, dense, “definitely California!” tropical fruit style palate is enjoyable, but we

hear complaints that there's too much alcohol. Still, it's rich, well-extracted, and has lots of flavor. If only it were lower in alcohol and higher in acidity. It's a likeable wine, but surpassed by others.

9) 2010 Paul Hobbs "Ulises Valdez Vineyard" (Russian River Valley) - \$75 - 17 points (3/4/0) - 95 rating

Light, yellow-tinged color. Gorgeous nose leaps from the glass with lovely vanilla, toasty oak, and spice. There's a nice harmony between elements of caramel, wet leaves, and compost. Modern styled and youthful wine #9 hits us with a "flamboyant aria of oak," but there's no denying that it's sweet, rich, well-rounded, and flat-out delicious. The wonderful acidity carries it along from start to finish. We admire the wine's length and vitality. Very impressive!

10) 2009 Mount Eden Vineyards "Estate" (Santa Cruz Mountains) - \$55 - 8 points (1/2/1) - 93 rating

Medium-light yellow color. Sexy, toasty, baby diaper, sauvage nose is attractive in its own unique way. There's a note of orange zest in there as well. Good acidity on the palate dances with a variety of partners: tangerine, soy, black earth, and alcohol as well. This wine shows very good overall balance. The finish is long and consistent, but it turns rather delicate. Chardonnay #10 certainly is different, but we really like it.

11) 2009 Ramey "Ritchie Vineyard" (Russian River Valley) - \$60 - 11 points (2/2/1) - 93 rating

Light straw color. Gorgeous bouquet is loved by all in the room. We get sauvage accented scents of smoke, toast, earth, grilled corn, and grilled peach. Well-structured and straightforward in the mouth. It's clearly well made. There's very good acidity, with minerals and saltiness. Also, the sweet and sour interplay was interesting, and certainly gave wine #11 personality. Ultimately, a very enjoyable chardonnay.

12) 2010 Kongsgaard "The Judge" (Napa Valley) - \$260 - 3 points (0/1/1) - 92+ rating

Light straw color. Attractive nose features lots of citrus zest, with no overt sweetness. Wine #12 is a little tight on entry, but we do enjoy the fine, ripe peach and nectarine flavors. At first, #12 was all about structure and acidity. But it evolved to show signs of elegance, and flavors that suggest eau de vie pears in alcohol. Very long, consistent, delicious finish. This wine cried for more time to evolve.

13) 2008 Marcassin "Three Sisters Vineyard" (Sonoma Coast) - \$225 - 6 points (2/0/0) - 92 rating

Medium-light yellow color. Attractive, woody aromas are obvious but not overpowering. It reminds us of buttered popcorn, easy on the caramel. In the mouth we have a medium-bodied chardonnay, very rich, with very good acidity. Wine #13 is concentrated, almost cloying, with an apple pie character and a lot of alcohol showing. This wine turns slightly bitter in the finish. Still, it's well-made and quite enjoyable.

14) 2010 Scherrer "Helfer Vineyard" (Russian River Valley) - \$40 - 30 points (5/5/5) - 96 rating

Light straw color. Beautiful, open, expressive nose suggests apple and pear skins, talc, and a creamy quality that adds to its allure. Wonderful in the mouth as well; a wine of freshness, vibrancy and vitality. It's a complex chardonnay with citrus, apple and tangerine flavors. Very long, consistent finish. Everyone in the room loves this wine. Once again, Scherrer's "Helfer Vineyard" proved to be California's single best under-the-radar chardonnay at the high end.