

ANYONE who likes California Chardonnay now will love the wines even more in the future. That's the word from growers, winemakers and sommeliers, and it's primarily due to phylloxera. From the mid-1980s through the 1990s, an outbreak of the pest caused vineyard owners to replant a massive 16,000ha (hectares) of vines, mostly in Napa and Sonoma. The Napa Valley has a total 14,000ha of vines, so replanting has been extensive. And at a cost of about \$62,000 a hectare, it has cost the better part of a billion dollars.

The silver lining is that new and better clones of Chardonnay have been planted in sites most suited to the variety. Viticulture has been modernised, and now the replanted vines are reaching maturity and producing fruit that's wowing even old hands at grape growing.

PHOTOGRAPH: TED STEFANSKI/CEPHAS

'In the future we're going to see spectacular wines,' says John Clews, vice president of winery and vineyard management at Clos du Val. 'In the past we only had one Chardonnay clone in Carneros, but now we have lots to choose from,

We're getting away from steely, grapefruity flavours and getting more pear and peach into the wines.'

The replantings have led to, 'the greatest improvements in the history of winemaking,' enthuses sommelier Jim Lark, owner of The Lark, a restaurant in Michigan.

But New York sommelier Charles Scicolone disagrees: 'Winemakers talk about getting away from the overoaked, fat style, but they're not doing it. Those big wines are not good food wines.' While it may be true that plump, oaky, buttery Chardonnays have limited food appeal, many vintners are turning towards a more food-friendly style. In fact, the top white wine at this year's Sonoma County Harvest Fair was a Chardonnay from start-up winery Roshambo of Healdsburg. The winning wine 'is an attempt to get away from the oak and butter that's so prevalent in our industry,' says Paul Brasslet, the winemaker.

So what is the current state of California Chardonnay? 'There is no current popular style,' says Lark. Any attempt to classify California Chardonnays is too difficult. 'This is

a state so vast, with so many regions, sub-regions, price points, practices and yield levels that the phrase is irrelevant except to the state's Department of Agriculture as a statistical grouping,' says Joe Spellman, master sommelier at Paterno Wines International.

MYRIAD FLAVOURS

Not only that, there are the flavour differences in fruit from the various regions. Those from the Santa Maria area (Meridian, Foxen, Byron, Cambria, Lane Tanner) show rich, unctuous tropical fruits, pineapple and mango. Monterey County, whose Chardonnays show enormous improvement of late, have distinct lemon and lime flavours (Lockwood, Ventana, Mondavi's Coastal wines), while the Los Carneros region that straddles Napa and Sonoma counties along the cool margins of San Pablo Bay supplies rich, red apple and pear-toned citrus-y Chardonnay for many Sonoma and Napa Valley wineries. In Sonoma, the Russian River Valley is not only perfect for Pinot Noir, its Chardonnays show silky red apple and fig flavours →

10 OF THE BEST CHARDONNAYS

- **Aracia, Carneros 2001** ★★ ★★
Typical Carneros citrus-apple-pear flavour with gingerbread and coconut from the barrel regime. Up to 4 years.
N/A UK. \$20; tel: +1 707 226 9991
- **Chateau Montelena, Napa Valley 2000** ★★ ★★ ★★
No malolactic yields a soft, delicate, yet crisp wine of great finesse with a light oak nuance on the finish. Up to 5 years.
£21.59; VCI
- **Landmark Vineyard, Damaris 2000** ★★ ★
Complexity in a fruit-driven wine with apple, pear and citrus flavours around a core of honey custard. Up to 4 years.
£25.95; Jer, Lay
- **Hanzell, Sonoma Valley 2000** ★★ ★★ ★★
Minerality, forward fruit of spicy apple,

- and a light touch of oak. Up to 5 years.
£34.10; VCI
- **Flowers Camp, Meeting Ridge 1999** ★★ ★★
Verve and deep concentration mark this beautifully balanced wine. Up to 5 years.
N/A UK. Tel: +1 707 847 3661
- **Kongsgaard, Napa Valley 1999** ★★ ★★
Big and rich, sleek and unctuous, pedal-to-the-metal Chardonnay. Up to 4 years.
£55.71 (2000); VCI
- **Pahlmeyer Napa Valley 2000** ★★ ★★
Orange peel, toasted hazelnuts, and floral citrus notes. Up to 4 years.
£49.95; Rei
- **Arrowood, Sonoma County Reserve, Speciale Cuvee, Michel Berthoud, Chardonnay 2000** ★★ ★★ ★★

- A huge core of liquid minerals is given a surface of honeydew melon, peach, and apple. Extremely sophisticated and silky textured. Up to 4 years.
N/A UK. Tel: +1 800 938 5170
- **Truchard, Carneros-Napa Valley 2000** ★★ ★★
Very complex yet light on its feet. Lime, fig, hazelnut, pear and green apple flavours. Honeysuckle, vanilla and lemon on the nose. Up to 4 years.
N/A UK. Tel: +1 707 253 7153
- **Sonoma-Currer, Les Pierres 2000** ★★ ★★ ★★
Elegant and delicate with earthiness underneath, a long berry sorbet finish, and aromas of orange blossoms. Up to 5 years.
£32.95; Res

For full stockist list, see page 102.

(Jordan, Dehlinger, Kistler, and Gallo Sonoma). In Mendocino County, Anderson Valley Chardonnays reveal grapefruit and green apple flavours (Navarro, Greenwood Ridge, and Husch).

Many wineries have more than one style. Near Sebastopol, Marimar Torres makes 10,000 cases of a food-friendly bottling of Chardonnay from the 'Don Miguel' vineyard that shows pippin apples and fresh melon to the palate and hyacinth and lemon blossoms on the nose. She also makes a small amount of 'Doble Lias' Chardonnay which sits on twice the lees of an ordinary barrel with 20 months of lees contact, resulting in a huge, muscular wine that bears little resemblance to the regular bottling.

There's another force driving California Chardonnay toward a crisper, leaner style, and that's the Australians. Top producers Down Under have been getting away from the big Burgundian style of barrel fermentation, and are meeting with success. Now some Californians are thinking about eschewing oak altogether. Signe Zoller, winemaker at Meridian in Paso Robles, says: 'We're looking at the possibility of a

separate bottling with no oak.'

Sonoma-Cutrer Vineyards of Sonoma County, has been doing this for a while. Its Russian River Ranches bottling is the most popular restaurant wine in America, white or red. Why? 'Our style is higher acid, leaner wines designed to complement food,' says winemaker Terry Adams. 'We've been working with the same vineyards for 30 years, so there's a consistency that consumers can count on.'

FOLLOWERS OF FASHION

Spellman classifies California Chardonnays into 'popular style' – accounting for the bulk of the market – and 'fashionable style'.

'Over the 23 years I've been in the business,' he notes, 'the variety has gone from a wannabe Euro-imitator to a worldwide phenomenon, and run a gamut of styles. The current popular style is vaguely fruit driven, high in alcohol, and markedly flavoured by oak, lacking in acidity, which neither pairs well with well-designed food nor ages well.'

'That's the popular style. Then there's the fashionable style. I wrote over 10 years ago about the desire of many wine producers to "dirty up"

their Chardonnays – with wild yeast fermentation, non-temperature-controlled barrel fermentations, lees ageing and the like. Every year we read of "this year's model" of fashionable Chardonnay from a little-known region or grower. On the established fashion side, I would include Kistler, Marcassin, Rochioli, Talbott, Peter Michael; more recent additions include Kongsgaard, Ramey, Littorai, Rudd and Flowers. Others began life as fashion items but have become commodified by growth or new ownership: Matanzas Creek, Simi, Newton, Cuvaision and Chalona come to mind.'

Chardonnay still leads the market for California wines, but its lead is shrinking. In 1992, it commanded about 40% of the top-selling wine market and in 2002 just over 20%, says *Wine & Spirits* magazine.

For the future, few winemakers foresee any dramatic changes in style in the next 10 years except for a trend towards less noticeable oak. What's changing, they all agree, is that the quality of the fruit, due to replanting, is rocketing skywards and they couldn't be happier. **D**

Jeff Cox is a US-based wine writer.

10 BEST VALUES

■ **Chateau Souverain, Sonoma County 2001 ★★ ★★**

Bright acidity, and complex flavours with light toasty oak.
£14.99; BWC

■ **Bonterra Vineyards, Mendocino County 2000 ★★ ★**

A pretty, light wine with luscious fruit to pair with chicken and fish.
£8.49; Boo, Bot, Maj, Odd, Saf, Sai, Thr, Woi, Wka

■ **MacRostie, Carneros 2000 ★★ ★**

Those who think Chardonnays aren't food-friendly should try this apple and citrus *tour de force*.
N/A UK. \$19; tel: +1 707 996 4480

■ **Meridian, Santa Barbara 2001 ★★ ★**

A mass appeal wine with lush tropical

flavours of pineapple and coconut, and soft acids.

N/A UK. \$10; tel: +1 805 237 6000

■ **Cambria Vineyard, Katherine's Vineyard 2001 ★★ ★★**

Lush, vibrant tropical fruit flavours along with vanilla and pear.
KJa (case only)

■ **Chateau St Jean, Sonoma County 2001 ★★ ★**

A burnished wine with lemony citrus flavours and oak nuances.
N/A UK. \$14; tel: +1 707 259 4500

■ **Clos du Bois, Alexander Valley 2000 ★★ ★★**

A silky texture enfolds a basket of tropical fruits: pineapple, guava and coconut.
N/A UK. \$16; +1 707 857 1651

■ **Kendall-Jackson Vineyards, Vintners Reserve 2000 ★★ ★**

Peach, green apple, and melon flavours with butterscotch and toasty oak.
£8.99; Cos, Sai, Som

■ **Au Bon Climat, Santa Barbara County 2001 ★★ ★★**

Great concentration and acidity. This leans toward citrus and minerals rather than typical Santa Barbara tropical fruit.
£17.50; Har, L&S, M&V, Rei, Sel, Wmb, You

■ **Clos du Val, Carneros 2000 ★★ ★★**

Mature flavours of red apple and citrus are supported by firm acids.
£15.50; May

All wines can be kept for up to 4 years.

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