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TOP 100 WINES 2011



"I hope our wines always kind of have an elegant balance, but '09 was a year when we were able to have real maturity at slightly lower sugar. The '09s have levity. They're like ballet dancers. They're muscular and beautiful, but they're more weightless."

— John Kongsgaard, Kongsgaard Wines

Chardonnay

Earlier this year I prognosticated that American Chardonnay had snapped back from its baroque years ([here](#)) and was again ready to shine.

With one major exception, our tastings this year proved this theory beautifully, aided by the subtlety of the 2009 vintage.

There are serious winemakers making Chardonnay that speaks of its origins and potential, without having to resort to excess. It is, frankly, the best time in years to be drinking Chardonnay from these shores.

2010 Arnot-Roberts Watson Ranch Napa Valley Chardonnay (\$30, 13.2% alcohol):

Duncan Meyers and Nathan Roberts have turned out another stellar lineup this year for their micro-label, but this bottling from a vineyard in the very south end of Napa is more proof that Napa Chardonnay can thrive when handled with care. While their effort from nearby Green Island had more salinity, this is stony and steely, with ripe apple and an exotic pineapple-skin aspect, plus marjoram and lemon zest accents.

2009 Bergstrom Old Stones Willamette Valley Chardonnay (\$30, 13.9%):

Josh Bergstrom insists that Old Stones is for early drinking, but there's extraordinary depth here. Ripe and intense, this adds deep, creamy tones to bright apple, Meyer lemon and apricot flavors, with a wild-mushroom accent. A quintessence of Oregon Chardonnay.

2009 Kongsgaard Napa Valley Chardonnay

(\$75, 14.1%):

Many consider John Kongsgaard to be California's Chardonnay master, but this 2009 arguably is the finest Chardonnay he has made yet, and perhaps the one with the most nimble step. From the nonpareil Hudson and Hyde vineyards, it has a racier, tighter profile than usual, with a crazy level of focus; this wine stares you down and won't blink. Peach skin and lime pith, with a white-stone minerality, are just the start of the many seamless layers of flavor within.

2009 Hirsch Vineyards Sonoma Coast Chardonnay (\$50, 14%):

Hirsch's rare white bottling, fine-tuned by new winemaker Ross Cobb, harnesses dramatically powerful fruit from 3.9 acres planted on its coastal ridgetop in 1994 and 2006. Once again, a unique mix of aging in oak, steel and small glass vessels brings a fullness to the saline, mouthwatering presence of stone fruit edged with thyme, green apple and quince. Layered and pure, an expression of Chardonnay's true potential.

2009 Cartha Sonoma Coast Chardonnay (\$27, 13.5%):

A new value-minded project (the name means "those who do the work" in Sanskrit) from winemaker

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-Robert Parker

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Castello di Amorosa
NAPA VALLEY

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John Raytek (Ceritas) and vineyard manager Glenn Alexander. The Petaluma Gap is its geographic heart, and there's a cool mint aspect to dried peach, sandalwood and hay. The sort of refined effort that usually commands twice the price.

2009 Evening Land Vineyards La Source Seven Springs Vineyard Eola-Amity Hills Chardonnay (\$60, 13%):

Hollywood producer Mark Tarlov's new project has attracted a star roster of talent, including Larry Stone (Rubicon) and consultant Dominique Lafon. But his Oregon winemaker, Isabelle Meunier, deserves credit for evoking the best of a lauded Willamette Valley property. There is a laser focus to the flavors in this filigreed effort, as Meunier has found a nervy power to the fruit. It unfolds slowly, picking up flesh from beautiful flavors of lemon peel, dried honeycomb and green apple. Without an ounce of fat, this is Chardonnay expressed as pure sinew.

2009 Failla Estate Vineyard Sonoma Coast Chardonnay (\$44, 14.2%):

From Ehren Jordan's dry-farmed estate parcel near Cazadero comes a glorious, muscular specimen of California Chardonnay. A gorgeous 2010 bottling is almost on shelves, and yet this is still at least two years from being ready. Heathery wood aromas harmonize its taut accents of granite and marjoram and kaffir lime with powerful, dense lemon and pear skin flavors. A great mineral intensity signals that this is Chardonnay for the ages.

2010 Fess Parker Ashley's Sta. Rita Hills Chardonnay (\$35, 14.1%):

The vineyard formerly known as Ashley's is now owned by Bill Foley (and called Rancho Las Hermanas), but the Fess Parker label found a gorgeous, outgoing expression in this cooler year. Great saline intensity balances out ripe fig, Cavaillon melon and lime flavors, and a barrel-driven richness. Proof that a full-bore style can work when done right.

2009 Foxglove Central Coast Chardonnay (\$14, 13.9%):

While their single-vineyard efforts from 2009 impress on their own, there's something to be said for the gorgeous quality that Bob and Jim Varner harness in their larger-production Central Coast wine. Made in steel, brimming with quince and ripe pear and all the pretty tree-fruit flavors of Chardonnay, this is an example of the winemaking elite wanting to work with fruit that over-delivers. That two of the state's top talents are on a mission to make an everyday wine is an example that far more winemakers should emulate.

2009 Hanzell Sonoma County Chardonnay (\$60, 14.5%):

Under winemaker Michael McNeill, Hanzell has found a solid return to its best attributes: a powerful expression of a famous Sonoma site. The '09 is marked by a welcome subtlety — quiet oak appearing more as a welcome roast-peanut accent (think of it like being at a favorite baseball game) to profound lemon and fig fruit, with pastry cream and heather accents. Its evident mineral power and pure fruit portend a long life ahead.

2009 Sandhi Santa Barbara County Chardonnay (\$28, 13.3%):

This new label from a star lineup of Rajat Parr (Mina Group), investor Charles Banks and winemaker Sashi Moorman is upending the conventional wisdom about the Sta. Rita Hills. Not to dismiss the extraordinary quality of its Sanford & Benedict bottling, but this more modest effort — basically declassified S&B made in neutral oak — shows tremendous stony depth. Lots of lemon pith, tangerine, green olive and salt, with winter melon and a true minerality that's matched by subtle lees presence. Focused, pure and a stunning example of the new California Chardonnay.

2009 Stoller Vineyards SV Estate Dundee Hills Chardonnay (\$28, 14%):

Bill Stoller's site, at the hands of winemaker Melissa Burr, remains a top spot for not only Pinot but Chardonnay, too. This latest is concentrated and stylish, with lots of pastry cream and nuanced oak giving richness to the energetic lemon pulp, peach and Anjou pear.

2009 Tor Kenward Wente Clone Napa Valley Chardonnay (\$54, 14.6%):

Industry veteran Tor Kenward and winemaker Jeff Ames have taken the template of blockbuster Chardonnay, applied it to a rocky portion of the Hudson vineyard, and devised a savvy tribute to the Wente vine clone. Hefty and polished, with evident oak and roasted lemon aromas balanced by the Wente nuance: lemongrass, caramel and a pear-drop sweetness. A gorgeously layered effort for this heavy-hitting style.

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