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# Wine Spectator

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## —CHARDONNAY'S

# BRIGHT FUTURE

*Vintners explore new directions for California's signature white wine*

BY JAMES LAUBE

Chardonnay, but also the shifting mood and tastes of consumers.

One major development has been wines with little or even no oak, a change from the barrel-fermented style long associated with California Chardonnay. In addition, there has been a greater emphasis on acidity, vibrancy, elegance and structure, a trend that became more pronounced with the 2012 and 2013 vintages. Whatever one thinks of the style, it would be hard not to notice the lower prices that can accompany unoaked bottlings, which avoid the costs of expensive French barrels. (There are also more affordable Chardonnays in general due to the competition engendered by having a wider range of options on the market.)

Examples of this style include the Marimar Estate Chardonnay Russian River Valley Don Miguel Vineyard Acero Unoaked 2014 (91, \$29), a sharply focused white offering, flamboyant mix of flavors;

rich and juicy Saracina Chardonnay Mendocino County Unoaked 2015 (90, \$18), made by the family that built Fetzer into a powerhouse; and the Foley Chardonnay Sta. Rita Hills Steel 2014 (91, \$30), which is lively and elegant.

"There are all kinds of Chardonnay at Ramey Wine Cellars. One of the deans has been making Chardonnay here since fire and fueled a white wine boom.

Addressing the range of styles available is a question because it involves so many variables. Making the baseline decision of what style to pursue has many interpretations or trimmer, more refined renditions. A host of considerations to address, including whether or not to use malolactic or secondary fermentations and whether or not to use



Spanish native Marimar Torres, pictured here at her Russian River Valley estate, produced an outstanding example of the unoaked style of Chardonnay in 2014.

market, Ramey says, since consumers have to keep up with these swings and adjustments.

"If Chardonnay is overoaked, let's go stainless," Ramey explains of the thinking. "If alcohol is too high, let's go 'in pursuit of balance'"—a reference to a movement started in 2011 that aims to produce wines of greater subtlety and restraint, with higher acidity and lower alcohol. Ramey thinks that the IPOB influence has been positive overall, leading vintners to reassess their goals and opening up opportunities for different expressions.

That said, many veteran producers are staying the course with their well-established styles, even if there's some fine-tuning along the way. In addition to Ramey, this group includes top estates such as Aubert, Paul Hobbs, Peter Michael, Mount Eden, Lewis and Rochioli.

"The way we deal with Chardonnay is we see the wisdom of the past

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referring to the approach that he and his partners took in the 1990s, involving spartan yields, fully fermented, barrel aging, native yeasts and so on. "I want to produce wines that reflect terroir more than show their cards earlier.

The challenge facing winemakers has to do with "balance," he says. "In classic white Burgundy, you could get them. Good Chardonnay has 12-14 percent alcohol naturally." So can you get it with even greater ease, giving vintners

more options to pick at many levels of ripeness. That helps to account for the wide range of styles, from trimmer, steelier versions to more opulent interpretations. This makes each winemaking decision all the more important.