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But Here Are 10 Chardonnays from California That I Like (Really)

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Please don't take the impression from the previous post that I dislike all chardonnays made in California. What I dislike are badly-made wines — that is, thoughtlessly-made and overmanipulated wines — of any grape, genre and geographical origin. The truth is that I like California chardonnays quite a lot, especially when they capture the essence of what I think of as classic California-ness, a variety of bright ripeness and textural power married to clean acidity and a profound mineral element.

There's no need for the Golden State's producers to adhere strenuously to Burgundian and Chablisienne models, as glorious as the chardonnay wines from those hallowed regions can be, just as there's no need to suppress the natural exuberance that California's many and richly varied microclimates often impart, especially in warmer areas. There's also no need, however, to exaggerate that exuberance through the slavish use of French oak and the (wholly natural but easily subdued) malolactic process that occurs in barrel and transforms crisp malic ("apple-like") acid to creamy lactic ("milk-like") acid.

Ripeness is essential, but balance is all.

*The Nickel & Nickel chardonnays are barrel-fermented but do not go through the malolactic process. Oak is typically fairly restrained; both of these wines received nine months in French barrels, 42 percent new oak for the Truchard, 55 percent new oak for the Medina. Despite that fact, you feel the oak a bit more in the Nickel & Nickel Truchard Vineyard Chardonnay 2006, Napa-Carneros, than in the Nickel & Nickel Medina Vineyard Chardonnay 2006, Russian River Valley, Sonoma County. Still, the Truchard is sleek and smooth, almost lustrous; it's a golden blond, while the Medina is more platinum. The Medina, my favorite of this pair, reveals tremendous presence and verve, incredible layering of limestone and shale, of rich spicy fruit and vivid acidity; the texture is almost talc-like yet it retains electrifying crispness. Each is a terrific chardonnay, but I give the Truchard a rating of Excellent and the Medina, well, it has to be Exceptional. Drink these now through 2012 or '13.

*Blackstone Sonoma Reserve Chardonnay 2006, Sonoma County

*Raymond Reserve Chardonnay 2006, Napa Valley

*Markham Chardonnay 2006, Napa Valley

*Handley Vineyard Chardonnay 2006, Anderson Valley, Mendocino County

*Clos du Val Chardonnay 2006, Napa Valley

*Sonoma-Loeb Private Reserve Chardonnay 2006, Sonoma County

*Hendry Barrel-Fermented Chardonnay 2004, Napa Valley

*Oakville Ranch Chardonnay 2006, Napa Valley