

# CALIFORNIA'S GREAT WHITES



Four decades after a young California winery bested some of the top Premier Crus in Burgundy, a slew of exceptional Napa Valley winemakers have taken up the craft, making world-class chardonnays that prove the victory in 1976 was anything but a fluke.

by SHAUN TOLSON

Forty years ago this May, British wine merchant Steven Spurrier organized a blind tasting of French and Californian wines to mark the bicentennial of US independence. Spurrier, whose Parisian shop and affiliated wine academy catered to the English-speaking expatriate community living in the City of Light, believed that the competition—since branded the Judgment of Paris—would validate the quality of the wines made by some of California's best vintners but would ultimately reaffirm the superiority of the wines produced in France. Yet the event, which was held in a small room adjacent to the patio bar at the InterContinental Hotel in the 9th Arrondissement of Paris, produced far different results. Californian wines claimed top honors in both the red

and white categories. In fact, Chateau Montelena's 1973 chardonnay ran away with the victory, besting Domaine Roulot's 1973 Meursault Charmes premier cru by 5.5 points.

"What the Judgment of Paris did, it gave winemakers in Napa Valley, California, America, and the rest of the New World the confidence to go up against the established European masters," says Matt Crafton, the current head winemaker at Chateau Montelena. "It opened so many doors for our industry. For example, at that time in the early 1970s, we couldn't get any of our wines on menus in New York or Chicago restaurants. But after the Judgment of Paris there was suddenly a demand for it." ▸



*Clockwise from top left: Far Niente chardonnay; Chateau Montelena; Aubert Estate Vineyard.*

Photos: (top left) Jason Tracchi; (bottom) Jak Wonderly



To say that Napa Valley's wine industry has changed significantly since Chateau Montelena shocked the world—especially the long-established viticultural monarchies of Burgundy—would be an understatement. Back in the late 1960s and early 1970s, chenin blanc and riesling were the dominant white varieties in the valley. In fact, when the Barrett family took ownership of Chateau Montelena in 1972, the first wine that they produced was a 1972 riesling. It wasn't until the mid- to late 1970s that chardonnay ascended to its throne as the most prominent white varietal in Napa. Today, it is the second most prolific wine varietal in the valley behind cabernet sauvignon. More than 30,000 tons of chardonnay grapes were harvested in 2014, compared to the 2,187 tons that were harvested in 1973.

Much of the valley's growth as it pertains to chardonnay can be attributed to a new clone of the chardonnay vine that was genetically engineered at the University of California Davis during the early 1980s. The vine was said to be perfect for its consistent, plentiful yields. However, respected Napa Valley winemakers criticized those new clones—and still do—for their fruit, which they argue has little character or depth of flavor. Today, more than 200 Napa Valley wineries make chardonnay, but the fruits of their efforts are not created equal. The most exceptional producers make wines that each have their own nuances and unique flavor profiles, and those wineries all share one integral characteristic: They are all connected, in some fashion, to the premier crus of France.

In Chateau Montelena's case, that connection manifests itself in the form of inspiration. "We want a wine that ages like Burgundy but tastes like Napa Valley," says Crafton, who acknowledges that the most notable difference between the winery's production today and its production in the early 1970s is a better understanding of where different varieties grow best in the valley. Today, the vast majority of Chateau Montelena's chardonnay is grown in a vineyard off the beaten path in the Oak Knoll District. "The vineyard is owned by the Hanna family and it's the perfect embodiment of chardonnay," Crafton explains. "It's the perfect combination of soil, altitude, and sun exposure."

As for how well Chateau Montelena's chardonnay ages, the winery sells a library pack of six vintages (2007–2012) to allow oenophiles to discover that for themselves. It also sells older vintages from its private cellar on a case-by-case basis. "We hold back a significant portion of our vintages every year and make them available later to show people that our chardonnay does age well," Crafton says. "It's something that we always believed in."

Napa Valley chardonnays that possess cellaring potential may not be common, but they are not altogether impossible to find. About 20 miles southeast of Chateau Montelena, Director of Winemaking Dirk Hampson works with winemaker Nicole Marchesi at Far Niente, a winery that was founded in 1885 by one of the >



Clockwise from top left: Chateau Montelena; Far Niente cellar; Aubert Winery.



Photos: (Bottom left) Jak Wonderly

## Napa's Knockouts

A look at some of the Valley's best chardonnay producers.

### AUBERT WINES

**Location:** Calistoga.

**Founded:** 2000.

**Annual chardonnay production:** 8,000 cases.

**Prices:** \$85–\$95.

**Noteworthy:** Vineyards feature chardonnay genetic material that can be traced back to the revered vineyards of Burgundy. [aubertwines.com](http://aubertwines.com)

### CHATEAU MONTELENA

**Location:** Calistoga.

**Founded:** 1888.

**Annual chardonnay produced:** 55,000 cases.

**Prices:** From \$50.

**Noteworthy:** The winery's Jade Lake was formed accidentally in the late 1950s when the chateau's third owner hit a natural spring while attempting to dig a traditional moat for the property. [montelena.com](http://montelena.com)

### FAR NIENTE

**Location:** Oakville.

**Founded:** 1885.

**Annual chardonnay produced:** 25,000 cases.

**Prices:** From \$65.

**Noteworthy:** The first wine caves in North America since the turn of the 20th century were dug at the winery in 1980. Today, Far Niente features 40,000 square feet of caves. [farniente.com](http://farniente.com)

### LEWIS CELLARS

**Location:** Oak Knoll Distric.

**Founded:** 1992.

**Annual chardonnay production:** 3,000–4,000 cases.

**Prices:** \$55–\$75.

**Noteworthy:** The winery has produced the same amount of wine each year since 2000, which has allowed the Lewis family to execute all phases of the business themselves. [lewiscellars.com](http://lewiscellars.com)

### MORLET FAMILY VINEYARDS

**Location:** St. Helena.

**Founded:** 2006.

**Annual chardonnay production:** 900–1,400 cases.

**Prices:** \$80–\$145.

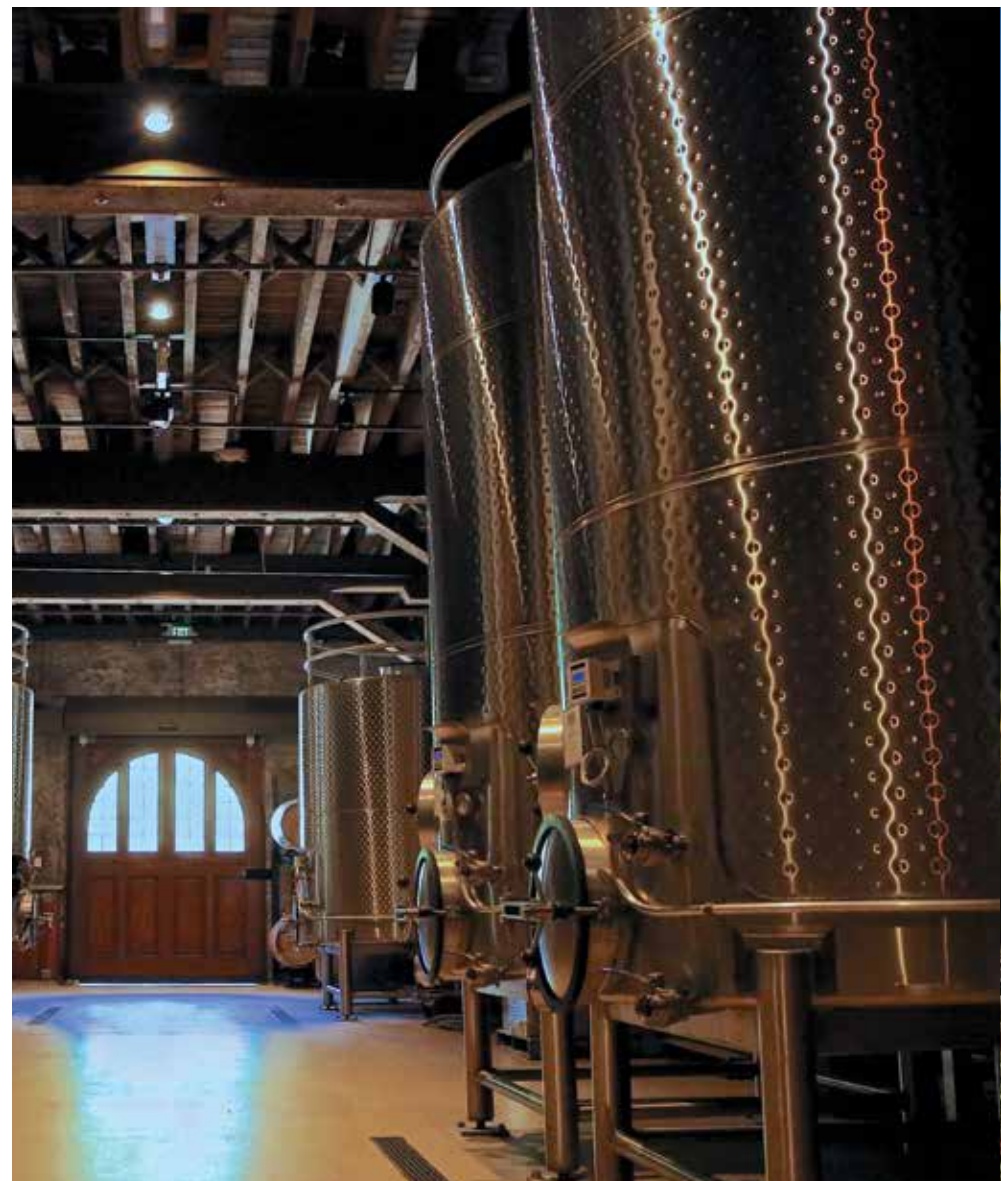
**Noteworthy:** Appointments must be scheduled for tours and tastings. There is a \$100 charge per person for those tours; however, the fee is waived if a guest purchases at least six bottles of wine following the tasting. [morletwines.com](http://morletwines.com)



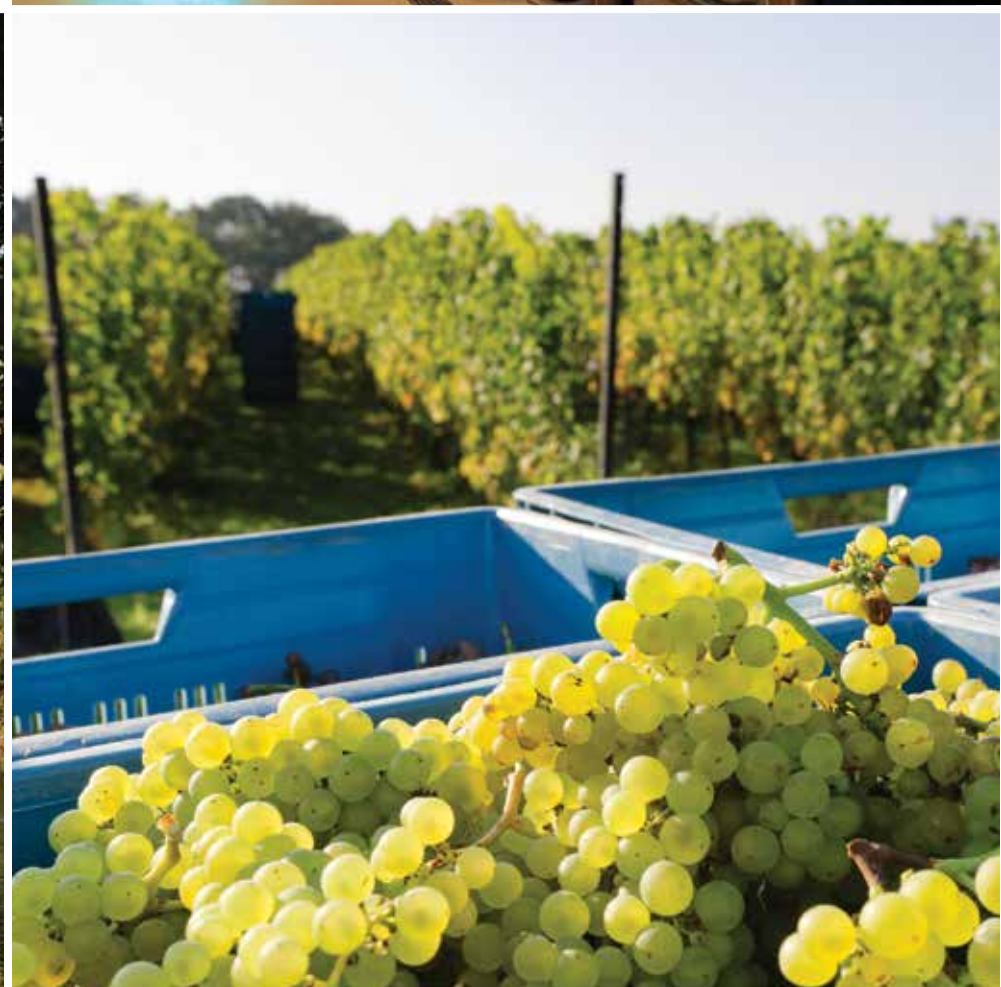
many hopeful miners who flocked to northern California during the Gold Rush. Hampson was a student at UC Davis at the time of the Judgment of Paris, and later spent two harvests in Europe, spending time in Bordeaux at Château Mouton Rothschild in 1981, before joining the Far Niente team the following year. Like Chateau Montelena, the winery makes a chardonnay that ages gracefully, and it releases a limited number of bottles of those aged vintages through its Cave Collection.

“From an empirical point of view, we did not set out to make a wine that was age-worthy. But how we have gone about finding a wine with great balance has produced a wine that ends up being able to age,” says Hampson, who notes that the winery’s chardonnay is typically made up of a blend of grapes from as many as 50 vineyard lots. “What happens with the aging is that the floral notes and the sense of fruitiness decrease, while a slight earthy or nuttiness increases. They’re all pleasurable alternatives—no better or worse—but they only come about with aging.”

On the northern limits of Napa, less than three miles east of Chateau Montelena’s revered chardonnay vineyard, former race car driver Randy Lewis manages his family’s namesake winery, Lewis Cellars, and produces four chardonnays in limited quantities. In the spring, the winery releases its more powerful chardonnays—its single-vineyard Barcaglia Lane and its Reserve Chardonnay—which are bigger and bolder, Lewis explains, because they’re blended from the richest-tasting barrels of the season. “Our goal is to make a big, fairly rich chardonnay but with good balance and nice acidity on the finish,” he says. “You can have richness and balance at the same time if you do it right.”



*Clockwise from top left: Chateau Montelena Cellar; Chateau Montelena Estate Vineyards; bottles from Lewis Cellars; chardonnay grapes; Jade Lake at Chateau Montelena.*



Photos: (Bottom center) Iiu92458/Stock



Lewis’ indoctrination into wine began during the 1970s when he was racing on the Formula 3 circuit in Europe. Lewis would spend his time away from the track exploring the quaint villages in the area, and on many of those sojourns he would end up touring local wineries and vineyards. He fell in love with French wines, those from the Rhone Valley in particular, laying a foundation for wine appreciation that he tapped into almost 20 years later when he and his wife Debbie founded their Napa Valley winery in 1992.

Around that same time, Frenchman Luc Morlet was introduced to Napa Valley viticulture. Like Lewis, Morlet’s love of wine originated in France, but Morlet’s connection goes far deeper—he grew up working in his family’s pinot noir and chardonnay vineyards, cultivating grapes that went into the family’s Champagne, Pierre Morlet & Fils. After earning a master’s degree in oenology from Université de Reims (as well as a viticulture degree from École Viticole de Champagne and an MBA in wine business from Dijon Business School in Burgundy), Morlet spent five years learning the winemaking craft via internships throughout France before taking a winemaker position at a French subsidiary in St. Helena, Calif.

In 2006, after more than a decade spent as head winemaker for a handful of top labels in Napa Valley (including Peter Michael Winery), Morlet and his wife began producing wine in extremely limited quantities under their own label, Morlet Family Vineyards. “I grew up with the notion that terroir plays a huge role in chardonnay,” says Morlet. “It is about expressing the terroir and being as authentic as possible.” >



Morlet Family Winery



Because of that, Morlet selected two vineyards for his chardonnays, both of which have soils that are rich in minerals. In that way, Morlet's chardonnays are Burgundian in style, or "mineral-driven," as he describes them. But Morlet is quick to add that he is not attempting to copy Burgundy wines. "I focus on the mineral aspect so it gives the wine a lightness," he says. "You cannot hide the climate that we have. You have to have a richness to be authentic. It is a balancing act."

Richness is also at the core of Mark Aubert's chardonnays. Aubert was born in Napa Valley, raised in St. Helena, and graduated from Cal State Fresno with a winemaking degree in 1985. It was around that time—after he learned about clones of chardonnay in Napa Valley that could be traced back to the Grand Crus of France—that he cultivated a passion for chardonnay. His interest in those old vines led him to the Peter Michael Winery, where some of those clones were planted, and he spent a decade there as the label's winemaker. Today, Aubert produces wine under his own namesake label and makes chardonnays from vines with genetic lineage that can be traced back to France.

All seven of Aubert's chardonnays have cellaring potential anywhere from 7 to 15 years or longer, but he doesn't speak much about that. Instead, he talks

passionately about the unctuousness of the wines, which reflects the warm California climate. "We're in the flavors and fragrances business," says Aubert. "I'm a big aficionado of candy and perfumes. They play well into winemaking."

Aubert describes his chardonnays as "hedonistic." It is a style that Aubert prefers, since chardonnay is often poured to begin a meal. "They're usually the first on the table, if you're going to have a white first," he says. "We want to give people memories, and there's one guaranteed way to do that: by pumping up the character."

A quick survey of Napa Valley's chardonnay production today speaks volumes of the varietal's evolution in the region since the Judgment of Paris; but according to Hampson at Far Niente, there is a far more important element that tells the story of that transformation. "We tended back then to compare ourselves to the French," he says of the Napa winemakers' perspective during the 1970s. "Now we look to Napa Valley and what others around here are doing and what fits this climate and these soils. There's a collaboration between great growers and winemakers to keep improving the wine [that we produce], but it's being improved with an eye to what fits Napa Valley." ♦

Photo: M.J. Wickham



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