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Six Chardonnays from Mount Veeder: Give Thanks

Posted by Fredric Koepfel



For the July 31st issue of the *Wine Spectator*, veteran columnist and taster James Laube wrote the lead article, “California’s Best Chardonnays: Top 30 Producers.” With the exception of longtime writers and pundits like Dan Berger and Charles E. Olken, Laube probably knows more about the wines of California and the history of its industry in the last three or four decades than anyone, so naturally it’s instructive to see his take on what’s going on with the chardonnay grape in the Golden State and his roster of the 30 best estates and wineries. Since Laube writes for a magazine format, one can see why he limited his selection to 30 and a short paragraph to each. Matters were different when he wrote the book *California’s Great Chardonnays*, published in 1990 by Wine Spectator Press; in that tome, Laube included 74 producers, devoting two to four pages of descriptions and notes apiece.

It’s interesting to compare the list of “Great Chardonnays” from 1990 to the “Top 30 Producers” of 2012; a considerable amount of attrition in several areas has occurred in 22 years. Many of the wineries that produced great chardonnay wines in 1990 don’t exist anymore or were acquired and absorbed by other companies or went through an unfortunate transition to lesser quality. And the reverse proposition is true; some of the “Top 30 Producers” of chardonnay wines in the article weren’t a gleam in their founders’ eyes in 1990, while others, like Rodney Strong, are included now because of improved performance. In fact, only five producers from the earlier book make it onto the present roster: Beringer, Hanzell, Kistler, Robert Mondavi and Mount Eden.

When Laube describes or reviews the top wines, he emphasizes richness and complexity, though he usually tempers his tastes by mentioning brightness, acidity, poise and elegance, qualities that I wholeheartedly endorse. Actually, of course, I would take brightness, acidity, poise and elegance over richness any day (though not complexity), and it puzzles me to read in Laube’s reviews for this article

A little like a top-rated chardonnay



(and seen in many past issues of the Wine Spectator) praise given to such attributes as butterscotch and roasted marshmallow. I cannot for the life of me conceive why anyone would want a chardonnay to smell or taste like butterscotch or roasted marshmallows, or if they tasted such a wine wouldn't spit it out in horror. Butterscotch belongs on sundaes and the proper place for roasted marshmallows is at the end of sticks held over a campfire while a gaggle of 12-year-olds unhappily drones "Kumbaya."

All of which leads to this post's focus, and that's my reviews of six chardonnay wines from Mount Veeder, a series of steep hillsides, stretching up some 2,000 feet, at the southwestern corner of Napa Valley and part of the Mayacamas Range that separates Napa and Sonoma counties. None of these wineries is included as a Top Producer in Laube's story, and only one (Hess Collection) is mentioned in the brief reviews that follow, but I found them pretty damned brilliant. No butterscotch or roasted marshmallows in these mountainside chardonnays, no "toasty oak"; this is, rather, one of the most elegant groups of chardonnay I have tasted, though they're also powerful, flavorful and multifaceted. I bestowed four Excellent and two Exceptional ratings.

These wines were samples for review. Butterscotch sundae image from foodsnoobz.com



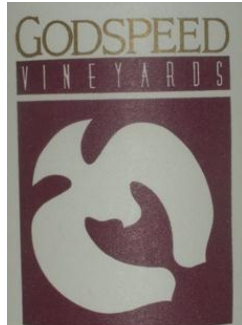
Fontanella
FAMILY WINERY

Fontanella Family Winery Chardonnay 2010, Mount Veeder, Napa Valley. Our first wine in this Mount Veeder line-up aged nine months in French

oak, 33 percent new barrels; a smidgeon of the wine, 12 percent, went through malolactic fermentation (henceforward abbreviated "malo"). The color is pale gold; the first impression is of a chardonnay that's clean and fresh and bright, yet very spicy in its ripe pineapple-grapefruit scents and flavors given some gravity by bastions of flint and limestone. There's a touch of white peach and nectarine, and a texture that's almost talc-like in its combination of firmness and softness, enlivened by crisp acidity. The wine gains power in the glass; this is a mouthful of chardonnay that asserts its presence on the palate but manages to achieve a measure of elegance too in its balance and

integration. 14.4 percent alcohol. Now through 2015 or '17. Production was 600 cases. Winemaker is Jeff Fontanella. Excellent. About \$34.

I wrote about this wine at the end of October last year; here's the [review](#). You can see that the intervening months have given the wine space to settle down a bit.



Godspeed Vineyards Chardonnay 2010, Mount Veeder, Napa Valley. The regimen here is 11 months in French oak barrels, 80 percent neutral (used several times) and 20 percent new; the wine does not go through malo. The color is pale gold; aromas of smoky lemon curd and lemon balm are woven with touches of mango, pear, yellow plums and pineapple and, after a few moments in the glass, hints of toasted hazelnuts and cloves. The wine is rich, ripe, downright gorgeous, but the pulchritude is blessedly tempered by resounding acidity and a burgeoning element of limestone-like minerality for a sense of acutely honed balance. However juicy and bountiful, the Godspeed Chardonnay '10 is quite dry, dense, almost chewy, yet suave and smooth, and the finish is long and spicy. 14.1 percent alcohol. Now through 2016 to '18. Production was 550 cases. Excellent. About \$28.



Hess Collection Chardonnay 2010, Mount Veeder, Napa Valley. This pale straw-gold chardonnay is given no new oak, aging, rather, for nine months in four- to five-year-old French barrels; there is no malo. Produced from vines planted at altitudes ranging from 1,300 to 2,000 feet elevation, the wine offers a brilliant bouquet of spiced lemons and pears with pineapple and grapefruit, quince and ginger in the background and a high note of honeysuckle. The wine delivers tremendous power and gravitas, as well as lip-smackin' stone-fruit and citrus flavors bolstered by crackling acidity, all elements assembled with lucent fleetness and transparency. Not gorgeous but lovely; not flattering to the palate but subtle and supple. The finish is packed with spice, limestone and flint. 14.4 percent alcohol. Now through 2016 or '18. Production was 392 cases. Excellent. About \$35.



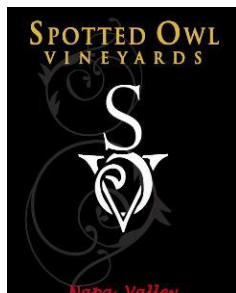
Mayacamas Vineyards Chardonnay 2009, Mount Veeder, Napa Valley. In this chardonnay, among the group, we see the longest period of time in oak: six months in large American casks; one year in French barrels, 20 percent new; the wine does not go through malo. The result? A "Wow!" as my first note. The color is pale straw-gold; aromas of honeysuckle and jasmine, steel and limestone, quince and fig and ginger discreetly

unfold hints of candied grapefruit and pineapple. The wine, dry and spare in the mouth, bristles with vitality and energy and displays awesome purity and intensity in its blending of fruit, acid and mineral elements; despite the sensation of elevating, crystalline, almost balletic qualities, there's underlying earthiness through the finish, a seeming connection to soil and bedrock. 14.5 percent alcohol. Now through 2018 to '19. Production was 1,156 cases. Could this please be my house chardonnay? Exceptional. About \$30, a **Remarkable Price for the Quality**.



Y. Rousseau "Milady" Chardonnay 2009, Mount Veeder, Napa Valley. Again, no malo in the making of this wine, though it's barrel-fermented, using natural yeasts, and aged 11 months on the lees in French oak, of which 20 percent of the barrels were new. (The fruit derived from the Godspeed Vineyard.) The wine is quite fresh and bright, very pure and intense (if My Readers don't mind that I repeat these important words), dense, chewy, spicy. The color is shimmering pale gold; classic notes of pineapple and grapefruit open to hints of cloves and toasted hazelnuts. This chardonnay is moderately creamy, smooth and svelte but heightened by chiming acidity and scintillating limestone and flint-like minerality. The finish is long, dry and spicy and packed with minerals. 14.5 percent alcohol. Now through 2016 to '17. Production was 195 cases. Winemaker was Yannick Rousseau. Excellent. About \$36.

I wrote about this wine at the end of October last year; here's the [review](#).



Spotted Owl Vineyards Chardonnay 2010, Mount Veeder, Napa Valley. Here is the earthiest, the boldest and ripest of these six chardonnays; I wrote "very spicy," followed by "very spicy." Here, also, are terrific tone and energy, in a wine that feels almost visceral in its drawing upon the essential core of the chardonnay grape's character and its frank lively appeal to the palate, yet it abdicates not a nuance of the finest detail of its pineapple-grapefruit scents and flavors layered with camellia and talc, pear and yellow plum, cloves and figs. Wood-wise, this was barrel-fermented with natural yeasts and aged 11 months in French oak, 25 percent new barrels; information about malolactic was not available. If acidity and limestone minerality could glitter, this wine would light up a dark room. The finish is long, dense, lithe and spicy. 14.8 percent alcohol. Now through 2018 or '20. Inaugural release of this winery's chardonnay; 120 cases. Winemaker was

Rolando Herrera. Exceptional. About \$45.

5 RESPONSES