

Fantesca, St. Supery Chardonnays Wow Tasters

Napa winemakers use less oak to create fruitier wine

By Emily Bell
FOR THE STAR

Not so long ago, the phrase “Napa Chardonnay” conjured an image of buttery roundness and tropical ripeness. Consumers expected a wine lavished with oak, and made almost universally approachable by a hint of sweetness. While

hedonistic and accessible, these wines did not exactly showcase fruit or provenance, and were difficult to pair with food.



Of course, some producers (Stony Hill Vineyard comes immediately to mind) have maintained a house style apart from the big chard trend. And whether it's politics or wine, it seems that with time the pendulum eventually swings the other way. Accordingly, many Napa winemakers are pulling back stylistically: Some have reduced the amount of oak used in vinification, or decreased the percentage of wine put through malolactic fermentation (the bacterial process responsible for buttery flavors and mellowing of acid in white wine). Others have eliminated one or both of these elements completely.

When a wine spends time in oak, its fla-



John Waters Jr. photo

Trefethen winemaker Peter Luthi was part of the August wine tasting panel sponsored by the St. Helena Star and Napa Valley Vintners. The panelists judged some 16 Napa Valley chardonnays.

vors concentrate through evaporation. Oak also contributes flavor (toast, nuts, caramel, and spice, to name a few) to the wine, and by allowing for controlled oxidation, oak maturation helps with the evolution of flavor and integration of the finished product.

Oak's influence on a wine can be appealing — turning apple to spiced apple tart, or adding layers of butterscotch or toast. However, excessive use of oak can mask fruit flavors in a wine, ultimately resulting in a less interesting finished product. When combined with too much malolactic fermentation, and a touch of residual sugar, the resulting wine can be flabby and one-dimensional. Eliminating oak entirely produces a more fruit-driven and focused wine, usually quite food-friendly, though arguably less rich and complex than one

Tasters like unoaked chardonnays

By David Stoneberg
FOR THE STAR

Tasters including Trefethen's Peter Luthi and Honig's Kristin Belair were quite surprised, after a recent blind tasting of 16 Napa Valley chardonnays, to find that they really liked them.

“There were three wines in the second flight that I really enjoyed,” Belair said. The chardonnays tasted were produced with little or no oak aging, and Belair added there was only one wine with an overripe flavor. “There is just so much out there that is laden with oak,” she said. “What you're tasting is just the oak.”

Luthi said he enjoyed the unoaked chardonnays, adding that he thinks the times of the big, oakey, buttery chardonnays are finished and added producers are moving back to more fruity wines. He added the wines are “way more interesting than

Tasters

- Kristin Belair of Honig
- Stephan Blicher of BP Wines
- Brett DeLeuze of ZD
- Peter Luthi of Trefethen
- Coral Mika of BP Wines

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aged in oak.

Late last month, a panel of wine tasters met at CIA's Rudd Center for Professional Wine Studies to taste a selection of chardonnays made in a variety of styles, from rich and oaky to lean and crisp. Of the 16 wines tasted, the panelists liked the following seven best:

Flight One

The **Fantesca Estate and Winery 2006 Los Carneros Chardonnay** (\$45) was the panel's favorite wine from flight one. The wine was barrel fermented in French oak, with 45 percent of the barrels being new, and spent a total of 10 months in barrel and on the lees, during which time battonage (stirring the dead yeast cells and other solids) was completed every two weeks. Thirty percent of the wine was put through malolactic fermentation.

Tasters found vanilla, butterscotch, gooseberry, mineral, quince, pear, and spice. Several commented on the wine's crisp acidity, and one summed it up with the comment, "A very nice wine."

The Keenan Winery 2006 Spring Mountain District Chardonnay (\$29) was the panel's second place wine of those tasted in flight one. The

majority of the juice was fermented in French and American oak, with 20 percent fermenting in stainless steel. The wine was not put through malolactic fermentation, and the portion fermented in oak matured in barrel (on the lees) for seven months, with battonage occurring weekly.

Panelists noted a "Nice clean fruit aroma," with red delicious apple, tropical fruit, and lemon. One commented that despite the wine's significant oak program, the resulting product was "not oaky." Butterscotch, a "mineral texture," and good balance were also cited.

The Domaine Chandon 2007 Unoaked Carneros Chardonnay (\$24) was the panel's third place wine. As the name implies, this wine spent no time in barrel. It likewise was not put through malolactic fermentation.

Tasters found pear, papaya, guava, citrus, "green apple Jolly Ranchers," and fresh grass. Texturally, tasters commented on the wines "nice roundness." Several panelists also commented that the wine had sauvignon-blanc like characteristics.

Flight Two

The St. Supery Vineyards and Winery 2007 Napa Valley Oak-Free Chardonnay (\$22) was the panel's top choice from flight two. Another wine made without oak or malolactic fermentation, this chardonnay showed tasters a "pretty floral nose," with

ripe tropical notes, including pineapple and plantains, along with lemon custard, apple, quince, aloe and spice. Several tasters also commented on the wine's good acidity, but while one thought it showed "good balance," another felt it was "too hot on the finish."

Panelists voted the 2006 Trefethen Family Vineyards Estate Chardonnay (\$33, Oak Knoll District) the second place wine in flight two. The wine was fermented both in oak barrel (60 percent) and stainless steel (40 percent). Twenty four percent of the juice was put through malolactic fermentation, and the wine spent a total of nine months in oak, on the lees.

Tasters noted floral aromas, tropical fruit, citrus, as well as barrel-driven vanilla, cigar, brioche, and white pepper. One thought that the wine was "linear" and "angular" with good minerality. Another summed up the wine as "good balance throughout — a very nice wine," but still another thought that the wine was "dull."

The 2006 Silverado Vineyards Vineburg Chardonnay (Napa Valley, \$30) and 2006 ZD Reserve Chardonnay (Napa Valley, \$55) tied for third place in flight two.

The Silverado Vineyards Vineburg Chardonnay was fermented in a combination of French oak (59 percent used; 13 percent new), and stainless steel

barrels. Battonage was done weekly, and the wine matured a total of 6 months in barrel. A quarter of the wine was put through malolactic fermentation.

The wine showed tasters pear, floral aromas, spice, green apple, pear, wet wood, beeswax, artificial tropical fruit, beer, spritz and flint. One commented on the wine's "good balance," and another noted a "slight bitterness."

The De Leuze Reserve Chardonnay was fermented and matured entirely in American oak barrels and was not put through malolactic fermentation.

Oak aromas stood out for tasters here, with the most emphatic note being, "Smells like a lumberyard!" though one felt there was "very nice oak and fruit integration." Panelists also found the wine rich, with decent acid, and aromas of brown sugar, vanilla, yogurt, and coconut.

(Emily Bell is the California sales manager for Ehlers Estate and a freelance food and wine writer. The wines tasted were provided by member wineries of the Napa Valley Vintners, the nonprofit trade association representing more than 300 wineries. Many wineries offer local residents discounts on their wines through the Napa Neighbor program, visit www.napavintners.com/programs and click on Napa Neighbor to learn more.)

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oaked chardonnays." He said consumers like the fruity, cleaner chardonnays.

Brett deLeuze from ZD Wines, though, disagreed: "People love the chardonnays that are big, rich and with a buttery style," he said, adding that Rombauer is one of the few producers that make "big" chardonnays, which were popular some 20 years ago.

Belair said she's glad the wine was left out of oak barrels. "Some of these wines are subtle and more complicated" than the oakey chardonnays. The panel's coordinator, Stefan Blicher, agreed. "Chardonnay is defined by how it is made," he said.

Two flights were tasted:

The top wines from the first flight were: **2006 Fantesca Estate & Winery** from the Carneros AVA; a 2006 Keenan Winery from the Spring Mountain district; and a 2007

Domaine Chandon unoaked chardonnay from Carneros.

The top wines in the second flight were: 2007 St. Supery Vineyards & Winery, oak-free chardonnay from the Napa Valley; 2006 Trefethen Family Vineyards estate chardonnay from the Oak Knoll district; and two wines tied for third place: 2006 Silverado Vineyards Vineburg Chardonnay from Carneros and 2006 ZD reserve from the Napa Valley.