

Wine Spectator Weekly

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GET WINE SPECTATOR RATINGS HERE FIRST—EVERY THURSDAY

A recent comment in the *Weekly* opposing the ABC (Anything But Chardonnay) sentiment drew a spirited response on *Wine Spectator's* Forums, with many wine lovers decrying California Chardonnays, in particular, as "overpriced, overoaked, overextracted and overalcoholized." Well, here's another rebuttal, from James Laube's tastings of Chardonnays from the exciting 2001 vintage. Many are indeed rich, ripe, opulent wines, but Laube finds a balance and complexity that justifies the style. For the best examples, turn to the Hot Wines on page 4.

Elsewhere, we review an assortment of reds from Australia, and highlight some worthy wines from France's often overlooked Loire Valley. Those who dislike big, oaky Chardonnays will surely find something to like among the Loire's racy, food-friendly reds and whites.

California

I tasted another wave of first-class 2001 Chardonnays recently, and they were further evidence of the exceptionally high quality of these wines. California is routinely able to produce full-blown, ultraripe, opulent yet elegant Chardonnays with tremendous complexity and richness. While some of the prices are getting up there, there are also plenty of solid values in the \$20 to \$35 price range. One of the highlights was the Keller Sonoma Coast La Cruz Vineyard (see Hot Wines), which at \$28 is one of the great finds from this new appellation. Meantime, Domaine Alfred's Chamisal Vineyard Califa shows the strength of this retooled Edna Valley vineyard (also a Hot Wine). Staglin made its best Chardonnay ever, a non-malolactic version that is quite rich and creamy. Beringer's 2001 Sbragia-Limited Reserve is an exemplary version of that wine.—J.L.

Beringer

Chardonnay Napa Valley Sbragia Limited Release 2001
93 points | \$40 | 5,000 cases made

A real mouthful of delicious Chardonnay, with a range of flavors stretching from ripe pear, fig and citrus to pretty smoky oak, hazelnut and caramel. Finishes with a pure gush of rich earth and Chardonnay flavors, turning elegant and graceful.—J.L.

Lewis

Chardonnay Sonoma County 2001
92 points | \$40 | 1,200 cases made

Rich and full-bodied, with a delicious array of spicy apple, honey, honeysuckle, fig and apricot, yet for all its size and creamy fruit flavors, it maintains a sense of elegance and finesse.—J.L.

Staglin

Chardonnay Rutherford 2001
92 points | \$50 | 931 cases made

Rich and complex, with lots of spicy, toasty oak draped over a core of silky hazelnut-infused pear and fig, showing off enticing aromas and finishing with a long, intricate fruit and oak aftertaste.—J.L.

Pahlmeyer

Chardonnay Napa Valley 2001
91 points | \$60 | 2,034 cases made

A bold, rich, creamy style, with layers of pear, fig, apricot, spice and vanilla. Shows a little heat on the finish, where the texture is coarse; not as refined and complex as the Sonoma Coast bottling (92 points, \$60; reviewed in the April 10 *Weekly*), but still excellent.—J.L.

Beringer

Chardonnay Napa Valley Private Reserve 2001
90 points | \$35 | 9,000 cases made

Silky-textured and well-proportioned, with rich toasty oak wrapped around a core of ripe pear, tangerine and fig-infused flavors. Finishes with a delicate aftertaste and lots of subtle nuances.—*J.L.*

Qupé

Chardonnay Santa Maria Valley Bien Nacido Reserve Block Eleven 2001
90 points | \$25 | 1,400 cases made

Vibrant, rich and concentrated, with a zingy, citrusy edge to the tart, earthy pear and lemon blossom notes. Very distinctive in that respect, as the nervy acidity makes it an ideal choice for many dishes.—*J.L.*

Truchard

Chardonnay Napa Valley Carneros 2001
90 points | \$30 | 2,006 cases made

Intense and vibrant, with a lively display of ripe citrus, pear and nectarine flavors, it manages to be both rich and complex and elegant and refined.—*J.L.*

Williams Selyem

Chardonnay Russian River Valley 2001
90 points | \$30 | 382 cases made

Rich and extracted, with well-focused layers of fig, apricot, melon and toasty oak. Young and a bit raw, it turns complex, with a long, intricate finish.—*J.L.*

Australia

Fox Creek

Shiraz McLaren Vale Reserve 2000
92 points | \$64 | 350 cases imported

This one goes for all the intensity and depth it can muster. It could have been too much of a muchness, but it's impressive for its deftness. Ripe and rich, it's generous with dark plum, berry and black pepper flavors, finishing supple and round, letting the flavors echo beautifully. Drink now through 2012.—*H.S.*

Fox Creek

Shiraz McLaren Vale Short Row 2001
91 points | \$30 | 300 cases imported

A portion of the home vineyard (appropriately enough, with shorter rows than the rest) is pruned

differently as well. The result is a serious Shiraz, dense, broad and generous with its peppery, slightly gamy blackberry, plum and spice flavors, nicely focused to persist against a layer of chewy tannins on the finish. Best from 2005 through 2010.—*H.S.*

Nepenthe

The Fugue Adelaide Hills 2000
91 points | \$27 | 90 cases imported

Usually, Nepenthe's corner of the Adelaide Hills is too cool for Bordeaux varieties; it's better-suited to Chardonnay and Riesling. In a warm vintage like this, supple, but also refined and generous, wines are possible from Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Cabernet Franc, offering an impressive range of flavors in a sleek package, centering on black currant, blackberry and anise flavors that persist beautifully on the harmonious finish. Drink now through 2010.—*H.S.*

Dominique Portet

Shiraz Heathcote 2000
91 points | \$30 | 100 cases imported

French-born Portet, whose brother Bernard has Clos du Val in California, started up his own winery outside Melbourne after two decades at Taltarni. If this is an indication of what he's up to, it will be worth watching closely. The wine packs a lot of gorgeous flavor on a deft frame, one that allows the cherry, raspberry and sweet spice character to play out beautifully without becoming heavy or chewy. It's all in gorgeous balance, with a finish that sails on and on. Drink now through 2012.—*H.S.*

Barton Vale

Shiraz Eden Valley The Changeling 2001
90 points | \$38 | 620 cases imported

Peter Smith, a leading Australian consultant to technological firms, owns a few bed and breakfasts and a string of vineyards in Barossa Valley, from which renowned winemaker Rolf Binder fashioned this rich, ripe wine. It's distinctive for its spicy, bay leaf-scented blackberry, cherry and coffee-spice flavors, which linger nicely on the round, velvety finish. Drink now through 2010.—*H.S.*