

THE WINE PAGE

'89 Chardonnays Got a Bum Rap

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Even before the wine was in the bottle, many critics were advising the consumer to forget the 1989 Chardonnay vintage in California. It won't be any good, they reasoned, because of all that rain at harvest time. Grapes subject to this kind of weather can end up producing thin, unappealing wines.

The '80s are the principal Chardonnays on the market now, and these wines are turning out to be surprisingly full flavored and well balanced. Looking back with 20-20 vision, it's easy to see where the critics went wrong. It is also interesting because here are a number of striking parallels between the vintage of 1989 and the vintage of 1991 in California:

■ A heavy crop in a drought year.

■ A cool summer with a somewhat late harvest, though not as late as this year.

■ The promise of an outstanding vintage.

The major difference between the two years is that in 1989, the rains came before the completion of harvest. This year — so far — the major rains have held off, but a soggy harvest can be a disaster.

So when several days of fairly heavy rains hit California's North Coast on Sept. 15, 1989, many wine critics dumped on the vintage — in particular Chardonnay — before the grapes were even picked.

Pray and Cross Your Fingers

Not too many years ago, winemakers caught in a wet harvest had few options but to say a prayer and hope for the best. In the past few years, growers and winemakers have learned there are many ways of coping with harvest rains, from steps that can be taken in the vineyards weeks before harvest to measures used weeks after the grapes are crushed.

For some, the first, and most pleasant, option was simply to sit back and smile, because their Chardonnay was already picked and fermentation was under way. The second option was to sit tight and try to wait out the rain, hoping that it would stop soon and the warm September sun would dry off the grapes. The third was to go out in the rain and pick grapes, prepared to make the best of it.

Growers in warmer locations had a terrific year in 1989. John Shafer at Shafer Vineyards in Napa County grows his Chardonnay on a south-facing slope and picked most of it before the rains.

"We did have one lot from the Carneros region that came in after the rain. It just didn't make the cut and we sold it off on the bulk market," Shafer said.

Bo Barrett, the winemaker at Chateau Montelena in Calistoga, had reduced his crop by about one-third by thinning the grape clusters in May and June. With fewer grapes on the vine, the fruit ripened earlier, beating the rains by a few days.

Painted With Some Brush

Dick Arrowood at Arrowood Vineyards in Sonoma County believes his 1989 Chardonnay is his best to date. "I got it in before the



BY FREDERIC LARSON/THE CHRONICLE

A sampling of the '89 Chardonnays on the market now

A SAMPLING OF THE '89s

- **Chamisal Edna Valley**, \$15 range. Rich, intense wine; good balance with delicious fruit.
- **Chateau Potelle**, \$12 range. A ripe, warm wine with layers of long-lasting fruit.
- **Chateau Montelena**, \$20 range. Good, lemony, apple-like tones with a smooth, complex finish. Good aging potential.
- **Chateau St. Jean Estate Selection**, \$15 range. A well-balanced, richly textured wine with a long, spicy finish.
- **Cloninger Monterey Chardonnay**, \$15 range. Big fruity wine with lots of tropical fruit aromas.
- **Congress Springs San Ysidro Reserve**, \$15 range. Fairly well balanced with some oak showing through but broad spicy flavors centered in cinnamon on the palate.
- **Ellston Sunol Chardonnay**, \$10 range. Good tropical fruit nose; a round, soft wine that goes down very well.
- **Franciscan Oakville Estate**, \$12 range. Wonderful pear/peach nose; spicy on the palate; lovely balance. A real winner.
- **Mt. Veeder Estate**, \$15 range. A rich, creamy wine with good aging potential.
- **Murphy-Goode**, \$12 range. Good balance with delicious blend of spice and fruit; developing well in the bottle with some aging potential.
- **Pine Ridge, Knollside Cuvee**, \$15 range. Intense buttery fruit; big wine.
- **Retzlaff Livermore Chardonnay**, \$10 range. A warm, spicy wine with good acidity balancing a delicious Chardonnay fruit.
- **Rombauer Napa Chardonnay**, \$12 range. Pleasant, melon-like flavors.
- **Seghiso Sonoma**, \$8 range. A delicious, crisp wine with good flavor and very nice Chardonnay fruit.
- **Shafer**, \$15 range. Somewhat restrained wine, with lean yet long-lasting fruit and a complex finish. Should age well.
- **Sterling**, \$15 range. Well balanced, with a lean texture but spicy Chardonnay fruit on the mid-palate.
- **Truchard**, \$16 range. Lovely, full-bodied wine with spicy Carneros fruit.
- **Wente Bros. Central Coast**, \$8 range. Lovely, elegant wine; well-balanced with apricot, peach flavors; an outstanding buy.

rains — all but one lot of 20 tons which we left on the vine. It never did dry out. There are some outstanding '89 Chardonnays, but we all get painted with the same brush, good or bad."

Chris Benz, the winemaker at Murphy-Goode winery in Sonoma

County, made a different decision.

"We didn't pick anything until after the rain," Benz said. "Then we worked like mad to get the grapes in before rot spread through the vines. We machine-picked but we also sent a crew in front of the machine, cutting and

dumping rotten clusters. After getting the grapes in, I was very conscious of the danger of rot. I got the juice as clean as possible, settling and discarding the lees."

Because of selective picking and discarding some wine after crush, Murphy-Goode only got about 58 cases a ton, compared with the normal 66 cases.

"The wine was a little lighter than normal going into bottle," Benz said, "but the surprising thing is that it is developing beautifully, taking on some richness with body age. I'm very happy with the wines now."

At Truchard Vineyard, a new winery in the Carneros district of Napa, winemaker Michael Havens was anticipating the winery's first Chardonnay. He also chose to sit out the rains and the grapes actually continued to ripen during three days of downpour, but went into a holding pattern after the sun returned.

As mold started to form, Havens began picking, even though the grapes were slightly less ripe than ideal. During the picking, bunches with mold were thrown from the gondola, so a minimum of rotten grapes reached the fermenter.

Sulfur Counters Mold

A standard method of treating moldy grapes is apply sulfur before fermentation. The sulfur destroys the mold organism, which helps remove off-flavors from the finished wine. Havens, however, adhered to a no-sulfur policy, believing that sulfur destroys the freshness of the wine and creates harsh byproducts during fermentation that can have a negative impact on wine flavor.

Havens barrel-fermented the Chardonnay and induced malolactic fermentation, steps that added richness to the slightly underripe wine. By the time the Chardonnay had finished fermentation, it was opulent and well-balanced.

Yet a third option was that chosen by Greg Upton, the winemaker at Franciscan Vineyards in Napa and at its sister winery, Estancia in Sonoma, who did some picking during the rain. He said there are several things a winemaker can do to make decent or even good wine from a potentially rotten vintage.

"The key in 1989 was selectivity," Upton said. "If you got your grapes after the rains started, you simply had to be very careful in blending, using great caution and patience in only using lots that were free of rot."

Wines with some of the musty character from rot could be treated with Bentonite, an agent that removes some of the mustiness, he said.

"An '89 blend with some rot is not going to be a great wine, but it is possible to make an attractive wine, even under the worst of conditions," Upton said.

In tasting the 1989 Chardonnays, expect a wide range of quality. Those made from grapes brought in before the harvest will be somewhat richer, yet are not as full-bodied as the 1988s. The 1989 growing season was cool, even before the rains, leading to a leaner, less fruity and in many ways more elegant wine.