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Storm Clouds, Silver Lining

A rain-dampened 2011 vintage for California Chardonnay results in lighter-style wines

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Winemakers have to play the cards they're dealt. With 2011 Chardonnay, that meant making rigorous grape and juice selections after Mother Nature delivered copious autumn rainfall in many areas, resulting in the most challenging harvest in decades. Many growers lost nearly half their crop in the deluge, putting a serious crimp on volume.

Yet the resulting wines, while variable in quality, reflect California vintners' ability to adapt and rethink their approaches to Chardonnay. Overall, the 2011 wines are elegant, showing less richness and intensity than is typical for the category, with dialed-back flavors and ripeness levels. Some of these tendencies are by design, as winemakers seek to create styles of greater refinement and finesse; those who peg California Chardonnay as overly oaky and top-heavy on tropical fruit flavors might be surprised by what they find.

But not all producers fared as well. "I don't remember working so hard in the vineyards for so little," says Tor Kenward of Tor in Napa. "In the end we did declassify, choosing not to make wine from some blocks. What we did bring in early October was excellent. [The wines] are brighter than most years, but with good fruit [close to 25 Brix]. There is no greenness." The bottom line, according to Kenward: "If you did not pay very close attention in the vineyard, you probably regret it."

"Three of our larger blocks stayed in the field," says Sonoma's Ramey. "So, tasty, delicious wines in a lighter vein [are typical for 2011]." Ramey has just released his 2010s, including his Sonoma Coast Platt Vineyard (92, \$60), which is intense and crisp, with a core of green apple and ripe pineapple flavors.

In the past few years, California vintners have branched out to different styles of Chardonnay. At one extreme are versions that are fermented in stainless steel, never see the inside of an oak barrel and are crisp, like biting into a ripe green apple. Mer Soleil's Santa Lucia Highlands Silver Unoaked 2011 (87, \$24) and Morgan's Monterey Metallico Un-Oaked 2011 (88, \$21) are good examples of stripped-down, bare-bones Chardonnays.

At the other end of the spectrum are bottlings that are ripe and well-oaked. Winemaker John Kongsgaard, based in Napa, created an experimental (unreleased) Chardonnay that stayed in barrel for four years, 2008 to 2012, in order to test the limits of barrel aging. Kongsgaard believes that aging Chardonnay in oak for extended periods gives the wine added layers of complexity and a silkier texture, not the heavy-handed wood presence some might expect. Both of his 2010 Chardonnays are sensational. The Judge (96, \$175), openly rich and smoky yet graceful and polished, is named in honor of Kongsgaard's father, and makes a profound statement about Chardonnay style. The Chardonnay Napa Valley (95, \$75) is a tour de force that stretches the range of flavors, adding roasted, smoky marshmallow and tiers of marmalade, tangerine and roasted fig.

Bill Hunter of Chasseur in Sonoma is another vintner adjusting his style somewhat, easing back on ripeness. "2011 quality was dependent on the timing of the pick," he says, "and there was certainly a split nature about the vintage." He will release his 2011s next year, but his 2010s are worth seeking out, and are more streamlined than prior vintages.

"I don't want you to get the wrong idea [about scaling back]," Hunter adds. "Being a fan of Burgundy, I realize we in California can't make Burgundy. We need riper fruit than Burgundy to bring out the proper flavor. Winemakers who are currently following the trends of less ripeness and lower alcohol to the point of light, thin wines are going to get burned. There is a limit, creating a window for optimum ripeness. I've noticed that overripeness decreases the minerality expression of the vineyard and moves [it] toward homogeneity. This is where the window is, at the meeting point of the two." Chardonnay lovers have plenty of options—with bottlings from 2009, 2010, 2011 and 2012 all currently in the market. By most accounts 2012 will be an exceptional vintage, benefiting from great weather and a bountiful crop. In many ways, winemakers say, it is the opposite of 2011.

Boosted by the variety of styles being produced, there's a little something for everyone when it comes to California Chardonnay.

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