

Vineyard 7&8 - 2008 "8" Chardonnay - 94 points

Listed in the top 10 recommended wines by James Laube in the July 31, 2010 California Chardonnay Issue of Wine Spectator.



James Laube's Recommended California Chardonnays

More than 400 wines were reviewed for this report. A free alphabetical list is available at www.winespectator.com/073110. WineSpectator.com members can access complete reviews for all wines tasted using the online Wine Ratings search.

TOP WINES

WINE	SCORE	PRICE
AUBERT Chardonnay Sonoma Coast Reuling Vineyard 2008 Richard and full-bodied, with ripe layers of fig, apricot and melon shaded by toasty, smoky roasted marshmallow flavors.	97	\$80
PETER MICHAEL Chardonnay Sonoma County Ma Belle-Fille 2008 A tremendous Chardonnay, intense, pure, ripe and complex, with concentrated pear, apple, fig and melon flavors.	97	\$85
AUBERT Chardonnay Sonoma Coast Ritchie Vineyard 2008 Bold, rich and expressive, layered and complex, offering tiers of ripe citrus, lemon peel, pear and melon.	96	\$80
PETER MICHAEL Chardonnay Sonoma County Mon Plaisir 2008 Unctuous and layered, rich and creamy, showing opulent fig, melon and honeysuckle flavors. Complex, intense and persistent.	96	\$80
MOUNT EDEN Chardonnay Santa Cruz Mountains 2006 Simply delicious, a rich, buttery style, delivering ripe, vivid, delicate peach, pear and honeydew melon fruit.	96	\$48
CHASSEUR Chardonnay Sonoma Coast Sangiacomo Green Acres Hill 2007 Bold and richly flavored, with a mix of exotically tropical fruit, pineapple and grapefruit. Well-balanced and elegant.	95	\$48
PETER MICHAEL Chardonnay Sonoma County Point Rouge 2007 A deliciously rich, creamy style, with smoky, toasty oak wrapped around fig, melon and honeysuckle. Focused and persistent.	95	\$175
RIDGE Chardonnay Santa Cruz Mountains Monte Bello 2006 There's wonderful perfume, floral aromas in this pure, rich and silky white, which unfolds to reveal layers of fruit.	95	\$60
ALPHA OMEGA Chardonnay Napa Valley 2007 A seductive style that's smooth, rich and creamy, with zingy acidity adding vibrancy to the ripe fig, melon and baked apple.	94	\$52
VINEYARD 7 & 8 Chardonnay Spring Mountain District 8 2008 Ultra rich and creamy, full-bodied and layered, with a mix of fig, honeydew melon, spice and honeysuckle flavors.	94	\$50
CHALK HILL Chardonnay Chalk Hill 2007 Bold, rich and full-bodied, with fig, apricot, smoky oak and roasted marshmallow flavors that are complex and distinctive.	93	\$48
ERIC KENT Chardonnay Russian River Valley 2008 Combines ripe, firm, complex fruit with cedar and spice. Full-bodied, with ripe pear, melon, honeysuckle and mineral notes.	93	\$39
MALDONADO Chardonnay Sonoma County Parr Vineyard 2007 Smooth, rich and creamy, with fig, tangerine and nectarine flavors that are full-bodied, pure and complex.	93	\$25
OLABISI Chardonnay Mendocino Double Top Secret Vineyard 2007 Full-bodied, rich and layered, bold and focused, with baked apple, melon, fig and honeysuckle flavors.	93	\$30
SBRAGIA FAMILY Chardonnay Napa Valley Gamble Ranch Vineyard 2007 Remarkably complex and layered, full-bodied, elegant and polished, with tiers of nectarine, peach, melon and light toasty oak.	93	\$40

TOP WINES (continued)

WINE	SCORE	PRICE
RODNEY STRONG Chardonnay Russian River Valley Reserve 2007 Floral honeysuckle, ripe fig and melon scents are rich, elegant and refined, with light toasty vanilla oak on the finish.	93	\$40
ROBERT YOUNG Chardonnay Alexander Valley 2007 Rich and opulent, with layers of fig, melon and honeysuckle flavors that are full-bodied, silky-textured, long and persistent.	93	\$40

TOP VALUES

WINE	SCORE	PRICE
ALONDRA Chardonnay Mendocino County Middleridge Ranch Vineyard 2008 This well-balanced white shows ripe, complex apple, pear and melon flavors in an elegant presentation.	90	\$16
MERRYVALE Chardonnay Napa Valley Starmont 2008 Fresh and vibrant, with tangerine, nectarine, peach and pear flavors that are intense, complex, layered and cleansing.	90	\$20
VALLEY OF THE MOON Chardonnay Russian River Valley Unoaked 2008 Fresh, intense and vibrant, with a rich, layered mix of green apple, baked apple, pear and spice flavors.	90	\$16
CASTLE ROCK Chardonnay Russian River Valley Reserve 2008 This concentrated white has creamy mocha, pear, fig and melon flavors.	88	\$18
GUENOC Chardonnay Lake County 2008 Rich and creamy, with complex flavors that are pure and focused.	88	\$14
SOUVERAIN Chardonnay Alexander Valley 2008 Intense, juicy and vibrant, with creamy oak, pear and nectarine flavors.	88	\$17
STERLING Chardonnay Napa Valley 2008 Tangy nectarine, peach and green apple flavors are pure and focused.	88	\$15
BOGLE Chardonnay California 2008 Fresh and lively, with apple, melon, ripe pear and honeysuckle flavors.	87	\$10
DANCING BULL Chardonnay California Vintage Blend 2008 Intense and vibrant, spicy and a bit raw, but focused and complex.	87	\$12
ESTANCIA Chardonnay Monterey County Pinnacles Ranches 2008 This intense white shows Key lime, citrus and green apple flavors.	87	\$12
FOUR VINES Chardonnay Santa Barbara County Naked 2008 Fresh and vibrant, with citrus, grapefruit and pippin apple flavors.	87	\$14
LUCKY STAR Chardonnay California 2008 Fresh, clean and vibrant, with pear, melon, citrus and spice flavors.	87	\$9
LYETH Chardonnay Sonoma County L de Lyeth 2008 Delicate aromas lead to green apple, pear and lime notes.	87	\$13
MAIN STREET Chardonnay Santa Barbara County 2008 An elegant style, with delicate peach, pear and melon flavors.	87	\$10
MONTEVINA Chardonnay California 2008 Complex, with ripe, spicy pear, fig and apple crisp flavors.	87	\$11
KILLER JUICE Chardonnay California Angel Juice 2007 Fresh, ripe flavors are intense, elegant and stylish.	86	\$20 3L

Fire and Ice

California Chardonnay shines in 2008 despite challenging environmental conditions

James Laube
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For California Chardonnay vintners, 2008 was a trying vintage amid already difficult times. Hard frosts in the spring severely damaged many prime North Coast vineyards, cutting the crop in some plots by half or more. Then forest fires burned through much of the summer, leading to smoke taint in many Mendocino wines, red and white alike.

But it is hard to derail California's Chardonnay express. The varietal remains the Golden State's most popular white, and year-in, year-out manages to produce scores of enticing wines across a wide range of styles and price points. Despite the reduced crop, 2008 gave winemakers an adequate supply of high quality grapes, resulting in intensely flavored Chardonnays with vibrant acidities.

Chardonnay lovers will have plenty of great wines to discover from 2007 as well. Of the two young vintages, I prefer 2007, which was more consistent across the major growing regions. Based on what I've tasted so far, 2008 shows more variation, proving to be a better year for Napa and Sonoma than for Carneros, which often excels with this grape, or for Santa Barbara, farther to the south. But a lot depends on your tastes. If you prefer wines with higher acidity and crisper flavors, 2008 might be more to your liking. One thing is for sure: There is no shortage of exciting Chardonnay to drink.

Since my last report on the category (July 31, 2009), I've blind-tasted more than 400 new Chardonnays in our Napa office. Of those, more than half are from 2008, with the rest almost entirely from 2007. Both vintages have much to offer, yet they are quite different in style and personality. There are also some wines from the problematic 2006 vintage entering the market; with a few exceptions, stick to '07 and '08 on your Chardonnay shopping excursions.

The best wines from 2008 offer lots of richness, depth, complexity and flavor, though they are trimmer and tighter than the more opulent 2007s. Many '08 Chardonnays have been slow to develop; when I tasted the wines in February and March, a number of them were very green, backward and closed. By now they should be more forthcoming and expressive.

Both 2007 and 2008 were easy winemaking vintages compared with 2006, when vineyards faced a cool, damp fall that led to the spread of botrytis—the kind of frustrations that drive winemakers up the wall. Some vineyards were left unpicked and many wines were sold in bulk to négociants.

My favorite 2008 bottlings come from Sonoma standouts Peter Michael and Aubert, wineries whose Chardonnays are consistently among the most excellent irrespective of vintage (you'll see their names among the top-rated wines of 2007 as well). The Aubert Reuling (\$80) and the Peter Michael Ma Belle-Fille (\$85) each earn 97 points on the Wine Spectator 100-point scale. A notch below, at 96 points, are Aubert's Ritchie Vineyard (\$80) and Peter Michael's Mon Plaisir (\$80). The latter's Belle Côte comes in at 94 points (\$75). Also noteworthy, at 93 points, are the Peirson Meyer Charles Heintz (\$55), the Shibumi Knoll Buena Tierra (\$65) and the Eric Kent Russian River (\$39), an excellent value.

Following the very intense and fragrant Chardonnays from 2007, the wines from 2008 displayed astonishingly dense texture during the fermentations and the aging, says Nick Morlet, winemaker at Peter Michael. "Finally after a couple months in the bottle they started to reveal their real personalities: They are more mineral [and] concentrated, with a lot of gras [rich mouthfeel] and a seamless texture. In addition, they have an incredible finish, which might be, for some of them, longer than with 2007. They should delight our palates for at least a decade."

Those who've enjoyed Chardonnays from both Aubert and Peter Michael may find similarities. Both wineries produce intense, tightly wound and enormously complex wines, made in a Burgundian style, offering detailed flavors in rich, creamy textures. They typically need time in the bottle and can stand a few hours of decanting. Many vintages drink well for eight to 10 years.

Peter Michael's four '08 Chardonnays come from estate vineyards, planted on steep hillsides in Knights Valley, a region in Sonoma County just north of Napa Valley that is starting to gain wider acclaim as more and better wines emerge from its vineyards.

Aubert sources his grapes mostly from vineyard sites farther west and closer to the coast, including his own Lauren vineyard (named for his daughter), along with the Ritchie and Reuling sites, in Sonoma Coast, and Larry Hyde & Sons, in the Carneros district, near San Pablo Bay.

Some interesting history of the two wineries also ties into our cover story (see page 36). Mark Aubert made Peter Michael's wines for years before starting his own winery. He began his career there working with Helen Turley when she was Peter Michael's winemaker, adhering to many of her methods. In turn, so did his eventual successor at Peter Michael, Nick Morlet (whose immediate predecessor was his brother Luc). One more link: Luc Morlet's eponymous label bottled a 92-point Chardonnay Sonoma Coast Ma Douce 2008 (\$70).

Yet even within the Burgundian model, which includes barrel fermentation, lees stirring, little fining and minimal or no filtration, there are ranges of style in 2008, from the ultrarich wines of Napa Valley such as the **Vineyard 7 & 8 Spring Mountain District "8" (94, \$50)** and the Lewis Reserve (93, \$65) to tighter versions such as the El Molino Napa Valley (91, \$50), which eschews a strong oak presence and does not undergo malolactic fermentation (the secondary fermentation that softens natural acidities).

While the more expensive wines hover in the \$70 range, it isn't hard to drink classy 2008s for \$35 or less. Good examples include versions from Chappellet (91, \$32) and Groth (91, \$29), both from Napa, as well as Souverain's Winemaker's Reserve from Russian River (92, \$30) and Bernardus' Monterey County (92, \$22). At \$20 or less look for the Valley of the Moon Russian River Unoaked (90, \$16), the Guenoc Lake County (88, \$14) or the Sterling Napa Valley (88, \$15), among others.

Part of the beauty of Chardonnay is that the variety produces a flavorful wine while also lending itself to various stylistic interpretations (and, in turn, flexibility with food). Winemakers have the choice of using oak barrels in fermentation or aging, partially using them or not using them at all. The wines can be lean and crisp, with flinty green apple, mineral and citrus flavors, or full-blown, very ripe and oaked to the point where they take on a tropical fruit character.

In recent years, more wineries have backed off on their use of oak and new oak, and some are finding an audience for non-oak Chardonnays made in stainless steel, sometimes called "naked" or "stripped." The Four Vines Chardonnay Santa Barbara County Naked 2008 (87, \$14), the aforementioned Valley of the Moon Unoaked 2008 and the Morgan Chardonnay Monterey Metallico Un-Oaked 2008 (89, \$20) are all good examples of the style-and great values as well.

Chardonnay grows well in the coastal appellations, with Santa Barbara providing bright, vibrant versions and Monterey riper, fleshier styles. Sonoma is the state's biggest producer of high quality Chardonnay, and you'll find many great wines in a variety of styles from the county. Farther inland, Napa Valley and Carneros offer a mix of ripe flavors and tight acidities.

Those styles were fully expressed in 2008, despite the tough conditions. For Aubert, the vintage provided one of the smallest crops he's seen in a long time-mostly due to frost in the spring, which freezes and kills the tender shoots of the newly emergent vines. "There were spectacular failures. People who never had a frost, ever, had a frost in 2008," Aubert explains.

Drought also played a key role in 2008, as it has in other recent years. "The real big thing was we were right in the middle of the drought, the ground was very dry [and] clusters were very small," Aubert says. "Vines react to weather, and in dry years, they regulate the size of the crop so they don't have to expend energy by producing a larger-size crop."

"Assuming you got your grapes picked at the right time, [2008] is a good vintage," says David Ramey, who makes six Chardonnays from Napa and Sonoma, including vineyard-designated and appellation wines. A heat wave in September proved a hitch for some winemakers, Ramey explains. Aubert had already picked. Ramey waited. Each was pleased with his respective decision.

The vintage also faced rampant wildfires, which threatened vineyard areas in both Northern and Southern California. The fires spread rapidly across an already parched terrain. "The entire state of California was, sadly, touched by about 1,000 fires during 40 days," recalls Peter Michael's Nick Morlet. "The sky stayed overcast for one month. We didn't find any smoky compounds in the juices and the wines by chemistry and sensorial analysis." But some wines grown farther north in Mendocino showed smoke taint; a few were bottled nonetheless.

The plus side of a small-crop equation is it can lead to wines with greater density of flavors. "The great thing is the [2008] wines are very concentrated. Between the frosts and a spring shatter, it mitigated our crop by 10 percent to 20 percent," says Aubert. When he walked the vineyards before harvest, he says, "You wondered, 'Where did all the fruit go?'"

For Andy Smith, winemaker at Sonoma producer DuMol, 2008 is the best vintage he's experienced. "[It's] comparable to 2005 in terms of structure, but these wines have greater density and will age longer," Smith says. "They have the richness of 2002 and 2004, but [with] lower pHs [and] higher acidities-very pure wines but taut and holding power in reserve right now. I prefer them to the 2007s which are more obviously rich but softer, broader and with less precision and focus."

Smith shares Aubert's observation about the vintage, explaining that the grapes had very thick skins due to the winter drought and then the warm summer. This resulted in small berries and led to very concentrated flavors at harvest, which came on quickly in the heat.

Winemaking went smoothly in 2008 as well. The initial fermentations were very rapid, but malolactic fermentation lasted into July. "This kept the lees naturally in suspension, adding texture and preserving freshness," Smith says. "The wines needed a long time on the lees to 'fill out' and absorb their structures. We did not do any lees stirring with this vintage, to preserve the tautness of the wines."

In 2007, an almost perfect growing season led to an easy, uneventful harvest and uniformly ripe, rich, opulent and aromatic wines. "[The 2007 vintage] was so easy, it just flowed," says Ramey. "We didn't have any issues. The wines were balanced, lush and came to maturity in an easy way."

My highest-rated 2007s from Sonoma include several bottlings each from Peter Michael, Aubert, Chasseur, Paul Hobbs (the Walker Station being the best) and Martinelli, along with the Rodney Strong Reserve (93, \$40) and the Ramey Ritchie Vineyard (92, \$70). In Napa, Alpha Omega has taken a big step up in quality with its 2007 (94, \$52).

Erin Green, winemaker for Pahlmeyer, who makes Chardonnay from both Napa and Sonoma, says she's thrilled by all three of the past vintages, 2006 to 2008, and is optimistic about 2009. "Everything [in 2009] came in lower [tonnage], with high quality. It was one of the easier years to put the blend together."

Vintners like one more thing about Chardonnay. It's one of the first grapes of the season to be picked. If the growing season goes smoothly, as it did in 2007 and 2009, Chardonnay is an easy crop to manage and an easy wine to make. There are more challenging years, such as 2006 and 2008, but usually there are enough steps taken in the vineyard to separate the marginal grapes from the cream of the crop.

From that perspective, the 2009 vintage should keep the California Chardonnay express rolling in high gear.

Senior editor James Laube, based in Napa, is Wine Spectator's lead taster on California wines.