

728 views | May 9, 2019, 09:30am

Carneros: Chardonnay, Pinot Noir And More From Napa And Sonoma



Tom Hyland Contributor 

Food & Drink

I write about wine (and sometimes food) from around the world.



Vineyards at Grace Benoist Ranch of Etude in the Carneros AVA PHOTO BY JIM CAUDILL

Being early ripening varieties, Chardonnay and Pinot Noir need a cool climate in which to excel. The French have known this for centuries, which is why the Burgundy region is based on these two grape types. Throughout California, areas such as the Russian River Valley in western Sonoma County, and the Sta. Rita Hills appellation in Santa Barbara County are renowned for their efforts with these two varieties, while the Carneros region, where Napa and Sonoma meet, is another great region for Pinot Noir, Chardonnay as well as varieties such as Merlot, Syrah and Sauvignon Blanc.

Carneros is an American Viticultural Area (AVA) that is situated at the northern end of the San Pablo Bay, an extension of the San Francisco Bay. It is this location that makes Carneros unique, as Steve Rogstad, winemaker at Cuvaison, notes. "Because our AVA is low lying (almost sea level) and directly facing the San Pablo Bay, we get fog rolling in at night that slowly peels back during the morning hours. This limits sunshine and keeps temperatures moderate." This is an ideal

situation for producing wines of very good acidity and structure, and the best Pinot Noirs and Chardonnays of Carneros - the leading varieties planted here - display heightened aromatics and excellent freshness, as well as remarkable varietal character.

There are approximately three dozen wineries located in Carneros, some on the Napa side (the larger of the two), with a few located in the Sonoma sector. The former includes Saintsbury, Cuvaision, Acacia, Etude and Domaine Carneros, while Sonoma Carneros producers include Gloria Ferrer, Donum Estate and MacRostie. In addition, numerous wineries in Napa and Sonoma purchase Pinot Noir and Chardonnay from Carneros, either from vineyards they own (such as Clos du Val for their Gran Val Vineyard or Shafer Vineyards with their Red Shoulder Ranch), while others purchase fruit from some of the top growers in Carneros, such as Truchard Vineyards, Hyde Vineyards and Sangiacomo Vineyard.

At Pine Ridge, a Napa Valley producer known for their various offerings of Cabernet Sauvignon, winemaker Michael Beaulac also produces a Chardonnay, sourced from their Collines Vineyard in Carneros. He practices a long cold fermentation and then employs batonage (lees stirring) to give weight to the wine. "As with all my wines, I am looking for texture and complexity," he says. He puts the wine through malolactic fermentation to soften the high overall acidity; "it's important to have the wine go through malolactic (m/l) in order to achieve the richness I'm looking for." Many other producers of Carneros Chardonnay also follow this technique, although Elias Fernandez at Shafer Vineyards blocks m/l in the winery's Red Shoulder Ranch wine, which is one of the finest examples of Chardonnay from this AVA.

Regarding Pinot Noir, the variety thrives in Carneros, with multiple expressions due to the specifics of several factors. Tim Colla, winemaker at Saintsbury, one of the leading Pinot Noir producers in Carneros, notes the importance of planting the variety in the proper location. "Site is the defining characteristic of every wine we make. Within Carneros our sites vary in aspect, soil composition, clonal and rootstock selections, as well as, age of the vine and trellis system. At the end of the day, I can pull the same single clone from 3 different sites within a three mile radius in Carneros and the wines taste different, each a unique expression of its site."

There are several single vineyard Pinot Noirs from Carneros produced at Saintsbury, and while each of the wines displays excellent varietal character, it's fascinating to taste the differences between them; for example, the Toyon Farm and Stanly Ranch displays greater weight on the palate as compared with the Lee Vineyard, which has the most finesse of the winery's Pinot Noirs. Incidentally, a principal reason for the complexity and richness of these wines has to do with the

age of the vines, as the Stanly Ranch was first planted to Pinot Noir in the 1950s, with the Lee Vineyard dating back to 1967.



Domaine Carneros, one of California's most celebrated sparkling wine houses PHOTO COURTESY DOMAINE CARNEROS

Given the success of Chardonnay and Pinot Noir in Carneros, it's only natural that high quality *méthode champenoise* sparkling wines are produced here as well. Arguably the most famous is Domaine Carneros, founded in 1987 by the celebrated Champagne house of Taittinger. Winemaker Eileen Crane, who has served in this capacity since day one, notes that at that time the Taittinger firm was seriously looking for a location for a home for sparkling wine production in California and while they considered the Russian River Valley as a site, "the location in Carneros was compelling." Carneros was also the home of sparkling wine firms from Champagne houses such as Chandon and Mumm, and the fine Spanish sparkling wine producer, Gloria Ferrer.

The top cuvée here is "Le Reve," French for "the dream." This is a Blanc de Blancs, 100% Chardonnay, with the wine modeled after Taittinger's prestige cuvée, Comtes de Champagne Blanc de Blancs. Why did the company opt for this decision? Crane explains; "When I was hired in 1987 to build Domaine Carneros, Claude Taittinger (then president of Champagne Taittinger) said to me, "we have France's best Blanc de Blancs and I would like to have someday America's greatest Blanc de Blancs." In late 1998 we released the first Le Rêve 1992."

She goes on to clarify the choice of Chardonnay for their best sparkling wine. "Even if Claude Taittinger had not asked specifically for a Blanc de Blancs super cuvée, I would have headed in the same direction. In the ten years I previously had in the *méthode champenoise* industry, I was well aware that Chardonnay was the grape to create the finest bubbles. Pinot Noir is a stalwart of the premium industry, but the finesse of Chardonnay over time is not to be challenged in my

opinion." The Le Reve has stood the the test of time; impressive upon release, the finest examples often drink well some 12 to 15 years after the vintage.

As for other varieties in Carneros, there is an impressive variety, ranging from Sauvignon Blanc, Viognier and Roussanne (white) to Merlot and Syrah (red). At Truchard Vineyards, Chardonnay is the best known variety they work with, but their Merlot and Roussanne are of notable quality, while their Syrah is regularly outstanding. Proprietor Anthony Truchard notes that they planted this variety back in 1989, and recalls what they discovered about their vineyards at the time. "When we ripped the soils prior to planting, this area of the vineyards was completely different from the majority of our property which is primarily clay soils. We realized this soil was composed of volcanic rock and on very steep slopes. One of our wine importers said this reminded him of the Cote Rotie and that inspired us to think of Northern Rhone varieties. This cool climate and rocky soil was ideal for Syrah." The current 2017 release does have much in common with the most celebrated Rhone wines, and is one of the most elegant and varietally pure examples of Syrah produced anywhere in California.

Clearly, wines from Carneros, whatever the variety, offer structure that is vital for the wines' ability to age gracefully for several years, while the natural acidity preserves freshness. Other wines from California may pack more of a punch, but for overall varietal character and harmony, Carneros is at the top of the pyramid.

Notes on current releases from Carneros

Sparkling Wines

Cline "Nancy's Cuvée" NV - Aromas of red cherry and strawberry. Medium-bodied, this has good richness and freshness and has a dry, nicely balanced finish. Pair this with duck breast or a simple chicken salad with strawberries. 2-3 years. **Very Good**

Gloria Ferrer Blanc de Noirs NV - Primarily Pinot Noir with a smaly percentage of Chardonnay. Bright copper color; aromas of strawberry, orange peel and plum. Medium-bodied with good acidity, this is very appealing and elegant with a round, satisfying finish. Pair with any puoltry and lighter game birds over the next 2-3 years. **Excellent**

Gloria Ferrer "Carneros Cuvée" 2007 - 50/50 Pinot Noir/Chardonnay. Yeasty aromas with perfumes of yellow plum, rose petals. Medium-full with a rich, layered mid-palate. Great complexity, very good acidity and excellent persistence. Outstanding effort that is not that well known, but deserves to be

ranked among the very best sparkling wines of California. Delicious now, but even better in 5-7 years. **Outstanding**

Domaine Carneros Le Reve 2012 - 100% Chardonnay. Distinct yeasty aromas, lemon zest, Bosc pear and a hint of anise. Lively acidity, excellent persistence and complexity. Rich mid-palate and notable varietal purity with beautiful varietal expression and harmony. Appealing now, but structured for several years of aging, 5-7 years, perhaps longer. A reference point for California sparkling wine. **Outstanding**

Chardonnay

Acacia Chardonnay 2016 - Aromas of baked apples, vanilla and a touch of honey. Medium-bodied with good varietal character, this is nicely balanced and has good acidity and persistence. For the money, this is a fine effort. Enjoy over the next 1-2 years. **Very Good**

Beaulieu Vineyards Carneros Chardonnay 2017 - Lemon custard, orange blossom and pear aromas. Very good varietal character, ample wood notes, balanced acidity and good persistence. Nicely balanced, though a touch too much alcohol. Enjoy over the next 2-3 years. **Very Good**

Pine Ridge Chardonnay “Collines” 2017 - Aromas of mango, Anjou pear and a hint of clove. Medium-full, this is ripe and slightly forward. Offering impressive persistence, good acidity and distinct brown spice notes, this has fine harmony and would best be paired with a river fish with a brown butter sauce. Enjoy over the next 3-4 years. **Excellent**

Robert Mondavi Chardonnay Reserve 2016 - Aromas of baked apples, orange blossom and lemon cream. Rich with appealing ripe fruit backed by good acidity and impressive persistence. The wood notes are nicely integrated, and overall harmony is quite good, while there is excellent complexity. Enjoy over the next 3-5 years. **Excellent**

Etude Chardonnay Grace Benoist Ranch 2016 - Aromas of lemon peel, orange water and daffodil. Medium-full, this is sleekly styled with very good acidity, subtle wood notes and very good persistence. Subdued, with good harmony, this is a nicely refined Chardonnay. 3-5 years. **Excellent**

Cuvaison Chardonnay “Couertina” 2017 - Aromas of lemon zest, vanilla and apple peel. Medium-full with very good concentration, this is a rich and spicy Chardonnay with very good varietal character, notable persistence and a finish with a distinct nuttiness. Enjoy over the next 3-5 years. **Excellent**

Clos du Val Chardonnay “Estate” 2016 - Lemon essence, pineapple and vanilla aromas. An elegantly styled Chardonnay with impressive varietal character and a sense of place. Offering good acidity, very good persistence and harmony, this has ideal ripeness along with subtle spice notes in the finish, and the overall impression is one of restraint and elegance. Enjoy now and over the next 3-4 years. **Outstanding**

Nickel & Nickel Chardonnay “Truchard Vineyard” 2017 - Aromas of lemon zest, almond and anise. Medium-full with excellent concentration. Rich, layered mid-palate with lush, ripe fruit; excellent persistence, good acidity, distinct spiciness from oak. Big finish, well balanced, notable complexity. 3-5 years. **Outstanding**

Sonoma-Loeb Chardonnay “Private Reserve” 2017 - Aromas of hazelnut, pecan and lemon oil. Medium-full, this has a rich mid-palate, very good acidity, well integrated oak and excellent persistence. Ideal harmony, and fruit and wood serve each other well. Very well made, this has excellent complexity and is quite stylish, without being showy. Enjoy over the next 5 years, perhaps longer. **Outstanding**

Chappellet Chardonnay El Novillero Vineyard 2017 - Aromas of baked apples, hazelnut and Meyer lemon. Medium-full with excellent ripeness, good acidity and well-integrated oak. Lovely texture, beautiful complexity and notable persistence. This is quite impressive now, and will improve and offer great pleasure for another 5-7 years. **Outstanding**

MacRostie Chardonnay “Sangiaco Vineyard” 2017 - Lemon oil, mango and lilac aromas. Medium-full with very good depth of fruit, very good acidity, notable persistence and subtle wood notes. Excellent varietal purity and outstanding harmony. Classic Carneros style. 3-5 years. **Outstanding**

Sangiaco Chardonnay “Home Ranch” 2017 - This is the initial release of Chardonnay under the Sangiaco label; the family has been selling their grapes to numerous producers in Napa and Sonoma. Aromas of lemon zest, golden apples and yellow orchid. Medium-full with very good to excellent concentration. Rich mid-palate, ideal ripeness, very good acidity, and well managed oak that adds lovely complexity and a creamy texture to the wine. Superb harmony, this has classic Carneros Chardonnay character and is simply delicious! 5-7 years for peak, but so appealing right now! **Superb**

Pinot Noir

Clos du Val Pinot Noir “Estate Vineyard” 2016 - Morel cherry, nutmeg and bacon aromas. Ripe and complex with medium-weight, elegant tannins, very good persistence and acidity. This offers impressive varietal character as well as ample wood notes, as well as attractive brown spice notes. Enjoy over the next 3-5 years. **Excellent**

Gloria Ferrer Pinot Noir Reserve “Rust Rock Vineyard” 2015 - Lovely aromas of morel cherry, cardamom and cumin. Medium-full with very good concentration. Ideal ripeness, very good acidity, notable persistence, medium-weight tannins and subdued wood notes. Beautiful complexity, this is a stylish and extremely well made Pinot Noir for enjoyment over the next 5-7 years. **Outstanding**

Donum Estate Pinot Noir "West Slope" 2016 - Black cherry, wild strawberry, marjoram and bacon aromas. Powerful depth of fruit, ample oak, good acidity, excellent persistence. This is a Pinot Noir with a lot of youthful exuberance that impresses now, but needs a bit of time to round out and display greater glories. Best in 7-10 years. **Outstanding**

Robert Mondavi Pinot Noir Reserve 2016 - Bing cherry, cardamom and nutmeg aromas. Offering a rich mid-palate, this has delicious varietal character, nicely balanced tannins, good acidity, excellent persistence, and nicely integrated wood notes. Excellent complexity, and a well structured finish with subtle brown spice notes. Stylish with very impressive harmony. Enjoyable now – peak in 5-7 years, perhaps longer. **Outstanding**

Etude Pinot Noir Grace Benoist Ranch 2016 - Ripe maraschino cherry, marjoram and nutmeg aromas. Ripe, meaty varietal fruit perfumes, distinct wood notes, good acidity and notable persistence. Medium-bodied tannins, this has excellent harmony and is ripe and forward, but with the structure for 7-10 years of aging. **Outstanding**

Saintsbury Pinot Noir “Toyon Farm” 2016 -Aromas of strawberry preserve, red cherry and coriander. Medium-full this has a rich mid-palate with expressive varietal fruit, good acidity, rich, youthful tannins that are nicely balanced and well-integrated oak. This is a bit richer than the other single vineyard Pinot Noirs from Saintsbury and needs a bit more time to round out and emerge with its best expression. Peak in 7-10 years. **Excellent**

Saintsbury Pinot Noir Stanly Ranch 2016 - Aromas of bing cherry, nutmeg and tea leaf. Medium-full with very good concentration. Ideal ripeness, medium-weight, beautifully balanced tannins, good acidity and excellent persistence. Notes of plum and delicate brown spice in the finish. Very stylish and delicious! 7-10 years. **Outstanding**

Saintsbury Pinot Noir Lee Vineyard 2016 - Aromas of red cherry, marjoram and a note of tobacco. Medium-full, this has beautiful varietal fruit with ideal ripeness, perfectly integrated wood notes, very good acidity and medium-weight, graceful tannins. Excellent persistence, outstanding harmony. Sublime! Best in 5-7 years, perhaps longer. Brilliant Carneros Pinot Noir! **Superb**

Other Wines

Truchard Roussanne 2017 - Papaya, lemon zest and orange poppy aromas. Medium-full, this is ripe, forward and a bit lush and has excellent persistence and good acidity. The finish is slightly bitter with a touch of heat (14.1%). 3-5 years. **Very Good**

Sonoma-Loeb Viognier “Cold Creek Vineyard” 2016 - Beautiful aromas of honeysuckle, vanilla custard and golden poppies. Medium-full with very concentration, a rich mid-palate and a finish with very good acidity and persistence. Nice harmony, excellent varietal character and impressive complexity. A beauty! Enjoy over the next 2-3 years. **Excellent**

Cuvaison Sauvignon Blanc 2018 - Classic aromas of grass, capsicum and gooseberry. Medium-bodied with very good concentration. Textbook cool climate Sauvignon Blanc flavors, this is reminiscent of a New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc, but a bit more toned down in style. Impressive persistence, very good acidity and complexity. A Sauvignon Blanc lover's Sauvignon Blanc. 2-3 years, perhaps longer. **Excellent**

Duckhorn Merlot “Carneros” 2016 - Aromas of red raspberry, sweet red spice and red poppies. Medium-full, this is deeply concentrated and has a rich, layered mid-palate, excellent persistence, very good acidity, medium-weight tannins and nicely integrated wood notes. Ideal varietal character and harmony. Beautiful wine – peak in 7-10 years. **Superb**

Cline Syrah 2016 “Single Vineyard Series” - Dark chocolate, blackberry and mocha aromas. Medium-full, this has ideal ripeness, good acidity, elegant tannins and very good complexity. This is very appealing, with excellent harmony, and fortunately is not made in the too-often overly ripe, jammy style of California Syrah. Enjoy now, but better in another 3-5 years. **Excellent**

Truchard Syrah 2017 - Bright purple, aromas of blackberry, clove and menthol. Medium-full, this is a delicious Syrah with beautiful ripe fruit, good acidity, ideally balanced tannins and subtle wood notes. Lovely complexity and impeccable harmony, as well as notable persistence. Very stylish, with

outstanding varietal purity. So beautifully restrained, this is the finest California Syrah I have ever tasted! 7-10 years. **Superb**

Stags' Leap Winery Late Harvest White Wine 2017 - This wine is a tribute to the great examples of Sauternes from Bordeaux by winemaker Christophe Paubert, a native of that region. 100% Viognier. Light golden yellow color, exotic aromas of apricot and a touch of honey. Rich expression on the palate, but with an elegant, delicate mouthfeel. Ripe, and with very good cleansing acidity, this has a long, satisfying, lightly sweet finish (12% residual sugar). Enjoy over the next 5-7 years. **Outstanding**

Text © Tom Hyland



Tom Hyland Contributor

I am a Chicago-based wine writer, educator and photographer, with 37 years of experience in the wine industry. For the past 20 years, I have been a freelancer, writing p... **Read More**
