

Diner's Journal

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The Chardonnays of California

By **Eric Asimov** Jan 11, 2011



(CHIP CHIPMAN/BLOOMBERG
CHARDONNAY GRAPES IN CALIFORNIA)

The first time I had a Kistler chardonnay was back in the mid-1980s, at the original Röckenwagner, an airy restaurant in Venice, Calif. I had never heard of Kistler at the time, but one of my companions told me the story of how these two young men, Steve Kistler and Mark Bixler, had started a winery and, virtually by themselves, were making chardonnays that were rivaling white Burgundies.

That, of course, was a bit of a stretch. Kistler was, in fact, making wines that set a standard for California chardonnay. But with that introduction to the wines, I kept watch over the years, sampling them whenever I had an opportunity. I must say, I had mixed feelings about Kistlers. Sometimes I found them to be brilliant, vividly etched wines, taut and full of mineral flavors even as they epitomized the exuberant style of California chardonnay. Other times they seemed lifeless and heavy, without the structure to age.

Always, though, they were popular, so highly sought after that you could find them only in restaurants or by way of the Kistler mailing list. Kistler is still popular, but its style is evolving, the wines becoming less oaky, less powerful, more graceful and focused. It's an extremely rare instance of a winery, at the top of the heap, altering a successful formula, and the subject of my column this week.

What does Kistler's evolution signify? Well, let's be clear. Kistler is not pandering to a shift in the marketplace or of public tastes. It's more about following the arc of Steve Kistler's own taste, and as he told me, he found himself in the last decade preferring wines that were more lively and structured, with finesse, to wines that were powerful above all.

Will it have any effect on the market? Probably not, for the very good reason that California chardonnay now accommodates an entire spectrum of styles. No longer is the big, powerful, full-blown style dominant. Sure, you can still find plenty of these wines. Aubert epitomizes the best of this style, huge in the glass, easily breaking 15 percent alcohol, yet balanced, and far more mineral-flavored than tutti-frutti.

On the other side are the leaner chardonnays, made in the California tradition of blocking the secondary malolactic fermentation, which transforms sharp malic acid into softer lactic acid. The best example is Stony Hill Vineyard, which continues to make superb chardonnays that can last for decades. Other top producers in this tradition include storied California names like Mayacamas, Forman and Chateau Montelena, along with numerous wineries that market their wines as "Chablis-like." This last is no more than hype, as I've yet to taste any California chardonnay, or any chardonnay from anywhere, for that matter, that bore more than a faint resemblance to Chablis.

In the middle of these two extremes is a wide realm, filled with impressive producers, none more so than Kongsgaard, which I think consistently makes the best chardonnays in California today. I love the historic chardonnays of Mount Eden Estate and Hanzell, and the single-vineyard chardonnays of Littorai.

Most exciting of all, though, are the up-and-coming chardonnay producers whose wines may be hard to find but are well worth the effort. They include names like Peay Vineyards, Rivers Marie, Failla, Lioco and Rhys Vineyards. No doubt there are many others, but these are the California chardonnays that today make me most happy when I can find them. Among them, Kistler is in excellent company.