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# Decanter

March 2015

## Chardonnay: The world's best (outside Burgundy)

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# The best Chardonnays in the world (outside Burgundy)

Aside from Chablis, Meursault or Montrachet, which of the world's leading Chardonnay regions would you turn to, and what are the top wines from each? In a landmark tasting, Stephen Brook heads up an expert panel to find out – and the results may surprise you

CHARDONNAY, MOST WINE lovers agree, is the noblest white grape variety (we'll allow Riesling enthusiasts a dissenting voice). But at least four decades have gone by since it was a monopoly of the Burgundy region and Champagne. Today it is widely planted throughout the world, and with mature vineyards and experienced winemakers working with the variety, it was irresistibly tempting to test how Chardonnay outside Burgundy is faring, especially since concerns about premature oxidation and ever soaring prices increasingly persuade wine drinkers to look outside that region.

Unlike its stablemate Pinot Noir, Chardonnay has never been particularly difficult to grow. While it tends to thrive in a relatively cool climate and site, it can succeed in a number of styles, from unoaked Chablis to richly oaked versions. In short, it's malleable, a variety that winemakers love to play with, as they can easily exercise their skills on it, dabbling in all kinds of variables, such as yields, barrel fermentation, malolactic fermentation (or its suppression), lees-stirring, and more.

Given Chardonnay's popularity, the field for any tasting of top Chardonnays needed to be narrowed down, a task undertaken by *Decanter* experts who nominated what they considered the finest Chardonnays from their regions. From these lists,

the editorial team made a final selection of 80 wines (see box, right). The tasters (myself, Jasper Morris MW and Steven Spurrier) were given minimal information: just the vaguest indications about oak-ageing and alcohol. Thus the wines were required to speak for themselves. Spurrier and I broadly agreed with Morris' assertion that 'about half the wines couldn't have been Burgundy, but half quite easily could have'.

## Power vs finesse

The wines fell, approximately into two camps: those with 13.5% alcohol or less, and those with 14% or more. The less powerful wines tended to be aged, or so it seemed as they were tasted, in a moderate proportion of new oak. The emphasis was on freshness, acidity and finesse.

Those in the second camp tended to be richer, toastier, with more evident use of oak. There were excellent wines in both camps, although the panel (perhaps because of our demure European tastes) tended to favour the fresher styles, which showed precision, restraint and, often, minerality.

The 2013s showed beautifully, and there was less tension and more overt sucrosity in the 2012s. Rather to our surprise, the handful of 2010s were mostly stunning, with very little evolution.

*'If we had the same number of theoretically top Burgundies in a tasting, they would not have been as consistently good'* Jasper Morris MW



Moving to the more powerful and oaky bottles was quite a gear change, but there was no shortage of impressive wines in that category, although the tasters often questioned their sucrosity, and the fact that some valued power over finesse.

Morris was keen to distinguish sweetness from sucrosity, pointing out that the latter referred to the impression of sweetness. Actual sweetness could easily be derived from a dollop of residual sugar in the wine – a common feature of much popular Californian and Australian Chardonnay – whereas sucrosity could just as easily be a side-effect of high alcohol. It wasn't always easy to distinguish between the two, though it seemed there were few wines that had alarming amounts of residual sugar.

A fine white Burgundy should offer complexity, nuance, finesse and ageability. How many of these qualities were echoed in the non-Burgundian Chardonnays? Morris willingly conceded that for at least 20 years other regions have produced wines of a quality that rivalled good Burgundy. Indeed, he noted of this line-up, 'If we had the same number of theoretically top Burgundies in a tasting, they would not have been as consistently good.' Spurrier and I felt much the same, though Spurrier suspected he might have assessed more critically had the wine actually been from Burgundy.

Had this been a conventional *Decanter* panel tasting, just over half the wines would have fallen into the Outstanding or Highly Recommended categories – an impressive result. (Though given the wines had been pre-selected for their exceptional quality, this figure may not be quite as astounding as it at first appears. Nonetheless the panel was more than delighted by the quality overall.)

### Analysing the results

Looking closely at the actual results, it's hard to see any clear pattern. Among the wines with the highest average scores (which we've rated as Outstanding and above) four are from Australia, three are from South Africa, there are two each from the US and New Zealand, and one each from Canada and Italy. The only surprises here are the unexpectedly strong performances by wines from Lombardy and Niagara, and the presence in force of South Africa's Hemel-en-Aarde region.

Among the next tier of high-scoring wines (Highly Recommended), seven come from the US ➤

## And the nominees are...

### Argentina (nominated by Patricio Tapia)

- Bodega Aleanna, El Enemigo, Mendoza 2012
- Caelum, Reserva, Luján de Cuyo, Mendoza 2011
- Catena Zapata, Angélica Zapata, Tupungato, Mendoza 2012
- Catena Zapata, White Bones, Tupungato, Mendoza 2011
- Catena Zapata, White Stones, Tupungato, Mendoza 2011
- Finca Sophenia, Reserva, Tupungato, Mendoza 2012
- Luca, G Lot, Tupungato, Mendoza 2012
- Luigi Bosca, Finca Los Nobles, Mendoza 2011
- Rutini, Apartado, Mendoza 2013
- Trapezio, Plus Chardonnay, Agrelo, Mendoza 2011

### Australia (Huan Hooke & Tyson Stelzer)

- By Farr, Geelong, Victoria 2012
- Cullen, Kevin John, Margaret River, Western Australia 2012
- De Bortoli, Section A5, Yarra Valley, Victoria 2012
- De Bortoli & Shermeline, Phi, Lusatia Park Vineyard, Yarra Valley, Victoria 2007
- Flametre, SRS, Wallcliffe, Margaret River, Western Australia 2013
- Gioconda, Beechworth, Victoria 2011
- Leeuwin Estate, Art Series, Margaret River, Western Australia 2010
- Mac Forbes, Woolf Yallock, Yarra Valley, Victoria 2013
- Oakridge, 864 Single Block Release, Yarra Valley, Victoria 2011
- Penfolds, Reserve Bin 13A, Adelaide Hills, South Australia 2013
- Penfolds, Yattarna, South Eastern Australia 2013
- Tolpuddle Vineyard, Tasmania 2012
- Vasse Felix, Heytesbury, Margaret River, Western Australia 2012

### Canada (Stephen Brook & Jon Bonné)

- Norman Hardie, Estate, Prince Edward County, Ontario 2012
- Tawse, Estate, Niagara Peninsula, Ontario 2011

### Chile (Peter Richards MW & Patricio Tapia)

- Alto Las Gredas, Gran Reserva, Perquenco 2012
- Aristos, Duquesa d'A, Cachapoal 2009
- Calyptra, Gran Reserva, Cachapoal 2011
- Clos des Fous, Locura 1, Rapel, Central Valley 2012
- Concha y Toro, Marques de Casa Concha, Limari 2012
- De Martino, Quebrada Seca, Limari 2012
- Maycas del Limari, Quebrada Seca, Ovalle, Limari 2010
- Miguel Torres, Cordillera, Reserva Especial, Limari 2012
- Pandolfi Price, Los Patricios, Itata 2010
- Tabalí, Talinay, Coastal Limestone Vineyard, Limari 2013
- Viña Aquitania, Sol de Sol, Malleco Valley, Traiguén 2011
- Viña Ventisquero, Tara White Wine 1, Atacama 2013

### Italy (Ian D'Agata)

- Bellavista, Convento 55 Annunziata, Curtefranca, Lombardy 2010

### ■ Ca' del Bosco, Curtefranca, Lombardy 2010

- Cantina Terlano, Rarità, Terlan, Alto Adige 2000
- Capannelle, Tuscany 2011
- Felsina Berardenga, I Sistri, Tuscany 2012
- Gaja, Gaja & Rey, Langhe, Piedmont 2011
- Isole e Olena, Collezione Privata, Tuscany 2012
- Jermann, Dreams, Venezia Giulia 2012
- Les Crêtes, Cuvée Bois, Valle d'Aosta 2012
- Tasca, Vigna San Francesco, Contea di Sclafani, Sicily 2012
- Vie di Romans, Friuli Isonzo, Friuli Venezia Giulia 2012

### New Zealand (Bob Campbell MW)

- Bell Hill, Canterbury 2011
- Dog Point Vineyard, Marlborough 2011
- Felton Road, Block 2, Bannockburn, Central Otago 2012
- Forrest Wines, John Forrest Collection, Wairu Valley, Marlborough 2011
- Fromm, Clayvin Vineyard, Marlborough 2007
- Giesen, The Fuder, Clayvin, Marlborough 2012
- Kumeu River, Maté's Vineyard, Kumeu 2011
- Martinborough Vineyard, Martinborough Terrace, Martinborough 2012
- Neudorf, Moutere, Nelson 2012
- Villa Maria, Keltern Vineyard, Hawke's Bay 2013

### South Africa (Tim Atkin MW)

- Ataraxia, Hemel-en-Aarde 2013
- Chamonix, Reserve, Franschoek 2013
- Crystallium, Clay Shales, Overberg 2013
- Crystallium, The Agnes, Western Cape 2013
- De Wetshof, Bateleur, Robertson 2012
- Hamilton Russell Vineyards, Hemel-en-Aarde Valley, Walker Bay 2013
- Jordan, Nine Yards, Stellenbosch 2013
- Longridge, Stellenbosch 2013
- Richard Kershaw, Clonal Selection, Elgin 2012
- Sumaridge Estate Wines, Upper Hemel-en-Aarde Valley, Walker Bay 2012

### USA (Jon Bonné and Stephen Brook)

- Au Bon Climat, Los Alamos Vineyard, Santa Barbara County, California 2011
- Ceritas, Porter-Bass Vineyard, Sonoma Coast, California 2012
- Chanin, Sanford & Benedict Vineyard, Santa Rita Hills, California 2012
- Faglia, Haynes Vineyard, Coombsville, California 2012
- Hanzell, Sonoma Valley, California 2012
- Hirsch Vineyards, Sonoma Coast, California 2012
- Hyde & De Villaine, HdV, Carneros, Napa Valley, California 2010
- Knez, Demuth Vineyard, Anderson Valley, Mendocino, California 2012
- Lioco, Demuth Vineyard, Anderson Valley, Mendocino, California 2012
- Littoral, BA Thieriot Vineyard, Sonoma Coast, California 2012
- Ramey, Platt Vineyard, Sonoma Coast, California 2010
- Sandhi, Bentrack, Santa Rita Hills, California 2012



– all Californian – six from Australia, five from New Zealand and four from Chile, with three from Italy and two each from South Africa and Argentina. Here the surprise is the strong showing by Californian wines from different regions. The perception of Californian Chardonnay is that it tends to be oaky and heavy, and while the wines nominated for this tasting tended to be in a fresher and more elegant style, it is still noteworthy that so many came through strongly. Australia and New Zealand also showed great regional diversity.

Of the least admired wines (those that didn't make the top 32 from the 80 tasted) it is striking that so many came from South America and Italy. Even so, there were a number with high scores, although we tasters did not always agree. By contrast our scores for the top 32 wines listed here were far more uniform.

I'm not sure we can draw any firm conclusions from this tasting. German and Austrian Chardonnay were not represented, and Morris argued that Italy was over-represented. It seems to be a case of great winemakers and wineries, rather than regions that clearly rival Burgundy. From New Zealand, wines from Martinborough,

Bell Hill, Giesen and Neudorf all did splendidly, but that may be as much to do with the talents of Paul Mason, Marcel Giesen and Tim Finn rather than the greatness of any specific sub-region and its terroir. Similarly, the top Chardonnays from California included bottles produced by David Ramey, Ehren Jordan, Sashi Moorman and Ted Lemon, all widely acknowledged as masters of the variety.

The panel discussed ageability. Morris was reluctant to recommend long cellaring, but noted the best should 'age without difficulty for 10-15 years'. Spurrier was more cautious, rarely going beyond 2020. My own view is closer to Morris', although it is hardly essential to cellar any of these before they can be drunk with pleasure.

On the basis of this tasting, Burgundy need not look anxiously over its shoulder as hordes of great Chardonnay producers draw ever closer. It's not news that other regions can dazzle with this variety. But it does seem to show that, given Chardonnay's essential malleability, a great winemaker in a great spot can make outstanding wine. Moreover, many of these wines are substantially cheaper than their role models from Burgundy (see box p29).

## The judges



**Stephen Brook** has been a *Decanter* contributing editor since 1996 and has won many awards for his wine writing. He has also written more than 30 books,

including *The Fine Wines of California*. **Brook's favourite: Ca' del Bosco, Curtefranca, Lombardy 2010 (see p32)** 'I knew this estate makes Italy's greatest sparkling wines, but clearly it excels with still Chardonnay too: exotic yet has great precision, tension, pungency and length.'



**Jasper Morris MW** is the Burgundy buyer for UK wine merchant Berry Bros & Rudd and the DWWA Regional Chair for Burgundy. His book, *Inside*

*Burgundy*, won the André Simon award for the best wine book of the year (2010). **Morris' favourite: Tawse, Estate, Niagara Peninsula, Ontario, Canada 2011 (see p32)** 'Beautifully floral, concentrated and elegant. Not too exotic, but balanced and powerfully intense without being heavy. Very persistent.'



**Steven Spurrier** is *Decanter's* consultant editor and chairman of the Decanter World Wine Awards and Decanter Asia Wine Awards.

**Spurrier's favourite: Penfolds, Reserve Bin 13A, Adelaide Hills, South Australia 2013 (see p28)** 'Very elegant and linear. Good now, and with a good future.'

## Highly Recommended wines (in alphabetical order)



**Bellavista, Convento SS Annunziata, Curtefranca, Lombardy, Italy 2010**

£35-£46 Carruthers & Kent, Exel Wines, Hawkshead Wines, Hedonism, Liberty Wines, Scarlet Wines, SH Jones, Slurp, Winedirect

Herbaceous nose but not too green; has finesse and grace. Apricot and banana crème brûlée palate. Stylish and long, discreet toasty finish. **Drink 2015-2018 Alcohol 13%**



**Bodega Alcanna, El Enemigo, Mendoza, Argentina 2012**

N/A UK [www.enemigowines.com](http://www.enemigowines.com)

Heady stone fruits nose with some tropical elements. Excellent acidity and has some class to the fruit – certainly ripe, but a success in this style. Has real structure and grip with a long, nutty finish.

**Drink 2015-2020 Alc 13.9%**



**Cantina Terlano, Rarità, Terlan, Alto Adige, Italy 2000**

£88 Astrum Wine Cellars, Woodwinters

Mellow lime and apple nose. Balanced and delicious on the palate with yellow fruit and good freshness. Quite opulent with some heft on the finish, which is oaky and long. **Drink 2015-2020 Alc 13%**



**Ceritas, Porter-Bass Vineyard, Sonoma Coast, California, USA 2012**

N/A UK [www.ceritaswines.com](http://www.ceritaswines.com)

Honey, citrus and summer-fruits nose. Rich and plump without seeming heavy, as there is refreshing acidity coursing through the wine. Ripe and juicy, but also tangy and invigorating. **Drink 2015-2022 Alc 12.9%**



**Chanin, Sanford & Benedict Vineyard, Santa Rita Hills, California, USA 2012**

£24.95 Flint

Big, oaky nose with apple compote and stone fruits. The wine has length, elegance and broad flavours. **Drink 2015-2018 Alc 14.5%**

## CHARDONNAY



**Concha y Toro,  
Marques de Casa  
Concha, Limari,  
Chile 2012**

£11.45-£12.54 **Hawkshead Wines, SH Jones, Slurp, Tesco Wine by the Case, TJ Wines**  
Some florality over yellow summer fruits. Good attack with ripe acidity – a bold style that is concentrated, spicy and quite toasty. **Drink** 2015-2021 **Alc** 14%



**Felton Road, Block 2,  
Bannockburn, Central  
Otago, New Zealand  
2012**

£22-£30 **Berry Bros & Rudd, Bibendum, Farr Vintners, Hawkshead Wines, Hedonism, Laithwaite's, SH Jones, Slurp, Solent Cellar, The Wine Society, Woodwinters**  
Attractive bacon fat nose. Rich and juicy, with a seam of acidity to give tension and bite. Fruit blends well with oak. Mineral. **Drink** 2015-2020 **Alc** 13.5%



**Finca Sopenia,  
Reserve, Tupungato,  
Mendoza, Argentina  
2012**

£12.85 **Ellis of Richmond**  
Lightly smoky pear aroma. Lean, intense, ripe fruit backed by a fresh structure. There's sufficient acidity to keep it lively, and the aftertaste is decidedly citric. **Drink** 2015-2022 **Alc** 13.5%



**Flametree, SRS,  
Wallcliffe, Margaret  
River, Western  
Australia 2013**

N/A UK [www.flametreevines.com](http://www.flametreevines.com)  
Fresh nose with notes of lemon and lime and a delicate herbal tang. A pungent style that's clearly youthful, but with fine concentration and acidity. There's ripe fruit on the long finish. **Drink** 2015-2024 **Alc** 13%



**Fromm, Clayvin  
Vineyard,  
Marlborough, New  
Zealand 2007**

£31.99 **All About Wine, D Byrne & Co, The New Zealand Cellar, Woodwinters**  
A lot of elegant oak on the nose – toasty and stylish. Lots of depth and acidity over the quite pronounced phenolics. Forward and attractive; a good wine. **Drink** 2015-2022 **Alc** 14.5%



**Giesen, The Fuder,  
Clayvin, Marlborough,  
New Zealand 2012**

£31.86-£35 **Harrods, Lay & Wheeler**  
Floral aromas over yellow fruits. Ripe and juicy on the palate with just a hint of sweetness but balanced by extract, oak and intrinsic power. Has personality and persistence. **Drink** 2015-2020 **Alc** 14.5%



**Hamilton Russell  
Vineyards, Hemel-en-  
Aarde Valley, South  
Africa 2013**

£21-£23 **D Byrne & Co, Harrods, Handford Wines, Harrogate Fine Wine Co, Hawkshead Wines, Selfridges, SH Jones, Slurp, Spirited Wines, The Wine Society, Tivoli Wines, Whole Foods**  
Stylish nose with classy oak; poised and fresh. Weighty yet still lively palate with good acidity and a mineral touch. A rich finish; impressive and exotic. **Drink** 2015-2022 **Alc** 13%



**Hanzell, Sonoma  
Valley, USA 2012**

£50 **Goodhuis**  
Oranges and cream – a notably exotic nose, which actually freshens up and balances out. Plump and juicy, with good concentration, depth of fruit, nice lift and length. **Drink** 2015-2020 **Alc** 14.5%



**Hirsch Vineyards,  
Sonoma Coast,  
California, USA 2012**

N/A UK [www.hirschvineyards.com](http://www.hirschvineyards.com)  
Lively, with a very pure and classy bouquet of pink grapefruit and lemon. Quite rich, sleek and concentrated palate with good acidity and just a hint of sweetness. A distinctive Chardonnay. **Drink** 2015-2022 **Alc** 13.5%



**Jermann, Dreams,  
Venezia Giulia, Italy  
2012**

£39-£43 **Exel Wines, Farr Vintners, Great Western Wine, Harrods, Majestic, Winedirect**  
Buttery, tropical nose of lime, mango and pineapple. A ripe style but it has been kept in line very nicely – not too exotic and with very good length. Smooth and rich; very well expressed. **Drink** 2015-2022 **Alc** 13.5%



**Kumeu River, Maté's  
Vineyard, Kumeu, New  
Zealand 2011**

£23.50-£30 **Bonnetts Fine Wines, The Wine Society**  
Oakly nose with apple compote. There is a really impressive weight of fruit on the mid-palate here, with some yellow plums, and just enough acidity to balance and good length. **Drink** 2015-2020 **Alc** 13.5%



**Lioco, Demuth  
Vineyard, Anderson  
Valley, Mendocino,  
California, USA 2012**

N/A UK [www.liocowine.com](http://www.liocowine.com)  
Lightly honeyed nose with clear and well-expressed citrus fruits. Rich palate but has rather edgy acidity – sleek in texture with plenty of energy and an attractive, grapey style. **Drink** 2015-2020 **Alc** 13.2%



**Littorai, BA Thieriot  
Vineyard, Sonoma  
Coast, California, USA  
2012**

£63.99 **Hedonism**  
Powerful apple and apricot  
nose, with well-integrated oak.  
Natural fruit and good acidity  
with that slight exoticism of  
New World Chardonnay. A fine,  
persistent finish. **Drink**  
2015-2022 **Alc** 13.6%



**Longridge,  
Stellenbosch, South  
Africa 2013**

N/A UK [www.longridge.co.za](http://www.longridge.co.za)  
Quite a powerful bouquet of  
lime and floral notes. Ripe and  
juicy palate with a hint of  
sweetness, but it's balanced by  
tangy acidity. A touch of  
coconut on the finish – this has  
a good future. **Drink** 2015-2020  
**Alc** 14%



**Mac Forbes, Woori  
Yallock, Yarra Valley,  
Australia 2013**

£30 **Oz Wines**  
Interesting, smoky and mineral  
nose showing vibrancy.  
Citrusy palate with oak in just  
a supporting role, the structure  
coming from good acidity.  
A racy style showing finesse  
rather than opulence. **Drink**  
2015-2024 **Alc** 13%



**Maycas del Limarí,  
Quebrada Seca, Ovalle,  
Limarí, Chile 2010**

£21 **New Street Wine Shop**  
Bready and yeasty nose. Quite  
profound fruit and complex  
texture, good persistence, with  
neither overt sweetness nor  
alcohol burn. Well-blended  
with nice broad flavours.  
**Drink** 2015-2020 **Alc** 14%



**Miguel Torres,  
Cordillera, Reserva  
Especial, Limarí,  
Chile 2012**

£10.99-£13.50 **Cork & Bottle,  
Fareham Wine Cellars, Fine Wines  
Direct, Yorkshire Vintners,  
Vintage Marque**  
Discreet lime and green pea  
nose with light oak. Hefty  
weight to this broad-  
shouldered wine with biscuity  
oak and some sucrosity to the  
ripe fruit. Very persistent.  
**Drink** 2015-2018 **Alc** 14%



**Neudorf, Moutere,  
Nelson, New Zealand  
2012**

£44.99-£50 **Berry Bros &  
Rudd, Must Wines, The New  
Zealand Cellar, The Wine Society**  
Intense apple nose, with fine  
oak aromas that are well  
integrated. Good weight of  
fruit on the palate, which has  
vigour and minerality behind it.  
The oak is evident but should  
harmonise more with age.  
**Drink** 2015-2024 **Alc** 13.5%



**Penfolds, Reserve Bin  
13A, Adelaide Hills,  
South Australia 2013**

£65-£70 **Berry Bros & Rudd,  
Corking Wines, Lay & Wheeler,  
Noel Young**  
Bacon fat aromas with apple  
and floral notes. A touch of  
fresh lime on the palate, which  
is vigorous and lifted with  
ripeness and precision. A  
restrained style but well made.  
**Drink** 2015-2024 **Alc** 12.5%



**Penfolds, Yattarna,  
South Eastern  
Australia 2013**

£96-£125 (2012) **Berry Bros &  
Rudd, Frazier's, Laithwaite's,  
Harrods, Hedonism, Woodwinters**  
Delicate citrus nose – distinctly  
lemony with white flowers.  
Appears to be a lighter, elegant  
style of Chardonnay but there's  
still some weight on the palate.  
Perfectly balanced – a very  
classy wine. **Drink** 2015-2024  
**Alc** 13%



**Sandhi, Bentrock,  
Santa Rita Hills,  
California, USA 2012**

£44.95 **Roberson**  
Has an attractive grapey style,  
along with some lemony notes.  
Good citrusy length of fruit on  
the palate with nice acidity and  
length. Has grip and tension,  
and some minerality on the  
finish. **Drink** 2015-2022  
**Alc** 13.7%



**Tabalí, Talinay,  
Coastal Limstone  
Vineyard, Limarí,  
Chile 2013**

£15.99 **All About Wine,  
D Byrnes & Co, Woodwinters**  
Lime cordial nose and very  
ripe citrus and apricot fruit.  
Melon notes on the palate and  
reasonably intense broad  
flavours. A good expression  
of Chardonnay with excellent  
oak balance. **Drink** 2015-2022  
**Alc** 13.5%



**Tolpuddle Vineyard,  
Tasmania, Australia  
2012**

£35.50-£44.99 **Exel Wines,  
Free Run Juice, Halifax Wine Co,  
Harvey Nichols, Hedonism, The  
Longship, Miles Better Wines, No2  
Pound Street, ND John, Oz Wines,  
Selfridges, Slurp, The Vineking**  
Floral and fresh aromas with  
great clarity and minerality.  
Rich, dense, very concentrated  
palate showing firm acidity,  
grip and extract. Admirable  
tension and persistence.  
**Drink** 2015-2024 **Alc** 13%



**Vasse Felix,  
Heytesbury, Margaret  
River, Western  
Australia 2012**

£29-£40 **Avery's, Corking  
Wines, Hawkshead Wines,  
Laithwaite's, Majestic, SH Jones,  
Slurp, Wine Direct**  
Sprightly lime and tropical  
fruit aromas with a dash of oak  
– stylish. Good depth of fruit  
on the palate with lemony  
acidity and length. Made to  
evolve, with a fine future.  
**Drink** 2015-2024 **Alc** 13%

## Best-value wines tasted

\* Denotes wines already listed in this feature, among the top 32

- **Ataraxia, Hemel-en-Aarde, South Africa 2013 \***  
£18-£25 Bancroft Wines, Bottle Apostle, Handford Wines, Majestic, Stone Vine & Sun, The Wine Library  
Alcohol 13.5%
- **Chamonix, Reserve, Franschhoek, South Africa 2013**  
£22 Berry Bros & Rudd, Handford Wines, Lay & Wheeler, The Wright Wine Co, SA Wines Online, Raeburn Fine Wines, South Down Cellars  
Alc 13.5%
- **Chanin, Sanford & Benedict Vineyard, Santa Rita Hills, California, USA 2012 \***  
£24.95 Flint  
Alc 14.5%
- **Clos des Fous, Locura 1, Rapel, Central Valley, Chile 2012**  
£13.99 Buon Vino, Camber Wines, Carruthers & Kent, Luvians, New St Wine Shop, No2 Pound St, Park Vintners, Prohibition Wines, The Secret Cellar, Theatre of Wine, Whole Foods Market, Winebear, The Wine Chambers, Winedirect, The Wine Reserve  
Alc 14%
- **Concha y Toro, Marques de Casa Concha, Limari, Chile 2012 \***  
£11.45-£12.54 Hawkshead Wines, SH Jones, Slurp, Tesco Wine by the Case, TJ Wines  
Alc 14%
- **Crystallum, The Agnes, Western Cape, South Africa 2013**  
£22.99 The Good Wine Shop, The Secret Cellar, The Wine Reserve  
Alc 13.5%
- **De Bortoli, Section A5, Yarra Valley, Victoria, Australia 2012**  
£22 North South Wines  
Alc 12.5%
- **De Martino, Quebrada Seca, Limari, Chile 2012**  
£23.99 Les Caves de Pyrène  
Alc 13.5%
- **Dog Point Vineyard, Marlborough, New Zealand 2011**  
£19-£22.50 AG Wines, Berry Bros & Rudd, Hedonism, New Zealand House of Wine, The Wine Society, Winedirect  
Alc 14%
- **Felsina Berardenga, I Sistri, Tuscany, Italy 2012**  
£24.99 Eclectic Tastes, Liberty Wines, PM Wine Cellars, Stainton Wines, Toscanaccio  
Alc 13%
- **Finca Sopenia, Reserve, Tupungato, Mendoza, Argentina 2012 \***  
£12.85 Ellis of Richmond  
Alc 13.5%
- **Forrest Wines, John Forrest Collection, Wairau Valley, Marlborough, New Zealand 2011**  
£18.99 Adnams  
Alc 13%
- **Hamilton Russell Vineyards, Hemel-en-Aarde Valley, South Africa 2013 \***  
£21-£23 D Byrne & Co, Harrods, Handford Wines, Harrogate Fine Wine Co, Hawkshead Wines, Selfridges, SH Jones, Slurp, Spirited Wines, The Wine Society, Tivoli Wines, Whole Foods  
Alc 13%
- **Maycas del Limari, Quebrada Seca, Ovalle, Limari, Chile 2010 \***  
£21 New Street Wine Shop  
Alc 14%
- **Miguel Torres, Cordillera, Reserva Especial, Limari, Chile 2012 \***  
£10.99-£13.50 Cork & Bottle, Fareham Wine, Fine Wines Direct, Yorkshire Vintners, Vintage Marque  
Alc 14%
- **Norman Hardie, County, Prince Edward County, Ontario, Canada 2012**  
£20 The Wine Society  
Alc 12.5%
- **Sumaridge Estate Wines, Upper Hemel-en-Aarde Valley, Walker Bay, South Africa 2012**  
£21.99 The Wine Co  
Alc 13.5%
- **Tabali, Talinay, Coastal Limestone Vineyard, Limari, Chile 2013 \***  
£15.99 All About Wine, D Byrne & Co, Woodwinters  
Alc 13.5%
- **Villa Maria, Keltern Vineyard, Hawke's Bay, New Zealand 2013 \***  
£19.30 Hatch Mansfield  
Alc 13.5%

## Outstanding wines

(in alphabetical order)

### Ataraxia, Hemel-en-Aarde, South Africa 2013

£18-£25 Bancroft Wines, Bottle Apostle, Handford Wines, Majestic, Stone Vine & Sun, The Wine Library

Lime and tropical fruit on nose and palate. Shows interesting complexity in the mouth with a crisp acid balance, some lees character, well-integrated oak, length and precision. **Drink** 2015-2023 **Alc** 13.5%

KEVIN GRANT SPENT 15 years working at some of South Africa's top wine estates, including a long stint as winemaker at Hamilton Russell. In 2004 he struck out on his own, when he and some investment partners purchased a 50ha site, the highest in the Hemel-en-Aarde region, but still close to the ocean. Six hectares were planted to Chardonnay, and another 6ha to Pinot Noir. The soils for this wine are similar to those on which the Crystallum (see p30) is grown: clay, with significant granite and shale content. The vineyard faces mostly south, ensuring a cool microclimate. The wine is barrel-fermented and aged in 28% new oak from Burgundian coopers; there is occasional lees-stirring and after nine months of ageing the wine is bottled. Beautiful purity and clarity.



### Bell Hill, Canterbury, New Zealand 2011

£75 Armit

Attractive floral nose and very well-balanced aromas of apple and oak. The fruit is fully ripe but balanced by the acidity, which is perfectly integrated. An impressive wine with a tangy finish.

**Drink** 2015-2020 **Alc** 13.5%

BELL HILL'S CHARDONNAYS and Pinot Noirs enjoy a cult following in New Zealand, and by that country's standards they are expensive wines. The 2ha of vineyards were planted in the late 1990s at a former limestone quarry near Canterbury. Marcel Giesen and his wife Sherwyn are the owners. Giesen is one of the three brothers that run their eponymous winery in Christchurch, having emigrated from their native Germany in the 1980s. They undertook an extensive and detailed soil analysis to get to grips with the terroirs of each parcel. The vines are atypical of the country's norms by being planted at a density of between 9,000 and 12,500 vines per hectare. The Chardonnay is aged in barrels and then in tanks, and undergoes malolactic fermentation; the use of new oak is minimal. It's a very concentrated, mineral wine, with a light phenolic edge. But production is tiny, often under 1,000 bottles, and this scarcity also contributes to the cult status of the Bell Hill wines. ➤



## By Farr, Geelong, Victoria, Australia 2012

£39-£50 Carruthers & Kent, Exel Wines, Highbury Vintners, Liberty Wines, Oz Wines, The Fine Wine Co, The Vineking, Winedirect

Elegantly oaked nose with some tropical fruit, mango and lime. Good depth of complexity with the oak blended in, and ripe fruit but excellent acidity to balance. A full and somewhat exotic style yet has tension and complexity.

**Drink** 2015-2020 **Alc** 13.5%

GARY FARR HAS worked countless vintages in Burgundy and is steeped in its traditions and practices. Yet he knows well that Geelong isn't the same place as Beaune. A decade ago his Chardonnays were quite big and tropical, and he was producing that style because he despaired of making the more Burgundian style that was closer to his heart. 'It's impossible to sell tight, elegant Puligny-style Chardonnay,' he once told me. 'You can't give it away, especially if you've given it some bottle age before release.' His Chardonnay has always been a hefty wine, fermented with natural yeasts and given full malolactic fermentation before being aged in one-third new barriques. This 2012 demonstrates a greater finesse and complexity than in the past. With Australian as well as international tastes shifting to a sleeker style of Chardonnay, Farr's lament can be consigned to the past.



## Crystallum, Clay Shales, Overberg, South Africa 2013

£24-£28 Exel Wines, HarperWells, Hutton & Edwards, Hawkshead Wines, Hedonizm, Selfridges, SH Jones, Slurp, Starmore Boss, The Drinkshop, The Secret Cellar, The Wine Reserve, The Vineking, Winedirect, Wright Wine Co

Suave, silky and concentrated, this has a spiciness and distinct minerality that gives real complexity. Rounded fruit on the palate with impressive weight and nice lift of acidity to follow the rich flavours. Impressive quality with a good future. **Drink** 2015-2024 **Alc** 13.5%

PETER FINLAYSON CUT his teeth at Hamilton Russell, the first estate in coastal Hemel-en-Aarde to specialise in Burgundian varieties. He left to produce his own wines under the Bouchard Finlayson label, and throughout the 1990s and 2000s released citric, finely tuned Chardonnays in particular. In 2007 his sons Andrew and Peter-Allan, who had initially pursued other careers, teamed up to create Crystallum Wines, also specialising in Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. Their Agnes Chardonnay (which did not shine in this tasting) is a full-bodied blend from various vineyards, and their top wine is this, the Clay Shales, which comes from a single vineyard 300m in altitude and facing south, which in South Africa implies extreme coolness. The shale and clay soils give the wine a striking minerality.



## De Bortoli & Shelmerdine, Phi, Lusatia Park Vineyard, Yarra Valley, Victoria, Australia 2007

£25 North South Wines

Crystalline nose of mango and tropical fruit with some fresh citrus. This continues on to the palate which has good lift and length and well-judged oak blending in. A ripe wine but not over-exotic. Impressive. **Drink** 2015-2019 **Alc** 12%

DE BORTOLI IS a large company that has a dual identity. Its main winery is located in Griffith, New South Wales where, among other wines, it produces its celebrated botrytis Semillon called Noble One. At the same time it owns extensive vineyards in the Yarra Valley, where Steve Webber, who is married to Leanne De Bortoli, makes the wines. Phi is a joint venture established in 2002 between Webber and the grape-farming Shelmerdine family, which owns a vineyard located on red basalt soils along Lusatia Park Road in the Upper Yarra Valley. Planted to a high density in 1985, this well-drained, high-elevation vineyard is considered the Yarra's finest. Winemaking is unremarkable: whole-bunch pressing, barrel-fermentation with natural yeasts, malolactic fermentation, light stirring, and ageing in barrels for nine months – but the wine is beautifully poised and focused, a reflection of site rather than technique.



## Failla, Haynes Vineyard, Coombsville, California, USA 2012

£28.35 DeFine Food & Wine, Flint

Fine florality with citrus overtones and good natural richness of fruit. Rich but precise palate, with ample ripe apple and apricot fruit, and balancing acidity. Impressive persistence and lovely aromatics. **Drink** 2015-2020 **Alc** 13.9%

IT MAY SURPRISE some to find Ehren Jordan's Failla label among our top tier of Chardonnays. For many years Jordan was the winemaker for Turley, a winery that specialised in Zinfandel and Petite Syrah. These were mainly super-concentrated, high-alcohol wines that divided the critics. Many admired them; others found them undrinkable. The heyday of this style at Turley was in the 1990s, and in recent years the wines have been far better balanced. Jordan left Turley in 2013 and now focuses on his own property 430m up in the Sonoma Coast highlands, where he has planted Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Syrah, which he farms organically. Jordan also buys fruit from favourite vineyards, and this Chardonnay is sourced from the Haynes Vineyard in Coombsville, a cool area in southern Napa. The vines were planted in 1966. The inaugural vintage was 2011, which was entirely barrel-fermented, but in 2012 Jordan vinified part of the juice in concrete eggs. Just 500 cases were made.





**Giaconda, Beechworth, Victoria, Australia 2011**

£90-£95 AG Wines, Berry Bros & Rudd, Hedonism, Noel Young, Woodwinters  
A mix of fruit and bacon on the nose with well-judged ripeness. Rich, full-bodied, very ripe and toasty palate – a full-throttle style with power and a good deal of oak, yet it has a lemony freshness and lovely balance. **Drink** 2015-2022 **Alc** 13.5%

AFTER A DECADE studying and working in California, Rick Kinzbrunner returned to his native Australia to seek out the right spot to plant a vineyard. He found it in the remote Beechworth area in northern Victoria, where Brown Brothers had planted many of its vineyards. He liked the clay and gravel soils, especially a sector with significant content of decomposed granite and quartz. From 1982 he planted an old Penfolds clone of Chardonnay with small berries at a high-lying, south-facing site. He was soon making a wine that was widely regarded as one of Australia's finest. Barrel-fermented, it goes through full malolactic fermentation. Although Kinzbrunner only uses one-third new oak, the wine usually comes over as toasty and powerful, even though he does his best to reduce those characters by ageing the wine in his cool, underground cellar for up to 22 months. This 2011 was acclaimed with even more than the usual enthusiasm by the Australian wine press, and with good reason.



**Leeuwin Estate, Art Series, Margaret River, Western Australia 2010**

£55-£64 Fortnum & Mason, Four Walls, Harrods, Harvey Nichols, Hawkshead Wines, Hedonism, Jeroboams, L'Assemblage, Oz Wines, Secret Cellar, Selfridges, SH Jones, Slurp, Uncorked, WineDirect, Woodwinters  
Fine floral and light citrus fruit on the nose with a hint of green pea. This is quite exciting with beautifully fresh acidity backing the intensity of fruit on the palate. Exceptional persistence on the finish. **Drink** 2015-2020 **Alc** 14%

PERTH BUSINESSMAN DENIS Horgan was encouraged by California's Robert Mondavi to plant vineyards in Margaret River in the 1970s. The vines went into the ground from 1975 and 1979 was the first vintage. Within a few years Leeuwin had become the grandest of Margaret River wineries making a range of majestic wines, principally Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay. Art Series, launched in 1980, is the top tier, made from the oldest vines that produce small berries and very concentrated juice. After some skin contact the wine is fermented in mostly new barrels, with some lees stirring. Leeuwin used to encourage malolactic fermentation but no longer does so. The result, demonstrated over three decades, is a magnificent, limpid, complex Chardonnay, with broad shoulders but rarely showing excessive oak or heft. (This is a wine I once confidently placed in Burgundy during a blind tasting in Australia.)



**Ramey, Platt Vineyard, Sonoma Coast, California, USA 2010**

£49-£56 Swig, Woodwinters  
Hefty, oaky nose, with apple compote and apricots. Bright attack, fresher than the nose, concentrated with intense acidity. There is quite a substantial oak component but I would tip the fruit to win with further ageing. **Drink** 2015-2020 **Alc** 14.5%

DAVID RAMEY IS one of California's best and most respected winemakers. In the early 1990s he was the winemaker at Dominus, and then at Rudd. But for over a decade he has run his own winery, sourcing fruit from outstanding vineyards. Setting up his own label allowed him to return to his first love: making Chardonnay. Ramey makes no apology for the fact that likes a full-bodied, ripe expression of Chardonnay, and he is not one of the winemakers striving to produce an ultra-lean Burgundian style. Platt Vineyard is a very cool site, just a few miles from the Pacific Ocean, and is the source of the wine many consider Ramey's top Chardonnay, in which the intensity of fruit is balanced by excellent acidity, resulting in a wine of great vibrancy. The vintage tasted was 2010, and the wine showed little sign of maturity, and is still hitting its stride.



**Richard Kershaw, Clonal Selection, Elgin, South Africa 2012**

£32 Berry Bros & Rudd  
Fine, dried herbs and honey nose with fresh summer fruits. Reasonably full bodied with attractive acidity and the fruit and oak in harmony. This has a welcome severity and complexity on the finish, which shows some minerality. **Drink** 2015-2024 **Alc** 13.5%

BRITISH-BORN MASTER OF Wine Richard Kershaw was winemaker for Mulderbosch before setting up his own project in Elgin in 2011. This is South Africa's coolest wine region and is well known for its Sauvignon Blanc, though it has also produced excellent Chardonnay. Kershaw is very clear about the style of wine he wishes to make, and places great emphasis on his selection of Burgundian clones and on the sourcing of grapes from individual plots with distinctive soil types. His Chardonnay is picked by hand, whole-bunch pressed, and handled by gravity without pumping. The wine is barrel-fermented with indigenous yeasts and malolactic fermentation is discouraged, thus retaining the wine's natural acidity. This wine spent 10 months in 40% new Burgundian oak, although 10% of the crop is fermented and aged in steel. ➤



## Runners-up

### Ca' del Bosco, Curtefranca, Lombardy, Italy 2010

£60-£70 **Fortyfive10, Hedonism**

Fine, bright colour with beautiful floral elements, elegance and concentration. Lean attack has precision and tension, showing fine, lemony acidity. The oak adds a touch of coconut but it is discreet. Very individual and persuasive.

**Drink** 2015-2020 **Alc** 13%



Maurizio Zanella

MAURIZIO ZANELLA HAD plenty of his industrialist father's money to work with when he established this winery on the family estate in Franciacorta. But the ebullient Zanella is no mere playboy. He set his sights high and spared no expense in building a superb winery – forget the helipad and focus instead on the magnificent underground

ageing cellars for his sparkling wines. He studied in Bordeaux and Beaune for two years, and knew exactly what he was trying to do. First, he developed a range of first-rate, traditional-method sparkling wines, including arguably Italy's finest prestige cuvée, Annamaria Clementi. He also became one of Italy's first producers of serious Pinot Noir from five Burgundian clones. Ca' del Bosco also produces a Carmenera and a Bordeaux-style blend named in honour of Zanella.

Burgundy also supplied the raw material for the estate's Chardonnay, which is grown on stony soils near the winery at a density of 10,000 vines per hectare. The vines are now over 30 years old. After harvesting, the bunches are chilled and then – a Ca' del Bosco speciality – washed and dried in an air-tunnel before being pressed and decanted into new French oak for fermentation. It stays in wood for at least eight months, undergoes full malolactic fermentation, and is stirred regularly. The wine is then given long bottle ageing before release.

Ca' del Bosco has established a good track record for its Chardonnay, even though it tends to be overshadowed by the superb sparkling wines and Bordeaux blend. I've tasted many vintages from 1987 to 2000, and it has always shown a fine balance of weight, oakiness and intensity of fruit. Undeniably rich, it is always free of heaviness and has gained in finesse over the years.



### Tawse, Estate, Niagara Peninsula, Ontario, Canada 2011

N/A UK [www.tawsewinery.ca](http://www.tawsewinery.ca)

Ripe citrus and pineapple aromas – quite exotic with an attractive florality. Good attack, with concentrated fruit and high acidity, showing real intensity and pungency. Discreet, fresh and very persistent. An extremely classy wine. **Drink** 2015-2022 **Alc** 13%



Paul Pender

FINANCIER MORAY TAWSE founded his eponymous wine estate in 2005. It is located in the Vineland district of the Niagara wine region. At first he worked closely with the French-Canadian winemaker Pascal Marchand, who had established a firm reputation for full-bodied Burgundies at Domaine de la Vougeraie in Nuits-St-Georges.

After leaving Vougeraie in 2006, Marchand pursued a career as a consultant and roving winemaker and from 2011 he and Tawse joined forces to create a negociant house in Burgundy, Marchand Tawse. As Tawse had also acquired the 5ha Domaine Maume in 2012, Marchand was able to draw on those and other Tawse-owned sites for the Marchand Tawse wines. With Marchand's growing involvement in Burgundian ventures, he ceased to consult for the Niagara winery. For many years Tawse's chief winemaker has been former carpenter, Paul Pender. Some 30,000 cases are produced each year.

The property is a large one, with 80ha planted and the vineyards farmed organically and biodynamically. All grapes are handpicked and processed in a gravity-operated winery. Pender makes a number of single-vineyard Chardonnays as well as this Estate bottling. Here, grapes from vineyards in the 20 Mile Bench sub-region are whole-bunch pressed and fermented in barriques with minimal intervention. Malolactic fermentation is not induced, but if a wine feels like losing some malic acidity, that's fine with Pender. No new oak is used and after 12 months in barrels without lees-stirring, the wine spends a further six months on fine lees in tanks before being bottled. The cellars are covered with earth, so as to maintain a constant temperature and humidity level (about 85%), providing ideal ageing conditions for wines in barrel. Only 6,500 bottles were filled.



## Top wine of the tasting

### Martinborough Vineyard, Martinborough Terrace, Martinborough, New Zealand 2012

N/A UK [www.martinborough-vineyard.co.nz](http://www.martinborough-vineyard.co.nz)

Finely expressed summer fruits nose with hints of lime and apple. Perfectly poised on the palate with a certain raciness and also quite mineral. In balance, with natural fruit, citrusy richness, fine oak and a long finish. **Drink** 2015-2020 **Alcohol** 13%

IN 1980 THERE wasn't much going on in the small town of Martinborough, other than sheep farming, so soil scientist Dr Derek Milne and his brother Duncan could name their vineyard after the settlement where they began to plant.

They and their fellow investors were intrigued by a study made in 1978 which argued that the Martinborough district had excellent potential for Burgundian varieties. The well-drained soils and dry autumns seemed to offer ideal conditions.

The Milnes were initially more interested in Pinot Noir than Chardonnay, and their Pinot plantings are Martinborough's oldest. Early vintages would prove controversial as wine authorities rejected them for lack of typicity, but from 2000 onwards the Pinots showed fine complexity, texture and balance.

The brothers were also interested in Riesling, Pinot Gris and Chardonnay. Their winemaker between 1986 and 1999, the celebrated Larry McKenna from Australia, made the most of the vineyard's potential, and his 1998 Chardonnay won Champion Wine of the Show at the 1999 Air New Zealand Wine Awards. McKenna was succeeded by Claire Mulholland, and since 2007 the winemaker has been Paul Mason.

This Martinborough Terrace Chardonnay 2012 was picked by hand and whole-bunch pressed, before being fermented with indigenous yeasts in French oak, where it remained for 12

months, with occasional lees-stirring. It went through full malolactic fermentation and Mason showed a light touch with new barrels, using only 20%. Acidity is rarely a problem in New Zealand, so it comes as no surprise that the wine shows an invigorating raciness and minerality, while the discreet oak influence is there to support the structure of the wine rather than impart strong oak flavours that would detract from the purity of fruit.

Despite the early interest in Pinot Noir, it seems this Chardonnay is every bit as fine. **M**



Above: sweeping views of the Martinborough Vineyards estate, and winemaker Paul Mason (top)

