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# Winophilia



A Taste of the IWC

## FOCUS ON CENTRAL COAST CHARDONNAY

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It wasn't that long ago that the words "California chardonnay" and "elegant" were seldom uttered in the same sentence. But thanks to a growing number of visionary producers, things have definitely changed in recent years in California's Central Coast, and some of the best examples of balanced, stylish New World chardonnay are now made here.

Contrary to stereotype, much of the Central Coast is downright cool, thanks in large part to its proximity to the Pacific Ocean. From the coast inland the topography is hilly, and many of the best vineyards are planted on elevated slopes that are exposed to cold ocean winds, which make this an ideal climate for chardonnay. Planting those sites took no small degree of courage back in the 1970s and 1980s as most of California's vines before that were planted in flat, hot areas that guaranteed a large crop and could be easily maintained and harvested by machine. That's not the case with most of the area's best vineyards today, and the quality shows, but it wasn't until recently that the wine world began to really pay attention to the quality that could be achieved here.

Adam Tolmach's **The Ojai Vineyard** has been producing high-end wines from the Central Coast for a couple decades now and his **2009 Chardonnay Bien Nacido Vineyard Santa Maria Valley** (\$30), sourced from one of the most respected vineyards in the state, is a seductively perfumed, juicy chardonnay that shows a suave blend of depth and energy. Made from old vines, this wine shows excellent concentration but maintains a light, stony touch. Tolmach worked in Burgundy before setting up shop in California and it shows in his elegant wines.

**Alma Rosa Winery and Vineyards** is owned by Dick Sanford, who planted the renowned Sanford & Benedict vineyard in 1970, sold it in 1981, and then started Sanford Winery. He sold Sanford Winery and finally wound up back in the business again with this project in 2005. His **2009 Chardonnay El Jabila Vineyard Sta. Rita Hills** (\$28) shows serious depth and power, along with admirable structure and focus. For all its richness this is a very suave, fat-free wine that shows a lot of complexity now but has the guts to age.

Speaking of pioneers, Bob Lindquist, the owner/winemaker of **Qupé**, has been a steady source of bright, understated wines that impress with finesse rather than power. His **Qupé 2009 Chardonnay Bien Nacido Reserve Eleven Santa Maria Valley** (\$20) is a deeply pitched wine with intense orchard fruit and floral character and a spicy underpinning. This

is another example of a Central Coast chardonnay that manages to be both powerful and elegant.

**Foxen Vineyard** has long been known for producing big, muscular wines but recent vintages have yielded finer, more nuanced bottlings. Foxen's **2010 Chardonnay Bien Nacido Vineyard Block UU Santa Maria Valley** (\$32) displays the winery's rich style but there's also very good energy and precision to its spicy pit fruit flavors.

Jim Clendenen's **Au Bon Climat** is a source of structured chardonnays and pinot noirs that reflect his own Burgundy training, and his **2009 Chardonnay Bien Nacido Vineyard Santa Barbara Historic Vineyards Collection Santa Maria Valley** (\$30) is a great example of Clendenen's style. It's a nervy, energetic wine that offers mineral-driven citrus and melon flavors, good density and a smoky complexity. This youthful chardonnay benefits significantly from aeration—or a good decanting.

**Calera Wine Company** is owned by another Burgundy devotee, Josh Jensen. Like Tolmach and Clendenen, Jensen spent time in Burgundy before starting his own winery. Calera's **2010 Chardonnay Mt. Harlan** (\$30) is a highly complex wine with a dry, musky character and energetic orange and pear aromas and flavors. There's a smoky, spicy quality to this wine that reminds me more than a little of a white Burgundy.

Finally, the **2009 Talbott Vineyards Logan Sleepy Hollow Vineyard Santa Lucia Highlands** (\$23) is sourced from the same vineyard as this winery's high-end chardonnays, which retail for close to \$100 a bottle. This nicely delineated, aromatically complex wine is a steal, offering the character and spicy complexity of chardonnays that sell for two or three times the price.