



## California Central Coast Wine Tour

# Class III – Chardonnay

On the third leg of our tour through California's Central Coast, we visited three wineries: Rabbit Ridge Winery, Dunning Vineyards and Martin & Weyrich Winery. All three vineyards produce several varieties of wine, but Chardonnay is a specialty that they all have in common. At each vineyard, we had a great time learning about this ever-popular Burgundian white grape.

### **Rabbit Ridge Winery**

We began our visit at Rabbit Ridge by meeting Joanne and Erich Russell. Joanne is the president of Rabbit Ridge Winery, and her husband Erich is the founder and winemaker. Rabbit Ridge produces three wines that include Chardonnay, and Joanne took the time to describe their differences. The Live Oak Vineyard Chardonnay is aged in oak barrels, which gives it buttery and vanilla nuances. Meanwhile, the No-Oak Chardonnay is fermented and aged only in stainless steel, and Joanne explained that many customers prefer this oak-free style. The third wine she showed us is called "Blonde of the Vine" and was named after Joanne herself! It's a blend of Chardonnay and Viognier.

After learning about the selection of wines at Rabbit Ridge, we headed out into the vineyard with Erich and Joanne to see how the winemaking process begins. As we drove to the top of the vineyard, Erich told us that Chardonnay is one of the wines that is most made in the vineyard. "From the vineyard, you get an apple, lemon or lychee character," he explained. Aging wine in oak and putting the wine through malolactic fermentation, he said, add the characteristic butter and cream flavors that many people associate with Chardonnay. Malolactic fermentation is also known as secondary fermentation, and involves introducing bacteria that convert malic acid to lactic acid. It results in a buttery, creamy wine.

Next we spoke with Sandy James, the compliance and operations manager, who showed us the lab at Rabbit Ridge. We watched as she did an alcohol test on a bottle of Merlot, which involved heating the wine to record the exact boiling point. The wine boiled at 89.4 degrees, and using a sliding rule, Sandy determined that the wine was 14.1% alcohol – exactly right for their Merlot. Sandy explained that the tests they do are the same for all wines, so a test for Chardonnay would look very similar.

Before heading to the next stop, Joanne gave us some tips on pairing Chardonnay with food – her suggestions included buttery pasta dishes and seafood. We also learned that Chardonnay is one of the grapes used to make traditional Champagne.

## **Dunning Vineyards**

Our visit to Dunning began at the top of the vineyard, where we had a good view of the coastal range that separates Paso Robles from the Pacific Coast. Bob Dunning, the owner and winemaker, explained that because of their proximity to the coast, their vineyard is ideal for growing Chardonnay. At the end of every hot afternoon, there is a coastal breeze that “slows the ripening down and maintains acid.”

Bob explained that Chardonnay from cooler climates, like the climate at Dunning, can age up to 10 years if fermented in oak barrels, as he does in his winery. Bob took a sample from a barrel of his Chardonnay and held it up for us to see. “What we’re looking for now is the infusion of oak, that vanilla character, combined with bright acidity and a little bit of citrus, pear or melon. They all kind of blend together into a really nice balanced wine.” When it comes to food pairing, Bob agrees that Chardonnay pairs well with a wide range of foods. Crisp, stainless steel fermented Chardonnay goes great with shellfish and oysters, he says, while barrel fermented Chardonnay goes better with rich foods.

We had a great time learning about the wine production process with Bob. To begin, he took us out into the vineyard and showed us how he uses special techniques to farm grapes sustainably. Plucking leaves off the vines reduces the canopy, which can open up the vines for more exposure to sun and wind – natural pesticides! Reducing the crop by removing bunches of grapes can help create a smaller yield, which makes for a high quality wine.

Next, Bob explained the production process for Chardonnay. The grapes are always picked early in the morning when they are cool, and they are pressed as whole clusters. This means that the juice is removed immediately from the skins of the grapes. Next, the juice is chilled for about a day in stainless steel tanks before it moves into oak barrels for the fermentation process. Bob’s methods create a Chardonnay that he enjoys, and he explained that since his wine is an estate wine, customers can expect the same quality and style year in and year out. This, he explained, is an advantage of all estate wineries – if customers like the wine one year, they will probably enjoy it in the future as well, since the vineyard and production techniques will be the same.

## **Martin & Weyrich Winery**

At Martin & Weyrich Winery, we spoke to the two winemakers, Craig Reed and Alan Kinney, about their two Chardonnays. Like Rabbit Ridge, Martin & Weyrich makes an unoaked and an oaked Chardonnay. The unwooded Chardonnay is aged only in

stainless steel, and has crisp flavors with hints of peach and melon. Meanwhile, the Jack Ranch Edna Valley Chardonnay is 100% barrel fermented in 60% new French oak, which makes for a wine with a creamy vanilla character and toasted oak undertones. Craig recommends pairing the unwooded Chardonnay with simple salads, and meanwhile, would pair the barrel fermented style with richer foods like lobster bisque.

We followed Alan and Craig to the barrel room, where we took a closer look at the barrels of 2006 Chardonnay. We learned about bungs, which are plastic closures used to plug the holes in wine barrels – also known as bungholes. There are two types of bungs, explained Alan. Ventilator bungs have a small flap that allows for release of gasses as the wine ferments, but once fermentation is over, solid bungs are used to completely seal off the wine from outside air.

Next, Alan and Craig explained the process of stirring dead yeast cells in Chardonnay. The yeast cells, also known as lees, can add complex flavors to the wine, so many winemakers stir the barrels regularly to reincorporate the yeast cells on a regular basis. Alan explained that they typically stir the lees once a week for about 3-4 months, then every two weeks for a few more months, and then once a month for a few more. In total, the Chardonnay at Martin & Weyrich is in the barrels for 14-16 months before it is bottled.

As we sampled some of the Chardonnay, Alan explained that swirling wine in the glass is analogous to turning up the volume on a stereo. “As you’re swirling it, you’re adding air, and it gets more powerful as you swirl,” he elaborated. Craig spoke a bit about closures for wine bottles, and explained why Martin & Weyrich uses both screw caps and corks to seal wine bottles. Screw caps, he explained, are “almost a perfect seal. The wine stays fresh and very drinkable for a long period of time.” Craig said that they already use screw caps for most white wines, and that they are planning to use them for simple red wines as well. Meanwhile, he informed us that Martin & Weyrich would never stop using corks on some of their wines. “We are still using and are always going to use them on our ageable wines, because they actually allow for a transfer of oxygen that helps the wine evolve over time.”

After our tour of the barrel room, Craig and Alan bid us farewell, but not before Craig showed us his secret talent – he really knows how to juggle those bungs!

### **Fun Facts about Chardonnay**

Chardonnay is the most widely grown wine grape in California, with over 400,000 tons crushed every year.

Traditional Champagne is usually made from a blend of Pinot Noir, Pinot Meunier and Chardonnay.

Champagne that is made from 100% Chardonnay is known as ‘Blanc de Blanc.’

Compared to other grape varieties, Chardonnay is usually early to ripen and early to harvest.

Chardonnay vines withstand cold temperatures well – this allows them to grow successfully in cold climates like New York and Ontario.