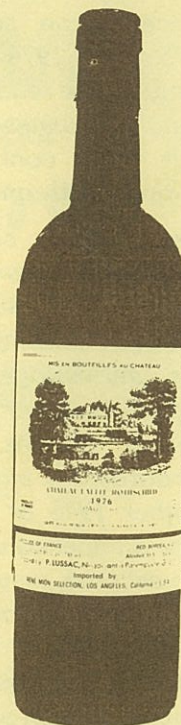


THE UNDERGROUND WINELETTER

A Definitive Guide to Fine Wines

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Why The "Underground" Wineletter? "Are We Terrorists?"

Response to our new publication has been great. There's obviously a lot of interest in intelligent, unbiased commentary on wine. We're often asked about this wine or that, but occasionally we're also asked why the name "Underground"? Are we terrorists? Perhaps a reincarnation of the Weathermen? Are our foreign correspondents disciples of Che Guevara? No. Nary a machine gun or shoulder holster anywhere. Our interest is strictly fine wine—drinking it and reporting on its merits as objectively as humanly possible.

Can wine be considered subversive? Perhaps the basis of a new secret weapon? We think not, but no doubt our "tell it like it is" approach may stir

up some controversy, particularly where comment is unfavorable. So be it. We consider our criticism constructive. After all, the better wine is, the greater the benefit to producers, distributors, retailers, and consumers. So "Underground" we'll stay; down here in the cellar, drinking and enjoying our wine just as we always have. In between bottles, we'll publish our letter, free from any outside influence. This is our battle. Not exactly the stuff to satisfy Genghis Khan, but we think Thomas Jefferson would approve. And, far away, in some remote and well-stocked, sub-celestial cellar; Bacchus smiles, nods approvingly, and proclaims "Finally, on earth, The Underground Wineletter. Veni. Vidi. Vici."

John Tilson
Editor

February-March 1980

volume 1, Number 4

1976 BORDEAUX

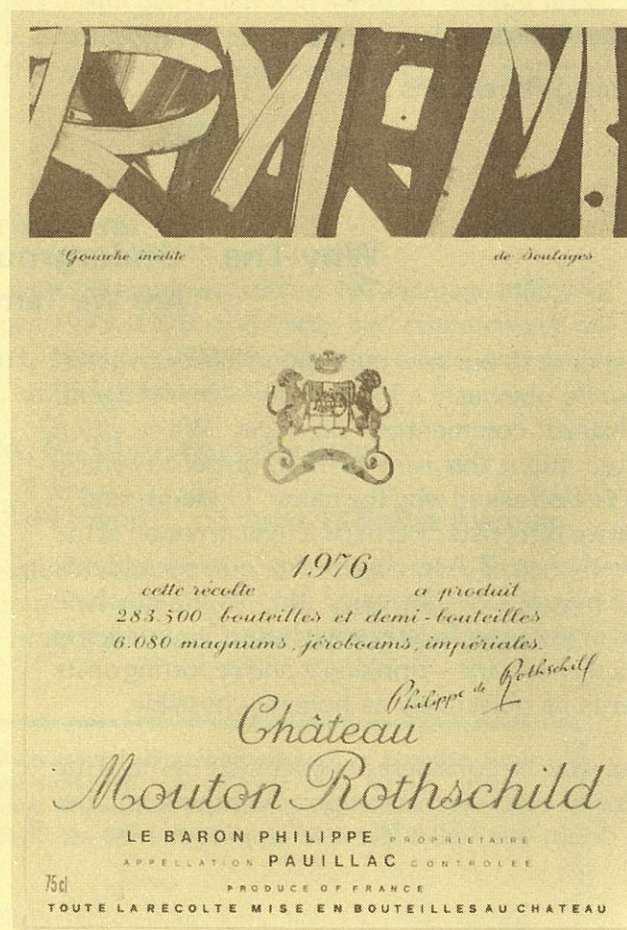
"The 1976's Are Just As Expensive As The Generally Superior 1975's"

The 1976 Bordeauxs have arrived with much the same fanfare as did the 1975's. At first, the words "vintage of the century" were heard, but this is now only a faint echo. Although lacking the concentration, color, depth, and tannin of the 1975's, the 1976's have enormous charm, and many will be ready for consumption within a few years. The wines are characteristically ripe, with high sugar content, but low in acidity, thus lacking depth and backbone.

The weather conditions were marked by extremes. It was one of the warmest summers on record (only surpassed by the 1947 and 1949 vintages), causing the grapes to ripen earlier than any vintage in recent memory. The near perfect weather conditions throughout the summer months created hopes for a truly extraordinary vintage, and talk was heard of another 1945 or 1961. However, these hopes were dampened when heavy rains arrived near harvest time, resulting in one of the largest crops on record, approaching the enormous quantity of the mediocre 1973 vintage. On balance, the year has been described as similar to the 1921 growing season with the fermentation and must resembling 1959.

What this all means is that the quality of the 1976 vintage will not prove to be the equal of 1975. Unfortunately, the bad news is that, despite the abundant production, the 1976's are just as expensive as the generally superior 1975's. With the incredibly high opening prices for the 1978 vintage, prices may not ever fall drastically, but, nonetheless, the currently astronomical West Coast prices are likely to drop. On the West Coast, first growths command prices of \$450-650 per case. On the East Coast, the same wines are \$275-375 per case. Likewise, other second through fifth growths that command prices of \$175-250 on the West Coast can be bought for 20%-30% less on the East Coast. The two major factors regarding Bordeaux purchases are patience and selectivity. Generally speaking,

given comparable prices for 1975 and 1976's, take the 1975's. As reviewed in the August-September 1979 issue, La Mission Haut Brion, Palmer, Calon Segur, Lafite, Latour, Leoville Las Cases, Petrus, and Pichon Lalande are outstanding. Following are such wines as Latour Haut Brion, Trotanoy, Cheval Blanc, Gruaud Larose, Haut Brion, Montrose, Mouton, and Ducru Beaucaillou. However, should one have adequate supplies of the 1975's (who can have enough La Mission and Palmer?), acquisition of some earlier maturing 1976's should be considered to bridge the gap. Many of these wines can be enjoyed in 5-8 years; although, not unlike the beautiful 1962's, most will undoubtedly hold for a much longer period. Be selective; for, even though many of the 1976's are quite good, many others are light and uninteresting.

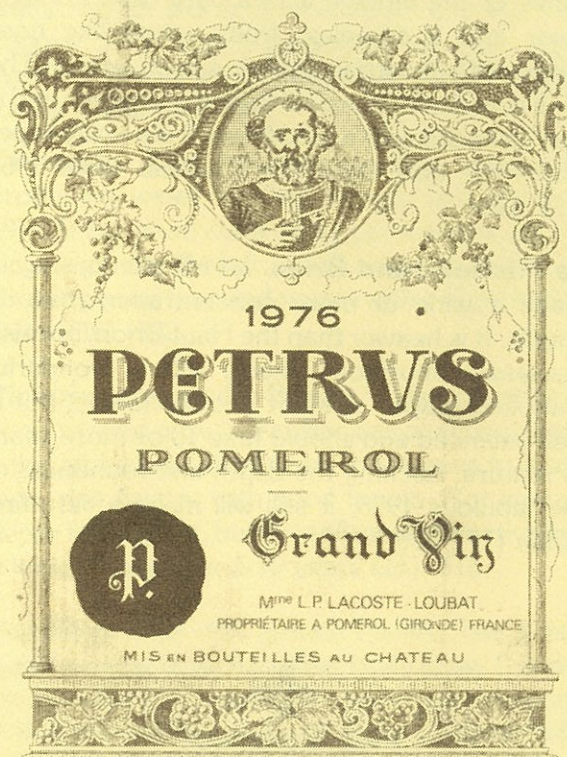


Outstanding

Lafite Rothschild. Oh my, what a wine! How nice it is to see this property put two superlative wines back to back with the 1975 and 1976. The 1975 may have more depth, but the 1976 may be even more opulent. It has a dark color and a multi-faceted, perfumed nose of vanilla and fruit. It is amazingly complex, showing great flavor and exquisite balance. The decidedly cocoanut tinged flavor may not be a typical Pauillac, but it is extremely attractive. The wine should develop early and drink beautifully well into 1990's (18). \$40

Mouton Rothschild. If the 1975 ultimately proves to be a better bottle than this 1976, it will be something to behold. At this juncture, the 1976 is most appealing and, while it will certainly mature sooner than the 1975, there is little else to fault. The color is dark and the nose is overwhelming with a ripe, rich, cassis-like, cedary quality and packed with fruit. The wine has great flavor and good fruit, tannin and acid. It will be a masterpiece in 10 years. Great Mouton! The ultimate in style, power, fruit, and elegance. BRAVO! Questions about the ultimate quality of the 1975 do not exist with the 1976 (18). \$35

Petrus. The wine of rock stars and the rock star of wine again shines in 1976. It has a dark color with an amber edge. The nose is perfumed and opulent with a spicey, cedary quality. Already the cassis-like flavors show complexity, great balance, breed, and style. Lacking the intensity and tannin of the 1975, it shows a better youthful balance than its longer lived brother. This is a superb wine to be consumed in 3-4 years and surely for a decade or so beyond (18). \$55



APPELLATION POMEROL CONTRÔLÉE

Shipped by Ets JEAN-PIERRE MOUEIX - LIBOURNE

BORDEAUX RED WINE
CONTENTS
750ml (24.7 FL OZ)



PRODUCE OF FRANCE
ALCOHOL
12% BY VOLUME

Imported by CHATEAU & ESTATE WINES COMPANY NEW YORK, N.Y.

Very Good

Cheval Blanc. This consistently superior St. Emilion is very similar to the 1975. It has a medium dark color and a lovely, intensely perfumed, fruity nose. It has good fruit and flavor and is harmonious and seductive. Perhaps not as concentrated as the 1975 and lacking some of the 1975's structure, it may be just as good at an earlier age (17). 40

Cos d'Estournel. This wine has a medium dark color and lots of oak and perfume in the nose. It is very fruity with nice texture and delicious flavors. There is a great deal of tannin and depth. It is a really good wine that will develop well for at least 4-5 years—maybe the best Cos since the 1966 (17). \$15

La Lagune. This is one of the most concentrated wines of the vintage with a very dark crimson color and a complex, fruity, cassis-like nose mixed with an intriguing ripe, spicy quality. The wine is rich with heaps of fruit on the palate and is well balanced with a long finish. It is a really super wine—the best from this Chateau since 1961 (17). \$14

La Mission Haut Brion. La Mission has again made a wine of more concentration than its cousin. It is heavier than the Haut Brion, but also possesses enormous charm with a wonderful complex, grapey nose. It is quite tannic, but is well balanced and should take 10 or more years to mature. Lacking the depth and roundness of the fabulous 1975, it still will make a very fine bottle (17). \$30



Latour. As one usually expects from Latour, the wine has a dark color and is closed-in and backward. It shows a concentration of fruit, tannin and wood and a hint of a coffee flavor. The wine is a fleshy style, but could prove to be low in acid (17). \$40

Ausone. Ausone's back! Again the cry is heard. The difference is that in 1976 it's almost true. The wine has a medium dark color and a fruity, complex, coconut-like nose. It is very firm with good fruit, acid, and tannin—very well knit. The flavor is earthy, reminiscent of Graves, and it finishes dry, hard and tannic. This wine will need 8-10 years to show its ultimate charm—clearly the best Ausone in decades, but absurdly priced (16). \$60

Branais-Ducru. This third growth St. Julien has a dark color and a lovely, fresh, perfumed, fruity nose. It is a wine of concentration and substance with the necessary acid/tannin balance for 5-6 more years bottle age—a really fine wine (16). \$15

Calon-Segur. This St. Estephe has a good medium dark color with lots of fruit on the nose. The wine is well balanced with good tannin, fruit and acid. It has good depth in a lighter style that should prove very elegant with 5-7 more years bottle age (16). \$15

Ducru-Beaucaillou. Ducru seems to be doing no wrong. The 1976 is a consistent follow up to the successful 1975. The 1976 will be perfect to drink while the 1975 matures. The color is fine and dark and the bouquet is big with lots of fruit and a hint of roses. It has complex tastes of vanilla and oak with an excellent long, firm finish. There is good tannin, fruit, and acid, providing excellent balance. The wine is very attractive and should mature into a lovely, elegant wine in 4-5 more years (16). \$20

Figeac. This 1976 is as good a wine as has been produced from this property since the 1961. It has a medium dark color and a very fruity, almost tropical fruit nose, with a woody cigar box like nuance. The nose is really extraordinary. It is a tannic, fruity wine with nice balance. A bit more depth of flavor would be consistent with the powerful nose, but it will round out very nicely in 3-4 years (16). \$16

Gruaud Larose. This second growth St. Julien has a medium dark color and a subdued fruity oaky nose. The wine has nice fruit and good tannin and acid. It is well knit and will improve for 5-10 years. Like so many other good vintages from this chateau, it will be an elegant, silky wine of class and breed (16). \$20

Haut Brion. Haut Brion had made an attractive wine that rivals the very good 1975. It has a medium garnet color with an amber edge. The nose is very perfumed with fruit and a characteristic Graves wax like quality. There is fruit, glycerol, and acid with the earthy Graves flavor. It should be an early maturing, lighter style wine showing class and breed (16). \$40

Leoville-Las-Cases. This second growth Chateau has been making really good wine for the past two decades. This 1976 is a fine wine, not nearly the class of the 1975, but still very good. It has a medium dark color and a fruity nose with cedary nuances. It is fruity and quite acidic and tannic at this early stage. With 5-7 years more bottle age, an elegant, lighter style wine should develop (16). \$20

Leoville-Poyferre. This second growth St. Julien has a medium dark color and an intense, spicy, complex, fruity nose. In the mouth there is much fruit, and lots of oak, vanilla and tannin. The wine is well made with excellent balance. It is rich and substantial with more depth and power than neighboring Las Cases (16). \$15

Montrose. In the typical style of Montrose, this wine has a dark color with a fruity nose reminiscent of tobacco and licorice. The complexity in the nose is most impressive for young wine, particularly the usually closed-in Montrose. It is rich on the palate with an intensity of fruit and tannin. The wine is firm and a bit severe. It will never have the charm and style of Calon Segur or Cos d'Estournel, but the patient will be rewarded with a flavorful wine of substance in 8-10 more years (16). \$19

Palmer. Although not in the same class of the superlative 1975, this Chateau has produced a nice 1976. The wine has very good color, with a very fruity bouquet reminiscent of ripe plums. The wine has lots of fruit and is very well balanced, although a bit short on the palate. It will be ready for consumption relatively soon (16). \$22

Pichon-Longueville-Lalande. While not as intense and fruity as the really superb 1975, this wine is, nonetheless, a worthy, earlier maturing successor. It has a good medium color and a

fruity, vanilla like nose. It is very fruity with nice flavors in a most appealing medium style. Another 3-4 years of bottle age should yield a lovely bottle (16). \$17

Trotanoy. This Pomerol, which is capable of producing wines to rival Petrus, falls short in 1976. It has good color with a perfumed nose. It is a wine of depth that is still somewhat closed, showing good fruit and tannin with a slight herbal flavor (16). \$22

Pichon-Longueville-Baron. This consistently good second growth Pauillac has a medium dark color and a perfumed nose. It has good fruit and nice, ripe flavors with good tannin. Not enough depth to be great, but it is still most attractive and a wine to keep for 5-10 years (15). \$16

Batailley. This fifth growth Pauillac has a very good color with an excellent fruity nose. It is rich on the palate with good tannin, acid and balance. It is a very well made wine that should develop for 4-6 years (15). \$14

Cantemerle. This fifth growth from Macau, Haut-Medoc has a deep crimson color and the nose shows good fruit. Although just beginning to open, there are grapey, cassis-like flavors showing through. The wine is full bodied and will require many more years to develop the silky elegance that will surely evolve (15). \$16

Dufort-Vivens. This relatively small second growth Margaux reportedly shares common ownership with the larger and better known Brane-Cantenac. If so, thank goodness there's no family resemblance, for this wine is far better. It has a medium dark color and a lovely, perfumed nose. There is good fruit and nice flavor with a soft roundness. The finish is quite tannic, but the wine should develop well over 3-5 years (15). \$13

Gloria. For consistent value, it is hard to beat this well known Cru Bourgeois St. Julien. Again in 1976 it has produced better wine than some of its more highly esteemed neighbors. The wine has a medium dark color and a closed-in fruity nose. It has good depth, fruit and tannin, with lots of flavor. It is a bit coarse now, but should round out nicely in 3-4 years (15). \$11

Haut-Bages Liberal. This Pauillac is reportedly under new management, resulting in an overall improvement in quality. The 1976 is rounder, softer and more subtle than the nice 1975. It has a good dark color with a hint of an herbal quality in the nose, and good tannin and fruit. With 3-4 more years of bottle age, it should be a lovely wine of class and style (15). \$10



La Conseillante. This Chateau consistently commands the highest price of any Pomerol with the exception of Petrus. However, in most instances the price is unjustified. The 1976 is very nice in a lighter style. It has very good color with a wonderful fruity nose. It is fruity, well balanced, and quite forward (15). \$20

Lascombes. At around \$10 per bottle, this represents one of the best values of the vintage. A wine for early consumption (drink it now and for the next 4-5 years), it is lovely, elegant claret. The color is medium dark with an intensely perfumed vanilla/cherry-like nose. While no doubt partially attributable to new oak, there are already impressive elements of bottle bouquet. The wine has good fruit and is very soft with just a trace of tannin. A bit short on the finish and a bit light, otherwise, it is very, very nice (15).

Good

Clerc-Milon Rothschild. Purchased by Baron Philippe Rothschild in 1970, this fifth growth vineyard adjoins Lafite and Mouton. The 1976 has a medium color, with a fruity, raspberry-like nose. It has good fruit, flavor and balance in a lighter style. With 2-3 more years in the bottle,

the wine should soften and provide very pleasant drinking (14½). \$11

Trottevieille. This Premier Grand Cru St. Emilion is owned by the owners of Chateau Batailley in Pauillac. It has a good medium dark color and somewhat closed nose. There is good fruit and a nice balance of tannin and acid. Another 2-3 years should yield a fine bottle (14½). \$14

Grand-Puy-Ducasse. This Pauillac property, related by proximity and common ownership to the better known Grand Puy Lacoste, has produced a fine wine. It has a medium dark color and a nice fruity, cedary Pauillac nose. There is good fruit, acid, and tannin. It is a wine of substance that will be very good indeed if the fruit can outlive the tannin (14). \$13

Haut Bailly. This Graves has a medium color with a nice fruity nose reminiscent of cherries. There is nice fruit on the palate and the wine is forward and somewhat light—nearly ready to drink (14). \$14

Leoville-Barton. This St. Julien has a medium color and a lovely fruity/cedary/sandalwood nose that shows complexity. It is very fruity with a lack of depth and a short finish. However, it is pleasant for drinking now and for many years in the future (14). \$15

Lynch-Bages. Known as the poor man's Mouton, the 1976 lacks richness. The color is medium red with a cedary, vanilla nose. It has fruit and a nice flavor, but needs more depth and style (14). \$17

Malescot-Saint-Exupery. This Margaux has a medium dark color with a closed in nose showing hints of fruit and cedar. It has nice fruit and flavors, but the relatively high acid will require many years to round out. This is one to lay away for 5-8 years (14). \$16

Margaux. The 1976 is yet another in a long line of disappointments. Will this once outstanding property ever return to form? A medium color and a perfumed nose with a hint of vanilla are the only signs of the wine's breed. It is fruity, but thin and undistinguished without style or depth (14). \$40

Pape Clement. This Graves has a medium dark color and a fruity earthy bouquet. Although a bit austere, there is good fruit and tannin and the wine will improve with a few more years bottle age (14). \$16

Pavie. This Premier Cru St. Emilion has made a pleasant wine. It has a medium color with a fruity, grapey nose. Fruity, with simple, youthful flavors and not intense, the wine is, nonetheless, quite pleasant and nearly ready to drink (14). \$15

Saint-Georges. This large property from Saint-Georges-Saint-Emilion usually produces sound wine. This 1976 has a good medium color and a very forward, fruity nose. It has good fruit on the palate and is attractive for early consumption (13½). \$8

Troplong Mondot. This Grand Cru St. Emilion has a medium color and a clean, fruity, raspberry-like nose. The grapey flavors are pleasant, but lack depth. This is a pleasant wine for current enjoyment (13½). \$10

Angludet. Another Grand Cru St. Emilion, this property makes consistently sound wines such as this 1976. The color is medium dark and the nose is closed, but the wine has good oak, fruit, and tannin. Not exciting but it should make a good bottle in another 2-3 years (13). \$12

Beychevelle. This fourth growth St. Julien usually ranks with many second growths, a fact which is reflected in its price. The 1976 is good, but lacks the fruit, class, and style that is associated with Beychevelle. It has good color; but an herbaceous nose, mixed with an excessive amount of tannin, and a dry finish are disturbing (13). \$20

Clinet. This little known Pomerol usually produces a sound wine that tends to become quite austere with age. The 1976 seems quite typical. It has a medium dark color, a nice perfumed nose suggestive of violets, but in the mouth it is tannic and quite dry. Not enough fruit to outlive the tannin, the wine should be consumed over the next few years (13). \$13

Clos des Jacobins. This St. Emilion has a medium dark color and some fruit and tannin. Although not very exciting, it is a pleasant wine which will be ready for early consumption in 1-2 years (13). \$10

Cos Labory. This fifth growth St. Estephe usually appears thin and austere. The 1976 is no exception with a medium red color and a fruity nose. It has fruit, but is rather thin. There is some flavor masked by the hard, austere style. Time will not likely resolve the problems and it should be enjoyed over the next several years for the youthful fruit and flavor (13). \$7

Dauzac. This Margaux is lightly colored but has a wonderful, fruity nose. In the mouth there is cassis-like fruit. The fault is a lack of backbone and intensity. It is ready for current consumption (13). \$13

Duhart-Milon Rothschild. This property, owned and managed by Lafite, has been making good wine in recent years. The 1976 has good color and a lovely fruity, candy-like nose. In the mouth there is some fruit, but little depth. The wine is very pleasant and quite forward. It should be ready in 2-3 years (13). \$14

Domaine de L'Eglise. This Pomerol has a good dark color, but it lacks fruit and there is a slight grassy taste. The wine will benefit with a couple years more bottle age (13). \$13

Grand-Puy-Lacoste. This fifth growth Pauillac has a medium color and a closed nose. The wine has some fruit, but lots of acid and tannin. Much time will be required, but the overall body and fruit does not balance the severe style (13). \$15

Greysac. This popularly priced Graves is making sound wines that are usually good values. The 1976 has a medium color and a fruity nose with nice flavors and good fruit. It has a bit too much acid just now, but 2-3 years should round it out nicely. However, time will not help the lack of flavor and intensity. After all, at the price it's a very good value, but to expect great wine at \$6 or so a bottle is, alas, an impossible dream (13).

Rauzan-Gassies. This third growth Margaux has a subdued fruity nose. It is very open and very easy to drink with good fruit on the palate and very little tannin. It lacks concentration, flavor, and complexity and is ready for current consumption (13). \$14

Taillefer. This rather obscure Pomerol has produced a good lighter style wine with a deep garnet color and a very intriguing candy like nose. There is good acidity, balanced with fruit and wood; but it finishes a bit dry and austere (13). \$12

Vieux Chateau Certan. This once highly regarded Pomerol has not lived up to its reputation for many a year. The 1976 is an enjoyable wine with medium dark color and some fruit and tannin. It is by no means an exciting wine, but will provide some nice drinking in a couple of years (13). \$18

Clos Rene. Young Pomerols usually have very perfumed aromas and this is one of the most appealing of the vintage with an intense fruity/spicey quality. Unfortunately, the wine doesn't deliver what the nose promises. The color is medium garnet and in the mouth the wine is thin, tannic, and lacking fruit—another wine to drink now (12½). \$14

De Fieuzal. This little known Graves will stay that way unless the wine improves. It has a medium light color, a fruity green bean nose and fruity, light, tart, acidic flavors—overpriced (12). \$14

Nenin. Here is another unremarkable wine from this highly regarded Pomerol. The color is medium garnet with an amber edge. The nose is perfumed, but the flavors are thin and the wine lacks depth, intensity, and balance—a wine to drink now for its youthful fruit (12). \$12

Below Average

Beausejour. This Pomerol has a medium color with too much acid and tannin. It lacks fruit resulting in a wine lacking character and depth (11). \$10

de Ferrande. This Grand Cru St. Emilion has a medium red color. The nose is somewhat closed. So typical of many Grand Cru St. Emilions, it lacks fruit, depth, concentration and flavor interest (11). \$8

Langoa Barton. This third growth St. Julien has a good color, but the nose is closed and unyielding. Unfortunately, the wine tastes thin with much acidity and a vegetative quality. It finishes short and is out of balance (11). \$12

La Pointe. This usually reliable Pomerol really missed the mark in 1976. It has a medium color and a fruity nose, but is thin and watery with a disturbing lack of fruit, structure, and intensity (11). \$12

Prieure-Lichine. This fourth growth Margaux suffers from a disturbing lack of fruit and concentration. It has a medium color with a fruity nose, but the thin flavors are devoid of interest and finish very short (11). \$12

Talbot. This usually sound fourth growth St. Julien has a good dark color with a fruity, bell-pepper nose. It is thin, acidic and lacking fruit—not attractive (11). \$12

Brane-Cantenac. Another loser from this second growth Margaux that seems to have forgotten how to make good wine. This wine has a medium dark color and a stemmy, fruity, bell pepper-like nose. In the mouth the vegetative flavors render the wine most unattractive. Can they be picking too early every year or is there some other reason to account for the decidedly off character present in the wine (10)? \$13

Latour-Pomerol. What a disappointment! This highly regarded Pomerol has a very good garnet color and not much else that's attractive. The nose smells of airplane glue. There is excessive acidity and the stemmy, green flavors are not appealing (10). \$16

The 1976 vintage is certainly a very good year. There are very few poor wines. The prices are quite another matter and, unlike 1975, where several non-first growths made outstanding wine, there are none in 1976. The three great wines of the 1976 vintage are all first growths. They are classic wines in their respective styles: Lafite, a wine of class and elegance; Mouton, a wine of power and depth, and, Petrus, a wine of great breed and intensity. If you want the best, these are the wines to buy. The other first growths don't measure up. Except for Margaux, all are very good wines, but for a lot less money, many other wines are much better values. Cos d' Estournel, La Lagune, Ducru-Beaucaillou, Figeac, Leoville-Poyferre, Pichon-Lalande, Branaire Ducru, Calon-Segur, Gruaud Larose, Leoville-Las Cases, Palmer and Trotanoy are fine wines. However, as good as these wines are, with the exception of Cos d' Estournel, La Lagune, Figeac, Leoville Poyferre, and Branaire Ducru, all made better wine in 1975. This again points out the importance of selectivity between the 1975 and 1976 vintages where both are being offered for comparable prices. At a price of about \$10 per bottle, Gloria, Haut-Bages Liberal, and Lascombes should be considered best buys. Many of the aforementioned wines can be drunk with pleasure now, but most will benefit from 2-6 years more bottle age and some will be superb for 15-20 years.



Domestic Gewurtztraminers

"This is one instance where warning labels might be appropriate. For while not damaging to your health, they certainly can raise havoc with your taste buds!"

The Gewurtztraminer grape is an integral part of the great California wine experiment. The shy bearing grape of Alsace has been widely planted in California, and, to a much lesser extent, in Washington and Oregon. While the total California plantings of some 2800 acres are relatively small, new vines have resulted in a

significant increase in tonnage crushed—about 1700 tons in 1976, over 3600 tons in 1977, and nearly 5000 tons in 1978. Of 1978's production, some 54% came from the central coast southern section (Monterey, San Benito, San Luis Obispo, and Santa Barbara Counties), 25% from Sonoma and Marin Counties, 20% from Napa County and about 1% from Mendocino and Lake Counties.

As you might expect, prices too have been rising. In 1978 Gewurtztraminer commanded an average price of \$675 per ton in the Central Coast Southern Section, second only to the \$725 per ton for Chardonnay. Sonoma Gewurtztraminer was \$738 vs. \$778 per ton for Chardonnay, Napa Gewurtztraminer was \$681 per ton vs. \$806 per ton for Chardonnay and Mendocino and Lake Counties \$795 per ton was even higher than the \$788 per ton for Chardonnay.

The rising popularity of Gewurtztraminer is partially explained by the white wine boom. Like Chenin Blanc, it is usually made either dry or slightly sweet with 1-2% residual sugar. However, while Chenin Blanc is generally dismissed as quaffing wine (not unlike most French Vouvray), much has been said of the great attributes of domestic Gewurtztraminer with comparisons made to the wines of Alsace. Alas, it is another case of promises, promises! Domestic Gewurtztraminers bear little resemblance to their European counterparts. For one thing, the grape is very difficult to work with. Even the most experienced winemaker can have difficulty. Secondly, the grapes have been widely planted in experimental plots to determine what is the best area. Thirdly, winemakers are continuing to experiment with how to make the wine: sweet, slightly sweet, or dry, or even white or pink!

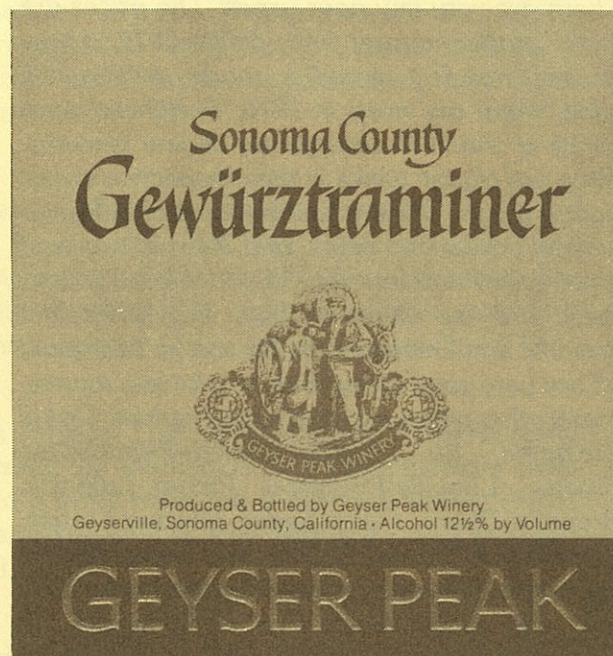
For the most part, domestic Gewurtztraminers represent a stiff challenge. Very few really good ones have been produced. As late harvest desert wines (Auslese and Beerenauslese styles), Smothers, Chateau St. Jean and Joseph Phelps have achieved notable success, but where drier domestic Gewurtztraminers are concerned monumental successes are far outnumbered by

monumental failures. Were it not for the economics of smaller wineries and the gullibility of the public, many would neither be offered for sale or purchased at any price. Consumers will vote with their pocketbooks as to what type of wine they prefer. The very perfumed, strong flavored Gewurtztraminer may by best if toned down a bit, yet still with the characteristic spiciness. Also, a slight amount of residual sugar tends to soften the wine and often hides off flavors. Drier styles often lack fruit and exhibit an austere quality that must be carefully matched with food and served ice cold to mask the faults of the wine. The softer, slightly sweet styles may be used as aperitifs, again preferably well chilled. The sweet wines are suitable only for dessert. Nearly all California Gewurtztraminers should be consumed within 1-2 years of the vintage. Most often, the sooner the better. This is probably true for the Washington and Oregon varietals as well. Unlike their Alsatian counterparts, domestic Gewurtztraminers do not age gracefully. Instead of gaining complexity and roundness, they tend to lose fruit quickly and take on a flat, dull, often oxidized quality.

Currently available domestic Gewurtztraminers (excluding the late harvest wines) are reviewed below.

Very Good

1978 Geyser Peak "Sonoma". Everyone loves a bargain. O.K., here it is! At \$2.99 it's not only the best domestic Gewurtztraminer for the money currently available, but the best period. With other Gewurtztraminers priced at 50-150% higher, it stands out even more. The wine has a light gold color, a spicy, attractive varietal nose, and good fruit and flavor with a slight spritziness. It is low in acid, has a touch of sugary character and is a bit short on the finish, but these flaws do not substantially detract from the good overall palate impression. If you don't mind the noticeable sweetness, it is an outstanding value for a distinctly varietal Gewurtztraminer! One note of caution worth repeating is that this Gewurtztraminer is no exception to the early drinkability rule. For maximum enjoyment of its still youthful charm, this wine should be consumed within the next 6 months (15).



Good

1978 Joseph Phelps. This Napa Valley winery consistently produces good Gewurtztraminer. The latest release is no exception. It has a light gold color, a floral spicy nose, and has good fruit and a nice flavor. The slight sweetness is nicely balanced with good acidity giving the wine a clean, crisp palate impression. Not as flavorful as might be expected, and rather short on the palate, it is nonetheless attractive (14). \$5.75

1978 Clos Du Bois. This Sonoma wine has a gold color and a spicy varietal nose. It is rather tart and bitter with varietal character, but lacking style and charm. It would best be consumed with a sausage dish of some sort (13). \$5

1978 Dry Creek. The label indicates that this Sonoma Gewurtztraminer is Diana's favorite. Diana must like Riesling. For as appealing as this fruity, sweet wine is, it lacks varietal definition and the sweetness qualifies it almost as a desert wine. The \$7.50 price? Well, if Diana can sell it at this price, she must like that better than drinking it (13)!

1977 Simi. The gold color of this Sonoma wine gives a clue to its age, but the nose exhibits a nice varietal quality. The wine has a fruity floral character on the palate and is notably sweet and short on the palate. It is a pleasant wine without serious flaws, except for the price (13). \$6.50

1977 Villa Mt. Eden. This is an attractive Napa Valley Gewurtztraminer with a light gold color, an attractive spicey/apple-like nose. It is fruity with good clean, rather subdued flavors and a hint of spritz. The finish is rather short and the wine is slightly sweet (13). \$6

NV Gallo. OK, this California appellation wine is not a world beater, but its quite good with varietal character. At \$3.29 it's a good buy. In fact, were it not for Geyser Peak really outdoing themselves with the 1978 Gewurtztraminer, this would be an outstanding buy. The faults of the wine are that it's thin, somewhat watery, and a touch too sweet. The color is very pale and the flavors delicate and subdued. However, it is clean and well made, a statement that many higher priced bottlings can't make (12½). \$6

1978 Ste. Chapelle Vineyards "Special Harvest." This Sunnyslope, Idaho winery produced this wine from grapes grown in the Sagemoor Vineyards in Washington State. Nowhere on the label can an indication of sweetness be found. In fact, it's very sweet and suitable only as a light dessert wine. It has a light gold color with a perfumed, sweet pea nose. The wine is very spritzzy, almost sparkling with grapey, simple, sweet flavors that lack varietal character (12½). \$7.25

1978 Stony Hill. This small Napa Valley winery has probably been making Gewurtztraminer for as long as anyone in the state. Some can be very pleasant and, unlike others, usually benefit from some bottle age. This 1978 is not one of the best. It has a light yellow gold color, a citric nose, and thin, tart flavors with a slight spritz. It is clean and pleasant, but lacks varietal character (12½). \$7

1978 Alexander Valley Vineyards. This Sonoma Gewurtztraminer has a light gold color

and a skunky, chemical nose. It is fruity, sweet, and spritzzy, much like pop wine (12). \$5

1977 Chateau St. Jean. This Sonoma County Gewurtztraminer is a prime example of the fleeting glory of the grape. A year ago the wine was clean, crisp, spicey and distinctly varietal; one of California's better efforts. Those bottles still around have changed significantly. The citric quality of the wine has become pronounced, the varietal character has all but vanished and the wine is flabby and uninspiring (12). \$6.25

1978 Chateau St. Jean. Alas, this 1978 Sonoma bottling lacks the early charm and style of the 1977. It is light yellow gold in color, with a spicey floral nose. In the mouth it is flat, soft, and citric with little flavor interest—overpriced (12). \$6.75

1977 Chateau St. Michelle. Gewurtztraminer from Washington and Oregon seems to have promise and St. Michelle has made good wine from Washington grown grapes, but this isn't one of their better efforts. It is actually quite a nice wine, but not at all like Gewurtztraminer. The chief fault is a chemical apricot-like nose. It is sweet with a fruit wine flavor (12). \$4.75

1978 Christian Brothers "St. Regis Vineyard." If you like sweet wine, you'll love this Napa Valley bottling. It has very little varietal character, but the gold color, sweet pea nose, and fat, syrupy fruit render it as an acceptable after dinner quaffer (12). \$6

1978 Grand Cru Vineyards "St. Francis Vineyard." This Sonoma wine has a light gold color, but, oh my what a nose! If one can get past the smell, the wine has good fruit, is slightly sweet and clean without much varietal character—overpriced (12). \$6.75

1978 Hacienda Cellars. This Sonoma wine has a light gold color and a skunky, sulphured nose. It has sweet flavors and is pleasant enough, but is flabby and undistinguished (12). \$5.75

1978 Fetzer. This wine with a California appellation is pleasant, but totally devoid of varietal character. It has a light gold color, a peachy nose, and is sweet and clean with straightforward flavor (12). \$5.25

1978 The Firestone Vineyard. This Santa Ynez Valley Gewurtztraminer also lacks varietal character. It has a light gold color, very little aroma, and tart, thin, acidic flavors (12). \$5

1978 Sterling. Another wine without varietal character, this Napa Valley Gewurtztraminer has a light gold color, a floral peachy nose, and is very dry and tart without much flavor. It is stripped and has a decidedly chemical-like aftertaste (12). \$5

1978 Villa Mt. Eden. The 1977 is a more successful wine. This 1978 has a light gold color, a slight grassy nose, a bit of a spicey quality, and is dry, but lacks flavor and fruit (12).

Below Average

1977 Almaden. Besides having no varietal character, this wine with a San Benito appellation has a strange nose resembling paint thinner and is sweet, yet with citric/chemical flavors (11). \$3.99

1977 Charles Krug. A gold color, musty nose, and watery flavors are about all that's worth noting in this Napa Valley wine (11). \$5

1978 Martini. This wine with a "California Mountain" designation is already over the hill, or the mountain, if you prefer. The gold color, burnt nose, and oxidized quality render the wine undrinkable (11). \$4

1978 Matanzas Creek Winery "St. Francis Vineyards". What an enigma! A few months ago this Sonoma wine, if dry and austere, at least had varietal character. Now it has a contrived chemical nose, off flavors, and a decided spritziness (11). \$6

1978 Navarro Vineyards. This Mendocino wine has a light gold color, chemical nose, and watery, bitter flavors. The fruit is obscured by the faults and the wine is unattractive (11). \$6

1978 Pedroncelli. Another Mendocino wine with a gold color and a Riesling-like nose. The dry, bitter flavors are not pleasant, and the wine is devoid of varietal character (11). \$3.75

1978 Sebastiani. From Sonoma County, this unattractive wine has a gold color and a medicinal nose. It is fruity, but flat and lacking acid and flavor (11). \$4.75

1978 David Bruce. This is the good Doctor's first Gewurtztraminer produced from grapes grown in the Edna Valley of San Luis Obispo County. He predicts great things for the grape in California if it's made dry. O.K., David, but that doesn't mean sherry! This wine has a dark gold color and a buttery nose. It is dry and austere, lacking fruit, with sherry-like flavors and real problems. The price is a rip-off (10). \$7

1977 Husch. This Mendocino wine is a pale yellow with a skunky, sulphur nose. It is dry, tart, devoid of flavor, character, and style—a poorly made wine that insults the consumers' intelligence with a \$7.25 price (10).

1977 Mirassou. This Monterey Gewurtztraminer has a light gold color, a moldy fruit nose, and is flat, flabby and totally lacking in flavor interest (10). \$4.75

1977 Rutherford Hill. This Napa Valley wine has a light gold color, a really foul nose, some fruit, but austere and lacking taste and flavor (10). \$5

1977 The Monterey Vineyard. There's no excuse for this poorly made wine from Monterey County. Not even mixing it with Coke will save it. It has a dark yellow color, a cooked, rubber-like nose, and a strange sweetness that is like citric sugar water. The lack of aftertaste is a blessing (9). \$4.50

1977 Reuter's Hill. Another Washington state wine with a light gold color and a chemical apricot nose. It is dry, austere, and lacking fruit with a stale, unpleasant flavor (9). \$4.50

1977 Sebastiani "Rosa". Here is a pink, now almost copper colored Gewurtztraminer. It has no fruit, no flavor, and no character, but it is terribly oxidized (8). \$5

1978 ZD. From the Tepusquet Vineyard in Santa Barbara, give this wine credit for a light gold color. Otherwise, it is almost without redeeming virtue with a terrible grassy nose and a very bitter, unpleasant flavor (6). \$5.75

An "Outstanding" domestic Gewurtztraminer in a dry or slightly sweet style has yet to be made. Indeed, the dry style will undoubtedly be elusive; and no doubt consumers will be asked to pay for the continuing experiment. With the \$2.99 Geyser Peak being the only "very good" rating of currently available domestic Gewurtztraminers, it surely is one of the best buys around. Other than this, there are only a handful of Gewurtztraminers worth buying and the great majority are forgettable. This is one instance where warning labels might be appropriate. For while not damaging to your health, they certainly can raise havoc with your taste buds. But then again, maybe the optimists are right. It seems inconceivable that domestic Gewurtztraminers can get any worse!



MORE CHARDONNAY

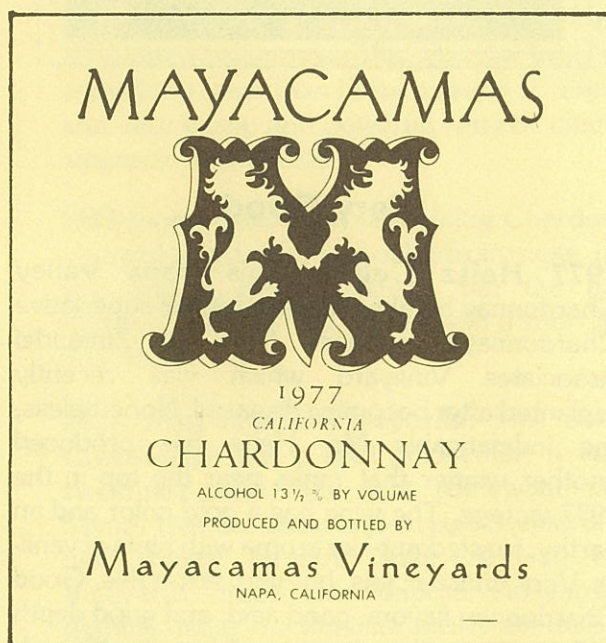
"The 1978's Will Be In The News For The Better Part of a Year As An Almost Unbelievable Number of Bottlings Come to Market"

The 1978 Chardonnays continue to proliferate, and the last of the 1977's are on their way. The 1978's will be in the news for the better part of the year as an almost unbelievable number of bottlings come to market. A bountiful harvest after two drought years, maturity of recent plantings, and the almost epidemic outbreak of new California wineries (something like 450 at last count and still climbing) all combined to account for the deluge. Since the October-November, 1979, Chardonnay issue, the following wines have been released:

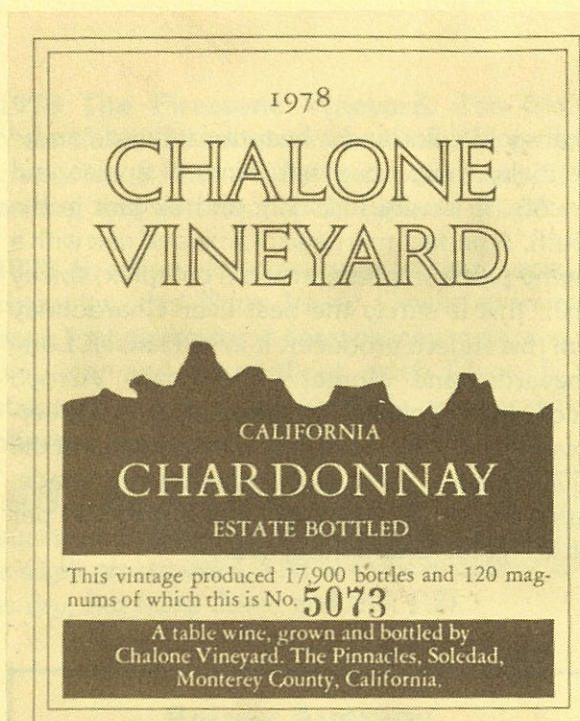
Outstanding

1977 Mayacamas. This "California" Chardonnay comes from three vineyards—10% from Fay Vineyards in the Stag's Leap area of Napa, 30% from the mountain vineyards of Mayacamas in Napa, and 60% from 3 year old vineyards in the Carneros District in Sonoma. What a wine! It has

a light gold color and a beautiful intense candy-like, oaky fruity nose with hints of apples and apricots. It is very full, rich, and elegant in the mouth. A perfect marriage of fruit and oak with a lengthy palate impression and a complex, spicy finish, this is surely the best ever Chardonnay from this superb producer. It joins Hanzell, Long Vineyards, and Monterey Peninsula "Arroyo Seco" (see Volume 1, Number 2, October-November, 1979) as the best Chardonnays of the 1977 vintage. Some 1500 cases were made. Watch for an April release at about \$12-14 per bottle—great Chardonnay (18½).



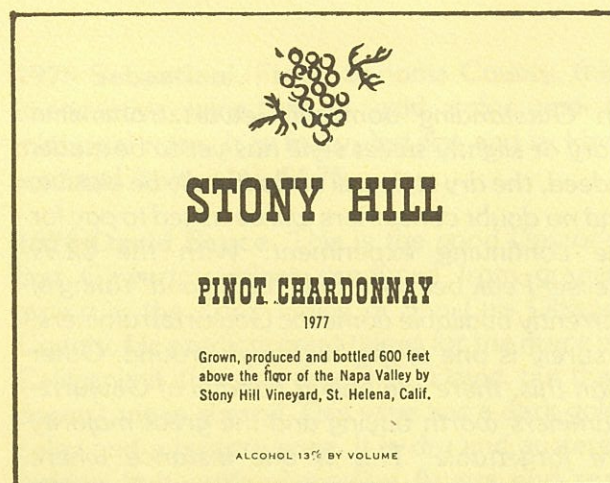
1978 Chalone Vineyard. In the 1978 vintage this Chardonnay ranks at the head of the class! Although different in style than the equally outstanding St. Clement reviewed in October-November, this superb Chalone bottling ranks with the very finest they've ever produced. It has a golden color and an overwhelming perfumed, spicy nutty/nose with a strong oaky/vanilla overlay. It is rich and concentrated, with great depth. Very long on the palate, this huge beautifully balanced wine has French-like flavors. It is a masterpiece that should improve for at least 3-4 years (18). \$12



Very Good

1977 Heitz Cellar. This Napa Valley Chardonnay breaks the long string of superlative Chardonnays produced from the Zinfandel Associates Vineyard which was recently replanted after becoming diseased. Nonetheless, the indefatigable Mr. Heitz has produced another winner that ranks near the top in the 1977 vintage. The wine has a gold color and an earthy, toasted nut-like aroma with hints of vanilla. Very unusual; yes, but very attractive. Good Chardonnay flavors, good acid, and good depth of flavor make the wine appealing now, although 3-4 years more should yield an even lovier wine in a lush style. Considering the quality of the wine, the \$8.50 price is quite attractive (Joe's tasting panel that meets to evaluate comparable bottles, and ostensibly price the Heitz wine accordingly, must have had an off day!) (17).

1977 Stony Hill Vineyard. This limited production Napa Valley Chardonnay is consistently one of the best. This 1977 is no exception with a light gold color, a lovely fruity nose and lots of fruit. Already the wine has class and style with a lean, firm structure that will require at least 4-5 years bottle age (17). \$9



1978 Clos Du Val. This is the first Chardonnay from this Napa Valley winery. The winemaker is the son of a former winemaker at Lafite. The Cabernet Sauvignon has had little resemblance to Bordeaux except in the imagination of wine writers. So it is with this Chardonnay. It's not French-like, but it is very good in a beautiful light, delicate style. The wine has a light gold color and a lovely subdued nose suggestive of peaches with a hint of oak. It is clean, fresh, crisp, and fruity—a delicious wine that drinks beautifully now for its youthful zestiness (16). \$9

1978 Clos Du Bois Second Release. This Alexander Valley Chardonnay has a light gold color and a deep oaky/variatal nose with good fruit and more oak, flavor, and richness than the "regular" bottling. It is likewise, lengthy on the palate with a trace of bitterness. In need of 3-4 more years bottle age, it will make a most attractive wine (15). \$8.50

1978 Edmeades Vineyards. This Mendocino Chardonnay is most unusual, but worth trying for a different taste experience. After all, life is more than plain vanilla! It has a golden color and an unusual nose suggestive of apples and bubble gum. Bubble gum? Yes, bubble gum **and** apples. Wrigley's are you there? The wine has good fruit and acidity. Drink it young while it's still fresh and lively (15). \$8.50

1978 Jekel Vineyard. This estate bottled wine is a good effort for this new Monterey County winery. It has a light gold color and an unusual nose—floral, but somewhat tar-like. It is clean with nice fruit and flavor and, thank goodness, without the Monterey vegetable flavor. It is not intense, but quite attractive (15). \$7.50

1978 Napa Wine Cellars. This Napa Valley Chardonnay has a gold color, a lovely oaky fruity nose with hints of cinnamon apples. It has nice fruit and good flavors, but is a bit citric and tart on the finish (too much adjusted acidity?). Although another year or two in the bottle will help, the wine should be enjoyed relatively young for its fresh fruit character (15). \$9

1978 Keenan "Napa Valley." This is a powerful Chardonnay with a gold color and an oaky/alcoholic nose. It has big fruit in an oaky style with cinnamon complexities. It is a bit hot and quite hard at this juncture, but should improve with a few years in the bottle (15). \$10.00

1978 Veedercrest "Winery Lake Vineyards." This is a Carneros Chardonnay from a winery that has more small batches than practically anyone, except perhaps Chateau St. Jean. It is a stylistic wine with a light gold color, a fruity oaky, slightly alcoholic nose, nice flavor and good fruit. The wine is flawed by a slight bitterness and harshness—still it is attractive, although over-priced (15). \$10.95

Good

1978 Callaway. Surprise! This first Chardonnay from Callaway has some varietal character. It has a gold color and a subdued, fruity nose. The flavors are clean and a bit tart. There is good backbone with alcohol overtones. Short on the palate, but, otherwise, this wine is quite good (14). \$8

1978 Clos Du Bois. This bottling is not as rich, complex, or oaky as the "Second Release." It has a light gold color, an attractive fruity/vanilla nose, and is fresh and clean with crisp apple-like flavors. Another 1-2 years in the bottle should help, but the wine lacks depth and complexity (14). \$7.50

1978 Dehlinger Winery. This Sonoma Chardonnay has a gold color and an oaky, fruity nose with a hint of free sulphur. It has nice fruit and flavor with a considerable degree of oakiness (14). \$7.50

1978 Keenan "Sonoma." This Chardonnay is not as rich as Keenan's Napa bottling. It has a gold color, a vanilla nose and fruity flavors that finish a bit short (14). \$10.00

1978 ZD Winery "Napa." This Chardonnay from the Carneros district has a light gold color and a fruity, oaky, slightly citric nose. It has fruity, oaky flavors and is tart and citric on the finish. It needs several years in the bottle to develop, but the lack of richness and texture will not result in a memorable wine (14). \$9.50

1978 ZD Winery "Santa Barbara." This Chardonnay comes from the Tepusquet Vineyard. It has a gold color and a grassy oxidized nose. In the mouth it is very rich with a buttery texture and a tart finish. Overall, it lacks the structure of the 1977, although at an early age, it appears richer. The oxidation in the nose is disturbing and raises questions regarding the wine's longevity (14). \$10

1978 ZD "La Casa Zepponi Vineyards." This Sonoma Chardonnay has a light gold color with an unusual oaky nose that may be from using something other than French oak. It is very oaky and very heavy and powerful without charm or elegance (14). \$10.00

1978 Inglenook. This Napa Valley Chardonnay has a light gold color and oaky/fruity nose. It has fruit and a delicate flavor, but the palate impression is thin and watery with a short finish (13). \$7.50

1978 Iron Horse Vineyards. This Sonoma Chardonnay has a light gold color, a vanilla/sweet-pea nose, and light somewhat watery flavors that are clean and straight forward. This new winery formerly sold the Iron Horse Vineyards grapes to Sonoma Vineyards for bottling under the Windsor mail order label (13). \$8.50

1978 Lambert Bridge. This estate bottled Sonoma Chardonnay is a problem wine and not nearly as good as the 1977. It has a gold color and an oaky, sulphur nose. It is a huge mouthful of oaky flavors, but it is also harsh, bitter, hot and out of balance (13). \$8.50

1978 Sebastiani. This Northern California Chardonnay has a light gold color and an attractive fruity, almost banana-like nose. It is fruity and clean with a tart, but not stony flavor. It lacks depth and is short on the finish. Meant for consumption now, the price is attractive (13). \$5.00

1978 Martini. This California Chardonnay has a light gold color, a very woody nose, and light fruity flavors. Clean, thin, and with a slightly bitter finish, this wine should be consumed now (12½). \$4.89

1978 Mirassou "Harvest." The less expensive regular bottling is a better wine (see Volume 1, Number II). This Chardonnay has a gold color and an unusual earthy nose with a hint of sulphur. It is a big wine with fruit, oak, and a slight vegetative quality. The sulphur gives the wine a sharp aftertaste (12½). \$7.50

1978 San Martin. This Chardonnay from San Luis Obispo, Santa Barbara, and Monterey is most notable for the \$5.00 price. It has a gold color, an oaky/fruity nose, varietal flavors with a vegetative character, and a slightly bitter finish (12½).

Below Average

1978 BV. This Napa Valley Chardonnay follows in a line of unremarkable white wines from this venerable winery. It has a light gold color and a fruity nose with an ample dose of free sulphur. It

is clean, fruity, tart, thin, citric, and short on the palate (11). \$6

1978 Bell Canyon Chardonnay. This San Luis Obispo Chardonnay has a light gold color, an oaky/grassy nose and fruity, bitter flavors that are a bit harsh (11).

1978 Fenestra. This Livermore Valley Chardonnay has a gold color, a vanilla/varnish-like nose, and an unusual, herb-like flavor. It is a big wine that lacks depth, complexity, fruit, and style (11). \$7.50

1978 Charles Krug. This Napa Chardonnay has a light color and a faint floral nose. It is clean, but thin and watery and lacking flavor and aftertaste (11). \$6.50

1978 Parducci. This Mendocino Chardonnay has a light gold color and a weedy, sulphur nose that cleans up with air. It has an apple-like taste, but is austere and slightly bitter (11). \$5.50

1978 Wente Bros. This California Chardonnay has a light gold color and a grassy, sulphur nose. It is fruity with a slight spritz and clean flavors that show little varietal character (11). \$5.50



Coming Attractions:

An in depth look at **Cabernet Sauvignon**, beginning with the highly acclaimed **1974** vintage followed by **1975**, **1976**, and **1977** • Plus a look at older vintages **1973**, **1970**, and **1968**, and commentary on **1978** and **1979** Cabs • Plus **Zinfandels**, **Vintage Port**, **1928** and **1929 Bordeaux**, world-wide price trends, and outstanding pre-release California wines, and wine Bargains.

About Our Rating Scale & Quoted Prices

18-20 Outstanding 15-17 Very Good 12-14 Good Under 12 Below Average

Wines are ranked on a 20 point system on the basis of relative merit. Wines with identical rankings are listed in alphabetical order. Rankings are usually made only after several tastings of any particular wine. Unless otherwise noted, prices quoted are the approximate California suggested retail prices.

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