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Radical Chardonnays

Santa Barbara winemakers are taking Cali chards in crisp new directions

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Lompoc, Calif.



Nancy Pastor for The Wall Street Journal

Melville Winery, in Lompoc, where Greg Brewer is the winemaker.

The first time I tasted a Chardonnay from the Santa Rita Hills I was baffled. On the one hand, it was very ripe and fleshy, and on the other, it had a bracing acidic slap that I associated with cool-climate whites and even a mineral note, which you seldom find in New World wines. It was a little like meeting Jessica Simpson, only to have her start speaking perfect French in Carla Bruni's voice. To say I was disoriented would be an understatement. That was just before the movie "Sideways" made a star out of Santa Barbara Pinot Noir, not to mention Paul Giamatti. (You may remember Merlot in the role of villain.) The Santa Barbara region, specifically the Santa Ynez and Santa Maria valleys, is by now well known as a source of fine Pinot Noirs. What's less well known is that this area is producing some of California's most compelling Chardonnays.

The hottest area for Chardonnay, the Santa Rita Hills, is an appellation that came into existence only in 2001. Actually it's not so much hot as it is cool, which is what gives these Chardonnays a crispness that's missing from so many California chards. The wine that impressed and confused me was an '03 Brewer-Clifton Sweeney Canyon Chardonnay, crafted by ex-surfer and rock singer Steve Clifton and ex-French professor Greg Brewer in a prefab metal shed located in an industrial park not far from the chemistry has something to do with the contradictory lean/fleshy quality of their wines. Mr. Brewer is a lean, hyperactive former competitive cyclist; the Laguna-bred Mr. Clifton still seems much more like a surfer than an oenologist, brawnier and far more laid back. But both are quick to credit the unique geography of their chosen region. (They also make Pinot, but it's the whites that first caught my attention.) "This is such an extreme region," Mr. Brewer says. "It gives us the material for these really radical chards."



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Greg Brewer at the Brewer-Clifton winery in Lompoc, Calif.'s Santa Ynez Valley

Part of the explanation lies in the unique geography: The cool Alaska current hits the California coast at Point Conception just west of here and the mountain ranges that frame the Santa Ynez Valley run from west to east, funneling the cool marine air up the valley. As the temperature in the interior rises over the course of the day, the cold air is drawn inland; every night a blanket of fog covers much of the valley. This cooling effect is what makes the Chardonnays so crisp, preserving their natural acidity. Even in summer the temperatures in the Santa Rita Hills, which rise in the western part of the valley, rarely top 70 degrees and fall as low as 45 on summer evenings.

Back in 1970, after falling in love with the wines of Burgundy, a young Vietnam veteran named Richard Sanford was scouring California for a suitable climate in which to grow the Burgundian varietals of Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. Mr. Sanford drove up and down the Santa Ynez Valley in a pickup truck with a thermometer, checking temperatures every mile. Eventually he decided that the cool western part of the valley had just the climate he was looking for. With a partner he bought land and planted the Sanford & Benedict Vineyard, first with Pinot and later with Chardonnay. The team made Pinots and Chardonnays and sold grapes to others, including Jim Clendenen of Au Bon Climat, Santa Barbara's rock 'n' roll version of Robert Mondavi. Mr. Clendenen's Sanford & Benedict bottlings helped spread the fame of the vineyard. Mr. Sanford eventually lost control of the vineyard and the winery that bears his name in a dispute with a corporate partner, and now makes wines under the Alma Rosa label. Mr. Clendenen's Au Bon Climat Sanford & Benedict Chardonnay remains the benchmark for that great vineyard.

Wineries like Babcock, Foley, Ojai and Melville gradually followed Mr. Sanford's lead in the area. Greg Brewer and Steve Clifton apprenticed at other wineries before starting Brewer-Clifton in 1996. They maxed out credit cards, borrowing from friends and buying grapes from growers in the valley and nearby Santa Maria. Eventually they focused on the Santa Rita Hills, buying grapes exclusively from vineyards there. Around the same time, Mr. Brewer took a day job at nearby Melville Vineyards and Mr. Clifton started Palmina, a winery devoted to Italian varietals. Their Pinots and Chardonnays have achieved cult status and stellar ratings from critics.

I find their chards particularly compelling, edgy and extreme. I have sometimes thought that the Brewer-Clifton Chardonnays tasted like turbocharged Chablis and in fact Chablis is a passion for both of them. After a 2004 visit to the area, including a quasi-religious experience tasting in the cellar of Domain Raveneau, Mr. Brewer was inspired to start a new Chardonnay project called Diatom, named for the areas diatomaceous marine soils. "I wanted to push the limits, to make something really extreme."

At Melville, Mr. Brewer had already taken an unusual step in his development of Chardonnay with a wine he called Inox. While most winemakers in California and Burgundy use some new oak barrels to help oxygenate and mellow their Chardonnays, and encourage a secondary fermentation to soften the malic acids, Mr. Brewer created a minimalist white fermented in stainless steel, blocking the secondary fermentation by chilling the wine. The result, called Inox, is lean and crisp, utterly lacking the buttery quality of old-school Cali chard.

"I think of Brewer-Clifton as skiing, Melville Inox as snowboarding and Diatom as the X Games," Mr. Brewer says. "I wanted to push Chardonnay to an absolute extreme."

Extreme, but minimal. For his Diatom Chardonnays, which are vinified like Inox, he lets the grapes get very, very ripe, riper than Inox, which in a hotter area would result in a flabby wine.

The result is radical indeed, an extreme example of the fat/lean syndrome. Diatom is so radical, it's deviant," Mr. Brewer says. He sees heavily oaked Chardonnays as elaborately cooked and sauced dishes. "Diatom is like a piece of toro, fatty but also pure and minimal," he says. He also believes the minimalist winemaking style lets the characteristics of the vineyards, and the area, shine through. It's unique and yet it highlights the family traits of the region. I like to pour these chards for friends who claim they don't like California Chardonnay. Even those who aren't instantly converted tend to be pleasantly surprised.

Oenofile

The best way to find Brewer-Clifton and Diatom is to get on their mailing lists; go to brewerclifton.com and diatomwines.com.



2009 Diatom Huber
Santa Rita Hills
Chardonnay, \$48

Incredible tension and precision. Great flesh and great acidity. A deconstructed margarita—lime and salt and alcohol and even agave. Wowza!



2009 Melville Inox
Santa Rita Hills
Chardonnay, \$42

This one cuts like a Ginsu knife. Very sharp acidity keeps the ripe fruit from being cloying, as does the saline note on the finish.



2008 Brewer-Clifton
Santa Rita Hills
Chardonnay, \$36

Honey and beeswax on the nose—this superripe and fleshy, but also acidic like barely ripe kiwi. This has got the shrill high end guitar and the low end bass. A great food wine.



2007 Sanford
Chardonnay
La Rinconada Vineyard, Santa Rita Hills, \$35

Tastes a lot like lemon curd. Shows the signature mineral note and bracing acidity.



*2008 Babcock
Top Cream Santa Rita Hills
Chardonnay, \$45*

Very nice acidity. Shows that Santa Rita stony note as well stone fruit, a la nectarine fruit. Fifty percent new oak makes it a little heavier than the above.



*2007 Au Bon Climat
Santa Ynez Valley
Sanford & Benedict Chardonnay, \$35*

(Actually within the Santa Rita appellation despite the label.) Very polished and sleek with a nice mineral streak, and a backbone of lemony acid offset by a slight touch of vanilla. Bring on the salmon.