

[St. Helena Star](#)

Panelists judge 18 chardonnays from Napa Carneros

[Catherine Seda](#) Napa Valley Register | Posted: Thursday, October 7, 2010 12:00 am |



The St. Helena Star/Napa Valley Vintners tasting panel ranked these six Napa Carneros chardonnays the best during a recent judging. Photo courtesy of Alan's Studio on Main, St. Helena

Top 6 wines

1. HdV Wines, \$60
2. Clos Pegase, \$24
3. Truchard Vineyards, \$30
4. Sequoia Grove, \$28
5. Silverado Vineyards, \$30
6. **Renteria Wines**, \$55 (correct price is \$40)

Carneros chardonnay has quite a reputation. Since chardonnay is a cool climate grape liking the moderately cooler temperatures of Carneros, the grape is well planted and well regarded from

here. The grapes benefit from the constant wind and fog from the San Pablo Bay and people expect the wines to show elegance and crisp acidity. Many more northern Napa wineries purchase Carneros fruit to blend in with their riper, less acidic fruit.

While the region took off in popularity in the 1980s with consumers' newfound love for pinot noir and sparkling wines, it is not a newly planted area. It is instead one of Napa Valley's older winegrowing regions. Agoston Haraszthy, an early pioneer of the Napa Valley, had planted grapes in Carneros by 1880.

The St. Helena Star and Napa Valley Vintners Tasting Panel recently tasted through 18 Napa Valley Carneros chardonnays from the 2008 vintage at the Culinary Institute of America's Rudd Center. While Carneros straddles both Napa and Sonoma, this was a tasting of only the Napa-side wines. Unbeknownst to the tasters, the wines were organized by price. Three different flights of six wines each were tasted; flight one being the least expensive and flight three the most.

Did the panelists prefer the more expensive flights of Carneros chardonnay? Well, yes and no. There were several tasters including Shannon Kuleto of The Napa Valley Vine Trail and Brett deLeuze of ZD Wines, who appreciated the second two flights. These panelists noted the wines' concentration and complexity.

On the other hand, Leigh Meyering of Spring Mountain Vineyard appreciated the fresh fruit and less obvious oak flavors of the first flight. Panelists did notice that the more expensive a wine, the more oak-influenced spices and malolactic-influenced butter flavors there were. It also was noted that the pricier the wine, the heavier the glass bottles in almost all instances.

Following the three-flight tasting, panelists then re-tasted blind the top two wines from each flight in a grand taste-off. This combined the wines from the different priced flights. The ultimate winner from the top six taste-off did turn out to be from the most expensive flight, yet the number two wine was from the least expensive flight. It seemed to be just a matter of what you were looking for: fresh, more fruit driven wines or more deeply oak spiced wines.

The best of the best? The HdV Carneros Hyde Vineyard Chardonnay 2008 (\$60). The wine has great luxurious concentration with seamlessly integrated oak flavors. It is almost haunting in its depth; panelists noted its incredibly long finish.

Second place went to Clos Pegase from Mitsuko's Vineyard Chardonnay Carneros Napa Valley (\$24), a round, ripe wine with peach and lemon zest flavors. It is fermented in French oak barrels and stirred on its lees.

Truchard Vineyard Chardonnay Carneros Napa Valley (\$30) is quintessential Carneros chardonnay. The Truchard family purchased their then-abandoned prune orchard back in 1974, before Carneros took off in popularity. They have transformed the estate into pure magnificence. Twenty different Napa Valley wineries purchase Truchard fruit. This chardonnay is French oak barrel fermented and aged on its lees.

Sequoia Grove Chardonnay Carneros Napa Valley (\$28) has pear fruit with spice and herb flavors. It is a beautifully balanced wine that comes from the winemaking team of Michael Trujillo and Molly Hill. The grapes were fermented in stainless steel and then put into French oak barrels (35 percent new) where it was stirred on its lees.

Silverado Vineyards Vineburg Vineyard Chardonnay Carneros (\$30). Fermentation for half of the wine happens in stainless steel, which helps the wine keep delicate floral and citrus aromas and flavors. The rest, fermented in oak barrels, adds a great richness to the final blend. It has lots of tropical fruit and spice.

Renteria Napa Valley Chardonnay Carneros (\$55). The winery itself has an incredible story. Salvador Renteria used innovative vineyard techniques in the '60s and '70s to farm exceptional fruit from lower yields. He caught the eye of historic figures like Andre Tchelistcheff. This is a wine that embraces the creaminess of malolactic fermentation with the red apple and stone fruit flavors of the grape. (correct price is \$40)

(Catherine Seda handles international wine accounts at Balzac Communications & Marketing and holds a diploma from the Wine and Spirits Education Trust (WSET). Only wines from Napa Valley Vintner member wineries are accepted and tasted. Not all wines submitted are chosen to be tasted as often there are more wines submitted than tasted. The wines are chosen by random. Many wineries offer local residents discounts on their wines through the Napa Neighbor program, visit www.napavintners.com/programs.)

Star/NVV panelists

The following people participated in the recent St. Helena Star/Napa Valley Vintners tasting panel, which judged 18 chardonnays produced in the Napa Carneros region.

Kristin Belair, Honig

Karen Cakebread, Ziata

Eric Carpenter, St. Helena Wine Merchants

Brett DeLeuze, ZD Wines

Wayne Donaldson, Donaldson Wine, LLC

Todd Graff, Frank Family

Gene Ivester, Alan's Studio Off Main

Keith Hock, Schramsberg

Shannon Kuleto, St. Helena resident

Leigh Meyering, Spring Mountain

Tom Simoneau, Vintage Wine Estates

Chris Phelps, Swanson Vineyards

John Skupny, Lang & Reed

Anne Vawter, Oakville Ranch Co.

Rudy Zuidema, Sea Fog/The Grade

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