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The Chardonnay That Blazed the Trail

By Dan Shaw

Half a century ago, Stony Hill put the quintessential California wine on the map. Today, it's still going strong.

The letter is dated Nov. 18, 1954. It begins "Dear Jerry," and it ends "Sincerely, Fred".

Fred was the late Fred McCrea, proprietor of the first winery built in Napa after Prohibition and creator of what would ultimately become one of California's first cult wines — maybe even the very first — before the term "cult wine" even existed. Jerry was a family friend — one of a few dozen to whom McCrea sent letters, trying to sell his first vintage, the 1952 Stony Hill Chardonnay.



"There weren't a whole lot of wine stores in California back then," says McCrea's son, Peter, "so my dad just sent letters to some of his friends, asking if they'd like to buy any of the wine."

The 1952 Stony Hill Chardonnay was the first in a line of superb, age-worthy Chardonnays, and Stony Hill now is not only one of my favorite wines but also one of the great, if unlikely "secrets" of the California wine world — a wine that is arguably occult, as well as cult.

In that first offering, 52 cases were available, all priced "a little below the average of other Chardonnays on the market," McCrea said in his letter. "It is \$23.40 a case, less 10% in case lots."

Stony Hill's Chardonnay production has since increased to a still modest 3,000 cases a year. Its mailing list also has grown to 3,000 — and one bottle now costs more than a case did half a century ago.

But when the Stony Hill offering letter for the 2001 vintage was mailed this month to those 3,000 lucky souls, the price — \$27 a bottle — was still below that of other top California Chardonnays. Kistler Chardonnays are \$60 to \$65. Peter Michael's and Pahlmeyer's are \$60. In Wine Spectator's rating of 2001 Chardonnays, for of the top five — and 12 of the top 18 — are in the \$40-to-\$50 range.

Marcassin — the only California Chardonnay I like better than Stony Hill — is released in even smaller quantities than Stony Hill and sells for \$60 to \$90 a bottle on release, depending on which Marcassin you're lucky enough to get. Unlike Stony Hill, which has only modest retail and restaurant markups, Marcassin immediately doubles, triples and quadruples in price.

When I had lunch here recently with Peter McCrea and his wife, Willinda, who jointly run Stony Hill, they were clearly surprised that I mentioned Marcassin and Stony Hill as my two favorite Chardonnays. The two styles couldn't be more different.

Marcassin is a big, rich wine, much like a grand cru white Burgundy – a Chevalier-Montrachet or Bâtard-Montrachet, the kind of full-bodied white wine I want with steamed lobster or Copper River salmon. Stony Hill as my summer Chardonnay, the white wine I want to drink when the weather is warm and the food is light.

But unlike most California Chardonnays, which don't age well, Stony Hill not only ages very well, it changes in the bottle more than any other white wine I drink regularly – more even than Marcassin, which also ages well.

I've been on the Stony Hill mailing list for about a decade, I think, and have tasted their wines as far back as 1977; I've consistently noted that after a few years, they seem to pick up weight and body and elegance.

They remain truly Burgundian in style, though, and that's no surprise. Fred McCrea loved white Burgundies and sought to emulate them from the time he bought his vineyard on the northern slopes of Spring Mountain, above St. Helena, in 1943.

First Bottling

McCrea and his wife, Eleanor, built the winery in 1951. The next year they made their first wine, bottled in 1953 and offered for sale in 1954 in the state's first-ever use of a mailing list to sell wines.

When Fred McCrea died in 1977, Eleanor took over, and when she died in 1991, Willinda took charge of the winery's business operation. When Peter retired as a longtime Chevron Oil Co. executive in 2001, he began to run the winery full time. Meanwhile, Mike Chelini has been the winemaker since 1973. So there's been a consistency to the Stony Hill style – a style that has largely gone out of fashion in California, where buttery, over-oaked Chardonnays get high scores and slavish imitators.

The subtlety – some austerity – of Stony Hill is intentional.

Chelini generally avoids the new barrels that can give white wines an oaky, toasty flavor, for example. He prefers older, more neutral barrels that permit the natural flavors of the grape to prevail.

"We don't have a lot of what I call tutti-frutti, tropical fruits like pineapple and banana," he says, "so we want to hang on to the fruit we do have, the softer pear and apple flavors."

Chelini also avoids the malolactic fermentation process that's so popular among his colleagues. All wines go through a primary fermentation in which yeast converts the grapes' natural sugar to alcohol and carbon dioxide; in a secondary, malolactic fermentation, bacteria convert the tart malic acid in the grape to milder, lactic acid, which makes young wines less harsh.

But Chelini thins his wines need the tart acid to complement the fruit and provide good companionship to food.

Peter McCrea says malolactic fermentation would "destroy the special, flinty quality of our wine, and it's that quality – that style – which differentiates our wine and makes it terroir-specific."

He pauses, grinning. "There's a reason my dad named the wine Stony Hill."

McCrea says his wine sells better on the East Coast than it does here because "they're more accustomed to drinking French wines back there." But Stony Hill has customers all over the country, and not just for the flagship Chardonnay.

The winery also makes smaller quantities of Riesling (500 cases), Gewürztraminer (250 cases) and Semillon de Soleil (fewer than 200 six-packs), as well as a lighter, early-drinking Chardonnay, "SHV", made from younger vines.

But it's the flagship Chardonnay for which Stony Hill is best known, and McCrea and his wife are just starting a major push to sell more of it in Southern California, where their customers already include more than 40 restaurants.

About 65% of Stony Hill's annual production goes to mailing list customers, and given the small supply and big demand for the wine – and the stratospheric prices of many of his competitor's wines – I asked McCrea why he did charge more.

He just shook his head.

"I don't think there's a bottle of Chardonnay in the world worth more than \$40," he said. "My dad was thrifty, and he built everything very cheaply. I doubt that he invested \$50,000 in the winery. So we have low overhead. Why should we gouge?"

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