

The New York Times

Napa's Un-California Chardonnay

FRANK PRIAL
April 16, 2003

IN 1943, Fred McCrea, a San Francisco advertising executive, and his wife, Eleanor, invested in a small goat ranch on the lower slopes of Spring Mountain, in the Napa Valley, as a weekend hideaway. They had no interest in growing grapes, but in 1946, encouraged by friends, they began planting a few vines each year. They called the place Stony Hill, and when the first vines matured they sold their grapes, mostly chardonnay and pinot blanc, to other wineries. In 1951, they built a small winery, the first in the Napa Valley since Prohibition, and began producing wines, concentrating on chardonnay because they loved white Burgundy. It was an audacious choice. No one in California really knew how to make chardonnay or even where to plant the grapes. Not until the 1970's did chardonnay start to become the ubiquitous brassy California white wine.

Without a template for California chardonnay, the McCreas relied on their innate sense of quality. Their winemaking did not include heavy doses of new oak flavor and techniques to soften acidity, which are now standard California features. Their vines came from a Burgundian clone given them by the Wente family, winemakers in Livermore. Their small lots of wines were highly popular and gained a reputation of being able to age like good white Burgundies. Over the years, Stony Hill became one of the first California cult wines. Their chardonnay was sold only by mail, and it was said that for every person on their mailing list, 10 fans waited to fill in. Production is still limited to 3,000 cases a year.

Even so, tastes change. As big, oaky chardonnays came to dominate the marketplace in the 1980's and 90's, Stony Hill became almost a forgotten winery, a historical footnote. Nonetheless, the McCreas and their son, Peter, and his wife, Willinda, who took over after Fred and Eleanor died, clung to the Stony Hill way, making wines with good acidity and no intrusive oak taste or aromas.

The Dining section tasting panel wanted to see if Stony Hill had remained true to its original ideals. So we set aside our standard procedure of a blind tasting of the wines of various producers and decided on a vertical tasting of 12 vintages of Stony Hill chardonnay, from 1990 through 2001, purchased directly from the winery. Courageously, Peter McCrea threw in a bottle of his 1973 vintage -- a 30-year-old chardonnay that turned to be extraordinary and drew a hearty "Wow" from our guest panelist.

Our panel consisted of Amanda Hesser, Eric Asimov and me, along with our guest, Bernard Sun, head sommelier of Montrachet, the New York restaurant. Among us we had tasted hundreds of California chardonnays over the years, and frankly, we are no great fans of the predominant style. California chardonnays, we agreed, too often come off as parodies of fine white wine, too soft, too heavy, too alcoholic and seriously over-oaked, often artificially. Even the best of them tend to fade after just a few years.

We need not have worried. These Stony Hills were remarkable wines, in the classic Burgundian tradition: elegant; intense fresh taste, thanks to good acid levels; and that delicious bite the French call nerveux. Alcohol levels were reasonable, and the wines had just enough oak in the finish to enhance rather than overpower.

"My heart belongs in Burgundy, and these wines have a certain similar style to Burgundies," Mr. Sun said. "They're Chablis-like across the board, and not California-like."

Mr. Asimov was just as enthusiastic. "These are my kind of wines," he said. For Ms. Hesser, the afternoon "was one of the most fun tastings I've had." She added, "They are the model for what California chardonnay should be: floral, good acidity, light-bodied."

And I liked them because I thought they were good food wines -- and 99 percent of wines are not.

I wasn't entirely surprised by the tasting. In 1987, at a dinner devoted to older California wines in St. Helena, in the Napa Valley, we drank -- among many others -- the '65 and '67 Stony Hill chardonnays that Joe Heitz had made

from Stony Hill grapes. Their fresh bouquet and liveliness were innate qualities, just as they were in our panel's tasting.

The Australian writer James Halliday put it succinctly when, after drinking a 1962 Stony Hill chardonnay in 1992, he wrote: "The combination of soil, clone and a strictly non-interventionist winemaking approach resulted in tiny quantities of infinitely slow-maturing chardonnay, which over the ensuing decades has gained for itself the reputation as one of California's greatest."

Our star awards could be misleading because the differences we noted were invariably questions of style rather than quality. For example, with an unprecedented four stars, the 1973 was our favorite. But we were impressed with its great age as much as by its taste and bouquet.

We didn't list a "best value," nor the prices, although you can find current vintages of Stony Hill chardonnay in stores, generally at \$30 to \$40 a bottle.

There was a time when Stony Hill chardonnays were said to need 10 years to mature properly. Not any longer. Still, these are not instant-gratification wines. Five years would probably make a great difference.

Admittedly, few people will ever get to drink all these vintages. That's sad, because they show what could be done with chardonnay in California -- if enough people cared.

Tasting Report: Stony Hill Chardonnays Seem to Remain Forever Young

2001 *** [Rating: three stars]

Although this wine has not been released, the panel sensed great potential. Eric Asimov loved it, but called it tightly wound. Amanda Hesser said it had lots of energy. Bernard Sun and Frank J. Prial both felt it was too young, but looked forward to tasting it after the acidity had calmed down.

2000 ** 1/2 [Rating: two and a half stars]

In contrast to the acidic 2001, the panel agreed that this was a much softer wine. Prial called it short, though he felt it improved markedly with food. Sun also liked it better with food. Hesser felt the flavors were somewhat diluted. Asimov found it creamy and not as acidic as some other vintages.

1999 ** [Rating: two stars]

The panel was puzzled by some unusual aromas. Prial said it smelled like spiced meat, Hesser found grapefruit and Asimov said it reminded him of halvah. In the mouth, mineral flavors dominated.

1998 *** 1/2 [Rating: three and a half stars]

This was the first wine in which the panel detected some aging. Sun felt it was losing its early austerity, becoming pleasantly fatter and richer. Hesser tasted honey, golden raisins and thyme. Prial found it more Californian in style than some other vintages, but added that it went very well with food. Asimov called it delicious, deep and entirely ready to drink.

1997 *** 1/2 [Rating: three and a half stars]

A favorite of Prial and Asimov. Prial called it elegant and balanced. Asimov said it still needed time to develop. Sun, too, called it elegant, with good acidity. Hesser termed it nicely balanced but not outstanding.

1996 *** [Rating: three stars]

One of her favorites, Hesser said. Sun called it riper and sweeter than some others. Prial found beautiful balance and said everything came together. Asimov called it creamy and earthy.

1995 *** 1/2 [Rating: three and a half stars]

Asimov loved this wine, saying it was fresh, lively and still youthful. Sun said it gained complexity and elegance and was still evolving after two hours. Prial found attractive mineral flavors and said it was typical of the mid-90's Stony Hills. Hesser was unmoved by this vintage, calling it flat.

1994 *** [Rating: three stars]

The panelists detected attractive nutlike aromas that come from aging. Prial called this wine balanced but said it was aging somewhat rapidly. Sun loved the nose, finding nutty, caramel aromas. Hesser was surprised by its lightness. Asimov felt it was great with food..

1993 *** [Rating: three stars]

At its peak, said Prial, who found intensity and slightly burnished flavors. Hesser loved the nose, finding flowers, honey and nuts, and was surprised that the fruit was still fresh. Elegant and austere, said Sun, adding that it carries you quite a long way. Asimov found it soft, deep and dark.

1992 Not rated

The panel agreed that this bottle was oxidized. (Stony Hill says that some of its 1992 vintage was marred by faulty corks.)

1991 *** 1/2 [Rating: three and a half stars]

Everyone liked this wine with food. Sun called it elegant. Prial likened it to the '95 and '96. Asimov liked the aged character, which reminded him of a riesling. Hesser detected herbal qualities.

1990 ** 1/2 [Rating: two and a half stars]

Beginning to show its age. Sun called it softer and more quiet than the '91, but Hesser felt it had more complexity. Asimov felt it was losing fruit. Prial agreed it was tired but said it was still well balanced.

1973 **** [Rating: four stars]

The panel was astounded that a 30-year-old chardonnay could seem so youthful. Sun called it elegant and balanced, and Asimov said it was beautiful. Great, Prial said. Hesser found it lovely and smooth and said she wanted to keep putting her nose in it. The panel agreed it had an uncharacteristic, though restrained, touch of oak.

WHAT THE STARS MEAN:

(None) Pass It By

* Passable

** Good

*** Excellent

**** Extraordinary

Ratings reflect the panel's reaction to the wines. The panelists this week are Frank J. Prial, Amanda Hesser, Eric Asimov and a guest, Bernard Sun, the head sommelier at the restaurant Montrachet. The Stony Hill wines were bought from the winery. Most of the later vintages are generally available in good retail shops and restaurants