

## Better with Age

### Stony Hill's Chardonnays stand the test of time

Linda Murphy  
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For 51 years, the folks at Stony Hill Vineyard have just said no.

No to a fancy winery, high-tech equipment and a gleaming tasting room. No to changes in ownership and a procession of new winemakers. No to new oak barrels and malolactic fermentation in the winemaking process. No to producing Napa Valley's 800-pound gorilla, Cabernet Sauvignon.

Stony Hill is all about Chardonnay and has been since 1947, when Fred and Eleanor McCrea planted their vineyard on a former goat ranch on a northwest slope of

Spring Mountain, high above St. Helena. They began making a wine that emphasized purity of fruit flavors, the mineral character that came from their rocky soils and a firm natural acidity that gave their Chardonnays remarkable longevity. This style continues today, in stark contrast to the current sea of big, soft, opulent California Chardonnays with a short shelf life.

At a time when too many California Chardonnays taste more of toast, butter and caramel than they do of fruit, Stony Hill's wines are delicate and lean on release, with fresh green-apple, pear and lemon flavors, hints of slate, subtle spicing and brisk acidity. While typical Chardonnays from this state are at their best in their first year or two in the bottle - when there is enough fruit to balance the oak and butter flavors - Stony Hill Chardonnays begin to develop their true personality after about five years in the bottle. Slowly they develop weight, richness and complexity, the fruit character preserved by the high natural acidity inherent in the grapes that winemaker Mike Chelini leaves intact by not putting the wines through the secondary malolactic fermentation so common in California Chardonnay winemaking practices.

Ageability is often the yardstick by which wine aficionados judge the merits of a wine. To them, a good wine that doesn't improve in the cellar is merely good; a good wine that continues to develop and mature gracefully can be great. Over the years, Stony Hill Chardonnays have been great -- so respected and sought-after that there is a waiting list to get on the winery's legendary mailing list, which the McCreas use to sell most of their wines directly to their customers.

The proof that California Chardonnays can age is in bottles of Stony Hill Chardonnay. The 1986 showed marvelously at a recent tasting; still-youthful Chardonnays from 1973 and 1978 were among those served to guests at Stony Hill's 50th anniversary party last year. The current release, 1999 (\$27), is soon to be replaced by the 2000 vintage (\$27); both are expected to carry on the Stony Hill longevity legacy (see "Tasting notes").

Fred McCrea, a former San Francisco advertising executive who got his inspiration by drinking the white Burgundies of France, died in 1977, Eleanor in 1991. Their son, Peter, and Peter's wife, Willinda, took over at Stony Hill after Eleanor's death, and little has changed since, except for a replanting of the vineyard in the 1980s after Pierce's disease, an addition to the winery building and just two label design tweaks.



Chronicle / Craig Lee

Chelini has been with the McCreas for 31 years, working first as their vineyard manager and becoming winemaker in 1973. He says the place suits his personality.

To visit Stony Hill is a flashback to 1951, when the McCreas hired ranch foreman Charlie Thompson, father of Rep. [Mike Thompson](#), D-St. Helena, to build the simple wood winery structure, then about the size of a large bedroom. Fred McCrea painstakingly carved decorative grape clusters into the huge wooden winery door. "That door was the first and last thing Fred ever carved," Chelini says.

A second production room, made of stone, was added in the 1980s. The facility is still small and rustic, a patchwork of materials and resembling a mountain cabin more than a Napa winery. Inside, there are 194 barrels of varying ages, most of them dark and weathered by time, moisture and wine stains. Chelini points to one barrel from Stuttgart, Germany, at least 35 years old and still used to make Riesling.

"Nothing about Stony Hill has ever been state of the art," says Peter McCrea with a laugh as he walks through his 42-acre vineyard, which ranges in elevation from 650 feet to 1,200 feet. "My father was quite thrifty, and he wasn't in for a lot of money when he bought the property in 1943 -- \$7,500 for 160 acres."

Says Chelini: "Guys who used to work here come back to visit and say, 'Oh my god, things haven't changed since I left.' "

Thrift has nothing to do with the winemaking decisions these days. The Stony Hill style is embraced by wine lovers and collectors who cherish the lean, austere style and know the wines will gain complexity and roundness as they mature. New barrels impart unwanted wood and toast flavor during the fermentation and aging process, so Chelini uses small, older barrels and large upright oak tanks that impart virtually no flavor to the wines yet give them texture and proper oxidation. The age of the barrels used for the Stony Hill [Chardonnay](#) ranges from 5 to 25 years. When Chelini does buy a new barrel, it's to replace one that is past its prime or beyond repair.

If a bottle of Stony Hill has "just 1 to 2 percent Chardonnay that has been in a new barrel, our customers can pick it up," Chelini says. "They say, 'Mike, is there a little new wood in here?' "

Malolactic fermentation of Chardonnay has become a standard procedure at most [California](#) wineries. All wines -- white and red -- go through primary fermentation, where yeast converts the natural sugar in the grapes into alcohol and carbon dioxide. Reds and some whites also go through malolactic fermentation, which transforms the sharp malic acid in the fruit to a softer lactic acid, leaving the wine rounder and less tart.

But the buttery character that the process imparts is not welcome in Stony Hill wines.

"When I pour our Chardonnay for those new to the Stony Hill style, they say, 'Gee, this doesn't smell like Chardonnay,' " Chelini says. "They expect the wine to be buttery and creamy. We don't want buttery or creamy."

One of the benefits of malolactic fermentation is that it ensures that a wine will complete fermentation. Sometimes a primary fermentation will become "stuck," meaning activity stops before all the sugar has been converted by the yeast. Winemakers can induce malolactic fermentation to finish the job.

"We use Montrachet yeast, which is good for getting complete primary fermentations," Chelini explains. "But if it gets cold in the cellar and a fermentation sticks, we will wait until the first full moon in March for it to start going again. We won't resort to malo."

Thirty-eight of Stony Hill Vineyard's 42 vine acres are planted to Chardonnay; Riesling, Gewurztraminer and Semillon vines provide fruit for the small lots of those white-grape varieties that the McCreas make and sell, mostly to their mailing-list members.

"When my mother and father began planting the vineyard in 1949, they used a Chardonnay clone developed by the Wente brothers (in the Livermore Valley), the only Chardonnay budwood available at the time," Peter McCrea says, noting that there were just 200 acres of Chardonnay planted in California in 1949. Today there are more than 100,000.

"We've never had phylloxera here but we've had [Pierce's disease](#) (a lethal grapevine disease caused by a bacteria carried by the sharpshooter insect) forever, as the riparian vegetation surrounding the vineyard is a habitat for the sharpshooter," says McCrea, a retired Chevron vice president. "We replanted with the Wente clone, propagated from our best vines, in the mid- 1980s, so for a time when our vineyard was very young, we purchased some fruit; now the average age is 15 years."

The Wente clone, when planted in Stony Hill's rocky, volcanic soils and exposed to cooling coastal breezes and fog, produces small yields and small berries filled with intensely flavored juice.

"We pick the grapes based on balance, not on sugar levels," Chelini says. "We watch the acidity and the pH; if the grapes are at 23.2 percent sugar and the acid starts to drop, we pick. If the acid drops, malolactic fermentation can begin on its own, and we have to prevent that. A healthy pH (a numerical measurement of the intensity of the total acid in the grapes) also guards against malolactic, and we lightly filter the wines as another preventative."

Stony Hill Chardonnays usually have an alcohol content of about 13 percent - - low by today's [California Chardonnay](#) standards and a plus when it comes to matching the wines at mealtime; the lower the alcohol and crisper the acidity, the better Chardonnay goes with food.

"We love the contrast Stony Hill Chardonnay gives to other California Chardonnays," says Scott Tracy, sommelier at La Toque restaurant in Rutherford.

He currently has the 1997 vintage on his list (\$88).

"We use the wine in the same way we use white Burgundy -- we recommend it for the acidity that cuts through sauces and the minerality that works so well with herb-tinged dishes, oysters, scallops and other shellfish. We see the lightbulb go on in people's heads they think they're not going to like a wine and then try it with food; that's the magical reward of wine."

The McCreas produce approximately 3,500 cases of wine per year, 2,500 of them the Stony Hill Chardonnay. They also bottle a \$15 Chardonnay called SHV, made in a similar style but from much younger vines. Although Stony Hill does not have a tasting room, the McCreas will accommodate appointments for Monday- through-Friday visits.

Willinda McCrea, who took over the business affairs when Eleanor McCrea became ill in 1990, says about 60 percent of sales are to 3,500 mailing-list members and 20 percent each to California residents via direct sale and small national distributors who focus mostly on restaurant accounts.

"It would be difficult for us to expand and we don't want to," Peter says. "We have a perfect farming unit, we make all our wines here, grow all our own grapes. We're very comfortable where we are."

"Customers who have bought our wines for years know the taste of our vineyard and they know what to expect from the wines," adds Chelini. "We provide consistency and integrity."  
And wines with a long lifeline.

### 3 CHARDONNAY PRODUCERS WHO UNDERSTAND THE CELLAR

In addition to Stony Hill Vineyard, there are a handful of California wineries that make Chardonnays for the ages. They emphasize natural fruit character, acidity that keeps the wine lively over the years and restrained winemaking techniques that allow the taste of the soil to shine through.

In most cases, little or no malolactic fermentation is induced, and the use of toasty oak is judicious during fermentation and aging.

Three of the top cellar-worthy Chardonnay producers -- Mount Eden Vineyards, Mayacamas Vineyards and Hanzell Vineyards -- are profiled here. For similar styles of Chardonnay, also look to Chateau Montelena, Far Niente, Flora Springs, Forman, Gundlach-Bundschu, Iron Horse, Melville, Russian Hill Estate, Staglin and Trefethen, among others.

### THIRTEEN VINTAGES OF STONY HILL CHARDONNAY

Stony Hill Vineyard proprietors Peter and Willinda McCrea and their longtime winemaker, Mike Chelini, recently conducted a 13-bottle vertical tasting of their estate Chardonnays for The Chronicle. If there was any doubt that California Chardonnay is capable of improving with time in the bottle, this tasting erased it. The wines were tasted in order, from youngest to oldest.

-- 2001: This is Stony Hill Chardonnay at its youngest, an infant that is more than a year away from release into the market. Despite its angularity and puckering acidity, it's textbook Stony Hill, with great structure and depth of flavor (Granny Smith apple, lemon, lime), firm acidity and a long citrus finish.

2000: Very Chablislike in its lean lemony aromas and flavors and hints of slate and soil. Refreshingly tart and somewhat austere, there is great depth of flavor here that will emerge with maturity. This wine will be released soon, and when it is, try it with fresh oysters if you don't have the patience to put in in your cellar for a few years.

1998: This vintage has been in the bottle for four years and it's just now opening up. It's a pretty wine, lemony and fresh, with notes of spiced pear and flint and a long finish. It has a gorgeous texture and an elegance that comes from a very cool -- and much-maligned -- vintage. Ignore the vintage reports and enjoy this one now and for the next 10 years.

1997: Medium-weight, juicy and full, this [Chardonnay](#) has Granny Smith apple, melon and citrus flavors and a nutty character that will become more pronounced with time. Any initial sharp edges have been softened by cellaring. "Some wines go to sleep for a year and then wake up," Chelini says. "This is one of those wines." The vintage was warm, the grapes were harvested at optimal maturity and the result is a concentrated wine to drink now and keep an eye on for future development.

1996: The wine has a vanillin nose (despite the use of neutral barrels) with flavors of Granny Smith apples, lemon-lime, tropical fruit and cinnamon spice. It's viscous, mineral, earthy, nutty and round -- just as one would expect an aged Burgundian Chardonnay to be.

1995: Shy on the nose, this vintage opens to flavors of spiced apple, pear and citrus, with a pleasant earthy quality, decent richness and good acidity. Where is it going? Deciding that is part of the fun.

1994: Its earthy, toasty nose is followed by flavors of Meyer lemon and pear, with acidity that is obvious yet doesn't bite, and a slight honey finish. My notes say "ethereal"; Chelini's say, "delicious now, but its richness bodes well for a long life ahead."

1993: "We prayed over this wine," says Willinda McCrea. "Thankfully, it woke up three to four years ago. It's firm and focused." Adds Chelini: "It will get better and better, but it took 10 years to get started." This Chardonnay from a very average [California](#) vintage has recovered from its shyness, showing a nutty nose, hints of minerals and flavors of citrus and tropical, pineapple fruit.

1992: My favorite wine of the day, with ripe apple, lemon and apricot flavors, youthful freshness, gentle acidity and a finish that went on forever. A great companion for many foods.

1991: An elegant, understated wine that is defined by its soft citrus, melon and apple flavors, a touch of honey and complex yeastiness. It has a long, smooth finish, moderate acidity and superb balance.

1990: Lovely and integrated, this Chardonnay shows its age yet is still vibrant. Soft, fruity deliciousness and great depth.

1986: The McCreas had to replant their Pierce's-disease-infected vineyard in the mid-1980s; this wine comes from the original vineyard planted by Fred and Eleanor McCrea. For a Chardonnay this long in the tooth, it is still lemony and crisp, with a wonderful depth of flavor and texture.

Linda Murphy is a Chronicle staff writer. E-mail her at [lmurphy@sfchronicle.com](mailto:lmurphy@sfchronicle.com)

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