

EATING & DRINKING

ON WINE / LETTIE TEAGUE



Chenin Blanc Is Once Again The Height of California Cool

GRAPES REGULARLY fall in and out of favor among winemakers and growers. Chenin Blanc fell so far in California, it practically dropped off the winemaking map. In 1991 there were just under 31,000 acres of Chenin in the state; by 2024 the total had slipped to just over 4,000.

Now, thanks to a band of impassioned vintners, California Chenin is back. The best Chenins I tasted for this column were some of the most memorable California wines I've tasted this year.

Thanks to its bright acidity, Chenin Blanc, a native of the Loire Valley of France, was often used in California as a blending grape in decades past to help boost the flavors of its flabby peers. Made in dry and sweet styles, both sparkling and still, versatile Chenin is also wonderfully aromatic, with notes of green apple, citrus and herbs, and its best examples possess a notable mineral note.

Although Chenin is planted in larger quantities in places like the Central Coast, where winemakers still prize it as a useful component of a blend, the best California Chenin Blancs today are produced from older vineyards in places like Clarksburg, Mendocino, Santa Ynez and Sonoma's Dry Creek Valley.

Where the Vines Are

Santa Ynez Valley boasts one of the state's oldest Chenin vineyards—at least 40 years old, perhaps older. With a name that nods to its fossil-rich soil, Jurassic Park Vineyard has won fame thanks to high-quality Chenin Blancs from producers such as Failla and Leo Steen.

Regarded by some as the progenitor of modern California Chenin, Danish-born Leo Hansen founded Leo Steen Wines in 2004. (Steen is a name for Chenin Blanc in South Africa, where it is the pre-eminent white grape.) In addition to his Jurassic Park bottling, Hansen makes Chenin from the old-vine Saini Farms vineyard in Dry Creek Valley and Peaberry vineyard in Mendocino, and a sparkling Chenin as well.

Napa Valley's Lang & Reed winery also sources Chenin from Mendocino. Co-proprietor John Skupny



and his son, winemaker Reed Skupny, went looking for old-vine Chenin vineyards in California after Reed's seminal stay in the Loire Valley almost 20 years ago—not an easy search. "With so few acres left in the North Coast, it was hard to find a source of Chenin we wanted to work with," said John Skupny. But in 2013 he pounced on a Chenin vineyard in Talmage, Mendocino, that had first been planted in 1980. That vineyard supplies grapes for one of the three Chenin Blancs produced at Lang & Reed today.

Loire Valley Chenins also inspired Michael and Anne Dashe of Dashe Cellars—perhaps not surprising, as Anne is French. They began making Chenin Blanc in 2016 when they dis-

covered the Heringer vineyards in Clarksburg. They made 320 cases that first year and hope to produce 800 cases in 2025. The grape is "the single biggest bright spot in our sales, both at our winery and throughout the country," said Michael. "We've been increasing production every year, especially the last few years, because we can't keep up with demand."

Something Unexpected

Other producers said that novelty—the fact that Chenin isn't the old, familiar Sauvignon Blanc or Chardonnay—has helped to spur sales. "Sommers are clamoring for it, and it has proven to be an easy sell once people taste it," said Mark Poremb-

ski of Zeitgeist Cellars, who, along with his wife, Jennifer Williams, has been producing Chenin Blanc from St. Helena, in Napa, since 2014.

Perhaps most important for a larger group of consumers, the first vintage of Kendall-Jackson California Chenin Blanc debuted this year. The Jackson Family also owns the Matanzas Creek Winery, and according to head winemaker Kris Kato, the idea of producing Chenin under the Kendall-Jackson label took hold after the Matanzas Creek Chenin Blanc was launched. Kendall produced some 21,000 cases of this crisp, pleasant, if rather neutral example and plans to produce more.

Though that number may be tiny

by Kendall-Jackson standards, it far outstrips the production of any of the Chenin winemakers whose bottles I bought for this column, which ranges from a few hundred to a few thousand cases. This means some of the wines recommended below may be harder to find, but each one is well worth seeking out.

Buy Them Now

The Chenin Blanc that may be the hardest to find was also the most singular wine of my tasting: the slightly sparkling, super zippy 2021 Stolpmann Vineyards So Fresh Chenin Blanc Pet'Nat (\$43), from Ballard Canyon in Santa Barbara. Made from whole, uncrushed fruit, it lived up to its name, was a delight to drink and clocked in at a mere 11.5% alcohol. Sadly, the 2023 vintage will be the last of the So Fresh Pet'Nat, noted managing partner Peter Stolpmann. The winery will focus on still Chenin wines.

The other Chenins I tasted and loved were all dry, still wines, ranging from bright and mineral to luscious and rich. The great diversity of Chenin styles contributes to the wine's appeal. On the bright, mineral, crisp side, the intensely mineral 2022 Failla Jurassic Park Vineyard Chenin Blanc (\$46) impressed, as did the 2023 Leo Steen Saini Farms Chenin Blanc (\$18) from Dry Creek Valley in Sonoma, which Hansen has been producing since 2006.

The standout richer Chenins included the lush, almost tropical 2023 Dashe Cellars Les Enfants Terribles Concrete Cuvée Clarks-

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burg Chenin Blanc (\$26), the creamy 2023 Lang & Reed Mendocino Chenin Blanc (\$35) and the 2023 Zeitgeist Cellars St. Helena Napa Valley Chenin Blanc (\$40), which brought to mind something Porembski, said: "We love how Chenin Blanc has a natural unctuousness while still having tension."

California might produce much less Chenin Blanc than Chardonnay now, and that is unlikely ever to change. But Chenin's relative scarcity is surely part of the appeal. If the wines featured here offer any indication, the value of California Chenin Blanc will only rise—though not the prices, I hope.

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ENOFILE / 5 CALIFORNIA CHENIN BLANCs TO BUY BEFORE EVERYONE ELSE CATCHES ON

2023 Zeitgeist Cellars St. Helena Napa Valley Chenin Blanc \$40 A bit of new-oak fermentation gives this lush white a crème brûlée note. It's the 10th Chenin from Zeitgeist—though there are only 18 acres bearing Chenin in Napa Valley, according to the winemaker.

2023 Lang & Reed Mendocino Chenin Blanc \$35 Lang & Reed began with one Chenin in 2013 and now makes three. Father and son winemaking team John and Reed Skupny made this lushly textured wine from Mendocino marked by notes of stone fruit and herb.

2023 Dashe Cellars Les Enfants Terribles Concrete Cuvée Clarksburg Chenin Blanc \$26 This shows a juicy, bright, tropical side of the grape. It's sourced from the cooler Sacramento River delta and fermented in an egg-shaped concrete vessel—hence the name.

2022 Failla Jurassic Park Vineyard Santa Ynez Valley Chenin Blanc \$46 Sonoma-based winemaker and Failla owner Ehren Jordan produced an impressive Chenin in 2022 from the Jurassic Park vineyard—wonderfully savory and mineral, with a persistent finish.

2023 Leo Steen Saini Farms Dry Creek Valley Chenin Blanc \$18 Leo Hansen went looking for old-vine Sonoma Chenin and found it in the Saini Farms vineyard. This bright, mineral white marked by notes of citrus and herb has been in his portfolio for nearly 20 years.

