



Diatom's Chardonnay vineyards

CALIFORNIA CHARDONNAY

FRESH CHARACTER FROM OCEAN BREEZES
PROPELS WELL-PRICED STANDOUTS
FROM THE CENTRAL COAST

BY KIM MARCUS

California's coastal counties south of San Francisco offer a fertile hunting ground for Chardonnays that compete well with their North Coast counterparts, in most cases at a fraction of the price.

The vast majority of vineyards here are spread over four counties. From north to south, these are San Benito, Monterey, San Luis Obispo and Santa Barbara. They are collectively part of what's called the Central Coast, where Chardonnay accounts for about half of vineyard plantings. The topography is defined by mountain ranges, broad valleys and rolling landscapes that funnel in cool Pacific air, which helps make quality grapegrowing possible in the hot California sun.

Indeed, many large wine companies based in the Golden State draw grapes from these areas for multi-county blends. In San Benito County, the smallest of the four counties, the best-known winery

is Calera, which uses fruit from throughout the Central Coast to make its rich and spicy Chardonnay.

Monterey County is a grapegrowing workhorse and is defined by the broad reach of the Salinas Valley, where fogs sweeping in from its northern mouth at Monterey Bay are powered by strong ocean breezes. Large, expansive vineyards are the norm in the valley's floors and benchlands, planted in alluvial deposits of gravel mixed with fertile loam.

Monterey's distinctive appellations include Chalone, Arroyo Seco and the Santa Lucia Highlands. The latter district offers the top-scoring Morgan bottling, which shows concentrated tropical fruit and spice flavors. Chalone, featuring volcanic uplands and limestone deposits, is home to the winery bearing the same name, whose

estate bottling has a rich acidity that nicely supports its fruity flavors.

In San Luis Obispo County, the leading district is Edna Valley, where the vineyards are



KIM MARCUS' SMART BUYS IN CALIFORNIA CHARDONNAY

92	\$28	Morgan Chardonnay Santa Lucia Highlands Highland 2019
91	\$22	Cambria Chardonnay Santa Maria Valley Katherine's Vineyard 2019
90	\$30	Chalone Chardonnay Chalone 2019
90	\$30	Diatom Chardonnay Santa Barbara County 2020
89	\$19	Ancient Peaks Chardonnay Santa Margarita Ranch 2020
89	\$22	Wente Chardonnay Arroyo Seco Riva Ranch Vineyard 2019
89	\$23	Mount Eden Vineyards Chardonnay Edna Valley Wolff Vineyard Old Vines 2019
89	\$25	Calera Chardonnay Central Coast 2018
89	\$25	Hahn Chardonnay Santa Lucia Highlands SLH 2018
88	\$18	Firestone Chardonnay Santa Barbara County 2018
88	\$20	La Crema Chardonnay Monterey 2019
88	\$22	Kendall-Jackson Chardonnay Santa Barbara County Grand Reserve 2019
88	\$22	Qupé Chardonnay Santa Barbara County Y Block 2019
88	\$23	Talbott Chardonnay Monterey Kali Hart 2019
88	\$25	San Simeon Chardonnay Monterey Estate Reserve 2018

planted just miles from the ocean. Its Chardonnays carry a distinctive savory cut, with one of the best examples of this style being the Mount Eden.

Santa Barbara has established itself as an epicenter of quality in recent decades, as vintners have pushed the boundaries—and quality—of grapegrowing. Santa Barbara is unique in California because many of its valleys are on east-west orientations rather than the more typical north-south topography, creating diverse *terroirs*.

Look to wines from Sta. Rita Hills and Santa Maria Valley for added dimensions of flavor and quality. The Cambria Katherine's Vineyard shows what Santa Maria can do, with its deft combination of spice and white fruit flavors richened by aging a portion of the wine in barrel. Diatom from Sta. Rita Hills is made and aged in stainless steel tanks, and its fresh fruit flavors are a vibrant expression of Chardonnay without the influence of oak.

It's a big world of Chardonnay in California with many different styles, and these Central Coast counties help power it with their wide range of smart buys.