



□ Time To Try Chenin Blanc – Again

✘ Chenin blanc is undergoing a renaissance of sorts, clawing back respectability after overcoming its reputation as one of the main ingredients in mid to late 20th century bulk white wines. Many were dirt cheap, lacking any sort of varietal character, and featured in gallon jugs with screw caps.

Widely planted in California in the last half of the 20th century, currently available acreage has decreased by 75 percent in just the last 20 years. Today, Chenin blanc doesn't make the top 10 grape varieties grown in California.

Known as a “winemaker’s grape,” growers and winemakers can influence the outcome by employing various techniques. Harvesting early or growing it in a cool climate results in a higher-acid wine. Ferment and aged in stainless steel or oak is a vintner’s choice. Leave on the vine for an extended period of time and you can make a sweet dessert wine or anything in between sweet and dry.

Aside from California, Chenin blanc is a significant white wine in the Loire Valley of France where it is prominently marketed as Vouvray. In South Africa where it is commonly called steen, it is the most planted grape and accounts for half of the world’s Chenin blanc production.

A few larger California producers make credible, varietally bottled Chenin blancs that are widely available to consumers.



*Dry Creek
Vineyards Chenin*

Dry Creek Vineyards Chenin Blanc Clarksburg 2018 (\$16) has a pleasant peach and pear notes. **Pine Ridge Vineyards also offers a 2019** (\$16) Chenin blanc blended with a bit of viognier and grown in Clarksburg as well and is a food-friendly example of Chenin blanc's potential.

Small producers are demanding attention as they attempt to set the bar with a new focus on high quality and an artisan approach to this little-noticed grape.

We spoke with Natalie Brown (full disclosure: Pat's niece), winemaker for Rococo Wines in Paso Robles, and part of the Willow Creek Wine Collective, to gain insight into this new movement and to taste her Chenin blanc. Brown confirmed the "small producers, high quality movement" is driving her and other small Chenin blanc winemaker's efforts to produce Chenin blancs that deserve to be bottled on their own.

Her efforts are focused on finding vineyard sources that are "low yielding, older vineyards" and "managing canopy growth and irrigation" to tamp down the tendency of Chenin blanc to over-crop.



Rococo Chenin Blanc 2016

Brown has produced Rococo Chenin blanc since 2016 and currently produces about 500 cases of three Chenin blancs from three different California appellations. Each bottling offers a distinctive perspective on how the vineyards and winemaking affect Chenin blanc. All are fermented and aged in stainless steel and none undergo malolactic fermentation.

Brown only uses native yeasts for her fermentations. Amazingly, two of her vineyard sources are rooted in non-grafted vines and thus far have avoided the ever-present scourge of the phylloxera root louse.

We tasted all three Rococo wines and the following are our impressions:

- **Rococo Shell Creek Chenin Blanc Paso Robles 2019** (\$24). We found this non-grafted, elegant Chenin blanc to present bright peach and pear notes, bright acidity, and a very balanced impression in the mouth. The Shell Creek Vineyard was planted in 1972.



Natalie Brown

Rococo Delta Chenin Blanc Clarksburg 2019 (\$20). From a 27-year-old vineyard near the Sacramento River. The wine expresses moderate fruit and a mineral-driven, dry version. It is the most austere of Brown's three wines. A perfect match for rich chicken or fish dishes, especially if there is a rich sauce.

- **Rococo Own Rooted Chenin Blanc Santa Barbara County 2019** (\$24). Pear notes are predominant in this own-rooted Chenin blanc. Bright acidity compliments the unctuous mouthfeel and a slight bit of residual sugar. Our favorite! From a vineyard planted in 1974 and decades ago supplied fruit for the famous Carlo Rossi Chablis which wasn't Chablis and didn't contain any chardonnay.

Rococo's wines only have limited retail distribution. However, they can be ordered from www.willowcreekcollective.com and shipped to most states.

Wine picks



Imagery Cabernet Sauvignon
2018

Imagery Cabernet Sauvignon 2018 (\$20). This reasonably priced cabernet sauvignon from Sonoma Valley delivers reasonable quality with dark fruit notes, moderate tannin, and medium body.

- **Ladera Pillow Road Vineyard Chardonnay 2017** (\$50). Ladera, known more for its mountain-grown cabernet sauvignon, acquired this 9-acre property in the Sebastopol Hills region of the Russian River Valley in 2006. Today, the chardonnay and pinot that come from the vineyard are outstanding. Ladera holds the wine in bottle for a year so the consumer gets the benefit of a year of additional age. Aged sur lies in 60 percent new French oak for 15 months, it has a creamy texture and just the right amount of oak flavors. Tropical fruit aromas, apple flavors with a hint of coconut.
- **MacRostie Thale's Vineyard Pinot Noir 2017** (\$58). Delicious blueberry aromas highlight this Russian River Valley pinot noir. Soft mouthfeel and fresh blackberry flavors with hints of vanilla and oak.



Argyle Brut Rose
2015

Foppiano Vineyards Lot 96 California Red Blend 2017 (\$13). We loved the eclectic combination of petite sirah, barbera, zinfandel and mourvedre from this historic producer long known for its petite sirah. Jammy in character, it has wild raspberry notes with a hint of cinnamon. Great value.

- **Argyle Brut Rose 2015** (\$50). Using pinot noir, pinot meunier and chardonnay grapes, Argyle has created a dynamic sparkling wine with cherry, grapefruit and spice flavors.
- **Two Hands Angel's Share Shiraz 2018** (\$33). If you're looking for wine with big fruit character, Australian shiraz is ideal. From the McLaren Vale, this wine exudes blueberry and plum flavors with hints of licorice and spice.

Tom Marquardt and Patrick Darr, [MoreAboutWine](#), posted on [SouthFloridaReporter.com](#), July 20, 2020

Tom Marquardt and Patrick Darr have been writing a weekly wine column for more than 30 years. Additional Wine reviews on [MoreAboutWine](#)

All photos are randomly selected and do not indicate any preferred wine. Listed prices are subject to change

You can send questions to Tom Marquardt <mailto:marq1948@gmail.com>