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The Shape of Chardonnays to Come

Justin Willett, Gavin
Chanin and Sashi
Moorman on the
Santa Barbara Coast




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SANTA BARBARA STRUCTURALISTS

THE SHAPE OF
CHARDONNAYS
TO COME

by **Luke Sykora**
photos by Andrew Schoneberger

from left: Gavin Chanin, Justin
Willett and Sashi Moorman

A photograph of two men standing in a rustic wooden doorway. The man on the left is wearing glasses, a denim shirt, and dark pants. The man on the right is wearing a light purple shirt and khaki pants. They are both smiling and looking towards the camera. The background shows a vast landscape with a vineyard in the foreground, rolling hills, and a valley in the distance under a bright sky. The doorway they are standing in is made of dark, weathered wood.

“Form alone, even though totally abstract and geometrical, has a power of inner suggestion.”
— Wassily Kandinsky

Richard Sanford returned from Vietnam a dedicated pacifist. Thanks to a shipmate who turned him onto a beautiful Volnay, he began to think about working with wine as a way to ground himself in his return to civilian life. A UC-Berkeley geography major, he compared hundreds of years of climate data from the United States and Burgundy to find an appropriate site.

He found what he was looking for along California’s Central Coast, where east-west valleys channel cool coastal air well inland, moderating the climate. To narrow down his options, he drove up and down the valleys with a thermometer. He isolated a band between two and four miles wide stretching from Edna Valley through Santa Maria, Los Alamos and into the Santa Ynez Valley—basically mapping what are now the major cool-climate growing regions in the Central Coast.

Finally, he found his spot: a gentle, bowl-shaped slope near the Santa Ynez River, the result of a prehistoric landslide. “I thought this was the perfect place to plant this vineyard,” Sanford remembers. “It was a healing experience after the war. At first there was no electricity. I lived there for six years, driving around on the tractor. Getting the vineyard established was an almost spiritual experience.”



Gavin Chanin (left) and Trey Fletcher, general manager of Bien Nacido Vineyards, with chardonnay vines in W Block.

Instead of using a phylloxera-resistant rootstock, he planted the vines on their own roots. It was an economic decision: Growing his own cuttings into rootings, he turned something that cost 10 cents into something that was worth 90 cents.

Forty years later, those vines, along with a similarly old planting at Bien Nacido in the Santa Maria Valley, are producing some of the most sought-after chardonnay in Santa Barbara County, particularly for a set of winemakers pursuing a style that aims for lively acidity, lower alcohol, transparency and restraint. The focus on these two plantings isn't accidental: this set of winemakers is finding that old vines are an important tool in their quest for chardonnays that have depth and, hopefully, longevity.

DEEP ROOTS

In Burgundy, it's a common understanding that the concentration and depth that promote ageworthiness are a function not just of site, but also of vine age—of the vines digging in and accommodating themselves to the site's soil and microclimate. But Santa Barbara, and California in general, present a challenge: If you aren't making zin, there aren't a whole lot of old vines to go around.

Gavin Chanin of Chanin Wine Company makes wine from one of Bien Nacido Vineyard's oldest chardonnay blocks in the nearby Santa Maria Valley, and will also

soon be working with the old Sanford & Benedict planting under his Price Chanin label, which he recently launched with investor Bill Price.

Chanin was particularly clued in to the role of vine age after tasting at Domaine de L'Arlot in 2007. There, he tasted seven different lots of pinot noir from Clos des Fôrets, all with different vine ages. "It was amazing how different the wines were," he recalls. "As the vines got older, the wines got more minerality and depth to them, more spice, less fruit flavors. That was something I really took home with me.

"I think vine age is important for getting ripe fruit at low alcohol," Chanin says. "So when I started my company, that's what I went after."

Chanin finds that the old vines naturally moderate yield and vigor. As a result, they don't need to be manipulated as much. At Bien Nacido's W Block, where he gets the chardonnay for his Bien Nacido bottling, there's usually no need to top the vines during the growing season to get rid of excess vegetation, and no need to drop fruit to concentrate the flavors and speed the ripening process.

Chanin came to Bien Nacido in 2004, spending the summer between high school and college working with Jim Clendenen at Au Bon Climat, which is located on the property. Later, while pursuing his BA in art at UCLA, he continued to work harvests at Au

Bon Climat and Qupé—which share a wine-making facility—eventually working his way up to assistant winemaker for the two wineries. He launched his own label in 2007.

One of his jobs was grape sampling the X Block syrah for Qupé winemaker Bob Lindquist. That's when Chanin first saw the old chardonnay vines in the neighboring W Block. "That syrah was always killer, so I kept that in the back of my mind," he says.

His 2009 Bien Nacido Chardonnay from W Block is a pure, crystalline wine, the flavors intense but almost weightless. The vineyard, on the other hand, doesn't look terribly impressive: trellised, thick-trunked, healthy chardonnay vines on a slight incline. W Block was part of the Miller family's original 1973 Bien Nacido planting. At first, it was planted to riesling on its own roots. Then, in 1990, they grafted it over to chardonnay. Even though the grafts themselves aren't ancient, it's *vinifera* on *vinifera*, not mediated by rootstock, and the roots systems at this point are fully mature. Chanin has found that the old W Block vines tend to produce a very mineral, racy chardonnay with great length.

If part of the inherent character of W Block is related to vine age, the soil and clone also play a part. Elevated above the valley floor on a raised bench, the soil is rocky and well drained, intermixed with broken fragments of lime and slate. That's important, because W Block is planted to



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Justin Willett of Tyler Winery

“Working with the old vines, both at Sanford & Benedict and Bien Nacido, they’re own-rooted. There’s a density to the flavor profile. And there’s the way they tend to handle heat, which can be attributed to this root structure that’s much deeper.” —Justin Willett

Clone 4, which was originally sourced from the Martini Vineyard in Carneros, heat-treaded at UC-Davis and widely planted in the 1970s. In a nutrient-rich situation, Clone 4 can throw a large crop of innocuous fruit. In relatively infertile soil, though, and especially with some vine age, Chanin finds that its neutrality makes Clone 4 a great reflector of terroir.

In the winery, Chanin follows a path of minimal intervention. “I like making chardonnay more than pinot noir. It’s known, for good reason, as being a grape winemakers put their print on. But if you want to, you don’t need to do much of anything,” Chanin says. He presses the chardonnay, settles it, barrel ferments it with ambient yeast and leaves it on its lees for a year or so, then sulfurs and bottles it. He thinks that extended lees contact—without stirring—is important to his style of chardonnay. “Lees contact has been in Burgundy for 100 years

as a way to loosen up really tight wines,” Chanin points out.

His ultimate goal? “A wine doesn’t have to have any fruit to be delicious,” he proposes. The things he values in great chardonnay don’t translate into the typical 21st-century tasting note, that curious mélange of individual fruit flavors. “The characteristics I like in chardonnay are refreshing acidity, spice, savory elements, minerality. Those are the things that I want, but those are the things that people are talking about as secondary—the end of the tasting note,” he says.

Without fruit, you’re left with structure and texture, which can certainly be harder to describe and grasp. Perhaps it’s no coincidence that Chanin’s comfortable in this territory, since he’s also an abstract painter. (Reproductions of his bright, bold canvases grace his Chanin Wine Co. labels.) Thinking of his 2009 Bien Nacido Chardonnay, it



makes perfect sense: that sense of crystalline purity isn’t about easily recognizable fruit tones, so much as the formal essence of chardonnay.

CALIBRATING YOURSELF

Justin Willett, who operates Tyler Winery in one of the warehouses in Lompoc’s “wine ghetto,” is another believer in older vines and their ability to produce powerful yet restrained chardonnay. He works with the original Sanford & Benedict planting, as well as Bien Nacido’s W Block.

Lately, he’s been separately vinifying different clonal and block selections to see how vine age and clonal differences translate into a finished wine. Willett shows me several different lots from Bien Nacido, all from the 2011 vintage. A sample of Clone 95 from younger vines is pleasantly juicy. The Robert Young Clone sample is less fruit-driven—a



Old-vine chardonnay at Sanford & Benedict Vine

soft, savory wine. Then he brings out W Block. It tends toward savory flavors too, but the textural upgrade is pronounced: it fills the mouth, while also showing a great deal more verve and length than the other two wines.

“Working with the old vines, both at Sanford & Benedict and Bien Nacido, they’re own-rooted. There’s a density to the flavor profile. And there’s the way they tend to handle heat, which can be attributed to this root structure that’s much deeper,” Willett comments.

Unfortunately for those interested in working with old vines, quite a few of the original Santa Barbara County plantings from the 1970s have already been ripped out, even at vineyards like Bien Nacido, as yields drop and the vines become less and less financially viable. There’s a lot of competition for the remaining old-vine fruit: As in some of Burgundy’s Grand Crus, winemakers count their allocations in rows, rather than acres.

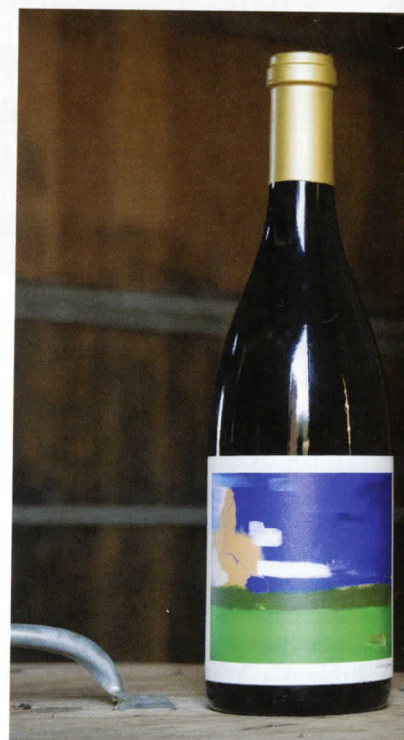
So Willett also works with younger vineyards. There’s Zotovitch, a late 1990s planting on extremely sandy soil near the Santa Ynez River, and Santa Maria’s Dierberg Vineyard, which is also sandy and has similar vine age. Lately he’s picked up fruit from Wenzlau Vineyard, a geologically varied hillside site in the Santa Rita Hills.

To aim for wines with length and staying power using these younger vineyards, he’s picking everything earlier than he did in the past. While he used to work with chardonnay coming in at 24° or even 25° Brix, he now picks under 23°, and often under 22°. “At these lower levels, you don’t get the stone fruit and tropical flavors,” Willett says. “It’s much more these odd aromatics you wouldn’t expect. More savory, more green.

“It’s something I’m still getting my head around,” he admits, “calibrating yourself to taste what these flavors are.” For Willett, it’s about trusting what’s underneath. “It’s so lean and tart, but I know there’s so much power and underlying richness that’s going to be there in the end,” he says.

Willett is curious to find out how long wines from these vineyards can actually age and develop. For him, without that long-term drama, what’s the point of making a single-vineyard chardonnay? To that end, he’s less concerned with how the wines taste on release.

“When you open young Burgundies, they don’t taste like a lot—they’re all wound up with acidity and sulfur,” he says. So recently he’s been upping his sulfur additions prior to bottling. He’s willing to trade early fruit expression for some reductive character if it adds to the wine’s potential longevity.



Given that Willett studied architecture at UC-Santa Barbara, that attention to a wine’s structural integrity makes a great deal of sense. So it was in some ways the ultimate compliment when, after tasting Willett’s 2010 Dierberg Vineyard Chardonnay a



portfolio tasting in New York, Meursault vigneron Jean-Marc Roulot asked Willett about how he's sulfuring.

A PURE SIGNAL

Sashi Moorman works out of another Lompoc warehouse, just around the corner from Willett's winery. Lompoc is a flat, gloomy, windswept town close enough to the ocean to be ravaged by coastal fog all summer long, but not close enough to have any actual beachfront property. Still, Moorman's made it his home—he's one of perhaps three winemakers who actually live in Lompoc, the only real town abutting the Santa Rita Hills. When he's not busy at Evening Land or his several other projects, he makes wine for Sandhi, a label he runs with sommelier Rajat Parr of the Michael Mina Group.

With his thick shock of slightly graying hair and penchant for sonic metaphors, Moorman speaks about chardonnay like a hipster audiophile talking about his stereo system. "You want to eliminate the static," he tells me. "You want the cleanest, purest signal." He thinks that the Santa Rita Hills—the growing region that Richard Sanford first developed in the 1970s—can transmit a particularly lively signal through chardonnay.

The Santa Rita Hills isn't necessarily an easy appellation to love. The landscape looks like somewhere half way between the Sonoma Coast and Mars. Prickly chaparral spreads out along the Santa Ynez River valley, then ascends the weathered slopes. In places, the hardscrabble scrub gives itself over to brilliant white lacunae. That's pure diatomaceous earth, formed from the accumulated skeletons of prehistoric marine

algae—so lean on nutrients that, where it's highly concentrated, nothing can grow.

The growing season here is long but cool, which means slow, even ripening. Pinot noir, though, which was instrumental in building the appellation's reputation, can have set issues due to the cool early-season weather. So Moorman believes that the Santa Rita Hills is more suited to chardonnay—as long as it's picked at the right time. In a cool year like 2011, for those who picked early, the region delivered whites with 3.0 to 3.1 pHs, and 10 or 11 grams per liter of acid. That's a lot of natural acidity, and as Parr and Moorman have started to trade numbers with winemakers in Burgundy, they find that the raw numbers, at least, are actually quite similar.

Within the larger Santa Rita Hills appellation, Moorman is zeroing in on a particu-



“You want to eliminate the static.
You want the cleanest,
purest signal.”
—Sashi Moorman

lar formation that he thinks is the region’s sweet spot. It’s a band of decomposed Monterey shale and lime to the south, along Santa Rosa Road, sandwiched between the alluvial soils of the river valley and the diatomaceous earth higher up on the hills. This happens to be where Richard Sanford planted his pioneering vineyard.

While Moorman reveres the old vines at Sanford & Benedict, he’s also working with some brand-new vineyards in more exposed areas, in hopes of finding another way to get chardonnay with both raciness and concentration. One of those vineyards is Bent Rock, a north-facing 2007 planting a few hundred feet above the Santa Ynez River. As he shows me around the vineyard, Moorman picks up a glassy, banded shard of shale and hands it to me. It’s still warm despite the overcast sky—the hillside is radiating heat from the mid-day sun. That’s important, because with its northern exposure and coastal proximity, Bent Rock needs all the warmth it can get.

Moorman points out the Rita’s Crown Vineyard across the valley. It’s another 2007 planting Parr and Moorman work with. It’s south-facing and higher in elevation, with thin soils and a lot of diatomaceous earth, especially toward the top of the vineyard.

Sandhi’s 2010 chardonnays from Bent Rock and Rita’s Crown do belie the idea that you necessarily need old or even fully mature vines to get chardonnay with both richness and electricity. At this point, they’re much more open and easy to read than Sandhi’s wound-up old-vine Sanford & Benedict, the Bent Rock salty and succulent, the Rita’s Crown beautifully rich but still firmly acid-driven.

For Moorman, the vineyards are already starting to develop personalities. “I love the oceanic flavors in this wine—the saline, almost organic flavors,” he says of Bent Rock. “Rita’s Crown is more inorganic to me.”

But despite the extreme exposures of the newer sites, he still considers Sanford & Benedict his Grand Cru. “I think most of us who are concerned about wine quality are coming around to the idea that Sanford & Benedict is the jewel of the crown—it’s an ideal place to grow pinot noir and chardonnay,” he says.

One factor, certainly, is the practical benefits of having old vines: the sugar accumulation is slower and so the picking window is wider. With younger finds, he finds that he needs to be much more vigilant.

It doesn’t hurt that Sanford & Benedict still bears numerous signatures of its past. The plants are still dry-farmed, and they’re trained on an outdated 1970s hanging wire trellis. The old barn where Richard Sanford made the first Santa Rita Hills wines hasn’t gone anywhere.

But the ultimate asset is that the vines are both old and planted in the right place. “It’s unusual in California that one of the oldest vineyards is also one of the best,” Moorman says. By best, he means well situated: the site’s north-facing exposure mitigates solar radiation, keeping it cool. The soil, a mix of clay and Monterey shale, is very similar to what he finds at the more exposed Bent Rock.

Here, though, the region’s incessant winds are blocked by a rock outcropping to the west. The atmosphere is peaceful in a very literal sense: a pocket of stillness. Except for the occasional distant car coming down Santa Rosa Road, the only sound is the hushed rattle of grape leaves rippling in the breeze.

Like Sanford, Moorman speaks about the vineyard as a quasi-spiritual place, and finds that, each year, these old vines seem to naturally set and ripen a moderate crop of supremely balanced fruit, as if by now they’ve learned exactly what this place is for, and what they’re supposed to do. ■

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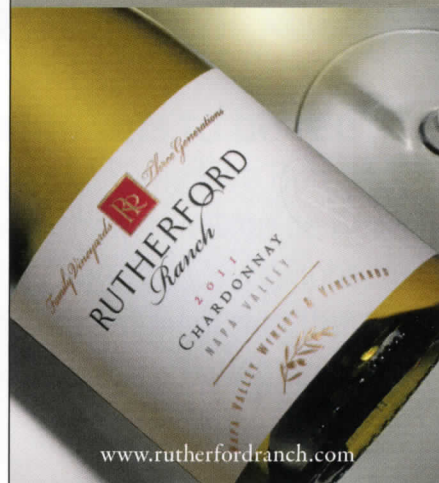


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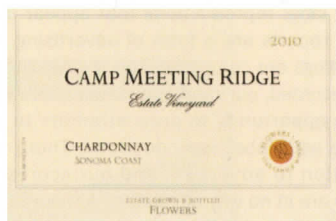
YEAR'S BEST CHARDONNAY

Our blind panels tasted **661** new-release American chardonnays for this issue. Our critics rated **55** as exceptional (90+) and **28** as Best Buys. **Joshua Greene** reviews wines from California; **Patrick J. Comiskey** reviews wines from New York, Oregon and Washington. Find a complete list of wines tasted and all reviews at wineandspiritsmagazine.com.

CALIFORNIA



95 | Chanin \$35
2009 Santa Maria Valley Bien Nacido Vineyard Chardonnay Gavin Chanin had worked three harvests with Au Bon Climat's Jim Clendenen before he turned 21, when he started making his own wines. He brings a fresh perspective to this Bien Nacido fruit, selecting a block of some of the oldest vines on the property, originally planted to own-rooted riesling in 1973, grafted to chardonnay in 1990. He harvests at the moment the grapes reach ripeness, pressing the cool grapes directly into tank and then transferring the juice with all its solids into barrel to ferment and age. His picking decisions and minimal handling result in a wine with maximum expression: This tastes like drinking fossils, the lees transformed to scents of seashells and chamomile flowers. The structure of the wine is vertical rather than broad and horizontal, the texture seamless—creamy, lemon zesty and delicious. *Chanin Wine Co. Santa Maria, CA*



95 | Flowers \$65
2010 Sonoma Coast Camp Meeting Ridge Chardonnay The transparency of this wine gives it a slight edge over Flowers's Moon Select for the moment. It's a long, arching

arrow of lemon and orange citrus flavors, a grand wine buoyed by oceanic leasiness that brings oyster shells and kelp to mind. Grown predominantly with a selection of old Wente material from the Hyde Vineyard in Carneros, this has the intensity of a red wine, the supple refinement and welcoming grace of a fine chardonnay. *Flowers Vineyard & Winery, Cazadero, CA*

94 | Flowers \$70
2010 Sonoma Coast Moon Select Chardonnay This wine's mouthwatering fruit flavors layer yellow citrus with a cool red berry note, showing the concentration of the vintage on the far coast. It's saturated with flavor, but the finish remains focused, clean, gently persistent with spice and a sandstone rasp. The Flowers team considers Moon Select their best expression of the Camp Meeting Ridge Vineyard, in this vintage, a selection based on Block 3, with the oldest vines on the estate. Jason Jardine describes the block's iron-rich soils as having high concentrations of schist and sandstones. The wine is built for the cellar. *Flowers Vineyard & Winery, Cazadero, CA*

93 | Au Bon Climat \$40
2010 Santa Maria Valley Nuits-Blanches au Bouge Chardonnay This is Jim Clendenen's 30th Anniversary bottling, 44 percent from Le Bon Climat, the balance from Bien Nacido K Block, one of the original blocks planted in the early 1970s. It's focused on fresh nectarine-like fruit flavor, following a narrow structure straight through from the aroma into the lasting finish. The fruit is firm and juicy, substantial enough to stand up to the almond and walnut contributions of the oak. Built to cellar, this should evolve well in bottle over the next several years. *Jim Clendenen, Mind Behind, Santa Maria, CA*

93 | Ceritas \$52
2010 Sonoma Coast Porter-Bass Vineyard Chardonnay Surrounded by a coastal forest of redwoods and firs, the Porter-Bass Vineyard was originally planted in the late

19th century on a saddle between ridges, nine miles from the Pacific. You sense the coastal cool in this wine's subtlety in the flavors of chamomile and pear, acidity integrated into a lemon curd delectability of fruit and lees. Pour it with Dungeness crab. (275 cases) *Ceritas, Santa Rosa, CA*



93 | Failla
2010 Russian River Valley Kiefer Ranch Chardonnay From a vineyard in Geyserville, this is made by Ehren Jordan, who focuses his attention on Sonoma's far coast. It captures the coast in open, airy refreshment—a gentle rain of citrus fruit and floral notes of jasmine. This is buxom in the middle, zesty in the end, with a bright glint of acidity that sets it up for the raw bar. (550 cases) *Ehren Jordan Wine Cellars, St. Helena, CA*

93 | Hirsch
2010 Sonoma Coast Chardonnay Bright notes of lemon curd open onto a creamy, quiet and gentle white. It hints at the tonality of lees with spice that lasts, the concentration of the wine showing in the length of the flavor. From a short crop and a cool, relatively wet year on the far coast, this will benefit from several years of bottle age. (1,000 cases) *Hirsch Winery, Cazadero, CA*

93 | Ridge
2008 Santa Cruz Mountains Monte Bello Estate Vyd. Chardonnay Ridge grows compelling chardonnay on their limestone-mountaintop above the Pacific. In this vintage, the texture is as smooth as river pebbles, the wine rolling from potent almond to velvety, fleshed apple flavors. It balances fresh buttery richness and ripe sweetness in a