

## Wine Press - California's Chateau Montelena Continues To Make Classic Wines



The 2018 Chateau Montelena Napa Valley Chardonnay. (Photo by Ken Ross)

California's Chateau Montelena could easily cash in year after year on its legendary "Judgment of Paris" victory in 1976.

At that infamous wine tasting in Paris, the winery's 1973 Chardonnay beat out some of the best Chardonnays from France's famous Burgundy region in a blind tasting.

The result made international news and unleashed a flood of interest in wines from California's Napa Valley.

A movie ("Bottle Shock") was even made about the tasting, focusing mostly on Chateau Montelena.

Actor Bill Pullman played Jim Barrett, the owner of the winery, in the 2008 film.

Chris Pine played Barrett's son, Bo, who also worked at the winery.

In real life, Bo became the head winemaker in 1982.

The Barrett family still owns and operates Chateau Montelena.

Then in 2014, Matt Crafton was promoted to the position of head winemaker.

Since then, Crafton has been creating classic wines that honor Chateau Montelena's history while also helping to bring the winery into the 21st century.

"It's really fun being part of Montelena where I think a lot of people assume we do have a very specific style," Crafton said during a recent phone interview. "They assume it's cut into this very specific box. It's really kind of a philosophical or cultural style if anything else. There's no magic recipe. There's no thou shalt not make a wine under 14 percent or over 14 percent. That's kind of what makes Montelena special and what's helped us stay at the forefront."

"Again, it's the philosophical, cultural belief that Jim started when he founded the winery and that Bo has continued," Crafton said. "He really allows us to explore. There's this incredible amount of freedom that we have and the goal is literally to be as expressive as possible."

In an effort to stay at the forefront, Crafton will oversee one of the largest vineyard replants and redesigns in the winery's history next year.

He leads Chateau Montelena's sustainability program and was instrumental in helping the winery become certified as a Bay Area Green Business and Napa Green Winery.

But perhaps most important, Crafton has not lost sight of what matters most – making great wines.

"We look to make wines on a very simple level that are delicious – they have to taste good – and they also have to age," Crafton said. "Everything kind of in between those two is up to us. So if you look at the wines that have been made over years, you'll see that the wines change."

The **2018 Chateau Montelena Napa Valley Chardonnay (\$60 Suggested Retail Price)** is a great example.

Many California Chardonnays hit all the wrong notes – too much oak, too much butter, too over the top.

Chateau Montelena's 2018 Chardonnay takes a complete different approach. Its flavors are soft and subtle. Its aroma is flinty yet floral. There are slight tropical notes, a hint of almonds. And yes, there's a dash of butter flavors but nothing overwhelming. Everything's well balanced and in harmony with each other. Everything tastes just right.

"The 2018 Chardonnay was definitely more of a classic California ripe year and that's in stark contrast to some of the cooler years," Crafton said. "There's still that Montelena character that weaves through it, which is a function of the growing site."

But just because it was a great year in the fields doesn't mean the wines just make themselves in the cellar, Crafton explained.

"It's a challenge every year (at Chateau Montelena) because there isn't much to hide behind," Crafton said. "It's not an oak driven wine. There isn't a ton of alcohol. So if you aren't able as a winemaker and a grape grower to tease out the nuances of the vineyard and the vintage – which is more difficult that it sounds like – you end up with a pretty monotonous, boring wine."

As a result, Crafton explained that he doesn't have a specific style he's going for every single year.

"I think it's easy to try to fit yourself into a box," Crafton said. "I've made all different sorts of wines – very modern wines, very classic wines and everywhere in between. I think what I try to go for is originality and honesty in what we're creating."

"Why I love my job is these wines aren't stamped out of the same mold each year," Crafton said. "So based on what we're tasting and the vineyard, you start to piece together this picture. The analogy I like to use is the grape has this DNA in it so it's kind of my job to decode it based on the growing season. So we'll vary almost everything we do. We'll vary how we process – whole cluster, destemmed or crushed. We'll pick at different times based on flavor profiles – acid and those things. Things get reinvented every year. Experience helps you a little bit, with being able to understand the long-term trajectory and the potential of some of the decisions you make. But if I had to make the same wine every year, I think I'd go crazy."

The 2020 vintage will be much smaller than other years. That's because some of the grapes were damaged by smoke from this past summer's forest fires in California.

"We lost all of our red grapes this year" due to smoke damage caused by this year's wildfires, Crafton said. "So no Cabernet, no Zinfandel." Smoke and fire also destroyed this year's Riesling crop, Crafton said.

Fortunately, the winery was able to pick all its Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc grapes before this past summer's wildfires in Napa Valley.

"I've reflected on it a fair amount and it's just one of those things," Crafton said. "Thankfully, we didn't lose our vines. It was more of a function of the smoke (damage). I think we made the right decision under the circumstances to not go ahead and not go forward with anything. All you can do is make good decisions with the cards you draw."

Crafton added he continues to learn more about winemaking with each vintage.

"It's constantly evolving," Crafton said. "I learn something new every year. I think our tastes change too as we get older. You have to have what I call intellectual honesty. You have to look very carefully at the decisions you make every year and the results of that. That's something I've really worked on."

He added that's also true with the rest of the winemaking team at Chateau Montelena. "We're very honest in our feedback, what we did well and what we didn't" Crafton said. "So for me, it's easy when you're young and you think more of everything – more ripeness, more extract, more tannins, more wood. And I think there are still a lot of people who still think that way. But what you miss out on is just that really kind of dynamic cohesion."

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"It's the difference between a still life and an impressionist painting," Crafton added. "They're both beautiful but you look at a great master who can paint a still life, something so simple. Simplicity in a way is incredibly beautiful."

Crafton added, "If we do our best to make a really beautiful wine, it's going to taste beautifully also."

Cheers!