

the drunken cyclist



I have three passions: wine, cycling, travel, family, and math.



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Tasting Chardonnay with the First Family

A few months ago, I was out in Napa for a conference and I decided to add on another day to (finally) visit the fine people at Wente Vineyards in the Livermore Valley, considered “America’s First Family of Chardonnay.” Even though I had lived in the Bay Area for years, and have visited several times since, I had never visited the Livermore AVA.

2017 Wente Eric’s Small Lot Chardonnay Livermore Valley, CA: Retail \$30. 80% of the Chardonnay planted in the United States today can trace its origins back to Ernest Wente’s (2nd generation) 1912 planting of Chardonnay that he had brought to California from a nursery in France (hence the “First Family” moniker). Decided brilliant yellow, but short of golden in the glass, with lemon rind, minerality, and a bit of white pepper. On the palate, this is simply fantastic: fruit, weight, tartness, intrigue. It really has it all, including a rather lengthy finish.
Bravo. Outstanding. 90-92 Points.



2016 Wente Vineyards Morning Fog Chardonnay Estate, Livermore Valley, CA: Retail \$18. Wente has been making a varietally labeled Chardonnay since 1936, the first to do so in this country. This is Wente’s largest production Chardonnay, using fruit from across the Livermore Valley which is coated with a morning coastal fog, easily lured into the East-West oriented valley. Brilliant yellow in the glass with plenty of lemon curd, a touch of lime, and a healthy-sized vanilla bean. A bit of weight on the palate, with that lemon curd (or is it more of a lemon bar?) up front and through the midpalate. It finishes with pure lemon rind oil and a bit of delicate spice. Solid. **Very Good. 87-89 Points.**



2016 Wente Vineyards Riva Ranch Chardonnay, Arroyo Seco,

Monterey: Retail \$22. Fairly golden in the glass with a chalky minerality, butter, lemon, and touches of oak. On the palate, this is certainly falls into the “traditional” style of California Chardonnay: big, juicy, buttery. But it stops well short of being bombastic or over the top. Still, this is likely not the wine to serve your neighbor who swore off the big Chards of a decade or so ago. But to paraphrase my grandmother: “big Chards need loving, too” and there is a lot to love here. Great acidity and tropical flavors, this is not a one note wine. Chicken with a creamy mushroom sauce? Whoa potential on that pairing. **Very Good to Outstanding. 88-90 Points.**

2016 Wente Chardonnay nth Degree, Livermore Valley, California: Retail \$70. The nth Degree wines are all small production, small lot, and receive special attention from winemaker Karl D. Wente. Deep golden color with lemon meringue pie and healthy oak on the nose, with rich, even decadent flavors on the palate. This an extremely well-made “California Chardonnay” in the traditional sense, with plenty to like, even love in this wine (as stated above, big California Chardonnays need love too). The big, heavy bottle is not one of them: this is an outstanding, even “great” wine, but there is no reason to put it inside a heavy bottle. If wineries are serious about their carbon footprint, the use of heavy glass (it must be twice or more the weight of a “normal” bottle) needs to stop as it serves absolutely no purpose. Enough soapbox.

Bottle notwithstanding, the wine is truly Outstanding. 91-93 Points.

2016 Wente 135th Anniversary Limited Release Chardonnay, Central Coast: Retail \$40. Just looking at the bottle, it is hard not to get goose bumps: 135th Anniversary? I can barely count that high. Clearly, Wente has been doing plenty right to be around for that long, and this is evidence to that end. A bit of golden color, and a hint of oak, with wave after wave of tropical fruit. While 100% of this wine went through malolactic fermentation, and 80% was aged for 16 months in a combination of oak (old/new, French/American), it does not come off as heavy or over-done. Not at all. In fact, I could drink a ton of this Chard—great fruit on the palate (yellow apple, mango, and some citrus), balanced acidity, and a smidge of vanilla on the lengthy finish. Yum.

Very Good to Outstanding. 89-91 Points.



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