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10 Luscious California Chardonnays

New reviews of outstanding bottlings from the 2011, 2010 and 2009 vintages

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Tasting Highlights bring the best wines from our editors' most recent tastings to WineSpectator.com members.

Hanzell Vineyards is one of California's most storied estates. Both its Chardonnay and Pinot Noir are legendary for their distinctiveness and longevity. The 2010 Hanzell Chardonnay displays the estate's typical tightness and flintiness, forgoing full malolactic fermentation in order to keep the acidity fresh and vibrant. It's also lightly oaked, allowing the wine to focus on the vineyard and its fruit. Also of note is that Hanzell's style has gone largely unchanged over the decades: What you taste in a young Hanzell is remarkably similar to a young Hanzell from the 1960s. Properly cellared, these bottlings will age for a decade or more with ease.

Below you'll also find a mix of 2009 to 2011 Chardonnays, some from newer producers (Knights Bridge, Kesner and Semper), and others from veterans such as Paul Hobbs, Three Sticks, Hartford Court, Kosta Browne, Pierson Meyer and Pride.

HANZELL Chardonnay Sonoma Valley 2010 Score: 92 | \$75

Exhibits a fresh, snappy, vibrant mix of white peach, nectarine, chalky soil and pithy citrus peel notes. Full and persistent, this is tempting now, with a lively and engaging finish that promises to gain with time. Drink now through 2022. 2,329 cases made. —J.L.

KNIGHTS BRIDGE Chardonnay Knights Valley West Block 2009 Score: 92 | \$65

Ultrarich and creamy, exhibiting tiers of ripe pear, fig, honeydew melon, baking spice and anise. This is elegant and graceful, ending with a delicate finish. Drink now through 2018. 300 cases made. —J.L.

THREE STICKS Chardonnay Sonoma Valley Durell Vineyard 2010

Score: 92 | \$50

Tight and slow to unfold, this reveals a mix of ripe pear, green apple and citrus, overlaid with notes of toasty, smoky oak that linger on the finish. Drink now through 2019. 493 cases made. —J.L.

HARTFORD COURT Chardonnay Green Valley of Russian River Valley Fog Dance Vineyard 2010 Score: 90 | \$65

Expressive, with layers of apple, pear, fig and spice, ending with a touch of cedar and ginger. The aftertaste lingers. Drink now through 2018. 295 cases made. —J.L.

PAUL HOBBS Chardonnay Russian River Valley Ritchie Vineyard 2011

Score: 90 | \$70

Rich and full-bodied for an '11, boasting a complex mix of pear, fig, honeysuckle, vanilla and smoke. Deep and pure on the persistent finish. Drink now through 2018. 212 cases made. —J.L.

KESNER Chardonnay Sonoma Coast Rockbreak 2010 Score: 90 | \$55

Marked by rich, honeyed flavors, this offers honeysuckle, fig, pineapple and apricot



Debra Peterson

Chardonnay grapes on the vine in Hanzell's Sonoma vineyards.

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notes, turning spicy and oaky on the finish. Drink now through 2018. 186 cases made. —*J.L.*

KOSTA BROWNE Chardonnay Russian River Valley One Sixteen 2011

Score: 90 | \$58

Sleek and perfumed, with pretty floral scents wrapped around lively and refreshing flavors of subtle tangerine and nectarine. Drink now through 2016. 2,191 cases made. —*J.L.*

PEIRSON MEYER Chardonnay Sonoma Coast Charles Heintz Vineyard 2011

Score: 90 | \$55

Graceful, elegant and understated from the start, this builds depth and dimension, showing tiers of ripe pear, citrus, honeydew melon and light oak shadings. Drink now through 2017. 300 cases made. —*J.L.*

PRIDE Chardonnay Sonoma County Vintner Select Cuvée 2011 Score: 90 | \$48

Intense, displaying a racy edge to the pure and persistent flavors of citrus, nectarine and ripe pear. Long and cleansing on the finish. Drink now through 2018. 331 cases made. —*J.L.*

SEMPER Chardonnay Sonoma Coast Ulises 2010 Score: 90 | \$65

Rich without being weighty, this offers a mix of tropical fruit, butterscotch, fig, nectarine and creamy oak flavors that turn smoky on the finish, ending long and persistent. Drink now through 2017. 150 cases made. —*J.L.*

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