

## Why Napa Valley Is for White-Wine Lovers, Too

And we're not just talking buttery Chardonnay.

By MIKE DESIMONE AND JEFF JENSSEN



Carolyn Ann Ryan / Getty Images

If we were to play game of word association and we called out “Napa” we’re willing to bet that the majority of respondents, without hesitation, would reply “Cabernet Sauvignon.” If there were a chef or two in the mix, we might hear “cabbage” as well, but knowing our readers we’re aware that Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon remains top of mind. Exploring a little further, we’re sure that we could elicit at least a small amount of acknowledgment that the United States’ most famous wine region also produces Chardonnay. However, beyond that we think we would be hard pressed to find a large cohort of wine drinkers who are aware that Napa Valley’s grows and produces a wide range of white wine.

According to the California Department of Food and Agriculture’s California Grape Crush Report from March 2023, the 2022 grape harvest in Napa Valley brought in 26 different white grapes, including those you may expect such as Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, and Riesling (which the state classifies as White Riesling) as well as more surprising varieties such as Verdejo, Arneis, and Fiano. There is a separate category labeled “other white wine” that includes unaccounted-for varieties that don’t show up in the official statistics. We know for a fact that Silverado has Kerner growing in its estate vineyards and that Dan Petrosky, the founder of Massican, buys Greco for his Gemina blend, so we think it’s a pretty sure bet that if you can name a white grape there is a vineyard in Napa growing it and a winery vinifying it.

Thirty miles long and five miles across at its widest point, Napa Valley is a small wine region with a diverse assortment of climates and soil types. With vineyards ranging from sea level to over 2,600 feet in altitude and 16 individual AVAs in addition to Napa Valley itself, there is ample opportunity to bring out the best in many different types of grapes. Of course, we are all aware of Napa Chardonnay, which ranks second in plantings behind Cabernet Sauvignon. Napa Chardonnay may have been the style that prompted the ABC (Anything But Chardonnay) movement, as wine drinkers began to move on from a style that tasted like a two-by-four dipped in butter in favor of more fruit forward, refreshing pours. It is made in several different styles here from fresh and high acid to well-oaked and buttery. At the top of the pyramid sits Kongsgaard the Judge, a complex and creamy Chardonnay that fetches just shy of \$1,000 a bottle. Other producers that make amazing versions running the gamut from austere and high acid to full bodied and oaky include La Jota, Signorello, Alpha Omega, Far Niente, and Chateau Montelena.



Accendo Cellars is among the wineries making exceptional Sauvignon Blanc.  
ACCENDO CELLARS

Sauvignon Blanc is another Napa Valley favorite whose popularity is growing in the United States thanks to its fresh tropical and citrus fruit flavors and high acidity. It’s terrific to sip on its own or alongside seafood, salads, or dishes with tangy cheese. Arkenstone makes some of the best we have tasted, and there are also excellent bottles from Joseph Phelps, Lail, Eisele Vineyard, Accendo Cellars, and Frog’s Leap. If you have a few thousand dollars to spare and an inside track, you can also secure an ultra-rare bottle of Screaming Eagle Sauvignon Blanc, which is among a handful of unicorn wines that everyone has heard of but no one you know is likely to have tasted.

Frequent readers know that we love our Riesling, even if the wine-loving public fails to concur. Many people fear it because they don’t know if once opened a bottle will turn out to be dry, sweet, or somewhere in between. Prior to Prohibition, Riesling was one of the most widely cultivated varieties in Napa and across California, but it has been on the decline since then. Napa wineries produce world class dry Riesling on par with the finest bottles from Alsace, offering bone-dry freshness and flavors of peach and lemon with a hint of florality. Look for bottles from Chateau Montelena, Smith-Madrone Winery, Trefethen Family Vineyard, V. Sattui, Elizabeth Spencer, and Grgich Hills Estate.

For a real off-the-radar Napa white wine experience, keep an eye out for Napa Valley Viognier. This Rhône Valley transplant is grown here in miniscule amounts, but its orchard fruit flavors, pronounced florality and soft spice notes are many a wine geek’s favorite. We realized it had really made it when we saw that the Prisoner Wine Company had released an Oakville Viognier called Friction. Outstanding producers include Stag’s Leap Winery, Darioush, the Hess Collection, Clif Family, and Sterling Vineyards.

Many Napa whites are single-vineyard bottlings that are available only to wine club members or visitors to a winery tasting room, so you are more likely to encounter some of those we’ve mentioned as well as the more offbeat varieties on a visit to the valley than in your local wine shop. That said, sommeliers are always on the lookout for something different to make their clients happy, so always check the “Other White Wine” section of the list when dining out. You may be surprised as well as pleased with what you find.

---