

Forbes

Wines Of The Week And A Tequila To Savor:

**Chateau Montelena Chardonnay 2016, Fulldraw Vineyard "Hard Point" 2016,
And Casa Noble Single Barrel Extra Añejo**

BY BRIAN FREEDMAN

It's easy to lose sight of the fact that springtime has arrived in much of the country, but here it is, with warmer and longer days finally—hopefully—implying that better times are ahead of us. These two Wines of the Week—and one particularly notable tequila—seem particularly indicative of the season, and I personally found them to be bright spots in these dark times when I recently tasted them.

My white Wine of the Week, the Chateau Montelena Chardonnay 2016, is a reminder of how stunning the wines from this legendary producer are . . . and how tensely structured and crystalline in flavor the best of California's Chardonnays can be.

Too often, those two seemingly innocuous words—California Chardonnay—are a stand-in for wines of power but not much nuance, ripe fruit verging on the tropical, and defined by their use of new oak. It's a stereotype that hasn't been accurate in a fairly long time, but old wine impressions tend to die hard, and this one seems to be particularly prone to stick around. To be clear, however: California is a massive state, with countless wine-producing regions and appellations, a seemingly infinite range of terroirs, and brilliant winemakers with Chardonnay philosophies that run the full gamut.

There's nothing wrong with more broad-styled Chardonnays. I love many of them, they can be absolutely delicious, and I'll be covering them here in the coming weeks and months. But the Chateau Montelena Chardonnay 2016 is of a different sort altogether, more akin to the steeliness of Chablis than, say, the round generosity of Meursault. It's a mouthwatering wine that calls out for food to enjoy alongside, yet there's nothing wrong with sipping it on its own on a Saturday afternoon. Or, now that so many of us are sheltering in place, a Tuesday afternoon. It's haunting, powerful, lithe, and impeccably structured, and whether you pop the cork now or in a decade, I suspect it'll offer intense pleasure either way.

My red Wine of the Week, the Fulldraw Vineyard "Hard Point" 2016, from Paso Robles, California, is a full-throttle, gorgeous example of just how winning this style of Grenache can be.

There's nothing small about this wine: At 15.6% alcohol, two glasses may make you want to start singing karaoke...at least, it did for me. But there's fantastic nuance pulsing beneath all that power, and it's clear that this is crafted from top-quality fruit that's been managed beautifully from bud-break to bottling.

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It overflows with waves of black raspberry, blackberry liqueur, kirsch, and cassis that are joined by chocolate ganache, espresso, and mineral that rings through the finish with a hint of meatiness and floral peppercorns. It's flat-out fantastic, and a reminder of just how exciting the best wines from Paso Robles can be.

Finally, there's the Casa Noble Single Barrel Extra Añejo tequila, which has become a go-to spirit in my house recently. I've been a fan of Casa Noble for years, and their Reposado in particular tends to be on heavy rotation here. This one takes their Añejo and treats it to an additional stint in French oak. Each bottle is hand-numbered, and the barrel number is also written by hand. The one I tasted, which is bottle number 259 out of 300 from barrel 151, is sweet and generous, yet with a spine of spice that the flesh of fruit—nectarines, cinnamon-dusted baked apples, orange marmalade—is built around. It finishes with a nod in the direction of carob, café con leche, and white chocolate. After a big meal, or even sipped as a hearty before-dinner drink, it's outstanding.



The Chateau Montelena Chardonnay 2016 is proof that Napa Chard can be just as structured as it is powerful.
COURTESY OF CHATEAU MONTELENA

Chateau Montelena Chardonnay 2016 Napa Valley

Such a subtle and restrained nose, with slightly salty hints of caramel complicating notes of hard pear, lemon, and a touch of quince. On the palate, this is vivid with acidity and has a skeleton of pure slate-like minerality that lends a briny note to the lemon-lime, Granny Smith apple, tarragon, and white tea flavors. It shines with serious concentration, yet on a frame that never becomes heavy or heavy-handed: I would put this toe to toe with the best of Chablis, no question.