

# San Francisco Chronicle

## CHRONICLE'S WINE SELECTIONS

### Santa Cruz Mountains Chardonnay

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Thursday, January 26, 2006

We tasted 25 current-release Chardonnays from the Santa Cruz Mountains and were somewhat disappointed, finding just six to recommend. The wines that failed to earn at least two stars fell into one of two camps: those that were simple, thin and under-fruited, and those that were cloyingly sweet, alcoholic and unbalanced.

However, the wines in the middle of the spectrum -- those with clean, ripe fruit, minerality, subtle toasty oak, refreshing natural acidity and fine balance -- are worthy of attention:

#### TWO STARS

2003 Beaugard Trout Gulch Vineyard Santa Cruz Mountains Chardonnay (\$25) Here is a wine for those who love their Chardonnays unctuous and oaky. It also packs a wallop -- the label reads 15.5 percent alcohol and there is indeed some heat on the palate. Still, there is plenty of juicy golden apple and pear fruit, notes of hazelnut and spice, and just enough acidity to cut through the richness.

#### TWO STARS

2002 Byington Quenneville Vineyard Santa Cruz Mountains Chardonnay (\$26) The nose offers toast, spice and mineral notes, with a hint of green herb. Golden apple, poached pear and citrus flavors dominate the palate, and the finish is juicy and brisk.

#### TWO AND A HALF STARS

2003 Clos La Chance Santa Cruz Mountains Chardonnay (\$19) Sipping this wine is like taking a bite of the baked, spiced apple Mom used to make. Ripe pear and subtle pineapple and citrus flavors are there, too, plus toast, vanilla and hazelnut. This Chardonnay is fresh, lively and blessedly dry in an all-too-sweet Chardonnay world.

#### FOUR STARS

**2002 Mount Eden Vineyards Santa Cruz Mountains Chardonnay (\$35) This is a beautifully textured, moderately rich Chardonnay, offering layer upon layer of golden apple, pineapple and tangy tangerine and lemon-curd flavors, steely minerality and mouthwatering acidity. In the background are hints of cinnamon toast and crème brulee. It's delicious now, though with this producer's track record for making Chardonnays that age beautifully for 15 years or more, it's also tempting to put it in the cellar for a few years.**

#### THREE AND A HALF STARS

2003 Ridge Santa Cruz Mountains Chardonnay (\$30) Ridge makes just one white wine on a regular basis and this is it. The wine is distinctive for its mint and honey aromas, yet also offers classic Chardonnay character and complexity -- apple, pear and tropical -fruit aromas and flavors, brown spice, hazelnut and toast notes and a rich, slightly oily texture. The finish is long and clean.

#### TWO AND A HALF STARS

2003 Thomas Fogarty Santa Cruz Mountains Chardonnay (\$25) This well-made wine has plenty of complexity, yet the fruit is the star -- fresh apple, pear, pineapple and citrus. The palate is deep and rich with a subtle hint of sweetness that is balanced by racy acidity.

Key: FOUR STARS Extraordinary THREE STARS Excellent TWO STARS Good