

WINE

# The Evolution of California Chenin Blanc

Once found in cheap blends, the grape is gaining popularity among boutique producers

written by

Courtney Schiessl

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*Chenin Blanc grapes at Palmero Family Vineyard. Photo courtesy of Craig Haarmeyer.*

If a wine glass contained California Chenin Blanc in the 1970s or '80s, the chances were high that it was poured either from a jug of nondescript blended

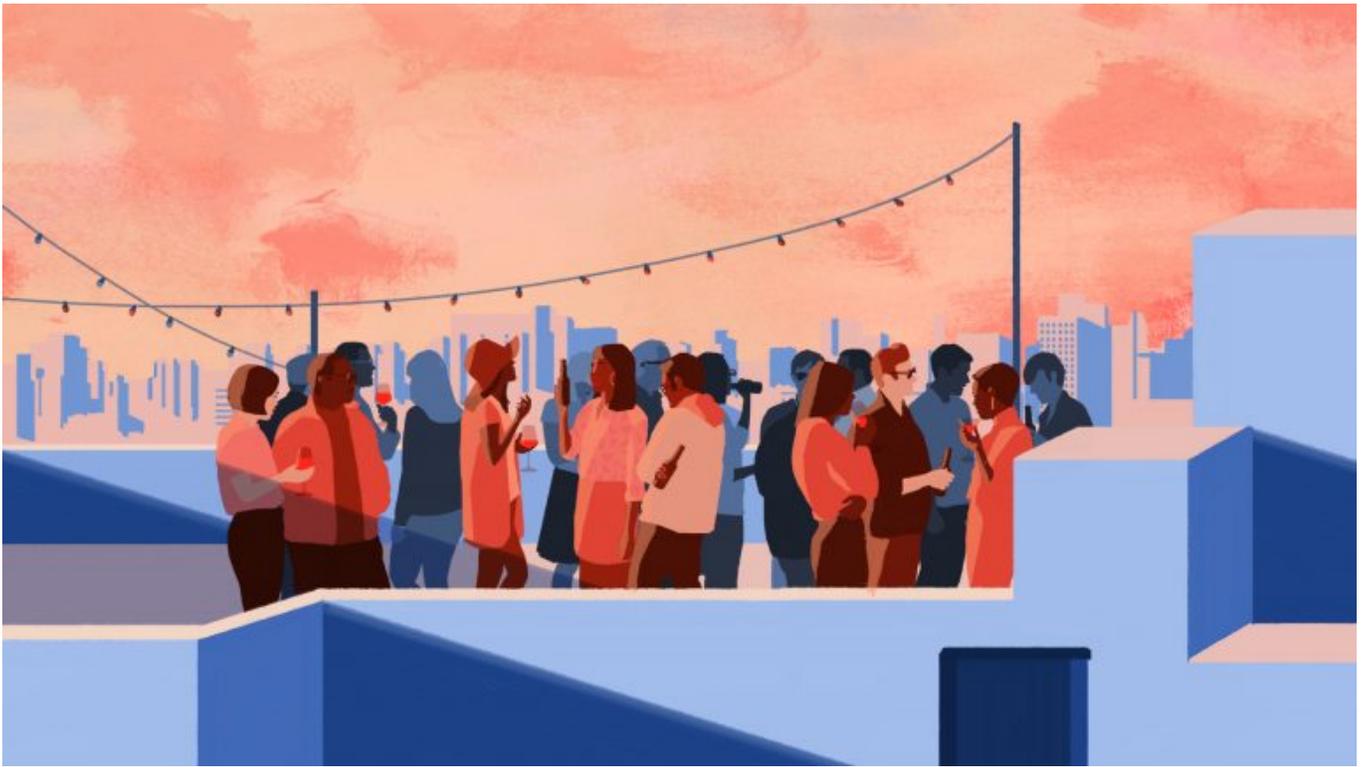
wine or a bottle of semisweet, inexpensive single-varietal Chenin from a North Coast producer. “Chenin’s history in California is a little inglorious, to say the least,” says James Sligh, a sommelier at [La Compagnie des Vins Surnaturels](#) in New York City. But these days, new cuvées of high-quality California Chenin Blanc are appearing on American wine lists every year.

Over the past decade, artisanal winemakers riding the “[new California](#)” wave have launched interesting, limited-production Chenin Blanc wines from the Central Valley, Sierra Foothills, Mendocino, Santa Barbara, and elsewhere. With the popularity of Chenin Blanc rising among consumers, these small producers are striving to change the reputation of California Chenin for good.

## **Acidity and Adaptability**

Chenin Blanc was one of California’s first popular white grapes, planted throughout much of the 20th century. It came to prominence in the 1970s and ’80s for two uses: bulk blending juice, which was labeled as California Champagne or Chablis, and inexpensive, palate-friendly single-varietal wine with residual sugar. Both versions were typically lackluster, with some exceptions. Many major North Coast winemakers released varietal Chenin Blanc wines—a 1984 [Bern’s Steak House](#) wine list includes names like Robert Mondavi, Inglenook, and Chappellet in the American Chenin Blanc section—and vineyard acreage of the high-yielding variety skyrocketed, particularly in the hot Central Valley, with more than [300,000 tons crushed](#) during the grape’s peak, in 1988. “They grew Chenin for its acid,” Sligh says, “and used it as a cheap blending grape in bulk wine—basically the lime squeeze in a cocktail.”

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While most varietally labeled options were historically merely cheaper alternatives to Chardonnay, Craig Haarmeyer, who started making Chenin Blanc wines at [Haarmeyer Wine Cellars](#) in Sacramento County in 2009, points out that a select few producers were making quality Chenin cuvées long before modern versions emerged. “Chalone Chenin, which was planted in 1919, was a big deal,” he says, adding that he plans to open a bottle of the Monterey County producer’s 1960 vintage soon. Chappellet, too, was considered a quality Chenin Blanc producer; the 1984 Bern’s wine list indicated that the cuvée was “very dry.”

Interestingly enough, today’s boutique producers value Chenin Blanc for some of the same reasons as the bulk producers from generations past. “I think that

Chenin Blanc is just a great variety to work with,” says Haarmeyer. “It naturally holds its acidity better than some others.” The grape’s adaptability also makes it attractive, which is why Chenin Blanc has become a signature variety of South Africa, far from its cool home region of the Loire Valley. While producers like Haarmeyer, [Sandlands Vineyards](#), [Precedent](#), and [Dashe Cellars](#) have had success with the grape in the Central Valley regions outside Sacramento, wineries like [Pax Mahle](#), [Dirty and Rowdy](#), and [Jaimee Motley](#) are working with Chenin Blanc in Mendocino County.

One of California’s most popular Chenin Blanc sites is the Santa Ynez Valley’s Jurassic Park vineyard, named for the dinosaurlike oil rigs that surround 35-year-old own-rooted vines. A number of producers, including [Leo Steen](#)—arguably the first to attempt a “new Chenin” wine—[Lo-Fi](#), [Field Recordings](#), and [Habit](#), purchase fruit from this vineyard. Nearly all of these winemakers have been working with the grape for under a decade.

## Vineyard Plantings and Graftings

Even as more winemakers hop on the Chenin bandwagon, the grape’s vineyard acreage is steadily diminishing. According to the California Department of Food and Agriculture, plantings have decreased annually—from 21,410 acres [in 1998](#) to just 4,790 acres [in 2017](#). Partly because many of the vines planted in the 1970s and ’80s were favored for productivity over quality, the few existing quality-driven Chenin Blanc vineyards are highly coveted and leave winemakers wanting more.

“It’s become hard to find vineyards that seem compelling, and that are farmed for wine quality,” says Tegan Passalacqua, the director of winemaking for [Turley Wine Cellars](#) and the owner-winemaker of Sandlands Vineyards. While the demand for his Sandlands Chenin Blanc wines now necessitates additional grape sources, Passalacqua began working with Chenin Blanc in 2011 because he knew

that fruit was available at Story Vineyard in Amador County, a dry-farmed, own-rooted vineyard planted in 1979 that Sligh calls “one of the great sites for Chenin.” While more producers are grafting vineyards over to Chenin Blanc—Frei Vineyard in Solano County and Rorick Estate Vineyard in Calaveras County were both grafted using cuttings from Story Vineyard—old, existing vines better control yields for quality fruit. “Young vineyards seem to want to be more productive,” Passalacqua explains, “so you need to control the crop by thinning fruit, but the old vineyards are more naturally balanced.”

Still, newly planted or grafted Chenin Blanc vineyards offer a key advantage to winemakers: control over viticultural practices. Mike Roth, the co-owner and winemaker of Lo-Fi in Santa Barbara, uses Jurassic Park fruit for Lo-Fi’s Chenin Blanc, which was first vinified during the 2014 vintage. But the Jurassic Park vineyard is sustainably farmed, not organically farmed, so Roth grafted an acre at [Coquelicot Estate](#) over to Chenin Blanc in order to work organically. Other vintners are also experimenting with best practices, both in the vineyard and in the cellar, including testing for optimal ripeness (higher levels of ripeness isn’t necessarily bad, according to Haarmeyer, since Chenin retains plenty of acidity) and trying various vinification vessels. Haarmeyer even makes a pét-nat from Clarksburg Chenin Blanc fruit.

“This is really just the beginning of Chenin Blanc in California,” Sligh says. “Absolute acreage of Chenin may not be rising, but [at a recent Chenin Blanc dinner] we poured multiple debut vintages, and there are people grafting over or finding and rehabilitating neglected sites.” The category may be young, but it’s certainly enthusiastic, and to really see what California Chenin Blanc can become, both producers and buyers need to share in that enthusiasm. “Chenin is making a comeback, and we have done a pretty good job of getting producers interested,” says Haarmeyer. “We need to keep making high-quality wines, and buyers need to continue to educate [consumers]—and recommend the wines.”

*Courtney Schiessl is a Brooklyn-based wine journalist, educator, and consultant who has held sommelier positions at some of New York's top restaurants, including Marta, Dirty French, and Terroir. She has written for Forbes.com, VinePair, and Wine Folly, among other publications, and she is currently pursuing the WSET Diploma in Wines and Spirits. Follow her Champagne-fueled adventures on Instagram at @takeittocourt.*

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