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Chenin Revival

Once Napa's most planted white grape variety, renewed interest gives California's chenin blanc a new life in the glass. *by* JILLIAN DARA

Chenin blanc from Aloft Wines; Larkmead Vineyards is one of the oldest family-owned wineries in Napa.

Chenin blanc is a white wine grape indigenous to France's Loire Valley. As with many native French grapes, it's found success beyond its borders, particularly in South Africa. At one point, chenin blanc was Napa's dominant white wine variety.

Most of Napa's original chenin blanc plantings were removed in the 1970s to clear space for the more profitable cabernet sauvignon. In recent years, there's been a renewed interest in the variety of legacy producers and newcomers.

"Chenin blanc is perfect for the Napa Valley," shares Felicia Woytak, proprietor of Palisades Canyon Wines (palisadescanyonwines.com), one of the wineries working to bring the variety back in fashion. Woytak adds that the grape's naturally high acidity performs particularly well in the region's canyons (like its Calistoga vineyard), where diurnal shifts can drop as much as 50 degrees. "This allows the chenin to ripen while retaining acid and aromatics." Here are some exceptional Napa producers.

Palisades Canyon
Last October, Palisades Canyon debuted its inaugural releases, and the 2021 Chenin Blanc sold out in two minutes. Now in its second release, the 2022 vintage delights with a zesty but luscious palate, offering the variety's quintessential notes of juicy pear and dried lemon. The winery recently planted another acre of chenin blanc on Mt. Veeder to increase its total to 2.5 planted acres, which comprises about 10% of all the chenin in the county. *palisadescanyonwines.com*

Kinsman Eades
When winemaker Nigel Kinsman wanted to try something new, he

"Chenin blanc is perfect for the Napa Valley."
–FELICIA WOYTAK, PALISADES CANYON WINES

looked to Diamond Mountain, where he removed cabernet sauvignon vines and replaced them with a more suitable variety for the site: chenin blanc. The resulting wine is full-bodied with a balanced minerality imparted by the volcanic soils of Diamond Mountain; it joined the husband and wife-owned Kinsman Eades' Aberro label, meaning "to wander," where the wines stray from the norm to prove value in the virtue of being different. *kinsmaneades.com*

Larkmead Vineyards

As one of the oldest family-owned vineyards in Napa Valley (founded in 1895), Larkmead is committed to innovation with its Research Block, a 3-acre vineyard established in 2020. The block is planted to eight different varieties that are predicted to lend themselves to blending experimentation. Last summer, Larkmead released its first wine from this plot, a chenin blanc with zesty acidity, a round midpalate and layers of green apple, pear and lime leaf. *larkmead.com*

Chappellet

When Donn and Molly Chappellet purchased the winery's Pritchard Hill property in the 1960s, chenin blanc vines were part of the original parcel. The vines were replanted in 2007 and reintroduced under Chappellet's Signature designation. The wine offers depth thanks to its fermentation in neutral French oak barrels and stainless-steel tanks, defined by quince, pineapple and clove notes. *chappellet.com*

Aloft Wines

On their fifth vintage, the Mondavi sisters sourced their chenin blanc grapes from 85-year-old vines first planted by their grandfather, Peter Mondavi Sr. The grapes are cold fermented in stainless-steel drums and a new French oak barrel, creating elegant layering and a creamy finish. Tasting notes for the 2023 vintage include lemon, lime and tropical florals united by a crisp acidity that makes this wine ageable for 15 years (maybe more). Look for an April release of the sixth vintage. *aloftwine.com*

From top: Sunset at Chappellet in Napa; Palisades Canyon 2021 chenin blanc sold out in two minutes—its 2022 vintage is equally great.