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WINEMAKER DAVID RAMEY
An In-depth Profile

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PROFESSOR CHARDONNAY

**DAVID RAMEY'S EQUATION FOR CALIFORNIA'S PREMIER
WHITE WINE SQUARES TRADITION AND VISION**

BY KIM MARCUS
PHOTOGRAPHS BY ALANNA HALE



Ramey, shown at his Westside Farms vineyard in Russian River, made his first Chardonnay in 1996. He has since added a few red wines to his lineup, but the white grape remains his favorite.

Trailblazing winemaker David Ramey

has almost 40 vintages under his belt in California. Now he's on the cusp of realizing a long-held dream: to create a new estate winery in the heart of Sonoma's Russian River Valley—a region he's helped put on the world map for great Chardonnay. ■ Just north of the river near the wine country town of Healdsburg that Ramey calls home, Westside Road winds its way through a realm thick with vineyards, oak woodland and towering redwoods. It is hallowed ground for lovers of rich and well-structured Chardonnays and Pinot Noirs alike, home to top-flight producers such as Williams Selyem, Gary Farrell, Rochioli and Arista.

Next summer, Ramey plans to break ground on a winery on the north side of that road. The 75-acre property he purchased in 2012 holds his first estate vineyard, which covers 42 acres.

The new cellar will also be a big change from his current wine-making home, a leased industrial space in Healdsburg. It has served him well since 2003, and its utilitarian nature, as well as a second space secured nearby in 2007, is a fitting reflection of the self-made success of the family business.

It's been a long, hard journey, however, for Ramey and his wife of 30 years, Carla. They've built Ramey Wine Cellars on their own, without partners, since founding it in 1996—all while raising their two children, Claire and Alan, and as David honed his craft and paid the bills by working in a host of leading wineries in Napa and Sonoma, beginning in 1980.

Ramey, now 68, can rightly be called the Professor of California Chardonnay, a winemaker's winemaker who has published academic papers, pushed boundaries in the cellar and pursued the classic Burgundian techniques that are the benchmarks for Chardonnay around the world. His influence has been profound, grounded in tradition, research and experience, all driven by a vision that has helped reset the equation for great California Chardonnay.

"I love Chardonnay," Ramey says. "It is the red wine of white grapes. It is the most compelling white wine around." Chardonnay makes up 60 percent of his 35,000-case annual production: He also makes three Cabernets and two red blends from Napa, three Syrahs from Sonoma and a Russian River Valley Pinot Noir.

"He's an absolute icon and pioneer to be sure. When you think about California Chardonnay, he's on the Mount Rushmore," says Matt Courtney, winemaker at Arista and for his own wines at Ferren.

"He's taken not only what he's learned and studied from around the world back to California, but used the data from work he's done in his own cellar to refine his wines," says Jesse Katz of Aperture and Devil Proof and whom Ramey recruited to run Lancaster Estate in Alexander Valley in 2008. "His wines are rich, textured and full of beautiful acidity, and are not trying to be something they're not."

That style makes Ramey's Chardonnays restrained but powerful on release, with flavors that fully develop and expand with time in the cellar, another hallmark of the Burgundian imprint.

The Ramey Chardonnay lineup comprises seven wines—two appellation bottlings and five single-vineyard wines. The current releases of these wines, from the 2016 vintage, are sleek and structured, and all scored an outstanding 90 points or higher, led by the Hyde Vineyard 2016, which rates classic, at 95 points. (See the chart on page 58 for reviews of all Ramey's 2016s.)

The Hyde wine, from a top vineyard in the Carneros district of Napa Valley, is Ramey's only Chardonnay from outside Sonoma; all the others, except the Sonoma Coast bottling, come from the Russian River Valley. Hyde was his debut bottling in 1996, and although the site is the warmest Ramey works with, breezes from nearby San Pablo Bay keep it relatively cool. "Along the California coast, wherever there is a break in the hills you get good Chardonnay and Pinot Noir," Ramey says. "That has been a real change over the past 30 years—the march to the sea and to the limit of ripeness."

The latest Hyde bottling also reflects Ramey's predilection for



Siblings Alan Ramey and Claire Ramey-Pejovic have joined the family wine company, with Alan following mom into the business side and Claire, like dad, focused on the vineyards and winery.

Chardonnays that accentuate better acidity, with a bit less ripeness and less new oak than has been the norm in California up until the past decade or so. To realize that goal, he has significantly backed off his use of new oak for aging his wines and is harvesting earlier for more vibrant fruit flavors. "Less new oak is the answer to overoaked Chardonnay," he declares. "My model for Chardonnay is a really good Meursault or Puligny-Montrachet in a ripe vintage."

Despite looking to a Burgundy model, though, Ramey remains proud of his California roots and says the state's winemakers can deliver more consistent quality over a wider range of styles than their peers in Burgundy, and at a fraction of the price, mostly because of a warmer and drier growing season that in most vintages culminates in superb fruit.

"We apply the classical winemaking techniques of Burgundy,



Ramey anticipates breaking ground on his dream winery at Westside Farms next year, a 75-acre property he purchased in 2012.

Current Releases From David Ramey

Ramey makes seven Chardonnays: five single-vineyards and two appellation wines. All are from purchased grapes except the Westside Farms and Russian River wines, both supplied by the estate vineyard. WineSpectator.com members can access complete reviews using the online Wine Ratings search.

SCORE	PRICE	WINE
95	\$65	Chardonnay Napa Valley Carneros Hyde Vineyard 2016 Precise and powerfully structured, with rich, savory notes. Concentrated minerality on the spicy, textured finish. 1,256 cases.
94	\$65	Chardonnay Russian River Valley Ritchie Vineyard 2016 Firm and mineral-filled, with powerful acidity. Rich toasty notes to the flavors, with savory touches. 898 cases.
94	\$65	Chardonnay Russian River Valley Rochioli Vineyard 2016 Concentrated fruit and pastry flavors build the foundation of this focused style. Pure-tasting finish. 901 cases.
93	\$42	Chardonnay Fort Ross-Seaview 2016 Well-sculpted, with fresh-cut fruit flavors. Minerally midpalate, with saline and flinty hints on the structured finish. 3,017 cases made.
93	\$65	Chardonnay Russian River Valley Westside Farms 2016 Vibrant acidity and floral accents to the white fruit flavors, with flinty, spicy notes on the rich finish. 208 cases.
93	\$65	Chardonnay Russian River Valley Woolsey Road Vineyard 2016 Fine-edged, with ripe flavors supported by zesty acidity. Toasty accents on the buttery finish. 761 cases.
91	\$42	Chardonnay Russian River Valley 2016 Focused and fresh, with herbal notes. Finishes with wet stone, spice and sage cream accents. 6,521 cases.

developed over the centuries, to our tremendous fruit here in California, in Sonoma County and Napa," he says, purposefully. For Ramey, the keys to those Burgundian techniques are barrel fermentation, which adds richness and flavor, and the secondary fermentation known as malolactic, which tames natural acidity. "It's a fine line here. We can't make Burgundy," he says. "But I'm trying to make the best Burgundian-style Russian River Chardonnay I can."

Ramey grew up in the Silicon Valley town of Sunnyvale, before computers were ascendant and when orchards still dotted the landscape. He earned a master's degree in enology from U.C., Davis, the nation's top winemaking school, in 1979, and followed that with experience gained working a harvest for Christian Moueix at Pétrus in Pomerol. It was in Bordeaux where he first learned the Old World techniques of winemaking that he would apply in California.

In 1980 he began at Simi as an assistant winemaker under Zelma Long, another industry pioneer. They worked together for five years and collaborated in steering California Chardonnay away from the big, extracted versions that came from hot fermentations with extended skin contact and which too often quickly fell apart or turned brown in the bottle.

Instead, they pursued whole-cluster pressing, lees contact and cooler fermentations. Their work ultimately resulted in an academic paper, published in 1986, on skin contact and fermentation temperatures, which Ramey co-authored with leading U.C., Davis, and French winemaking researchers.

"We went through a period, and I was part of that I think, where originally, in the '60s and '70s, people here said, 'You can't do what they do in France'—it's apples and oranges—and some of us here started saying, 'Well, why don't we take a look at what techniques have developed over centuries in France and see if they work with our grapes too?'" Ramey says. "Why don't we run experiments and see? So that's when we started on the Chardonnay side, getting

away from skin contact, to go to barrel ferment and lees contact and malolactic—and it worked.”

After Simi, Ramey took the helm at Matanzas Creek for five years, and then oversaw the cellar at Chalk Hill for six. He did a second stint with Moueix in Bordeaux in 1989 and came back determined to use wild yeast fermentations, which he saw in France but which were rare in California at the time. The last two winemaking jobs he held were at Moueix’s Napa Valley estate of Dominus, where he helped manage the construction of the winery, and at Rudd Estate, which he left in 2002 to strike out on his own. He has also consulted for a number of cellars over the years, including Lancaster, Rodney Strong, Hall and Snowden.

While he was working at Dominus, he says, a light bulb went on in his head. He asked Moueix for permission to make a white wine on his own, as Dominus made only reds, and he was given the go-ahead. He began in 1996 with 260 cases sourced from the Hyde Vineyard.

By 2003, Ramey was bottling 15,000 cases, sourced from a host of vineyards. He used contacts he made when working for others to get prime fruit sources, such as Dutton and Bacigalupi in Sonoma, and Hyde and Hudson in Napa Carneros, places where personal relationships are key to securing the best raw materials. The early 2000s were a heady time for Ramey, but they were also fraught with the added pressure of equipping a new winery.

“I grew stupidly with no plan,” he recounts. Although the winery remained profitable throughout these years, he says, the fast growth resulted in cash-flow problems. “And by ’03 I was upside down with the bank, and I had to sell my way out of it,” he says. “Which we did.”

It takes a division of labor to successfully run a family-owned winery, and Carla Ramey has handled the business side since the start, including worker’s compensation and compliance with various governmental regulations “I’m definitely the person who does the boring stuff,” says Carla, who drew her first salary from the business only in 2005. “David’s so passionate about winemaking,

“I LOVE CHARDONNAY, IT IS THE RED WINE OF WHITE GRAPES. IT IS THE MOST COMPELLING WHITE WINE AROUND.”

—DAVID RAMEY

and he’s so out in front, talking to people and showing the wines.”

Her focus now is to secure the bank financing to build the Westside Road winery, and taking on partners is not out of the question. “We’re going to have to get pretty creative to figure this out. Where there is a will, there’s a way,” Carla says. Ramey, characteristically, cuts to the chase as he talks about taking on debt for the first time in many years: “We just want to make sure we don’t do anything stupid.”

Six foot-1 and sporting a stubbly growth of beard and wire-rimmed glasses, Ramey has a gravelly voice and broad shoulders. His conversational style is forthright without being didactic, but he also has little patience for critics, winemakers or techniques that he considers wrong or beside the point. He minces few words, perhaps born of a long career serving many masters and winemaking styles.

Take “unfined and unfiltered” wines, a vogue for many vintners seeking a more natural winemaking style. The two are not dependent on each other, Ramey insists. “Some of the bullshit that’s been promulgated over the past 30 years needs correction—like unfined, unfiltered,” he exhorts. In his own cellar, he doesn’t filter, which could strip out the flavors and texture he is seeking, as well as the nutrients needed for malolactic fermentation, but he does fine the wines—adamantly so.

“Sometimes I talk to winemakers who haven’t been trained classically and nobody taught them about fining, and they say, ‘Oh, no, I don’t want to fine. I don’t want to take anything out of the wine.’ The way I describe fining agents—it’s like using a piece of triple-aught fine steel wool on a wood chair: It doesn’t change the shape of the chair—it polishes it, it finishes it, and that’s the way to think about these very traditional and gentle fining agents,” he says, such as casein (from milk), isinglass and bentonite, which are all in his toolbox.

As for the characteristics he seeks in his wines, he is just as opinionated: “I almost never describe a wine in terms of flavor or aroma descriptors. To me it’s all about texture in the palate—smooth, silky. I like the old days when the French or Italians would describe the wines almost in terms of gender or sex—voluptuous or lean. This wine is Audrey Hepburn, or this wine is Jayne Mansfield. Man, that’s communicative.”

Ramey has seen fashions for California Chardonnay come and go. He bristles at the lingering backlash against California’s big and buttery Chardonnays, epitomized by the ABC (Anything but Chardonnay) trend that came to the fore in the mid-1990s—not because he preferred those wines per se, but because the reason for snubbing them was misplaced, he says, with malolactic fermentation seen as the culprit. As a



Associate winemaker Lydia Cummins and VP of winemaking Cameron Frey have been on the team since 2008 and 2002, respectively, with Frey having been the label’s first non-family staffer.



Frey and Ramey draw samples of newly fermented Chardonnay from a cross-section barrel designed to demonstrate the winemaking process.

result, the pendulum swung dramatically for some winemakers, with many abandoning malo altogether.

"At the height of the ABC days, malo got a bad name," he says. "And people were completely unaware that all white Burgundy goes through malo, and people were talking about malo-lactic in California Chardonnay as if it was an activist plot to make buttery Chardonnay. 'I can't stand California Chardonnay, I like Chablis, I like acid.' Well, Chablis goes through malo," he points out, in reference to the tauter, leaner white Burgundies.

For his part, Ramey blames overblown wines on too much new oak and skin contact. Led by vintners like himself, who have backed off new oak and are using gentler extraction techniques, California Chardonnay has been revitalized over the past 10 years. In the beginning he used two-thirds new oak for his single-vineyard wines; it's now down to about 25%. He made the shift after running an experiment that showed that older oak barrels, up to six or seven years in age, still provided plenty of flavor to the wine—and less intrusively than did higher levels of new oak.

Ramey sees balanced acidity as the hallmark of his wines, and it is indeed a common thread among them. It gives them the ability to age, and he considers them best enjoyed five to 10 years after the vintage.



Carla Ramey has handled the business side of Ramey Wine Cellars since its founding, while her husband is more in the public eye.

For the future, Ramey says he is starting to play with Sonoma County Cabernet, and there will also be more Pinot Noir. But the new winery is first and foremost, and he thinks of his children's involvement in the project with a smile on his face: Claire, 28, focuses on the winery and vineyards; Alan, 26, is involved on the business side.

For Carla, one important aspect of the new winery is that the family will be able to see each other more often. With the current two-building setup, they sometimes meet only in passing, and finally at dinner together. "It's been gratifying to have the kids enter the business with their youthful ideas and energy," Carla says. "We're so excited to work toward getting the new facility built so we can all be in one building."

The Rameys are only the third Anglo owners of the property, known as Westside Farms, since 1869. It includes ranch buildings from the 1940s and a hop kiln from the same era, which will be renovated to serve as a tasting room and hospitality center. So far, the struggle to build the winery has been bittersweet: It took

six years to get the building permits from county officials, mostly because of opposition by some local residents on Westside Road.

"People move to wine country and then build a McMansion and don't want to have a winery as a neighbor," Ramey laments. "I wish I were six years younger. I don't have the same energy as I had at 62. But now I'm passing stuff off to the kids," he adds.

The family is designing the winery to handle a 60,000-case production as a hedge for future growth. It will be a long way from the 260 cases of Hyde Chardonnay Ramey made in his first vintage. But through it all, he has held steadfast in the vision for his wines and for his place in the fast-evolving world of California winemaking.

"I'm a traditionalist certainly in terms of wine style. And when all the new kids come along and want to break the rules, I say 'We did that 30 years ago, and it didn't work, and we disregarded it,'" Ramey says. "There were no goals and no limits at the start. But then again, I didn't think I'd get to 35,000 cases." □