

Pair chardonnay with Dungeness Crab

Panelists chose 5 favorite Valley chardonnays

By Emily Bell

FOR THE STAR

**Winning 2007
Carneros chardonnays**

Bouchaine Vineyards, \$30
Truchard Vineyards, \$30
Rombauer Vineyards, \$32
Mi Sueno Winery, \$38
Frank Family, reserve, \$55

For most wine drinkers, winter is red wine time. While we might have a glass of white as an aperitif during the colder months, there is something that is indisputably satisfying about a glass of hearty red wine on a cool winter night.

Chardonnay might be the exception that proves the rule. Grown throughout the winemaking world, in obvious places like France and Australia, but also less obvious ones like Lebanon and India, it is made in styles that range from crisp and austere to lush and round. The leaner styles pair well with a wide range of foods, but those plush decadent wines toward the other end of the spectrum have a pleasing heaviness that makes them work in wintertime.

This is actually my favorite time of year for drinking chard, because of another seasonal tradition: the "crab feed." A buttery, round, chardonnay is a great companion for rich, sweet, succulent crabmeat.

A distinctly West Coast custom, the crab feed involves eating mounds of fresh Dungeness crab along with a few simply prepared side dishes. Like its East Coast cousins, the Low Country boil and the clam bake, it's a festive way to

enjoy the local fruits of the ocean as a group, and with minimal fuss in the kitchen. For this reason, it has become a favorite fundraising theme for charities throughout the region.

To prepare a crab feed at home, you'll need cooked, cooled crab (the Pacific Seafood Group's Web site recommends 1 pound of crabmeat per person, roughly equivalent to 2 pounds in shell), and a few straightforward items to accompany it. Melted butter, salad, and crusty bread are really all you need; but go ahead and do cocktail sauce, lemons, boiled potatoes, chowder, etc. as you like. And don't forget the chardonnay.

Our panel met Jan. 22 in the offices of the Napa Valley Vintners to taste Napa Valley chardonnay from the 2007 vintage. Of the 13 wines tasted, they liked the following five best.

Tasters noted bright fruit in the **Bouchaine Vineyards Carneros Chardonnay** (\$30), along with aromas of flowers, toasted graham crackers, tropical fruit, gooseberry, hazelnut, and lemon. Tasters also noted a "big, round" texture that led into a "decadent finish."

The **Frank Family Carneros Reserve Chardonnay** (Tasting room only, \$55) showed tasters aromas and flavors of caramel, apple, butter, toast, menthol, and vanilla, along with a "good fruit/oak balance" and a lasting finish.

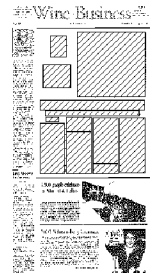
The **Mi Sueno Winery Los Carneros Chardonnay** (\$38) showed tasters vanilla, peaches, pears, honey, crème brulee, red delicious apple, and lemon curd.

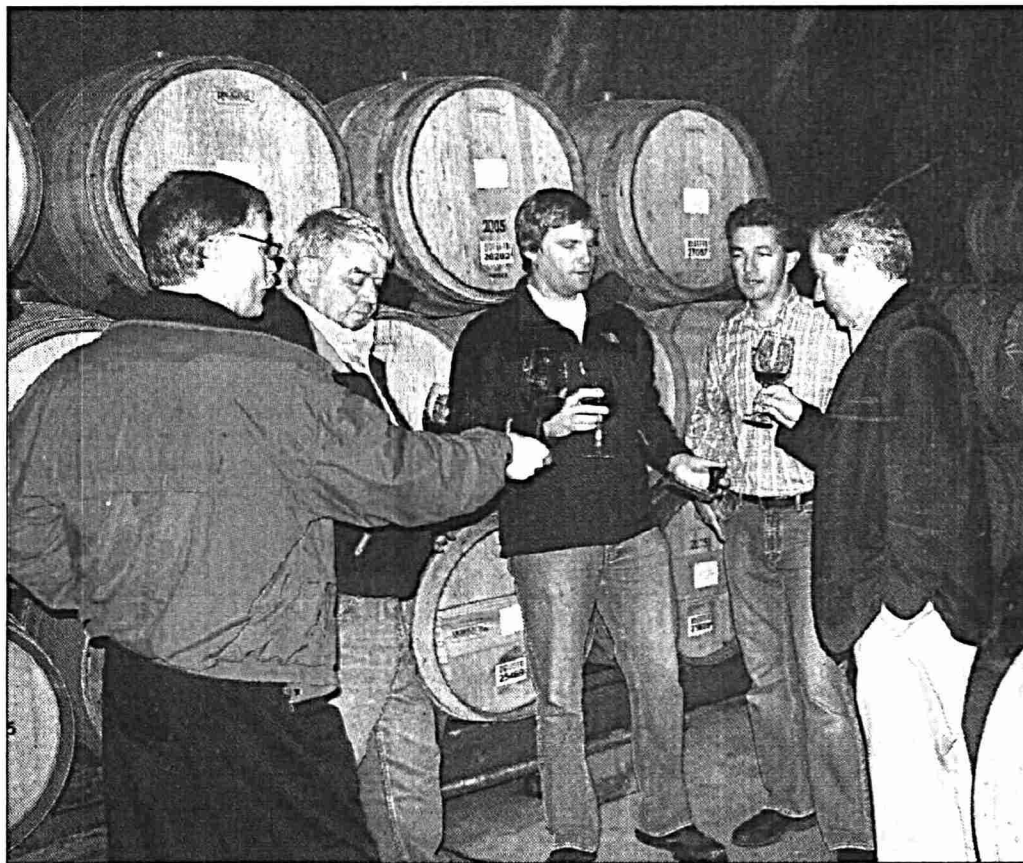
Though some found it "stylized" and "complex," one commented that the "oak overpowers [the] fruit."

The **Rombauer Vineyards Carneros Chardonnay** (\$32) struck one taster as a "rich, full-throttle chard." Aromas and flavors of caramel, ripe pear, pineapple, mango, lemon, lime and toasty oak were noted. "Beautiful, rich deep fruit and oak" was one taster's comment, but another felt it was "flabby" and "too sweet."

Panelists found the **Truchard Vineyards Carneros Chardonnay** (\$30) "very fruit forward," with notes of lemon, sugar snap peas, peach, muscat, and pear. "Nice minerality" and "good richness" were also cited.

(Emily Bell is the California sales manager for Ehlers Estate and a freelance food and wine writer. The wines tasted were provided by member wineries of the Napa Valley Vintners, the nonprofit trade association representing more than 300 wineries. Many wineries offer local residents discounts on their wines through the Napa Neighbor program, visit www.napavintners.com/programs and click on Napa Neighbor to learn more.)





Carolyn Younger photo

Rombauer Vineyard's Alan Cannon, left; Rombauer Vineyards owner Koerner Rombauer; winemaker Rob Lloyd; K.R. Rombauer, national sales and marketing manager; and Jim Teegan, East Coast sales manager, conduct a barrel tasting in the Rombauer caves in early 2008.