

“This resulted in a desire to elevate our Chardonnays to the same level as our Pinots. We challenged ourselves to make significant improvements, but we had a lot of freedom to explore, discover and define who we wanted to become as a Chardonnay producer, because we had yet to establish any precedent.”

The Chardonnay program at Kosta Browne was still a relatively blank canvas when Howsepian became winemaker. That’s when the team started shaping the style, trying new things, discovering what they liked and what they don’t like. “We didn’t come from a specific school of thought for Chardonnay, so we focused on experimenting and learning, which has contributed to our own unique style. By no means were we reinventing the wheel, but we built our own set of unique steps that ultimately created our style of Chardonnay.”

He points out this process in the spirit of Kosta Browne’s founders, Michael Browne and Dan Kosta, who were not formally trained, rather found a style through trial and error. Today Howsepian describes his winemaking as simple, with minimal or zero intervention. “That requires a tremendous amount of patience and restraint because it is human nature to intervene and to subject our will when things don’t go perfectly to plan. Intervention in winemaking is an exchange of character. To gain one thing is to lose another.”

A critical step he employs is to crush Chardonnay grapes before pressing, to produce as many solids as possible. “By incorporating juice lees to the fermentation, you ultimately increase the solid content of the resulting wine, which is critical in the foundation to aging, whether you decide to stir or not.” He also has his own take on malolactic (ML) fermentation. “Full ML has recently been frowned upon, but that’s because many full ML wines are picked too late and don’t have the natural acidity remaining to keep a wine from feeling heavy.”

One of the last steps is blending, which Howsepian spends a lot of time on, pointing out that sometimes as little as 1% or 2% in a blend can make a world of difference. So they blend endlessly until they are completely satisfied. Next, his focus is on finding more vineyard sources to fit and support his vision for Chardonnay, and to become recognized equally as a leading Pinot Noir and Chardonnay producer.

**Q&A** | **Favorite Chardonnay and food pairing?** Dungeness crab with butter sauce. Simple yet delightful!

**What is the most important thing you’ve learned about making Chardonnay?** Besides sourcing from the best possible vineyards, maximizing and capturing juice lees is the foundation of a great Chardonnay.

**What do you like about working with Chardonnay?** I like the challenge of producing a great Chardonnay. It requires much more precision, strategy, and awareness from start to finish than most other varieties.

**What is your biggest challenge when it comes to Chardonnay?** We choose to cultivate native fermentations for quality. However, this winemaking practice tends to progress slowly through winter and spring, so it requires a lot of patience and a careful eye to refrain from intervening.

**What would be your advice to a new winemaker starting to work with Chardonnay?** It’s extremely difficult to make a great Chardonnay. Be intentional, take the time to learn each detail of each step along the way and the

impact it has on the taste of the wine. Master your process, because at some point you will need help. Invest the time in your staff to execute your vision. A winemaker is no one without their team’s support. Find the right grapes and grapegrowers to partner with, work within your means and don’t overthink it. If working with oak, spend a lot of time fine-tuning the oak program; it makes a world of difference. Always test your theories and practices with blind tastings, know your audience, and don’t forget to have fun!

## RECENT RELEASES

- 92 KOSTA BROWNE** Chardonnay Russian River Valley Bootlegger’s Hill 2020 **\$170**
- 92 KOSTA BROWNE** Chardonnay Russian River Valley One Sixteen 2021 **\$85**

## DARRIN LOW

### DOMAINE ANDERSON

Domaine Anderson has remained relatively under the radar since its inception in 2012. Winemaker Darrin Low joined the team in 2016, bringing with him a fresh take. “Stylistically, I’ve found it both challenging and liberating to work with these organic estate vineyards and parcels,” says Low, 55. “I’ve learned that each site



has specific tendencies and needs, which allows me to coax the best qualities from each vineyard. I have been able to set an appropriate style that reflects the appellation and each site.”

Under Low’s direction, the style of the wines has become distinctive and memorable, with a purity of fruit flavors gushing on a mouth-watering frame that speaks to Anderson Valley. While Chardonnay has been grown in the

area for years, a significant part goes into crisp sparkling wines, including Roederer Estate, Domaine Anderson’s sibling in sparkling wine.

“I want my wines to have energy,” explains

Low. “Freshness and vibrancy in a wine not only make Chardonnay exciting to drink, but I think it makes you want a second glass. Honoring *terroir* helps achieve this, but I am extremely judicious in new oak use as the impact can throw the wine away from this style.” Many of his Chardonnays see only 10% new oak (sometimes less), letting the natural texture and acidity shine through.

Low’s challenge now is to maintain the standards he has set. He prefers minimalist winemaking, even when environmental factors might try to blow him off course. He learned valuable lessons in recent drought vintages (2020–2022) that will help him in subsequent years. For example, he says, “Native fermentations can be tricky, so I am still experimenting with native versus organic yeast

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—DARRIN LOW

and no fining to maintain the integrity of flavor.”

Low also puts a lot of emphasis on the way the grapes are farmed. Domaine Anderson wines come from organic certified and/or biodynamic certified grapes, including estate vineyards they farm personally. “Certification ensures that we follow a strict standard and that we don’t use any synthetic chemicals or pesticides in our farming.”

These practices include composting, planting cover crops and bringing in sheep. They also introduce beneficial mites, keep bees on the property, and secure wildlife acreage that flanks both sides of the Dach home vineyard. They keep a small flock of chickens on the property and plant rows of insectary plants, all to support biodiversity. “The remarkable thing about Chardonnay is its adaptability to world climates and wine styles,” Low observes.

**Q&A | Favorite Chardonnay and food pairing?** A rich and flaky grilled salmon comes to mind to pair with a crisp Chardonnay or, if indulging, it’s hard to beat a juicy Maine lobster with a mineral-driven white Burgundy. **What is the most important thing you’ve learned about making Chardonnay?** Making barrel-fermented Chardonnay has taught me to be infinitely patient and to trust my instincts about the process, from vineyard to bottle, but particularly in the cellar.

**What do you like about working with Chardonnay?** I appreciate that Chardonnay displays great diversity and versatility. All of our Chardonnays are estate-grown and they are distinctive, with each vineyard’s *terroir* imprinted upon it.

**What is your biggest challenge when it comes to Chardonnay?** One of the biggest challenges I face is caused by one of our best resources: the sun. We receive plenty of sun in California, and our Chardonnays can develop intense citrus flavors, acidity and ripeness. With consistent canopy management and other tools we have developed, we have learned to tame the intensity so that more nuanced and subtle qualities of texture and flavor emerge.

**What would be your advice to a new winemaker starting to work with Chardonnay?** If you’re going to make Chardonnay, you need to approach it with an open mind and humility, but you also have to have a plan. Know what style you want to make, make sure you are informed about it, be confident in your decision-making. Above all, be prepared to learn from your mistakes.

#### RECENT RELEASES

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| <b>93</b> DOMAINE ANDERSON Chardonnay Anderson Valley Dach Vineyard 2021              | <b>\$50</b> |
| <b>92</b> DOMAINE ANDERSON Chardonnay Anderson Valley Walraven Vineyard 2021          | <b>\$50</b> |
| <b>91</b> DOMAINE ANDERSON Chardonnay Anderson Valley 2021                            | <b>\$45</b> |
| <b>91</b> DOMAINE ANDERSON Chardonnay Anderson Valley Navarro-Fairhills Vineyard 2021 | <b>\$50</b> |



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—JOE NIELSEN

## JOE NIELSEN RAM’S GATE

Winemaker Joe Nielsen has been paying attention to taste trends. “The evolving American palate seems to be leaning towards cleaner, more refined ingredients in the foods we savor and a heightened appreciation for craftsmanship evident in wines, cocktails and the overall fine dining experience,” he explains.

Nielson, 38, is also ambitious. When he was promoted to general manager and winemaker at Ram’s Gate in 2021, he was happy to be given *carte blanche* to decide the style direction for the wines. “This is a rare relationship with owners and winemakers, and one for which I’m extremely grateful. I am able to produce the wines I would seek myself as a wine lover and collector.”

So far, the results have been impressive, starting with Nielson’s preference for harvesting fruit at what he considers the intersection of ripeness and freshness. This carries over to his decisions in the cellar.

“We collaborate with over 20 different coopers, and our goal remains consistent: to ensure oak plays a supportive role, enhancing the fruit’s natural character, much like a pinch of salt elevating a