Sandhi 2009 Chardonnays

26 May 2011 by Jancis Robinson

$209 for six bottles

Buy these wines

I'm very aware that some of our wines of the week are not available in the US, where so many visitors to this site are based. This week's choices are available only in the US - in fact these are the first releases from an exciting new producer whose wines seem to be available only via their own website.

Sandhi, a Sanskrit word for collaboration, apparently, is designed to make Chardonnay and Pinot Noir with much more finesse and much less alcohol than is the California norm and, having tasted the first two Chardonnays and a fascinating Pinot to be released this October, I am convinced they are on to something. The partners are Rajat Parr, ex sommelier and now wine director of Mina restaurants including RN74; winemaker Sashi Moorman; and Charles Banks, who used to run Screaming Eagle and now has interests in South Africa. Banks already owns Jonata in Santa Barbara and Santa Barbara is to be the focus of this new producer.

Quantities are small and I can't even tell from the Sandhi website whether there are still stocks of the six-bottle cases of these first two Chardonnays; the offer seems to come and go online. If you can't get hold of these debut releases, I recommend you put yourself on their mailing list for future releases - if you are interested in California wines with a very strong burgundian accent, obvious ambient yeast and minimal intervention.

I was completely won over by **Sandhi, Sanford & Benedict Chardonnay 2009 Sta Rita Hills** that reminded me of the most delicious Puligny, but much more accessible than many. Purple pagers can read my full tasting note here, and doubtless key to the greatness of this wine, to which I gave 18/20, is the age of this famous vineyard, first planted in 1971. It is of course the cooling influence of the fog on this north-facing vineyard that makes this nervy-yet-rich wine possible. The theoretical selling price of this wine is a very fair $45 but it will be difficult to find as only 370 cases were produced.

Even smaller quantities of the entry level $28 **Sandhi Chardonnay 2009 Santa Barbara County** wine were made, but the plan is to step up production in subsequent vintages. This is another very restrained, almost austere, Chardonnay with rather less complexity than the Sanford & Benedict bottling described above - a bit like a premier cru Chablis, I thought. My detailed tasting note is here. But both these wines are so unlike the California norm, they are of real interest to the curious.

I asked Raj Parr how he made these wines and his answer came from his travels in Patrimonio, Corsica: 'I am very excited to rack the 2010 chardonnays into tank in August. We made four single-vineyard Chardonnays and four single-vineyard Pinot Noirs (100-300 cases each) and a Santa Barbara County blend (1,800 Chardonnay and about 500 Pinot Noir) with alcohol levels 12.3 to 13.8%. We don't add anything to the wine during the entire winemaking and élevage, though we do make sure there is enough SO2 for the wine to age (30 ppm free in Chardonnay and 18 ppm for Pinot). Most adjustments are made a few months before bottling.'