

# Wine Spectator

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## A Mind for Wine

**David Ramey has helped to shape California winemaking for nearly three decades** *-by Tim Fish*

Some winemakers are farmers, others are scientists or technicians or even desk jockeys. A few, like David Ramey, are philosophers. After 30 years in the business, Ramey has spent as much time thinking about wine as he has making it. "Making really good wine is a matter of a lot of small factors," he says. "It's like raising children-if you do it right from the beginning, you just have to give them a little nudge here or there [later]."

While his focus is now largely on his signature Ramey label, with a few consulting jobs on the side, the winemaker has left fingerprints at wineries all over California. He has established the house style at several high-profile wineries, including Matanzas Creek, Chalk Hill and Rudd. And wherever Ramey's worked, he's produced great wines, almost always Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon.

"He's a very gifted artist. He's also a perfectionist and has a tremendous desire to be the best," says Leslie Rudd, owner of Rudd Winery-where Ramey was winemaker from 1998 to 2002-and the Dean & DeLuca grocery stores. "And he's one of the few people who can go from being a winemaker to running a business."

Ramey, 58, has a professorial air about him. With dusty-gray hair, wireframe glasses and a resonant voice, he calls to mind the late author David Halberstam. He is not hasty when it comes to answering questions and is detailed when he does. Asked about what appeals to him about the wine business, he pauses and looks off into the distance. "I love the intersection of art and commerce," he finally says. "I love the fray of the battlefield. It's dynamic."

In 1990, he similarly changed the direction of Chalk Hill. "He was instrumental in turning our whole direction to more natural winemaking," says Furth, who continues to see Ramey's stamp on Chalk Hill wines today.

In 1996, when Ramey became general manager and winemaker at Dominus, he also launched his own label with his first release, a Hyde Vineyard Chardonnay, which remains one of the most highly rated wines he's ever made, according to Wine Spectator.

At Dominus, Ramey focused on overseeing the construction of architect Herzog & de Meuron's distinctive stone design of the winery.

"He taught us about quality," says Rudd, who is one of Napa's savviest businessmen. Since leaving Rudd in 2002, Ramey has quietly built his signature brand to nearly 40,000 cases annually. He has consulted at a number of wineries over the years, most recently Rodney Strong, Hall and Snowden.

Watching the development of California wine in the past 20 years, particularly Chardonnay, Ramey is convinced that many winemakers have missed the forest for the trees. California, he argues, adopted a piecemeal attitude toward the winemaking techniques of Burgundy and Bordeaux: stirring lees here, partial malolactic there, filtering, or not. "Winemakers were putting clear [filtered] Chardonnay into new barrels, and taking them out two months later when they taste oaky," he says. "It needs to be a holistic approach." While he follows the French methods, he adds, "Why would we use the Burgundian and Bordeaux vintages as a yardstick? White Burgundy has 14.7 percent alcohol on a good year. This issue of alcohol is overblown. That's where our grapes are ripe. It's California's birthright."

Ramey pauses while he contemplates the situation. "The idea," he finally concludes, "is to let nature make the wine."

### David Ramey in Brief

1979 Graduates from University of California, Davis; works harvest with Christian Moueix in Pomerol  
1980 Becomes assistant winemaker at Simi  
1984 Works as Matanzas Creek winemaker  
1990 Takes on winemaking duties at Chalk Hill  
1996 Manages Dominus and handles winemaking there  
1996 Launches Ramey Wine Cellars  
1998 Oversees winemaking at Rudd Estate  
2002 Focuses on Ramey brand and consulting