

## Wine of the Week: Olema 2016 Chardonnay



Jesse Fox

**PEG MELNIK**

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Jesse Fox was a chef at the French Laundry when wine bewitched him with the aroma of harvest, nudging him to change his allegiance.

“I’d be coming up and down the valley and I could smell harvest,” he said, alluding to fermenting grapes.

This chef-turned-winemaker is behind our wine-of-the-week winner — the Olema 2016 Sonoma County Chardonnay at \$15. It’s a floral chardonnay and on the palate it has notes of citrus, pear and a hint of vanilla bean. The Olema has a lingering finish, but what makes it a standout is its balance. It’s spot on.

### THIS WEEK’S BLIND TASTING

Knock-Out Chardonnays

#### TOP PICK

Olema, 2016 Sonoma County Chardonnay, 13.8% alcohol, \$15.

★★★★

An easy-drinking chardonnay, with notes of apple, pear and a touch of oak. Citrusy finish. What makes it a standout is its pitch-perfect balance. Definitely over delivers. Impressive.

Fox, 38, is associate winemaker at Calistoga's Amici Cellars and his primary responsibility is to make Olema wines. He studied at Cornell University, and graduated in 2002 with a degree in hotel and restaurant administration.

Before delving into the world of wine, Fox worked at Yountville's French Laundry in 2004. As the Canapé Chef de Partie, he prepared foie gras, as well as oversaw and made all the VIP courses, including caviar, soups and custards.

"I have never worked so hard or so fast in my life," Fox said. "I had to, with 12 to 20 hours a day ... The skills I learned there help me every single day in winemaking and beyond. Details are everything. Maybe (chef Thomas Keller) taught me that or maybe I had it in my blood from the beginning, but he pushed you to listen to that inner voice that asks 'is it good enough or can it be done better, more perfect?' No one is perfect but striving to be, listening to that voice as much as possible, makes better wine."

What's so compelling about chardonnay, Fox said, is "its capacity to have a broad range."

"Chardonnay is the varietal that is a benchmark in terms of complexity in white wine and can range from an easy-drinking summer wine on the porch to some of the most classic and well-regarded wines in the world," Fox said. "When you taste a great balanced wine, it's not about oak, alcohol or acidity, it's just, 'Wow that is delicious, refreshing, exactly what I needed today.'"

The challenge?

"Reaching the potential of this majestic grape, the optimum balance of weight and acidity while maintaining primary aromatics," Fox said. "I refuse to make a boring, simple white wine no matter the price."

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