

Chardonnay

Chardonnay is a funny grape. It is arguably the most popular in the world, and yet most of those who love it would find it difficult to describe exactly what it tastes of.

The truth, I suspect, behind Chardonnay's popularity on the mass market is its very blandness. Just as Mateus Rose was so successful in the mid-20th century because it was neither red nor white, sweet nor dry, still nor fizzy, so inexpensive Chardonnay makes so many friends because it cannot be accused (unlike Riesling, Gewürztraminer or Sauvignon Blanc, for example) of having too strong a flavour. It is also, crucially, usually relatively high in alcohol and, often, oaked, so that the overall effect - albeit unacknowledged - is of a rather sweet wine that is very easy to appreciate by newcomers to wine.

If this sounds negative, it is only because I think so much Chardonnay made today is without any great character - which is not the grape's fault. Chardonnay can make quite sensational wines in the hands of a great winemaker but it, perhaps more than any other grape variety, tends to express winemaking every bit as much as vineyard site. It is uniquely malleable and versatile.

Perhaps Chardonnay's most distinctive role is as a vital ingredient in top-quality sparkling wine, especially champagne. Although in most champagne it is blended with Pinot Noir and Pinot Meunier, Blanc de Blancs champagne which made exclusively of Chardonnay shows that it can produce elegant, lively, savoury fizz all by itself. (What the dark-skinned Pinots tend to add is not colour but ballast, or body.) Ambitious producers of sparkling wine the world over tend to depend on Chardonnay to add class to their wines. There is something about the elusive flavours of Chardonnay that marries particularly well with the traditional champagne-making process, involving extended ageing with the residues of a second fermentation in bottle, making a much deeper, denser sparkling wine than one based on, say, Chenin Blanc (as in the Loire) or Riesling (as in some top quality Sekt). No one could accuse Chardonnay of lacking body!

This is particularly evident in Chardonnay's grandest form: *grand cru* white burgundy such as rich and hazelnutty Corton-Charlemagne and majestic Montrachet made on the famous Côte d'Or in eastern France. These wines are often well over 13.5 per cent alcohol and are truly mouth-filling. In fact, it is my belief that Chardonnay in many of its forms is so alcoholic and broad-flavoured that it can be quite difficult to match to food. In fact it IS food! And almost needs to be chewed and savoured without the distraction of more solid matter...

The truly thrilling thing about Chardonnay grown on the Cote d'Or is that here, as nowhere else, it *can* express a sense of place, even if winemaking - which for top-quality Chardonnay produced anywhere almost invariably includes fermentation and maturation in different sorts of oak barrels; a second, softening malolactic fermentation; and different levels of stirring, or '*batonnage*', of the lees at the bottom of the barrel - inevitably superimposes itself too. Oak can be tasted in the form of a certain toastiness, char - or even vanilla flavours in the case of American rather than the more normal French oak favoured by Burgundian wine producers. Producers in regions which have only recently mastered the art of encouraging malolactic fermentation (such as parts of South America and Iberia) often leave its milky, almost rancid side-effects on flavour in their Chardonnays. While a white wine that has been energetically 'stirred' often has a paler colour and smoother, almost dancing (as I fancifully call it) texture than one that hasn't (because the lees have stopped it picking up too much colour and tannin from the wood).

The distinctions between the wines of the famous white wine villages can therefore easily be blurred by the different winemaking regimes of different producers, but *stereotypically* Meursault is buttery, Puligny-Montrachet is steely and creamy, while next door Chassagne-Montrachet can be slightly nuttier and more textured.

The one wine region where Chardonnay is not routinely oaked by its most ambitious practitioners is Chablis in the far north of Burgundy, almost as far north as Champagne. And Chablis is a widely misunderstood wine as a result of all this. Because of its latitude, Chablis does not easily ripen the Chardonnay on which it exclusively depends. The wines are much higher in acidity and lighter in body than those made on the Côte d'Or to the south. Oak and malolactic fermentation are exceptional and - partly as a result - Chablis can age superbly. It invariably tastes 'green' somehow when it's young, very sappy and refreshing. It then typically goes through a rather awkward adolescent stage where it can take on some odd wet wool odours and then, in glorious maturity at about 10 to 15 years old, it is an extraordinarily appetising drink reminiscent of wet stones and oatmeal. (Yes, words ARE a very poor medium for expressing flavours!)

I have lingered on Chardonnay in north-east France because it is here that it has had the longest to dig itself in and distinguish itself. The latest DNA research shows, by the way, that it is the result of a chance crossing between a member of the Pinot family and an obscure, humble variety called Gouais Blanc in France and Weisser Hünisch in Germany.

But I am also a great fan of top-quality Californian Chardonnay. The golden state produces almost obscene quantities of this grape - in fact I think most Americans think white wine equals Chardonnay - but a few spots, particularly in Sonoma and the Central Coast to the south, where fog slows ripening, are capable of making truly great Chardonnay. Some of my favourite producers are Kistler, Marcassin and Au Bon Climat - and the Reserve bottlings of Robert Mondavi can also be impressive. These wines have a gloss, a sort of golden Californian glow, which makes them much more approachable in youth than their Burgundian prototypes. If Californian winemakers have one obsession, it is that their wines have clean, friendly noses and no rough edges...

Australian Chardonnay is to me some of the most distinctive. It has a sort of 'twang' to the nose which is definitively citrus, closest to lime (it often has a very slight greenish tinge to its deep gold). The Australians are past masters at delivering reliably made Chardonnay bargains now that they have enough grapes, and the fact that they were the first to use oak chips to imbue cheaper wines with some oaky flavour means that they also now use them more subtly than, say, typical eastern European wine producers. Such names as Giaconda, Petaluma Tiers Vineyard and Leeuwin prove that Australians can also make Chardonnays with real finesse and ageing potential.

Chardonnay is also the most planted grape in New Zealand, and the typical NZ Chardonnay exhibits that country's trademark streak of clean, green acidity. South Africa's Chardonnays can be attractively smoky, while Chile's taste like the inexpensive copies of North American Chardonnays that they are.

Chardonnay is grown in virtually every wine region elsewhere, but rarely shows much local character. Of all the wine styles made today, barrel-fermented Chardonnay is the most 'international', with all the connotations of a loss of local identity that that word entails. At its worst, Chardonnay is a bland white wine; at its best, an expression of place and power. Just don't expect it to have as long a life as [Riesling](#)!