Robert Mondavi, Woodbridge Chardonnay 2006 California

16 Sep 2008 by Jancis Robinson
From $4.99 and £7.

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Have I gone mad? Choosing a California Chardonnay made by the world's biggest wine company that can be found in the US for as little as $4.99 and is so widely on sale in the UK at around £7 a bottle.

Believe me, I am as surprised as you may be about how enthusiastic I am about this decidedly mass market wine but I tasted it alongside two of Constellation's trophy Chardonnays, **Robert Mondavi Chardonnay 2006 Napa Valley** that sells for around £17 and **Hardys, Eileen Hardy Chardonnay 2005 Tasmania/Tumbarumba** that sells for £20 and I actually preferred the **Robert Mondavi, Woodbridge Chardonnay 2006 California**! It was much more vibrant and fruity. The Australian was pretty good, but just a bit too marked by lees contact, while the Mondavi Napa Valley wine seemed to be trying so hard not to be too flashy that it was simply too subdued and tight.

Woodbridge is the high volume offshoot of the famous Robert Mondavi winery in the Napa Valley, with its base in Lodi, the distinctive AVA just south of Sacramento. When Constellation acquired Mondavi in 2004, Lodi native Todd Ziemann who had made wine at Constellation's Turner Road winery (about which I was once so rude here) was appointed to look after winemaking at Woodbridge. He was allowed to upgrade the winery facilities at Woodbridge quite considerably. He was pretty pleased with his 2005 Chardonnay apparently but the small berries of the 2006 crop seem to have resulted in particularly expressive fruit that is fully ripe but not sweet or thin and has real follow-through. The stop-start vintage of 2006 with its July heat spikes, but much cooler weather thereafter meant that the last grapes were picked in Lodi as late as 13 Oct.

The 2006 Chardonnay consists of 68% Lodi fruit, leavened with 14% of fruit from the fashionable, fog-cooled Central Coast region north of Los Angeles with a few bits and pieces from elsewhere. More fun with percentages: as is the California wont, this is not 100% Chardonnay. These winemakers have to earn their salaries by constant bench blending, making up experimental lots to see exactly which blend tastes best (while, presumably, costing less). This one apparently is just 80% Chardonnay with 6% Colombard (the tart armagnac grape that is a workhorse variety in California), 5% Sauvignon Blanc, 5% Semillon (of which there is precious little in California, so that's intriguing), 2% Viognier and 2% Muscat. There was quite a vogue for perfuming Chardonnays with grapey Muscat a few years back. I would never have picked out all these ingredients in the blend but I do think the whole works really well.

After pressing in an enclosed membrane press (no oxygen allowed), the juice was fermented at just 50 deg F (10 deg C) in stainless steel tanks. Malolactic fermentation was suppressed for most of the wine so retain natural acidity and most of the wine was aged in tank on its lees for seven months with just a small amount put into barrel. (I love these California geeky tech specs.) The wine has 13.5% alcohol and just 3g/l residual sugar (anything below 2 is bone dry). And yes, pH fans, I can even supply that: 3.48.

No matter, this is quite extraordinarily friendly wine for one that must be made in such vast quantities. I think now is the right time to drink it, ideally but not necessarily with food - I wouldn't stick it in a cellar for future consumption.

This is almost certainly the most widely available wine I have ever made wine of the week. If you click on the Find this wine link you will see stockists all over the US and UK plus Canada, Mexico, Hong Kong and all over Europe. I jam assured that the blend on sale in the US is identical to the blend that I have tasted (twice now) in the UK, even though this was not the case with the 2005.

It's cheapest in the US. Brits have to cough up about £7 for it chez Asda, Sainsbury's, Tesco, Thresher, Waitrose and www.everywine.co.uk, the online outfit that tries to offer every single wine on sale in the UK.

Just so you realise that I haven't lost my critical faculties completely, I can report that I thought Robert Mondavi Woodbridge Shiraz (sic) 2006 California, also tasted recently, was pretty awful – very pinched and ungenerous.

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