

# Pour Decisions

By Brett Chappell

## Chardonnay's day is dawning again

Chardonnay is the world's second most-planted white grape. Such was not always the case. The boom of wine drinking in the 1980s caused Chardonnay's acreage to triple in Bourgogne. In the same period, California's acreage has grown almost five times. Now California's chardonnay plantings outnumber all the chardonnay plantings in France. There are, however, people who will not drink it. Anything but chardonnay or "ABC" is their mantra. Their minds may be changed as the winemaking world adapts to a brighter style of this wine.

Chardonnay is easy to grow and adapts to the cold of Champagne and heat of California. It has three notable drawbacks: It blooms early and is susceptible to spring frosts, its thin skin is prone to rot at harvest, and it has a very small harvest window for the perfect balance of acid and sugar. This causes problems in warm wine growing regions.

Chardonnay must, or pre-fermented juice, has high sugar levels. This may lead to either high alcohol levels, which can masquerade as a bit of sweetness, or out-and-out residual sugar. These high sugar/alcohol levels were one reason for its popularity with the 1980s burgeoning wine drinkers.

Before the last couple of decades and changes in the climate, Bourgogne seldom had a problem with full ripeness. Often, Bourgogne vigneronns had to rely on chaptalization, adding sugar to grape must before fermentation, to meet the minimum alcohol requirement of 12% to 12.5%. Chardonnay is a transparent grape and when picked before full ripeness, shows its terroir. The wine may be steely when grown in a cool climate and fermented and aged without oak. Chablis is the poster child of this style. Warm the climate, pick a bit riper, and add the slightest dollop of oak—*et voila*, Mâcon or Côte Chalonnaise. Cool climate plus serious, new oak = the Côte d'Or.

Chardonnay in the new world is transparent also. Yet, its ripeness tends to overshadow the vines' terroir while highlighting its evelage, or handling. The California chardonnay formula has developed since the 1940s when the Wentz family in Livermore, CA, committed to serious chardonnay cultivation. California winemakers had to account for a warm growing region, big sugar, big alcohol, big wine, and a possible lack of acid. Winemakers used techniques to augment this richness. The ripe fruit could stand up to extended lees contact (allowing the wine to sit on spent yeast cells), which gave the wine even more lushness; malolactic fermentation (a secondary bacterial fermentation that softened sharp malic acids into creamy lactic acids); and intense oak aging that added notes of vanilla and butterscotch. Chardonnay in this style drinks like a brioche bread pudding.

Nascent wine drinkers of the 1980s were quite enamored with this flamboyant, oaky style. Most winemakers were happy to oblige these tastes. The wines were stunning, simply by being stunning. This opulent, fruit-driven style became synonymous with the very word chardonnay. If the wine is deficient in acid to begin with, however, these techniques accentuate this broadness and lead to flabby, ponderous wines. Then the backlash came. The consumer, and the new wave of winemakers, were tired of overworked chardonnay.

In the 2000s, many new world winemakers have begun to harvest earlier. They also dialed back lees contact, malolactic fermentation and oak treatment. These

changes have allowed California chardonnay to show its terroir. Many younger Californian winemakers look to Bourgogne as a hallmark for chardonnay. Wine, they believe, should be a product of place more than a vehicle for technique. In essence, the less they show their hand in their wine, the more successful they feel the wine is. Less is more here.

Keep an eye out for Oregon chardonnay. The Pacific Northwest climate is cooler than most of California. Its days are shorter with less sunlight, hence more like Bourgogne. Oregon producers had to suss out the proper clones of chardonnay. They originally planted California clones that needed more ripening sunlight hours than Oregon had to offer. French Dijon clones came to the rescue. Chardonnay was relegated to second fiddle while Oregon tuned its first chair pinot noir strings. Pinot gris, which is easier to grow, was the go-to white grape for the state for years. Yet, chardonnay from Oregon has advanced at a lightning pace. They are wines that offer the transparency of Bourgogne and the intense fruit flavors of the new world without need for winemaking makeup.

New York winemakers are following this fresh path also. If you like the big, lush style, don't worry—those are still available. Chardonnay in the new world is making a comeback with more options than ever before. This grape offers a playground for a deft winemaker.

*At MF Chappell Wine Merchant, our guided wine class in April centers on wines from the United States other than California. Each month, we pair a six-pack of wines, an overview article, and a virtual meeting to a chapter or two of Karen MacNeil's The Wine Bible. Brett Chappell is a French Wine Scholar, Certified Sommelier and Wine Educator. He and his wife, Jen, a Wine and Spirits Education Trust Level Two, own MF Chappell Wine Merchant in Atlantic Beach. Their website is MFChappellWine.com, and the phone number is 252-773-4016.*



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