

It was a dark and stormy night. The revelers were inside tasting wine and staying dry. Laughter and the sound of “oh, mocha” or “this wine has gone through serious oak” floated through the air. Suddenly the door blew open and a stranger stepped in. He strode purposely to the wine bar. The server stepped hesitantly towards the stranger and asked in a small voice “Which of our wines would you like to taste? I can recommend the Merlot.” The stranger narrowed his eyes and growled “ABC”. A gasp was heard throughout the tasting room “Anything But Chardonnay”. Didn’t he know?

No joke! So much Chardonnay had entered the marketplace overoaked and blowsy that many of us turned away, leaving the noble grape for Sauvignon Blanc, Pinot Gris (aka Pinot Grigio), and Viognier to satisfy our white wine desires. Well,

I am here to tell you that Chardonnay deserves much better treatment than that.

Chardonnay is one of the noble grapes “vitis vinifera”. It ranks up there with Pinot Noir and Cabernet Sauvignon. The grape can be a light to medium-bodied white with crisp acidity and subtle flavors or a full-bodied white with complexity and richness.

Society of Wine Educators describes Chardonnay as “all about winemaking”. The grape is neutral in flavor and aroma, marked by simple green apple and mineral notes.

Winemakers can influence its flavor through several wine making practices such as fermenting in oak barrels or the addition of oak chips that are much cheaper than a barrel. Oak gives that butter popcorn and vanilla flavors that we often pick up with a glass of Chardonnay.

DNA analysis places Chardonnay as an offspring of the Pinot family and Gouais Blanc. It is indigenous to Burgundy, France. It performs to its best in limestone soil and cool climates but is such an adaptive grape that it can survive anywhere. It buds early so is susceptible to frost yet it ripens early so can be picked before autumn cold rains. All this

means that Chardonnay can be grown just about anywhere. That doesn’t mean it is at its best anywhere!

Some of the words often used to describe the flavor and aroma of Chardonnay are flint, stone, lemon, cantaloupe, peach, pineapple, banana, butter, caramel, green apple, pears, honey, ginger, vanilla, oak, butterscotch, nutmeg. Note that New World (US, Australia, Chile, for example) Chardonnay is often the most full bodied with the butterscotch, vanilla, and nut flavors. The fruits associated with New World are tropical, apple pie, burnt sugar, vanilla, ginger, nutmeg, and lots of oak, with low acid and is short lived.

Old World (France, for example) Chardonnay is more subtle with higher acid and green apples, stone, and flint tones.

Old World wines are longer lived; you can keep them 10 years plus. They see very little wood during their winemaking cycle.

While the differences mentioned above are general and note true in every case, they can be helpful in finding your style.

Here are some of the areas of the world that make wonderful Chardonnay, all in different styles. Find out the style you like and shop the world!

Burgundy is the birth place of great Chardonnay, in my humble opinion. It is easy to think that wine from Burgundy is only red, made from the Pinot Noir. Now you know that Burgundy is also white, only from the Chardonnay grape. There are laws in Burgundy that dictate the variety of grapes allowed to be grown there. The major winemaking areas are Chablis, Cote d’Or (especially Cote de Beaune), and Maconais. Did you know that, not counting Beaujolais, 60% of Burgundy’s wine is white! It is important to recognize that Chablis from France has nothing to do with Chablis from any other place, including the United States. French Chablis is 100% Chardonnay, rich, complex, with a fine aroma and mineral finesse. California Chablis is not any of the afore mentioned! Beware!



Champagne is another region that elevates Chardonnay to the highest heights. You may recall from my previous article that Blanc de Blanc Champagne is made from Chardonnay. We may be getting more access to Champagne if the National de l'Appellation d'Origine has its way in enlarging the designated land available to grow grapes to be made into Champagne.

The United States has many viticultural areas that grow Chardonnay grapes. Let's look at a few states that offer readily available bottles in our retail stores.

California is a major contributor to our best Chardonnay. It is reported that there are over 100,000 acres of vineyards dedicated to Chardonnay in California alone! Taking into account that Chardonnay does its best work in cool climates, it comes as no surprise that Carneros, the coolest part of Napa County, makes legendary Chardonnay. Sonoma County is perhaps the best known region with the cooling effects of the Pacific Ocean fog bringing the night time temperatures down to around 50 degrees F. This preserves the grape's acid levels, making the wine very food friendly and crisp on the palate. Remember that squeeze of lemon on your fish? Also look for Chalk Hill Chardonnay, located on the eastern side of the Russian River Valley for a fresh, clean, citrus laced wine. Knight's Valley and the Alexander Valley offer a fuller bodied Chardonnay. In the Mendocino County, the Anderson Valley makes memorable Chardonnay. The Central Coast, especially the Santa Lucia Highlands in Monterey County, produces elegant Chardonnay. There are so many wonderful, carefully made wines to choose from! My only recommendation would be to avoid the warm areas for your Chardonnay source. Read the back label searching for information on how long the wine was placed in oak or had oak chips added. If it is crisp, Old World style you are looking for, the kind that goes well with food, avoid too much oak and the warmer climates.

Washington State "goes from strength to strength", says Wine Spectator. The Chardonnay has a natural acidity and just enough fruit to make them irresistible. Look for Owen Roe Yakima Valley and anything from Horse Heaven Hills. Surprise! Kentucky! The home of bourbon also makes great Chardonnay thanks in part to a cigarette company's settlement that pays farmers to rip out tobacco and plant grape vines!

New York! New York! I am referring to the State of course. I have heard lots of disparaging remarks recently about New York State wine. I am here to tell you "not so". Yes, the weather limits the varieties but Chardonnay is one that works quite well. The New York Wine & Grape Foundation is committed to the noble vinifera grapes. North Fork in the Long Island area is home to 33 wineries and is the warmest wine region in NY State. The grapes don't have the body for lots of oak and are frequently fermented in steel. Upstate New York, with the Finger Lakes wine industry, boasts Fox Run Chardonnay, clearly its best. The majority are Chablis style with pear and apple notes. The Hudson Valley has two wine trails, one on each side of the river. The weather is the most difficult of the three NY wine regions. Look for Millbrook Chardonnay for the successful results of their struggle.

Oregon, my personal Pinot Noir favorite, also makes stunning Chardonnay. That should be no surprise to lovers of Burgundy. The two varieties grow together so well. The summers in Oregon are wet and the vineyards are impacted by

a Maritime climate. The Willamette Valley and the Umpqua Valley grow great Chardonnay. The flavors are pure and rich and very Burgundian. I was in heaven during my recent visit and tasting.

I am writing this article in Dallas and it is therefore fitting that I comment on the Texas Chardonnay. The Texas Hill Country in the Lone State makes a very flavorful, sassy Chardonnay near Fredericksburg at the Grape Creek and Fall Creek wineries. My favorite of the tasting came from Becker. If you are passing through DFW Airport, they have a great Texas wine bar to taste the local wines. Great fun!

New Zealand is renowned for its Sauvignon Blanc but it also holds its own with its Chardonnay. Search for Kumeu River and its Burgundian style offering. Also, Marlborough in the top of the South Island makes a small quantity of mineral driven Chardonnay.

Australia has buckets of wine from many varieties and Chardonnay is among them. Their Chardonnays are frequently in screw cap bottles, preserving the freshness in the bottle. Victoria and Tasmania are cool regions so look for wines from there.

South Africa's Walker Bay has a maritime climate perfect for Chardonnay. This area is in the Overberg District. Stellenbosch, always with a high reputation, has a great Chardonnay from Mulderbosch boasting high acidity, pear, fig, pineapple and papaya. Also look for Chardonnay from the Western Cape area.

Chile, our home of fabulous Carmenere, shows wonderful Chardonnay in its Aconcagua Region - especially Casablanca. How romantic! Casablanca is near the coast and the cool fog retains Chardonnays acidity.

Neighboring Argentina is not a big producer of Chardonnay but it does have some worth seeking out. Mendoza region is your best bet. The Mendoza clone was developed at UC Davis.

Italy has a little share of the Chardonnay market. It does well in the Eastern hilly region of Franciacorta, Lombardy, an area famous for sparkling wines. Also, the Trentino-Alto Adige makes a super Chardonnay. Finally, the Veneto has cultivated Chardonnay and is worth searching out.

Greece has also thrown its hat in the ring. Chardonnay is one of five international varieties grown here. I haven't had a chance to try any yet, so if you do, drop me a line.

Global warming is having its influence on Chardonnay; or at least that is part of the reason that England is emerging as a "watch out for" area for sparkling wine. Kent, Sussex, Dorset...these are all names of places to visit and keep an eye on. The soil is chalky and the famous winemaker and consultant Michel Laroche, from Chablis, has declared it most suitable for Chardonnay.

Also of note is Slovenia with a Trockenbeerenauslese Chardonnay (read dessert wine), from the Austrian influenced area. West Slovenia is Mediterranean in climate and delivers an intense Chardonnay. Baja, Mexico in the Guadalupe Valley, Israel's Judean Hills, and Grace Vineyard in China round out our world tour.

In summary, Chardonnay is a true world traveler and a great companion. Try it again for the first time!