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# CHARDONNAY

## { NEED TO KNOW }



BY W. BLAKE GRAY



While there is some debate over what is the king of red winegrapes (Cabernet? Nebbiolo?), Chardonnay is the undisputed queen of whites. The most widely planted winegrape in California, it is also clearly the most popular wine in the U.S., with sales increasing every year.

People love Chardonnay because it is generous—full of fruit and then some. It is sometimes called a wine-maker’s grape because it is so moldable; treatment in the vineyard, during fermentation and barrel-aging can dramatically impact style. Which is all the more reason to take a look at what makes this popular wine tick.

### CHARDO-HISTORY

1680s

The first mention of Chardonnay was in the Mâconnais, where “Chardonnay” was said to make the best wine. It takes its modern spelling from a Mâconnais village named Chardonnay (population 162) near Uchizy.

1936

The first varietally labeled Chardonnay in the U.S. was released. This shift represented a fundamental distinction, affirming that New World wines were based on the *grape*, while Old World wines still defined themselves as a product of *place* first.

1976

Chateau Montelena becomes the most famous Chardonnay in American history by besting a field of French and California Chardonnays in the “Judgment of Paris” tasting.

## STYLE POINTS

Chardonnay is both flexible and generous; indeed, one of its strengths is its recognizable, embraceable flavors, which can manifest in distinct ways.

**Fruit can fall into several camps; depending on ripeness when picked and type of fermentation, flavors can be:**

### CRISP AND TART

[Green Apple, Lemon, Grapefruit]



### STONE/TREE-FRUITY

[Peach, Red Apple, Pear]



### TROPICAL

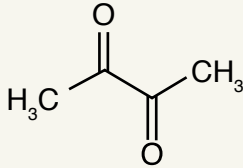
[Banana, Coconut, Guava]



Then if the wine has been put through malolactic fermentation and aged in oak barrels, a whole other layer of aromatics and flavor elements come into play; think butter, oak, yeast, vanilla, caramel, toasted marshmallow...

### WHAT MAKES A WINE TASTE BUTTERY?

If a Chardonnay smells and tastes like butter, it's no wonder. Diacetyl, a chemical that gives butter its flavor, is a natural wine byproduct resulting from a technique called "malolactic fermentation," or "malo" for short. This technique can be applied to both white and red wines, but you don't notice it in the reds, and it is expressed vividly in Chardonnay.



### WHAT MAKES A WINE TASTE OAKY?

Just as with whiskey and Cognac, some flavors in wine come from the wooden barrels it ages in. Vanilla, coconut, toast—these are all flavors of wood. A generation ago the only way to add those flavors was to use new wooden barrels, but those are expensive. Today, for cheap wines many big wineries soak a teabag of oak chips, or use wooden staves in stainless steel tanks. It does the trick for less.



## TABLE TALK

Chardonnay is about the best wine on the shelf to go with roast chicken. Consider that as a shelf talker. In fact, whatever it is going on the family table at night, chances are Chardonnay can make it better.

**Other Chardo-partners:**

### LOBSTER & SHELLFISH

This classic combo works especially well with a big buttery Chard.



### CHEESE

*Mais oui*, notably Camembert, Gouda, Gruyere... even mac & cheese.



### FISH

Lighter wines go with medium-textured fish like trout, snapper, Chilean seabass; heftier, oaked wines with meatier fish like salmon, tuna, monkfish.



### PASTA

Chardonnay is right at home with creamy and cheesy pasta dishes, as well as with primavera.



### NOTHING

Lest we get too caught up in the food pairing game, it's worth noting that Chardonnay remains one of America's most popular sipping aperitif wines—its flavors are widely appealing.

## KEY TO QUALITY: 'CHILL'

Not surprisingly, given Burgundy's marginal climate, it is widely agreed that the best **Chardonnays come from cool climates**, so it's worth knowing the locations of cool regions in generally warm countries. For example, Monterey and the Sonoma Coast are cooler than Napa Valley and yield excellent Chardonnay.



## FUN FACT: NATIONAL CHARDONNAY DAY IS



1980s

It was not until the '80s that Chardonnay overtook Chenin Blanc as America's most popular wine—not just white wine—from California. Chardonnay has been No. 1 ever since.

1990s

Chardonnay wasn't necessarily considered a luxury wine until the 1990s. A turning point was the film *Disclosure*, in which Demi Moore seduces Michael Douglas with a bottle of high end Napa Valley Chardonnay (1991 Pahlmeyer).



## LABEL LOGIC

Chardonnay, being both flexible and expressive, lends itself well to clues on the back label about how it tastes.

- If it's "**toasty**," it's likely oaky. Wines that taste buttery will often just come out and say "buttery." Nothing wrong with transparency like that.
- If you read "**rich**," it went through malolactic fermentation. Words like "**crisp**" or "**fresh**" suggest it probably didn't go through malolactic; and some labels will get more technical, describing how part of the wine went through malo and part did not, implying balance.
- Among the most important label trends of all: **Unoaked Chardonnays** are still certainly less common than barrel-aged ones, but they are **definitely gaining attention** because they usually announce it right on the label, often with catchy, "steely" monikers.



## SELLING POINTS

Chardonnay is both super-cool and super-uncool at the same time. Here's how to sell to both the younger crowd and the classic oak fans.

- Consider two different Chardonnay sections, "**Classic**" and "**Cool**."

Under **Classic** you can put Napa Valley Chardonnays, and staples in the \$12-and-under arena. In short, this is your Chardonnay "establishment," built on trusted brands. And those brands can and should span price ranges.

For **Cool**, think modern Sonoma Coast Chardonnays, cooler South African Chards, New Zealand (NZ is very underrated Chardonnay country) and Chablis. Depending on your clientele, all your white Burgundy might go here.

- Even today, not everyone realizes Chardonnay is the **white grape of Burgundy**; it never hurts to point it out.
- Remember that stylistic distinctions among Chardonnays cut across price points; don't be afraid to cross-reference wines of similar primary character. "**If you like that, try this!**"
- Shelf talkers and bottle neckers are important. Use phrases like "Big & Buttery" or "Yeasty/Toasty" when the style merits; ditto "Fresh & Mouthwatering." Don't be afraid to write "This is not your grandma's Chardonnay" or "Great Gift."



## CALIFORNIA: CHARDONNAY CENTRAL

IN 2015, CHARDONNAY  
REPRESENTED IN CALIFORNIA:

**16.4%** | **633,572**  
OF ALL GRAPES & TONS CRUSHED

{ THE NEXT-MOST-POPULAR WAS  
CABERNET SAUVIGNON, AT 14% }

THERE ARE NOW ABOUT **100,000**  
**ACRES** OF CHARDONNAY PLANTED IN  
CALIFORNIA; IN 1941 THE OFFICIAL  
TOTAL WAS 100 ACRES.

TOP CALIFORNIA COUNTIES,  
BY CHARDONNAY VOLUME:



## GEEK SPEAK

People talk about "Wente clone" Chardonnay, after Ernest Wente took cuttings from France's University of Montpellier viticultural nursery in 1912. But in fact, Wente's original cuttings probably included multiple clones and in the 100+ years since, they have mutated, so the meaning of "Wente clone" is quite fluid.

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