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Chardonnay grapes in Napa Valley, California.



The wine barrel making operation at Chateau Margaux in Medoc, France. Photo by Jim Bryant.

Oak – Friend or Foe?

CHARDONNAY IS ONE OF THE MOST WIDELY GROWN GRAPES and popular wines, yet I often hear people say that they hate Chardonnay. And they say it with conviction. How to reconcile these facts? I think the answer, at least to some extent, lies in understanding the role that oak plays in the production of wine. Although oak impacts many aspects of wine for almost all grapes, it probably is most easily understood in Chardonnay.

But back to the beginning. Why is oak the wood of choice for almost all wine, where wood is used to affect the taste, smell, or mouth-feel? I hasten to note that I am not a winemaker, but many different types of wood were essentially eliminated through trials over many years, and the overwhelming wood of choice (99 percent) is oak. And not just any oak, mind you.

Several years ago in Napa Valley, I experienced

first-hand just how different types of oak can influence a single wine differently. At the Del Dotto winery, the proprietor, David Del Dotto, led two of my friends and me on a tasting of one of their premium Cabernet Sauvignon wines where the only difference was the type of oak. The grapes were all harvested from one small vineyard, vinified the same, and then placed in 13 different types of oak – several from different forests in France, one from Slovenia, and a half dozen or so from different U.S. states. In addition, each type of wood varied by receiving a light, medium, or heavy toast. Although we spit much of the wine, none of us could believe how different all the wines were based on toast levels and forests of origin. Given this experience, it helped me understand how large an impact oak can have on different grapes, most of which are lighter in flavor than Cabernet Sauvignon.

In general, the impact of wood aging on red wine can be described variously as imparting oak, cedar, smoke, vanilla, spice, and pepper, whereas the influence of oak on white wine adds vanilla, spice, and smoke. For both red and white wines, the key to using oak is to determine which oak's taste improves the wine best and most importantly, how much toast and time in oak to use, so as not to render the wine overly oaky, but to allow for full integration into the grapes' flavor profile.

Back to Chardonnay. The world's most expensive Chardonnays come from France. The two greatest appellations are Corton Charlemagne (my favorite) and Le Montrachet (generally the more expensive of the two). Both of these appellations produce wines that range in price from the low \$100s to \$500 in general, but both have an example selling for \$2,000 or more upon release. They are beyond good/wonderful/great and represent the height of what Chardonnay can reach.

The Corton Charlemagne is generally the 'bigger' and richer of the two, while Le Montrachet is lighter (but still very intense) and typically displays great minerality and the distinctiveness/precision of the terroir. Both of these types of wine see lots of oak during maturation, but the terroir dictates that the juice can stand up to the oak, integrate well with it, and not come across as an oaky Chardonnay. Thank God, because if you just want oak, chew on a piece of wood. Corton Charlemagne is generally regarded as the world's greatest wine with salmon and lobster.

My favorite producers (also bigger volume



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and less expensive) include Louis Latour and Bonneau de Martray. The vineyard was originally owned by Charlemagne, for whom the wine was originally created and named, when his wife insisted he stop spilling his beloved red wine, Le Corton, made from Pinot Noir, into his white beard. Le Montrachet, displaying a little more finesse, is a perfect pairing with crab, scallops, and fine fish, particularly with rich sauces. Favorite producers include Marquis de Laguiche, Joseph Drouhin, and Sauzet. Less expensive but great, even world-class Chardonnays, can also be found in the adjacent appellations of Puligny Montrachet, Chassagne Montrachet, and particularly, Batard Montrachet. In Australia, great, even world-class Chardonnays come from Mount Mary and Leeuwin Estate (Art Series). In the U.S., some of the best Chardonnays are produced by Kongsgaard, Aubert, and Kistler. Finally, as I wrote in "Argentina's Best" (see QB July/August 2009- www.qbarrington.com), Luigi Bosca's Chardonnay Finca Los Nobles represents the best high-quality Chardonnay I've found. I truly believe that there are very few people who would not fall in love with Chardonnay if they were fortunate enough to drink one of the above.

On the other hand, one of my all time favorite wines is Chablis (see QB article on Chablis in July/August 2010 issue). This wine is 100 percent Chardonnay also, but unlike the aforementioned wines, sees little or no oak. Ranging in quality levels from Petite Chablis (not imported) to Chablis to Premier Cru Chablis to Grand Cru Chablis, at U.S. prices of approximately \$20-\$30; \$40-\$60; and \$70-\$100 respectively, the last three levels represent unqualified values. Made without any oak, or with only minor influences of large, older oak barrels, these showcase the Chardonnay grape like no other expressions. Just as is the case with Corton Charlemagne and Le Montrachet, the Grand Cru Chablis ages magnificently (10-15 years for optimum enjoyment). Chablis gains in intensity as the price escalates, and all go well with lighter seafoods, especially oysters, shrimp and scallops, as well as great fish. The greatest producers are Dauvissat, Raveneau, and William Fevre. I recommend trying any Premier or Grand Cru from all of them.

I encourage you to try some of the aforementioned wines before coming to the conclusion that you dislike Chardonnay or dislike oak. À votre santé! U



PHOTO: THOMAS BALSAMO

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