



KING CHARDONNAY

Like it or not, this ubiquitous varietal is the best-loved wine in America

By Jan Walsh

When people don't know what they like, at least they like what they know. And most of America knows Chardonnay.

Despite being an overproduced, overoaked wine with crowds of boycotters, the varietal has survived—and survived in a big way. In fact, it's still the most popular wine in the United States. A recent study from the research firm ACNielsen says that although reds outsold whites overall in 2004, Chardonnay remained the top-selling varietal. But its enduring success continues to mystify much of the country's wine drinking public, leaving them shaking their heads and asking, "Why?"

Among wine drinkers, it seems familiarity breeds popularity rather than contempt, and Chardonnay's popularity has also been its curse. For a time, overproduction led to a decline in quality, and for Chardonnay-crazy consumers, this wine eventually became their frame of reference for how all wine should taste.

With a surge in popularity in the late 1980s and early 1990s, prices fell (along with quality) and Chardonnay glutted the market. Wine was sold off

in bulk for pennies on the dollar. Some winegrowers ripped up their Chardonnay vines and planted different varietals. Others created diversified styles of Chardonnay, from an oaky, buttery and creamy wine to a lighter, fruitier wine with more acid. Remarkably, Chardonnay has survived its own evolution, and today's Chardonnay is diversified in style and improved in quality.



“For many years the American public’s point of view was highly influenced by those touting, 'California-style' Chardonnays,” says Mark Rosenstein of Asheville, North Carolina’s The Market Place.

Restaurateurs continue to oblige the Chard-centric American consumer, making it the best-represented white on many restaurants’ wine lists. Caroline Styne, owner and wine director of Los Angeles hot spots AOC and Lucques, attributes Chardonnay’s staying power to its familiarity and its diversity. “People drink it, so we need to have it,” Styne says. “ Chardonnay is user-friendly and approachable, and people relate to it. They feel safest with what they know. Unfortunately, once a person finds a wine they like, that is all they want to drink.” And if they don’t find their favorite label among the restaurant’s offerings, they may be disappointed with the prospect of trying another.

IS OAKY OKAY?

Among the different faces of Chardonnay, there is one style that until recently reigned supreme with myriad Americans. “For many years, the American public’s point of view was highly influenced by California-style Chardonnays,” explains Mark Rosenstein, chef and restaurateur of The Market Place in Asheville, N.C. “But this style is a pretty narrow definition of the Chardonnay grape. Oak and butter are not its natural flavors. Oak is also challenging to food.” The winemaker’s practice of aging the wine in oak produces overtones of toast, vanilla and butter. “But Chardonnay made in the Burgundy style with acidic expression is good with food,” Rosenstein says.

Given Chardonnay’s popularity and how easy it is to grow, a planting boom in California was inevitable. “For decades, Chardonnay has been both the king and queen of wine,” says Joe Davis, winemaker for Arcadian Winery in California’s Central Coast. “It leads the pack in red and white sales and has for years and years. But when something is successful, it gets overproduced.”

So Chardonnay ended up just about everywhere, even though everywhere is not suited to Chardonnay. Thus the quality declined, and prices suffered as Chardonnay’s glut sat on market shelves. “In 1997 and ’98, bulk market sellers sold Chardonnay for \$30 a gallon. In 2000 and 2001, it was down to \$3 a gallon,” Davis recalls. “Much was sold in bulk for just the cost of the bottle and cork. But competition is good, because the market corrected itself after the glut was gobbled up.”



Cecil De Loach, winemaker for Hook & Ladder Vineyards and Winery, began exploring Chardonnay's leaner side in 2005 with fruity, stainless-steel fermented versions.

Today, Chardonnay remains California's most widely planted wine grape, with 96,000 acres under vine in 2004. "There may still be too many people growing Chardonnay, but it is making a favorable comeback in quality," Davis says. "And growing it is still competitive. No one can produce Chardonnay that is not good quality and continue to produce anymore." And it's as affordable as those generic production wines from the '80s and '90s. Fortunately for winemakers, the grape is famously flexible and lends itself to being influenced by the winemaker and the land where it's grown. And it adapts to both cool and warm climates with differing lengths of maturation, ripeness and a balance of acid and sugar. Cool-climate Chardonnays are lighter in body with a crisp and tangy acidity, and a warm climate ripens the fruit, resulting in rich, full-bodied, fruity Chardonnays.

STYLE MATTERS

Many winemakers who survived the overproduction diversified their styles of Chardonnay by adding Old World offerings. For instance, a style called Naked Chardonnay ferments the wine in stainless steel tanks and uses partial malolactic fermentation (a process that gives wine a creamy, buttery quality) to create wines with restraint and balance. "We used to make one Chardonnay, and now we make three, plus a sparkling wine," says Jeff

Mayo, president of Mayo Family Winery in California's Sonoma Valley. "No other white grape has such versatility. And customers like the variation. Even the 'Anything But Chardonnay' people love our crisp, light, un-wooded one. And even those who love to hate it enjoy it as a sparkling wine."

In 2005, Cecil De Loach, owner and winemaker of Hook & Ladder Vineyards and Winery in California's Russian River Valley, began making his second style of Chardonnay. "It is totally stainless-steel fermented with yeasts to give it a fruity component. And it is fermented slow and cold. We grape growers also like Chardonnay because it can go either way—still or sparkling," he says.



Despite its overexposure, Jeff Mayo, president of Mayo Family Winery, still likes to kick back with a glass of Chardonnay.

The different styles of Chardonnay are almost like different wines. Yet this diversity and quality have long been the case in Burgundy, where styles range from extremely dry, steely and unoaked to rich, full-bodied and aged in new French oak. These style variations are well represented on many restaurants' Chardonnay lists. The Market Place's Rosenstein divides Chardonnay into Old and New World, and he also offers three house Chardonnays. "For broad expression of styles, we have Oregon's Chehalem INOX 2004, which takes its name from the Spanish word for stainless steel:

inoxidable. Sebastiani is a middle-of-the-road California-style wine, and La Monatine, a white Burgundy, is from pure, traditional French soil.”

Chardonnay is not the only wine evolving in style and improving in quality. “There is a real growth in red wine quality, beyond just Cabernet, also in Pinot Noir, Syrah and Merlot. This quality didn’t exist 10 years ago,” Davis says. “Chardonnay-centric consumers are now ready to try other wines. Many women who often order a glass of Chardonnay will now order Pinot Noir or Merlot.” But as their quality improves, these reds have new Chardonnay competition. Rather than being overproduced and cloaked in oak, “Naked Chardonnay” is now exposed and is at the center of America’s attention. So even though Chardonnay has taken its lumps from the world’s critics and wine hounds, its popularity remains extremely high. Even the major-league bump that Sideways gave to Pinot Noir couldn’t unseat Chardonnay from atop America’s wine lists. Its versatility and the relative ease with which it takes to almost all climates and soils makes Chardonnay a popular pick for winemakers and grape growers. Ultimately, it may be that very flexibility that helps Chardonnay maintain its often surprising longevity as America’s most popular wine.

Jan Walsh holds a Guild of Sommeliers certification and is a freelance writer and a wine columnist for *Birmingham* magazine and has been writing for *Wine Spectator* since 1995. She can be reached at jan@jan-walsh.com.