

“UNOAKED CHARDONNAY” FINDING NEW POPULARITY

by Rich Mauro

You're walking down the store aisle looking for a nice Chardonnay; you check the labels and you see strange descriptors such as “unwooded” or “unoaked,” “naked,” and even “bare naked.”

You wonder, “What’s up with that?”

What’s up is that more and more wineries are venturing into the brave new world of producing Chardonnay without the safety net of new oak barrels. Speaking of “New World,” this is mainly a phenomenon of the so-called New World wines, especially those from California and Australia.

Oak has long been an integral part of producing the Chardonnay wines of Burgundy’s Côte d’Or (for both fermentation and aging), though in Chablis to the north, barrels were only used for storage, if at all. But in the last 30 years producers in California and Australia got in the habit of lavishing their Chardonnay with increasing amounts of new oak that would make even the Burgundians blush.

Many also added a second fermentation (called malolactic, which converts sharper malic acid to softer lactic acid). Certainly consumers came to like the resulting buttery, nutty, toasty, vanilla, butterscotch and coconut qualities resulting from these practices as Chardonnay grew to and continues to be the most popular white wine in America.

Yet, the action beget a reaction. Heard of the “Anything but Chardonnay” movement? Its adherents eschewed the big, rich character, of heavily oaked Chardonnay and sang the praises of wines from Riesling, Gewürztraminer, Sauvignon Blanc and Pinot Grigio that typically saw no oak.

As movements go, it wasn’t so consequential but many winemakers have now decided they want to give consumers a wine that is a truer expression of the grape. So, they have begun to ratchet down the new oak and the malolactic fermentation. Numerous producers have gone all the way and eliminated both practices.

The resulting wines, fermented and often aged in stainless steel tanks, typically are bright, with a purity of apple, citrus or tropical fruit. There is a precision to these wines and a palate-cleansing natural acidity, although oak holdouts might find them lean or austere. The best

have an indigenous richness of texture and mineral complexity that comes from the highest quality fruit.

Maybe we shouldn’t be surprised that the key here is the quality of the fruit. Just like top cuts of meat or fish, the less the chef (winemaker) does to them, the better.

Speaking of food, the other problem with the rich style of Chardonnay is that the wines are not exactly food friendly. The unoaked or lightly oaked style, on the other hand, makes a perfect companion to a range of foods, from fish, seafood, white meats, ham, dishes with a cream sauce, and even salads.

Australian and New Zealand producers have really set the pace for this return to a more hands-off approach. I’ve read estimates of at least 200 different unoaked Chardonnays from these countries.

Two recent favorites are illustrative. The 2004 Starvedog Lane No Oak (\$15) from the Adelaide Hills of South



Australia is a brisk wine with citrus-lemon zest, a hint of spice and good presence in the mouth. The 2004 Kim Crawford Unoaked (\$20) from the Marlborough region of New Zealand nicely balances intense tropical fruit with refreshing acidity.

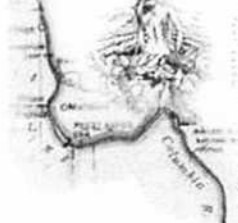
In the U.S., wineries such as Martin & Weyrich, Melville, Morgan and Mayo Family are pioneering the style in California, as are top Pinot Noir producers Bethel Heights, Chehalem and Domain Drouhin in Oregon. From Washington I found a 2004 Desert Wind Bare Naked (\$15) to be nicely representative of the style. Crisp lemon and pear fruit are exposed to the drinker without

DESERT WIND

BARE NAKED
CHARDONNAY

2004 WAKLUM ESTATE
COLUMBIA VALLEY
WASHINGTON

DESERT WIND VINEYARD



100% VINO ALCOHOL BY VOLUME

embarrassment.

Some makers of “unoaked” Chardonnay do use neutral oak barrels to round out the wine and add texture. But they know that oak should be treated like makeup or a spice — a little can provide just the right accent; too much and you lose the essence of the

original. They also go light on the malolactic or eliminate it altogether.

Stony Hill Vineyards in the Napa Valley is the paragon of this style of chardonnay. And they’ve been doing it for over 50 years, long before California became smitten with Chardonnay, let alone oaky Chardonnay.

When Fred and Eleanor McCrea planted their vineyard on Spring Mountain in 1947, there were only 200 acres in the whole state. Through the years they stayed true to their vision of a Chablis-style Chardonnay, even while most others succumbed to the oak/malolactic fashion.

Their son Peter, his wife Willinda and winemaker Mike Chelini (since 1973!) have continued the family tradition. Even though their 2002 Chardonnay (\$30) tastes elegant, even restrained, it is balanced with an intensity of apple and



citrus fruit with mineral notes attributable to its hillside origins and mild microclimate. This is also a wine that will gain complexity with age.

Maybe, just maybe, the future of Chardonnay may be its past.