

THE WINE GUY

More wineries limiting — or skipping — chardonnay's time in oak barrels

You're looking for a nice chardonnay and, as you check the labels, you see strange descriptors: "unwooded," "un-oaked," "naked" or even "bare naked."

What's up with that?

What's up is that more wineries are venturing into the brave new world of producing chardonnay without the safety net of new oak barrels.

Oak has long been an integral part of producing the chardonnays of Burgundy's Côte d'Or (for both fermentation and aging), though in Chablis to the north, barrels were used only for storage, if at all. Most contemporary winemakers, though, followed Burgundy's lead and went oakly.

Many also added a second fermentation (called malolactic, which converts sharper malic acid to softer lactic acid). Consumers came to like the buttery, nutty, toasty, vanilla, butterscotch and coconut qualities resulting from these prac-



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tices, and chardonnay grew to become (and remains) the most popular white wine in America.

Yet, the action beget a reaction. Heard of the "Anybody But Chardonnay" movement? Its adherents eschewed the big, rich character of heavily oaked chardonnay and sang the praises of wines like riesling, gewürztraminer, sauvignon blanc and pinot grigio that typically saw no oak.

Many winemakers have now decided they want to give consumers a chardonnay 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 even elimi-

nated 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.

These wines have a precision and a palate-cleansing natural acidity, although oak holdouts might find them lean or austere. The best have an indigenous richness of texture and minerally complexity that comes from the highest-quality fruit.

Unlike their richer oaked cousins, the unoaked or lightly oaked style also makes a perfect companion to a range of foods: fish, seafood, white meats, ham, cream sauces and even salads.

Australian and New Zealand producers have really set the pace for this return to a more hands-off approach. Two recent favorites are the 2004 Starvedog Lane No Oak (\$15), from the Adelaide Hills of South Australia — 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., Martin & Weyrich, Melville, Morgan and Mayo Family wineries are pioneering the style in California, as are top pinot noir producers Bethel Heights, Chehalem and Domain Drouhin in Oregon. I found a 2004 Desert Wind Bare Naked (\$15) from Washington to be nicely representative of the style.

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. Stony Hill Vineyards in the Napa Valley is the paragon of

this style of chardonnay. And they've been doing it for more than 50 years, long before California became smitten with chardonnay, let alone oaky chardonnay. Their 2002 Chardonnay (\$30) tastes elegant, even restrained, but is bal-

anced with intense citrus fruit and mineral and will gain complexity with age.

So the future of chardonnay may just be its past. Reach Rich Mauro at

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