

Chablis

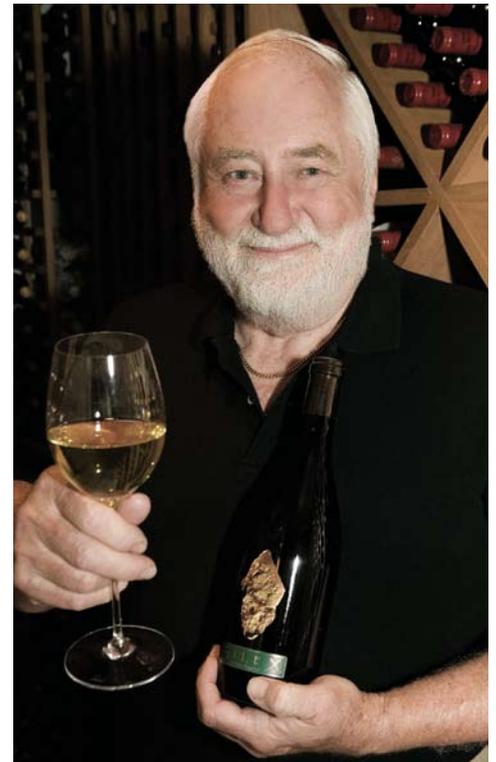
I BELIEVE CHABLIS IS THE MOST MISUNDERSTOOD WINE IN THE WORLD. *While it has been one of my favorite wines for decades, there is considerable confusion about the appellation. Much of the problem originated because the United States did not sign the Treaty of Versailles which ended World War I. The signatories agreed on many things, but one was not to misuse naming conventions. Regarding wine, two of the most flagrant violations occurred when the United States and other non-signing allies named pedestrian white wine 'Chablis' and called domestically produced sparkling wine, 'Champagne'. Thankfully, those days are behind us.*

Chablis is Burgundy and therefore is always made from 100 percent chardonnay (it's the law.) However, Chablis is located north of the rest of Burgundy and as such often has substantially different weather from the rest of Burgundy. In fact, Chablis is at the extreme limit of sustainable viticulture and the wines are generally more austere as a result. Most producers use oak sparingly or not at all in aging the wine, so it is less "round" and "buttery" than most other chardonnays whether from Burgundy or elsewhere. Most Chablis does not undergo malolactic fermentation which also emphasizes the purity of the chardonnay fruit and increases its ability to age well. All in all, these wines are very enjoyable by themselves and are tremendous food wines.

A few words about the soil helps explain why this chardonnay is in a class by itself. The vines are grown in soil consisting primarily of tiny ancient fossilized sea shells—thus the attractiveness and minerality of the wine. Geologists term the soil Kimmeridgean, and it consists of fossilized oyster shells, limestone and clay and it is somewhat similar to that found in the Loire appellation of Sancerre as well as Champagne. I've always thought that when the French use the term "gout de terroir" (literally, taste of the earth) one of the best examples is Chablis with its flinty overtones, even though it is from the ubiquitous grape chardonnay.

As is the case in all appellations, there are different quality levels. Although not generally imported, the basic level is called Petit Chablis. It is

a relatively simple wine, that is drunk locally. The next level is simply called Chablis. Although this level of offerings won't age as long as the highest two levels, Chablis is different from almost any other appellation in another way in that these inexpensive renderings (\$16-\$25) capture the essence of more expensive level wines. The next level is called Premier Cru Chablis, and in great years from quality producers can be very high quality wines. Costing from \$30-\$50 except for the great producers Dauvissat and Raveneau, these wines are generally best enjoyed from three to seven years after vintage. My favorite vintages are 2002, 2004, 2005 and 2008 is felt by many producers to be one of the all-time best. In addition to the two producers noted above, my favorites include William Fevre (which has greatly increased in quality recently), Boudin, Drouhin, Verget and Ponsot. Favorite vineyards include Vaillons, Mont de Milieu, Montmains and Montee de Tonnerre. Boudin produces a Premier Cru Chablis named Fourchaume, which is my choice as the best value high quality option. It produces a wine named L'Homme Mort, which is the only Chablis I know of which in quality terms is between Premier and Grand Cru. Although these wines are not flashy and opulent, with several years of bottle age, they become rounder and less austere. Favorite food to go with Premier Cru Chablis include Dover sole, skate, shrimp and scallops without rich sauces as well as other mild white fish, simply prepared. Vegetarian dishes can be great accompaniments also.



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The greatest examples of Chablis come from the seven vineyards comprising the Chablis Grand Cru appellation. They include Bougros, Les Preuses, Vaudésir, Grenouilles, Valmur, Blanchot and Les Clos, which is thought to be the best of these. These wines from the top producers are among the greatest wines in the world and usually cost \$60-\$90 with the exception of Dauvissat and Raveneau. The wines age exceptionally well (five to 15 years after vintage) and develop a richness overlaying the minerality underneath which must be experienced to be believed. My favorite foods to marry with Grand Cru Chablis include shellfish (except lobster) prepared in light-to-rich sauces, as well as fresh fish prepared with appropriate sauces and spices.

I implore you to try some of these wines with appropriate foods so that you can join me in some of life's greatest sensations. A sante! U