

Chardonnay

Earth's Ubiquitous White Wine

By Jim Bryant

The consumption of Chardonnay in the United States continues to lead all other wines. Yet many sophisticated drinkers and knowledgeable wine enthusiasts lament the current obsession with the grape and lean toward the “ABC” (Anything But Chardonnay) school. Why the great divide?

Chardonnay is so controversial because it has a wide range of attributes. In fact, current-release Chardonnays can be bought in the United States at prices that range from mid-single digits to \$1,500 per bottle. Such a vast range in price is accompanied by a wide range in perceived quality and value. Luckily, you don't have to spend a fortune to experience some of the best examples of Chardonnay.

Chardonnay is a green-skinned grape variety that is produced all around the world; its name is believed to come from the village of Chardonnay in the Mâconnais region of France. In general, the major debates involving Chardonnay concern whether the wine is oaked or unoaked, and whether the wine has undergone malolactic (ML) fermentation (and to what degree). ML is a process that controls flavor by converting tart malic acid via a second fermentation to softer-tasting lactic acid.

As in art, tastes in wine are personal, and many knowledgeable people enjoy both oaked and unoaked Chardonnay. Just as with art, you should experiment with both styles to determine your preference. Generally, even if you like oaked Chardonnays, the degree of oak comes into play. Since the grape is so impressionable, the newer the barrel and the heavier the degree of barrel toast, the more the wine will taste and smell of oak. Oak manifests itself by the presence of a sweet vanilla taste that can become dominant. Many people who like both styles often prefer unoaked or lightly oaked wine

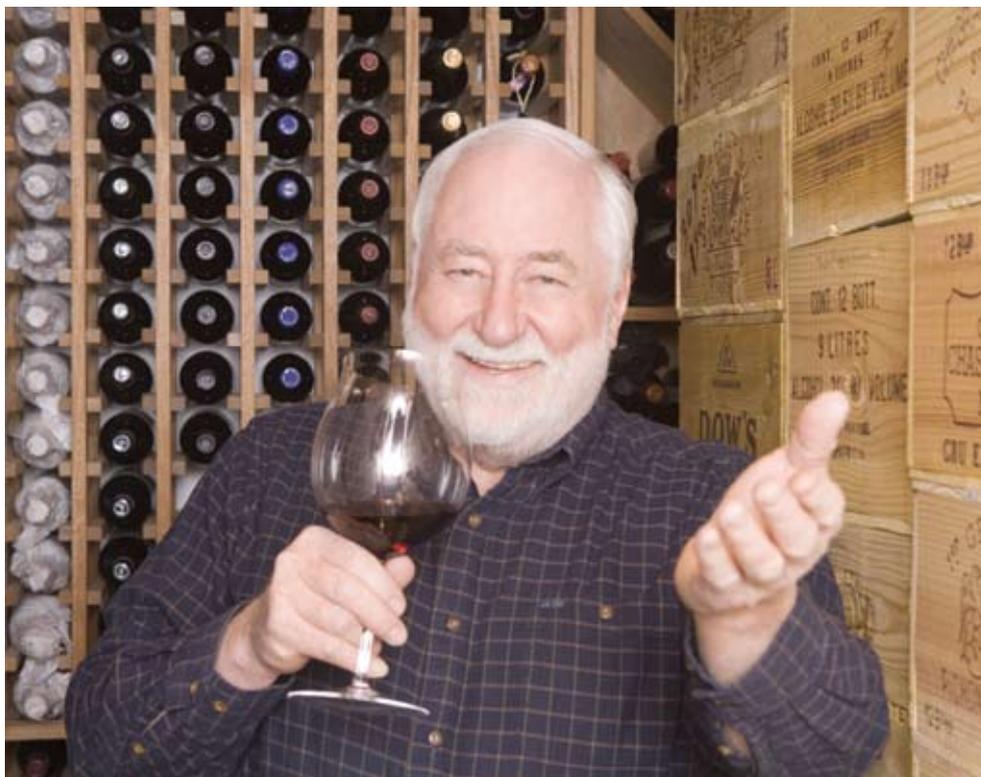


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with food so that both are in balance.

Chardonnays are produced throughout the world's wine regions. Decent, quaffable everyday examples (\$10–\$20) are readily available from France and particularly Australia. Very good examples (\$20–\$40) are produced in France, the United States, and Australia, and great examples (\$40–\$100+) usually hail from these three countries as well. As you experiment, you will find that research pays.

In France, the more expensive wines don't list the grape on the label. Look instead for the Burgundy appellation; e.g., Montrachet, Puligny Montrachet, Chassagne Montrachet, or Corton Charlemagne. These wines, from great vintages, are among the greatest wines in the world, particularly the Montrachet and Corton Charlemagne.

Quintessential food combinations are salmon or lobster with Corton Charlemagne, crab with any of the Montrachets,

and veal with either. A small area of France called Chablis also produces a Chardonnay by the name of Chablis. The higher-end Chablis, named Premier Cru and Grand Cru, are long-lived, steely, and flinty. They show much minerality and are sublime with most shellfish, except lobster. These Chardonnays from France, unlike most Chardonnays from elsewhere, will age beautifully for 10 to 20 years depending on producer, year, and storage conditions. They will be best when near or at maturity. Sante! U

Barrington resident Jim Bryant is pursuing his passion and love of wine as an international wine consultant. This follows a 30-year career in senior financial and general management positions at two Fortune 100 companies. He is the owner of James R. Bryant L.L.C. and may be reached at profwino@comcast.net.