



- PART ONE OF FOUR -

THE [R]EVOLUTION OF CHARDONNAY

CHARDONNAY'S REIGN IN THE U.S. IS UNDISPUTED. NOT ONLY IS IT THE MOST WIDELY PLANTED GRAPE, IT IS THE BEST-SELLING WHITE WINE YEAR AFTER YEAR. BUT FAR FROM TAKING THIS WHITE GRAPE FOR GRANTED, WINEMAKERS CONTINUE TO DISCOVER THE VARIETY'S POTENTIAL AND CONTINUE TO EVOLVE CHARDONNAY'S STATUS QUO.

One of the most globally revered grape varieties, Chardonnay's different iterations can be seen in some of the world's most famous wines. In Burgundy alone, the style swings from crisp, mineral-driven Chablis to round and layered Meursault. Sparkling wines, particularly Champagne, often employ the grape as part of a cuvée or a stand-alone star in a Blanc de Blancs.

The earliest documented Chardonnay cuttings in the U.S. arrived in the 1880s from Burgundy. It was nearly wiped out during Prohibition, but plantings by Stony Hill in the 1940s – the first known plantings of Chardonnay in Napa Valley – started a revival. Other winemakers soon followed suit and evolutions in American Chardonnay commenced: Hanzell was the first to do controlled malolactic fermentations, and Robert Mondavi experimented with stainless steel ferments.

Despite winemakers' interest in Chardonnay, Americans drank wine brands versus varietal-labeled wines in the 1960s and 1970s, according to Master Sommelier Larry O'Brien. At the time, "white Burgundy" was the catchall phrase to describe Chardonnay, regardless of the wine's origin. It wasn't until the Judgment of Paris in 1976 when vintners – and the drinking public – began to think about grapes specifically. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, winemakers began traveling the world – France in particular – to learn winemaking techniques. In California, David Ramey pioneered winemaking practices that he saw in the cellars of Burgundy, such as sur lie aging in barrel, using native yeasts, and eliminating skin contact. By 1988, Chardonnay plantings had increased exponentially and eventually there were more Chardonnay plantings in the U.S. than in France.



With the focus on Chardonnay came a heightened interest in finding the right style for the grape. Kendall-Jackson released its first Vintner's Reserve Chardonnay in the early 1980s, and it has been the number-one selling Chardonnay in the country for more than 25 years. In order to achieve the wine's signature flavors and aromas, Jess Jackson blended grapes from various sites along the cool Northern Coast of California. Soon, the fruit-driven and round style became synonymous with "California Chardonnay," as winemakers tried to emulate that palate-pleasing balance.

While Kendall-Jackson focused on calibrating the perfect blend of sites, wineries like Kistler reinforced the concept of terroir's influence with their single-vineyard bottlings, deepening the understanding of Chardonnay's limitless potential. Plantings fanned out across the state. In Sonoma, Mark Aubert's vineyard-designate wines showcased another side of Chardonnay. Santa Barbara County also saw a boom with winemakers like Jim Clendenen, who established Au Bon Climat.

A Terroir-Driven Focus

As vines continued to age and their physiology changed, winemakers took a closer look at their sites, and a more terroir-driven style came into focus.

"Over the last 30 years, we've really narrowed in on where we should be planting and what we should be planting, and that's where our biggest jumps in quality have come – getting the right plant material in the right place," says Jeff Stewart, winemaker at Hartford Family Winery. "For me, the best thing to do is not think about how you can make a style, or follow a trend, but to actually just express the place."

This site-specific foundation allows winemakers to zoom out when crafting their cuvées. La Crema's appellation-designate Sonoma Coast Chardonnay and Copain's Tous Ensemble Chardonnay source from vineyards in optimal locations. This micro even goes macro for Kendall-Jackson's Vintner's Reserve. "It's fun to go right down to the nitty-gritty block detail for a vineyard-designate Chardonnay; that's the future," says Kendall-Jackson winemaker Randy Ullom. "It's bifurcated: more specificity, and more blending all together for great quality coastal Chardonnay."



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Randy Ullom · Winemaker
Kendall - Jackson

Investigations into clonal selection have opened the door for other domestic regions, such as Oregon's Willamette Valley, to produce high-caliber Chardonnay. The grape is also finding its voice elsewhere in the world; in cool-climate pockets of South Africa, producers like Capensis showcase their own refined take on the variety, working with fruit from high-elevation sites and some of the oldest soils in the world.

Because Chardonnay is so widely embraced, it has faced its share of backlash over the years. But, "popularity doesn't determine sophistication; because something's popular doesn't mean it isn't sophisticated," says O'Brien. "Chardonnay is popular for the very fact that it is capable of great sophistication, and of great complexity. It's a rare variety that thrives in very diverse environments." This diversity is what continues to excite drinkers while drawing new fans into the fold.

Cellar Evolution

With a better understanding of terroir's influence, winemakers fearlessly embraced experiments in the cellar. Picking time, fermentation vessels, oak aging, native yeast, and skin contact - all these choices continue the Chardonnay dialogue.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY AMY NOONAN



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COMING TO AMERICA

Following the CHARDONNAY road from France to America.



1880s

Earliest documented cuttings of Chardonnay arrive in the U.S. from France.



1960s

This decade marks the growth of plantings throughout California. By 1988, there is more Chardonnay planted in California than all of France.



1976

During the Judgment of Paris, a blind tasting competition, California Chardonnay beats out its French competitors.



1980s

An enological boom commences as winemakers began traveling the world – France in particular – to learn winemaking techniques.



Today

Chardonnay is the most popular wine variety consumed in the U.S.



"Chardonnay is popular for the very fact that it is capable of great sophistication, and of great complexity. It's a rare variety that thrives in very diverse environments."

Larry O'Brien
Master Sommelier

The diversity of Chardonnay contributed to its popularity; options at every price made the grape accessible to everyone, and the plethora of styles available meant drinkers could find something that appealed to their palates.



- PART TWO OF FOUR -

BRINGING CHARDONNAY TO THE TABLE

AS WINEMAKERS CONTINUE TO EXPLORE A DIVERSITY OF CHARDONNAY STYLES, SOMMELIERS APPROACH THEIR WINE LISTS WITH FRESH EYES. NEW OPTIONS MEAN CHARDONNAY CAN PLAY A MAJOR ROLE IN THE DINING EXPERIENCE AND OFFER SURPRISING TWISTS ON TRADITIONAL PAIRING FORMATS.

Our love of travel has reshaped many of our notions about food and wine pairings. “I don’t really like rules anymore because we’ve mashed up cultures and cuisines all into one menu nowadays,” says Master Sommelier Michael Jordan. As global experiences make their way into dishes across the country, and as winemakers continue to evolve our notions of Chardonnay’s personalities, now is an exciting time to be eating and drinking.

“Chardonnay is well-poised to be something of a chameleon as far as its affinities with food,” says Greg Brewer, winemaker at Brewer-Clifton and diatom. While styles of Chardonnay were formerly put on a spectrum – powerful and oaky to lean and mineral – today’s range of options are like points on a compass guiding us towards countless styles.

“Chardonnay is well-poised to be something of a chameleon as far as its affinities with food.”

Greg Brewer
Founder & Winemaker
Brewer-Clifton & diatom



Breaking the Rules

Although the adage of “pairing like with like” still rings true, Jordan prefers to think of savory, saline styles of Chardonnay as a component in the dish, which complements and draws out flavors. “When you have a very crisp, citrusy, mineral-driven Chardonnay, we compare it to things that would thrive on fresh lime juice or lemon juice being squeezed on [it].” Lightly cooked shrimp, steamed clams, or other briny bivalves immediately come to mind.

Unexpected pairings not only bring something new to guests’ experiences, they change people’s perceptions of Chardonnay styles they may have previously taken for granted. Chardonnays from iconic wineries, like Freemark Abbey, that are powerful and structured are an obvious match with creamy sauces and sweeter proteins like scallops or lobster. But steak? “Put a little béarnaise on it,



“A filet Oscar with crab on top of the steak on top of béarnaise – Chardonnay is money with that. It is way better than a red wine.”

Thomas Price
Master Sommelier

then you’re in heaven,” says Master Sommelier Thomas Price. “A filet Oscar with crab on top of the steak on top of béarnaise – Chardonnay, such as Stonestreet’s Upper Barn Chardonnay, is money with that. It is way better than a red wine.”

Rewriting the Wine List

It’s not just expanding Chardonnay styles that create endless options for lists; the number of Chardonnay-producing regions continues to grow, giving sommeliers something else to introduce to their guests. “Southern hemisphere Chardonnays, they’re beautiful,” says Price. “Capensis [from South Africa] is one of the best Chardonnays in the world. Catena [in Argentina] makes gorgeous stuff from their high-altitude vineyards.”

Closer to home, “Oregon Chardonnay is going to be a really, really big deal in the very near future,” says Price. “Fresher, brighter styles of wine,” like WillaKenzie in Willamette Valley, “generally are more versatile with a wider array of foods.” Jordan agrees, noting, “this is one of the most exciting things in the wine world for me right now. We’re still just scratching the surface of what’s possible.”

Pleasure Beyond Pairings

While there’s often a big focus on complementing food and wine, the beverage performs other roles throughout the dining experience, as well. Higher-acid Chardonnays, like ones from Gran Moraine in Oregon, or Greg Brewer’s diatom, operate as more than just a best friend to oysters and shellfish. “Acidity has an astringent quality; it makes your mouth juice up when the wine has gone,” explains Jordan. “People think you drink water in between? No, no, no. Wine cleanses your palate so you can taste that next bite of food even better; that is a magical quality of wine.”



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Michael Jordan
Master Sommelier

Beyond the dinner plate, Chardonnay is well-positioned to serve as an aperitif. Restrained fruit-driven styles, like Copain’s Les Voisins, fulfill this particular niche in the dining experience, according to Price. “I think a lot of people have a glass of Chardonnay and then they move into Cabernet with their dinner,” he says. Chardonnay as an aperitif also speaks to a rising awareness of well-being in today’s society. “We’re all more focused on our health; where somebody used to drink a couple of martinis before dinner, a glass of Chardonnay offers us a delicious alternative.”

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- PART THREE OF FOUR -

THE PACIFIC COASTLINE

A SLICE OF [CHARDONNAY] HEAVEN

The Pacific coastline from Willamette Valley down to Santa Barbara holds a special appeal for winemakers, due to climate, soils, and the ever-elusive terroir. This scenic swath of the country reveals some of the most unique Chardonnays being grown today.

Chardonnay thrives in numerous regions, and a look at the grape from four distinctly different areas allows for closer examination of its chameleon-like personality. This mix of classic and emerging regions not only reveals Chardonnay's allure, but shows the trajectory of its popularity - both today and beyond.

Sonoma County, California

The Sonoma Coast has long been revered for Chardonnay, but a new movement to create distinct identities within the larger appellation has led to what Craig McAllister, winemaker at La Crema, calls an "uncoupling" movement.

"Because it's a big appellation, there are a number of soil types and climates throughout - the West Sonoma Coast pocket is vastly different from Los Carneros," he says. "So I think as people are looking for more distinctive Chardonnays, this uncoupling, in a sense, really lets us see different expressions based on where the Chardonnay is grown." In the well-established, lower-elevation Russian River Valley, where Chardonnays are revered for their purity of fruit and great acid, winemakers seek to define "neighborhoods," such as Middle Reach and Santa Rosa Plain, and articulate nuances in these classic wines.

Wrangling the ocean's influence on viticulture has led to the emergence of new regions. On the extreme Sonoma Coast, free-draining, low-vigor soils - formerly part of the sea floor - and the Pacific Ocean's moderating effect on the climate result in wines with concentrated fruit and texture, according to McAllister. Chardonnays like Hartford Court Seascape Vineyard and Copain's Tidal Break take full advantage.

At higher elevations, Chardonnay takes on a different expression. Stonestreet's high-elevation vineyards (ranging 400 to 2,400 feet), nestled

in the Mayacamas Mountains above Alexander Valley, "gets cooler coastal fog that comes through the Petaluma Gap," says winemaker Lisa Valtenbergs. The natural acidity and phenolic compounds that develop in this climate result in well-structured, age-worthy wines.

"[P]eople are looking for more distinctive Chardonnays, this uncoupling [of the region], in a sense, really lets us see different expressions based on where the Chardonnay is grown."

Craig McAllister · Winemaker
La Crema, Sonoma County



Anderson Valley, California

Anderson Valley's Sonoma-like diversity of climates contributes to its rising prominence. Fog-shrouded mornings and cooling winds mean long growing seasons for high-elevation sites like DuPratt Vineyard (1,550 feet) and Skycrest Vineyard (2,200 feet). The heat stays on the valley floor mid-day, resulting in late ripening for anything at elevation. According to



Copain winemaker Ryan Zepaltas, it's common for the DuPratt Chardonnay to be picked late in the season, but the natural acidities in the grapes remain optimal. "I always feel like there's a pear element, a good sense of chalkiness in the wines with a slight perception of sweetness on the corners that gives it soft edges, but they're very linear down the middle," says Zepaltas.

It's not just about looking up and down in Anderson Valley; influences also vary along the east-west latitude. Closer to the coast a cooler, less sunny environment takes hold, while the interior, closer to the town of Boonville, remains warmer.

Santa Barbara County, California

Santa Barbara County, with its numerous AVAs, is unified by the Pacific Coast's influence. "In the Santa Maria Valley, we always talk about our transverse mountain range," says Jill Russell, winemaker at Cambria Estate Winery. "When you're looking out, there are no obstructions to the ocean; it's an east-west valley-that's pretty rare in California. We get blankets of fog, and then when that lifts, we get a cooling wind. We call it our refrigerated sunshine." The long hang time allows for great acidity to develop, but the fossilized sea shells and marine sediments in the soils impart flavors that result in richness and freshness on the palate.

Savory, saline qualities tend to be a signature of the Sta. Rita Hills appellation. "In our particular case down here, the diatom wines have a tendency to carry a kind of lemon-lime salt, deconstructed margarita-esque [quality]," says Brewer-Clifton and diatom winemaker Greg Brewer.

"When you're looking out, there are no obstructions to the ocean; it's an east-west valley-that's pretty rare in California."

Jill Russell · Winemaker
Cambria Estate Winery,
Santa Barbara County



Willamette Valley, Oregon

Oregon's Chardonnay story has wine professionals excited for the next chapter. The original plant material was brought up from California in the 1960s, but didn't produce the same level of quality. After David Adelsheim of Adelsheim Vineyards conducted extensive research into Chardonnay clones, the proper vines made their way to the region and Oregon never looked back. But clones are only half the story. "I think soils are a big driving factor of style," says Shane Moore, winemaker at Gran Moraine. "It's almost like how we talk about soils with Pinot Noir, but we're just starting to work it out more with Chardonnay. The marine sedimentary soils are giving a little bit more of a structure to Chardonnay."

"Soils are a big driving factor of style - giving a little bit more of a structure to Chardonnay."

Shane Moore · Winemaker
Gran Moraine,
Willamette Valley



Despite the Pacific Coast's length and variety, the wines grown there do have a commonality. "There is an extremely high level of quality and attention to detail with Chardonnay that maybe wasn't there fifteen, twenty years ago," says Mollie Battenhouse, Master of Wine. With a wide diversity of styles, this is truly America's gold coast for Chardonnay.



"With a wide diversity of styles, this is truly America's gold coast for Chardonnay."

Mollie Battenhouse
Master of Wine

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- PART FOUR OF FOUR -

INSIDE THE (CHARDONNAY) WINEMAKER'S MIND

OFTEN CALLED "THE WINEMAKER'S CANVAS," CHARDONNAY REFLECTS NOT ONLY ITS TERROIR, BUT ITS WINEMAKER'S STYLE. IT'S NOT JUST ABOUT FLAVORS AND AROMAS; THESE DAYS, IT'S ALL ABOUT TEXTURE. THE CHOICES A WINEMAKER MAKES - FROM THE PICK TIME, TO THE VESSELS, TO FERMENTATION - ALL REVEAL THEMSELVES ON THE PALATE.

"The more I've grown as a winemaker, the more time I've spent thinking about texture, as opposed to aroma and mouthfeel. [Texture] really drives most of my winemaking decisions, whether that's speaking about viticulture or winemaking," says Erik Kramer, winemaker at WillaKenzie Estate in Oregon's Willamette Valley. "It's about having the right amount of energy and tension juxtaposed with viscosity, so you get this really balanced textural experience."

One of the first major decisions is made in the vineyard. "When you decide to pick, you can make everything from sparkling to really rich and ripe, so that ripeness level is very important," says Kristy Melton, winemaker at the historic Freemark Abbey winery in Napa Valley. "We find that different ripeness levels are appropriate depending on the region. So, it's not like a pick at [a certain] Brix number will get you a style."



Erik Kramer · Winemaker
WillaKenzie Estate

"The more I've grown as a winemaker, the more time I've spent thinking about texture, as opposed to aroma and mouthfeel."



Fermentation choices play a role in textures, as well. Skin contact gives Ryan Zepaltas at Copain a wine with "grip and backbone...an al dente, slightly underripe, green apple skin vibe." He divides the harvest as it comes in: some fruit will be directly pressed, some will soak on the skins for a couple of hours, while some may macerate overnight. "When we get to the blending table, we have some of those options," he says. "A short amount of skin contact - four to eight hours - feels like it adds another layer in the resulting wines."

Zepaltas also uses natural yeasts, which he feels contribute to a "truer expression" of the grape and do not mask the flavors that develop in the vineyard.

The winemaking vessel, whether for fermentation or aging, can have a profound impact on a wine's personality. For Greg Brewer's Chardonnays, which include Brewer-Clifton and diatom, "everything is raised in a neutral state." For Brewer-Clifton he uses only "really old barrels," some even decades old, and no malolactic fermentation or disturbance of the lees. "It's very straightforward; akin to slicing and plating raw fish at a sushi bar," he says. For diatom, he harnesses the ripeness of his Chardonnay with stainless steel. "It's the most vulnerable, raw kind of expression of Chardonnay that I can see myself producing," he says. "And I love pushing that envelope, that kind of teeter-totter, bass-treble, savory-sweet."

For Kendall-Jackson's wines, winemaker Randy Ullom takes a different tactic with vessel use. "When you ferment in a barrel, you build out that midpalate," he says. "Barrels also give you nuances of oak flavors, like coffee or vanilla, which come from the barrel's source - the forest it's from in France - and how you toast it." Oak is so integral to Ullom's regimen that Kendall-Jackson crafts bespoke barrels to ensure total control over the winemaking process. "We source our oak down to the tree level in France, and trace it all the way through the system, to grain tightness, how long those staves had been aged, and then our toasting regime. We're very conscious of every little detail."

While oak plays a pivotal role in Melton's winemaking, a judicious use of malolactic fermentation also helps her achieve what she calls a "quintessential and timeless" Chardonnay. "We do about a 50 percent malolactic



Randy Ullom · Winemaker
Kendall-Jackson

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treatment on the wine as well, just enough to build some richness and complexity, but not to overwhelm the wine and make it single noted from those characters," she says.

The focus on texture is building new bridges with drinkers and introducing them to Chardonnay in a different way. "Within the last five years, the Court of Master Sommeliers started teaching texture in blind tasting and how important that is," says Master Sommelier Nick Hetzel. "From a consumer standpoint, textures are an incredibly important thing to talk about because my apple might be your pear, my blackberry might be your black raspberry. So, at some point, that sort of thing becomes a little more experiential and precious. Whereas if I'm just trying to talk to you about how a wine feels through texture, I think it's a lot easier to relate to."

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