

AN INTRODUCTION TO CHARDONNAY

- Chardonnay has benefited from the world-wide boom more than any other grape variety. Winegrowers love it because it is easy to grow, produces relatively high yields and fits well into a wide range of climates. Winemakers like it because it has enough flavour and complexity to withstand a wide range of winemaking techniques, which allow a winemaker to put their “stamp” on the wine. Consumers like it because it is affordable, relatively dry, matches well with food, and the name is often heard and easy to pronounce.
- From the growers, the only major complaint is that Chardonnay buds early which puts it at risk of spring frosts and that the thin skins sometimes allows rot during wet harvests. Production is critical with anything over 80 hl/ha (4.5 tons per acre) washing out the flavours. To make truly fine Chardonnay, production must be less than 30 hl/ha or 1.7 tons per acre. Picking time is crucial as Chardonnay loses crucial acidity fast in the later part of the harvest.
- In earlier years, Chardonnay was considered part of the Pinot family and was labeled “Pinot Chardonnay”. Over recent years, this claim has been discounted and people label the wine as “Chardonnay”. On holdout has been Tyrrell’s of Australia; Bruce Tyrrell (the individualist that he is) continued to insist that Chardonnay IS part of the Pinot family and his top-end Chardonnay continues to be labeled “Vat 47 Pinot Chardonnay”.
- Much to the amusement of Tyrrell’s and the chagrin of the rest of the wine world, recent genetic testing of the researchers at the University of California (Davis) have found that Chardonnay IS part of the Pinot family to their amazement and Tyrrell’s delight, the member of the Pinot family that gave rise to Pinot Chardonnay is a grape called “Gouais Blanc”, a variety so obscure that it could only be obtained from the archives of an agricultural research centre in France. This decidedly un-noble grape is believed to have been brought to France by the Romans about 2000 years ago. Although widely planted, it was limited to inferior sites and so scorned by the authorities that they sought to ban it completely in both the 16th and 18th centuries. Today, it makes the widest range of great white wines in the world.
- The “home” of Chardonnay over the last century has been France and especially Burgundy – with the great wines of Montrachet and Corton Charlemagne setting the standards. To the north of Burgundy you will find two of the great Chardonnay regions; Champagne (pure Chardonnay is labeled as “Blanc de Blanc”) and Chablis with the steely acidity and gunflint mineral quality. To the south of Montrachet and Corton Charlemagne you find Chardonnay under the names of Pouilly Fuisse, Macon and even Beaujolais Blanc.

- In California, the Chardonnay excels in Napa and Sonoma with the heat and sunshine producing very big, full styles of wine. Cooler climates are beginning to excel as winemakers try to achieve the complexity and balance that arises in cooler climates. Sub-regions of Napa and Sonoma that are noticeably cooler, such as Carneros, Russian River are coming into their own. South of San Francisco Bay you find Monterey and Santa Barbara Chardonnays exhibiting typical California fruit with more balancing acidity.
- Washington
- Okanagan
- Chile