

A CASE FOR A CASE OF CHARDONNAY — WINEGROWER NICK PEAY

As the Wine Institute reported in 2011, “Chardonnay far and away remains the most popular wine in the U.S. and has continued to be the leading varietal wine for the last decade.” It occupies that middle ground of the wine palate, less weighty than the white wines of the Rhône, such as Grenache Blanc or Marsanne, but more substantive than say, the Albariño of Galicia. Winegrowers the world over have crafted versions from the viscous and oak-laden to the exceedingly tart and one-dimensional. And it is not static once in the bottle. By now, we’ve reminded you aplenty how wine constantly evolves and transforms over time.

And so, today, when you encounter a Chardonnay here is what you might find: The young Chardonnay, and by that I mean just finished, just bottled or about to be bottled, can be exuberant and rich with heady aromas of apples, pears and vanilla. Not exactly a wine to contemplate, but one that seems to speak of beauty yet to come when all the parts settle down and come together. But not all outgoing young Chardonnay turns into subtle, elegant, endlessly compelling wine that makes you just want to stick your nose in the glass and visit awhile. When we buy what we think is an age worthy wine and lay it down, we are sometimes surprised to find upon pulling that cork 6, 8 or 10 years hence that it has become disjointed and clunky. The rich fruit has become syrupy, the acid awkward and poking out on the back half. Some of those more overtly fruity notes may have turned into cooked winter squash and pumpkin. Not compelling. You kind of just want to put the glass down and not pick it up. But maybe that wine will evolve in the glass as older wine transforms even more dramatically in the glass. So you pick it up again, hoping against hope that magic will happen in the glass: An old Chardonnay can start out smelling oxidized and tired, only to freshen itself up with ten minutes or more in the glass to reveal an array of subtle flavors. That tiredness seems to have disappeared. Then again, it may just get collapse in a heap.

And then there are the Chardonnays that are so tight and closed in their youth that you despair if anything interesting will evolve. At times, something amazing happens and a 5-10 year transformation reveals beautiful aromatics (think lemon tart, lime oil, even tangerine zest, plus something floral). There is a delicacy with a surprising fullness in the mouth, yet cleansing acidity, and a finish that carries on long after swallowing the beverage. With time, distinctly age-related nuttiness may emerge, a touch of marzipan, and maybe a hint of clover honey will dance around the other flavors. Or sometimes you end up with a simple, crisp wine, a little faded, not worth thinking too much about. At least you won’t recoil from taking another sip. At worst, a winemaker’s idea of a long aging style of Chardonnay results in so much acidity that it is, in fact, difficult to choke down. You won’t want to pick up that glass to take another sip, either. So that is a quick summary of a range of Chardonnay flavor profiles, but there must be more to it: what compels us to toil in a field so crowded, to work with a variety that so many have sought to interpret?

Chardonnay’s very ubiquity guarantees little respect. Yet I find I gravitate to Chardonnay when selecting wines from the cellar, consuming them without guilt, but with pleasure. Last night’s garlic and butter shrimp on linguine was well accompanied by a six year-old Puligny Montrachet. Sunday’s crudo appetizer was finely complemented by a competitor’s recent vintage West Sonoma Coast Chardonnay, my tastebuds delighting while my rational mind ignored the banality of the variety. And, I do drink our own Chardonnay, though not often under the same circumstances. Often, I drink a young Chardonnay at the vineyard when customers have ventured to our remote corner to pay us a visit. A few times a year, I get to attend a Peay wine dinner where an older Peay

Chardonnay will be paired with a course which I find ideal. I just cannot deny that I get so much pleasure from certain versions of that particular variety. Secrets revealed!

Our daily nutritional needs require three meals a day, three occasions to stimulate the nerve network that results in taste pleasure sensations. While I know a utilitarian diner or two who insists on ignoring these thrice daily sensations (asceticism appeals to these penitents, perhaps), it is a greater challenge to get in tune with one's Dionysian self, to shut out the torrent of information telling you what you ought to eat and drink. Don't get me wrong, I'm all for trying the new – Greek bottarga, burdock root broth, stinging nettle sorbet – but there is a time – quite a few, I find - for the familiar deliciousness of a perfectly broiled filet of black cod with a dollop of tarragon and crème fraîche, quinoa cooked in chicken broth with caramelized onions, and a slice of strawberry rhubarb galette. I find Chardonnay can be both pleasing and familiar, and also intriguing. It can compel one to savor; to be forced to pay attention to the pleasurable taste sensations so you register a taste memory and attempt to hang on to that peak experience. If this is that old every day wine called Chardonnay, why am I having such a mind-blowing organoleptic experience?

Peay Chardonnay drinkers, often newly exposed to our wine, often exclaim that they “don't like Chardonnay, but they love” ours. Ever so malleable, Chardonnay comes in many versions. There is no shame in being a fan of a really tasty version, even if there are vast oceans of versions that are ordinary or worse. Vive le Chardonnay!