

Chardonnay – Queen of White Grapes

Chardonnay is found wherever wine is made and consumed, with statistics showing that it is the 5th most planted cultivar globally (second if you exclude red wine cultivars). It is popular among both producers and consumers – demonstrated by the fact that it is planted in more grape growing areas than any other grape and is the most widely recognisable cultivar internationally.

From the winemaker's perspective Chardonnay has the potential to produce excellent, quality focussed wines in a wide range of styles while remaining terroir-expressive and easy to work with in the cellar.



History

Genetically Chardonnay is descended from Pinot and a nearly extinct French cultivar, Gouais Blanc. Chardonnay most likely originated in Burgundy, the name is thought to be linked to a Roman-era village, Cardonnacum (which translates to 'place of thistles') in the Mâcon area – where it grows to this day. The earliest known written reference to Chardonnay was recorded by monks in the year 1330 and it is believed that Cistercian monks were responsible for the first mass production and distribution thereof.

Viticulture

Chardonnay is prolific, with potentially high yields and vigorous canopy growth, so vineyard maintenance is a priority, although site and clone selection can go a long way towards managing vigour in the foundation phases. Tightly packed, medium sized bunches of grapes are typical, quite small and fragile with a thin skin and once ripe they are a brilliant golden yellow colour. Lower yields result in noticeable concentration of flavour, especially from vines producing smaller berry sizes. It is an early budding variety but enjoys an even and slow growing season as found on the Hemel-en-Aarde Ridge. Short spells of intense heat can lead to excessive sugar accumulation, however the cool night index of 12 degrees C and cooling influences of the Atlantic Ocean as well as the south-westerly sea breezes delay ripening here by up to two weeks compared to nearby areas.

The Creation Chardonnay is produced from three Dijon clones planted on east and southeast facing slopes:

- 76 – Medium bunch weight; balanced and restrained wines. Good quality and regular production.
- 95 – Medium bunch weight; fuller richer aromatic wines; performs well in most situations.
- 96 – Leaner wines structurally with good acidity, good quality and regular production.

All three clones are quality focussed and suited to heavier soils like the clay derived Bokkeveld shale soils of the Hemel-en-Aarde Ridge which are 450 million years old.



Vinification

In the cellar, Chardonnay presents the winemaker with a number of options, most of which it responds to extremely well, being a malleable cultivar which easily adopts the personality of the winemaker and its terroir. Oak contact on Chardonnay, when judiciously applied, can add texture, richness, complexity and in many cases allows for extended bottle ageing. Lees (the dead yeast cells left over after primary fermentation) contact in-barrel can lend an appealing creaminess to the mid-palate without compromising freshness and structure. It can add autolytic flavours as well and this can be encouraged by batonage, the process of stirring up lees in the barrels as the wine undergoes oak maturation.

Flavour Profile and Food Pairing

Unoaked Chardonnay can range from fresh and mineral with citrus flavours to a softer riper style which shows sweeter

tropical fruit notes. While heavily oaked Chardonnay can overwhelm with caramelized toasty notes, a more restrained oak regime will evoke a combination of delicate vanilla and citrus fruit notes with some nutty complexity.

The Creation Chardonnay opens with glorious layers of sun-kissed pear and peach on the nose, enhanced by fresh minerality and a hint of piquant vanilla. The full-bodied palate is in perfect harmony: generously fruity and subtly spicy, with well-judged acidity contributing excellent balance and a lively, lingering aftertaste. This exceptionally food friendly wine pairs well with shellfish like prawns and crayfish, as well as creamy pasta dishes. The texture and freshness also make it perfect with crème brûlée or a platter of soft cheeses to end the meal.