

chardonnay

Unless you've lived under a rock all your life, you'll know about Chardonnay. Or do you..? **Richard Middleton** discovers more

where it's from

One of the toughest grape origins to pin point, Chardonnay is reckoned to have come from a variety of sources and most likely is the bastard child of a few different grapes. Most agree it originated in Burgundy, but how it got there and from where, nobody really knows.

'Chardonnay's origin is not clear but the current thinking is that it is a combination of the classic Pinot Noir and an obscure variety from the Balkans brought over to France by the Romans,' says Pernod Ricard's Adrian Atkinson.

'But the homeland of chardonnay is France, and in particular Burgundy,' continues Heritage Wine's Toby Mason, 'which is where the grape's reputation has been forged. There is in fact a village called Chardonnay in the Mâconnais region of Burgundy, and some people theorize that this is where it was first discovered.'

'Corton Charlemagne and Montrachet are the benchmarks against which all other Chardonnays are measured,' says Philip Goodband of Constellation Europe, 'but these days we can all enjoy refined Chardonnay wines with real complexity and balance from many and varied wine regions such as California, South Australia and Barossa.'

what it tastes like

- Mineral, apple flavours in wines from cooler climates
- Mango, melon, pineapples in unaged versions
- Richer, buttery notes from aged wines
- Creamy, nuttiness add complexity

Depending on what type of Chardonnay you're supping on, flavours can range from sweet melon hints to wines with buttery notes. But it all depends on where it gets made, whether it gets aged and just how it gets made, and the good stuff is now garnering a good response.

'It's about time Chardonnay gets the credit it deserves,' says Pernod's Adrian Atkinson. 'In my opinion, the ABC club of the 90's (Anything But Chardonnay) has had its day. It was set up by a group of Californians who wanted everyone to drink Rhone whites rather than the over-oaked, insipid wines being produced back then - and at the time they had a point!

'However Chardonnay deserves to be cool again; the wines have changed enormously and the range of styles is fantastic.'

'Chardonnay grapes produce a fairly neutral wine,' adds Tom Forrest of Vinopolis, 'but this forms the perfect base upon which to add 'layers' of other flavours. The wines themselves can be mineral and appley in cool climates or more tropical (think mango, melon or pineapple) in warmer climates with rich honey or butterscotch notes.'

'However the most common characteristics are tropical fruits, lemon, pineapple and melon, with creaminess, nuttiness, perhaps vanilla and a steely edge sometimes adding complexity,' says Toby Mason. 'The use of oak barrels (French or American usually) in the ageing process will often add definition to the wine, with added buttery character.'

Confusingly, Chablis is also made using chardonnay grapes, but named differently due to where it gets made (that is, in Chablis, northern France). Due to the chilly climate, the wines offer more acidity with less tropical flavours but more finesse.

where's best?

- Cotes d'Or, Burgundy, France
- New Zealand
- Tasmania, Barossa Valley, Australia
- California
- Stellenbosch, South Africa

It all depends what you want, as Tom Forrest explains. 'For cool, crisp Chardonnays you cannot beat Chablis especially the Premier Cru Vineyards,' he says. 'New Zealand also fits into this style as does Tasmania in Australia and the Casablanca valley. For something more tropical there is Meursault in Burgundy, the Hunter Valley in Australia and the warmer areas of California such as the Napa Valley and Santa Barbara County.'

'Chardonnay thrives in climates with warm days and cooler evenings,' says Mark Nairn, head winemaker at Codorniu, 'and it's these regions that produce some top quality Chardonnays. It's not just a matter of where the grapes come from as the wine-making process makes a huge difference to quality.'

French chardonnay also receives much praise, largely due to the quality of the wines to come out of the country,

particularly from the Burgundy, which Toby Mason reckons are up there with the best.

'The Côtes d'Or in Burgundy is, in my opinion, where the finest Chardonnay based wines come from,' he says, 'with their superb structure, depth of flavour and complexity. However there are world class and very individual wines from California, Stellenbosch in South Africa, and Auckland in New Zealand for example. A lot comes down to the individual drinker and their preferred style.'

what to eat with it

- *Mineral styles match with seafood, light poultry*
- *Unoaked versions go well with salads and grilled fish*
- *For full flavoured chardonnays think soft cheeses (think Brie)*
- *Citrus leaning wines pair up with oysters, seafood and salmon*
- *Avoid very heavy, rich foods which will drown the flavours*

From salmon to salad to seafood, you can match the right chardonnay to your meal, so get a couple on your menu and they'll find an occasion to suit, as Tom Forrest explains.

'The lean mineral style is great with seafood, light poultry and some pasta dishes,' he says. 'Oaky styles with their extra malo-lactic buttery notes go well with oily fish such as salmon and mackerel but also stand up to richer poultry and light feathered game dishes like pheasant and partridge.'

'For light delicate seafood dishes try a Chablis style,' says Constellation's Philip Goodband, 'whereas lightly oaked chardonnays are well paired with roast chicken or pork. Fruit-driven New World chardonnays and top Burgundies are great with the richest fish and light meat dishes while oaky chardonnays should be paired with smoked fish or mildly spicy south-east Asian dishes.'

'You can really enjoy the buttery taste of a good Chardonnay with something like chicken or seafood with a creamy sauce,' says Mark Nairn. 'Mild cheeses such as Gruyère or Provolone are also a great match. Oysters and salmon pair well if you have a wine with strong citrus flavours. Definitely avoid rich, heavy foods as the flavours will overpower the delicacy of the grape.'

what the experts want

- *Adrian Atkinson & Toby Mason - Le Montrachet, domaine de la Romanet Conti (France)*
- *Mark Nairn - Domaine la Flaive (France)*
- *Toby Forrest - 2003 Marimar Torres Russian River Chardonnay, Don Miguel Vineyard (California)*
- *Philip Goodband - Eileen Hardy Chardonnay 2005*

For something special, both Adrian Atkinson and Toby Mason independently recommend Le Montrachet from Domaine de la Romanet Conti. 'Without doubt Le Montrachet from Burgundy, a tiny Grand Cru area of around 8 hectares in Côtes d'Or, produces the best wines,' says Toby Mason. 'There are only



a handful of producers making wines here, and the only one I've had the pleasure of trying is Domaines Ramonet, so that would be where my (not inconsiderable amount of) money would go!'

Elsewhere, the experts tour the world for their top value buys. Toby Mason reckons the reasonably priced South African Bergsig Estate chardonnay is worth a pop at £6.64 or the Australian, unoaked Red Knot from McLaren Vale, which comes in at a dash over £8. Tom Forrest meanwhile highlights three mid priced wines from three different continents. 'From Chile there's the Errazuriz Wild Ferment Chardonnay 2007 which comes in at around the £9 or from Burgundy, Alex Gambal Meursault Clos de Cromin 2005. The Meursault is a perfect example of buttery, spicy, slightly tropical fruit wine, and costs around £15.'

what we like

We chilled down this month's offerings amongst our editorial, wine loving friends. This is what happened.



*2007 Bergsig Chardonnay 14.5%ABV
£6.64, South Africa (Heritage Wine)*

'A fragrant, floral, nose, smooth with strong oak, butter and caramel overtones just as it says on the label. Sophisticated, very moreish. Perhaps expensive?'

*2007 Jacobs Creek Reserve Vintage 14.5%ABV
£8.99 Australia (Pernod Ricard)*

'In many ways a predictable white wine... not unpleasant by any stretch but its sharpness gets you in the throat. I can't see Coleen Rooney enjoying it.'



*2006 Barossa Valley Estate, E Minor 13.6%ABV
Australia (Constellation)*

'This cut the class in two. A lower league effort, relegation battle stuff,' from one end. 'Liked the peach edge, bit of butter and melon,' from another.

*2004 Pouilly Fuissé, Margolliets, Pierre Janny
£11.94 France (Heritage Wine)*

'Reet good,' came from the Cheryl Cole impersonator, while others liked the floral nose and rounded citrus flavours, melded with the oaky edge. Champion stuff.