

Balancing Act: Chardonnay at its Best – by Alexandra Lesnak

Originating in the Burgundy wine region of eastern France, Chardonnay has since spread around the world due to the admiration of cultivators and consumers alike. This grape is renowned for its ability to express itself in a variety of styles. Though casual wine consumers may not concern themselves with much more than the question of whether or not they prefer oaked or unoaked Chardonnay, there are many factors that can contribute to flavor nuances within both of these categories. The many expressions of Chardonnay can be largely attributed to aging practices, winemaking decisions, and terroir, or the total sense of place including but not limited to climate, soil type, and elevation.

As a collection of winemakers were interviewed and their Chardonnays were analyzed, it became apparent that the variety of soils, climates, viticulture, winemaking, and aging techniques used created very individualistic wines. Of the vineyards surveyed, many had unique climate characteristics that went on to shape their grapes and later their wines. At Chalone Vineyards in Monterey, California it was noted that their particular plot was at higher elevation than the majority of neighboring vineyards. This property sat right above the fog line, therefore exposing the grapes to more sunlight and drier conditions which contribute to riper and sweeter grape yields. At Riverview Vineyard, also in Monterey, 20mph winds shut down the vines' growth each afternoon creating a longer growing season and more acidic grapes. While the high malic content of the clay soils at Sangiacomo Vineyard generated a buttery mouthfeel, the iron pellets found in the Les Gorge de Narvaux plot restrained grapes from producing a high sugar content, leading to a lively acidity in the final product.

Further distinguishing the individual wines was the diverse array of techniques chosen for the vinification and aging stages. While Llyod Cellars put their wines through nearly 100% malolactic fermentation to create the big, butter Chardonnays that are their specialty, Cuvaision chose 60-80% malolactic fermentation for their wines to create a leaner product. Further differentiating these two wines, Llyod Cellars ages in American Oak (30-40% new), while Cuvaision uses beton (concrete) eggs and then French oak barrels (25% new). American Oak is known to impart stronger toasted flavors, for example vanilla and coconut, and the percentage of new barrels further increases these flavor notes. Both Metz Road Wines and the plot at Le Gorge de Narvaux use indigenous yeasts, instead of the more commonly used cultured yeasts, to better express terroir. Though cultured yeasts are more consistent, a winemaker has to trade off the spontaneity and dynamic flavor that can be achieved through indigenous yeasts.

Chardonnay permits itself to be cultivated in a wide range of micro-climates and is malleable to both vineyard conditions and winery procedures and choices. This grape continues to stay relevant today as it's many expressions continue to captivate audiences around the globe.