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Food & Drink: Corkscrew

## Give us butter or give us death An observation of the popularity of chardonnay

BY TAYLOR EASON  
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Trite but true, Americans are like sheep. They eat at the same fat-inducing fast-food joints, drive the same ozone-eating SUVs, live in the same urban-sprawl, ticky-tacky houses, and definitely drink the same wine: chardonnay. It's unfortunate that these boring, average people breed more than the enlightened ones and thus rule the universe (and, even worse, vote), but that's our current fate. Tastemakers: Perhaps we should rise up and force the possibilities of wine onto our culture, rife with sheeplike behavior. Maybe introduce a wine with its own flavor that challenges the palate?

*Note: I must insert here that I am referring to American chardonnay, not the more complex French white Burgundies, which are completely different from most chardonnays people know and love.*

Wine professionals have rallied for years against the popularity of this over-oaked and overappreciated grape. We push Spanish albariño, Portuguese verdelho, and Austrian gruner veltliner, but the unfailing chard sales mock our efforts. I feel like I'm drowning in buttery chardonnay, with hundreds of mundane chardonnays glaring at me – at wine shops, on wine lists and even shockingly at wine dinners. Some chardonnays can surprise, but the majority are yawn-inducing, or bold but lack finesse, like sorority sisters at a Phi Cappa Crappa party. Yes, it's the easy life preserver in the sea of wine, but people, come on! With so many vibrant, delicious options out there, why drown in bland plunk?

I suppose it all started in the 1980s, when California planted so many chardonnay vines the state brimmed with white. Now left with boatloads of fruit to mash and market, practically every California winery (not to mention virtually every wine region in the world) makes a chardonnay, so competition and vast marketing resources essentially prevent decent exposure to other wines.

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What is it about chardonnay? One wine director put it, "[People] like the easy labels and the fact that it's one of the few grape varieties [they] can pronounce. They learn a word and stick with it."

History proves this, since Americans have always loved their Cali chards. Michael Roberts, of Vintage Wine Cellars in Tampa, has been in wine retail sales for 20 years. He sees "No softening of chardonnay sales ... we just can't stop selling it. We expand our selection of other varieties, but they still ask for chardonnay. ... Twenty years ago, the rage was Napa chardonnay, 15 years ago, it was Sonoma, and now it's smaller appellations and regions like Washington. But it's still chardonnay they ask for."

I just don't get it. In a conversation with a chardonnay drinker, I beseeched him to explain. "I'm drawn to chardonnay because of the often oaky, buttery taste ... it's not an exciting wine, but one that you can drink by itself or with many food types ... reliable and consistent."

But why would anyone want to drink boring wine? You could get run over by a truck tomorrow, and the last thing you drank was a dull chardonnay. That would suck – kind of like your last meal being McDonald's. To combat this fate, try something equally as rich in body with similar aromatics as chardonnay, like viognier (VEE-oh-nyay) or maybe a fragrant torrontes (TOR-aun-tez) from Argentina. Or perhaps a dressed-up chardonnay from Australia, mixed with some earthy semillon to give the buttered toast a break. Please, anything but the same old shit.

Be bold. Be a leader. Break out of sheepdom.

**Recommended Wines**

**Four Vines 2005 Naked Chardonnay Santa Barbara** A chardonnay made without ever seeing an oak barrel or a pat of butter. Pure chardonnay flavor with ripe, sweet grapefruit, lemon, and a refreshing, steely finish. Sw = 2. \$14. 4 stars

**Adelaida 2005 Viognier Glenrose Vineyard Paso Robles** Gorgeous honeyed apricots and peaches, followed by an almondish, wet stone taste. Fascinatingly different from others. Sw = 2. \$30. 4.5 stars

*Sweetness (Sw) rating is out of 10, 10 being pure sugar. Star rating is out of 5, 5 being wine nirvana.*

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