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Chardonnay - a wine that needs the Midas touch

CHARDONNAY is commonly viewed as a blank canvas on which winemakers can create their own artwork. The analogy implies that chardonnay is devoid of its own character, and needs to be worked on in the winery to produce a stylish wine. But is that really true?

Winemakers often wax lyrical about how their wine has hints of classic Burgundian nuts or Chablis-style minerality. So there is obviously a recognisable style coming out of France. In Burgundy, for example, the greatest wines are from the Cote de Beaune sub-region's old limestone soils, which chardonnay loves. A number of world-famous appellations are devoted to the vine. Running north to south, the main ones are Corton Charlemagne, Meursault, Puligny-Montrachet and Chassagne-Montrachet. Montrachet are generally concentrated, full-bodied wines with higher alcohol, and Meursault is buttery, while Chassagne-Montrachet has a nuttier character. All these wines are barrel fermented, which is the best way to achieve a proper integration between oak and wine.

Chablis is often the alter ego of the Cote de Beaune white Burgundies. The region is cooler and geographically closer to Champagne than Burgundy. It is on the edge of the northern limits of successful grape harvesting and the austere climate plays an important part in the wines' make-up.

The Chablisians are split down the middle on whether to use new oak in their wines. The traditional non-oak brigade produces subtle, lighter wines, traditionally fermented in concrete vats or stainless steel. There is a strong minerality, gun-flint and steely character in these wines that displays its terroir clearly with hints of saline or oyster shells - which seems to emanate from the fossilised remains of sea creatures in the soil. This type of Chablis is unmistakable, completely different from the rich, buttery, stone-fruit style of Burgundy.

Chardonnay is planted in all parts of Australia. Some of our best wines come from the cooler regions, including the Adelaide Hills, Eden Valley, the Mornington Peninsula, the Yarra Valley and Margaret River. Small regions such as Orange, Macedon, Beechworth and parts of Tasmania also make outstanding wines.

The climate and choice of clones seem determining factors on wine styles before you enter the winery. Cooler climates, achieved by a combination of degrees of latitude or altitude, as well as moderating maritime influence, will result in higher levels of natural acidity and a more linear structure. Aromas will often be focused around the green and citrus fruits. The warmer the climate the more the wine will display stone and tropical fruit notes.

There is no denying the fact that it is in the winery where the major decisions are made with chardonnay.

A vast range of clones is used in Australia, including the Argentinean Mendoza, French Dijon clones (76, 78, 95, 96) and American Davis clones. At an altitude of 550m in South Australia's High Eden sub-region, Mountadam vineyard was one of the first to plant chardonnay in South Australia and claims to have a rare clone called Marble Hill (named after the winter residence of the Governor of South Australia), dating back to 1860, which was brought over by a French horticulturist from Burgundy. The clone was planted by the winery's founder, David Wynn, in 1972. The first vintage, 2006, was released last year. In Western Australia, the low-yielding Gin Gin clone was the first to be planted and is still used in the Margaret River region by top producers such as Pierro.

But there is no denying the fact that it is in the winery where the major decisions are made with chardonnay. The use of indigenous yeast, barrel fermentation, battonage (lees stirring) and type of oak all

can make their mark on the final product. The longer the juice spends in contact with the skin the more flavour will come out. Flavour is concentrated towards the outside of the grape, closest to the skin, and in the skin itself. But skin contact applied to white wines can cause coarseness, so it must be carefully applied.

The level of malolactic fermentation (MLF) in a chardonnay will determine the richness on the palate and often affect the level of noticeable acidity. MLF produces two useful by-products for chardonnay: ethyl lactate, which enhances the sensation of weight or body on the palate; and diacetyl, which gives that desirable buttery aroma which builds complexity.

Oak, almost certainly French, needs to be kept in balance and accompany the fruit

rather than dominate it. Oak can produce an array of aromas in the wine, including vanilla, oatmeal, biscuit, nuts, butterscotch, pencil shavings or smoky.

Former International Winemaker of the Year Philip Shaw has been making wines for nearly 40 years, working for Rosemount, then Southcorp, before he resigned to concentrate on his own vineyard and label in the cool, high altitude region of Orange. Philip's Koomooloo vineyard is at 900m on the side of the extinct volcano, Mt Canobolas. His Chardonnay No 11 provides an example of oak regimes. The wine is fermented using 100 per cent native yeast; 25 per cent is fermented in tank, while 25 per cent sees new barrels and 50 per cent goes into one-to-two-year-old oak.

The old phrase, 'You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear', is undeniably apt for chardonnay. It needs to come from a quality vineyard, but it also needs the Midas touch to create a wine with style. 