The great white

Chardonnay is the most popular wine in the country. So why are some Western winemakers changing everything about it—and saying it’s finally good?

BY SARA SCHNEIDER | PHOTOGRAPHS BY BROWN CANNON III
Winemaker Eric Hamacher scrutinizes his Willamette Valley grapes at harvest time, to catch them at the perfect balance of ripeness and acidity.
I BROKE UP WITH CHARDONNAY 15 YEARS AGO.

For some of us, the ABC (anything but Chardonnay) crowd, it became the wine we loved to hate, decked out in new oak, tongue-coating butter, and in-your-face sweetness. And with food? Diva Chard was a train wreck.

But here I am in Oregon’s Willamette Valley, huddled over a small table opposite a winemaker, cheese-mashy style, with glasses of straw-colored wine lined up between us like so many pawns. Eric Hamacher is on a quest to make toe-curling Chardonnay a different way. He nudges one glass forward, his 2010, and issues the question any ABCer dreads: “What do you think?”

A sip spins me around, messing with all my Chardonnay reference points. There’s no cloak of new oak, no slather of butter. This wine is mouth-filling and complex, like all well-made Chard, but it’s also dancing with minerality and bright with acidity, zesty citrus, green apple, and stone fruit.

“I’m a refugee from California Chardonnay,” says Hamacher of the big oaky, buttery style. “Funny, so am I, though the crowds aren’t with us. Chardonnay, much of it the outsized ‘California style,’ accounts for 21 percent of the wine we drink in this country. (Cabernet Sauvignon is a distant second, at 12 percent.) Hamacher made wine in California until he felt like he was being pushed too far to chase that style, to meet popular taste. In 1995 he moved north. “I was shocked at how bad the Chardonnay here was then,” he says. “But Oregon shares a parallel, rainfall totals, and temperature patterns with Burgundy,” the variety’s cool home in France. “I had to believe it could be good here,” he says.

Hamacher wasn’t the first to believe this, of course. It was natural for the Oregon pioneers of Pinot Noir in the early ‘70s to have a go at the exquisite white grape that grows alongside it in Burgundy. (If you’re drinking a red Burgundy, it’s Pinot; if you’re drinking a white, it’s Chardonnay.) But the early efforts at Chardonnay were dull as dishwater, and the grapes ripened weeks after the Pinot, dicey when rain threatens early in the fall. After numerous dismal tries, most Willamette winemakers ripped out their Chard vines and planted more Pinot.

A small band of tenacious believers persisted, though. David Adelsheim, one of the first winemakers in the valley, made a beeline to France to look for clues about why they were failing. “There the Chardonnay ripened at precisely the same time as Pinot Noir,” he says, “and with all the flavors in place that make it an interesting wine.” The light went on. In Oregon, they had planted clones from California, developed to ripen slowly in warmer places. They were very wrong for Oregon.

But you can’t just tuck some vine cuttings into your Samsonite and whisk them home to propagate. Adelsheim, working with cohorts like Rollin Soles of Argyle and Harry Peterson-Nedy of Chehalem, spent the next dozen years developing a pipeline through Oregon State University’s agricultural quarantine program. When the namedly named French clones—"76," "95," "96"—showed up in a box at OSU, someone whose name is lost to history said, “That must be the sticks from Dijon.” And from that moment they have been known Stateside as Dijon clones.

Only in 1989 did the particular Dijon clones best suited to the Willamette Valley become available. Since then, an increasing number of winemakers, including those pioneers and Hamacher, have been intensely honing their techniques on them in this promising place. “We didn’t set out to make white Burgundy,” says Adelsheim. And I have to agree—there’s more bright fruit in these wines. “But by keeping the extremes down—oak and alcohol—with our acidity, minerality, and freshness, we’re able to make elegant, balanced Chardonnay.”

The Oregon excitement gives me the courage to sidle up to California Chardonnay one more time, starting in chilly western Sonoma County. I’m ensconced in front of an arc of glasses on an expansive table at Paul Hobbs’ Lindsay House in the Russian River Valley. Outside, the fog plays cat and mouse through the vineyards. Inside, the Chardonnays are vibrant. “Great
A sip spins me around—this is not the Chardonnay I left behind.
The wine is dancing with minerality and bright with acidity.
Chardonnay has a sense of place,” Hobbs tells me. “It reflects where the vines are rooted.” The Russian River Valley is “simply outstanding for thin-skinned Burgundian varietals,” he says, because of its deep, well-drained soils, moderate to cool climate, and large shift between daytime and nighttime temperatures.

Contrasting his impeccably balanced wine with the sweet, flabby beverage I sent packing, I have to ask, How did big, fat Chardonnay ever come to rule? Blame a stuck fermentation, in part. Back in 1982, so the story goes, the fermentation on a portion of the Chardonnay at Sonoma’s Kendall-Jackson winery famously stopped before the yeast had eaten up all the sugar. They bottled the wine anyway. It won an award, sold out in weeks—and slightly sweet Chard became the darling of California whites.

BUT SUGAR ISN’T THE WHOLE STORY. After a Chateau Montelena Chardonnay (made by then-winemaker Mike Grgich) beat out all the white Burgundies in the legendary 1976 Judgment of Paris tasting, putting California Chard in their league, winemakers here started down an American-like bigger-is-better path.

They began out-Burgundy the Burgundians, running amok with the core techniques. Much white Burgundy is fermented and aged in oak casks or barrels to lend weight and flavor to wine that might otherwise be a little thin because it was grown in a chilly place. So we did too—even though it’s decidedly not chilly in most of California. And our sun-induced high alcohol levels extract even more cloying caramel and butterscotch flavors from those toasted barrels.

In cool Burgundy, Chard comes in with enamel-stripping acidity, needing a second fermentation that transforms harsh malic acids into mellow lactic ones—exactly the same as in dairy products, and thus the “butter” in Chardonnay. California winemakers adopted malolactic fermentation with gusto, even when their acidity was in the basement, and the result could stand in for buttered popcorn at the movies.

Still, Mike Grgich did make a Chardonnay that even French judges applauded (before they knew it was from Napa). My search leads me to his latest—and, over the wine’s vivid, focused finish, to breakup remorse. Clearly, Grgich never lost his way. And my tasting research turns up a handful of other longtime winemakers who’ve hewn to balance all along.

They, along with Hobbs and a few other minimalist winemakers in the coolest swaths up and down California—from far-west Sonoma to Santa Barbara County—are picking their grapes at lower sugar levels, dialing back on new oak, modulating malolactic fermentation, and generally showing the art of restraint.

Still, only now are there enough racy, minerally, bright-fruited Western Chardonnays to call it a movement. Pour me one more glass of crisp, brilliant, balanced Chard—a complicated number that engages my mind along with my senses—and I think I’m back in this relationship.

TERRIFIC AT THE TABLE

The combination of subtle richness, texture, and good acidity makes a well-balanced West Coast Chardonnay a much better food partner than overoaked, flabbier versions. The acidity holds up to the zippy vinegar-spiked dressings and sauces we love, and on the other hand, it cuts through more indulgent butter and cream sauces. If the wine has an earthy vein of minerality, it can be happy with wine-challenging ingredients like garlic, green veggies, and savory herbs, even eggs. And if it’s been stirred on its lees a bit, for some toasty bread dough character, it’s a natural with foods that involve pastry or batter. This seafood salad recipe (from our June 2012 issue) is one of our favorites with new-wave Chard; visit sunset.com/newchard for more killer pairings.

Seafood salad with creamy tarragon dressing +
Soter 2011 “North Valley” Chardonnay
(Willamette Valley; $30)

SERVES 4 AS A MAIN-DISH SALAD | 30 MINUTES

Serve this seafood mix on a bed of dressed watercress or butter lettuce, or as a sandwich in toasted brioche buns or on crusty bread.

1 lb. peeled, deveined medium shrimp (30 to 35 per lb.)
⅓ lb. bay scallops
½ lb. cleaned calamari, bodies cut into ½-in.-wide rings and tentacles cut in half lengthwise
⅓ cup mayonnaise
1 tsp. lemon zest
⅛ cup fresh lemon juice
¼ cup coarsely chopped fresh tarragon
1 tbsp. Dijon mustard
About ½ tsp. each kosher salt and pepper
⅛ cup coarsely chopped watercress leaves
1 avocado, pitted, peeled, and diced

1. Bring a large pot of water to a boil over high heat. Add shrimp, scallops, and calamari. Cover, remove from heat, and let steep just until shrimp are pink on the outside and opaque but still moist-looking in center of thickest part (cut to test), about 3 minutes. Drain seafood and immerse in ice water until cold; drain again.

2. Meanwhile, combine mayonnaise, lemon zest and juice, tarragon, mustard, and ⅛ tsp. salt and pepper in a food processor. Whirl until smooth.

3. Combine seafood, watercress, capers, and dressing in a large bowl. Add more salt and pepper to taste. Gently stir in avocado.
Our new Chardonnay crushes

**Willamette Valley**

1 | **ADELSHEIM 2011** (325). A fresh, mineral mix of apple, almond blossom, and nectarine with a burst of juicy, pleasantly puckery lime zest on the finish.

2 | **STOLLER 2010 DUNDEE HILLS RESERVE** (Dundee Hills, 328). A riot of vibrant flavors—pear, spiced citrus with a drizzle of honey, a little almond—which is balanced by beautiful acidity, elegant minerality, and a touch of brûlée.

3 | **ARGYLE 2010 “NUTHOUSE”** (Eola-Amity Hills, 335). Nut blossoms worthy of the name are balanced by Asian pear, pithy citrus, and a briny ocean breeze.

**Sonoma**

7 | **INMAN 2011** (Russian River Valley, 335). Snappy acidity makes the classic apple, pear, melon, stone fruit, fig, and almond blossom lineup buzz.

**Napa Valley**

10 | **GRGICH HILLS 2010** (326). Fresh straw, herbs, and creamy lemon around a core of intense tree fruit, including spicy quince.

**Edna Valley**

12 | **BAILEYANA 2009 “GRAND FIREPEAK CUVÉE”** (326). Exotic tropicals and just a hint of vanilla flirt with mouth-filling, creamy Meyer lemon.

**Santa Barbara County**

24 | **AU BON CLIMAT 2010** (326). Pithy grapefruit gives a lift to creamy lemon, pineapple, and almond blossom edged with minerality.

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