

# THE GLASSHOUSE

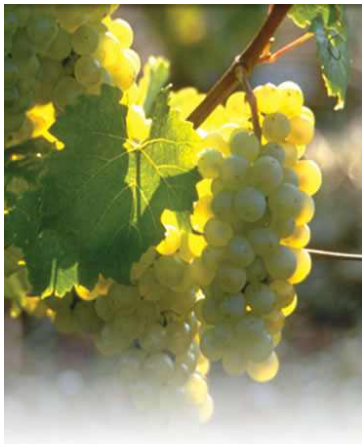
## WINE APPRECIATION SOCIETY

### MODULE 6

#### CHARDONNAY

IS IT AS SIMPLE AS 'ABC'?

In our last session we reviewed and tasted that most sensitive of grapes – Pinot Noir. By contrast Chardonnay – the world's most populous and widely spread white wine grape could not be more accommodating and 'easy' to grow. However in a deliciously ironic manner chardonnay finds its greatest expression also in the heartland of Pinot Noir in Burgundy in France. Indeed some of the finest Pinot Noir producers are also the finest Chardonnay houses- or are sited alongside each other.



Perhaps because Chardonnay is so accommodating it expresses itself in a million different ways. And as ever the French system of wine classification can help to add some confusion for the man in the street. For Chardonnay can be one and the same grape that can be perceived to produce the most exquisite of subtle white wines, being amongst the most prized in the world – but also capable of producing some of the cheapest and most unpopular wines. This could be the reason behind those who have responded to an invitation to drink wine with – 'Anything But Chardonnay' – including for example Prime Minister John Major, but might also say that they love Puligny-Montrachet, Meursault or Chablis!

Chardonnay is now grown right around the world and right around France too. This evening we will taste a broad range of wines that capture both terroir and production techniques. Hopefully we will be able to discover why the world went crazy for the grape and then wanted to turn away from some of the – 'very big' examples of its production.

Once again though we will see how the inspiration for the development of this wine variety around the world came from the very finest tradition of French wine making.

#### A BIT OF HISTORY

Until the 1980s the name Chardonnay did not appear on wine bottles and in fact was hardly grown outside its Burgundian homeland. Wine buyers were aware of Chablis, Montrachet, Meursault or Corton-Charlemagne to name but a few stalwarts but only the wine grower fussed over the grape. It is again worth recalling that under the French system of appellation contrôlée classification wine varieties are expressly forbidden from appearing on labels. Only on non-classified wines can the grape be named on the label. Because for the French what is important about wine is from where it derives – its terroir or climat.



But in the 1980s something quite revolutionary started to happen - and then developed into a broad trend that has really been unstoppable ever since. Grape varieties began to appear on wine labels – everywhere else in the world. Most particularly it was Chardonnay that became the most popular with its name planted slap bang in the middle of the label.

Wine drinkers found it easy to enjoy and vine growers found it is easy and profitable to grow. Chardonnay produces a consistent wine and improving production techniques meant that volumes could grow. It became the New World's rite of passage – new wine makers just had to produce a Chardonnay. There was literally an explosion of Chardonnay plantings, most notably in Australia so that by the 1990s the inevitable ensuing overplanting meant huge over production.

Whatsmore much of the new production became a technical production issue in 'wine factories' producing what many felt were consistent but 'boring' wines – in contrast to the centuries old family traditions that prevailed in Burgundy and relied more on what happens in the vineyard.

Also because Chardonnay lends itself to being matured in new(ish) oak barrels – as in Burgundy - a money-saving and time saving short cut saw cheaper Chardonnays being produced somewhat more quickly with oak chippings! For many who don't like the taste of Chardonnay it is actually the taste of oak to which they are really objecting. (There is a view that the principal beneficiaries of the New World craze for oak fermented Chardonnay were French coopers). The backlash against this new Chardonnay arrived just as the huge increase in production peaked. Prices fell and Australia had to get rid of its excess production – much of it ending up in 'cheap' deals in UK supermarkets.



## **THE GRAPE AND THE CLIMATE**

The reason for the growth in Chardonnay production around the world derived largely from the adaptability of the grape.

Decent Chardonnay can be produced in really quite hot regions such as California, South Africa and Australia. In these regions the heat gives the wine tropical fruit flavouring- and of course oak chips will make it taste of oak chips! And in much cooler wine regions such as Chablis, New Zealand or Tasmania the grape will give a fresh apple tingle which in much cooler years can veer towards thin acidity – eg some very cheap Chablis. The best examples of the grape can benefit from five or so years maturing in the bottle as in the finest Burgundies. But only in the finest Burgundies will it keep longer.

In cooler regions the grape can also give a subtlety for makers of sparkling wines – and Chardonnay is for example, the second most important grape in Champagne after Pinot Noir.

Wines from Chablis – the most northerly and coolest wine area in France have a particular taste. Jancis Robinson talks of 'wet stones with some suggestions of very green fruit, but without the strong aroma and lean build of a Sauvignon Blanc'.

Chablis lends itself to maturing for a long-time in the bottle. Top quality Chablis will display a mustiness after a few years – ‘as if the wet stones have sprouted some moss’ and then after about 8 years in the bottle it can develop much more complicated often delicious honey like flavours.

And then in more temperate climates Chardonnay will produce some of the finest white wines in the world. The heartland of Burgundy, the Cote D’Or and in particular Cote de Beaune, just as with Pinot Noir, is at the epicentre of the very finest Chardonnay production. Wines here produce a savoury but dense medium through which hundreds of vineyards and producers can make wines of individual character - but only after maturing in the bottle for a number of years.

In the Cote d’Or wines are matured in small oak barrels and are usually not worth drinking before they are three or four years old. But then the full richness of hazelnuts, liquorice, butter and spice and more aromas develop in these full bodied wines.

## THE LAND

### BURGUNDY

Generally speaking – and this is not an area that lends itself to generalisations – great Pinot Noirs pre-dominate in the more northerly Cote de Nuits and great Chardonnays pre-dominate in the Cote de Beaune at the southern end of the Cote d’Or. Chablis at the very northern end of Greater Burgundy is planted almost exclusively with Chardonnay.

The famous names of white Burgundies include Montrachet (both ts are silent) Puligny Montrachet, Chassagne Montrachet, Meursault and Corton-Charlemagne. These wines can differ enormously – Meursault for example tends to be butter golden and heavier than the wines from the Montrachets which exhibit a leaner purer character and which can mature for up to a decade in the bottle.

But as can be expected there are no hard and fast rules when it comes to pinning down Burgundy. Some believe that it is simply due to trial and error. Pinot Noir has been grown the length and breadth of the Cote d’Or for over ten centuries but the use of Chardonnay for white wines is much more recent. Initially chardonnay was grown here and there but was found to produce better results at the southern end of the Cote d’Or. The climactic differences are minimal over 30 kilometers – but what seems to make the difference is that there was much more marl (limy clay) in the soil in the southerly Cote de Beaune than the Cote de Nuits where the limestone soil favour Pinot Noir. However the obvious point to note is that the Cote de Beaune is almost twice the size of the Cote de Nuits and even though its great celebrity is with Chardonnay this area actually produces more red wine.



In the far south of Greater Burgundy in the Macon – ‘...the wines are often much more akin to New World wines – plump, open and user friendly wines that can taste of melon or apples warmed by the sun.’ – Jancis Robinson. Names such as St Veran and Macon Blanc need to be drunk within a few years of being in the bottle but wines such as Pouilly Fuisse can often be great quality akin to but at much lower prices than in the Cote d’Or.

## **CHABLIS**

'Chablis does not belong in Burgundy. Ask any geographer: the two are doubly different. Different on the basis of water; different on the basis of stone.' Andrew Jefford., the New France. And so not surprisingly wines from Chablis can seem quite different - thinner and more acidic – than the luscious wines of the Cote d'Or.

## **AROUND THE WORLD**

The best Chardonnays in California, Australia and South Africa tend to be grown in areas where there is some element of night coolness or sea cooling. So the sea fogs in and around San Francisco or the cooling south Atlantic near Walkers Bay near Cape Town or the cooler areas of Australia – such as Tasmania – can produce subtle wines similar to those found in the Cote d'Or. New Zealand is emerging as a successful Chardonnay producer and again it is the combination of day time warmth and night time coolness that aids producers here.

Chardonnay is now also grown in Chile and Argentina and is already testing the cheaper and middle market producers from the old-new world!

## **TONIGHT'S TASTINGS**

### **FRANCE**

#### **Chablis Jean Gouley**

An example of a steely flinty wine from Chablis. The family produce only 11.000 cases a year from 18 hectares.

#### **Macon Villages Domaine Botti**

Traditional vinification from the heart of the Macon but fermented in stainless steel.

#### **Meursault**

One of the greatest white wines of the world.

#### **Domaine de Pourthie**

A Chardonnay from the Languedoc in the south of France. This is a great example of a French region making a chardonnay in a 'New World' style. Fresh crisp and also fantastic value.

### **SOUTH AFRICA**

#### **Hamilton Russell, Walkers Bay, Hermanus**

We spoke and tasted their Pinot Noir last time – and the same applies to their Chardonnay. One of the finest Chardonnays outside Burgundy. Located in a sublime vineyard at Hermanus along the coast from Cape Town. The most southerly wines estate in Africa- and the closest to the sea. Chosen by the Hamilton Russells specifically to grow Burgundian style wines as the vineyards are cooled by the south Atlantic breeze. This is a real treat.

### **NEW ZEALAND**

#### **St Clair Omaka Chardonnay**

The Chardonnay wine from Neil and Judy Ibbotson. A beautiful example of a New Zealand Chardonnay.

## AUSTRALIA

### Foundstone

Bob Berton's no nonsense but technically brilliant chardy. Fermentation is in stainless steel tanks. There is no oak maturation.

