

## **Fêteing Chardonnay the Oregon Way**

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“To drink a series of white burgundies, or Chardonnays, as you might several clarets at a sitting, with the object of comparing them, is unusual,” observes Hugh Johnson in *A Life Uncorked*. On 27 February 2016, 250 wine industry members and consumers gathered for the fifth Oregon Chardonnay Celebration (OCC) at The Allison Inn & Spa in Newberg, Oregon, to do just that. Highlighting the growing importance of Burgundy’s premier white variety in the New World’s best location for its premier red variety, the International Pinot Noir Celebration (IPNC) is now a partner in the OCC. This alliance was first announced at an afternoon tasting of Chardonnays produced by some of the invited winemakers at the 2015 IPNC. A name change from Oregon Chardonnay Symposium and a move to posher quarters signaled more ambitious plans.

### **The Media Dinner**

The evening before OCC, a handful of media invitees including this writer gathered at Adelsheim Vineyard for a preview of the main event. At the reception, winemakers from Adelsheim, Alexana, Chehalem, Evening Land, Ponzi and Stoller, and the managing director of Domaine Drouhin Oregon, poured samples of 2013 and 2014 Chardonnay and discussed their approaches to dealing with each vintage.

We were then invited into the handsome dining room to enjoy a three course dinner prepared by the winery’s chef accompanied by one new and several older vintages. Seared diver scallops were matched with Domaine Drouhin Oregon’s floral, rich 2014 Roserock Chardonnay from a recently acquired vineyard in the Eola-Amity Hills American Viticultural Area (AVA) and Alexana’s complex 2012 Willamette Valley Chardonnay, its first wine from that grape. Next came spaghetti carbonara with pancetta and parmesan accompanied by Stoller’s crisp, youthful 2011 Reserve Chardonnay and Adelsheim’s juicy, food-friendly 2010 Caitlin’s Reserve Chardonnay. The third course, chicken scallopine, was matched with a trinity of older vintages, which evoked solemn admiration. Chehalem’s 2008 Ian’s Reserve Chardonnay and 2007 Evening Land Seven Springs Vineyard, Summum were both youthful with great acid balance. The polished Ponzi 2006 Chardonnay Reserve was riper and lusher. Each convincingly demonstrated that Oregon Chardonnay can comfortably age along with the best of them regardless of annual variations. Winemaker Luisa Ponzi opined: “Oregon Chardonnays miss some of the drama of Oregon vintages since they are picked early.”

### **Panel Discussion & Tasting**

A Case Study: Interpreting Chardonnay filled the first 2 hours of OCC. Arrayed in front of us were five glasses containing samples of wine made by five different winemakers from Dijon clone 96 Chardonnay harvested from the Lark Block of the Durant Vineyard in 2014. Two were

component wines destined to be blended, two were barrel samples of what will be single vineyard bottlings, and one was a complete wine already bottled and released.



Leading off the session, Moderator Elaine Brown observed that Chardonnay is the most site expressive and most expressive of the winemaker's intent. Willamette Valley Chardonnays display a constellation of tiny flavors that accumulate to give the same amplitude as those from California. This Sonoma County resident proclaimed Oregon Chardonnays unique, delicious and fine.

Paul Durant detailed the characteristics of the Lark Block of his eponymous vineyard. A wheat field until the late 1980's, this 200-foot elevation sedimentary soil site was planted with Dijon clones of Chardonnay in 1991.

Brian Marcy of Big Table Farm offered one of the component wines which showed bright floral notes with a flash of anise. His goal is simply delicious and balanced wine. He picks when he can obtain complete fruit requiring no adjustment. The wine fermented from 22 brix to bone dry in 4½ weeks and underwent malolactic fermentation.

Thomas Bachelder of Bachelder Oregon contributed one of the samples of what will be a single vineyard bottling. It had a juicy nose of concentrated fruit which continued on the palate with good acidity, nice balance and a long finish. The wine went through malolactic fermentation. Bachelder pointed out that to get good acidity from grapes from a vigorous site like the Lark Block and avoid fruit bombs, one needs a minimum amount of fruit. The more time the wine spends in the barrel, the more varietal features fade and “you can see the face of the stone.” In other words, you can taste the land. He also avoids talking about angel’s share, the wine that evaporates from barrels, but rather says to look down instead of up as a cook does when reducing a sauce.

Joe Dobbles of Dobbles Family Estate showed a component wine which displayed bright lemon, richer flavors and lower acidity. It will be blended with equal amounts of Dijon clone 76 from the same vineyard. He used 30% new oak and no malolactic fermentation. He picks his barrels based on flavor, noting that bigger is not better, and looks for richness, mouth feel, higher acidity, texture and primary and tertiary fruit. Chemistry is a secondary consideration. He loves Burgundy and brings back yeast from there.

Marcus Goodfellow of Goodfellow Family Cellars brought a wine that will be bottled as a single vineyard Chardonnay in another five months. Its nose and palate were dominated by toasty oak with a burst of juicy fruit flavor. He advocates slow fermentation followed by slow *élevage* (barrel aging) in larger barrels to avoid the wine becoming tired. As is done for white burgundy, his stylistic model, he uses a mixture of barrel types including *barriques*, *puncheons* and larger casks. The wines only undergo malolactic fermentation in one of these. His goal is to have the wine taste like the site and have intense flavor. He picks early to get brighter acidity.

Paul Durant is a farmer, not a winemaker, so his contribution, the sole finished offering, was made by Isabelle Dutartre. It exhibited medium intensity, nicely balanced fruit, rich flavors, a bit of heat and a medium finish. It did complete malolactic fermentation.

Brown noted the savory element and fruit core in all of the samples. While Marcy said that winemakers are still trying to find their voices, Brown, as an outsider, thought it was a really exciting time for Oregon Chardonnay with more media attention, increased investment and plantings. She urged us to remember this: Oregon Chardonnay is on the verge of exciting changes.



### **Grand Tasting**

For the next 2 hours, the emphasis turned from technical and educational to festive. Chardonnays from 44 wineries in the Willamette Valley and one each from Southern Oregon and the Columbia Gorge AVA were poured, in most cases by their producers. I tasted 21, many of which needed to be warmed or allowed to breathe a bit before sampling. Three from the 2015 event were poured again and once again merit mentioning: the elegant Beaux Frère 2012 Gran Moraine Chardonnay, the yummy Brittan Vineyard 2013 Chardonnay and the very pretty EIEIO 2013 Cuvee O Chardonnay. Other standouts included the polished Crowley Wines 2013 Four Winds Chardonnay, the floral Longplay Wine 2013 Lia's Vineyard "Jory Slope" Chardonnay, the hunger-inducing Matzinger Davies 2013 Chehalem Mountain Chardonnay, the herbal REX HILL 2013 Seven Soils Chardonnay, and the chalky ROCO Winery 2014 Chardonnay.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Like the wine it regales, the OCC is an event that is rapidly maturing into an important annual vinous affair. The first years were focused on technical aspects and aimed at producers who were at the vanguard of promoting Chardonnay as a major varietal, as logical as Pinot Noir is for our state. And while discussions among wine industry peers remains central to the event,

consumers are now invited to participate as well. The result is that the seminar walked the line between delving into the technical aspects of producing distinct Oregon Chardonnays and addressing some of the most basic questions from nonexperts regarding winemaking and wine tasting. That can be a lot to ask given the time limitations.

According to the Full Glass Research report dated January 2015, Chardonnay plantings in Oregon in 2013 covered 1,164 acres, a distant third behind Pinot Noir and Pinot Gris. And though that same year, 2,605 tons of Chardonnay were brought in, almost up to the 2,846 tons in 2000, Oregon still has a long way to go before this variety attains the pre-eminence that its red Burgundian counterpart has. That the IPNC has embraced this event is an important step toward the marketing aspect of gaining this grape its rightful place. As we leave the Anything But Chardonnay (ABC) error behind, we should now be asking Why Not Chardonnay? We'll know it has arrived when the O in OCC is changed to I for international.

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