

O Chardonnay

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Whether Chardonnay is the best of grapes, the worst of grapes or something in between is on the palate of the taster. On 14 March 2015, the fourth annual Oregon Chardonnay Symposium, hosted by Stoller Family Estate, pressed the case for the Willamette Valley expressions of this prominent white Burgundian cultivar being recognized on a par with its Pinot Noir. The four-hour event, themed “Attack of the Clones,” was equally divided between a Technical Session and a Grand Tasting. Stoller’s stunning tasting room was extended and tented to provide shelter from the late winter rain.

Technical Session

Rajat Parr, a partner and proprietor of Seven Springs Estate in the Eola-Amity Hills as well as of two other wineries in California, moderated the panel discussion. Addressing history, Jason Lett of The Eyrie Vineyards led off with an attack on the clones, encouraging us “to stop talking about clones by talking about clones.” He asked, since they don’t talk about clones in Burgundy, why should we here? He also provided evidence that challenged the impression that the early clones planted in Oregon were lackluster. His 2012 Original Vines Reserve from the heritage Drapper Selection was extremely elegant with honeyed perfume, lovely texture and a fine mid palate. The balance was excellent with nice acidity and a bit of toast on the finish.

John Paul of Cameron Winery took a scientific/philosophical approach. He differentiated between clones and vineyard selection and pointed out that these are frequently confused. His 2012 Clos Electrique Blanc from heritage clones offered an intense honeyed aroma with flavors after the nose. It was more bold than elegant, and finished long with good acidity.

Craig Williams owner of X Novo Vineyard in Eola-Amity spoke about diversity. He advocated clonal diversity for complexity and the health of the vineyard. The 2013 Walter Scott X Novo Vineyard Chardonnay was a clear reflection of this disjoint vintage. The nose was very toasty with floral and spice attempting to push through, the flavors were somewhat diluted but the finish was reasonable.

Thomas Bachelder of Bachelder Wines compared Chardonnay vineyards in Oregon, Niagara and Burgundy. The latter are mostly field blends of various clones. Oregon and Niagara plant wider than higher. The aroma of his 2011 Johnson Vineyard bottling initially burst forth with very ripe tropical fruit but then gave way to chalk. Some juicy fruit was noted on the palate with a hint of toast and a nice mid palate. It opened up with air.

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Mimi Casteel of Bethel Heights Vineyard talked about how to farm. She stated that while differences between clones are not interesting, they are important. Because there is no skin contact, it is hard to relate terroir to Chardonnay. Nevertheless, since it will grow anywhere, where the cultivar is planted must be selected carefully to get something elegant and transparent. The aroma of the 2013 Bethel Heights Casteel Reserve led with wet stone and juicy fruit but while elegant on the palate, was light and short, again reflective of the vintage.

Rajar Parr's presentation just addressed his 2007 Seven Springs Estate "Summum" Chardonnay. Hazelnuts dominated the bouquet with light toast and some fruit. The entry was delicate and demur while the mid palate was bolder. The finish was long and the overall impression was classy, elegant and confident.

As John Paul aptly summarized: "Clones absolutely matter and the more the merrier."

Grand Tasting

Only 56 of the more than 100 Chardonnays sampled by the organizers were selected to showcase. I tasted 16 during the two hour session. Here are some highlights. The 2012 Antica Terra Aurate displayed toasted hazelnuts, great balance, nice acidity and a long yummy finish. A 2012 Beaux Frères Gran Moraine offered a similar experience. Bergström poured both the 2012 and 2013 Sigrid and, as they were representative of each vintage, they couldn't be more different. The 2012 was big, buttery and rich while the 2013 was much more restrained and untypically bright. A 2010 Belle Pente, Belle Pente Vineyard offered toasted hazelnuts over fruit, an elegant mouthfeel and medium long finish. One of the more complex pours was the 2013 Big Table Farm which showed spice as part of the flavor mix. Another delight was a mouthwatering 2013 Brittan Vineyards Chardonnay with a very floral nose.

I was particularly impressed with bottles from the warmer 2012 vintage which reined in the fruit and struck a balance with other components. These included the typically restrained 2012 Brick House Cascadia and the nicely balanced 2012 Matzinger Davies. Two particularly food friendly wines were the 2012 Soter North Valley Reserve, with its laser focused aroma and bright citrus flavor, and the 2012 Stoller Family Estate Reserve Chardonnay, with an amalgam of aromas and rich flavors.

Final Thought

My nose and palate lead me to prefer the more restrained style of Chardonnay with crisper fruit, spice, chalk or wet stone, and in older examples, a touch of honey. A long, lingering finish and sufficient acidity to accompany a range of foods are necessary as well. While the most memorable Chardonnays I have enjoyed are Burgundies, it is clear that several Oregon producers are well on their way to matching their success with Pinot Noir and fielding compelling New World offerings. O Chardonnay, you are certainly nothing to duck.



