



IN CELEBRATION

Chardonnay

OUR REPORT ON THE INTERNATIONAL CHARDONNAY SYMPOSIUM

photos by Jeremy Ball

Convening in the stunning cities of Pismo Beach and Avila Beach, the International Chardonnay Symposium, co-hosted by The SOMM Journal, was a three-day immersion of winemakers, sommeliers and Chardonnay enthusiasts who shared their passion for this white grape through educational seminars, grand tastings and sumptuous dinners.

THE SOMM JOURNAL PANELS To Oak or Not to Oak? That Is the (Loaded) Question

by Jaime Lewis

Nowhere are winemakers' differing opinions more evident than in discussing oak's role in Chardonnay. Moderated by Master Sommelier Brian McClintic of Santa Barbara's Les Marchands Wine Bar & Merchant, the panel **"To Oak Or Not To Oak?"** included both venerated and rising stars in the Chardonnay galaxy to discuss the relationship between oak and the world's most

beloved white grape. "I think, of all the varieties, Chardonnay is probably the best at handling oak and being able to express its innate characteristics and terroir with striking clarity," said McClintic.

"We use nothing but new French oak," said Ray Brown of Clos de Chacras in Mendoza, Argentina. "I have drunk a lot of Chardonnays in my life—I like to think of myself as a Chardonnay connoisseur—



A packed house for “To Oak or Not to Oak?” at the International Chardonnay Symposium.



“I think an oak program, like salt and pepper, is only added to the meal if the meal could be considered wanting,” said Dieter Cronje. “If you mess with it too much, you’re just ironing out the differences between vintages, but those differences are, I think, the beauty of it all.”

and I find that new French oak produces a better Chardonnay.”

Winemaker Dieter Cronje of Presqu’île Winery in the Santa Maria Valley differed. “Oak is a universal flavor. Anybody can buy it if they have the money. To me, the more new oak you use, the more your wine is like anybody else’s. Of course each wine absorbs it and shows it slightly differently, but it always overshadows something terroir-wise.”

Somewhere between these two poles sat winemaker Christian Roguenant of Niven Family Wines in the Edna Valley. “There are two types of white grapes in the world: some have true varietal character; [and others have] a lot less, like Chardonnay. You can be successful with unoaked Chardonnay, but typically Chardonnay likes oak for that reason: because it doesn’t have strong varietal character.”

Karl Wenté of Wenté Vineyards came from the perspective of having some clonal control. “Because of some of the richness of the heritage clones that have never left our property—that we’re constantly sampling and taking cuttings of and pushing forward—the opulence and the

For Karl Wenté, oak and Chardonnay are anything but formulaic. “There’s no recipe in any given vintage. There’s no substitute for boots on the ground in the winery. The best analytical tools we have are our nose and mouth.”



Agree to disagree: Master Sommelier Brian McClintic (center) and panelists (left to right) Christian Roguenant, Dieter Cronje, Karl Wenté, Ray Brown and Peter Molnar offered distinctly different opinions on new oak in Chardonnay.

bigness of those fruit flavors can handle more new oak without being overwhelmed I always want the fruit on a pedestal because it’s Mother Nature’s beauty; I never want to stomp on it, but then you can layer in some richness with a judicious amount of oak.”

Peter Molnar of Poseidon Vineyards in Napa Carneros agreed that oak, when applied carefully, can support vibrant fruit rather than mask it—an opinion borne out in the bright acids of the 100 percent new oak-aged **Poseidon Vineyards 2013 Napa Carneros Chardonnay** that Molnar brought for the tasting.

“There is that prizefighter feeling of ‘oak versus fruit,’ battling it out to see who’s going to win,” Molnar said. “But research shows that oak actually has a huge amount of antioxidant properties, and certain species are very good at keeping oxygen out of wine. New oak isn’t necessarily going to limit or cover up fruit. In correct proportion, it can add a freshness to the wine both in terms of perception and also scientifically.”

McClintic agreed. “When Peter says he believes you can use 100% new oak and not have heavy oak influence in the wine, I think it’s validated by the wine in the glass right here. This is a pretty darned restrained Chardonnay.”

Despite differing opinions, appellations, price points (\$14 to \$42) and production numbers (1,000 bottles to 100,000 cases), each of the wines poured had its place on the Chardonnay spectrum. Archie McLaren, founder of the Central Coast Wine Classic, was in the audience. “Those of us who started drinking Chardonnay through the ‘70s into the ‘80s were confronted quite often with one- or two-dimensional wines,” he commented to the panel. “I’m basically expressing my gratitude to all of you for evolving the concept of Chardonnay to what it is now. It’s extraordinarily diverse and interesting, and all of these are quite special.” SJ



With the Edna Valley as a backdrop (specifically, Chardonnay vineyards at Edna Valley Vineyards), the “Diversity in Balance—Pairing Chardonnay with Food” panelists Steve Rogstad, winemaker for Cuvaison; Mark Davidson, educator for Wine Australia; moderator & CIA wine educator Robert Bath, MS; Kathy Marlin, Managing Director for Negotiants USA; and Steven Checca of Italy’s Farnese Group.

Coming Back Home to Chardonnay

by Robert Bath, MS

Chardonnay has been America’s longest and most dramatic love affair with a single grape since varietal wines became popular in the 1960s. The grape’s dramatic success in the U.S. made it fashionable for sommeliers to criticize Chardonnay and ultimately inspired a movement called ABC (Anything but Chardonnay). Chardonnay has survived this movement with aplomb, while continuing to lead all domestic wine sales categories.

I have to confess, I jumped on the ABC bandwagon early on, mainly out of the excitement and the novelty of California’s exploration and success with other white grape varieties. I’m proud to say that I have now come back home to Chardonnay. Why? It’s because of food! What I consider one of Chardonnay’s biggest faults, its ability to be shaped by winemakers in so many ways, ironically makes this grape an incredibly versatile performer with a wide range of food.

At the International Chardonnay Symposium, the versatility of Chardonnay with food was on full display. The “**Diversity in Balance—Pairing Chardonnay with Food**” panel discussion and luncheon that I moderated featured five excellent Chardonnays from around the world paired with a three-course menu. Perhaps the biggest bonus of this food and wine pairing experience was the variety of production methods and unique terroir these wines demonstrated paired with the creative menu designed by Chef Vatche Moukhtarian of Cracked Pepper Bistro in Fresno, California.

The first course, a cobia ceviche with avocado-tomatillo salsa, presented several wine pairing challenges, mainly high acidity and a strong spice component. The **Caldora “Terre di Chieti” Chardonnay** from Abruzzo, with its lower alcohol, bright acidity and absence of oak, deftly handled those challenges and allowed the cobia (aka lemonfish) to shine.



“Chardonnay is the most international varietal,” said Steven Checca, from the Farnese group. He tasted us on **Caldora Terre di Chieti Chardonnay** from Abruzzo, with vineyards off the Adriatic Sea on Italy’s eastern coast. The wine tasted fresh and clean, with hints of lemon-lime zest. No ML and subtle use of American and Slovenian thousand-liter oak barrels showcased a ripeness with a hint of salinity.



The sous-vide-prepared salmon with fennel pollen required a wine to stand up to its assertive flavors.



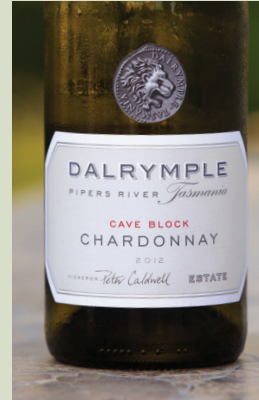
Winemaker Joe Ibrahim of Edna Valley Vineyards presented his **Edna Valley Vineyards 2012 Central Coast Chardonnay**. “This region offers the longest growing season in California, just seven miles from the Pacific. The grapes hold their acidity and delicate flavors arise.” The fruit-generous nose of pears and McIntosh apples are refined in a waxy, dry palate. Honeyed cantaloupe and clay minerality show against a stunning vibrancy.

Next up, a salad featuring local roasted beets with goat cheese mousse and cilantro oil, presented its own set of wine pairing challenges, in this case, relatively subtle, earthy flavors and a slight sweetness from the beets. In stepped the **Edna Valley Paragon Vineyard Chardonnay**, produced from grapes grown right outside our luncheon venue at Edna Valley Vineyards. The wine's ripe, rich fruit, harmonious acidity and balanced oak lifted this salad into another dimension of gustatory delight. The **Dalrymple Cave Block Chardonnay** from Tasmania was also a complete success with this salad and probably represented the most versatile/successful wine with all of the dishes that day.

The main course, sous-vide-prepared salmon with fennel pollen, didn't present as many wine pairing challenges, yet required a wine



Robert Bath, MS, pointed to the bottle of **Cuvaision Estate Chardonnay** and claimed Carneros as one of the regional pioneers of the variety. Winemaker Steve Rogstad has overseen 14 vintages for Cuvaision and this 2013, produced in a warmer year, exhibits an array of flavors and textures: ripeness with a base of tapioca, brown butter, white tea, magnolia creaminess, lemon curd and nectarine.



Kathy Marlin, Managing Director of Negociants USA, showcased **Dalrymple 2012 Cave Block** from Tasmania. This wine had won the Somm's Choice Award at our blind tasting the night before. Planted on slopes with large, volcanic rocks and no irrigation, it's whole bunch-pressed and 100% wild-fermented with partial ML. Acidity races through its spine. Peaches, ginger, chamomile, celery and apricot are just some of the notes that perform in the juicy, clean and honey-crisp wine.

that could stand up to the assertive, complex flavors of this dish. In this case, the dramatic character of the **Leeuwin Estate Chardonnay** from Margaret River and the classic ripe, forward fruit of the **Cuvaision Estate Chardonnay** from Carneros made both wines worthy partners. The firm structure of both wines, derived from oak aging, combined with the depth and character of grapes from older vineyards, were key elements in the success of the pairing.❏



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Exploring the Past, Present and Future of Chardonnay

by Karen Moneymaker

Nicholas Miller wryly noted “I’m not an MS, but a BS,” at the onset of the **“Fashion and Evolution of Chardonnay”** panel. Regardless, the fifth-generation farmer from the family that owns and cultivates Bien Nacido Vineyards was an ideal moderator to guide us through the vast and sometimes contentious subject matter of the discussion that took place in Avila Beach, CA.

As we sat down to a lineup of stunning Chardonnays, our panelists—Brian Talley, owner of Talley Vineyards; Vidal Perez, winemaker of J. Wilkes Winery; Katie Madigan, winemaker at St. Francis Winery & Vineyards; Michael Eckstein, winemaker at Grgich Hills Winery; and Bo Felton, winemaker for Migration and Duckhorn Wine Company—took the stage.

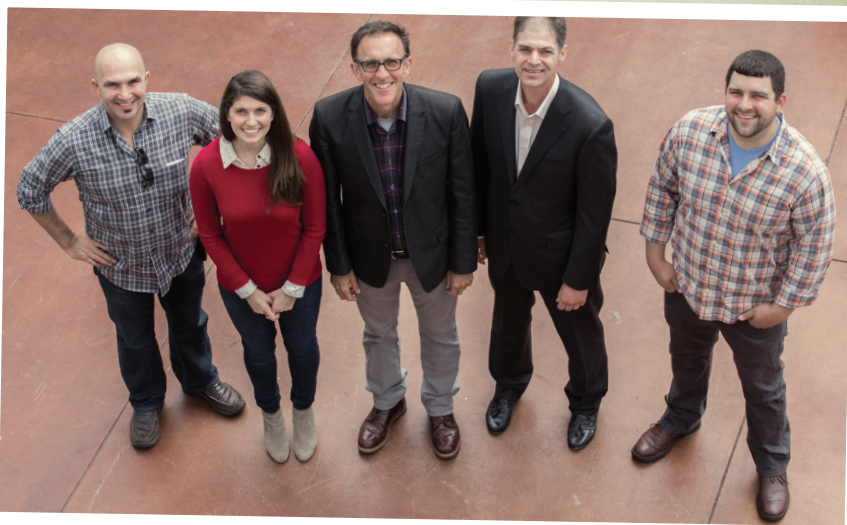
With the words “fashion” and “evolution” floating about, it was only a matter of time before “style, trends and market” joined the conversation as hot-button topics.

“Chardonnay makes the world’s greatest white wine,” declared Brian Talley, as we nosed and sipped the **Talley Vineyards 2013 Estate Chardonnay**, “It can be as terroir-driven as Cabernet Sauvignon or Pinot Noir, if handled with respect.” While his wine in the tasting was a beautiful example of a “classic, Old World approach,” it wasn’t long before a member of the audience asked about the tendencies towards no oak, stainless steel Chardonnays.

“We make an un-oaked Chardonnay,” Talley answered. “We noticed a clear trend and interest in austere Chard.”

“Also, we want to sell our wines,” Vidal interjected with a smile. “So we listen to our sales team. If they think they can sell it, we will try to make it!” And indeed, his **J. Wilkes 2012 Santa Maria Valley Chardonnay** was bursting with Granny Smith apple, bright acidity and honeysuckle.

“Chardonnay is going through a perpetual identity crisis,” chuckled Katie Madigan. “Just going to the grocery store is an overwhelming experience! Chardonnay is such a saturated market, but California is honing in on being more appellation-based. Consumers are becoming more and more able to rest on knowledge of appellation and consistency of regional style when choosing their wines.” While the panelists



Our panelists for the Fashion and Evolution of Chardonnay seminar. (left to right) Vidal Perez, winemaker of J. Wilkes Winery; Katie Madigan, winemaker at St. Francis Winery & Vineyards; Brian Talley, owner of Talley Vineyards; Michael Eckstein, winemaker at Grgich Hills Winery; and Bo Felton, winemaker for Migration and Duckhorn Wine Company.

did agree on a number of topics—the fact that Chardonnay should be planted in cooler climates, a general aversion to screwcap closure in wines that should age, and the opinion that “those who don’t like Chardonnay, haven’t had a good one yet”—each of their wines was as different as the places from whence they came. Madigan’s **St. Francis Winery & Vineyards 2013 Sonoma County Chardonnay** with a nose of tropical fruit and round, smooth mouthfeel; the power and structure of the **Grgich Hills Winery 2012 “Miljenko’s Selection” Chardonnay**; the focused richness and yellow apple notes of the **Migration 2013 Russian River Valley Chardonnay**.

As the discussion circled back to the paradox of the consumer’s love/hate relationship with Chardonnay, Felton took a stand. “I disagree with the thought that Chard is only made by what is ‘done’ to it. Winemaking, even with Chardonnay, starts in the vineyard. A wine should not lose its sense of place once it gets to the cellar.”

When asked what they thought could be the one most important factor for the future and success of Chardonnay, Eckstein voiced the hope shared by the entire room: “An educated and knowledgeable consumer.”



Nicholas Miller fifth-generation farmer from the family that owns and cultivates Bien Nacido Vineyards and moderator of the panel.



St. Francis Winery & Vineyards 2013 Sonoma County Chardonnay, Grgich Hills Winery 2012 “Miljenko’s Selection” Chardonnay, J. Wilkes 2012 Santa Maria Valley Chardonnay, Migration 2013 Russian River Valley Chardonnay, Talley Vineyards 2013 Estate Chardonnay.