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Worlds apart, wines have common theme – discover it

by Eleanor and Ray Heald

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When California's unoaked chardonnays entered the wine scene about a decade ago, they did not have the flavor profile they do today. Unoaked versions tasted a knee jerk away from oak-amped-up, big, alcoholic, fat styles created by uber-ripe grapes.

West Coast wine producers considered chardonnay a rather neutral variety. They thought oak-aging and malolactic fermentation were needed for character. White Burgundy (chardonnay) had become their model. What they failed to work into a fruit-forward equation, now in favor with consumers, was the fact that Burgundy is much cooler and grapes ripen with lower sugars, therefore lowering alcohol in the finished wine. Chardonnay from Burgundy has high acidity and tight-grained French cooperage is ideal for aging it. Malolactic fermentation was needed to tame harsh acidity.

Chablis (chardonnay from the northern Burgundy region of the same name) is the classic example for unoaked chardonnay. **Traditionally, these wines are fermented in stainless steel tanks or in combination with previously-used, neutral oak cooperage. Chablis does not have the buttery, vanilla or toasty notes associated with oak-fermented and barrel-aged chardonnay. However, no-oak chardonnays are often impacted by winemaking techniques, such as time on the lees for a creamy texture and malolactic fermentation which tames overt acidity when needed.**

New Zealand figures it out

Unafraid to change course, New Zealand winemakers took advantage of their climate to make some of the finest unoaked chardonnays, put the breaks on overtly-grassy sauvignon blancs and plant pinot noir in places like the Awatere Valley. The Crossings is one of a small group of pioneering Awatere Valley (Marlborough sub-region) winegrowers that gets it. The Crossings winemaker Matthew Mitchell says "it's all about the fruit source. Unique soil attributes of our Medway Vineyard (one of three winery owned), a dry climate and low yields enhance vibrant tropical fruit flavors of our unoaked chardonnay, underpinned with fresh acidity."

Worldwide, value-conscious wine producers have eschewed barrels because of their high cost. The New Zealanders were first to embrace the no-oak chardonnay style on a broad scale. Floral, ripe peach and pineapple dominate aromas and flavors of the delicious 2008 The Crossings Unoaked Chardonnay, \$17. We also liked The Crossings 2008 Sauvignon Blanc, \$15; and the 2008 Pinot Noir, \$21. All showcase great fruit and elegance at sensible prices.

California gets it now

"An unoaked chardonnay," maintains Sebastiani winemaker Mark Lyon, "shows nothing but pure varietal character without any oak attributes to mask the fruit's qualities and nuances." For Sebastiani 2008

Russian River Valley Unoaked Chardonnay, \$19, Lyon has a long-standing contract with Dutton Ranch in order to secure some of the appellation's best low-yielding chardonnay. Other producers have espoused oak-free chardonnay. In fact, that's the moniker St. Supery chose for its Chardonnay, \$25. Acero (steel in Spanish) is the name Marimar Estate, \$32, uses. Other favorites are Morgan Metallico, \$20, and 2008 Valley of the Moon Unoaked Chardonnay, \$16. Unoaked chardonnays are delicious with any seafood or spicy Asian dish.

Wine picks

Domaine Alfred Chamisal Vineyards newly released wines are the finest collection of Edna Valley wines we've tasted so far this year. Try:

- 2008 Stainless Central Coast Chardonnay, \$18: pineapple, white peach, ripe, fresh flavors.
 - 2007 Chardonnay Edna Valley, \$24: seven different clones offer Meyer lemon zest, pineapple enlivened by vanilla and toasty oak.
 - 2007 Califa Chardonnay, \$38: exciting citrus, apricots and ripe golden delicious apple.
 - 2008 Edna Valley Pinot Gris, \$24: peach, pineapple with brown spice hints.
 - 2007 Edna Valley Pinot Noir, \$38: nine clones offering black cherry, dark berry and savory spice.
- 2007 Califa Pinot Noir \$60: black fruit, cherries, plum, chocolate, subtle oak spice

Best values from France

Leave it to **Robert Kacher Selections** to never disappoint with French wines at \$15 or less. The following are some bargain recent releases from "Bobby." You may not know the producer, but you will remember the name Kacher!

- **2008 Domaine Tariquet** Chardonnay, \$13: citrus, apple, pear, elegant with a zingy finish.
- **2007 Mas de Guiot** Grenache/Syrah, \$11: dark juicy fruits like blackberry.
- **2007 Domaine de Gournier** Merlot, \$11: generous red fruits, drinkable and flavorful.
- **2006 Domaine Sainte Eugenie** Corbieres Rouge, \$12: elegant red fruits from carignan, grenache and syrah blend.
- **2007 Chateau Grande Cassagne**, \$12: grenache, syrah blend – dark fruits with hint of toasty oak in finish; rich and plush.
- **2006 Mas Carlot** Les Enfants Terribles, \$13: blend of 50-50 mourvedre and syrah with gobs of rich red

fruits.

- 2005 Mas Carlot Cabernet-Syrah \$15: black fruits, plum cassis, cedar, brown spices, good length in finish.

If your wine retailer is not stocking these wines, ask that they be ordered for you from National Wine and Spirits.

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