



Tim's Wine Market

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After two quarters of pretty exotic wines that were based on abstract themes, for this offering I return to the mainstream and revisit examples made with the Chardonnay grape. This is similar to the offering in December, but Chardonnay bears a second look through a different lens because the category is so diverse. In the final month of 2021, I made selections to compare three great wine regions where Chardonnay is ubiquitous: Napa Valley, Burgundy, and Champagne. This quarter the focus is not on terroir but how winemakers adapt this variety in the cellar to craft wines that show either a house or regional style. You also may scratch your head at the places of origin, but trust me, world class Chardonnay is produced in many places besides the ones that roll off the tongue. I think you will discover, as I did in the selection process, how different the wines can appear depending on choices made by the winemaker regardless of location.

2019 Topiary Chardonnay - \$35

Of all the “noble” varieties of wine grapes (Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Pinot Noir, Syrah, Sauvignon Blanc, Riesling, Chenin Blanc and Chardonnay), only Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay can claim true world dominance. Both varieties are highly adaptive, relatively easy to grow, and produce wines with consistent varietal character when properly farmed. This means that while subtle differences may exist between examples from diverse growing regions, you can pretty much always tell good examples no matter where they come from.

A fantastic example of this is my first pick, which is produced in the obscure but rapidly booming South African wine region of Franschoek. The name Franschoek means “French corner” in Afrikaans and defines the area where French Huguenots were granted land in the the early history of the South Africa colony. As the colony was controlled by the Dutch, the land was not considered great, actually called elephants’ corner before the French arrived. But it was far better than their fate in France where protestantism was illegal and punishable by death.

Our selection is produced by Philippe Colin, the scion of one of most important winemaking families in Burgundy. When his parents retired, Philippe and his brother Bruno decided to divide the family estate, Colin-Deleger. Always eager to make more wine than his 30 acres of vines in Burgundy can produce, Philippe often buys grapes from trusted growers to expand his offerings. Then in 2014, he discovered this estate in Franschoek with dramatic views of the Klein Drakenstein mountains and decided to buy it, renaming it Topiary. The estate is nearly 150 acres, but the grapes for this selection come from a small 5 acre parcel of 14 year old vines, planted at 2300 feet above sea level on sandstone soils.

The focus for this reserve club feature is the different Chardonnay wine production methods, and I chose this example as the baseline for traditional cellar techniques. For this wine, the grape bunches were harvested by hand and whole cluster pressed to stainless steel tanks. Fermentation was made using indigenous yeast strains, and the wine was racked to 500 liter French oak barrels after 7 days, with 1/3rd being new. The wine was left in the barrels for 1 year then bottled.

As a “typical” Chardonnay, you will find that Philippe’s example lands exactly where it should, in the middle of the fairway. The nose is a subtle but complex combination of buttercream frosting, toasted hazelnuts, dried apple, and grilled lemon. On the palate, this wine is dry with good concentration and very nicely integrated oak. Drink this polished example from 2022-2025 with butter poached lobster or grilled halibut.

2017 Edi Simcic Chardonnay Reserva - \$45

Some of you are probably familiar with the wines from Aleks Simcic, as I have featured examples of his reds and less expensive whites in other clubs. While the family stakes their reputation on their fantastic expressions of wines made with the Ribolla Gialla grape, it is their Chardonnays that capture the attention of American consumers. They only produce 300 cases of this wine each year, and it is a serious example released with some bottle age to drink now or hold.

Aleks and his dad Edi produce wine in the Goriska Brda region of Slovenia, directly adjacent to the border with the Italian region of Friuli. This is a very unique wine region in the world, benefiting from both Alpine and Mediterranean climate conditions. In addition, there is an abundance of limestone in the soils which imparts an intense saline quality to the

wines. Also, the history of this area plays into the style of the wines. Prior to WWI, this part of Europe was part of the Austro-Hungarian empire. For this reason, the winemaking styles of both Friuli and Slovenia have more in common with the richer wines of Austria and Hungary than the lighter bodied examples of Italy.

The winemaking for this wine is different than the other two selections this quarter in that the grapes are hand harvested but destemmed, then pressed to stainless steel tank. After allowing the juice to settle, the fermentation also is done with indigenous yeast, then racked to barrels once dry. Aleks also uses 30% new French oak, but smaller 225L barrels, where the wine rests for 11 months. He then bottles and puts the wine in their deep underground cellar for 3 years before releasing.

When you are ready to serve this wine, I suggest decanting it for a few minutes. It has been in the bottle for almost 4 years and needs a little oxygen to develop. Once you do this, the nose shows subtle notes of caramel, dried orange peel, baked apples, popcorn butter, coriander seed, and sea spray. On the palate, this wine shows an almost fat, oily texture to start, then the oak and acidity pull it tight into the finish with a lingering saline quality that is the hallmark of all of Aleks' wines. Drink 2022-2027 with grilled salmon or pork schnitzel.

Overnoy-Crinquand Chardonnay Vieille Vignes 2016 - \$69

Ok, buckle up and prepare yourself. Unless you are extremely adventurous, this final selection is probably unlike any Chardonnay you have ever tasted. This wine comes from the Alpine French region of Jura, which is close to the border of Switzerland in the foothills of the Alps. In the middle ages, the region fell under the same rulers as Burgundy. So, two of the primary varieties grown in the area are Burgundy staples Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, but there are some very interesting local varieties as well.

What makes some of the wines from this area so interesting is that they often are aged under a layer of yeast while in barrel. This is a thick, foamy layer of yeast that develops and protects the wines from oxidation while simultaneously imparting a very distinctive flavor into the wine. The example I chose for this quarter is one where you will detect this note, but it is no where near as extreme as many examples.

While the common term for this layer of yeast is *flor*, this is actually the Spanish term for the phenomenon because it is common in some styles of Sherry. In France, and specifically the Jura the term is *sous voile*, which means *under a veil*. While the voile exists, the yeast protects the wine from oxidation and develops the wine biologically. During this time, the yeast consumes some of the glycerine in the wine and results in wines that are sharper and more more focused. In addition, they produce some aldehydes which give the wines a nutty, slightly bruised apple quality. Unlike Sherry, where the *flor* can last for years, in the Jura the phenomenon is more more seasonal so the effects are less obvious in the finished wines.

Our selection come from the Overnoy-Crinquand domaine, currently run by Mickael Crinquand, the third generation of the family to farm in the tiny village of Pupillin. The family produces a few different bottlings of Chardonnay, but this cuvee is bottled from their oldest, 70 year old vines. One of the many things that makes the Jura so unique is that the Chardonnay vines grow in a layer of limestone that was pulverized by glaciers in the last ice age. Like the wines of Burgundy, this imparts an impressive sense of minerality into the wines, amplified by the intensity of old vines.

The family practices biodynamic farming practices, and everything is done by hand as the vineyards are too steep for any mechanization. Once the grapes are hand harvested, they are whole cluster pressed directly to old foudres where the fermentation takes place. Once the wine has completed malolactic fermentation, it is racked to 600 liter demi-muids, all old, where the sous voile develops. The wine is left in barrel undisturbed for 36 months, then racked and bottled.

When you are ready to serve this wine you need to decant it for up to one hour before serving, and cellar temperature is best: 55 degrees. This is not because the wine is young, but rather it helps the bouquet blossom. Once you do, this the nose is an exotic and savory combination of roasted carrots and fennel bulb, beeswax, raw quince, fresh apricot, and dill seed. On the palate, this wine shows impressive concentration with a deep note of saline and the subtle notes of flor, which is also found in some Sherries. It is important to serve this wine with food as it is most definitely not a cocktail Chardonnay. Try with miso and lemon glazed sea bass, pork shoulder braised with lemon and rosemary, or veal scallopini with a shallot/brown butter sauce.