

Robb Report

“If You Love White Burgundy, You’ll Love Oregon Chardonnays”

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Willamette Valley Winemakers rival their French counterparts for world-class versions of the world’s favorite white.

Chardonnay is the most popular white wine in the world. That fact alone means it’s far from one kind of wine—its millions of fans subscribe to an enormous range of Chardonnay character, from far-flung spots on the globe. But if you devote the white section of your cellar only to Chardonnay from Burgundy (which almost all white wine in Burgundy is), you’re, of course, in deliciously safe territory. Burgundy is home to the variety and the world’s gold standard for growing and making it.

It must be said that white Burgundy is also not just one style of Chardonnay. Its profile varies by region, especially according to warmth, soils, and whether it has been treated to oak. In general, though, compared to New World Chardonnay, Burgundy is earthier, more minerally; its fruit flavors are leaner, acidity levels higher, and savory notes come into play more than sweeter ones.

If your New World comparison to that is so-called “California Chardonnay” (granted, a broad-stroke cliché, but shorthand for a fat and buttery style), take a look one state to the north for an exciting new field of Chardonnays coming on strong. It’s Oregon’s Willamette Valley, where, as in Burgundy, the red claim to fame is exquisite Pinot Noir, planted by intrepid pioneers back in the 1960s and ’70s, when

California experts labeled them crazy. What they had on their side was the pedigree of latitude—a parallel shared with Burgundy. Now we know they were prescient on the Pinot front.

And if the great red of Burgundy was going to work in the Willamette Valley, why not the great white? Indeed, it was not for lack of trying. Winemakers there did plant Chardonnay, and a few have consistently produced beautiful bottles ever since. But only a few. For the most part, it didn't go well. It generally wasn't planted in the best places, and less effort was given to honing it in the vineyard and winery than on polishing Pinot Noir.

That was then, and this is now, as they say. In the last few years, Willamette Valley vintners—and more than a few from France—have brought a prodigious amount of know-how to growing and making Chardonnay in Oregon. They are New World whites, to be sure, with the variety's signature sweet fruit. But they are a different breed—crisp, aromatic, energetic, minerally, and often downright savory. These are Chardonnays that just might share more with white Burgundy than they do with California. Here's our selection of wines to get you started.

Lavinea 2015 Elton Vineyard Chardonnay Eola–Amity Hills:

Perfumed on the nose with both earth and floral notes, this Chardonnay fills the mouth with ripe apple, creamy lemon, and stone fruit flavors, leading to a long, flinty finish (\$60).