



Yarra Valley v Mornington Peninsula Chardonnay

To millions of wine drinkers, Chardonnay isn't just a grape variety, it's a brand and a lifestyle. To the wine industry worldwide, it's queen bee and liquid gold – the most widely planted white grape in Australia. CHRIS BARNES and our Tasting Panel of wine experts investigate this regal variety which dominates plantings in two of Victoria's richest wine regions.

Our Tasting Panel

Karl Stockhausen: (Chairman) Winemaker and Wine Show Judge

Chris Pfeiffer: Victorian Winemaker, Wine Show Judge and Chairman of the Melbourne Wine Show

Chris Barnes: (Facilitator) Wine Educator, Wine Show Judge

Christian Gaffey: Winemaker

Sally Fisk: Winemaker

Trent Mannell: Wine Show Judge

Rob Jones: Wine Afficiado



Chardonnay today is a household word. Though we may bandy about sayings like "Chardonnay Socialist" or "Chardonnay Swilling," how many people who have heard of Chablis or Burgundy know the connection with Chardonnay? How many buyers have any idea why some Chardonnays cost \$12 a bottle and others retail for ten times that amount? And importantly, how many winemakers know what sort of Chardonnay they are going to make when the grapes turn up at the winery door?

These were some of the questions and comments that flew around our tasting table, as a panel of winemakers, wine judges and wine educators got together at Australian Wine Selectors for our Yarra Valley and Mornington Peninsula Chardonnay Tasting.

The general verdict was that this tasting confirmed Chardonnay as a "winemaker's wine" – with just as much flavour coming from the winemaking practices as from the grape itself. The major difference between the two areas was that wines from the better established Yarra showed a more conventional and consumer friendly style, while wines from the Mornington (which has many new boutique wineries) were noticeably

adventurous and an individual reflection of the winemakers' craft.

Remember, Chardonnay is used for styles as different as crisp, sparkling wine from Champagne in France to rich, burnished wines from the Hunter Valley. In its Burgundian homeland, it has been responsible for all the finest White Burgundy. Today it's the second most populous variety in French and Californian vineyards and has found its way on to labels in places as diverse as Lebanon and Bulgaria.

The vine, in its many clonal variations, will grow in sub-alpine climates of Austria and Italy to hot, irrigated sites in Australia's Riverland. In short it's an exceedingly useful grape!

The title for discovery of Chardonnay in Australia causes quite a bit of "discussion", between the Murray Tyrrell supporters and the Mudgee crew. But suffice to say it was a grape variety unknown here until the 1970s and not popular till the early 1980s and then, didn't it boom! The full flavours and obvious oak of those wines seemed to suit the over-the-top style of the entrepreneurs and developers of the time. After all, big was better and you couldn't get bigger than Barossa Chardonnay with plenty of oak and alcohol.

The use of oak became commonplace in France by the Middle Ages when Chardonnay appeared in Burgundy, possibly coming from the Middle East where it is known by the synonyms Meroué and Obaideh.

In Australia in the early 1980s, South Australia's Roseworthy College, the only full-time winemaking institution in the southern hemisphere, believed Chardonnay needed the boost of new, full-flavoured, and very expensive, oak. That was fine if the grapes used were very concentrated in flavour and had appropriately high natural acid levels, which doesn't happen in every vineyard. So, if consumers wanted wood, cheaper alternatives such as chips in the tank began to become commonplace. Then there was a revolution. Towards the end of the 1980s someone said "enough".

Those styles now seem like dinosaurs and evoke images of people spitting oak chips and having a cigarette between courses – at the table! The market has moved on. In all aspects of food and wine, lighter and fresher flavours are now in demand. This hasn't seen the demise of Chardonnay, anything but, what it has done is caused winemakers to look for alternative ways to grow and work with this classic variety.

So a new style of "unwooded" or "unoaked" Chardonnay appeared. I remember the first time I tasted one of these wines in 1990, I thought the winemaker had bottled a tank sample by mistake! So much for my prejudice – the style took off and is now a valid alternative for winemakers who don't want oak dominance that risks making the wine cloying and bitter.

Another alternative for winemakers to work with is "malo". This term crops up all the time in Chardonnay tasting notes, although less frequently now. It's simply a technique to modify the acid structure of a wine using naturally occurring micro-organisms. The process has been occurring since the beginning of wine, although it's with Chardonnay where it really makes a flavour difference. In malolactic fermentation (MLF to your friends at the dinner party) malic acid is converted to lactic acid by lactic bacteria. This change causes the wine to take on buttery or creamy characters, particularly delicious in oaky Chardonnay.

Of course, the big issue for winemakers to address if they want to change the style of their Chardonnay is grape flavour and composition. This might seem a simple answer, but remember that although you can pick grapes earlier to get higher natural acid it's a poor substitute for growing the vines in a cool climate. It also doesn't help if the naturally vigorous Chardonnay vines are producing heaps of fruit.

The best quality Chardonnay will always come from vineyards with low crop levels. What's more you really need the best clone of Chardonnay for the lighter, more elegant wines. So this is no easy task!

It's the search for sites to produce high quality Chardonnay that led the pioneers of this wine in Australia to the Yarra Valley and then the Mornington Peninsula.

In the Yarra Valley the leaders were men such as John Middleton, Gil de Pury, Reg Egan, Bailey Carrodus and James Halliday. To the south on the Peninsula, as it's simply known, the names that stand out are Nat White, Brian Stonier, Garry Crittenden and the Hickinbothams.

Of course there are more famous names in both regions now, but these were the people planting Chardonnay in a region many viticulturalists told them would never be warm enough to ripen the grapes!



CHRIS PFIEFFER



CHRIS BARNES



KARL STOCKHAUSEN



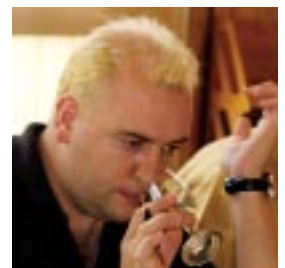
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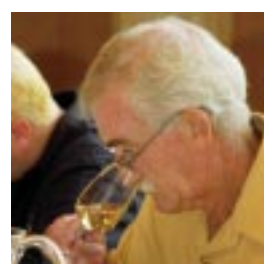
SALLY FISK



TRENT MANNELL



CHRISTIAN GAFFEY



ROB JONES

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So how do we define differences and similarities between these two premium Chardonnay-producing regions and what did we learn from our tasting?

The Yarra Valley and the Mornington Peninsula are cool climate, using the broad definition based on latitude, and both are recognised as that by consumers and winemakers alike. They both use this "cool" tag as a way to promote their wines and explain the styles of Chardonnay. The notion of both regions as premium producers is also very evident.

There is also some commonality in the emphasis on wine tourism and "boutique" production. This may not at first seem to have much to do with the Chardonnays we drink from these regions, but it does, as was obvious in our tasting.

The major differences in climate terms are the maritime influence enjoyed by the Peninsula and the effect of altitude, further cooling the Yarra Valley. Soil types differ, but more importantly the soils differ greatly within each region. So it's not really fair to make a general comparison of soil profile between the two. Suffice to say that both have their share of well-drained, low vigour soils. The clones planted in each region are a mix of the older so-called

"American" clones, but with more material related to the best vineyards in Burgundy.

Our Tasting Panel realised that it's in the glass where we see the real difference. We tasted 43 wines from both regions. All were current releases and only one was not yet commercially available. They were tasted blind, but classed according to region and vintage. Scoring was done using the 20-point Australian Wine Show System.

One point we were sure of. That this tasting confirmed Chardonnay as a "winemaker's wine" and the major difference seemed to be that the Yarra wines showed a more conventional and consumer friendly style, whereas the Mornington wines were more a reflection of winemakers looking for individual expression. This was evident in the use of oak, the time the wines spent in contact with the lees while in barrel and a pursuit of different flavours.

Three vintages made up the tasting, with the bulk of both regions from 2002. In general the 2002 wines looked better than the previous year and happily the few 2003s we tasted were all looking very smart. What good news for the Chardonnay drinker in 2004 and 2005!



Chardonnay

When reviewing the Panel's notes there are some telling similarities and differences between the regions. The words that seemed common to the Mornington Peninsula wine were "citrus, melon and fig" with characters of barrel-ferment and "Chablis style". While for the Yarra Valley the textbook descriptors of "melon, peach and nectarine" were common, added to the characters of more robust oak and overall ripeness. So how do we explain this?

The so-called "Chablis style" is more suited to higher acid wines. Leaving wines in barrels and "working" the wine achieves this. Stirring the lees (dead yeast cells) and allowing some volatile characters to occur in the wine helps lift the wine from the glass. It also tends to make the wine stand out from the crowd, and it's a style that many wine writers and judges are currently rating highly.

All this leads us to the Mornington Peninsula, where there are increasingly more small wineries with new labels competing for a place in the market.

On the other hand, the wines of the Yarra seem to be less adventurous, but perhaps more consistent. These wines showed

really good French oak treatment on the whole. They were also wines that seemed made for drinking and enjoying sooner rather than later. With a couple of exceptions, none of the wines reviewed from the Yarra should be cellared for more than two or three years. This is not surprising given these Chardonnays look slightly riper and richer, and come from makers who know the market and how to deliver what the drinkers want.

In essence the tasting found a great selection of Chardonnays that had moved from the over-oaked artefacts of ten years ago. They were, in the most part, wines that recognise that the most important part of any wine is the balance between fruit flavour and structure.

There were wines that the Panel thought came from immature vineyards and wines where the maker had tried too hard, and over worked the wine.

The difference between the regions in consumer terms is one of newer styles and variety of style on the Peninsula against consistency and less adventure in the Valley. No wonder that Chardonnay is still on the ascendency on a global scale!

REVIEWS

Out of the 43 wines tasted, these 18 were the stand-outs in the eyes of the Panel.

TASTING PANEL

Karl Stockhausen

Chris Pfeiffer

Chris Barnes

Keith Tulloch

Christian Gaffey

Trent Mannell

Sally Fisk

Rob Jones



FERGUSSON 1999 (\$25)

"Good to drink now"

The "oldest" wine in the tasting and one which is holding up for its age. The colour is still vibrant and the nose is quite delicate. There is an aroma of grapefruit and a mineral character. The acid is firm, but will soften and reflects the cooler 99 vintage. Trent said it was "very tight, with good citrus and peach notes." The Panel agreed the wine was austere but good to drink now.



PARINGA ESTATE 2001 (\$32)

"Keith Tulloch – top scorer"

This wine set the Panel talking about complexity, wild yeast and solids ferment! It has balanced citrus acid and very good integration of oak. Chris Pfeiffer said it was well crafted and Keith praised the "amazingly silky mouthfeel." Christian said it had good ageing potential. A fine, cool climate example from that vintage on the Mornington Peninsula.



WILLOW CREEK "Tulum" 2001 (\$30)

"Amazing persistence"

The Chairman liked this wine and wrote: "fresh fruit, crisp, clean acid – has potential." It's got delicate oak on the nose, with freshness up front that is very appealing. There are flavours of fig and some stone fruit on the palate. Keith praised the "amazing, minerally persistence." This is a Mornington wine with the ability to age for a few years in bottle.



COLDSTREAM HILLS RESERVE 2000 (\$43.95)

"Old school"

One of the more famous names from the Yarra Valley, it's a wine in the full-bodied style. There is plenty of toasty oak, which works well with the peach and ripe pear flavours. The comment "old style" came forward. Chris Pfeiffer said it had good acid while Keith called it refined. Sally thought it had good, far reaching appeal. At its peak now.



MÉTIER TARRAFORD VINEYARD 2000 (\$32.50)

"Karl Stockhausen – top scorer"

The name behind this label is Martin Williams, the consultant Master of Wine winemaker to many of Victoria's small producers. The grapes are from the Tarraford vineyard in the Yarra Valley. It has good stone fruit flavours and is fully developed. Both Chris Barnes and Karl scored it highly and praised the crisp acid. Chris Pfeiffer noticed the acid and found ripe fruit on the nose. The wine had broadening potential, so drink now.



RED HILL ESTATE 2001 (\$20)

"Rob Jones – top scorer"

Red Hill looks directly to the sea from the ridge that runs the length of the Peninsula. The cooling breezes seem to have allowed this wine to develop good intensity of flavours with plenty of peach and pear sweetness to carry the oak. The wine also displays extensive barrel work and focus, with Karl noticing some wild yeast characters. Rob praised its elegant style and complex, toasty oak. Not a wine to cellar.



ROCHFORD "E" 2001 (\$24)

"Meal in a bottle"

This Yarra wine was described by Keith Tulloch as a "meal in a bottle." The wine shows lots of nutty, almost marzipan, characters on the nose, which suggests plenty of oak time. Karl called it "old style." Chris Pfeiffer thought the oak was a little disjointed and we wondered if it was going through a development phase. The palate is still showing ample acid and a finish of peach. A wine to drink in the short term for those who like powerful Chardonnays.



DE BORTOLI 2002 (\$25)

"Panel's top pick"

This was certainly the pick of all the wines in the Panel's eyes. The wine is ripe and bold, yet still has a lift and freshness from very good natural acid. The oak is very well handled and gave the wine complexity, but not too much of a 'worked' character. This will age well, but it's so good now that it's hard to imagine it will get left in the cellar! In Trent's words: "a rich, complex style, good depth – long and savoury."



YARRA BURN 2001 (\$18)

"Drinkability"

The 2001 Yarra Burn had drinkability written all over it. The Panel agreed that it will attract a broader range of Chardonnay lovers than most, with richness in the mid palate and good oak. The overall peaches and cream style of this wine is very appealing. Not a wine to be cellared for a long time but made for straightforward enjoyment now.



SCORPO 2002 (NOT YET RELEASED)

"A Panel favourite"

Scorpo at Merricks on the Peninsula are getting plenty of press, and this wine shows why. The wine is lifted, with delicate peachy aromas. There's plenty of oak, but it's integrated and adds to the wine, not dominating it. Chris Barnes said it had great potential and the richness in the mid-palate means there will be plenty of life ahead of it. Keith praised its "generous fruit power." A Panel favourite.



DROMANA ESTATE 2001 (\$29)

"Funky flavours"

This wine is from one of the oldest Chardonnay vineyards on the Mornington Peninsula. On the nose is a barrel worked lees, or 'solids' ferment character. The oak is powerful and the wine has long citrus and peach flavours, and good balance enjoyed by Keith. This is a wine for the lovers of the so-called funky flavours and would match full flavoured foods.



OAKRIDGE 2002 (\$23.99)

"Chris Barnes – top scorer"

The cool Yarra Valley season in 2002 has produced a wine with lifted grapefruit and melon on the nose. It has got a creamy mid-palate and the toasty character from the French oak is evident through to the finish. The fresh, natural acid in this wine means it has a few years life in front of it. Keith and Rob loved the structure and Chris Barnes gave it Gold. A Panel's pick.



TUCK'S RIDGE 2002 (\$27)

"Chris Pfeiffer – top scorer"

This is a powerful wine with tight acid. It's another from the ridge of the Peninsula, and one that can age well. The characters of oak are there, but not too dominant. Overall the impressions are of a clean, fresh and well-balanced wine. Flavours are citrus and quite fleshy. This could open up with time, but the zesty, grapefruit flavours are best enjoyed now.



MOUNT MARY 2002 (\$43.50)

"Steely with opulent fruit"

The wines of Mount Mary are much discussed and sought after and this was no exception. The wine doesn't leap out at you. However there are delicate aromas of fig and the oak is underlying. It's the palate structure where the wine stands out. Christian calling it "integrated". The wine is steely and the Panel felt it needed time in bottle to soften and open up. Not for the drinker who wants 'sweet', early drinking Chardonnay.



ROCHFORD V 2002 (\$18)

"Simple and refreshing"

It should be said that a small percentage (15%) of Macedon fruit is used in this wine to add to the majority Yarra component. Perhaps this is where the citrus lift and fresh pineapple, noted by Panel members, comes from. It only appears to have a touch of oak, but that works with the overall fresh flavours of the wine. A simple, refreshing drink, not one to gain complexity with age.



BALGOWNIE 2002 (\$22)

"Style and complexity"

Balgownie Estate is better known in the Bendigo region, but now has a vineyard in the Yarra Valley. The style here is using good oak to highlight the barrel work and ripe Chardonnay fruit. Complexity was a common Tasting Panel comment, as was the use of malolactic fermentation. All this added up to a creamy, bigger style wine to be enjoyed now, rather than with three or four years in bottle.



LILLYDALE ESTATE 2002 (\$18)

"Silky and generous"

The palate is what impressed the Panel with this Yarra wine. The word "silky" came up for the mouthfeel as well as "generous" and "soft". This is a wine made to appeal now, and it succeeds, the butterscotch and peach go well together. It's perhaps a little old fashioned (still a favourite of many) but shows well what we saw in many Yarra wines.



SHELMERDINE 2002 (\$23-\$25)

"Investment in good oak"

This is a new name to the Yarra and the investment in oak is evident. The wine has a lifted, toasty and vanilla bouquet. The Panel thought this wine to have some peachy richness and flavours of hazelnut. It's a wine that should be drunk in the next year or so to retain freshness and the 'sweetness' of the French oak.