



CHARDONNAY

Recently I met with members of the press to discuss the upcoming Nashville Wine Auction to benefit the American Cancer Society (a fabulous event if you've never been). At the gathering I had some Cakebread Chardonnay and I remembered my first wine epiphany (before I had collected my first bottle).

I was ordering wine for a business dinner and Elise Loehr at F. Scott's suggested the Cakebread Chardonnay. I bit and the rest was history. I've been drinking Cakebread ever since.

Why were we drinking Cakebread? They are our guests of honor this year at the "Friends Wine Auction" on July 19th at the Opryland Hotel. They're coming to be honored for their great wine and to contribute to our community's efforts to raise money for the American Cancer Society.

So why chardonnay? It goes great with fish, seafood, and cheese. It can often be consumed by itself. It is the most popular grape in the world and it is used extensively in both still wine and sparkling wines. Chardonnay is the king of white wine. And just for the record, California has over 50,000 acres planted to this varietal. It surpasses any other grape in California by far (Cabernet Sauvignon is second with 35,000 acres).

However, California chardonnay has its own character and flavors. So much so that it has created a term "California palate" when used to describe why one likes California chardonnay over other chardonnays around the world. The flavors one notices in a chardonnay are lush, tropical fruits such as mango, pineapple, and bananas. It also displays apple and pear notes or lemon and green apple flavors. I've even found coconut there sometimes.

The use of oak really can affect chardonnay flavors as well (the oak is in the barrel in which the wine is aged). This fermentation in the oak adds butter and toast, as well as vanilla.

As to vintage, the great thing about California chardonnay is that vintage has little to do with the product. Oh, of course one year is better than another, but the product has become very consistent in the 90's - '97 being the best, a Wine Spectator "95" and '98 being the worst, a Wine Spectator "89" (out of 100).

One note on chardonnay. It expresses the tune of the fiddler better than any other grape. It truly can reflect almost anything the wine maker wants. That's why I think I had my Cakebread epiphany. Less fruit forward and more tart elements. Every region of the world makes it's own flavor of chardonnay. We here are most familiar with California chardonnay, so let's talk about that (duh!).

Most California chardonnay has a big tropical fruit style. This is known as the "powerful upfront style." It is created by using very ripe fruit with high alcohol content and low acidity. These wines were not made for aging and should be consumed early in their life (and often). That fits with your current aging program, right?

It is easy to pair this kind of wine with food. My favorite pairing is soft white cheese. Try Brie or Saint Albain. It is the greatest wine and food pairing I know of. Don't pair it with Bleu Cheese.

Also, chardonnay is one of the few wines that matches with green vegetables or any vegetables. Try it with avocados, peppers, olives, spinach, squash, or even white beans. Don't try it with artichokes, asparagus, green beans or most fruit.

The most common pairing seen for chardonnay is seafood. It's great with cooked oysters (not raw), lobster, monkfish, sea bass, shrimp or shark. Chardonnay isn't any good at all with anchovies, mackerel, or tuna. So rule out caesar salads as well.

As to meat, serve it with chicken, pheasant, quail, rabbit, or turkey. It is especially good with a mayonnaise and chicken sandwich or meat served with a butter or cream sauce. I wouldn't serve traditional California chardonnay with lamb or beef. Nor meat in barbecue sauces nor very spicy foods like salsa. No chardonnay with those green chile tacos.

Specifically, try chardonnay with these dishes: roasted sweet corn soup, chicken pasta, seafood risotto, or grilled quail. All are traditional pairings of chardonnay with food.

One further note about Cakebread, Jack Cakebread was operating an auto repair business in Oakland and working as a freelance photographer when he discovered Napa. I certainly am glad he gave up cars to bring me some wine. I hope you're enjoying it too.

Cervantes', Don Quixote (1605-1615), "Finding at the first draught that it was only water, he would swallow no more, and begged Maritornes to bring him wine."