

RETURN TO SPLENDOUR

Australian winemakers are harnessing ancient techniques in the quest to produce exciting new chardonnay, with incredible results.

By Simone Madden-Grey



The chameleon of the grape world, chardonnay has sported a multitude of styles during its life. Sparkling, still, oaked, unoaked, ripe and rich, lean and mineral, chardonnay has worn them all. And just when you think you have it pinned down, chardonnay steps out, newly attired and ready to challenge the notion of predictability.

Originating in France, the grape’s heritage was unknown until DNA profiling identified it as a descendant of pinot noir and gouais blanc. Chardonnay reached our shores in the 1830s but it wasn’t until the 1970s that it came into its own.

Chardonnay’s fortunes have gone through ups and downs since then (all that oakiness!) but in

its modern avatar, it has become a stalwart of Australian wine. Exploration of its expressions continues unabated, as winemakers innovate with the grape, drawing inspiration from the past to produce exciting new iterations.

→ A true classic

Viticulture is believed to have originated in the Caucasus region some 8000 years ago. Tradition dictated that grape skins and juice were fermented together in large clay amphora-like vessels, which are known as qvevri in Georgia. Set in the ground,

the qvevri were sealed with a stone lid after fermentation completed, leaving the grape skins in the wine for an extended period of time.

The use of these types of vessels has been revived in the 21st century, with producers in Australia, New Zealand and France now using clay amphorae and ceramic egg-shaped containers to bring a new dimension to chardonnay. These fermentation vessels do not impart flavour, but put the focus on what the grape brings to the glass.

Using this technique also means extended skin contact is an integral part of the wine, resulting in a complex balance of floral, earthy, bitter and sweet flavours alongside a slightly astringent sensation.

→ The original bubble

Pétillant-naturel, or pét-nat, is based on the original method of making sparkling wine from hundreds of years ago. Pét-nat wines undergo a single fermentation (compared with two in méthode traditionnelle, which is used for Champagne), yielding a softer bubble, lower alcohol levels and a touch of sweetness and sediment.

Australian winemakers including those in the Great Southern region of Western Australia and the Adelaide Hills in South Australia have been embracing this style of winemaking using grapes like chardonnay. The result: added finesse, fine bubbles and a creamy texture.

→ A noble pursuit

Who would have thought a fickle little fungus could produce a scrumptious dessert wine? Using the Botrytis cinerea (AKA “Noble Rot”) fungus to produce sweet wines is a centuries-old technique. A combination of morning mists and warm dry afternoon sunshine is key to the development of botrytis on grapes. A botrytised chardonnay is an unusual but special drop which winemakers are leaning into all around the world, including Australia. Expect a luscious silky texture enveloping flavours of candied citrus, juicy peach and pear topped off with a dash of ginger.

→ The gold standard

After decades of the pendulum swinging from rich and oaky to lean and mineral, chardonnay seems to have finally found its equilibrium. Oak is no longer the bad guy, with Australian winemakers using it in a measured way to whip into shape ripe and generous fruit that shows carefully chiselled muscles on its elegant frame and juicy acidity. Today, our chardonnay is no longer plumb and heavy, nor overly taut — as Goldilocks would say, it’s just right.

TRY THESE...



Leeuwin Estate Prelude Chardonnay, Margaret River

\$32 single price (\$30.40 in any six)
Delicately textured with flavours of pear, ruby grapefruit and white peach.



Devil’s Lair Margaret River Chardonnay, Margaret River

VC Club member price: \$40 (non-member price: \$45)
Light toast and minerals with a hint of grapefruit.



Tonic Chardonnay^, Adelaide Hills

\$35 single price (\$33.25 in any six)
Delicious peaches, nectarine and melon flavours with subtle notions of dried nut and spicy nougat.



Simi County Series Chardonnay^, California

VC Club member price: \$25 (non-member price: \$40)
Tangerine, lemon curd, stone fruit, white peach and nectarine flavours.



Stonier Chardonnay, Mornington Peninsula

A mouth-filling palate with an array of citrus fruits, ripe peach and honeydew melon. (See instore for pricing.)



Church Road McDonald Series Chardonnay, Hawkes Bay, New Zealand

VC Club member price: \$32 (non-member price: \$40)
A complex and creamy texture.

^National except NT