

Tastings:

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Tastings: Taking Sides in the Butter Battle — Is Rich, Round Chardonnay Ready for a Comeback? Unlearning Your `ABCs`

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TO OUR SURPRISE, this is a question we have been asked with increasing frequency over the past six months: Where can I get a buttery American Chardonnay? Or, as Jacqueline Jenkins of Riverside, Calif., put it: "The long-lost buttery Chardonnay of yesteryear -- oh, how we miss them." The reason we're surprised is that "buttery" is a word that was just about banned from public wine discourse several years ago. The fact that readers feel comfortable enough to ask about these wines again is, we think, a trend in the making.

In the 1970s, when the modern California wine industry was still young, vintners made big, ripe and very American Chardonnays that were notable for their massive tastes. Back then, "buttery" was a complimentary word in our notes. As we said about a Bacigalupi 1979: "Buttery, woody nose. Big, citrusy taste upfront, very peppery, but a big, buttery, smooth finish. Thick and incredibly long-lasting. Amazing combination of lemony acid, pepper and thick, creamy butter."

Those tastes are a factor of the ripeness and quality of the grapes, use of oak for aging and/or fermentation and malolactic fermentation, which turns malic acid into creamier lactic acid. When used carefully, all of that can create a terrific wine that's both big and balanced.

But then, in our minds, vintners got lazy, or maybe greedy. The big, ripe fruit flavors that could support a great deal of oaky, creamy, vanilla tastes were replaced by short cuts and technology. Many Chardonnays got fat and blowsy, with overly woody tastes and low acids that made them taste sweet and made them hard to pair with any food. Worse, most inexpensive Chardonnays began to taste like they were made in a lab from oak, sugar and water, instead of in a vineyard from actual grapes. Critics began demanding leaner, more balanced Chardonnay that could be served with dinner. Winemakers started touting their "French-style" Chardonnay. Wine geeks began to laugh at American Chardonnay and actually spent time talking to each other about the evils of "ML" (that's malolactic fermentation, to the rest of us). The Anything But Chardonnay backlash was in full swing.

To be sure, Americans never stopped drinking Chardonnay. It's still far and away America's most popular varietal wine. But actually asking for a buttery Chardonnay was like ordering whitewall tires for your new car -- cute, but where have you been?

Well, judging by our mail, the backlash to the backlash has begun. In Seattle, Jeff Fisher, manager at McCarthy & Schiering Wine Merchants, has seen it. "We have definitely seen an increase in the number of people asking for big butterballs," he told us. He thinks people are sick of taking abuse from the ABC crowd. "People don't want to be told what to do," he said.

At the Wine Warehouse in Greensboro, N.C., owner Mark Lile-King has seen it, too. "In the last six months, that taste profile has become more and more popular with our customers," he said. "Within a three-year span, people were almost afraid to utter those words." Mr. Lile-King, who is also a minister, thinks consumers are turning back to big, buttery Chardonnay as "America's comfort drink" at a time of world-wide stress.

Within a few minutes of entering the Vintage Wine Shoppe in Birmingham, Ala., a couple of weeks ago, we heard a customer come in and ask for "a buttery Chardonnay." (The owner, Patti Davidson, recommended Neyers Vineyards.) **And consider this: At a wine bar recently, we were interested to see a California Chardonnay called A Donkey and Goat described this way: "Big, fat, buttery, oaky California!" Personally, we found it tightly wound, with nice acidity, tastes of pineapple and grapefruit and a deep well of minerals. When we called the winery to discuss the menu's description, the co-owner and co-winemaker, Tracey Brandt, was literally speechless for several seconds before explaining that she and her husband-partner don't like buttery Chardonnays and didn't make one. In fact, they used neutral oak and worked hard to keep the acidity up. "Chablis is my inspiration," she told us. "If you have a buttery, almost syrupy Chardonnay, it might make a nice aperitif, but it won't go with any kind of food." But the wine bar**

knew what its customers wanted.

So, back to the question: What good buttery Chardonnays are out there these days? We called wine shops around the country and posed this question: "If we walked into your shop this minute and asked you for a buttery American Chardonnay, what would you sell us?" We said they could choose one over \$20 and one under \$20, but they had to answer right away from wines that were on the shelf. Here are their responses. In the interest of brevity, we have simply listed names for the wines, without vintages or vineyard designations. In many cases, these wineries make several different Chardonnays, but this will give you an idea of the names that came to mind. The prices are the approximate prices that these stores charged at the time we called.

Binny's Beverage Depot, Chicago; Ray Denton, wine manager. Far Niente (\$45); Kendall-Jackson "Grand Reserve" (\$16).

Century Liquors, Rochester, N.Y.; Michael Misch, general manager. Chalk Hill (\$28); Franciscan (\$14).

Grapevine Cottage, Zionsville, Ind.; Doug Pendleton, owner. Talbott (\$39); Murphy-Goode (\$15).

MicroWines, Cincinnati; Lauren Wiethe, retail sales. Frank Family (\$30); Samantha Starr (\$14).

Off the Vine, Grapevine, Texas; Wayne Turner, part-owner. Olivet Lane (\$24); Robert Stemmler (\$16).

Punches Pharmacy Plus, Clare, Mich.; Jeff Punches, owner. Toasted Head by R. H. Phillips (\$15).

Rimann Liquors, Lenexa, Kan.; Marshall Rimann, owner. Mer Soleil (\$37); Foris, from Oregon (\$10).

Spec's, Houston; Joseph Kemble, manager. Mi Sueno (\$36); Belvedere (\$18).

Table & Vine, Northampton, Mass.; Paul Provost, general manager. Chasseur (\$30 to \$45); J. Lohr (\$10).

Vineyard Express, Laguna Niguel, Calif.; Ken Spears, owner. Silver Rose (\$31); Bighorn Cellars (\$20).

In addition, Mr. Fisher recommended Varner (\$35) and Mr. Lile-King suggested Solitude (\$27) and Buena Vista (\$14).

Armed with that advice, we bought all of those we could find -- we got almost all of them -- and tasted them blind. (We bought them at different stores and the prices we paid, in many cases, were different.) Our favorites are listed in the attached index. Two reliable names -- J. Lohr and R.H. Phillips -- proved that, even at the low end, "buttery" doesn't have to mean simple and lacking in true fruit tastes. Our other favorite under \$20 was good old Kendall-Jackson; we'd urge K-J lovers to move up a few dollars to the "Grand Reserve."

At the higher end, we were stunned by a Chardonnay called Chasseur that seemed to walk the line perfectly: We could certainly recommend it to someone looking for a big, rich wine, but it also had great acids and restraint. We called Chasseur and Bill Hunter, winemaker and majority partner, wasn't happy. "I'm not a big fan of buttery Chardonnays and I don't think I produce one," he told us. "The buttery-popcorn characteristics are a byproduct of ML and that to me is a negative. However, I will admit that it's probably a crowd-pleaser among mainstream Chardonnay drinkers. My Chardonnay has a creme brulee and brioche characteristic that you also find in Champagne." Brioche and toast, we suggested to him, are often associated with a buttery characteristic. "Yes," he said, "but incorrectly." Mr. Hunter said that his Chardonnay does undergo ML, but that the buttery characteristics it imparts are later removed through careful winemaking. He made only 148 cases of the wine we enjoyed so much, and the winery has sold out of it; it was distributed to four states and Washington, D.C.

It's pretty clear that "buttery," of all things, has become a fighting word and something of a symbol of a gap between wine drinkers and winemakers. We think it's time for both sides to put down their butter knives. Our guess is that most people who are looking for a "buttery" Chardonnay are actually looking for the kind of big, rich whites they recall fondly for their pleasing tastes, wines that could be appreciated on many levels. Call these wines creamy, toasty or just plain powerful, but there is something special about them -- as long as they have great fruit, good balance and abundant acids. To us, that is a very special American Chardonnay -- and we think you will be seeing more of those as consumers and winemakers realize that, in many cases, they are seeking the same thing.

You can contact us at wine@wsj.com.

The Dow Jones `Buttery Chardonnay' Index

Responding to the requests of readers, we asked wine shops to recommend "buttery American Chardonnays" to us. Then we bought almost all of their recommendations and tasted them in blind flights, separated by price. Some of these wineries don't like the description "buttery" at all, but, in any event, here are the wines we liked best. Some of these are difficult to find.

OVER \$20

VINEYARD/VINTAGE: Chasseur (Hunter Wine Cellars) `Durell, Sand Hill' 2003

(Sonoma Coast)

PRICE: \$55.00

RATING: Delicious

TASTERS' COMMENTS: Best of tasting. It even looks gutsy: green-tinged and rich. Refined, with toast and great citrusy acidity. Ripe yet restrained. Awesome with stone crabs.

VINEYARD/VINTAGE: Chalk Hill Winery `Chalk Hill' 2002 (Sonoma County)

PRICE: \$36.99

RATING: Very Good

TASTERS' COMMENTS: Classy. Chablis-like intensity at the front opens into good mouth-feel and then a long, creamy finish. Good with food.

VINEYARD/VINTAGE: Far Niente Winery 2004 (Napa Valley)

PRICE: \$45.99*

RATING: Very Good

TASTERS' COMMENTS: The 2002 was our favorite in a tasting of expensive Chardonnay last year, and this is another winner. Elegant and restrained, more austere than buttery. Beautiful.

VINEYARD/VINTAGE: Solitude Cellars 2003 (Carneros)

PRICE: \$23.99

RATING: Good/Very Good

TASTERS' COMMENTS: Rich and toasty, like an easy mouthful of comforting

buttered toast. Dottie found it sexy and warming; John thought it was too simple.

VINEYARD/VINTAGE: Robert Talbott Vineyards `Sleepy Hollow Vineyard'
2002
(Monterey County)
PRICE: \$34.99*
RATING: Good/Very Good
TASTERS' COMMENTS: As rich as custard, with butter, toast and nutmeg,
true
grape tastes and a zingy hint of lime at the end that's a real eye-
opener.

VINEYARD/VINTAGE: Varner `Spring Ridge Vineyard; Bee Block' 2003
(Santa
Cruz Mountains)
PRICE: \$39.99
RATING: Good/Very Good
TASTERS' COMMENTS: Cinnamon, nutmeg and a long, mouth-coating finish.
Some
edges give it special interest and complexity.

UNDER \$20

VINEYARD/VINTAGE: J. Lohr Winery `Riverstone' 2004 (Arroyo Seco)
PRICE: \$10.99
RATING: Good/Very Good
TASTERS' COMMENTS: Best value. Another winner from a reliable name.
Butter
and toast in a lovely, light package. A very comforting house white.

VINEYARD/VINTAGE: Kendall-Jackson Vineyards & Winery `Grand Reserve'
2003
(Monterey, Santa Barbara, Sonoma)
PRICE: \$15.98
RATING: Good/Very Good
TASTERS' COMMENTS: Really good for `buttery' people, with spice,
nutmeg,
tangerine and a little bite at the end.

VINEYARD/VINTAGE: Toasted Head (R.H. Phillips Vineyard) `Lot 33' 2004
(California)
PRICE: \$12.99
RATING: Good/Very Good
TASTERS' COMMENTS: Easy and nicely balanced. Tongue-coating yet
refined.
Good fruit, with some weight. Friendly.

NOTE: Wines are rated on a scale that ranges: Yech, OK, Good, Very
Good,
Delicious, and Delicious! These are the prices we paid at wine stores
in
Alabama, California, Indiana, New Jersey and New York. *We paid \$34.99
for
Far Niente and \$29.99 for Talbott, but these prices appear to be more
representative. Prices vary widely.

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