TASTING: Different Styles of Chardonnay

Before you start the tasting:

1. Make sure you have the Tasting Checklist. If you don't have the checklist, please use the navigation bar at the top of this page to go to the class Introduction, where the download link is located.
2. Fill in the top portion of the Tasting Checklist.
3. Pull the corks from your two bottles of wine. Pour each wine into a separate glass, filling each glass about 1/3 full.
4. To remember which glass is which, you might want to place the two glasses side-by-side, keeping the unoaked Chardonnay on the left and the oaked Chardonnay on the right. In each section of the tasting, we'll evaluate the unoaked wine first and the oaked wine second.
5. Fill in all the sections of your Tasting Checklist as you work through the tasting.

INTRODUCTION

This tasting compares two Chardonnays: One with minimal or no influence from oak ("unoaked"), and a second with considerable oak influence ("oaked").

SAME GRAPE VARIETY

Because both wines are made with the same grape variety, they share the basic range of Chardonnay aromas and flavors—citrus, tree fruit, tropical, mineral—but in almost every other respect, these are very different wines.

DIFFERENT STYLES

The winemaker's intent for each wine is different:

The unoaked Chardonnay is intended to feature the aromas and flavors of the grape and nothing else. This style can be described as a "pure expression of the variety."

The oaked Chardonnay is meant to be a highly complex wine featuring aromas and flavors from both the grape and the winemaking process—a style we'll call "winemaker influenced."

OLD WORLD MODELS

If we relate these two wines to their Old World models, we find that the unoaked Chardonnay is made in the style of a Chablis; the oaked Chardonnay, in the style of a white Burgundy from the Côte d'Or.

WINEMAKING DECISIONS

Once the winemaker has decided upon style, all decisions about which grapes to use and how to vinify them follow one of two paths.

For an unoaked, "pure expression" Chardonnay:

- The winemaker may select grapes from a vineyard (or vineyards) in a cooler areas, knowing that these grapes will have more delicate flavors and a leaner structure than warm-weather grapes.
- Because the delicate flavors may be overwhelmed by oak flavors from barrel fermentation, fermentation takes place in temperature-controlled stainless steel tanks to preserve the grapes' flavor and freshness.
- Once fermented, the wine is fined, filtered, bottled and shipped to market. (For this reason, the currently available vintage of unoaked Chardonnay is generally slightly younger than barrel-aged Chardonnay.)

For an oaked, “winemaker influenced” Chardonnay:

- The winemaker, needing bigger, riper flavors that can blend well with oak, may choose grapes grown under warmer conditions, fermenting them in oak barrels at cellar temperature.
- Unlike stainless steel, which is neutral and imparts no flavors of its own to the wine, the oak barrels profoundly affect the wine, giving it a rich, creamy mouthfeel (especially with sur lie aging) and adding flavors such as vanilla, spice (clove, nutmeg), nut (hazelnut), toast, coffee, smoke and wood.
- After fermentation, the wine is left to age in the barrels for several months or more before being fined, filtered and bottled, and may be given additional aging in the bottle before being released.

COMPARE AND CONTRAST

Comparing the wines that result from these two approaches:

The unoaked Chardonnay will have a paler color, perhaps tinged with green. A leaner body with a balance that leans toward acidity. An elegant, lively finish. And fresh fruit aromas and flavors.

The oaked Chardonnay will have a darker color - from the barrel’s charred insides and from exposure to air while in the barrel - a thicker, fuller body, perhaps more alcohol. A finish that is richer and more powerful than it is elegant. And a range of aromas and flavors from the barrel fermentation/aging process not found in the unoaked version.

QUALITY VS. STYLE

Finally, neither style is inherently better than the other—they are simply different. To make a successful wine in either style requires high-quality grapes, good judgement and deft winemaking skills:

The challenge of the unoaked style is to capture all the fruit flavors and to retain them throughout the winemaking process; the inherent danger the winemaker faces is that the transparency of this style all-too-readily reveals his or her mistakes.

The challenge of the oaked style is to balance the fruit with the oak so that the oak acts as a frame to the fruit, complementing and enhancing it; the inherent risk is that the frame will command more attention than the picture.

SEE: CLARITY, COLOR, INTENSITY, LEGS

CLARITY

- Are both wines clear or bright?

COLOR AND INTENSITY

- Is the unoaked wine paler, less intense than the oaked wine? Any tinges of green? Is the oaked wine darker, more intense?
- The color of both wines typically ranges from straw to gold. Unoaked Chardonnay is usually medium in intensity; oaked, medium to dark.

LEGS

- Does one wine have more prominent legs, or are they about the same?

SNIFF: AROMA INTENSITY, IDENTIFICATION

INTENSITY AND IDENTIFICATION

1. Swirl and sniff your unoaked Chardonnay. Do you find any apple, pineapple, lemon and mineral aromas?
2. Swirl, sniff the oaked Chard: Do you find the same apple, pineapple, lemon and mineral aromas? Do you also find any vanilla, spice, nut, toast, coffee, smoke or wood aromas?
3. How do these wines compare in intensity of aromas?

SIP: TASTE, BODY, FLAVOR

TASTE AND BODY

1. Sip, swish and spit each wine.
2. Is the unoaked Chardonnay firmer, more acidic than the oaked? Livelier on the palate?
3. Does the oaked Chardonnay have a softer, fuller body than the unoaked? More alcohol? Any creamy sensations in the mouth?

FLAVOR

- Do the flavors of each wine echo their respective aromas?

SUMMARIZE: FINISH, BALANCE, COMPLEXITY, FINAL EVALUATION

This tasting compares two wines made from the same variety and looks at how the winemaking influences the wines' styles: The winemaker's goal for the unoaked wine is to produce a wine that is essentially pure Chardonnay. For the oaked wine, it is to create a big and powerful wine, using every means available.

Neither approach is necessarily better: A well-made wine in either style gives enjoyment and pleasure, just as a poorly made wine in any style does not.

As you finish the tasting, keep noting the differences between these two wines. Ask yourself if there is one style you clearly prefer over the other, and if so, why. (For instance, you may find the oaked Chardonnay more forceful, yet find the unoaked Chardonnay more charming.)

FINISH

- Which wine has more flavors?
- Which is more elegant and lively on finish?
- Which wine's finish is richer and more powerful?

BALANCE

- Are the elements of acidity, alcohol, sweetness or fruit harmonious and balanced in each wine?
- In the oaked wine, is the oak in balance with the fruit? Does it enhance the fruit or does it overwhelm the fruit?

COMPLEXITY

- Which of these two wines would you say is the more complex?

FINAL EVALUATION

- Which wine do you prefer?
- Do you like the flavors added by oak?
- Which wine do you feel is higher in quality?

Congratulations on completing the Class 9 Tasting!