



Chablis: Soft and rich

Chablis has long suffered from bad white wines from regions outside Burgundy calling their Chardonnay the French classic. Chablis is from northern Burgundy and is immediately recognizable for its minerality and acidity.

Arguably, Chablis is the world's greatest white wine. Chablis is Chardonnay but not all Chardonnay is Chablis.

Now that's not wine geek double-talk. It only takes one taste of good French Chablis to realize Chardonnay can be so much more than the big buttery, oak-infused wines coming from California and even the white Burgundys of France. And those wine lovers who like oaked Chardonnay will have to admit Chablis is something totally different.

It's not hard to imagine some casual wine drinkers not recognizing great Chablis as the Chardonnay grape.



Howard Hewitt

Chablis is about two hours southeast of Paris in the northernmost region of Burgundy. Winemakers grow Chardonnay almost exclusively.

To understand French wine you have to understand terroir. Chablis sits on the floor of a small valley with steep hills on each

side covered with vineyard. There are four main appellations of Chablis: Petit Chablis, Chablis, Premier Cru and Grand Cru. The Petit Chablis and Chablis represent the largest plantings and also the wines that are least expensive. These wines can be found in any decent wine shop at \$20-\$25. The quality will stun you at the price point.

The hillsides have plenty of limestone beneath the soils. A walk through the vineyard will illustrate the wine's minerality by noticing the amount of rock scattered across the vineyard floor.

The truly great Chablis wines are the Premier and Grand Cru wines. There are approximately 2,000 acres of Premier Cru vineyard and a mere 250 acres of Grand Cru grapes.

Chablis at the lower price point is often, though not always, fermented and aged

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without oak. The Premier and Grand Cru wines often are aged partially or for a limited time with oak and stainless steel.

The Premier and Grand Cru wines are meant for aging. Many wine drinkers think of white wine as a consumable product different from big reds. The great Chablis wines only improve with age and offer complexity and a soft richness on the palate only aging can deliver.

Chablis is a region of rich tradition, pride, and stubborn adherence to the region's heritage. A new generation of Chablis winemakers are experimenting with new technology, wine-making techniques, and embracing marketing of their unique region.

But to understand the French passion for wine there is nothing better than a visit with one of the region's biggest names. Bernard Billaud of Billaud-Simon is one of the biggest.

Visiting with him in October was an unforgettable experience highlighted by his passion for Chablis wines.

"Chablis wine is about minerality and acidity," he nearly shouted when asked a second or third time about the growing use of oak in the region. "If it's not about minerality, you're just making Chardonnay."

While the comment by itself is not terribly profound, you had to hear the derision and the way he strung out the word C-h-a-r-d-o-n-n-a-y to know this is a man of passion.

"The more minerally the soil, the more iodine it has and the more it needs wood," Billaud said. He added that wood neutralizes the iodine taste. "Chablis wines are acidic wines and a dry white wine from a singular vineyard. The grapes must be harvested when mature and not before."

"Chablis is located between acidity and jammy fruit and producers must harvest just in between to get the edge of the knife."

What is so wonderful about Chablis? It's the apple, pear and dry mineral taste that goes so perfectly with food — particularly seafood.

The Premier Cru and Grand Cru wines can be found in better Midwest wine shops ranging from \$30-\$100 a bottle and even higher. They are worth a try just to experience terroir as a French winemaker intended.

Suggested labels: Billaud-Simon, William Ferve, Domaine Séguinot-Bordet, Jean Marc Brocard, Pascal Bouchard, Domaine des Marronniers and Alain Geoffroy. There are plenty of other labels to try but these were some of my favorites during an October visit.

The greatest white wine in the world? Try a Premier or Grand Cru and make your argument to the contrary! ■

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