

Pour



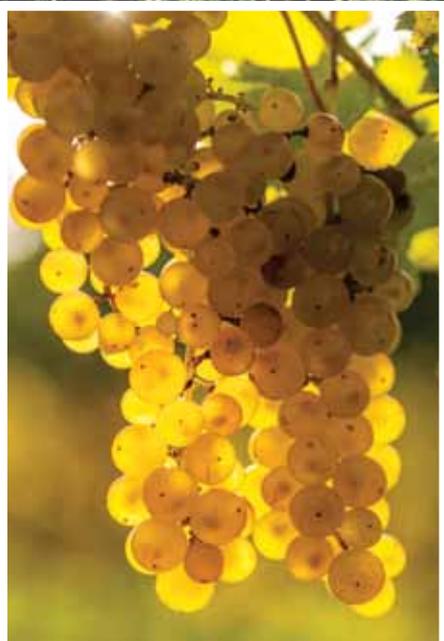
THE COOLER CLIMATE AND MINERAL CONTENT OF THE SOIL IN CHABLIS GIVE CHARDONNAY A DISTINCT FLAVOR PROFILE.



Elegant Chablis

Not the knock-off French white of days gone by, but the flinty, fresh real deal

BY MARK SPIVAK



CHABLIS-GROWN GRAPES EXHIBIT CLASSIC CHARDONNAY FLAVORS, BUT UNLIKE MOST CALIFORNIA CHARDONNAY, THESE WINES SPEND LITTLE OR NO TIME IN OAK.



For several decades, asking for a glass of Chablis was practically a reflex among American wine drinkers. What they received usually wasn't Chablis at all but an off-dry Chenin Blanc or Colombarid blend dispensed from a 3-liter jug. This wine experience did nothing to enhance the reputation of one of France's greatest white wines.

Real Chablis comes from the region of the same name, located east of Auxerre in northern Burgundy. The grape is solely Chardonnay, but the resulting wine is different from the California version. The French climate is much cooler, allowing the grapes to retain more acidity; the soil has more mineral content, giving the wine a flinty flavor profile; and, most important, oak is used sparingly or not at all in the winemaking process. Even though the finished wine displays classic Chardonnay flavors of citrus, melon, and pear, Chablis is a nuanced wine rather than "oak juice."

The region's top producers are generally acknowledged to be Dauvissat and Raveneau. Both have significant holdings in Premier Cru and Grand Cru vineyards and were among the earliest properties to bottle their own wine rather than sell the grapes to merchants. Dauvissat matures wine in barrels, while Raveneau does not. Prices tend to be steep. While the entry-level wines from Dauvissat start below \$50, Premier Crus average around \$75, and Grand Crus are easily twice as much. When you can find them, the Raveneau Premier and Grand Crus begin at \$150 and \$250, respectively.



CHABLIS, ALWAYS MADE FROM 100-PERCENT CHARDONNAY, IS LIGHT AND DRY WITH CRISP ACIDITY.



A WORD ON FOOD PAIRING: THE CLASSIC MATCH WITH CHABLIS IS OYSTERS, AS WELL AS FISH AND SHELLFISH OF ALL SORTS. HOWEVER, DON'T HESITATE TO SERVE POULTRY, VEAL, OR PORK DISHES WITH A SUBSTANTIAL, WELL-ROUNDED PREMIER CRU.

Fortunately, there is a growing number of producers turning out excellent Chablis at reasonable prices. They range from large estates to innovative small domaines. Some bottles to try:

William Fèvre: A balanced and judicious use of oak makes Fèvre a good introduction to the category. Prices start around \$25 for the Champs Royaux, a solid village wine, and climb to \$45 for Premier Crus (Fourchaume and Vaillons) and \$75 to \$100 for the Grand Crus of Les Preuses and Bougros.

Jean-Marc Brocard: Established 20 years ago, Brocard's estate encompasses 80 acres and offers something for everyone. Snag the basic Domaine Sainte Claire Chablis for less than \$25, Premier Crus for \$35, and the Grand Cru Les Clos for \$65.

Vergét: This *négociant* (a merchant who buys grapes, juice, or wine from small farmers to produce under a private label),

founded and operated by Belgian-born Jean-Marie Guffens, maintains scrupulous vineyard sources and a fanatical focus on quality. Chablis Terres des Pierres (\$25) displays remarkable concentration and brisk acidity that make it a pleasure to drink.

Daniel Damp & Fils: This small domaine now includes the wines of Jean Defaix, Daniel's father-in-law, and is currently run by his two sons. The basic Chablis (\$22) is crisp and delightful, and the Premier Cru Côte de Léchet (\$35) is even better.

Domaine Pinson Frères: In 1940, Louis Pinson was one of the region's first growers to bottle his own wine and sell directly to consumers. Today, his grandsons operate the estate. They produce a noteworthy entry-level Chablis (\$25), and an assortment of Premier Cru vineyards (Fourchaume, Montmain, Mont de Milieu) for \$35. <<



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