

Entertainment

Ethel Simmons editor/644-1100



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(60C)

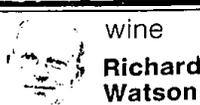
Days are golden for Chardonnay drinkers

Chardonnay drinkers have been, it seems, in a kind of golden era for the last few years.

Gradually, probably beginning with Sebastiani's release of its Country Chardonnay jugs (the first vintage release was in 1979), consumers of this noble white wine have had an increasing array of choices in the \$5-a-bottle range. Today there is an almost unbelievable range of selections in that price range. In even the most humble wine store.

Such names as Domaine St. George, Glen Ellen Proprietor's Reserve, Seghesio, Davis Bynum, Domaine Alexander, Fetzer Sundial, Christophe, Mariposa, Rutherford Estate, Round Hill, Mt. View, Liberty School, Corbett Canyon and M.G. Vallejo come readily to mind. While none of these is profound, most are decent and drinkable, a far cry above the "colombard"-based "chablis" wines we were offered a decade ago as our selection in every-day whites.

The presence of the Australian wine industry with its initial releases of chardonnays in this price range



wine
Richard Watson

also has enriched our alternatives. And, increasingly, French chardonnay-based wines have arrived, helped in their pricing by the then-strong dollar.

It is curious that this inventory of modestly priced wines did nothing to lessen the general esteem of this grape. Sales and choices of chardonnays in the \$12-15 range climbed as well through it all. It has become very much a two-tiered commodity. I recall many conversations I have had recently with both retailers and distributors about their efforts to find chardonnays to fill the hole with a sound choice in the \$9 range. There are some, of course, but not many.

ALL OF THIS has contributed to

an astonishing popularity for the wine. It is not uncommon in better restaurants today to be offered it among the choices as a house wine. Indeed, it has almost become generic.

The \$2.50-a-glass chardonnay adorns many a luncheon table in Birmingham, Troy, Livonia, and Westland, and it is a much more sophisticated selection for the patron than a Liebfraumilch, Piesporter or Burgundy, often the other alternatives.

It has all come full circle. What used to be served as "chablis" (and wasn't, in the true sense of that wine word) for a dry house wine is now a chardonnay (much closer to what a true chablis is).

Many of these inexpensive wines

are negotiant products, of course, both from California and France. That is, they are surplus wines purchased in bulk by bottlers that simply do not fit into the premium pipeline. Or they may be the product of the vast new plantings that are not yet bearing the high quality grapes they will in a year or two.

There has been, in short, a glut of the stuff on the market that has created this new echelon. A great deal has been consumed by thirsty people, many of them no longer scotch-and-soda or martini drinkers. (And who wants to order "a beer" at one of Detroit area's finer emporiums?)

It is now apparent that this favorable pricing condition is about to end. Prices for the 1987 crush are about to be raised at least a dollar a bottle (and probably a consequent half dollar a glass). We are about to leave this golden age.

It is not a case of collusion among winemakers. Would that these independent souls could get together to agree on anything, whether for their

own betterment or that of the industry as a whole.

A short-fall in the vineyards in 1987, maturing vines, a modest rate of inflation generally, increased consumption, greater demand and consequent increased numbers of producers are some of the causes. And there are others too complicated and full of intrigue to develop here.

What to do? Were we talking of the cabernet sauvignon, it would be easy to suggest that the consumer buy now before the increases take effect. Cabernets will, in general, endure and improve in the cellar for the next

several years. They are, for the most part, made for immediate consumption and will only deteriorate after a year or two in the cellar.

We could boycott the new wines when they are released but that would mean going thirsty. We could change to new varietal preferences but the public has become accustomed to chardonnay and its connotations. And so many still cannot pronounce "gewurztraminer."

Chablis, anyone? Beer?

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