



## the white queen of hearts

**I F CATE BLANCHETT'S ON-SCREEN PERSONA COULD BE** distilled into wine, I am certain she would be chardonnay. The shimmering blonde actor once famously described herself as “part extrovert, part wallflower” and, like the grape, she suits many roles. Subtle and persistent, both embody personality and character, filling a role completely while staying true to themselves. Chardonnay is at ease in the vineyard and tactful at the table with a glowing temperament – a winemaker’s dream.

The story of chardonnay is a fascinating study of winemakers’ obsession with an extraordinarily complex white that is produced more like a red wine than any other white variety. Then there is the magic of its home, Burgundy, which so many years ago prompted Australian winemakers to return to their own vineyards with chardonnay firmly emblazoned as the white queen of their hearts.

Chardonnay was different. Not like the long-lived regal riesling or the ephemeral princess that is fizzing champagne, or even the aristocratic opulence of sauternes. Chardonnay commanded hearts and industries with nuance and detail and a contrasting, almost red wine texture and richness of mouth feel. The Californians curtsied, officially obsessed in the 1960s, and held seminars till their blood ran white.

Chardonnay became a runaway success in the US and the industry quickly garnered significant interest. Meanwhile, South Australian winemakers remained riesling obsessed and could not believe the sometimes curvy and exotic chardonnay would ever displace the icy acidity and regal tautness of riesling. In NSW, winemakers were more open-minded and visionaries clustered to share the love. Murray Tyrrell grasped it immediately; Rosemount’s Chris Hancock and Bob Oatley saw the future and did what they could quickly and with quality. The public acceded wholehearted acceptance — it was the taste of the times: “bottled sunshine,” new, ripe, full, curvy and fun. Chardonnay’s tractability and well-stamped passport of mainly hot growing regions set the table, and Australia and the world dined out on lush, ripe tropical wines.

And then, when all seemed well, jaded familiarity in the ’90s saw powerful punches landing on its admittedly paunchy personality via the ABCs (“Anything but chardonnay”). Kath and Kim went below the belt with “kardonnay” and Bridget Jones’s sob story furthered chardonnay’s decline into ridicule and redundancy.

“Bottled sunshine” was going down the drain and Australia’s reputation with it, before a band of Yarra Valley and Margaret River winemakers led a painful reappraisal and then a revolution in the late ’90s. Finally, chardonnay had a new role, more personality with less oak, more fruit, subtlety and longer ‘white fruit’ flavours showing that Australia can adapt quickly. Now we are known for making some of the greatest chardonnay on the planet.

The reinvention of chardonnay is based on growing it, not making it. This means that winemakers seek to showcase the flavours of the vineyard more than their own actions. Hence, cooler low cropping vineyards and low technology winemaking such as whole bunch pressing; fermenting with “wild yeast” found living in the vineyard; and older and bigger oak barrels with less overt wood flavour to mature the wines.

These techniques help produce wines that retain the personality of their vineyard origins, and the results can be seen in the work of several Australian producers. Giant Steps Sexton Vineyard (traditional) and Tarraford Vineyard (modern) are a good introduction, as well as Domaine Naturaliste Purus (traditional) and Artus (modern) wines.

Australia charts a world-class course with less oak, less ripe exuberance and lower alcohol. The wines focus more on finesse with the classic silky texture of the variety. The key to the modern taste is a subtle balance between long fruit and savoury flavours. Our tools include picking early for acidity and not adding it, as well as whole bunch pressing to extract only the most balanced juice. Winemakers have learnt to control the savoury flavour elements by choosing a level of cloudiness in the juice for texture and flavour complexity, and fermenting with wild yeast. The trend is to larger capacity oak barrels, and an increased percentage of older oak or less time in new oak to reduce oak intensity and help fruit intensity and length of subtle fruit flavour.

The reign of chardonnay has, like any royal history, been tumultuous. It has suffered scandal, rumour and near social exile and yet it has managed to shrug these off. It has been shackled by oak and the inconsistencies of poor quality vines and incorrect clones, only to find itself freed by the hands of Australian winemakers. And through it all, the indefinable yet distinct essence of chardonnay; the white queen of hearts, long may she live. **HL**



# top drops



**Marchand & Burch Villages Chardonnay 2014 (\$37, 94/100)**

Exotic white flowers, elderflower and talc with oak and vanilla honey oak aromas. The palate is excellent. Active line of fresh fruit, ripe nectarine with mouth-filling density and fullness in the middle palate. Fruit rich and fleshy with subtle hops-like oak, and acid supporting. Very enjoyable drink-young wine.



**Giant Steps Sexton Vineyard Chardonnay 2014 (\$45, 94/100)**

A wine made with discretion and judgment, it has stylish aromas of oak and fresh pear. The palate is rich and fleshy from the start, with good acid drive carrying the fruit with apple acidity, peachy and appealing nougat, gentle butterscotch and dark toast oak flavours. Sexton is the cuddly brother and Tarraford, the more racy.



**Giant Steps Tarraford Vineyard Chardonnay 2014 (\$45, 95/100)**

The aromas are savoury and earthy, with wild yeast and less oak compared to the Sexton wine of the same year. In the mouth the acidity has verve and the fruit is deep and long with generous apple pear flavours. The finish has tangy, racy elegance with pith and minerals lingering.



**Moorilla Praxis Chardonnay Musque 2015 (\$28, 94/100)**

The best unoaked chardonnay of 2014/2015. Musque (Clone 76) is a recognised chardonnay variant with a muscat aroma. Very pale colour leads to lychee, white nectarine and muscat aromas. This is a fresh, high quality early drinking style with subtle nectarine and elderflower flavours with lovely length. Drink chilled and as young as possible.



**Wolf Blass Yellow Label Chardonnay 2015 (\$16, 90/100)**

The label has the addresses of very good vineyards for the price. Struck match and elegant fruit aromas; the palate is generous melon with a creamy texture. It retains its elegance with good structure and fruit balance. Gentle oak complexity is knit close to the flavour core.



**Centennial Vineyards Winery Block 2013 Chardonnay (\$19, 94/100)**

The complexities are here; nutty oak, a touch of brulee, yeast and white stone fruits, which glide into the mouth, balanced by richness to the layers of biscuit. There is white fruit and the texture of silky white butter with honey long on the palate. You don't often see such good chardonnay at this price.

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