

Chardonnay



Origin

There continues to be speculation as to whether the origins of Chardonnay are to be sought in Dalmatia or even in Lebanon. But according to the current state of findings, neither of these is correct. The variety originated from an accidental hybridization of Burgundy grapes with Gouais Blanc. Since a village in Mâcon (Burgundy) also bore the name Chardonnay, the home of the variety is presumed to be there. It was first mentioned in 1685. For a long time, it was cultivated in a mixed planting with Pinot Blanc and also frequently mistaken with it. The quality potential of Chardonnay was recognized relatively late; the differentiation of characteristics only took place in 1872 in Lyons. The worldwide reputation of Burgundy white wines, with the top locations at the Côte de Beaune (Montrachet) as well as in Chablis, is based upon this grape variety. Today, with regard to the white wines from Burgundy, but also with respect to the sparkling wines from the Côte des Blancs, Chardonnay enjoys an untouched preferable position. In Alto Adige, the variety came into cultivation incognito, as it were, and in fact it was erroneously called "yellow Pinot Blanc".

It was presumably plant material from the more southerly regions which unconsciously came to be planted in Alto Adige. But it may be the case that the variety arrived here mixed with Pinot Blanc stocks. The earlier name of Morillon for Chardonnay continues to be used in Styria, Austria to this very day. Archduke Johann brought the plant material from Styria at the time for his estates in Tyrol.

Distribution

The variety only achieved great distribution outside of France after 1970. Today, with 210,000 hectares (520,000 acres) worldwide, it is the most planted white wine variety. The largest areas of cultivation are located in its country of origin France with 51,000 hectares (126,000 acres) and the USA with an estimated 43,000 hectares (106,000 acres). That is followed by Australia with 21,000 hectares (52,000 acres), the same as in Italy. The country is led by Sicily (5,500 hectares/13,600 acres) ahead of Lombardy (3,000 hectares/7,400 acres), Veneto (2,800 hectares/6,900 acres), and the neighboring province of Trento (2,714 hectares/6,706 acres), followed by Friuli (1,500 hectares/3,700 acres) and Puglia (1,000 hectares/2,500 acres). Significant areas of cultivation are also found in Chile (13,000 hectares/32,000 acres), South Africa (8,300 hectares/20,500 acres), Spain (6,800 hectares/16,800 acres), Argentina (6,600 hectares/16,300 acres), Moldova (6,000 hectares/14,800 acres), New Zealand (3,900 hectares/9,600 acres), and Bulgaria (3,700 hectares/9,100 acres).

In Alto Adige, the variety has officially been represented since 1985. At that time, those areas were registered in a survey in which the majority was planted with Chardonnay. Previously, those areas had been assigned to Pinot Blanc. The requirements for recording under the wine laws resulted from the inclusion of the variety in the DOC producer regulations in the autumn of 1984. Starting out from the original 154 hectares (381 acres), the importance of the variety rapidly increased. By 1990, there were already 336 hectares (830 acres) planted, and in 2000, that figure had grown to 464 hectares (1,147 acres). Today, the area under cultivation is around 650 hectares (1,606 acres).

Chardonnay is cultivated primarily on the valley floor of the Bassa Atesina, particularly in the communities of Salorno, Magrè, Termeno, Cortaccia, Cortina s.s.d.v., and Egna. Another production area is in Oltradige. But the winegrowers in Terzano and Andriano also appreciate the variety.

Vines

This variety flourishes under the most varied of conditions: the spectrum ranges from extremely warm locations to comparatively cool climatic zones (such as Champagne). The loose structure of the grapes of individual clones reduces the risk of rot. The medium-sized bunches of a yellow to golden-yellow color mature at a medium-early date. When fully mature, the berries appear to be sprinkled with a rust-red. Then the grapes have to be harvested immediately, though, because otherwise they will break apart. At higher elevations, the variety may drop its blossoms. For that reason, the Chardonnay vineyards in Alto Adige are limited to lower hilly areas or else to the valley floor. At the higher elevations, Pinot Blanc is preferred.

Wine

The range in variation of the clones makes it possible to bring different stylistic directions of wine into the bottle. The spectrum covers the gamut from wines that are reminiscent of Pinot Blanc (with tones of apples and pears) to the aroma-intense Muscat. In general, Chardonnay wines often show notes of pineapple, banana, and melon. When planted at higher elevations, a scent of herbs (chamomile and lemon balm) may often be ascertained. The color ranges from lemon-yellow to golden yellow. When aged in small wooden barrels, smoky aromas and tones of vanilla are also added. In order to not change the typical characteristics of Alto Adige Chardonnay, the aromatic Chardonnay clones are only used up to a total of five percent. It is above all else the fine yet multilayered aromatic quality, the full-bodied feel, and the long-lasting flavor in the mouth which distinguish the variety in these parts.

Just as with Pinot Grigio, Chardonnay is not found as often on local wine lists as it should be entitled in correspondence to its distribution. This is also due to the fact that Chardonnay grapes from the Bassa Atesina are traditionally often vinified by wineries in the neighboring province of Trentino. In addition, Chardonnay is a favorite blending variety, either within the framework of the fifteen percent with other white wine varieties (especially the Burgundy varieties) that is allowed under the local wine regulations or else for cuvee wines such as Terzano Bianco and Alto Adige Bianco. Furthermore, the demand for Chardonnay is also growing on the part of local sparkling wine producers.