Why Plant Anything Other Than Chardonnay?

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Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. It’s a pleasure to see so many people in Canberra addressing the matters that really count to thinking Australians.

Why Chardonnay in the first place?
The singular issue facing us this morning is why plant anything other than Chardonnay? This was also the question confronting the good A bbot of the A bbey of St-Germain-des-Prés, who, for the sake of this treatise, we will refer to as Jean-Baptiste. Sleeping fitfully at night and acting moodily amongst his fellow brothers, Jean-Baptiste had pondered this issue for several months. He tortured himself again and again with the question of which white grape variety might give his abbey’s vineyards something of a viticultural edge. If the hairless tonsure atop his bonce was not sufficiently expansive prior to the restless scratching of his scalp, our Jean-Baptiste was certainly a less hirsute A bbot after a few months of deep viticultural meditation.

For our A bbot was not for the M uscat of Frontignan. N ot for him the R iesling of the Rhine, the F urmint of Tokay or even the A ligoté of Burgundy. N o, this man was clearly ahead of his time. He not only knew intimately the wines of M eursault, M ontrachet and C hablis, but he even knew what grape they were planted with: C hardonnay. A nd so, having arrived at the conclusion that to plant C hardonnay was to get onto a good thing, he did. A nd this was back in the year 1511.

Without wishing to suggest for a moment that our far-sighted A bbot had just become the world’s first C hardonnay groupie, this might indeed represent a profitable avenue for further historical and ampelographical research. For, by electing this grape above all alternatives on offer, the A bbot was in most respects about 450 years ahead of his time.

Thirty years ago, who had even heard of the grape Charlie Chardonnay? Those in the kno me might have been familiar with P uligny M ontrachet or even C hvalier M ontrachet, but back in 1967 Chardonnay didn’t rate too many column inches amid the studious ramblings of the wine press. M ost wine writers didn’t even know as much about C hardonnay as Jean-Baptiste, who had departed this mortal coil for the Great G rand C ru in the sky four centuries earlier.

M urray Tyrrell’s first C hardonnays, appropriately matured in oak, were tossed out of A ustralian wine shows because the wisdom of the day was that you didn’t waste good oak on white wine. H ow things have changed. But easily-persuaded growers think of them today.

It’s a measure of the all-conquering nature of C hardonnay that growers are actually hesitating to plant these grapes, each of which has already shown enough potential to make excellent, true-to-type wine in a variety of A ustralian locations, albeit mainly, to date, in the cooler ones.

The customer
Before we look more closely at the individual qualities of these grapes, let’s consider what the modern wine consumer is wanting. To speak rather generally for a moment, the wine buyer of 1997 is looking for several things. Wine must be immediately drinkable. People can’t wait for wine anymore. How many people are actually cellaring wine for drinking, and not with the idea of making some sort of profit down the line? A ustralian wine drinkers don’t have the money to buy

‘New’ French alternatives
O n the other hand, C hardonnay’s success paves the way for new and exciting alternatives. T he more that the bulk of the glob al wine drinking population associate C hardonnay with the reasonably qualitative, but the same, repetitive, inertia-inspiring beverage emerging from winery tanks of ever-increasing capacity, the more people are likely to look elsewhere. O ver-exposure is indeed a dangerous thing. Look what happened to B rist o!”

Back when our noble A bbot made his choice, C hardonnay was rated as anything but France’s premier white variety. It was a grape amongst many, a reliable cropper with the potential to make superlative wine if treated appropriately. T he wines of Burgundy were gaining in popularity throughout France and C hardonnay was attracting some degree of attention, but hardly universal acclaim. It was, if anything, a cult variety.

Four hundred and fifty years later it is the bulk variety. But now, in what the English delight in calling the N ew World, enter stage left the new cult wine grapes: other French varieties with names like M arsanne, Roussanne, V iognier and P inot G ris.

Of what Jean-Baptiste thought of these varieties, most of which originated in the Rhône Valley, no record remains. It’s genuinely possible he had never ever heard of them. Of more importance is what A ustralian winemakers and growers think of them today.

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Chardonnay which threatens to swamp the very diversity and individuality of expression which so attracts millions to the pleasures of wine, would he punt for it today? Personally, I doubt it.

With great respect to all those involved in their making, what would this fine and upstanding A bbot have made of wines like B in 65 and Q ueen A delaide C hardonnay? W ould he have chosen to plant C hardonnay if his first taste of the stuff was Jacob’s Creek or J aemieson’s R un? H ow would they have inspired him? C hardonnay has now become such a brand all of its own that it actually threatens to diminish the standing of the very wines which so attracted those like Jean-Baptiste all those centuries ago.
it in quantity all at once and they don't have the space to store it adequately. The wine industry has a very valid reason to put out a contract on the inventor of the town house and the inner-city apartment. Lifestyle living for some, perhaps, but where on earth do you put the wine?

Similarly, those who can cellar wine can't wait forever. If people can buy wines which reap rewards after only short to medium-term cellaring, they will. But more and more, our better Chardonnays are requiring at least a five to eight year period from vintage to drink at their very best.

While Marsanne and Roussanne can cellar, and cellar well for a significant period, with modern cool fermentation technology they can also become superb early-drinking styles. Neither Viognier nor Pinot Gris make cellaring wines; both are ideally suited to modern, short-term consumption.

Buyers demand value for money. There is a clear signal from the rest of the retail industry that the frenzied fashion in which Australians are entirely ignoring the recent massive price hikes in premium wine is something of an aberration, a glitch. It may last, it may not. Personally, were I a producer, I'd be looking to supply excellent value between $15 and $25 when compared to other Australian wines. There's a good margin there, and it's not beyond the cost of those who want it.

With due acknowledgment to the Mitchelton Marsanne, made à la burgundy, these new French varieties are hardly likely to require the investment in oak of most premium Chardonnays. Fruit prices won't reach the same astronomical levels and retail prices should reflect this, a prediction borne out by the accessibility of wines like St Huberts Roussanne and Heggies Viognier.

The overabundance of unwooded Chardonnay is still a major confidence trick played on an unsuspecting market and consumers will wake up to it sooner or later. Considerably more expensive than most rieslings, these wines are cheap to make, fast to return and considerably over-priced. Once buyers become aware of their deficiencies, especially when compared to other varieties which require no or little oak, their end will come. Count on it. Logic dictates that consumers will eventually prefer bottles of the outstanding Australian Riesling still priced around the $10 mark to the plethora of thin, featureless and almost empirically deficient unwooded Chardonnays priced at a premium and which owe their existence more to economics than any real winemaking intent.

I would expect that, once they enter mainstream Australian wine production, these new French varieties would knock the pants off all but the most exceptional unwooded Chardonnay. How many unwooded Chardonnays come close to the very modestly priced and unwooded Chateau Tahbilk Marsanne? A handful at most.

Buyers are seeking new, fresh, clean and uncluttered tastes. This is one of the reasons behind the recent conversion of many to unwooded Chardonnay, with its highly questionable results. The message from many is that unwooded Chardonnay is the only way to escape the over-exposure, by whatever available means, of many Chardonnays of the quercus species. Never before has a stronger case been presented, ladies and gentlemen, for us to shoot the messengers.

These new grapes fit the way we eat. The spectrum of fruit character from well-handled Viognier, Pinot Gris, Roussanne and Marsanne creates new and interesting matches with an abundance of cuisine. Their qualities sit easily with the modern demand for pure, expressive and mouthfilling flavour, even if they fail to evolve much beyond the primary.

Whether Italian, Thai, Vietnamese or even modern French-cross-Asian, most contemporary cuisine involves the combination, in an uncomplicated way, of fresh, high-quality ingredients, with unashamedly striking, assertive flavours and textures. Fine dining has been superseded by sophisticated cafe and brasserie style presentation, whatever the nationality of the cuisine. Whether we're talking about food prepared professionally or at home, it's my experience that these new French varieties fit easily into the way Australians take to their solids in the late 1990s. It's a development that shows no sign of slowing.

Furthermore, you don't need an MW to tell that these new grapes are clearly, obviously, starkly different from the mainstream white Australian varieties of Chardonnay, Riesling and Sauvignon Blanc. We Australians are an inquisitive crowd. We will buy and taste just because something is different. If we like it, we're confident enough to try it again. With Chateau Tahbilk's and Mitchelton's widespread success with the grape, you're hardly venturing into terra incognita when you buy a box of Marsanne, but once the words 'Pinot Gris' or 'Pinot Grigio', Viognier and Roussanne become part of the everyday wine vocabulary—as Pinot Noir has done over the last decade—wines from these grapes should live or die on their quality alone.

The market segments for new French varieties

To spend a moment longer on the likely market for these wines, it's worth dividing it into three rough segments.

Those who spend less than $8 per bottle and who buy on label strength of brand or on the presence or not of the word 'Chardonnay' on the labels of their white wines effectively rule themselves out of this discussion for at least another ten years. It would take that long for new plantings to mature and for new brands to strengthen to make any real impact with this market.

Then let's consider those to whom Chardonnay is at present the major imperative, but who would spend $20 per bottle only on rare occasions. These are the people who were wooed and won by Chardonnay's marketing, its full-bodied, mouthfilling flavour, even if they fail to evolve much beyond the primary.

The second market is the category of people who experiment, taste, read and absorb. They are the inquisitive crowd. We will buy and taste just because something is different. If we like it, we're confident enough to try it again. With Chateau Tahbilk's and Mitchelton's widespread success with the grape, you're hardly venturing into terra incognita when you buy a box of Marsanne, but once the words 'Pinot Gris' or 'Pinot Grigio', Viognier and Roussanne become part of the everyday wine vocabulary—as Pinot Noir has done over the last decade—wines from these grapes should live or die on their quality alone.

Finally are those who regularly spend good money on wine. Often fixed in their ways, this group also includes those who experiment, taste, read and absorb. They frequently spend more than they can afford, but love it all the same. They're on the ball, in touch and as keen as mustard. They have wine writers over the phone, spend hours telling retailers how to do their job and go to as many tastings as their schedule permits. They often work long hours in high-pressure jobs and they value the quality of their free time.

They're always looking for alternatives and pay good money for new and innovative wines, even if the wines in question would not stand up to the same scrutiny as many cheaper Chardonnays on the professional tasting bench. These buyers drink Chardonnay but choose it judiciously,
generally seeking those with the complexity and individuality imbued from traditional winemaking techniques. Most importantly, these are the people who will open the doors for the new varieties because right now they’re desperate for something different. They are the market, those to whom the new top-quality wines from the new French varieties should be directed. Only once they have been adopted by this set should makers aim for the larger and ultimately more profitable market beneath.

The varieties
From a wine writer’s perspective, this group of French varieties offers a welcome relief. I love my work, but find it harder each time to summon the enthusiasm to tackle a tasting bench of 40 mid-market Australian Chardonnays. There’s usually little wrong with them, but far too little to excite. Like many, I’m genuinely excited by the Australian wines I’ve tasted from Marsanne, Roussanne, Pinot Gris and Viognier.

Throughout the 19th century the white wines from Hermitage were very highly rated in England. The reason for this, according to Alexis Lichine, was because they were big and heavy, although this opinion might be coloured slightly by the fact that M. Lichine was of course a Frenchman. There is nothing big or heavy about the best contemporary white wines from Hermitage, or from the best of similar blends made elsewhere.

Nobody in Australian wine needs an introduction to Marsanne. Its freshness and zest in youth, its ability to develop citrus and honeysuckle fragrances and its ability to mature over a medium term into a lingering, toasty, honeyed and savoury white wine with richness and character make it the complete package. It’s for people who like their white wine young and old; it has personality and distinction.

Roussanne is potentially more interesting, since its fineness and tightness make it a perfect blending partner with Marsanne. Yeringberg’s blend of the two shows us that it works here as well as in the northern Rhône. The St Huberts Roussanne is distinctly true to type. I once tasted a trial wine by Rick Kinzbrunner from Giaconda which I could have sworn was a Rhône wine. I’m confident that we can make excellent Roussanne with all its characteristic herbal scent, spiciness, leaness and mineral finish and that Australians will take it strongly, especially on premise.

Viognier is especially suited to the Australian market. Instantly appealing with a juicy, almost oily texture and flavours of peaches, orange blossom and apricots, it’s a low-acid wine with a spicy, lingering, chalky finish. No cellaring required here. Enjoy it fresh and young.

Although it’s a low-cropping grape, Viognier does offer some insurance to the grower since it can be considered a dual purpose variety, successfully married to Shiraz in Côte-Rôtie, where it can represent up to one fifth of the finished wine. Clonakilla’s Shiraz and Yarra Yering’s Dry Red No. 2 illustrate just how well it can be deployed in an Australian red wine.

Like Marsanne and Roussanne, Viognier doesn’t require a massive oak budget, so it’s cheaper to make to its potential than is Chardonnay. It presents more complexity and character than unoaked Chardonnay, with better palate length and less angularity.

Most Australian Chardonnay is made in a simple, tutti-frutti style with tropical fruit and toasty/vanilla oak influence and does not improve in the bottle. Viognier, which would cost a similar amount to make, will reward two to three years cellaring, the perfect period of time to suit the modern lifestyle.

There’s only 25 ha of Viognier in Condrieu and only 3 ha at Chateau-Grillet, with perhaps another six or seven at Côte-Rôtie. But, as our corpulent Abbot would happily remind us, Chardonnay was once a minor variety too.

The black, or grey, sheep in this debate, is Pinot Gris, which happens to sell twice as quickly when pronounced in Italian. Likely to do its best when planted in regions too cool to consistently ripen its Burgundian relative, Pinot Noir, Pinot Gris has yet to demonstrate that in Australia it can match the Rhône trio of Viognier, Marsanne and Roussanne. That said, it should more than hold its own against middle-of-the-road Chardonnay on a quality basis and should not be expensive to make.

Doubtless Jean-Baptiste would have contemplated planting Pinot Gris, known throughout the Middle Ages in Burgundy as Fromenteau or Beurot and with an excellent reputation in Northeast France. If he made a mistake, ladies and gentlemen, now is the time to prove him wrong.

Like the blue-green algae presently threatening to clog up our river systems, ordinary Chardonnay, ladies and gentlemen, is clogging our dining tables. Our best Chardonnays are magnificent wines indeed, but they’re a different matter altogether.

While only those afflicted with cases of the most extreme optimism could even half expect the varieties of Marsanne, Roussanne, Pinot Gris and Viognier to challenge the place of Chardonnay as our premier quality white variety, there is unquestionably a niche waiting for them to fill, a niche that grows wider every year.

The size of the opportunity and its duration really only depend on two things: that the wines are sound and true to type, and that they are affordable to those who want to taste them. Go forth and multiply these vines, and from his cellar in the sky, even Jean-Baptiste, who only ever wanted to plant Chardonnay, will surely smile down on you.