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Particular Whites

When the subject of Chardonnay comes up, I'm reminded of the famous question asked of Marlon Brando's outlaw biker in *The Wild One*: "Hey Johnny, what are you rebelling against?"

"Whaddaya got?" is his reply.

For certain wine lovers, Chardonnay has become synonymous with boring conventionality. The "Wild Ones" of the wine world are in full-throated "Whaddaya got?" rebellion. Sympathetically understood and duly noted.

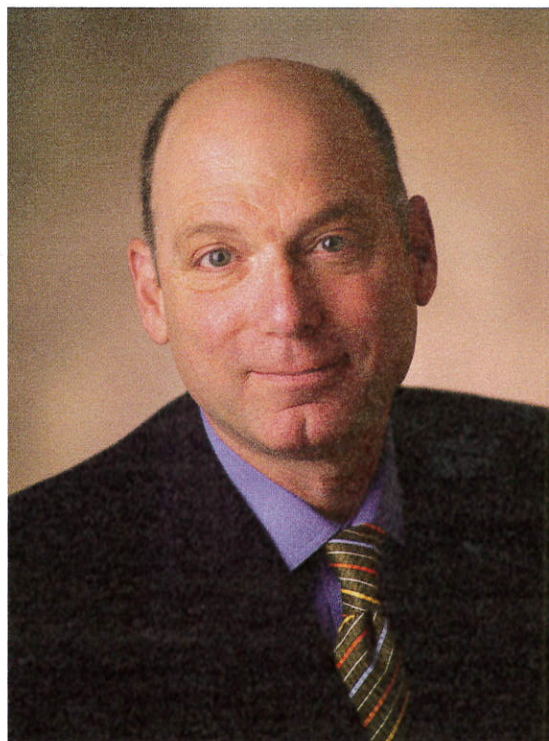
As for myself, I've been asking "Whaddaya got?" quite a lot lately.

It's just so easy to get into a buying rut. No sooner do we find what we like than we oh-so-happily have no interest in deviating from an assured, reliable pleasure. This is perfectly reasonable, but also deeply confining. It's happened to me, quite a lot actually, so I know all about that come-hither hum of welcome familiarity.

Now, I'm hardly alone in liking white Burgundies. For many lovers of white wine they represent a benchmark, delivering as they do the classic profile of green apple, white flowers and citrus, with a tinge of honey, as well as a distinctive stony mineral quality that's almost electric in its intensity.

The irony of this moment is that those of us who love white Burgundy are limiting ourselves by our conviction that only Burgundy—and therefore only Chardonnay—can create the dry white wines of our dreams. It's time for us to think again.

At a recent dinner party, for example, a guest brought a bottle of the 2002 Sine Qua Non Whisperin' E, a blend composed of Roussanne (50 percent), Viognier (31 percent) and Chardonnay (19 percent) sourced mostly from Alban Vineyard in California's Arroyo Grande. Did it taste like white Burgundy? Not literally so, no. But it had that particularity that makes so many of us admire what Burgundy delivers. It lingered in the mind as much as on the palate. Indeed, after nearly a dozen years of age, this white offered the same memorable detail as a Burgundy *grand cru*.



White Burgundy lovers limit ourselves by our conviction that only Burgundy can create the white wines of our dreams.

The same is true for a favorite wine of mine from Portugal's Douro region: Guru Branco from the winery Wine & Soul, a field blend of four indigenous white grapes (Viosinho, Rabigato, Códaga do Larinho and Gouveio). The depth, scale and, yes, particularity of this dry white wine is truly comparable to a top white Burgundy.

Similar stunners come from all points on the compass. Australia, for example, offers its dry Sémillons from the Hunter Valley north of Sydney. These wines, if given sufficient age, would be embraced by Burgundy as long-lost cousins.

Clear across the Australian continent, the Margaret River zone south of Perth delivers some amazing white wine particularity. Check out Cullen Wines' two single-vineyard Sauvignon Blanc and Sémillon blends. Burgundian? You bet, except for the grape varieties of course.

All right, I can hear you saying, it's possible. But I still want Chardonnay. Fair enough. Can I get what I like so much about Burgundy's crisp, miner-

ally Chardonnays from anywhere else in the world? Die-hard Burgundy lovers are dubious. But they're wrong.

If you're in the die-hard crowd, you'll think differently after trying the Chardonnays of Norman Hardie or Closson Chase in Ontario's Prince Edward County, or any number of Chardonnays from the Niagara Peninsula—from wineries such as Tawse and Malivoire. These wines can be dead-ringers for Burgundy.

The same may be said for Santa Cruz Mountain Chardonnays from Rhys, Mount Eden and Ridge. The last two have long and illustrious pedigrees, while Rhys, for its part, has excited just about everyone who has tasted its wines. Look also at Arnot-Roberts and Varner, which are both coming on strong with their own Chardonnays from the Santa Cruz Mountains.

Now, I would never want to take Burgundy's hallowed name in vain. But it has to be said: Today's most ambitious white wine producers don't take it in vain either. Rather, they take it to heart. Burgundy is a benchmark. And increasingly, these same producers who actually share a devotion to Burgundy are now delivering comparably profound "Burgundian" particularity. With, of course, all due respect.

Matt Kramer has contributed to Wine Spectator regularly since 1985.

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