

The Castel Giovanelli vineyards, part of the Kellerei Kaltern-Caldaro cooperative, grow exceptional Chardonnay next to Lago di Caldaro in Alto Adige's South Tyrol region.

sciardonnè: the diva grape

BY ANTHONY GIGLIO

RECENTLY, at a dinner party in Los Angeles with a table set for 20, I met Chris Kern and Teresa Rhyne, the couple who started forgottengrapes.com, which is dedicated to grapes that have been cast aside or overshadowed by international superstars such as Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Cabernet Sauvignon. They began describing their favorite grapes that have fallen into various states of obscurity using celebrity names to bring them back to life, and soon the entire table was matching grapes to celebs. Chenin Blanc? The Helen Mirren of forgotten grapes (incredibly versatile, ages well, celebrated now, but back in the 1970s wasn't so fabulous). Carménère? The Alec Baldwin/Charlie Sheen of forgotten grapes (great pedigree, had solid careers, bottomed out, repackaged, came back stronger). Viognier had my favorite analogy: The Beyoncé of forgotten grapes (curvy, highly perfumed, spicy). Yes, it's true, we sucessfully melded pop culture and wine geekdom.

Even though it's anything but a forgotten grape, I asked, "Who is Chardonnay?" throwing a curve-ball into the mix. After all, few varietals are as equally loved and reviled as Chardonnay. The adjectives flew in every direction. Ubiquitous! All-powerful! Dominator! Big! Steely! Cold! Buttery! Soft! All-consuming! Not beloved by all, but respected. Can you guess where this is headed? Chardonnay is *Oprah*.

Ironically, the two have been popular here for about the same amount of time, since the late 1980s. That's when I fell in love with Chardonnay (and Oprah, too), but (cue tender *Oprah* music) my relationship with the grape, like all relationships, has been a journey through good times and bad, rebounds and redemption, scorn and adulation, and, eventually, comfortable acceptance. (Oprah, I'd love to come on the show to talk about this further … .) Why all the drama surrounding this grape?

As a varietal, its name has become associated with a particular style of New World wine from California. Winemakers gave it dominant notes of butter through excessive malolactic fermentation, which converts tart malic acid to buttery lactic acid. They also favored lengthy aging in new oak barrels, which imparts notes of vanilla. When I first tasted it, like many Americans I was seduced by the honey-blonde bombshell, all curvy and creamy, buttery and rich—wine that was all the rage when *Dynasty* and Reagan were in vogue. Then I moved up to white wine from Burgundy, the original Chardonnay from its home region in France, and I discovered the minerally, crisp, ethereally complex side of the grape.

Then it seemed like every country on the planet started bottling Chardonnay. As its popularity grew, its quality-to-value ratio dropped and, outside of Burgundy wines, it seemed destined for a career of never-ending mediocrity (would it become the Barry Manilow of grapes?).

That's when I started to dabble in other varietals. I wanted to spice things up. I wanted the un-Chardonnay: lighter, zippier, livelier. I worked my way through Pinot Blanc and Gewürztraminer, and seldom looked back. That is, until I went to Spiaggia in Chicago a couple of months »

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ago, and everything turned upside down. I met Steven Alexander, a fellow sommelier and keeper of the keys to Spiaggia's legendary wine cellar of over 600 selections from every nook and cranny of Italy. When he approached our table and asked if we would like a nice Chardonnay, I actually burst out laughing, thinking he had a great sense of humor. He knew what I was thinking, so he asked me how familiar I was with Chardonnay from Alto Adige, the northeastern region that borders Austria and is one of Italy's best white wine regions.

For a second I imagined we were going to have a throw-down, but I humored him and confessed that I hadn't paid much attention to them, given the other exciting white wines Italy produces. I mean, why drink Chardonnay when there are so many other interesting grapes, like Falanghina, Vermentino and Kerner? He didn't answer me. Instead, he said, "I'll be back."

CHARDONNAY, CALLED Sciardonnè in Italian, has been grown all over the country for centuries, and it was often confused with Pinot Blanc (the Betty Draper from *Mad Men* of forgotten grapes—blonde, statuesque, blends in nicely with the in-crowd). In fact, in Alto Adige, where German is spoken alongside Italian, the historical names for each grape bore the subtle distinction made between the two. Pinot Blanc was called *weissburgunder* (white Burgundy) and Chardonnay was called *gelber weissburgunder* (golden white Burgundy).

It wasn't until 1978 that the Italian government dispatched ampelographers—grapevine experts—to differentiate between the two vines, which ultimately led, in 1984, to Chardonnay getting its first DOC, in Alto Adige. By the turn of this century, Chardonnay had become Italy's fourth most widely planted white wine grape. That said, several factors unique to Alto Adige help it compete with Burgundy as the preeminent region where Chardonnay is grown, and make it the place where one of the most over-produced grapes on the planet is turned into a wine like no other.

As Burgundy vintners will tell you, Chardonnay must be challenged to excel. Unless it is planted in the right soil, in a place with a long, cool growing season, the vines become lethargic, producing fat, lazy grapes that yield wines with little interest, intensity or staying power. Alto Adige is blessed with the right soil (limestone, chalk, granite and quartzite), and perfect weather of brilliant, big-sky sunshine and steep temperature drops at night—an effect that preserves the acidity in the grapes while allowing for full maturity of flavor compounds. This makes these Chardonnays remarkable, with an unadulterated purity of apple and quince aromas and flavors, and clean, mineral nuances.

Growers here also credit the area's mountainous topography for their Chardonnay's unique qualities. The vines grow on some of the steepest and highest slopes in Europe. Another factor contributing to the unfettered brilliance of the wines is that oak, if employed at all, is used judiciously, meaning you taste more fruit than the butter and vanilla of typical California-style Chardonnays.

BACK AT SPIAGGIA, Steven Alexander presented several bottles, ready to talk me into one. Among them were St. Michael-Eppan, Cantina Terlano, Cantina Andriano and Kellerei Kaltern-Caldaro, representing the best of Alto Adige's cooperative wineries (wineries made up of a number of growers who contribute their grapes), as well as Elena Walch, Alois Lageder and Tiefenbrunner, representing the best of traditional, family-owned wineries.

As we tasted, he explained that to his taste, Alto Adige Chardonnays possess the best of both Old and New World qualities. "They bridge the middle ground between Côte de Mâconnais in Burgundy and a Russian River Chardonnay from a cooler vineyard," he said, adding, "I always liken them to drinking from a pool of crystal-clear mountain water filled with glacial rocks." As a city boy, I explained, that's hard to imagine. "There is a certain precise, linear nature to the best whites of the region that amplifies the varietal fruit and kicks everything up to '11,' while maintaining that signature 'cut' from the acidity," he enthused. Well said, sir! The wines had my mouth salivating and my head spinning. These were youthful, beautiful wines, the kind that grab your attention and keep it. Unlike the Chardonnays of my youth, these were classier, more sophisticated and well-seasoned.

Twenty years after I first strayed from Chardonnay, I think I'm hooked again. The romance is back, and I'm ready to tell Oprah all about it. □

suggested bottles

With roots in prestigious Burgundy, Chardonnay became one of the world's most planted vines. While overproduction tarnished its name, winemakers in Alto Adige have quietly turned this notorious grape into incontestably illustrious wines. Our selections here are true standouts.



ALOIS LAGEDER
"Löwengang," Chardonnay, Alto Adige, 2008
This spectacular wine comes from one of Alto Adige's first biodynamic winemakers and is brimming with quince, passion fruit and apple pie aromas, and heaps of fruit in the full-bodied palate's long, luscious finish. $30.



CANTINA TERLANO
Chardonnay, Alto Adige, 2008
An exceptional value from one of Alto Adige's best cooperative wineries, this crisp, clean, minerally Chardonnay expresses the grape's deceptively lighter side until it builds in power toward the finish with toasty, creamy richness. $20.



ELENA WALCH
"Castel Ringberg Riserva," Chardonnay, Alto Adige, 2008
A beautiful Chardonnay with sliced apple, smoke and caramel aromas up front, then loads of mouthwatering apple fruit, leading to a long, full-flavored finish that goes on and on. $28.



ST. MICHAEL-EPPAN
"Sanct Valentin," Chardonnay, Alto Adige, 2007
A big, big wine with layer upon layer of apples interwoven with cream and spice. Rich, round and supple in the mouth, it coats the palate with Chardonnay richness. $36.



TIEFENBRUNNER
"Castel Turmhof," Chardonnay, Alto Adige, 2008
The perfect balance between fruity and creamy, and crisp and minerally, Tiefenbrunner seems to have this profile mastered, bringing out the best of Old World and New World styles in one beautiful bottle. $21.