

White and Blush Wines

(Seventh in a series of highly opinionated articles about grapes and wine in El Dorado County)

The main difference between red and white wines is not, as you would first think, in the color. It's in the ways they are fermented and in the amount of tannin in the wine.

Unlike red wines fermented with all the grape parts in the vat, white wines (and blush wines like white zinfandel, which are just faintly colored white wines made from red grapes) have the skins and seeds removed before the fermentation starts. Following crushing, the grapes are fed directly into a press which separates the juice from all the solid parts. After settling and clarification, yeast is added to the juice and the fermentation is allowed to proceed. The same operations are performed as in red wines, but the sequence is different: crush, ferment, press for reds; crush, press, ferment for whites.

While many whites and most blushes are fermented in stainless steel tanks, chardonnay (like a few other varieties) is frequently "barrel fermented." In this process, the juice and yeast are actually transferred to oak barrels and allowed to complete the fermentation there. In some cases, the wine will remain in the barrel, with all the yeast and sediment present, for several months to gain additional richness and complexity (called "*sur lies*" or "on the lees" aging).

Uh-oh, Chemistry!

There is sometimes a further fermentation process, most noticeable in white wines, called in winemaker's jargon the "malo-lactic fermentation." Without reverting to the technical details, let's just say there are several acids present in grape juice and wine. These are what give wine its pleasant 'tart' flavor (winemakers avoid the term "sour," which to them means spoiled wine that has turned to vinegar). Most wines contain both tartaric acid (familiar as cream of tartar) and malic acid, which is the acid that makes apples 'tart.' When conditions are right, or when the winemaker adds a prepared culture to the wine, the malic acid is converted to lactic acid, which is also produced when yogurt is made from milk. In addition to producing the smoother-flavored lactic acid, some other flavors are created during this process, most notably the "buttery" flavor present in some chardonnays.

The Economics of Color

Because white wines have much less tannin than red wines, they are ready to drink at a younger age, and generally don't live as long. While red wines will require up to two years of barrel aging to smooth out, most white wines are bottled within the following year. White zinfandel, which fueled the expansion of many wineries in the 1980's, was sometimes known as "cash flow wine," since it could be bottled and sold as early as December of the harvest year. Sadly, the consumption (and thus the production) of this once-favorite wine is down by over a factor of five from its peak.

The Benefits of Age

Although we talk a lot about the aging potential of wines, today this is mostly of academic interest. A surprising statistic is that, in this country, over ninety percent of wines are consumed within 24 hours of purchase, so the aging most wine sees takes place on the back seat of the family sedan. For that precious minority with the means and the patience to age wine, the amount of time to “cellar” or to lay down wines can be confusing as well. Reds with a lot of tannin will age longer; the soft and fruity ones should be consumed early. The actual timing depends on your own palate and preferences, and is best determined by experience. One useful technique is to buy a case and try one bottle every year to see the changes that occur. If you like your wines aged, you should become a student of varieties and vintages to avoid unpleasant surprises. It is rare, however, that white wines will benefit from more than a few months of aging.

If you like to store wines, the requirements are fairly simple: a constant temperature, as low as possible. Cellars are ideal, but even an inside closet will do in most homes. In most other locations, the temperature varies on a daily or weekly basis, and the wine in the bottle will expand and contract, causing leakage or premature senility. Gradual temperature changes with the seasons will usually not cause a problem. In any case, store **all** wine bottles on their sides to keep the corks wet and the wine as fresh as possible.

One fact of life you will have to accept: aged red wines will have sediment in the bottle. Tannins, which serve to protect a red wine from its surroundings, gradually form larger particles as they sacrifice themselves selflessly to the wine’s survival. Having given their all, these particles gradually drop to the side of the bottle as a fine sediment. This is not a flaw in the wine, but a monument to those brave chemical soldiers who have perished in a noble struggle to keep the wine safe while it ages to potential greatness! Simply stand the bottle up for a few hours before it is to be served, and pour it carefully into a decanter for convenient serving at the table.

The New Whites

The most widely grown white grape in California is French Columbard (over 400,000 tons last year), but since most of it goes into wine in boxes and large jugs as “Chablis,” it’s almost impossible to find a bottle with that grape identified on the label. Chardonnay, at over 300,000 tons, has been the dominant “varietal” white grape for many years, and will likely remain so. If you have an adventurous spirit, you might seek out some of the less common varieties: pinot blanc, pinot gris (largely from, gasp! Oregon), and varieties recently imported from the Rhône Valley of France--marsanne, rousanne and viognier (pronounced vee-ohn-yay). If you like these, and you have not heeded previous warnings about growing grapes, you might even want to grow some in your own vineyard.