

Chardonnay's bright future

The Oregon wine industry has built its reputation on the cool-weather pinot noir and pinot gris grapes, by far the dominant varieties here.

But wineries and vineyards are starting to invest more in green-skinned chardonnay grapes, seen as potentially the next big wine variety to come out of the state.

"There is increasing interest in producing premium tier chardonnay in the Willamette Valley," said Patty Skinkis, a faculty member at the Oregon Wine Research Institute at Oregon State University.

"Part of the history in wine here is when the pioneers of the industry came to Oregon they were experimenting," Skinkis said. "They didn't know what would grow well here. They originally chose a chardonnay clone that was suited for California, but it didn't do well in Oregon."

That's changed with the introduction of several new varieties from France, she and others said. The strains are referred to as the Dijon clones and Oregon wine makers like Steve Girard, co-owner of Benton-Lane Winery, are excited about "these sexy new clones of chardonnays."

"I think we're in chardonnay central," Girard said. "Lots of folks including myself said we should be able to grow 'kick-butt' chardonnays because we're at the 44th parallel. But the problem was always clone selection. It's the perfect climate now. The chardonnays I'm tasting, coming out of these clones, are fantastic."

"Some of us are pushing forward slowly with chardonnay and riesling," said Henry Peterson-Nedry, founder of Chehalem winery in the northern Willamette Valley. He said Chehalem produces about 20,000 to 25,000 cases of wine a year, of which about 7,000 are chardonnays.

"The Oregon chardonnays are much more predictable than the older clones, which we had to pray got enough sun," Peterson-Nedry said, who is among those who think that chardonnay may be the next big white wine out of Oregon. He said chardonnay was only superseded by pinot gris in the 2000s because they didn't have newer Dijon clones yet.

"This is not bulk wine," Skinkis said. "These are high-tier chardonnays. They have a unique aroma and taste that other chardonnays don't because of the clones, but also the climate here in Oregon."

Girard said that the chardonnays he is producing at Benton-Lane were more acidic, in a citrus-apple profile as opposed to the tropical-banana profile some California chardonnays have.

"I would say that from what I hear these chardonnays are probably a bit more aromatic," Skinkis said. "Chardonnay is usually considered a non-aromatic in comparison to riesling."

Girard said Benton-Lane will be planting more chardonnay vines in future and eventually plans to make it a main part of his business.

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“About 90 percent of our grapes are pinot noir,” he said. “That’s changing as we plant more chardonnay though. It will become a significant part of our profile in about five or six years. I suspect in 10 or 15 years Oregon will be as well known for chardonnay as we are for pinot noir.”

— Dashiell Paulson