

## Drinking Naked: Unoaked Chardonnays



Six years is a long time to do anything, let alone have the privilege of sharing with listeners my favorite wines over the years. Yes, six years ago today, I delivered my first Wine of the Week segment on WTOP and the excitement that I felt that day hasn't stopped since!

So, I thought it would be fun to revisit and update that first segment. I'm sure you all remember it... since we were talking about drinking naked!

Now, drinking naked – unfortunately - is not as naughty as it sounds. The expression is actually a wine term of art that was coined by Australian winemakers. It refers to chardonnay wines that have been made without any oak. Other idioms include virgin, au natural, in-the-buff and birthday suit. You have to love Australian humor.

The first wines – both white and red – to be intentionally vinified by the ancient Romans were made and stored in clay jugs. As the Romans moved throughout Europe and the Middle East, a sturdier vessel was required to withstand the long journeys, so wooden barrels were fashioned to transport the wines. This new method quickly gained popularity for both its durability as well as for the subtle flavors - typically vanilla, buttered toast, brioche and smoky notes – that the wood imparted to the wine. In addition, the porous material allowed the wine to evolve as it aged and this quickly became the preferred method of making wines.

Today, winemakers tend to use oak as a “flavoring” and, much like say, salt, it can be very subtle or heavy-handed. Either way, oak barrels are expensive – particularly French oak – and winemakers have found less expensive ways to impart oak characteristics to the finished product. In some instances, winemakers add oak-flavor by utilizing oak staves, oak chips or – in the case of very inexpensive wines – teabags filled with oak sawdust during the aging process.

However, “naked” chardonnays are fermented and stored in stainless steel tanks where they do not receive any oak treatment. Without influence from the oak, naked chardonnays allow the full, natural flavor of the fruit to shine through. Characteristically, these wines feature flavors of crisp green apples, nectarines and pears. And since there isn't any oak to interfere with the acidity, these wines have a tendency to be more refreshing than their oak-soaked cousins. This style of chardonnay is actually very versatile and can add a refreshing touch during the summer when warmer months call for lighter-styled, crisper wines.

For those wine consumers whose battle cry is ABC (anything but chardonnay), unoaked chardonnays offer a pleasant alternative to Sauvignon Blanc, Pinot Grigio and Riesling. They are just the thing to serve along with seafood, shellfish or roast chicken. Or you can simply enjoy them while sitting on the porch. Soon, your new motto will be “drink naked.”

Best of all, because there is no costly oak barrel treatment involved in the process, prices for naked wines tend to be under \$20, and many, like today's recommendations, are under \$15.

### **2014 Yalumba 'Y Series' Unwooded Chardonnay, South Australia**

From the country that started it all... As the name suggests, this wine receives no oak treatment. It has a lovely bouquet of Gala apples and white peaches. Mouth-filling flavors of apples, nectarines and ripe pear are built on a medium frame and the finish is long and impressive. The naturally abundant acidity keeps the entire experience fresh and crisp. **\$10**

### **2013 Luigi Bosca Finca La Linda Chardonnay, Mendoza, Argentina**

This chardonnay derives its pure fruit flavor from the temperature controlled stainless steel fermentation and native yeasts, producing layers of green apple, banana and pineapple on an easy, charming frame. The abundant acidity keeps the finish fresh and balanced. A great value for an unoaked chardonnay. **\$10**

### **2013 Toad Hollow Unoaked Chardonnay Francine's Selection, Mendocino County, California**

This winery was originally founded by wine veterans Rodney Strong and Todd Williams, who began experimenting with unoaked chardonnay as far back as 1993. One of the things that give this wine nice depth is the eight months it spends on the lees (yeast and other sediment) in the stainless steel fermentation tanks. It has lovely scents of Gala apple, acacia flowers and Bartlett pear. The supple palate displays notes of ripe apple, nectarine, pink grapefruit and lemon zest up front with notes of tropical fruit on the medium-bodied finish. **\$13**

### **2007 Four Vines Naked Chardonnay, Santa Barbara, California**

One of the most popular naked chardonnay wines, and a great value to boot, the bouquet is full of green apples, pear and nectarines. The flavors of peach, nectarine and kiwi are supported by surprisingly good depth that carries the fresh fruit across the palate. The bright acidity on the finish really accents the notes of citrus and pineapple and makes this a great pick to enjoy on a summer picnic. **\$14**

### **2014 Kim Crawford Unoaked Chardonnay, Marlborough, New Zealand**

Exhibits a zesty bouquet of lemon/lime and fresh peach. The acidity accents the fresh flavors of peach, pineapple, honeydew melon and tropical fruit. The finish ends cleanly with accents of grapefruit on the back end. **\$15**