



Ben Riccardi of Osmote Wine

So You Think You Know Chardonnay?

Reclaiming the world's most popular white wine for the Finger Lakes

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Chardonnay is the most widely produced white wine in the world. Its adaptability to a range of different climates—from the cool slopes of Chablis to the hot climes of Napa—has resulted in plantings all over the world. As an early-budding, early-ripening grape, it can thrive in cooler climates with short growing seasons, as it fully ripens before the first frost rolls in and produces lean and steely wines with bright citrus and crisp minerality. In hotter climates, high-yielding, very ripe grapes create richly flavored wines with tropical fruit notes and high alcohol content.

Chardonnay's adaptability doesn't end in the vineyard. The grape itself is relatively neutral when compared to aromatic powerhouse whites such as Riesling and Gewürztraminer. Because of this,

it provides a blank canvas for winemaker experimentation to bring out different flavors.

Known as the “winemaker's grape,” it is very responsive to techniques such as malolactic fermentation that softens acidity and provides a buttery flavor. It is also very responsive to the effects of oak aging, which increases the wine's mouthfeel and body and adds flavors like vanilla, coconut, caramel and praline. This makes for a complex wine that can be highly expressive and yet well-balanced.

So why are there so many consumers today who request “ABC”—“anything but Chardonnay”—as their wine of choice? Mostly because during the 1980s and '90s large mass-market winemakers answered the demand for full-bodied “butter bombs” by



over-ripening the grapes and over-oaking the wine, leaving the concept of balance behind in return for being able to sell inexpensive, and uninteresting, wine that people eventually grew tired of drinking.

With consumer demand moving away from this style, some regional winemakers are using the shift as an opportunity to reclaim Chardonnay as a grape capable of evoking real Finger Lakes expression.

One of these winemakers is Ben Riccardi, owner of Osmote Wine. Riccardi has been thinking about the potential of authentic terroir-driven Chardonnay for over eight years. A Finger Lakes native, Riccardi developed his skills and philosophy of winemaking by working around the world, including New Zealand, France, Chile, Sonoma and New York City, with the goal to come back to the Finger Lakes to make his mark. When launching his Osmote brand in 2016, Riccardi made the clear decision to start with Chardonnay.

“What drew me to it is knowing that if I made it, and it had nice expression, I wouldn’t have to compete with Riesling producers. Chardonnay gave me an opportunity to pop out real fast. With access to vines from the 1970s, it was so easy to get great fruit right away,” he says.

And pop out he did. In 2017, he released his first wine, the 2014

Osmote Chardonnay, to solid acclaim. It won the Best Oaked Chardonnay award at the New York Wine Classic. Then in 2018, his newly released 2017 Cayuga Lake Chardonnay won Best Unoaked Chardonnay and Best Overall Chardonnay.

Riccardi attributes his success to focusing on the beauty of the grape as expressed in the local cool-climate terroir. The use of large format barrels and indigenous yeast fermentation creates a wine with bright fruit expression, a light oak flavor impact, and a beautiful mouthfeel that is driven by minerality.

“It’s a return to classicism,” Ben exclaims. “By striving not to drive the process, like worrying about baseline primary aromatics and commercial-yeast-driven flavors, your wine stops tasting like so many places in the world, and begins speaking for the region itself,” he says.

Winemaker Ian Barry, of Barry Family Cellars, has made Chardonnay in the Finger Lakes for close to 16 years. For the first decade it was for other wineries. Today, Barry makes and sells it under his own label. Like Riccardi, he is committed to having his Chardonnay showcase the terroir of the Finger Lakes.

L-R Phil Arras of Nine-Four Wines, Ian Barry of Barry Family Cellars in his tasting room in Burdett.



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“For years we in the Finger Lakes were trying to replicate the high-demand California style of oaky, buttery, big Chardonnays, even using a little bit of residual sugar to increase the body,” he says. “But you can’t replicate the California style here. It doesn’t work. You’re not making wine you like, you are just making wine to sell.”

“I personally feel we have a significant untapped potential for Chardonnay here,” he adds. “Some of the oldest vineyards in the region are Chardonnay that produce fantastic fruit, which is a significant advantage for the region.”

Barry thinks the key to great Chardonnay is patience. His methods include hand-picked fruit, whole-cluster pressing, fermentation in old oak barrels, partial malolactic fermentation and lots of lees stirring. He defines his wine as “balanced fruit, minerality, texture and structure. Not too searingly acidic, but with a clearly defined backbone. I let the vintage determine the fruit profile,” he says.

Winemaker Phil Arras credits Lou Damiani, owner of Damiani Wine Cellars (where Arras is head winemaker), for instilling in him the love of Chardonnay. Damiani taught Arras the art and fun of making Chardonnay: blending wines fermented with different yeasts in barrels of different ages, to create a very Burgundy-influenced Chardonnay.

But when Arras and partner Josh Carlsen set out to make Chardonnay under their own Nine-Four label, they dialed in to the styles they liked and felt they could do well here.

That led them to Chablis, the distinct cool-climate region of Burgundy in France that creates mineral-driven, leaner, low oak-impact Chardonnays.

Aiming for subtle expression, Arras and Carlsen pick fruit early, use whole-cluster pressing, rely on a slower natural yeast fermentation, incorporate old oak barrel aging and then let the wine sit for a year in the bottle for flavor integration. Their goal is to create a wine that they believe is true to what the region wants to give us.

So, what is the takeaway? Here we have three Finger Lakes winemakers who put a lot of thought into Chardonnay and its potential. They all believe that the future of Finger Lakes Chardonnay is about letting the special terroir of our region shine through thoughtful and deliberate craftsmanship. They describe wines with ripe fruit expression wrapped in minerality and mouthfeel, low-impact oak profile that enhances texture without dominating flavor, and a backbone of acidity that puts a stamp of Finger Lakes authenticity on every sip. These are not your mother's everyday Chardonnays, but wines that have the potential to be as interesting, varied and terroir-driven as our beloved Rieslings. 🍷

ninefourwines.com
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Laura Winter Falk owns Experience! The Finger Lakes, a touring and events company that provides immersive wine experiences. She holds a PhD in food and nutrition and is a Certified Sommelier, with WSET 3 award in wines. She is also an adjunct professor of wine at Tompkins Cortland Community College. All this means she makes a living talking about and drinking wine in the Finger Lakes, which makes her very happy.

Heather Ainsworth is a regular contributor to myriad publications and serves as chair of the National Press Photographers Association's NY/Int'l region.



Tasting the wines:

Osmote Wine 2017 Cayuga Lake Unoaked Chardonnay, \$18

Ripe melon, apple and peach, white blossoms, crushed stones, round body, bright with clean fresh finish.

Osmote Wine 2017 Seneca Lake Chardonnay, \$21

Ripe pineapple, candied mandarin, lemon cream, round body, lemon drop, ginger and light toast with clean, fresh finish.

Barry Family Cellars 2016 Chardonnay Reserve, \$20–22

Ripe pear, vanilla, full round body, vanilla, butterscotch and toffee, toast with creamy finish.

Barry Family Cellars 2014 Chardonnay Reserve, \$32

Spiced pear, bruised apple and exotic star fruit, spiced crème brûlée, nutty with a touch of dill.

Nine-Four Chardonnay 2016, \$22

Ripe pear with notes of candied apple with creamy notes of ginger and toffee, notes of light toast. Nice round body with a crisp finish.

Nine-Four Chardonnay 2017 (not yet released)

Bright lemon cream and stone with wisps of vanilla on the nose, lean and clean body with nice acidity and a lovely crisp finish.