

Meet Black Chardonnay

SevenFifty Daily

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August 3, 2017

The search for the soul of Chardonnay has been labyrinthine. There have been so many wrong turns. So many dead ends. So many retreats and reorientations. (Remember the 180-degree swing from heavily toasted oak to “inox” steel tanks?)

Theseus emerged alive from the labyrinth of Daedalus by holding tight to a piece of thread. Similarly, those on the cutting edge of Chardonnay production today are looking fearlessly forward while holding tight to the traditions of the past.

And those traditions include a bit of black magic: juice that comes pouring from the press as dark as pitch but is a shimmering green-tinted gold by the time it's bottled. Some call this mysterious liquid Black Chardonnay.

If you're having a moment of *déjà vu*, you may be remembering George M. Taber's book "[Judgment of Paris](#)." According to Taber's account, the winemaker Jim Barrett found to his horror one day that his yet-to-be-released 1973 [Chateau Montelena](#) Chardonnay had turned a distinct copper color. Barrett concluded that it must have been severely oxidized, since it had the look of a wine with a century of cellar age. Later, to his surprise, the Chard returned to its proper golden hue. Taber describes the phenomenon as Bottle Shock, and the term was used as the title for the film adaptation of his book.

The way Taber tells it, the discoloration happened *after* bottling. But the author goes on to describe a mid-1970s winemaking milieu in which oxygen generally began to be seen as the enemy. University of California, Davis, professors believed that “excessive contact with air” would cause white wine to “lose its fruity flavors and turn brown,” Taber writes. “The researchers suggested engulfing the grapes and young wine in nitrogen in order to keep air away.”

Today's prevailing wisdom thus calls for a “gentle press,” or a slow squeeze, of whole clusters of Chardonnay in the airless environment of a pneumatic press that has been pumped full of nitrogen and sulfur dioxide.

But to make Black Chard, you've got to be brave enough to turn the prevailing protocol inside out. It feels almost like an act of violence. Rather than pressing gently, you smash the fruit vigorously. Instead of denying the must oxygen, you aerate it generously. In whodunit terms, it's murder by bludgeoning rather than slow asphyxiation.

But the Black Chard method isn't murder at all. In fact, it just might be a powerful immunization against the pox.

Premature oxidation—often shortened to “premoX,” or “the POx”—was a scourge that turned cellar-aged white Burgundies of the late 1990s and very early aughts into undrinkable Sherry. For those whose expensive wines succumbed to the POx, the effect was like purchasing a very pricey iron door for one's seaside cottage, only to find it rusted shut and useless. And it hasn't been vanquished. Online forums for oenophiles still bear the gripes of consumers whose Chardonnays didn't survive cellaring.

For years the consensus among wine critics was that the cork was the culprit. Meanwhile, a generation of producers doubled down on the elimination of oxygen, particularly during the pre-fermentation, or “must,” stage. The prevalence of reductive winemaking even resulted in a new acceptable flaw in Chardonnay: a sulfurous aroma. [As Jancis Robinson notes](#), the French, being French, hit upon a sexy turn of phrase, “*le matchstick*,” to describe this primal smell.

And yet while winemakers were tracking down ironclad corks and banishing air from their presses and making Chards that smelled like matchsticks (or something worse), [a 1998 review](#) of relevant scientific research dating as far back as 1965 unequivocally stated that “wines obtained from oxidized must are reported to display more resistance against oxidative quality degradation during aging.” Or put another way, “The more oxygen must absorbs, the less oxygen is consumed by the wine.”

That is, the cure for the pox is ox.

In an investigation of premox recently published on burghound.com, the expert Allen Meadows reports on a growing interest among white Burgundy producers in bringing oxygen back to Chardonnay winemaking, particularly before fermentation. “While there is anecdotal support for this approach,” he writes, “it is important to note that no one is yet certain that a direct causal link exists between premox and pneumatic presses, because there are so many other possible contributing factors.”

And as a [recent *Wine & Spirits*](#) article by Jon Bonné points out, Burgundian producers—such as [Domaine Bernard Moreau](#), [Domaine Boisson-Vadot](#), [Domaine Bruno Clair](#), and [Pierre-Yves Colin-Morey](#)—are now allowing air into their pneumatic presses or outright replacing them with open wooden cage presses. This preliminary exposure causes the must to turn a muddy color. When I asked David Croix of [Domaine Roulot](#) about this, he responded, “Yes, we let [the must] oxidize (turn brown) in the tray, and we only add sulfur once it is in the settling tank.”

In Oregon, where the top Chardonnay producers are very aware of Burgundian methods, producers such as [Arterberry Maresh](#), [Bergström](#), [Cameron](#), [Domaine Drouhin Oregon](#), [Hamacher](#), and [Ponzi](#) tell me that they, too, expose their must to oxygen. It briefly looks like mud. Then it looks like Chardonnay again.

But “Brown Chardonnay,” while interesting, doesn’t exactly provoke a frisson in this journalist. So let’s get back to the black stuff.

The must that absorbs the *most* oxygen prior to fermentation, the authors of the 1998 review wrote, is rich in phenols found in grape skins and seeds due to crushing, grinding, shredding, or heavy pressing of the fruit. This must darkens dramatically. And then the magic happens: “Phenols are the major oxygen-consuming substrate,” according to the review. “When they are allowed to oxidize in must, they precipitate.” And when they precipitate, that frightening dark pigment falls away.

Along with the dark color, most of the bitterness and astringency from those skins and seeds is removed by hyperoxidation as well, according to a [2015 study](#) led by Anthony Sereni at Oregon State University. So the Black Chard method has a push-pull effect. While the crushed or hard-pressed skins impart phenolics, the early oxidation of the must prior to fermentation softens them.

It’s easy to see why a producer might think twice before viciously grinding up beautiful golden Chardonnay berries and then allowing the juice to soak up all those bitter tannins from skins and seeds. It takes a leap of faith to allow one’s must to turn brown, let alone black, with oxygen exposure. Indeed, the 1998 paper suggested that “psychological factors” prevent winemakers from believing that “strongly browned juices” could possibly transform into a “lighter, more stable” wine.

But it’s only a leap of faith today—because this is a winemaking method with a long history behind it.

“We make this wine the way it was done 60, 70, or 80 years ago in Burgundy,” says Chris Hermann, whose Oregon [label 00](#) is a leading proponent of Black Chard. To be clear, this is an old method but not an ancient one. Black Chard isn’t an orange wine, because the period of skin contact lasts for hours rather than weeks, and the contact occurs only prior to fermentation.

Acceding that the white Burgundies of decades past weren’t as easygoing and drinkable at release as today’s Chardonnays, Hermann says he is more interested in making a wine with the structure to withstand decades of cellar age. “The idea,” he says, unapologetically, “is to explode through existing barriers and boundaries.”

Hermann cites [Domaine Coche-Dury](#) as his Chardonnay idol, so I asked Dixon Brooke, president of the domaine’s import firm, [Kermit Lynch Wine Merchant](#), if he could shed any light on the vinification methodology of one of the world’s least communicative wineries. “Coche-Dury is one of the few producers in Burgundy who have continuously used the old cage press,” Brooke told me. “They have been making the wines in the same way for the past 50 years.”

Burgundian consulting winemaker Pierre Millemann, who will be making a barrel of Corton-Charlemagne for Hermann's 00 label this year, says he has implemented the Black Chard method in the cellars of at least five Burgundian domaines, as well as in numerous wineries in Germany, Switzerland, and Italy. (In an aside, Millemann says he doesn't know the origin of the term Black Chardonnay, although Hermann says he first heard it in Burgundy.) And Bonné's article in *Wine & Spirits* makes mention of some Burgundian producers who are experimenting with light crushes for their Chardonnay grapes, "to beat them up just a touch."

In Oregon, while 00 Wines is the most extreme example of this style of winemaking—employing a full-throttle whole-cluster crush that reacts with oxygen to make a deep molasses-colored must—other producers are also dabbling in it. Chris Mazepink, best known as the winemaker at Archery Summit, has spent the past four years focusing solely on Chardonnay with his personal label, Ebony. Mazepink crushes his fruit as soon as it's harvested, then presses aggressively with the goal of extracting phenolics and creating turbidity. "A lot of wineries settle their juice before it goes into barrel," he says. "I prefer to go to barrel with a high portion of solids still in the wine."

At Lingua Franca in the Eola-Amity Hills, the winemaking is led by two Burgundians, Dominique Lafon and Thomas Savre. "In 2016 we played around with different press regimens," says the CEO and cofounder, Larry Stone. "And we turned the drum, to crumble the grape skins and stems and extract more tannins, phenolics, and flavor components."

Jay McDonald, the winemaker behind the EIEIO label out of Yamhill-Carlton, focuses on maximum oxygen exposure. After hard-pressing his Chardonnay, he lets the juice sit in an open-top fermenter, with nothing but a bug screen for protection, for three to five days until it browns. He then moves the wine to new oak barrels, leaving a large headspace to encourage fermentation. When it starts percolating, he moves it to neutral barrels to finish, freeing up his new barrels for Pinot Noir.

"I can claim that both my Chardonnay and Pinot Noir get 100 percent new French oak," McDonald says with a laugh. But the results are no joke: The 2013 EIEIO Cuvée O Chardonnay from Yamhill-Carlton scored a 93 in the *Wine Advocate* last year. McDonald says he hit upon his technique after finding to his frustration that his 2006 and 2007 vintages were prematurely oxidizing.

Other Oregon winemakers are proceeding more cautiously. "We do not crush pre-press currently," says Erica Landon of Walter Scott, "but we're very intrigued by this and will probably experiment with rollers in the future to crush the grapes pre-press cycle."

The Oregon Chardonnays made with skin contact have a tension to them that calls to mind a violin bow sliding across strings. A 2015 bottling from 00, called VGW (\$65), is tart and succulent, savory and botanical, with a hefty structure for a white that has an alcohol level of 12.9%. Served in a black glass, it could be mistaken for a red wine. Ebony's 2014 The Hive Chardonnay (\$35) is smooth and spicy, with pear, honey, and cream notes, but there's a surprising touch of grip to the finish. EIEIO's Chardonnays, made with a technique that emphasizes oxygen rather than skin contact, become increasingly complex—savory, briny, and flinty—with cellar age.

When I visit Lingua Franca, a barrel of foot-stomped Chard is lean and mysterious, with notes of grapefruit pith and slate. A barrel of sequentially pressed Chard is creamy yet juicy. And a barrel of staggered-press Chard, in which the press is applied with violent force and then eased up, repeatedly, is powerful and dense. I am quite curious to taste the finished blends of these 2016 experiments upon release.

And while Oregon's Willamette Valley appears to be the epicenter for Black Chard in the United States, others have been quietly dabbling in black magic as well.

"When I first started making wine commercially, in 1994, we still crushed Chardonnay like you would a Cabernet," recalls Ed Kurtzman, a California consulting winemaker. After puzzling over the pre-mox problem, Kurtzman followed his gut instinct in 2014 and began crushing his Chardonnay for his own small label, Sandler Wine Co. He started experimenting with the process at August West the following year. Kurtzman is pleased with the results so far, but tells me he is waiting for the true test: time.

In the meantime, it's worth reflecting that the winning white wine in the famous Judgment of Paris wine tasting, held on May 24, 1976, was the 1973 Chateau Montelena Chardonnay—the very same wine that, in Taber's account, had darkened mysteriously before turning to gold.