

Every time that I see or hear the word Chablis, I am reminded of how I almost missed my opportunity to visit this magnificent part of Burgundy. As I was driving I was thinking that I did not have enough time to stop at Chablis, that stopping would interfere with seeing the rest of Burgundy. Wrong! I resorted to plan B, revised my schedule, and spent two very rushed days in Chablis. I am glad I did because I learned something very important; that there is a huge difference between Chablis produced in the Burgundy region and the so-called Chablis produced in the rest of the world.

Let's see how we distinguish the two. Chablis is the northernmost wine district in the region of Burgundy. The grapevines in this district are 100% Chardonnay, yielding fruit that is renowned for the purity of its aroma and taste. The cool climate of this region produces wine with more acidity and flavors less fruity than chardonnay grown in warmer climates. The wines often have a flinty taste sometimes described as "gout de pierre a fusil" or tasting of gun flint. After harvest the fruit is typically vinified in stainless steel tanks. This scenario tells us that the wine will not have an "oak" flavor. However, like anything else in life, there are exceptions and some winemakers will introduce a small amount of oak flavor. This is a stylistic approach.

We all know that when it comes to wine the French are very strict and, rest assured, the wines produced in the Chablis district are included in these rigid controls. In 1938 the Chablis Appellation d'Origine Controlee was established. This control group established four levels of Chablis. These levels are identified as Grand Cru, Premier Cru, the generic "Chablis" and Petite Chablis. The four levels reflect the all-important differences in soil and slope. The better crus are receiving maximum sunlight. At the top of the classification are the seven Grand Crus vineyards, which are located on a hillside near the town of Chablis. Second in quality are the Premier Vineyards, which are 40 in number. Next are the generic AOC "Chablis" which is the largest appellation in the region. The final cru is the Petit Chablis.

The seven Grand Cru are Les Preuses, Vaudesier, Grenouilles, Valmur, Les Clos, Blanchot, and La Moutonne. These seven Grand Cru along with their 40 Premier Cru brothers are considered to be definite candidates for age worthiness. We sometimes stereotype when thinking of white wines and aging . . . that it will not do any good to lay down a white wine. In most cases this is true. However, in the case of the aforementioned Chablis Wines, consider casting your stereotype aside. Laying down a bottle or two will yield some dividends as evidenced by some examples that have been aging for over 10, 20, or even 40 years and show

no signs of weakening.

From the very first time Chablis was produced it was a success. Indeed, the Chablis producers have fought hard to protect the Chablis designation, even to the point of using legal pressure to get foreign countries to recognize their trademark on the term “CHABLIS.” However, outside of France the rules on the playing field changed. Chablis became a semi-generic term and it was used to describe almost any white wine, regardless of where it was made or what grape was used to produce it. Enter Jug wine! Anything labeled “Chablis” or “Chablis Blanc” coming from somewhere other than France is a false pretender and nothing like the original.

Allow me to share with you some comments I found in the *Baltimore Sun*, by their wine writer Lisa Airey. She says that “Real Chablis from Chablis is the perfect table companion . . . that it is an electric, kinetic glass of wine. The first sip skates across your palate like Hans Brinker on ice. The second sip has your electrons vibrating at a higher level.” I agree with the evaluation given the wine, however I would pay some tribute to the Chablis District Terroir.

Ms. Airey put together a summary with Mr. Arnoud Valour (Mr. Valour is from the Chablis and Grand Auxerrois Wine Bureau) that, in my opinion, says it all:

That there is a basic set of Chablis Aromas. There is Honeysuckle, Citrus, green apple, lily, Oyster Shell and minerality. Older Chablis or those with Premier Cru and Grand Cru Pedigrees have a different set of aromas: mushroom, honeycomb or beeswax, dried apricot or quince, gingerbread, almonds, brioche and sometimes candied ginger. With such a broad palette of aromatic expression, the trick is to choose a Chablis that will fit your dish or a dish that will fit your Chablis.

Basic tried and true Chablis food pairings consist of cheesy pate, goat cheese, shellfish, veal and foie gras. Chablis is a natural with Maine Lobster, Southern Fried Chicken, sushi, any of the crab recipes and oysters. I am delighted that he mentioned oysters because we can now enjoy oysters year round.

WINESPEAK

Here in the Lowcountry we are able to purchase Premier Cru Chablis on a limited basis or from retailers from other states who are able to ship to South Carolina. I realize that we have discussed alternative white wines until we are about to turn green, but there are more . . . many more. Go exploring at a good retailer. Ask a lot of questions. You just might enjoy the experience.

I used the word “cru” many times throughout the article. The word CRU can mean an estate or a vineyard, usually a superior one that has been classified geographically or by reputation. A classified Cru is known as a Cru Classe. Within any given classification there are Premier Crus (first growths), Grand Crus (great growths) and so on.