



Basic Juice Article **Is There Oak in my Wine?**

by: *Beau Jarvis*

Have you ever glanced at a wine label and seen the phrase, “Toasty Oak?” Not sure you want oak in your wine? I have a quick (and fun) taste-test that will help you with this wine quandary. Compare two Chardonnay styles: ‘Oaked’ vs. ‘un-oaked.’ I recently found two inexpensive Chardonnays, both under seven dollars. Stony Hollow, 2002/03 from Chile is \$5.95. It’s aged in stainless steel tanks without any oak. Oxford Landing Chardonnay, 2001 from Australia is \$6.95. The Aussie Chardonnay is aged in oak. Why go to the trouble of adding oak to a wine? As you’ll see, oak can dramatically change a wine’s aroma and flavor. Chill the wines for about a half hour. Pour some of the Stony Hollow into a glass, swirl it around and give it a sniff. I smell crisp pears and apples. This scent reminds me of biting into a Granny Smith right out of the fridge. Swirl and sniff the Oxford Landing. It’s made from the same grape, but the scent is very different. I smell ripe tropical fruits such as pineapple and mango. I also catch a whiff of vanilla and cloves. This spicy-sweet scent is often the tip-off that your wine has had some contact with oak. Now, onto the fun part: tasting. Don’t be afraid to swish and swirl the wines in your mouth (you can pretend it’s *Scope*). You might even try tilting your head forward and opening your mouth slightly while drawing in some air. This is rather elegantly referred to as ‘slurping.’ Be careful though, it does take some coordination! Sip and slurp the Stony Hollow. I taste fresh, crisp fruit with the kind of tart bite you get from a slightly green apple. The wine’s tart character makes my mouth water - something that makes a wine ‘food friendly.’ Next sip and slurp the Oxford Landing. What do you taste? Right off the bat, the wine seems fuller in my mouth – less tartness, more body. I taste tropical fruit with a little vanilla zip. To me, this wine shouts, “Oak!” So, which wine do you like? Of course there is no right answer. Personal preference is all that matters.

Generally, I prefer ‘un-oaked’ Chardonnay. Try the Stony Hollow Chardonnay with lighter, simple fare such as oysters, light cheeses or grilled chicken breast. If you too like this style, try French Chablis, a classic *sans oak* Chardonnay. Chablis wines will generally be more expensive. A nice, typical Chablis wine is the ‘La Chablisienne’

Premier Cru, 1999 (\$23). If you want to explore the fuller bodied, spicy, sweetness of ‘oaked’ Chardonnay, there are many California and Australian wines made in this style. For a definite fruit-oak punch, try Gallo of Sonoma, 2001/02 (\$10) Reserve Chardonnay from California. This wine goes well with richer food such as barbequed chicken and pork, salmon, or even fajitas. Of course there is more to a wine’s taste than whether or not it’s been aged in oak. But the next time your waiter describes a Chardonnay as having “lively oak flavors,” you’ll at least have an idea of what to expect. Cheers!

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