

Sunset

CHENIN BLANC

The West's first great white is growing up

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Chardonnay hasn't always been California's white wine of choice. Before the 1970s there was actually more Chenin Blanc planted in the state than Chardonnay—more than any other major white grape, in fact. I'm almost embarrassed to say that I have good memories of it—that sweet, simple, soft (now I'd say flabby) Christian Brothers. Many of us late boomers came of age drinking the stuff (more civilized than Thunderbird), and then moved on.

Poor Chenin just didn't stand a chance here because of what we were doing to it: leaving loads of sugar in a wine that had no business being sweet—in this country, at least. Back then, “American wanted all their jug wines to be sweet,” according to Bill Knuttel, winemaker at Dry Creek Vineyard in Sonoma County. “So winemakers used sugar to cover up all the defects and give the wine some flavors.” In other words, they stopped fermentation before the yeast had eaten up all the sugar.

In France, Chenin Blanc commands respect across a wide range of styles, from bone-dry to very sweet. In every case, though, it has bracing acid to balance the sugar, so its complex fruit and mineral flavors come through.



The difference is the weather. The Loire Valley, where the great French Chenins are grown, is very cold. “They always get better acid,” Knuttel says. The flip side, here in the much warmer West, is that our Chenin Blancs can have a floral character, along with peach and golden apples.

Done right—grown where it retains some acid, picked before it's too ripe, and fermented to a degree of sweetness that's in balance with acid—Chenin Blanc is a tremendous food wine. We love it with Sushi and Chinese.

Sadly, many wineries abandoned their early attempts at Chenin Blanc in favor of oak-laced Chardonnay. And now much of the land is too expensive for them to afford to start growing Chenin Blanc again. **But Dry Creek never jumped the ship, so to speak (there's a sailboat on the label). Instead, they figured it out.** They get their grapes from Clarksburg, a tiny, temperate (and reasonably priced) region close by the Sacramento Delta, where the variety shines. And Knuttel ferments it to just barely off-dry, with less than 1 percent sugar left, which is below most people's threshold of perception (just enough to give the wine a little richness and character and to play with the acid).

Evolution is paying off for Chenin Blanc—good news for evolving boomers.

