

*SOCIETY OF MEDICAL FRIENDS OF WINE*  
NEWSLETTER  
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**WHEREFORE ART THOU, CHARDONNAY?**  
**Bob Blumberg, Cellar Master, Society of Medical Friends of Wine**



My monthly wine tasting group just completed a tasting of 2014 California Chardonnays, and this caused me to reflect on this wine varietal in California. I think it is safe to say that this is California's most polarizing wine—people either love it or hate it, or both, depending on the style. It's hard to argue with the fact that it is capable of producing California's finest white wine. At the same time, some people subscribe to the ABC clause---give me **Anything But Chardonnay!**

How has this evolved? What is the history of Chardonnay in California? When and why has the style changed?

The history of Chardonnay in France was established for centuries, if not millennia, prior to its planting in California. The quality of the wines, and the variation in style, were well recognized. In Champagne, they produced a high acid wine perfect for providing freshness and age-ability to sparkling wine. In Chablis the wines were tart, flinty or chalk-like, an ideal foil for oysters. In the heart of Burgundy, the wine reached its pinnacle in prestige and price and was responsible for such great wines as Montrachet, which Alexandre Dumas once proclaimed should be drunk bare headed, on one's knees.

Further to the south the more productive, if less distinguished, wines of Macon and Pouilly Fuisse served a role as more affordable and quaffable wine, ideally suited to café life or bistro food.

When I first began drinking California wines, the potential of Chardonnay was already recognized, but precious little of it was around, as only a few hundred acres were planted, and when planted in the best areas, yields were sparse. Thanks to California labeling laws that allowed 49% of other grapes in non-vintage wines and 25% in vintage ones, much Chardonnay was blended with less expensive and less distinguished grapes, and the resultant wines were rather neutral in flavor. The use of oak for fermentation or aging was virtually nonexistent, and malo-lactic fermentation, common in Burgundy, was not encouraged. This did lead to pleasant, but simple, citrus and apple flavors in the best bottlings.

A few vintners, impressed by their experiences with European wines, introduced the concept of small batch, oak-aged Chardonnay with good success. Names such as Hanzell and Joe Heitz come to mind. Martin Ray, a visionary in some ways and an eccentric in others, also produced some very interesting bottles. An epiphany for me came with the release of the first wines from Chalone Vineyards. Produced from dry farmed grapes with high stress and minimal yield, grown in the Gavilan Mountains east of Monterey, the wines were exquisite and had the qualities of the best of the white Burgundies. I remember teaching a wine appreciation class at University of California Medical Center in San Francisco on wines of the world. We served a 1969 Chalone Chardonnay along with a Montrachet, with the wines served in paper bags to disguise their provenance. The Chalone won, despite there being a number of Francophiles in the room.

In the late 1960s through the 1970s there was a proliferation of quality Chardonnay, both in new, small boutique establishments and in larger wineries, with the likes of Freemark Abbey, Mayacamas, Robert Mondavi, and Sterling coming to mind. All of their Chardonnays demonstrated true varietal character and distinct improvement in overall quality compared with the average Chardonnay of the prior decades.

In the 1980's, vineyards expanded to cooler climate areas such as the Carneros region of Sonoma and Napa and to Monterey County and the South Coast. Names like Chateau St. Jean, Beringer, Zaca Mesa, Au Bon Climat, and Fetzer entered the fray with very fine Chardonnays.

Around the same time, a number of new, small producers dedicated to Chardonnay were founded, and many of them tried to emulate the French techniques of barrel fermentation, barrel aging, aging on the lees (yeast sediment), and the encouragement of malo-lactic fermentation to turn the tart apple-like quality of the wine's malic acid into a rich buttery tasting sensation from lactic acid. Kistler might be a prime example of this movement.

Many people and many critics loved this style, and success led to excess, and the next phase seemed to be an abundance of heavily oaked and butterscotchy Chardonnays. Add to this the modern tendency for higher alcohol levels in wine, and you had some huge, intense, and rich wines, if you liked them or big, unbalanced, and oxidized ones if you didn't. Somewhere along the way vintners, perhaps led by Jess Jackson's Kendall Jackson label, which enjoyed great sales success, discovered that the impression of a little sweetness in the wine helped balance out the oak extract and alcohol and seduced many palates.

Chardonnay had metamorphosed from a limited production, light, clean, and fruit dominated white wine into a huge production wine with everything about it tasting huge. Acreage went from hundreds to tens of thousands. New areas, not all of them ideal, were planted to this variety to keep up with market place success, and novice wine drinkers were heard ordering a glass of Chardonnay in a restaurant rather than a glass of white wine.

In the hands of many vintners, Chardonnay became what I refer to as a recipe wine. In attempting to have something for everyone, it was not uncommon for wines to be described as "60% barrel-fermented, half in new oak." The rest was fermented in stainless steel. All of it was barrel-aged, half in new oak and half in previously used oak. 30% of the wine was aged on the lees; 75% underwent malo-lactic fermentation, etc.

At the same time, its bipolar, love it or hate it, reputation, developed.

Much has been written about this, and for a while there seemed to be a counter reaction against the over oaked, overly buttery, high alcohol, sweet style of wine. It is not uncommon to read someone decrying the difficulty of marrying food with such wines. It is not uncommon to read a winery or wine shop description touting an "unoaked and refreshing" Chardonnay to have with your dinner. So I had thought a movement in moderation had taken hold.

Not necessarily true, as I learned at our recent tasting. We sampled bottles from Aubert, Beringer, Calera, Flowers, Forman, Rochioli, and ZD. Alcohol levels ranged from 13.5% for the ZD and Flowers up to 15.2% for one of the Auberts. Some of the wines demonstrated a nice apple character and reasonable acidity. More than half, however,

were full of oak flavors with tons of richness, sweetness, and butterscotch character, the latter from malo-lactic fermentation.

There was no consensus among the tasters—ratings depended on an individual's palate preference and whether one loved or hated that big, rich, toasty and high alcohol experience. The wines were served bagged and blinded, so awareness of price (range of \$17.99 for the Calera to \$129 for the Auberts) did not influence rankings. Each wine received first or second place votes as well as seventh and eighth place votes. Although probably not statistically significant, the Calera placed first and the Aubert Carneros Hyde placed eighth.

Someone asked why Aubert charged \$129 for their wines, and the answer was obvious—because they can. Mr. Parker apparently loves their wines and has raved about them with very high scores, and the production is limited. So if you are someone who loves big, rich, oaky, and buttery Chardonnay, likes to seek out highly rated and small production wines, and has adequate resources, go for the Aubert. Otherwise you might want to choose the Calera, which also was big, full, and oily with high toast. And you can always serve it in a paper bag.

One last cautionary word about tastings. If high alcohol and highly oaked wines are included, tasting more than a few of these can desensitize your palate. If you love this style, it doesn't matter, as you will still be able to select your favorites. If however this style is not your cup of tea, the risk is that in such a crowd a wine or two may strike you as being better balanced and more to your liking, when in fact the reality is that it is still a huge wine, perhaps just not as highly extracted and oaked as the competition. This will become apparent if you buy a bottle and serve it by itself at a later time.

Sweetness can also be deceptive to the palate. When sampling a number of wines and tasting only a small amount of each, the impression of slight sweetness can soften a wine and enhance its apparent fruit. That same wine when consumed with dinner, however, can be anything but refreshing and appetite stimulating after the first glass, and you can be left with a cloying sensation in your mouth and a lot of wine left in the bottle.

Do you have a favorite Chardonnay you would like to share with your fellow members? Please feel free to pass along some names and to offer your thoughts. Email me at [Blumberg@sbcglobal.net](mailto:Blumberg@sbcglobal.net). Perhaps in future newsletters we can include such recommendations.

## **DO OLDER PEOPLE BENEFIT FROM MODERATE WINE CONSUMPTION?**

Many thanks to our legal counsel, Jim Seff, for passing on information about this recent Wine and Health publication that should be of interest to our members. One goal of our Society is to inform our membership and the interested public about new publications in the field of wine and health. By making you aware of this material, you have the opportunity to read and form your own opinions and decide if this is information of value to your practice or to your personal life.

The following review was published in *The Drinks Business* by Rupert Millar on August 31, 2016.

*This US study, just published in the British Geriatric Society's journal, Age & Ageing, explores the idea that alcohol consumption, especially of red wine, is associated with lower levels of inflammation, cardiovascular diseases and frailty.*

*The researchers from the National Institute on Ageing highlighted the statistical correlation between moderate consumption of red wine and the diminishing of C-reactive proteins – which are often seen as a symptom or cause of inflammation.*

*As people age, they become more susceptible to inflammation, and individuals with high levels of C-reactive proteins are, correspondingly, more likely to fall prey to conditions such as frailty and low muscle strength. Inflammation is also a well-known risk factor for cardiovascular disease.*

*A previous study by the Women's Health Study by Luc Djousse, which canvassed 26,000 people, had shown that individuals who drank between 5 to 14.9 grams of alcohol per day – the equivalent of 1.86 units so a bottle of beer or a small glass of wine – had a lower risk of cardiovascular disease than those who either abstained or drank more than 15g per day.*

*Inflammation was, furthermore, 21% lower in those who drank moderately compared to teetotalers and 13% lower than in heavy drinkers.*

*Dr. Luigi Ferrucci, scientific director at The National Institute on Ageing, and one of the authors of the Age & Ageing editorial, said: "While evidence is growing that regular consumption of small amounts of alcohol, especially as red wine, may have a beneficial effect on health, there is still some doubt that this protective association found in this epidemiological study is attributable to abstention from alcohol by individuals who are already ill."*

*"Longitudinal studies are needed to shed further light on this question, which has important public health implications."*

The editorial comment referring to the possibility that the results are skewed by including control subjects who abstain from alcohol due to already being ill is an important one that is often raised when looking at similar epidemiologic studies. There clearly would be different interpretations if a study included non drinkers who do not drink because of underlying health issues as opposed to those who are healthy but choose not to drink. Hopefully, authors will address this issue in future epidemiologic studies.

## IN MEMORIAM

The Society recently lost one of its most loyal members with the passing of Marvin Epstein at the age of 93. Even in his later years and with significant mobility issues, the smiling face and wonderful warm personality of Dr. Epstein were often enjoyed by all at Vintage Tours and quarterly dinners. He will be sorely missed. We extend our sympathy to his lovely wife Ruth, who made it possible for him to attend our events, and to his entire family. His obituary follows:

### Marvin Allen Epstein M.D.

June 14, 1923 - August 11, 2016

Marvin Epstein, long-time Walnut Creek resident and a leader of its medical community, died peacefully on August 11, 2016, after a long illness.

Marvin Epstein was born on June 14, 1923, in Sharon, Pennsylvania, to Samuel and Bess Epstein. His father worked for Golden Dawn Foods, the wholesale grocery business that was founded by his father-in-law. In 1939, Marvin was admitted to [Harvard University](#) at the age of sixteen. A high school [teacher](#) suggested that he was too young and immature to enter Harvard that fall and should do an interim year close to home. He and a cousin rented a room in Cleveland next to an aunt's apartment and attended classes at Adelbert College of Western Reserve University for a year before transferring to Harvard. Marvin received his B.S. degree cum laude from Harvard in 1943 and shortly after, received a draft notice. He failed the physical because of his chronic asthma, which allowed him to immediately pursue his goal of becoming a doctor. However, when Marvin applied for admission to medical school, he faced rejection from nearly every school where he applied because of the Jewish quota system in place at the time. He was eventually offered a position as a research fellow in physiology at the University of Rochester School of Medicine and Dentistry and promised a place in the class of 1944. Marvin received his M.D. in 1948. After three more years at Rochester as an intern, research fellow, and assistant resident in medicine, he moved with his family—wife Mimi (Raben), daughter Judy (born 1947) and son Bill (born 1950)—to California to serve as resident in medicine at the Kaiser Permanente

Foundation Hospital in Oakland. The family settled in Pleasant Hill and became active members of both the medical and Jewish communities. In 1951, they were among the founders of the Contra Costa Jewish Community Center, today's Temple Isaiah. In 1952, Marvin went into private practice in internal medicine with Harold S. Robinson in Walnut Creek. A year later, he was drafted into the U.S. [Army](#) and the family moved to Edgewood, Maryland, for two years.

Returning to Walnut Creek in 1955, Marvin's private medical practice began to expand. He became active in the campaign to build a community hospital in Walnut Creek. This became John Muir Medical Center, which opened its doors in 1965. Dr. Epstein held many positions of leadership at John Muir, including chief of staff, chairman of medicine, chairman of cardiology, member of the board of directors, and member of the John Muir Health Foundation board. He founded the Cardiac Care Unit and served as its medical director for many years. In 1987, Marvin was the first physician to receive the John Muir Health Foundation Award of Distinction for outstanding leadership, service, and philanthropy. In honor of his many years of service, in 2008 John Muir Medical Center named two conference rooms for him.

Marvin continued to practice internal medicine and cardiology in Walnut Creek until he retired in 1993. Marvin remained active in the medical community and devoted more time to his many hobbies and pastimes. He wrote a memoir and history of his many years in medicine—*In Sickness and Health: The Progress of Medical Care in Contra Costa County, 1951-2000*, which was published by the Contra Costa County Historical Society. Always interested in his family's history and genealogy, in 2009 he published a family history and memoir, *A Modern Country Doctor*. Other interests included fishing, gardening, travel, photography, theater, opera, and weekly lectures at the Fromm Institute for Lifelong Learning at the University of San Francisco. An inveterate New Yorker reader, he subscribed for at least 75 years. Always gregarious, positive, upbeat, and on the go—friends called him the "Energizer Bunny"—Marvin was an active member of the Medical Friends of Wine, the [Rotary Club](#) of Walnut Creek—he served as treasurer for several years—and enjoyed outings with his many grandchildren and, eventually, great-grandchildren.

Marvin Epstein is survived by Ruth (Oswalt), his wife of forty years, and his younger brother, Louis (Marlene), of Sharon, Pennsylvania, his daughter Judy (Todd) Epstein Endelman, son Bill (Susan) Epstein, Kathryn (Christopher) Sirr, Brian (Joanne) Hazen, grandchildren Michael (Nina) Endelman, Flora (Jonathan) Endelman Margolis, Joshua (Lorri), David (Heloisa), and Daniel Epstein, Kaitlyn, Nicole, and Zachary Hurd, Trevor and Nathan Hazen, great-grandchildren Miriam and Noa Endelman, Maya and Ari Margolis, Mason, Asher, and Bia Epstein, and his nephew and niece, Richard Epstein and Georgia Robinson.

Contributions in memory of Marvin A. Epstein can be made to Save Mount Diablo, Walnut Creek, California, to The Friends of the Fromm Institute, San Francisco CA, or to Temple Isaiah, Lafayette, California.

## UPCOMING CALENDAR

### PLEASE MAKE A NOTE OF THE DATES AND WATCH FOR ANNOUNCEMENTS WITH SPECIFICS

**Saturday October 22, 2016:** Quarterly Dinner Meeting at Uncle Yu's, 999 Oak Hill Road, Lafayette, CA 94549. Uncle Yu's has been an East Bay pioneer in the pairing of delicious Asian food with wine. Come join us for a delightful dinner with wines personally selected to accompany each course by our own Larry Dennen.

**Tuesday November 15, 2016:** Board of Governors Meeting, Palio d'Asti, 640 Sacramento Street, San Francisco, CA 94111

**January 21, 2017:** Annual Dinner Meeting: Campton Place, 340 Stockton Street, San Francisco CA 94108

## RESTAURANT ACCOLADES

The **Bluestem Brasserie**, site of our Spring 2015 dinner, recently had an excellent review from San Francisco Chronicle restaurant critic Michael Bauer, where he raised their ranking to three stars.

The **Campton Place Restaurant**, site of two of our prior dinners and the location for our upcoming Annual meeting dinner next January, has been elevated from one to two Michelin Stars.

Dine with the Medical Friends of Wine and keep up with the exciting happenings in the Bay Area restaurant scene! And if you have a favorite restaurant that can accommodate a private group of our size, please pass on the suggestion. We are always on the lookout for exciting new dining venues.