



BY HILDA J. BRUCKER

The first rumblings of the “ABC Movement” hail back to the mid-1990s. The acronym stands for “anything but Chardonnay,” and it reflects the mindset of a growing number of wine drinkers who are tired of California Chardonnays. The majority of these wines are over-manipulated, critics claim, aged in wood barrels that impart a heavy oak flavor and subjected to a fermentation process that breaks down crisp, fruity flavors and gives wine a heavy, buttery profile.

Whether consumers grew tired of Chardonnay on their own or were influenced by the media is hard to say. But overall wine consumption has risen in recent years, and the current trend is definitely to look beyond Chardonnay. Louisville, Kentucky, wine critic Robin Garr foresees that consumer interest in trying new

Catering to the ABC Crowd

It may be time to re-think your wine list as consumers call for ‘Anything But Chardonnay’

wines will only increase, and he suggests that restaurants “look at it as a positive thing.”

Expand and educate

At Baraonda, an Atlanta restaurant serving pizza and classic Italian dishes, owner Costanzo Astarita carries 25 white wines, only two of which are California Chardonnays. “We carry them for those who really want them,” he explains. “Maybe 10 to 15 percent of the people go right for the oaky Chardonnays.” But he also carries five Italian Chardonnays and promotes Italian wines as much as possible. His wine list is organized by palate, with lighter wines at the top and heavier wines, like high-oak Chardonnays, at the bottom. In the middle are some rather obscure Italian varieties that include Gavi, Vermentino and Inzolia. “We have to educate the customers,” he says of these selections. “Rarely do we get someone who knows (these varieties). We almost have to hand-sell them... describe them, give customers a sample. If you leave it to the customers, they’ll first go with what they know, Pinot Grigio or Chardonnay.” But Astarita agrees that, with staff guidance, wine drinkers are usually eager to try something a little different. He holds wine tastings with his servers frequently to help familiarize them with the wine list.

Hold the oak, please

Though sales of alternative whites are on the rise, Chardonnay is still the top seller in the country. Even so, California winemakers



are producing lighter, less oaky Chardonnays to match consumer tastes. “I think the ‘ABC’ movement is a response to over-oaked Chardonnay, not to Chardonnay itself,” observes Michaela Rodena of Napa Valley’s St. Supery Winery. Winemaker Dan Lee of Morgan Winery is making a Chardonnay that is fermented completely in steel tanks — hence the name Metallico. “It’s been our all-star lately,” he says. “We knew there were people out there looking for no-oak Chardonnay, but we were surprised by just how many there were.”

The lesson here? Keep Chardonnay on your wine list, but offer variety in styles and make sure customers know the difference between them. Bárbara Gabel, co-owner of Zachary’s Pizza in Oakland, California, says her restaurant has always had a very streamlined menu. In the past it has included only three white wines — two traditional, oaky Chardonnays and another variety that is rotated seasonally. Though she doesn’t plan to expand the number of wines, she is getting ready to re-evaluate the choices offered. “I do think its true people are moving away from heavy oak,” she says. “From their questions, it sounds like they’re looking for another choice. Why not offer (a lighter Chardonnay) and describe it specifically as having no oak?”

The other whites

Statistics from the Wine Institute show that consumption of Pinot Grigio (also called Pinot Gris) rose more than 21 percent from 2002 to 2003, more than any other white wine, while Chardonnay consumption went up only 10 percent. Ken Gray, general manager of Everybody’s Pizza in Atlanta, says Chardonnay is a top seller for him because it pairs well with Italian food.

doughXpress *The Start Of A Great Pizza!*
PIZZA PRESSES

- Automatic or manual.
- Stainless steel or appliance white.
- NSF and ETL certified.
- Full range pressure control.
- Digital temperature control.
- Digital time on automatics.
- Easy and fast to wipe clean.
- Easy maintenance with external lube fittings.
- Silent running air compressors.
- Optional Teflon® coated platens.
- 120 or 220 volt.
- Press carts, silent compressors, and dough carts available.

NSF & ETL Approved

Rollers/sheeters require excess flour and they squeeze the air out of the dough resulting in a flaky, tougher, chewy crust. Our presses require no messy flour and leave the air in dough for a great taste.

Visit doughxpress.com or Call 800-835-0606

HIX CORPORATION
 Food Equipment Division



Sauvignon Blanc is another top seller, with consumption increasing by 15 percent from 2002 to 2003. Described as crisp, lively and grassy, it also complements a variety of foods. Pinot Blanc is another good option. Though still rather obscure (it's similar to Pinot Grigio), it offers tropical fruit flavors.

Gray also sells a fair amount of California Rieslings, and says he has his servers push this over White Zinfandel when a customer asks for a sweeter wine. "There's a little more money to be made," he says, "but, in part, it's interesting to get people to try something new. If you offer them something and they like it, then it's something you've done for them. If they find something they really like, it may not be available in lots of places — and maybe they'll remember where they had it and come back to the restaurant."

Gray tests the selling power of new wines by running chalkboard specials for a month at a time. Often he tries to get promotional help from the wine distributor so he can offer incentives to servers for selling it. "If it does really well, it's worth considering adding it to the list; we've done that a number of times." ♦

Hilda J. Brucker is an Atlanta freelancer.