

Fire & Ice

THE DILEMMA OF OYSTERS AND CHARDONNAY

by **Dan Vogel, CWS, CMS Certified Sommelier**
photos by **Kathryn Hayes**



A small selection of the 30 international Chardonnays we pitted against a wide range of oyster textures and flavors.

Author Dan Vogel, CWS, CMS Certified Sommelier, pours the first of many Chardonnays for Gene Castellino, Wine Manager of Whitefish Liquor Store, and Jennifer Lewis of Intermountain Distributing, CMS Certified Sommelier.



Freedom of choice isn't always pretty or tasteful. The table who just ordered a hundred bucks worth of sparkling fresh, two-day out of the ocean Kumamoto oysters is asking for your best Chardonnay selection. The host, a mid-50s woman in advertising, will not be deterred. While her mind desires the classic flavor and texture of California's popular oaky buttery selection, your palate is racing ahead of the speeding train before its smashes headlong into the jarring wreck of oak toast, low acid fruit and melted butter.

As tour guides and storytellers, our guidance of customers into the safe bays and wild waters of sensual exploration pays our professional rent. Can specific Chardonnay selections create an adequate or even excellent food pairing with half-shell oysters? How do you build a safety net within your wine list for this anticipated request? It is a threat at all, or is it long-held professional bias? The answer is yes to all questions. In the words of Kaleigh Brook Vrapic, CMS Level III candidate and owner of When in Rome restaurant in Bigfork, Montana, the soft, moist oyster seeks simply ... "the bones of minerality."





Jesse Felder, Owner of Stillwater Fish House & Oyster Bar, tends to the first round of shucking.



Adrienne Felder of Stillwater Fish House & Oyster Bar hones in on a pairing as Dan Vogel of The SOMM Journal, CSW, CMS Certified Sommelier, chronicles the journey.



Eric Anderson, Wine Manager of Fun Beverage Inc., CSW, CSM Level 1.

Tasting Methodology

As selected site for our oyster and Chardonnay encounter, Stillwater Fish House & Oyster Bar commands one of the highest volumes of half-shell oyster sales in the Pacific Northwest. Established in 2012, the restaurant's unlikely location in the Northwest corner of Montana, snuggled up against Glacier National Park and Whitefish Mountain Resort Ski Area, provides several million visitors every year. "Everyone thought we were crazy," shares Jesse Felder, owner/General Manager of what the locals simply call "The Fish House." When The SOMM Journal presented the challenge of this article, Chris Bernardi of Pacific Seafood Inc. generously supported the effort with nine of their standard offerings covering a wide range of oyster textures and flavors.

Ten panel members with various certificates and ratings confronted the nine oyster varieties with an international selection of 30 Chardonnays. With tremendous distributor and winery support, the call for candidates yielded a selection of wines with a full range of characters and constructions. Representing Italy, France, South Africa, California, Washington State and Oregon, the wines were fermented in all ranges of vessels, spiced with oak programs and grown in varied soil types.

Evaluating the oysters with Chardonnay was conducted in three flights. The panel was divided into two teams, and each took the burden of half the total wines. Once the panels had pared back the wines expected to be "non-oyster," the group as a whole received each type of oyster with commentary by Felder on the character, texture and history of each oyster. The final wines were then combined with each type of oyster in a gregarious exchange of commentary and argument. Ultimately, two of the original finalist wines were rejected, one of which had been among the highest-scoring Chardonnays evaluated by the first panel. Additionally, a previously rejected wine was brought back into the panel by clear consensus. This wine turned out to be the Joseph Drouhin Rully,

The Half-Shell Scoop

There are only a handful species of oyster grown as half-shell products in North America. *Crassostera gigas*, *Crassostera sikamea* and *Crassostera virginica* provide the lion's share of all oyster seed in North America. The *sikamea* produces the world famous Kumamoto, which originated in Japan but is now primarily grown in American and Canadian waters. All other oysters are either *gigas* or *virginica* and their names are usually derived from place names, essentially applications, where they are grown. Penn Cove, Hood Canal and Sunset Beach have obvious place names; Naked Roy's Beach oysters are named for a stretch of north Puget Sound



Lively discussion and debate ensues as we draw closer to the big reveal. (Left to right): Jesse Felder, Owner of Stillwater Fish House & Oyster Bar; Gene Castellino, Wine Manager of Whitefish Liquor Store; Jennifer Lewis of Intermountain Distributing, CMS Certified Sommelier; Kaleigh Brook Yrapi, owner of When in Rome Restaurant, CMS & ISG Certified Sommelier; Peter Grantz, Intermountain Distributing; Kevin Dodd, Executive Sous Chef at Latitude 48 (a Bill Foley restaurant.)

where a locally famous character named Roy would rollerblade while working on his whole-body tan. Kussish, while Asian in sound, are actually downsized Steller Bays. The flavors, textures, brininess and shell structure are all determined by the water, method and temperature in which they are grown. "Citified" oysters have smooth, easy-to-work shells and mild, sometimes-murky flavor due to their pampered home environments. Oysters that exhibit sharp rough shells and bracing, briny, firm-fleshed meats most likely come from turbulent ocean activity with colder temperatures and overall greater extremes.

So what about the wine? In short, Kaleigh's succinct statement "bones of minerality" echoes to the walls. After four hours of wine and oysters, the clearly favorite wine



pairings were the South African Glen Carlou Chardonnay and Lincourt Steel Chardonnay from Sta. Rita Hills, California. In fact, as the Glen Carlou, under the foil of #13, hit the table, conversation stopped among the panel and the guttural, animal sounds of culinary pleasure wafted from man and women alike. Everyone searched for the descriptor: "It's the lime," uttered Gene Castellino, Wine Manager of Whitefish Liquor Store, through a slurp of leftover liquor from a Kusshi oyster: "But it's best with the Penn Cove." In fact, if the wine stands well with the Penn Cove Select, oyster it's very likely to play well with many other varieties as well.

We had arrived at the true point of discovery. The dynamic "sense of place" so often associated with wine became crystal clear with our oysters. Wines and oysters both rise from the soils they call home while being washed by waters unique to the terrior and cared for by passionate "farmers of flavor." The Lincourt Steel Chardonnay, Sta. Rita Hills, illustrates the point. The bright flinty Santa Barbara

County fruit danced right by other higher-price wines to claim the California title. After much digging, it was also revealed that all the final California wines utilized measureable amounts of Monterey regional fruit.

On May 28-30 the International Chardonnay Symposium will be held in Pismo Beach, CA. This happens to be nearly equidistant between these stellar California AVAs. Could it be coincidence that the sense of place for California's oysters and Central Coast Chardonnays are identical?

All ten wines selected by this panel can stand the challenge of half-shell oysters. Collectively they offer a profile of fresh, balanced and understated. They also embody the fundamental need for minerality. However don't look for a secret recipe or for specific viticultural methods or winemaking practices. The final wines stand like a mixed crowd from the county fair: Oak, stainless steel and concrete fermentation and aging vessels are all represented. The ML fermentations used ranged from none to complete. One wine uses 25% Pinot Blanc while another is 2% Grüner Veltliner; some actually have 100% Chardonnay. Ultimately it is the yin and yang of allure that draws these varied and divergent wines into the company of the most romantic and titillating food in the universe. *sj*

TASTING CONCLUSIONS AND OYSTER-PAIRING GUIDANCE



- Fresh, balanced and understated Chardonnays work best.
- Full-throttle Chardonnay construction creates painful oyster clash.
- Regional overviews don't work; it depends on the individual wine.
- Although France won more placements, the

wines were most controversial and divisive.

- Flavor, while vital, is only barely more valuable than mouthfeel.
- Price is absolutely no indicator of suitability.
- Restaurant programs must be developed with wines and oysters intimately together.
- Ranking of wines changed dramatically when combined with oysters.
- Despite double-blind methodology and a large panel, consensus was nearly universal and consistent.

OYSTERS, MEET YOUR CHARDS: The Winning Wines



- #2 Joseph Drouhin 2013 Rully Blanc, Côte Chalonnaise, Burgundy, France *Imported by Dreyfus, Ashby & Co.*
- #4 Francis Ford Coppola 2012 "Sofia" Chardonnay, Monterey County, California
- #6 Lincourt 2012 "Steel" Chardonnay, Sta. Rita Hills, California*
- #8 A to Z Wineworks 2013 Chardonnay, Oregon
- #10 Joel Gott Wines 2013 Un-oaked Chardonnay, Monterey/Sonoma/Napa, California
- #13 Glen Carlou 2011 Chardonnay, Paarl, South Africa * *Imported by The Hess Collection*
- #19 Mouton Noir 2012 "Oregogne" Chardonnay, Willamette Valley, Oregon
- #22 Tiefenbrunner 2013 Chardonnay, Alto-Adige DOC, Italy *Imported by Winebow*
- #26 Domaine Romain Collet 2011 Chablis, 1er Cru Vaillons, France *Imported by APS*
- #27 Jean-Jacques Vincent 2011 "JJ" Bourgogne Blanc, France *Imported by Frederick Wildman & Sons*

* overall group top picks