

The great chardonnay shootout



The trial raged for more than four hours, and when it was over, 25 judges had sipped, slurped, swirled, and rated 221 wines in one of the most ambitious tastings ever held in Chicago. Herewith, the results.

By Craig Goldwyn
Photos by Charles Osgood

Some 500 wines made from chardonnay grape are available to the consumer in the Chicago area, ranging in price from \$4 to more than \$40. And which to buy?

The Tribune, with the help of George Schaefer, owner of Schaefer's Liquors in Skokie, Leonard Solomon of Solomon's Liquors in Chicago, and Jim Steele of Sola's Liquors in Riverdale, invited importers and merchants to submit their best chardonnay-based wines that are available at retail in the Chicago area to the Great Chardonnay Shootout. They responded with a selection of 221 wines.

The 25 judges were some of the best professional palates in the nation, all making their living by putting large amounts of money where their mouths are.

The scene in Solomon's wine warehouse could have been from a de Chirico painting. The five white-topped V-shaped tables appeared to be flying in formation

The top five finishers in the all-price showdown of The Tribune's chardonnay tasting (front page) included four California wines and one from France. However, when the wines were judged within their own price categories, French wines led in all six categories.



Judges in the "chardonnay shootout" were served six wines at a time in numbered glasses. This process was repeated every 20 minutes for four hours, with 10-minute breaks between servings. Each judge tasted about 44 wines.

through the high-ceilinged hall. In their crisp white jackets, the 25 tasters looked more like a convention of doctors or busboys than Bacchic priests assembled from across the country to pay homage to some of the greatest white wines ever given to man by the gods.

Around them buzzed a swarm of white-jacketed attendants. Before them were rows of tulip-shaped glasses of white wine, perched like flamingoes on slender stems.

The tasters swirled, sniffed, slurped, and spat. They filled the hall with deep, snorting sounds as they scrutinized the scent of the wines and made gurgling noises as they aerated and warmed the wines on their tongues.

This was a classic "blind" tasting, blind in that the judges had no idea where the wines came from. All any of them knew about the wines was that the numbered glasses before them purported to be made from chardonnay, and in which price category they are sold in Chicago.

In a sense, wine judges are really olfactory athletes. They

are not only experienced with the whole world of wines but have disciplined their senses of smell and taste to the same keenness that painters develop for their eyes and musicians their ears. Like an athlete they must operate at an intense level of concentration for several hours while seductive fragrances and flavors try to distract them. Not to mention the alcohol.

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First, for the shootout by cost, the wines were divided into price ranges. Judges were told to look for the best quality relative to the price and not to mentally compare inexpensive Macons with expensive Montrachets. They were also instructed to look for wines that taste best now and do not require long cellar aging to make them pleasant.

Because the wines came from so many different vineyards around the world, judges were instructed to rate them on a purely

hedonic scale, to respond to the wine as wine, not according to a preconceived notion of typicality or trueness to type. In short, they were asked to allow for a variety of styles.

When the tasting was over, the judges concurred that most of the wines were good examples of their type. Gerald Hirsch, a Chicago importer, remarked afterward that "of the 46 wines I tasted, only two or three were poorly made. I had a package of Roloids in my pocket, and I didn't have to use one. Ten years ago I'd have been sick as a dog!" Hirsch, fortunately, judged in the \$7.50-\$9.99 category.

Judges in the two lowest price categories often complained that the chardonnay charm had been blended out with the addition of other, lesser grapes. (In California up to 49 per cent of wine called chardonnay can actually be other grape varieties, and in France some regions permit liberal blending, and others have shown a penchant for liberal cheating.)

The first round of 221 wines was rated by five separate panels of five judges each. Scoring was by a logarithmic scale: 4, 2, 1, or 0 points. A perfect score would be 20 points.

A few weeks later, the 19 top-scoring wines were moved on to a final all-prices showdown to determine the best chardonnay available in Chicago regardless of price and the best bargains among them. In this all-prices showdown, a panel of 10 judges ranked the wines in order of preference, and an average rank was calculated.

But taste is still a matter of taste, and even the experts disagreed — often.

The most-frequent point of departure came over the issue of wood. Several of the judges preferred their chardonnays heavily flavored with oak barrels, while others sided with one judge who said, "If I want to taste that much oak, I'll go out and chew a door!"