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Pair some BBQ with a chardonnay

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BY BILL & KAREN GARLOUGH For GO

Summer is BBQ time. With Father's Day, July 4th and summertime in general, many Americans enjoy traditional BBQ. At Naperville's Ribfest, pork BBQ ribs are king. If you are a little "porked out," grilled chicken and fish are a welcome change. A wine that pairs well with both of these is Chardonnay. This can be a great patio wine while enjoying backyard grilling with family and friends this summer.

Wine Facts

Chardonnay is one of the most widely planted and successful white wines in the world, and is recognized as one of nine classic grape varietals. Chardonnay grapes prefer cooler climates. Chardonnay offers appealing flavors of tropical fruit, apple and butterscotch and has a creamy, full-bodied style. Quality Chardonnay is briefly aged in oak barrels to impart a creamy richness and a long, pleasing finish. Wine makers must be careful about the length of time the wine is in contact with the wood, as an "over-oaked" wine can lose its fruit flavors and balance, and taste unpleasant.



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Chardonnay's major growing areas include California and the Pacific Northwest, Chile, Australia, France, Italy and South Africa. The major difference is the "old world" style French Chardonnay tends to be leaner, crisp with mineral and apple notes, while American Chardonnay tends to be big and oaky with vanilla and butterscotch notes. As American tastes have shown preference for a lighter style of Chardonnay, American winemakers have moved away from their reliance on oak and are using stainless steel vats, resulting in a crisper, more food friendly wine.



Bill's Wine Picks (with suggested retail prices)

Oak levels in descending order
Foxglove, Central Coast, CA. -- Light oak \$12
Columbia-Crest, Columbia Valley, WA. -- Medium oak \$8
Chateau St. Jean, Sonoma, CA. -- Heavy oak \$9
Un-Oaked Chardonnay
Yalumba, South Australia \$9
Four Vines Naked Chardonnay, Santa Barbara, CA. \$13
Elderton, Barossa, Australia \$13
The Wishing Tree, Western Australia \$13

Wine of the Month Foxglove Chardonnay

The Varner Winery in the Santa Cruz Mountains in California consistently offer one of the of best values in the marketplace. Robert Parker gave the 2007 vintage 90 points and described this terrific medium-bodied cuvee as offering tropical fruit, pear and mineral notes. The good news is that 25,000 cases were produced, which should make this wine readily available. This wine should be consumed within 2 years, \$12.

The Wine Spectator's July issue reports that the 2007 vintage of California Chardonnay is outstanding, with the Northern California regions (Napa, Sonoma, Carneros) all receiving 96 out of 100 points. They described this vintage as "Ripe, complex, balanced and age worthy wines." This is great news to share and hopefully encourages you to try some 2007 Chardonnay soon.

Food Pairing

While Chardonnay is widely planted and consumed, it is not a food friendly wine for several reasons. Chardonnay's flavors tend to be complex, so it pairs best with simple dishes and sauces. Chardonnay tends to have a lower acidity level, which does not cleanse your palate after a sip. California Chardonnays present additional food pairing challenges, as they tend to have a toastier oak flavor and higher alcohol levels.

So why the popularity? The rich, buttery character of shellfish pairs beautifully with Chardonnay's buttery taste (think Lobster). In general, seafood, shellfish and chicken offer a simple flavor profile that will not compete with Chardonnay's complexities. And Chardonnay's bold flavors can stand up to a rich sauce that might accompany your entrée.

We suggest that you consider trying both "old" and "new world" styles of Chardonnay. When charcoal grilling or smoking meat, a toasty California Chardonnay can compliment the smoky flavors of your BBQ.

An unoaked, stainless steel aged Chardonnay will pair well with light summer salads or fish and chicken dishes that are cooked on a gas grill. The wine label may specify either unoaked or unwooded Chardonnay -- or ask your local wine merchant for their suggestions. It always comes down to personal taste preferences.

Directionally, Americans have moved away from heavily oaked Chardonnay and are now seeking out less oaky versions. The good news is more quality unoaked Chardonnay is now being produced worldwide.

Bill and Karen Garlough are the founders and owners of My Chef Catering in Naperville, the winners of the U.S. Chamber's National Small Business of the Year award. Bill is a Level 1 Master Sommelier and pairs food and wine for their customers.