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Our Guide to White Wine for Every Palate

Whether you prefer light and crisp or rich and luscious, there's a white for you.

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If your default happy hour order is "a dry white," you're probably used to something cold, simple, and pretty neutral. What are you missing out on? White wines are incredibly diverse and nuanced as a category. Understanding them can be complicated because they are expressive of their terroir: sauvignon blanc from France, New Zealand, and California will taste completely different depending on the soils and climate conditions of the place they're grown.

It's important to remember that the grape variety is only the raw material of the finished wine. A winemaker is like a chef: Give ten chefs the same basket of ingredients, and you can expect to get ten different dishes. Similarly, if you provide several winemakers grapes from the same vineyard plot, you may get very different results. So, while the guide to white grape varieties below is based on the grapes' innate attributes, results may vary according to the winery's style. And that's why wine tasting is fun: You get to try different expressions of the same grape and find your favorite.

Chardonnay

Chardonnay is by far the most popular wine in the United States. According to a 2018 study by research firm IRI, Chardonnay makes up nearly a fifth of U.S. wine sales and is twice as popular as the next-highest volume white variety (pinot grigio). The chardonnay grape comes from the Burgundy region of France. The most highly prized vineyard sites produce wines that are powerful, complex, and mineral, where the more entry-level chardonnays from there are light, lean and fresh, and filled with lemon and apple notes. When the grape is grown in California, Chile, or Australia—all major regions for chardonnay—it can be riper and more voluptuous.

Chardonnay has been misunderstood because of the predominant New World-style trend of the past couple of decades: rich, buttery, and oaky. All of those qualities are a result of the winemaking style, not the grape itself. New oak barrels can impart flavors of vanilla, coconut, and brioche and a creamier, fuller texture. And the buttery quality is due to a winemaking practice called malolactic fermentation where the malic acid in wine is converted to lactic acid. Not all chardonnay goes through this process. So, if you're an "ABC drinker" (which means "Anything But Chardonnay") because you don't like the buttery or oaky styles, you might want to give the grape another chance. Many wineries now will label the wine "unoaked" to better help consumers understand which version of the wine they're getting.

To explore the range of chardonnay, try a Californian like the fresh, crisp but richly textured Chappellet Grower Collection Calesa Vineyard Chardonnay 2017 (\$55, *wine.com*). For a French chardonnay go with Bouchard Aine & Fils Bourgogne Chardonnay 2017 (\$17.99, *wine.com*). This white Burgundy is balanced with notes of citrus and vanilla. What to eat when drinking chardonnay? Pair chardonnay with lemony roast chicken like Roast Spatchcocked Lemon Chicken, with a light summer pasta such as Corn, Tomato, and Basil Pasta, and with a sweet, rich entrée like Pork Roast with Apples and Sweet Potatoes.

Sauvignon Blanc

It takes its name from the French word "*sauvage*," meaning "wild" because sauvignon blanc was an indigenous grape that grew like a weed throughout southwest France. Today, it's one of the most popular white grape varieties in the world, planted on more than 275,000 acres globally. It became famous in citrusy, silky Bordeaux blanc blends (where it's paired with Semillon), but styles vary widely according to where it's grown. The

expressions from Sancerre and Pouilly-Fumé in France's Loire Valley are herbaceous and mineral. New Zealand's growing conditions produce wines that are zesty and brisk, with notes of grapefruit, passion fruit, key lime, and lemongrass. California sunshine creates more friendly, round, ripe, and fleshy styles.

To taste the range of sauvignon blanc, try a New Zealand wine like Loveblock Sauvignon Blanc 2019 (\$19.99, [wine.com](#)), a Californian like Duckhorn Sauvignon Blanc 2018 (\$24.99, [wine.com](#)), and a French sauvignon blanc like Pascal Jolivet Sancerre 2018 (\$31.99, [wine.com](#)) from the Loire. Pair sauvignon blanc with shellfish such as Scallops with Mint Pesto and Mussels in White Wine and Garlic, or try it with Leek-and-Goat-Cheese Tart with Rye Crust.

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Riesling

Most closely associated with German wine, riesling is a grape variety that's actually grown worldwide. Its hallmarks are floral aromas, citrus, and stone fruit flavors, and very high acidity. For this reason, it is a grape that can age exceptionally well, as that acid helps act as a preservative. Outside of Germany, other regions producing excellent riesling are Alsace in France, Australia's Clare and Eden Valleys, New York's Finger Lakes region, and Washington State. One important myth to dispel about riesling: It's not all sweet. There are plenty of dry and semi-dry rieslings out here. A pro tip? Turn the bottle over and check out the back label: you'll find a scale created by the International Riesling Foundation called the "Riesling Taste Profile." It will indicate where on the riesling dry-to-sweet spectrum the wine lies.

Riesling has become a darling of sommeliers because of its incredible versatility for pairing with food. Its pure, clean, fresh, and mineral expressions are fantastic with vegetable dishes and seafood, and the sweeter styles are famous for pairing with spicy food because sweetness helps balance out the spice. Try sweeter riesling with Thai Chicken and Noodle Salad and the fresher expressions with Fluke Ceviche with Corn, Scallions, and Chiles or Cod with Herbed White-Wine Lemon Sauce.

For a taste of the range of riesling, sample one from Washington State such as Eroica Riesling 2017 (\$18.99, [wine.com](#)), a German riesling such as Donnhoff Estate Riesling 2018 (\$23.99, [wine.com](#)), and one from Australia, Pewsey Vale Eden Valley Riesling 2018 (\$16.99, [wine.com](#)).

Pinot Gris or Pinot Grigio

A fun fact about pinot gris is that it's actually a genetic mutation of the pinot noir grape. It's originally from France but is also grown widely throughout Italy, where it goes by the name of pinot grigio. Grapes in the pinot family (which also includes pinot blanc) got their name because the Latin root "pin" means "pine," and the grape clusters are shaped like pine cones. Gris or grigio means, "gray" because the color of the grape skins has a pinkish-gray tone.

In France, the best area for pinot gris is Alsace, where it has a rich and full body and a slightly spicy flavor, as in Zind-Humbrecht Pinot Gris 2018 (\$27.99, [wine.com](#)). You'll also find this style in the pinot gris from Oregon, such as Ponzi Pinot Gris 2018 (\$15.99, [wine.com](#)), and from Washington, New Zealand, and South Australia. In Northern Italy, pinot grigio is often harvested early before ripeness, and higher sugar levels develop to create a lighter-bodied wine like Alois Lageder Terra Alpina Pinot Grigio Vigneti delle Dolomiti 2018 (\$15.99, [wine.com](#)). If you taste a pinot gris and a

pinot grigio side by side, you might not even be able to tell they're made from the same grape!

It's also not uncommon to see pinot gris aged with its skins, which will produce a coppery-colored orange wine. Pair pinot gris with a wide range of dishes, from Coriander-Crusted Salmon to vegetable dishes like Pasta with Roasted Summer Vegetables and Basil, to Sausages with Kale and White Beans.

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