



Clonal Matters

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the clones behind Corton-Charlemagne

WINE lovers with a fondness for Chardonnay soon find their way to the French Grand Crus of Corton-Charlemagne. Considered to represent some of the finest white Burgundies, Corton-Charlemagne wines show a rich yet steely character that is all their own, and they are capable of significant ageing (up to 20 years for the best vintages).

Legend has it that white wine vines were initially planted in the region at the insistence of Charlemagne's wife Hildegard, who disapproved of red wine stains on her royal consort's beard. Certainly, the reference has stuck – red wines from the region are simply

called Corton.

The appellation is centred round Aloxe-Corton, a small village located in Northern Côte de Beaune in Burgundy. The area stretches in a narrow band from Ladoix-Serrigny, through Aloxe-Corton to Pernand-Vergelesses.

The micro-climate in Corton-Charlemagne is fractionally cooler than that of Corton itself and the soils are different – lighter and whiter, with a stoniness that locals believe imparts a gunflint edge to the wines.

Great Corton-Charlemagne wines are built on great clones of Chardonnay. Typically,

winemakers who produce the Grand Crus will use a blend, often starting with clone B 95 and what they call Mass Select. As older vines are replaced, however, vigneronns have increasingly chosen ENTAV-INRA clones 548 and 1066 to form the backbone of Corton-Charlemagne wines. A third ENTAV-INRA clone – 809 – is added sparingly (usually comprising just 5 to 10 per cent of the wine). This trio of clones is fast becoming the industry standard.

Riversun Nursery Ltd has imported all three Chardonnay clones from ENTAV-INRA (the French grapevine selection agency) – plus

clone 121, which is designed for use in Champagne-style sparkling wines.

ENTAV-INRA clone 548 proved a standout in the nursery's 2007 micro-vinification trials. That was the first year that the imported vines bore fruit, and Riversun embarked on an ambitious small-batch winemaking programme whereby each wine was made from a single clone.

Making tiny amounts of experimental wine is a time-consuming and finicky job. No oak is used, and there is a deliberate lack of intervention by the winemaker: finished products must be clean enough to allow full expression of the clonal characteristics.

Similarly, in 2008, a small barrel of wine was made using Chardonnay clone UCD 15 as the base, with a modest addition of ENTAV-INRA clone 809. The wine was made by Anita Ewart-Croy (Kirkpatrick Estate Winery in Gisborne) and was designed to illustrate the subtle blending properties of 809, which displays a distinctively Muscat nose even though it is a Chardonnay clone.

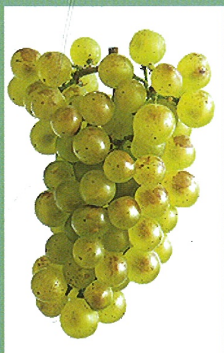
ENTAV-INRA clone 1066 is one of the last selections remaining in Riversun's post-entry quarantine facility. Slated for release later in 2009, it will complete the nursery's Chardonnay portfolio – and provide New Zealand winemakers with the same great clones used in the Grand Crus of Corton-Charlemagne.

- Dr Bonfiglioli is the technical director of Riversun Nursery Ltd.

ENTAV-INRA 548

Winemaking – produces full-bodied, balanced and meaty wines with complex aromas; designed for blending with other clones.

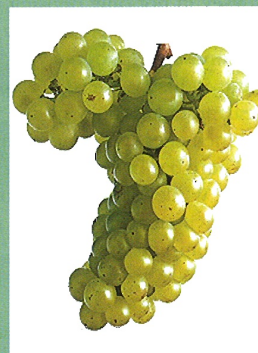
The ENTAV-INRA catalogue notes that clone 548 is slightly "precocious" (earlier to harvest) and appreciated for its viticultural performance as well as its blending capabilities.



ENTAV-INRA 809

Winemaking – Muscat aromas, fine and well-balanced structure; has to be used with care because of its strong Muscat flavour (generally between 5 to 10 per cent of a blend).

The ENTAV-INRA catalogue notes that clone 809 is appreciated for its viticultural performance as well as its blending capabilities.



ENTAV-INRA 1066

Winemaking – produces full-bodied wines with complex aromas; designed for blending with other clones.

The ENTAV-INRA catalogue notes that clone 1066 is also slightly "precocious" (earlier to harvest). The clone has small grapes and is very prone to "hen and chicken" formations on small open bunches. It is appreciated for its extremely low cropping levels, rich sugars and overall superior winemaking capabilities.