

The Clones Behind Corton-Charlemagne

By Dr Roderick Bonfiglioli

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% of the wine). This trio of clones are 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.



ENTAV-INRA® clone 548 – the backbone of Corton-Charlemagne – at Riversun Nursery's source block.

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 was released from Riversun's post-entry quarantine facility in 2009, and completes the nursery's Chardonnay portfolio – providing New Zealand winemakers with the same great clones used in the Grand Crus of Corton-Charlemagne.

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Clone	Notes	▲ Fertility ■ Bunch weight ● Bunch size	♥ Production potential ♣ Vigour ♠ Sensitivity to Botrytis	▣ Sugar ♦ Acids
ENTAV-INRA® 548	<p>Winemaking – produces full- bodied, balanced and meaty wines with complex aromas; designed for blending with other clones.</p> <p>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.</p>	<p>▲ Medium ■ Low ● Medium</p>	<p>♥ Low cropping ♣ Medium</p>	<p>▣ High ♦ Medium to high</p>
ENTAV-INRA® 809	<p>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% of a blend).</p> <p>The ENTAV-INRA® catalogue notes that clone 809 is appreciated for its viticultural performance as well as its blending capabilities.</p>	<p>▲ Medium ■ Low ● Small to medium</p>	<p>♥ Low to medium cropping ♣ Medium ♠ Medium</p>	<p>▣ High ♦ High</p>
ENTAV-INRA® 1066	<p>Winemaking – produces full- bodied wines with complex aromas; designed for blending with other clones.</p> <p>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.</p>	<p>▲ Low to medium ■ Very low ● Small to medium</p>	<p>♥ Very low cropping</p>	<p>▣ Highest levels for Chardonnay ♦ Low to medium</p>

Examples of Corton-Charlemagne Grand Crus:

- Domaine Bonneau du Martray
- Domaine Louis Latour
- Maison Louis Jadot
- Also, in smaller quantities
 - Domaine Rollin Père et Fils
 - Coche-Dury
 - Tollot-Beaut
 - Faiveley
 - Roumier