

# The Oregonian

## **Flavor in wine is a given -- character and originality, now, those are rarities**

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Although many wine drinkers think in terms of flavor, really fine wines are all about character. What's the difference? Originality mostly. Delivering flavors -- red and black fruits, whiffs of pepper, leather, tropical fruits and so forth -- is no great feat in the modern wine world. Indeed, it's expected. But going beyond flavors into that "I can't quite pinpoint it, but I know it's there" quality is rare. It usually comes down to where the grape is grown rather than how the wine is made. All the oak barrels in the world can't do it. Neither can a winemaker's intentions, no matter how sincere and honorable. Abacela Vineyards Viognier 2004: The white grape variety called viognier (pronounced vee-ohn-yay) is a rare specialty of France's Rhone Valley. Viognier is seeing a revival of interest, nowhere more so than in the United States. Southern Oregon is not yet cited as one of America's best locales for viognier. But Abacela Vineyards' consistently impressive rendition of this tricky white grape should eventually put Southern Oregon on the world map. The 2004 vintage is a superb version of viognier: absolutely dry, redolent of tropical fruits and filled with a delicacy and finesse often lacking in more heavy-handed versions from California and southern France. This is a terrific dry white wine not just for the usual suspects (fish, cheese), but also for more substantial foods where one might normally reach for a red. It's a benchmark viognier comparable or superior to the best of California and even some from France's Rhone Valley. \$19.95. (Distributor is Galaxy Wine Co.)

**Mount Eden Vineyards "Santa Cruz Mountains" Estate Chardonnay 2002: Followers of California's best chardonnays need no introduction to Mount Eden Vineyards "Estate" chardonnay from the 2,000-foot elevation of the Santa Cruz Mountains, south of San Francisco. Many fans, myself included, consider it California's single best chardonnay. What's it got? A huge amount of character, derived from the vineyard's stony soil and high elevation. The resulting taste is thrilling: intense, dense and suffused with an unmistakable minerality. Experience reveals that it improves with upwards of a decade's worth of aging, should you have the patience and a suitably cool storage space. Mount Eden "Estate" Chardonnay 2002 is not cheap, at \$42 a bottle. But should you want to taste the best of California chardonnays, this is the wine and worth the money.**

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