

TERRY ROBARDS



# Gavi: A Refreshing Alternative

consuming public in other countries has become preoccupied with Chardonnay. But the whites of Gavi deserve far more respect than they are getting.

Despite the success of some Italian producers with Chardonnay in recent years, it should be remembered that Chardonnay is a grape native to the Burgundy vineyards of France. Corvée di Gavi is believed to date back centuries, and it is uniquely suited to certain kinds of Italian food.

I first encountered Gavi years ago during a luncheon at a Piedmontese restaurant. The pasta course was a marvelous blend of mussels, clams and snails bathed in a peppery extra-virgin olive oil and tossed with a heap of linguine. The Gavi's crisp bite and sinewy texture made it a perfect foil for the richness of the dish. No Chardonnay could have carried off the same mission.

I have since consumed Gavi with ferruccine Alfredo and found it fully up to the task of mitigating the richness of the

sauce. Gavi is also splendid with deep-fried squid, almost any seafood sautéed in olive oil and with broiled shad and roe, all of which demand a wine with a certain tartness. I cannot imagine drinking a Chardonnay with any of these.

Gavi's level of acidity imparts a liveliness that is all but mandatory with certain rich foods. This is not to suggest that a typical Gavi is an acidic wine, but the balance that the best Gavis achieve between acidity, texture and fruit can be stylish and even complex. Some Gavias, moreover, are made with a slight *petillance* that embellishes their crisp charm.

There are no inexpensive Gavias. In our tasting, the least costly was the Gavi 1987 Monfrino at about \$7.50 (clearly the best value), and the most expensive, at about \$25, was the La Scolca Gavi 1987 Black Label, a big, firm, full and complex wine of roundness and length.

My favorite was the Gavi 1987 Vigneto Aborina of Castello di Tassarolo (\$17), a superbly balanced, fruity wine, with splendid texture and style and hints of almonds and apples. An altogether superb Gavi, it was the first to disappear.

Right behind the Tassarolo was the Gavi di Gavi 1988 of Villa Sparina (\$15). Firm, full, crisp, fruity and long, it is a powerful white that was splendid with the shrimp and pasta dish at lunch. I also liked the Gavi 1988 Principessa (\$12) of Villa Banfi, a lightly spritzy, fruity, crisp and firm wine. I tasted the Principessa '87 a day later and found the same *petillance*, suggesting that the spritz was intentional.

In Italy's headlong rush to compete in the Chardonnay sweepstakes, a fine and elegant grape variety native to her own Piedmont region seems to be an object of neglect. The Corvée grape, which yields white wine of surpassing quality in and around the village

of Gavi in Piedmont's southeastern corner, is perhaps Italy's greatest white wine asset.

Yet it remains masked in obscurity, partly because the Italians themselves until recently haven't taken any white wine seriously, and partly because the wine-

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Our dedication to the arts can be tasted in our wines

## Gavi is an Italian substitute for Chardonnay

producers, indicating that the importers, at least, recognize the quality of Gavi, even if most consumers do not. I also found another dozen in the wholesale listings when I was researching prices.

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Most of the other Gavias in the tasting were at least charming, a statement I could not make the last time I tasted 24 Chardonnays in one sitting. Gavi offers a refreshing alternative, especially with Italian food, and we should keep this in mind when trying to rationalize yet another Chardonnay with dinner.

Terry Robards, a wine retailer in Lake Placid, NY, is the author of several wine books.