



championing CharBono

By JEFF COX

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Meet charbono, the grape variety that's unknown to millions, ignored by most of the rest of us, and adored by just a lucky few. Lucky because charbono makes a unique wine with some very fine features. "The lasting impressions are very intense cola nut, vanilla bean, cassis and a vague suggestion of wild, brambly foxiness," enthuses Randall Graham of Bonny Doon Vineyards, who makes Charbono under his Ca' del Solo label. "The aroma is blueberries—it hits you in the face," offers Paul Smith of On ThEdge Winery, which straddles the boundary line between Napa and Sonoma counties high in the Mayacamas Mountains. "Its flavors of violets and tar are rich—like a Nebbiolo—without being bitter. The finish is tannic without being harsh." Vince Tofanelli of Calistoga's Tofanelli Family Vineyards, owns a few acres of charbono vines and makes a limited production wine from the varietal—he calls it "beautiful, pure ink"—and also sells his fruit to a handful of other wineries. Jim Summers, who grows estate charbono on his Tubbs Lane property just north of Calistoga,

says the bouquet typically displays "deep currant aromas followed by sweet bramble notes" and the palate delivers "supple black cherries finishing with lengthy, opulent tannins."

So what is this exotic grape? Why isn't it readily found on wine lists or in wine shops? And is there such a thing as a Charbono cult?

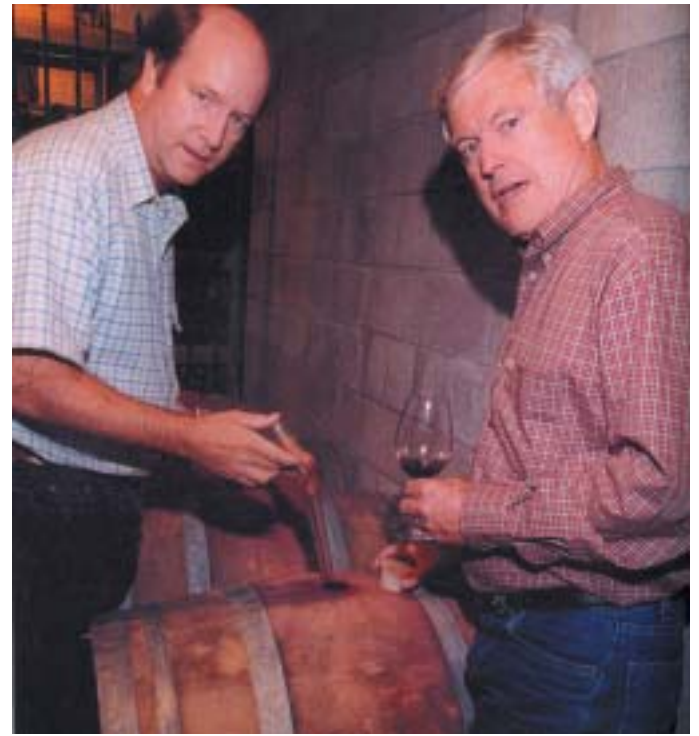
Charbono, from the Latin carbonarius meaning "maker of wood coal," is generally a dark, dense, brooding wine. Detractors would call it impenetrable. Although it is widely thought to be an Italian variety, the grape comes from the Savoie region of France, where it is called corbeau or sometimes douce noir (yet today it is virtually extinct there). In the Jura region, corbeau is known as charbonneau.

It's no great philological leap from charbonneau to charbono. In part because of its rather Italian-sounding name, charbono was thought by some to be the same as the Italian grape dolcetto. But French ampelographers who saw charbono in California had long thought it might be the same as corbeau. In 1999, UC-Davis Professor Carole Meredith, using DNA testing, confirmed charbono's identity as corbeau.

To express a pure charbono character, Ehren Jordan, the winemaker at Turley Wine Cellars, says that the grapes have to be really ripe. "Then it has a blueberry pie smell—appealing but unusual."

So what's not to love? The answer may be that a nearly extinct grape variety with confusingly different names in its European home, one that was also misidentified here in the United States, and one that reaches perfection only in limited areas, slipped through the cracks in a California where zinfandel and cabernet sauvignon are kings.

Although the variety lacks broad exposure, it does not fall deficient on track record. The legendary Inglenook winery, founded in Rutherford in the 19th century, made Charbono every year from 1882 until the winery was sold to Francis Ford Coppola in 1998. Inglenook even vinified the variety during Prohibition when it was made into sacramental wine. In the modern era, John Richburg, who joined Inglenook



Above left: Because of increasing demand, grower [Eddie Graziano](#) planted two additional acres of charbono for Pacific Star's winemaker/proprietor [Sally Ottoson](#). Above right: Charbono proponents and OnTheEdge co-owners [Paul Smith](#) (left) and [Dick Vermeil](#) compare the varietal to Nebbiolo "without being bitter."

in 1972, worked with 23 of those vintages (he left in 1994 to start Bayview Cellars). A high alcohol content for Charbono would be 12.5 to 13 percent, but it has a big body, can be low in acid, and has a lot of soft, long-chain tannins. He views it as a truly unique varietal. "I never associate another fruit with it. Charbono is Charbono," he says. "It's a fun wine—pleasurable, rather than a wine to get all super sophisticated about. It proves you don't need high alcohol and tannins to have a round, mouth-filling wine. I like it because it's an alternative to Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot."

But not everyone appreciates it. The *Connoisseurs Guide to California Wine* offers this description: "It tends to produce wines that are generally lacking in definable or interesting flavors. It is the rare California winery that continues to report production of Charbono, perhaps for the fun of trying to make something out of nothing."

Such an observation doesn't phase Charbono fanciers. Bonny Doon's *Graham* allows that "Charbono is not the most elegant grape variety in the world, nor the most food-friendly by a long shot," he admits, "in fact, it is terminally rustic, and people are either totally enamored of it or repulsed by it. It is, however, utterly, utterly unique and misunderstood, and therefore deserves compulsory inclusion in our repertoire."

Graham is not alone, but the grape's

proponents belong to a shrinking band of individualists. By the turn of this century, California's charbono plantings barely accounted for 50 acres with much of that fruit destined for blending with zinfandel. The charbono head count, however, is on the upswing. According to Gary Nelson of the California Agricultural Statistics Service, "Our latest report [2002] shows a total of 86 acres of charbono," a 60 percent increase in acreage over the two previous years.

Yet with less than 100 acres to its credit, the grape is on the endangered species list. If it survives in California, it will be due to the small corps of fans that is increasingly clamoring for the wine it yields, as well as to the Slow Food movement, which aims to "rediscover, catalog, describe and promote almost forgotten flavors of products in danger of extinction but still alive, and with real productive and commercial potential."

On ThEdge's Smith reports in an effusive e-mail that, "We have just been advised that Charbono varietal wine has been voted into the Slow Food Ark of Taste." He went on to offer, "Congratulations to the current and previous generations of dedicated charbono growers and to our fellow Charbono wine producers who are all so passionate about this excellent varietal!"

It is fitting that the Italy-based Slow Food movement is helping to preserve Charbono. In the late 1800s when many Northern Italians emigrated to Northern California, they brought vines with them, including varieties such as barbera from their home regions. Unbeknownst to them, however, some of the alleged barbera vines were, in fact, Charbono. Misidentified, it took its place in field blends with zinfandel or, as was the case at Inglenook and other wineries, it was labeled and sold as Barbera. It wasn't until the 1930s that



Charbono enjoys long lag time and is generally not ripe until early autumn • A portion of the fruit harvested by proprietor [Vince Tofanelli](#) and [Luis Aguilar](#) is contracted for by neighbors such as Turley Wine Cellars; the balance is destined for an estate bottling that Tofanelli calls "beautiful, pure ink."

Who makes Charbono and what does it taste like?

The following list represents a broad sampling, if not most, of California's Charbono bottlings:

Boeger Winery	2000 Charbono, El Dorado, \$12
Ca' del Solo	2001 La Farfalla Charbono, Napa Valley, \$15
Chameleon Cellars	2001 Charbono, Napa Valley, \$18
Cosentino Winery	1999 Charbono, Napa Valley, \$25 (winery only)
Dunnewood Vineyards	1997 Signature Charbono Port, Napa Valley, \$20
Duxoup Wine Works	2001 Frediani Vineyard Charbono, Napa Valley, \$17
OnTheEdge Winery	2001 Frediani Vineyard Charbono, Napa Valley, \$30
Pacific Star Winery	2000 Charbono, Mendocino, \$32
Shypoke	2001 Charbono, Napa Valley, \$20
Summers Winery	2001 Andriana Vineyard Charbono, Napa Valley, \$24
Tofanelli Vineyards	2002 Estate Charbono, Napa Valley, \$34
Turley Wine Cellars	2002 Tofanelli Vineyard Charbono, Napa Valley, \$28

Bonny Doon Vineyard, 2001 Ca' del Solo Charbono, La Farfalla, Napa Valley—\$15: Although the color is only medium dark, the flavor is a stand-out. Cherry and pomegranate sing soprano and alto, while blueberry hits the bass notes. A soft, lush effort without much acid backbone, but it packs a lot of pleasure into its fruity palate. Score: 87

OnTheEdge, 2001 Charbono, Frediani Vineyard, Napa Valley—\$30: Dense, almost black hue; soft, fine tannins; fat mouth-feel; not a lot of nuance, but rather a big, tarry flavor burst of ripe blueberry and elderberry in the mid-palate. Would marry beautifully with a dish such as pasta putanesca. Score: 88

Pacific Star, 2000 Charbono, Mendocino—\$32: An opaque purple-black hue shows good extraction during fermentation. Aromas of ripe Italian plums. Dominant flavors include intriguing wild huckleberry with Bing cherry and a dash of black pepper. Tamed tannins and soft acidity. Score: 90

Shypoke, 2001 Charbono, Napa Valley—\$20: This wine shows what nuance Charbono can achieve. The color is a very deep ruby-purple. The nose is a mixture of plum and licorice. The palate reveals sweet Bing cherry, dusty blackberry, cocoa, black currant, lavender, tar and a hint of fresh fig. Tannins are smooth yet firmly in place. Score: 91

Summers, 2001 Charbono, Napa Valley—\$24: In the nose, this Charbono yields aromas of earthy and musky black currant, ripe bramble fruits and a hint of black licorice. Black cherry shows up in the mouth. Lengthy tannins are supple, and the finish is surprisingly long. Score: 88 —**JC**

UC-Davis geneticist Dr. Harold Olmo found that the so-called barbera was actually Charbono.

Because the vine needs hot days and cool nights over a long growing season to ripen, the northern warmer end of the Napa Valley, around Calistoga, and sections of Mendocino County with similar climate profiles proved ideal. Hence, much of the early Charbono plantings were sited in those areas.

Many of the wine's inner circle of followers got their first taste of Charbono through the Inglenook Charbono Society, a loose organization whose members snapped up Inglenook's annual 3,000-case production. Counting myself among the group, I keenly remember the final dinner of the Society in 1989, when we drank our way through a vertical of Charbonos from the late 1970s to the mid-1980s. The meal was punctuated by much talk about Charbono's legendary ability to age. During his tenure at Inglenook, Bayview's Richburg tried Charbonos that were 40-plus years old. "It really does age well. I tasted bottlings from the 1930s and 1940s, and you wouldn't guess they were that old. You'd think maybe they were 20 years at most."

Its age-worthiness was more recently put to the test by Napa Valley winegrower Gary Heitz (no relation to Joe Heitz of Martha's Vineyard fame), who farms 7.5 acres of Charbono along St. Helena Highway a couple of miles south of Calistoga. Eager to

demonstrate its enduring qualities, he pulled from his cellar a bottle of 1985 Inglenook Charbono, a wine made partially from his own grapes. We two tasters determined that Inglenook must have been using very high-grade corks in those days, because only the bottom one-eighth inch of the stopper was stained with Charbono's signature inky color, despite its 18-plus years in the cellar. The rim was a rich, brick red and its bouquet huge, albeit mature. In the mouth, a healthy amount of fruit remained, although the typical blueberry flavors of young Charbono had softened into the generic, vinous flavors of old red wine. The tannins, which are long-chain and thus soft to begin with in this variety, were still evident and still soft.

We then fast-forwarded to his 2001 Shypoke Charbono, made by Heitz from 100 percent estate fruit. The aromas invoked vanilla and hot blueberry pie. The flavors showed sweet black cherry and cassis, and the silky-smooth tannins were perfectly tame. He made 200 cases of the sold-out 2001, is making 300 cases of the 2002 (to be released in the fall), and plans on making 500 cases of the 2003, due to what he sees as increasing interest in the varietal.

"I have customers who absolutely love this wine," Heitz says. "There's one man who comes here all the way from Texas. And during the 2003 harvest, a Norwegian woman doing a book on American foods spent a day-and-a-half here interviewing and

photographing because she was so interested in Charbono."

The growers and winemakers who work with charbono note that it's often the last grape to ripen, and that it's painfully slow to reach sugar levels that are barely adequate for other varieties. "The fruit will be 21 brix on September 15 and a month later, when we typically harvest it, the brix will be 22," Heitz says. "It usually comes in between 22 and 23 brix." That means the fruit gets a lot of extra hang time, which allows the development of mature flavors even as the sugar stays low, resulting in modest alcohol levels. (These attributes make it an ideal ingredient for rosé, and so, it's no coincidence that Bill Davies and Tom Gamble, under their Mt. St. Helena label, recently released a dry rosé Charbono that is the very definition of a rare bird in the wine world.)

Richburg, who made Charbono at Inglenook for all those years, elaborates: "With charbono, you have to hope it doesn't rain before you harvest it. Because it has soft, thin skins and tight bunches, rain will encourage rot. It also doesn't sugar up well and is late to mature, which takes harvest time into October when rain is always a possibility," he observes. In the absence of precipitation, he believes, "The long hang-time lets the fruit achieve a fine balance, and balanced wines will last."

"The fruit does take a long time to ripen," affirms Tofanelli, "but on the other hand, it's well behaved and doesn't need a lot of



Charbono has been given a new lease on life by wineries such as Pacific Star and Tofanelli, both of whom are championing the old Italian varietal in the form of limited production bottling such as those pictured.

attention the way zinfandel does.” For example, “I don’t need to pull leaves or drop excess crop. And in the winery I never get a stuck fermentation.” He grows between four and five acres of Charbono in Calistoga, all Gobelet head-trained with eight-by-eight spacings. Most of it was planted 15 years ago for Inglenook. Nowadays Tofanelli makes about 175 cases of Charbono annually and sells most of the rest of the fruit to Turley Wine Cellars.

“I try to enlighten people about the varietal,” Tofanelli says. “My best educational force is the staff at Tra Vigne (a St. Helena restaurant). The servers suggest people try it. And as soon as people taste it, they’re on board. Charbono is one of the original cult wines. Its followers are like a brotherhood.”

Calistoga neighbor Jim Summers, who has never experienced a stuck charbono fermentation either, prefers to drop some fruit. “I thin the crop to get between three and four tons. Otherwise it tends to overcrop and give seven or eight tons to the acre and you lose the varietal flavor,” he notes. Summers makes 900 cases of Charbono per year under his eponymous label. Last year, he even made a barrel of Charbono port and was so intrigued by it that this year he plans to make two.

The king of Charbono port, however, is George Phelan of Dunnewood Vineyards in Mendocino County. He makes just under 1,000 cases from Gary Heitz’s fruit and Larry Venturi’s charbono planted just north of Ukiah. “This winery was formerly Cresta Blanca,” he says, “and I tasted through some of its old port stocks. Some of were Charbono ports, which

always had lower TA [acidity] and softer tannins.” Charbono’s long hang-time results in lower acidity and thus higher pHs, making a smooth, fat port rather than something harsh. “Our port has flavors of dark cherry and plum, and maybe a little blueberry,” Phelan notes. “I made a dry Charbono years ago, but sales never supported continuing with it.” His 1996 and 1997 ports are currently available at the Dunnewood tasting room and retail for \$20.

Sally Ottoson, the winemaker/proprietor of Pacific Star winery located in cold and foggy Fort Bragg in Mendocino County, has stayed with dry Charbono and feels she’s finally turning the corner toward real recognition. “After years of twisting arms to get people to try it at \$6 a bottle, now I can’t make enough of it to supply the demand,” she says.

“Its bouquet reminds me of the old-fashioned, lingering perfumes worn by our grandmothers. The wine makes some ancient connection with my sense of smell,” Ottoson observes. “It has a unique taste,” she says, and then struggles to define it: “The taste is something ethereal, complex, with a big middle. Like perfume, it changes with the atmosphere. It’s earthy, magical...it’s just very hard to describe.”

She gets her fruit “from all available sources,” she says. “From the Frediani Vineyard, from the Heitz’s Shypoke Vineyard, from Jim Testa’s planting in Calpella (just north of Ukiah), and from Eddie Graziano’s home ranch, also in Calpella. “I convinced Eddie to put in two more acres of charbono for me a couple of years ago, and I’ll start getting fruit from it this vintage.” Her current release

is the 2000, which retails for an impressive \$32. Ottoson made 1,500 cases of the vintage—more than anyone else in the state.

That’s a lot of supply for a limited demand, but she sells it out—an accomplishment that caused Rod Smith of the Los Angeles Times to dub her the “Queen of Charbono,” a crown that fits. In regard to the trouble the variety has in generating enough sugar, Ottoson notes that, “Out of the 14 years I’ve made it, I’d say it got ripe or close to ripe about seven or eight times.”

The problem is that most charbono vineyards are old—some over 100 years—and the vines are full of virus. The leaves don’t manufacture sugar as well when they’re virussy, and the variety is simply late ripening anyway,” she explains. Help has arrived in the form of a heat treatment developed by researchers at UC-Davis that diminishes virus. There are now three charbono clones that show no virus at this point. Ottoson speculates, “This may mean a resurgence of charbono plantings.”

At Turley Wine Cellars, Jordan makes 250 cases of Charbono and sells it all on the winery’s mailing list. He calls the 2002 version, “Awesome—the best Charbono we’ve made yet.” The fruit is sourced from the Tofanelli Vineyard on Dunaweal Lane, but unlike many others, Jordan says, “Tofanelli gets it ripe consistently” with sugar in the 24 to 25 brix range.

Paul Smith, a partner in OnThEdge, buys his charbono from the Frediani Vineyard, sited along the Silverado Trail in Napa Valley’s proposed Calistoga AVA. It is said to be the most sought-after Charbono on the planet, and much of Frediani’s ten acres of old vines (50 to 70 years old) is under contract to producers such as Bonny Doon. Smith, however, has an “in”. His wife is Mary Sue Frediani, so he secured enough fruit in 2001 to make 130 cases of 100 percent Charbono. He released it last fall, and Smith says, “It started blowing out the door.” Speaking of the varietal in general, he predicts that Charbono is “going to explode,” and is confident that anyone who is a fairly sophisticated wine drinker “will jump right on it.”

A small group of wine lovers, winemakers and Slow Foodies seem determined to carry Charbono into the 21st Century. That’s good, because nothing that smells like hot blueberry pie should be overlooked.

Sonoma-based Contributing Editor Jeff Cox is the author of From Vines to Wines and Cellaring Wine.