

The hot grape varieties of the future?

10 Sep 2005 by JR

How many times have you heard someone say "I don't know much about wine, but I know what I like"? The phrase is supposed to define wine outsiders, those who call cases of wine "crates" and corkscrews "openers". But there is another phrase that might just as well define wine insiders: "I know quite a lot about wine and I know what I'm not supposed to like".

ABC is the acronym for the weary wine insider's refrain, Anything But Chardonnay, or Cabernet, or, as those who saw the movie *Sideways* now know, Merlot. These most-planted wine grapes are those that deliver wine to the masses and make up the great bulk of the global wine brands: the Gallo, Jacobs Creek, Yellow Tail and Blossom Hills of this world.

Wine professionals and serious wine aficionados are more likely to look for something a bit more outré than the most familiar grapes and, more and more, they are getting it. Ten years ago it looked as though the world's vineyards might soon be planted with nothing but the most famous international vine varieties. Today the pendulum is swinging most definitively back towards biodiversity with the rediscovery, or at least re-evaluation of local, almost forgotten specialities (sometimes called heritage varieties – the wine world's answer to heirloom tomatoes), and a much wider range of vines in general.

My own personal theory for this encouraging development is that it is not because the average consumer is desperate for a change from Chardonnay and Merlot. Rather the reverse in fact. With wine, familiarity breeds relief rather than contempt. Growers and winemakers worth their salt have been experimenting with less obvious vine varieties out of a keen personal interest. It would simply be too boring to concentrate exclusively on yet another plot of Chardonnay (unless of course that plot happened to be in Le Montrachet vineyard, in which case the three-figure retail price per bottle might be considered sufficient compensation). It was surely symptomatic of this phenomenon that during a week spent in New Zealand last January, tasting scores of wines each day, I could count on the fingers of one hand the Chardonnays, Cabernets and Merlots I was offered.

So what are the up and coming grape varieties? Not the really obvious ones such as Syrah (aka Shiraz), Sauvignon Blanc, Riesling and the finicky Pinot Noir that are already internationally famous, nor the relatively well-known ones that are already enjoying an obvious revival in fortunes such as Pinot Gris/ Pinot Grigio and Viognier, but the ones that make such obviously superior wines on their home ground that quality-conscious producers all over the world either are or will be scheming to import them for their own use - because they just have to see if they too can make wine from them that is good enough to titillate the palates of the ABC brigade.

WHITES

Roussanne Practically all the Rhône varieties are fashionable but the headily-scented Viognier is a bit obvious, Marsanne can be a bit heavy and the Rolle/ Vermentino with which they are so often blended rarely reaches its full potential. The nervy Roussanne of Hermitage however can offer body, acidity and an attractively green-fruited personality. Ch de Beaucastel's Vieilles Vignes full, white Châteauneuf-du-Pape is the most famous varietal Roussanne – so far.

Petit Manseng The top quality grape of tangy Jurançon in France's Basque country is not (yet) a proven traveller but the finesse of the green-golden wines – from refreshingly dry to unctuously sweet – that it produces on home ground suggest that it could add real interest to a blend, as it does to the white wine of Mas de Daumas Gassac, the Languedoc's most famous estate.

Albariño So chock full of confidence is this marine-scented Galician varietal wine, in dozens of sought-after bottlings from Rias Baixas in Atlantic-dominated north western Spain, that it has been imported by the likes of Havens in the Napa Valley and Abaceta in southern Oregon – in both cases to the most delicious effect.

Fiano/ Falanghina/ Grechetto One, two or possibly all three of these ancient southern Italian grape varieties are worth trying elsewhere, so firm, fine and generally full-bodied are the wines they produce. Fiano is increasingly popular in Sicily and is already planted in McLaren Vale while the quality of Feudi di San Gregorio's Falanghina is truly inspiring – and Grechetto is expected to revolutionise Orvieto.

Grüner Veltliner Austria's own spicy grape variety with the dill pickle accent is already the darling of wine waiters everywhere, so it is surely only a matter of time before Austria ceases to have a monopoly on plantings of it. I spied experimental plantings in New Zealand.

Assyrtiko The lemon and minerals grape of the Greek island of Santorini may turn out to owe its quality more to the island's volcanic soils there than to the grape itself, but someone somewhere is sure to undertake the experiment.

REDS

Cabernet Franc There is nothing new about Cabernet Franc, the inspiration behind Chinon, Bourgueil and Ch Cheval Blanc – in fact it is a parent of world-famous Cabernet Sauvignon – but its aromatic finesse, ignored for too long, may be just the thing for those on the rebound from bodybuilder reds. It is already beginning to be offered in varietal form from Languedoc vineyards.

Mencia Coincidentally this northwest Spanish grape speciality of the revived Bierzo region was for long mistaken for Cabernet Franc but has an additional undertow of mulberry fruit. Just the job for a modern red.

Tempranillo Tempranillo is now definitely Spain's most planted, and most admired, red wine grape but such is the increasing awareness of Spain's best reds that Tempranillo's reputation has spread far and wide and it is already being trialled in vineyards from the West Coast to Heathcote in Australia.

Touriga Nacional This is the most famous, if far from the most planted, port wine grape, increasingly revered for fiery, spicy, dark, dry unfortified wines too – and not just in Portugal.

Aglianico The noble, late-ripening red wine grape of the Neopolitan hinterland needs a warm climate but repays patience with great fruit and structure. It tastes classical which, with the Hellenic derivation of its name, is why we were all (apparently wrongly) convinced it came originally from Greece.

Ciliegiolo The juicy 'cherry-flavoured' grape of central Italy has something in common with the flirtatious Cinsaut grape of southern France, also due for re-evaluation.

Nero d'Avola Sicily's remarkably friendly, fruity and well-structured grape is already celebrated on the island where it is, miraculously, the most planted red wine vine. Surely it will inspire winemakers elsewhere.

Crljenak Kaštelanski You haven't heard of it? Oh yes you have – but you probably called it Zinfandel (in California), or Primitivo (in Puglia). The roots of this widely-travelled vine variety on the Croatian island of Kaštela near Split have only recently been established, by DNA testing.