

Grenache Enters the Spotlight

Long considered just for blending, the grape is getting new life in bold wines by American vintners



By DOROTHY J. GAITER AND JOHN BRECHER

We ordered a tasting menu at a restaurant recently and, wondering what wine could pair with all the dishes, decided on a Grenache Blanc blend from Tensley in California. Its white-wine tastes and red-wine heft made it a good choice. After a visit to the Monterey region last year, we wrote about a Grenache from Marilyn Remark Winery there that we found rich and soulful. When we were in Santa Barbara County recently, one of the most exciting wines we had was a Grenache rosé. During the same trip, the wine director of a fancy resort wondered aloud if Grenache would

be the next big thing. A few weeks ago, our assistant, Melanie Grayce West, came in one day and raved about a wine she'd had at a restaurant the night before -- an Edmunds St. John Grenache Blanc blend.

Are you sensing a pattern here?

Grenache is one of the world's most widely planted grapes. It's used in everything from France's Châteauneuf-du-Pape and Tavel to Spain's Priorat and Garnacha rosés. It was Australia's top grape until it was supplanted by Shiraz. And it has been widely grown in California for decades. It's even big in Sardinia, where it's known as Cannonau. However, the adjective often used to describe Grenache is "useful." It's hearty and productive, so it's primarily used as a blending grape. Allowed to grow and prosper without restraint, it makes a wan wine -- light in color, tannins, taste and character. If Grenache were a person, it would be the pretty girl's very-nice-but-plain best friend.

But U.S. Grenache is getting an extreme makeover. A small but growing number of winemakers -- led by "the Rhône Rangers," who specialize in wines from grapes associated with the Rhône Valley of France -- are taking Grenache more seriously and, at the same time, having great fun with it, fashioning it into a wine they think can stand on its own. They're planting Grenache in better areas, making the vines suffer and pruning more severely, creating, they hope, a wine of heft and stature. A couple of decades ago, it seemed that every winemaker in

A Sampling of American Grenache

In a tasting of American Grenache and Grenache Blanc, these were our favorites. There were not enough of these on shelves for a broad blind tasting, but we conducted a more-limited tasting and we were charmed with what we found. We rated all of those below as Very Good. If most of these wineries are unfamiliar to you, you're not alone. We list these as examples of a new generation of American Grenache, often made by small wineries. All of these -- and, indeed, just about all fine American Grenache and Grenache Blanc -- are made in very limited quantities. The reds go especially well with lamb, sausage with peppers, and roasted meats. Grenache Blanc pairs well with chicken, veal and heavier fish dishes. These could all age nicely. The first wine in this list is white and the rest, listed in alphabetical order, are red. Grenache is also known as Grenache Noir. All of these, including the white, improve with air, so we'd decant them (after tasting them first to make sure it's a good idea).

Celadon (Topanga Vineyards) Grenache Blanc 2007 (Beeswax Vineyard, Arroyo Seco). \$19.99.

A white wine with presence. Imagine a very ripe, very fleshy white peach. Fine acidity, so it's not heavy. Nice minerals. Needs food and could stand up to just about anything.

Alder (Palmina) 2004 (Alisos Vineyard, Santa Barbara County). \$19.84.

Marvelous, intense nose of strawberries and raspberries. Tight and streamlined, without much weight, and a real brightness about it. Pure and intense.

Paredon (Carr Winery) 2006 (Santa Barbara County). \$39.

This has the elegance and food-friendliness of a Pinot Noir, with soft spices that make it fine with food. Nice acidity gives it lift. Lovely with roast duck.

America wanted to see what he or she could do with Pinot Noir; these days, many are showing their stuff with Grenache. At the 12th annual Rhône Rangers grand tasting in San Francisco last month, there were Grenaches everywhere -- red, pink, blends and white. More than a third of the wineries there were pouring a Grenache of some type.

So, how is the new generation of Grenache? We decided to find out.

The world of Grenache is so complex that we could totally geek you out if we weren't careful. Grenache is different from, though related to, the grape Grenache Blanc, which was only officially recognized as an American varietal wine by the U.S. government in 2003. There is also Grenache Gris, which still isn't recognized as a U.S. varietal wine on its own, but which is sometimes made into a rosé in the U.S. (Other Grenache rosés are made from regular Grenache.) A winery called A Donkey and Goat makes a tasty rosé from Grenache Gris, and the one we had in Santa Barbara, Curran Wines 2007, was remarkably focused and intense. The owner and winemaker, Kris Curran, says she made 100 cases of the rosé after tasting the Donkey and Goat version, deciding how she'd make it differently and buying cuttings from their source that were then planted for her. It's distributed in eight states. She is married to winemaker Bruno D'Alfonso, and the two of them have a growing portfolio of labels. We recently raved about his Merlot. Her first Grenache is still in the barrel, and she's excited about it. Grenache "is never going to overtake Pinot Noir and Cabernet, but people are a lot more open-minded and are doing a lot more experimenting these days," she told us.

So with all of this our heads, we widely and buy Grenache and we could find. We 25 and we tasted nights. Because many and because different, we did blind. The result: wines. It is point, to say what general. Part of current state of Grenache is that still finding their styles are very try to explain the the red wines by

They taste like

We don't mean lamb, though they mean that, quite

the flavors of lamb. But think about what lamb tastes like, compared to, say, steak or chicken. These are more challenging wines, with meatier -- perhaps even gamier -- rustic tastes. They don't have the sweet juiciness of steak or the broad approachability of chicken. They have an herbalness to them that reminds us of the herbs in roast lamb and an earthiness that is special and soulful. They have enough character to make a statement on their own -- these are not shy wines, and their alcohol levels can be high -- but they are flexible enough to let winemakers express themselves. They can have some grapiness, Bing cherries, black pepper and a nice bite at the end that's like a little farewell giggle. We can understand why vintners enjoy them so much. (By the way, we found only a few wines labeled Grenache Blanc and they were also good -- quite substantial and, like the reds, quite soulful, with a depth unlike many whites today.)

And that brings us back to our discussion with Thamin Saleh, the wine director of the Bacara Resort & Spa in Santa Barbara. We were there to conduct a wine tasting for Dow Jones and Mr. Saleh, who has been working in the American wine industry for more than 20 years, wondered if



Erica Beckman for The Wall Street Journal

more these days," she

banging around in decided to shop every American Grenache Blanc ultimately bought them over several we didn't get very they were so not taste them These are special impossible, at this they taste like, in the charm of the American winemakers are way with it, so the different. But let's overall sense of saying this:

lamb.

they go well with do. And we don't literally, they have

Grenache could be the next big thing. We called him later to ask why he thought that might be. "I feel it's the bridge between the Pinot Noir and Syrah movements," he told us. "Pinot is getting expensive so people are wondering where shall we go? California Syrahs are so huge these days. Very few can handle foods. There's something in-between, which is Grenache. It tastes of strawberries, earth and some gaminess but its character is not as dark as Syrah." He added that he could prepare "a whole multicourse meal around Grenache, starting with rosé and ending with a late-harvest Grenache from Spain."

We can't emphasize this strongly enough, so pretend the following is in big, boldfaced letters: You are almost surely not going to walk into your corner wine store this weekend and find a fine American Grenache. For now, they are still such small, experimental undertakings that they are usually available only in very special stores, and especially near their home turf in California. But keep your eyes open because, sometime within the next couple of months, you will see a Grenache, Grenache Blanc or Grenache rosé at a store or on a wine list. When you do, we hope a little voice inside you will say, "I can't remember why, but I just know I have to try this."

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