

A Nichols Worth of Wine

April 2009

Endangered Whites

“ABC”, *anything but chardonnay*, was a term readily bandied about the wine world a few years ago. To some extent justifiably so, given some of the insipid and over-oaked wines produced from the queen of white varietals. Chardonnay, thankfully, is on the road to redemption. Driving this shift is that many chardonnay producers - especially those typically classified in the “value” category, today are making better wines than ever from this prolific grape.

Contributing to its perennial hold on white wine dominance is that the chardonnay grape has been planted widely in wine-growing regions previously dominated by indigenous varietals, such as Italy’s Alto Adige. So while all this has been good for chardonnay consumers, sadly, varietals that were just beginning to be recognized, that is consumers began exploring and buying them, run the risk of falling back into the relative obscurity from where they originated. This means that only the locals, and a few aficionado's of the vanishing varietals, can find or bother to uncork them.

When was the last time you pulled a bottle of gruner veltliner, or one of Italy’s “three V’s” - vernaccia, vermentino, or verdicchio, from your merchant’s shelf, or ordered a bottle at the local bistro? As I suspected. I don’t buy enough of the “lost varietals” either. Shame on both of us. These are delicious and distinctive wines, worthy of our wine consumer dollars, but we continue to wallow in a “*big three*” rut (chardonnay, sauvignon blanc and pinot grigio) when it comes to white wines.

I remember not so long ago while on a wine shopping excursion asking a friend whether he had tried a particular gruner veltliner and he replied, “*I never drink anything I can’t spell.*” Ouch! That hurt. After all, this wasn’t trockenbeereauslese, or even gerwurtztraminer. For those of you who haven’t tried the delicious “*V*” varietals lately (or at all), they have improved remarkably in the last few years. A little about these wines and some producers to look for. Note: Producer recommendations are based on wide-distribution and those I have tasted. Check with your retailer for options in your area. Also, better Italian restaurants will have the vermentino, vernaccia, and verdicchio on their list. Go ahead, explore!

Gruner Veltliner (*groom-er velt-line-er*).

The most widely planted white varietal from Austria, and grown successfully in many Eastern European vineyards, gruner veltliner is a mouthwatering, light to medium-bodied, slightly spicy wine that is especially food friendly. It’s surprising that this varietal isn’t getting a lot more play given that it is a current darling of sommeliers in the finest restaurants in this country and abroad. Top producers include: *Winzer Krems, Familie Brandl and Laurenz.*

Vernaccia (*ver-notz-zee-ah*).

It is almost impossible to visit Tuscany, especially the medieval, 11th century, walled-city of San Gimignano, and not have enjoyed a chilled bottle of one of Italy's earliest varietals, vernaccia. Like any number of Italy's wines, it is only in the past ten years, that vernaccia is being produced in what could be considered a consistent style. The better labels are rich and full-bodied, often redolent of almonds with a slightly bitter finish. Travelers to Tuscany enjoy many fine examples of vernaccia in the tiny village cafes and trattoria's in and around Florence; unfortunately, there are only a few dozen producers who ship vernaccia to America, but they are certainly worth seeking out. Here are the best from the region generally available in the US: *Vincenzo Cesani, Falchini, and Carpineto*.

Vermentino (*ver-men-teen-oh*). If there is a single white varietal, and for that matter a single wine region that has most excited me in the last few years, it is vermentino from Sardinia. While this grape is grown in a number of regions throughout Italy, it is the vermentino from the island of Sardegna, as the Italians refer to it, that has ignited so much interest in this previously ignored wine growing region. It is one of the more aromatic wines you may ever encounter, with intoxicating scents of wild fennel and sage, especially from the northeasterly scrub-covered and rocky terrain vineyards of the Gallura peninsula. On the palate, the wine often resembles the malvasia grape, with its melon and lemon flavors. Vermentino's crisp acidity is an incredible match to most simple seafood preparations and this is the wine I look for when ordering a Caesar Salad to alternately contrast and complement the anchovy-laced dressing.

Outstanding value vermentino producers include: *Argiolas, Antinori, and Cantina Santadi*.

Verdicchio (*ver-dee-key-oh*). Indigenous to the Marches (*mar-kay*) region of central Italy and bordering the eastern coastal area of the Adriatic Sea, this subtle green-hued white, at its best, is elegantly dry and crisp. Most of the better vineyards are planted inland from the sea along the foothills of the rugged Apennine mountain range where, until recently, they produced mouth-puckering, overtly acidic wines sold in fish shaped bottles. Verdicchio's have a distinctive nose of pine and flavors of apple and pear, and not unlike vernaccia, a somewhat bitter almond finish. In the hands of a new generation of winemakers, this is a varietal that has shed its once tarnished image and is worth revisiting, especially as a match to shellfish and most simple, grilled, unadorned fish dishes. Look for these producers: *Falesco, Saterelli, and Bucci*.

Eat, drink and be merry!

Bruce