

Unusual Grape Varieties

What is the point of this topic, and what do we mean by “unusual grape varieties” ?

Well, according to wine writer Jancis Robinson in “Vines, Grapes and Wines”, there are well over a thousand different grape varieties used to make wine in various places around the world. Yet most of us are only familiar with a dozen or two, at most.

How to make sense of that many grape varieties ? Well, one approach has been invented by Deborah and Steve De Long – the Wine Grape Varietal Table. (*visual*) They have taken nearly 200 grape varieties, and organized them into a table. The grapes in the top rows are light in body, and those at the bottom are the most full-bodied. Those closest to the center diagonal (between the reds and the whites) tend to have the highest acidity, while those on the outer edges have lower acidity.

This isn't to say that two varieties in the same portion of the table will taste similar – the flavors may be quite different. But there should be some high-level similarities in weight and crispness.

To illustrate briefly how the table works, let's find a few of the grapes most of us are familiar with:

Cabernet Sauvignon

Merlot

Syrah

Petit Sirah

Pinot Noir

Chardonnay

Sauvignon Blanc

Pinot Grigio

Riesling

Does it make sense to place these varieties in these regions in the table?

OK, so how does this table relate to our tasting tonight? Well, I have picked four white wines and four red wines to taste, all available locally at reasonable prices, that occupy different areas of the chart, and (at least in my opinion) are interesting wines all by themselves. So it's a way to relate some new grape varieties to some you already know, and a way to explore the varietal table.

(The table can be purchased online at <http://www.delongwine.com>)

I haven't tried to find the absolute most obscure grape varieties – that might be amusing, but if you never encountered those wines again, it wouldn't really amount to much. So I have tried to find some grapes that are not in the dozen or so grapes that most of us encounter regularly, but are still reasonably available locally. My hope is that you find a variety or two tonight that you like enough to buy a few bottles of, now and then.

And I think you'd be surprised at just how much grape diversity is available here. Surdyk's in Northeast just ended their fall wine sale. I read through the sale catalog, and made a note of grape varieties I considered at least somewhat unusual. Besides the ones we will be tasting tonight, I came up with about twenty. Here is what I found, just at this one store:

- Aglianico
- Albarino
- Arneis
- Bonarda
- Brachetto
- Carignane
- Carmenere
- Cortese
- Dolcetto
- Falanghina
- Insolia
- Lagrein
- Montepulciano
- Mourvedre
- Mueller-Thurgau
- Picpoul
- Prosecco
- Refosco
- Teroldego
- Torrontes
- Verdejo

So, there is quite a variety available out there if you look for it.

OK, but to get back to the fun part of the evening, what will we actually be tasting, and how soon do we start?

We'll start with the four white wines. In looking at the Table, it seemed to me that there were a number of white grapes that started with the letter "V", and they were distributed across the Table. For no very good reason, I decided to try to pick four wines that all start with "V" that cover a range from light to heavy-bodied, and with varying levels of acidity. So here they are, with perhaps just a bit of poetic license:

Four WHITES that start with “V” !!!

Vernaccia, also Vernaccia di San Gimignano From the region around San Gimignano in Tuscany, long considered one of Italy’s finest white grapes. The wine is mentioned in records going back as far as 1276, and it is mentioned briefly in Dante’s *Inferno*. Relatively light in body.

Rocca delle Macie, DOCG Vernaccia di San Gimignano \$12

Verdelho Widely grown throughout Portugal, and on the island of Madeira. Known for high acidity. Different from the Italian *Verdello* and the Spanish grape *Verdejo*. Thanks to Bob Parke for procuring this wine. There is a style of Madeira known as Verdelho, which is drier than *Bual*, and sweeter than *Sercial*. But we are not tasting the Madeira version – just a dry white table wine from this grape.

St. Amant (Amador, CA) Miss Independent Verdelho \$10

Grüner Veltliner The leading white grape variety in Austria, also grown in Slovakia and the Czech Republic. In 2008, nearly a third of all the vineyard acreage in Austria was devoted to Gr. Veltliner. The “Grüner” piece just means “green” in German, so I think it’s fair to call this a grape variety that starts with “V”.

Nigl Freiheit (Austria) Grüner Veltliner \$14

Viognier An aromatic, floral and full-bodied wine from the Rhone valley in France. Not quite as obscure as the others, but included because (a) as recently as the 1990’s, Viognier very nearly became extinct – there were fewer than 100 acres of it planted anywhere in the world; (b) I really like Viognier; (c) in my experience, not more than one person in twenty can spell it correctly and pronounce it properly, and (d) it starts with a “V”.

Witness Tree (Oregon) Viognier \$13

And I didn’t include these other white grapes that start with “V”: Verdejo, Verdiccio, Vermentino, Verduzzo, Vilana, Vinhao, Vitovska, . . .

The “Signature” Red Grapes of Four Regions

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|--------------|---|--------------|------|
| Zweigelt | The most widely-grown red grape in Austria, it was developed in 1922 by crossing other vinifera varieties (St Laurent x Blaufränkisch, a.k.a. Lemberger). Light to medium-bodied. | | |
| | H&M Hofer (Austria), 2008 | Zweigelt | \$11 |
| Tempranillo | Extensively grown in Spain, it traditionally forms a large portion of Rioja wines (blended with Grenache and other indigenous grapes). Called <i>Tina Roriz</i> in Portugal, it is a major component of many Ports. It tends to ripen earlier than other varieties, and is often low in acidity. Has been grown in California for years, under the name Valdepeñas. | | |
| | Campos Reales (Spain), 2009 | Tempranillo | \$11 |
| Pinotage | South Africa’s signature red grape, Pinotage is a cross between Pinot Noir and Cinsaut (also spelled Cinsault). It was invented in 1925, in an attempt to produce a grape similar to Pinot Noir, but less difficult to grow. Only a few small plantings exist outside South Africa. (One successful planting is in Lodi, CA.) | | |
| | Simonsig (S.A.), 2008 | Pinotage | \$13 |
| Nero d’Avola | “The most important red grape grown in Sicily. It is vinified into dark, thick, flavorful reds reminiscent of the best Australian Shiraz.”, according to WineCountry .IT, a website promoting Italian wines and tourism. Also, the heaviest, most acidic red variety on the De Long grape table. | | |
| | Feudo, Principi di Butera (Sicily), 2008 | Nero d’Avola | \$13 |

Reasonable examples of these varieties can often be found at Trader Joe’s (home of “Two Buck Chuck”) for \$5 or \$6 per bottle !!