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The next big white

Pinot gris is attracting undeserved attention, writes Curtis Marsh, but there are some standouts.

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Of the 867 grape varieties listed in the exhaustive Oxford Wine Companion, and this does not include the countless indigenous clones, it is mind-boggling how few make the cut on the international wine stage.

Since early Roman times, the wider popularity of grape varieties is largely determined by its ability to travel or adapt to new environments and, above all, fashion.

Setting aside red varieties, you can count on one hand the white varieties that have current global mass-consumer appeal; chardonnay, sauvignon blanc, pinot gris and riesling.

Chardonnay has acclimatized so well, wherever it has been planted, that if it were not for its noble pedigree, it would be reclassified as the grapevine equivalent of a noxious weed. Riesling is far more particular requiring specific soil structures and a cooler climate. Despite riesling's aristocratic standing - peaking in the late 19th century - its regard has been volatile ever since, only now enjoying a renaissance amongst the wine intelligentsia.

The ubiquitous adoration for sauvignon blanc does not have a long history but aptly represents the demands of contemporary lifestyle and the modern-day palate with its unashamedly and explicitly fruity, zesty crowd-pleasing style. Incidentally, apart from the muscat family, sauvignon blanc is the only grape variety that actually tastes like a grape in the finished wine.

Without question, there are an infinite number of distinctive, high quality white wines made from obscure indigenous varieties, although invariably difficult to pronounce. Even though these wines ordinarily offer excellent value, they are largely consumed within their own region or by a minority of perceptive, broadminded wine enthusiasts in the metropolises.

A good example of this is Gruner Veltliner, Austria's champion white variety. It's indisputably dependable, versatile, distinguished and a proven challenger to chardonnay. Yet, despite numerous accolades and a devout following in informed circles, it remains peculiar to Austria. However, I can report that cuttings are now being propagated in New Zealand and Australia and in the same manner that the new world winegrowers are altering the fortunes of pinot gris, I believe it will be the world's "next big" white variety, once we change the name.

Which brings me to pinot gris, also known as pinot grigio in Italy, from where millions of cases are exported to gullible guzzlers in the bottomless markets of the United States and the United Kingdom.

I can understand why Marlborough sauvignon blanc pushes all the right buttons in the mass-market, but Italian pinot grigio confounds me, given its contrasting lean, green and mean style. The majority of Italian pinot grigio is churned out by large co-operatives in the Veneto region who are supplied by grape growers with a predilection for inordinately high yields, diluting any pinot grigio character whatsoever. Indeed, most taste of nothing at all - a cold glass of Evian with a slice of lemon has more going for it.

Perhaps a feasible explanation is the aura of sophistication and vinous superiority implied with ordering an Italian wine, or maybe the vagaries of fashion.

Although it is white grape, pinot gris can develop a brownish-gray-pink bloom ("gris" meaning "gray" in French), equally apparent in the finished wine if there is prolonged skin contact when crushing the grapes.

As its name indicates pinot gris is a direct relative of pinot noir believed to have mutated around the Middle Ages in Burgundy, know then as Fromenteau. Pinot gris was eventually outlawed in Burgundy as a poor cousin to chardonnay, unjustly banished to Hungary in the 14th century where it was coined the "gray monk," apropos established by Cistercian monks.

It was reacquainted with French soil in 1568, brought back by Baron Lazare Schwendi from Hungary to Alsace, now widely accepted as pinot gris' spiritual home. It has a long history in Germany and Austria where it is



Ripe pinot gris grapes, picture courtesy of Villa Maria

I recently tasted 12 pinot gris at the Nelson Aromatics Symposium, the first bracket of six an international line-up with Zind-Humbrecht from Alsace clearly in a league of its own.

That said Dry River from Martinborough, representing New Zealand, was equally profound and complex and astonishingly Alsace-like.

In the New Zealand line-up, Chard Farm and Kumeu River were my preferences, with both wines at the cutting-edge of the New World pinot gris revolution.

Zind-Humbrecht Ragen Clos Saint Urbain 2002, Alsace, France. Opulent exotic nose brimming with tropical melons, ripe pawpaw pungency. Obvious apricot-like botrytis characters with golden syrup and oily-buttery scents amongst sweet vanillin. The gorgeously rich and creamy palate texture and crescendo of sweetness is balanced by a wonderful sweet-sour interplay of piquant marmalade flavors and incredibly powerful tangy pineapple-like acidity. Intriguing complex nutty nougat flavors among pungent earthy-minerals with intense spiciness and chalky phenolic grip at the finish. One of the most profound whites wines I have tasted. (RS 38 g/l. Watson's Wine Cellar, Tel: 2525 1237, www.watsonswine.com. In Singapore, Booze Wine Shop; www.booze.com.sg)

Dry River Pinot Gris 2005, Martinborough, New Zealand. Sweet custard and vanilla pod amongst peachy, apricot kernel aromas, raw almonds, oily scents, and an air-dried meat, fatty pork smokiness. Rich oily-buttery palate, quite nutty almond-like cake icing, creamy textured yet lively and tangy with apricot, dried tangerine peel, marmalade flavors. A long spicy farewell that is tangy and has excellent grip; also surprisingly dry appearance on the finish considering the overall richness of the wine and the RS 17 g/l. Very impressive wine, clearly the most complex from New Zealand (UK agent Justerini & Brooks www.justerinis.com or direct www.dryriver.co.nz)

known as Grauburgunder and more recently in North America where it is the most widely planted white grape in Oregon and second most in California. Pinot gris emigrated to Australia 1832 with James Busby, regarded as the father of Australian wine industry and French missionaries introduced an Alsace clone to New Zealand in the 1850s.

Clearly, pinot gris meets the prerequisite for popularity in being well-travelled and acclimatizing, however the stylistic ambiguity and polarisation between the "gris" and "grigio" camps is perhaps impeding its ascendancy.

There is no question that Alsace is capable of producing the most profound, complex and unctuous pinot gris in the world. However, they are often so rich, yet not classified as dessert wine, they confound the average consumer. Respectively, there are those who relish the blossom scented, zesty, dry savory "grigio" style, sometimes amplified by a saltiness and pleasant walnut-like bitterness.

This is where New Zealand winemakers are the vanguard making stylistic new waves using the similar pragmatic and contemporary approach that achieved the definitive Marlborough sauvignon blanc.

New Zealand's enviable long, dry radiant autumns and super-cool night temperatures of the southern extremities results in a succulent stone-fruit and tropical melange with commercially palatable residual sugars ranging between 6-12 grams per litre (RS g/l) that are barely noticeable, harmoniously balanced by natural, relatively high acidities. There are added glycerol-oily-textures from the residual sugars and buttery-nutty complexities from extended lees (dead yeast cells) contact but without overt oak influences. Pinot gris categorically does not benefit from new oak, unless you want it to taste like chardonnay.

Kumeu River Pinot Gris 2005, Kumeu, Auckland. Perfumed with mealy, muesli-like aromas among exotic ripe mango and fresh pineapple. Nutty and oily palate, lots of extended lees complexity, almonds and roasted cashews. The glycerol mid-palate livens up with grapefruit and pomelo freshness building in intensity and mouth-watering tanginess, lingering among a buttery-caramel opulence. RS 13 g/l. (Available from Northeast Wines: www.northeast.com.hk or www.kumeuriver.co.nz).

Chad Farm Pinot Griss 2004

Chard Farm Pinot Gris 2005, Central Otago.

Similar to Kumeu River in perfume with mealy, muesli-like aromas among exotic ripe mango but extra mineral elements of gun powder and gravely stone grown in alluvial schist gravels.

Lively palate entry brimming with grapefruit and marmalade tanginess, building in sweetness with peach and ripe nectarine flavors and becoming increasingly oily and nutty with wet slate mineral characters lurking around a vibrant finish and savory twist of bitter walnut.

The most balanced and appealing drink in the line-up, my benchmark New World pinot gris. (RS 10 g/l. Boutique Wines. Tel: 2525 3899 or www.chardfarm.co.nz)



"Curtis Marsh, a veteran wine importer and sommelier, is an Asia-based writer on wine, food and travel."

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