

Albarino and the Cornucopia of Unknown Wine Grapes



By George Parkinson

This past spring, the Sommelier Challenge in Philadelphia, a blind tasting of local wines by 30 beverage and hospitality professionals, awarded the Best Wine in the State to Stony Run Winery for its 2019 Albarino. Albarino is a wine grape well known within the wine industry from producers such as Granbazan, Burgans, Martin Codax, Opolo, Abacela and others from around the world. A “wine darling” if you will that impresses with bright aromatics and crisp acidity.

Yet, on a daily basis, in my wine bar, our guests remark that they have never heard of this wine grape. This doesn't surprise me. The national and international wine reviewers spend 99% of their efforts touting the top 10 “fighting varieties,” with little effort or regard for the category of “other wine varieties”.

It has become sort of a rant of mine that so much press is given to so few wine varieties and wine regions. The wine professionals who are your hospitality beverage manager, sommelier, or lead bartender spend much of their time trying to educate the general public about the wide range of wine grapes and wine styles being produced in new and upcoming wine regions around the world—only to be thwarted by the major press periodicals recounting another Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon. Confused about what is actually considered to be a good wine, the general public then runs to their safe ground of another subjective score by a widely distributed reviewer.

Sounding like sour grapes is not my intent here. The point I am making is that the beauty of wine is in the volume of wonderful blends and varieties available from around the Earth.

I, like many wine lovers, subscribe to a dozen different wine publications, blogs, and newsletters. Wine is my study and has been for over 40 years. I find it important to keep up with current events and wine production worldwide. The general wine consumer who isn't vested in the industry won't do these things, so, to save time, they'll rely on one or two sources who are paid by national beverage companies. This is where the industry loses the opportunity to educate.

If I said the words Saperavi, Pais, Mencia, or Castets, would you know them as wine grapes? They are indeed. If I wrote out the words Viognier, Arinarnoa, and Aglianico, would you be able to correctly pronounce them and also know them as wine grapes? Viognier (vee-own-yea), Arinarnoa (air-in-r-no-ah), and Aglianico (al-yan-i-koh). Yes, these too are all wine grapes.

Viognier, Marsanne, and Roussanne make up the predominant blends of white Côtes du Rhône wines—a region famous for Syrah. Yet most of the general public is not aware of this nor can they easily pronounce the words. Wines made from Marselan, Clairette, Grüner Veltliner, Bobal, and Blaufränkisch are not familiar to most people, and the many wine styles, food pairing partners, and accolades about them get swept under the rug for the next Chardonnay.

Albarino is exactly the grape that could shake the planet wide open for those seeking new adventures in wine. Its grape DNA suggests it to be a cousin of Petit Manseng, but no definitive parent has been identified. It originates from a place in Spain like no other part of that country's wine regions. Galicia, located on the Atlantic Ocean in the Northwest of Spain, is the wettest and consistently coolest place in Spain. It was the last stronghold of the Gaul or Celtic empire before the Romans conquered them. With great respect for their culture, the Roman empire erected a sculpture

of the dying Gaul as a tribute to their courage in battle.

While the Romans, Visigoths, Vikings, and Moors all attempted to dominate the region, the Galicians prevailed, and to this day the region is considered autonomous in Spain with the native language of Galicia as one of the two languages most spoken there. The wines of the region match the local diet of octopus, cod, mussels, scallops, cheese, and chorizo sausage. Going south into the Douro region, the people of Portugal pronounce this grape as Alvarinho, dropping the “B” and elongating the “H”. It will show up in many Vinho Verde white wines from this area.

A crisp white wine that can produce a wide range of color from pale straw to gold, the wine is extremely aromatic with notes of ripe nectarine, peach, apricot, and orange. Citrus in



the backbone of the body will spike the palate and allow for partnering with shellfish, grilled tuna, salmon, and crab. In the market, you can find many expressions of this grape made in Spain, California, and even Pennsylvania. It is a wine worth the money and one that will surprise many not aware of its existence.

This Thanksgiving, go out of your way to experience the cornucopia of other wine grapes and wine styles that exist around the world and are available in your local market or local winery. I wish you a very blessed and peaceful holiday as we take time to be thankful for what we have been given.

Peace

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