

Grapes: What's in a Name? (3)

(An Opinionated Multi-part Series about the Names of Wine, Grapes, Grape Areas and Wineries, number 24 in the overall series)

The origin of the names for many grapes is lost in antiquity, while others have been named by their developers or discoverers (and usually after themselves). As a result, there is a wide range of names applied to grapes, some of which are historical and some of which are silly. In some cases, as more was learned about grapes and their origins, names were changed to reflect that knowledge (or to protect the guilty), while in other cases, it's just usage that has changed. To make matters worse, many grapes have been misnamed or misidentified over the years, and watchful government agencies have recently taken it upon themselves to correct the errors.

A Variety of Varietals

When varietal naming of wines first started to become popular in the 1970's, not much was established about the correct names for the grapes. For many years, wines were labeled "Pinot Chardonnay," even though it was later established that chardonnay was not a true member of the pinot family. Similarly, "White Riesling" was a common label name, if only to distinguish it from the popular Grey Reisling of Wente Brothers. The common name was later changed to Johannisberger Riesling, and is now being further revised to just "Riesling."

Another such change was the grape formerly known as Napa Gamay. It turned out that it wasn't gamay at all, but two misidentified grapes. Some of it was found to be pinot noir (although an inferior clone that was being grown where the weather was much too hot), and the rest was a French variety known formally as valdigué. The ATF has recently stepped in to require that all future wines from this grape be labeled only as valdigué ("val-dee-gay," a name that hardly trips off the tongue of non-French speakers).

Counting on European Vines

One of the greatest mysteries, to this day, is the origin and name of our local favorite, zinfandel. The roots of this grape have been traced all over the European grapegrowing regions, and even with the aid of DNA analysis, its true identity still eludes us. Even less is known about the name, but it is supposed to be one of the grapes brought here by the fabled Hungarian Count, Agoston Harasthy. He was chartered to bring back European vines for planting in California in the 19th century, but amidst scandal and bankruptcy, the identity of many of his vines became lost. If, as the legend goes, he was eaten by crocodiles in South America, it was a fitting end for such a source of grapevine identity confusion.

Except for specifically-created hybrids, one of the few varieties of grapes whose entire history is known is that floral-scented white, gewurztraminer. The traminer vine has been grown for centuries in Italy, France and Alsace, producing pleasant but undistinguished

white wines. The berries are always greenish-white, but a farmer noticed that one cane of his traminer vine produced not white but light red berries, and these had much more aroma and flavor than their white cousins. What he had found was a “bud sport,” or spontaneous mutation of the vine that dramatically changed the character of the grapes and the wine made from it. They added the German term “gewürz” which means “spicy,” and every gewurztraminer vine grown today can be traced to cuttings propagated from the original cane with its odd-colored fruit. Interestingly, if only the flavor and not the color of the grape had been altered, it would have probably never have been discovered—we can only guess how many times it’s happened to grape mutations we didn’t identify.

Genealogy of the Grapes

Now that DNA typing is almost routine, several interesting discoveries have been made about the ancestors of the grapes we have come to know and love. Could we ever have imagined that cabernet sauvignon, perhaps the most famous of red grapes, is actually the offspring of cabernet franc and sauvignon blanc? Someone must have known it, somewhere along the line, for the name to have been so accurate to its parentage. Recently, these techniques have been used to determine that pinot noir, pinot gris and pinot blanc are actually *the same grape*, with only minor color variants. We always knew they preferred the same climate and had the same shy bearing tendencies, but it is interesting that differences in the amount of pigment in the grapes make such a great difference in the wine.

The most far-reaching discovery in this area comes from a comprehensive study reported in 1998 in the journal ‘Science.’ Many of our favorite wine grapes—sixteen varieties in all, including chardonnay—turn out to have descended from a cross between the noble pinot noir grape and a white grape named gouais blanc (gooey blank?). Gouais blanc is so widely disrespected in France that it’s not even allowed in any of the wines named under that country’s wine laws, and is now almost extinct. If you’re interested in the subject, a very comprehensive website is available at:

<http://www.wineloverspage.com/wineguest/wgg.html>.

One of my favorite stories concerns Prof. Dr. Müller-Thurgau, who was a respected scientist at the Wädenswil Wine Institute in Switzerland. He succeeded in crossing the two most widely grown vines in Germany: riesling and sylvaner. The grapes from the hybrid vine were found to possess unusual and intriguing flavors, and the vine has since been planted in many areas of the world, including Oregon. His only request was that the variety not be named for him, but after his death his name was attached, anyway. To add insult to injury, recent DNA typing studies have now cast doubt that the two named varieties are the true parents of the Muller-Thurgau grape.

But What’s in the Bottle?

It’s widely known that a bottle labeled ‘Cabernet Sauvignon’ needs to contain only 75% of that grape, and that the other 25% can be any other grape the vintner had on hand. When the appellation ‘El Dorado’ is added, the percentage requirement for the grape

variety is the same, but it's then required that 85% of the grapes come from the delimited region of the El Dorado American Viticultural Area. The most restrictive distinction allowed on the label of a wine is the name of the farm, ranch, orchard or vineyard where the grapes were grown, and adding that term to a label requires that 95% of the fruit be grown on that property. Finally, if the label has a vintage date, 95% of the wine in the bottle is required to be from that year.

So you can be assured, when you buy a bottle of 1998 El Dorado Cabernet Sauvignon, that at least 95% came from 1998, 85% came from El Dorado, and at least 75% of the wine is actually Cabernet Sauvignon. And now you also know who its parents are, so you know who to call if it misbehaves.