

Grapes: What Wines to Offer?

#52 in a series of opinionated articles about grapes and wine by John Smith

Whites, pinks, reds, dessert, sparkling, dry, sweet, fortified—a dilemma faced by every new winery owner is: how many and what varieties of wine should I make? In many regions of the world, the answer is dictated to a new winery—if you were growing grapes in France, only selected varieties (with limited crop yields) would be allowed in your wine. In other areas, the only wines you can make and sell are from grapes you grow on your own land. In California, where fewer government regulations control grape source, variety and style, wineries may either maintain a tight focus or try to be all things to all people.

Most small wineries in our area are dependent on a combination of new tasting room visitors, word-of-mouth advertising, and loyal customers who have grown attached to the winery over the years. One philosophy is: “We will always have a wine that *every* visitor will like and take home.” Others prefer to do only what they know they can do well, and offer a much more limited selection of wines, while some might actually limit themselves to wines from the grapes they grow. Since the introduction of varietal labeling in the 1970s, very few bottles today bear the traditional “copycat” foreign names of the past—“Burgundy,” “Chablis” or “Rhine;” instead, the name of the grape identifies most of the wines offered today. People will often come to a winery (especially in this area) looking for “a Zinfandel,” “a Barbera” or “a Port,” and if a given winery doesn’t offer one, they may not stay to try the other wines that are available.



The Beginnings

There was a time when tasting-room varietal selection was much easier: Chardonnay, Merlot, Zinfandel, and perhaps a Riesling or Chenin Blanc graced many of the earlier tasting bars, with an occasional Cabernet Sauvignon thrown in. In the 1980s, a few wineries began to experiment with other varieties, and wines like Barbera and Cabernet Franc began to appear. As the White Zinfandel craze began, everyone either offered that or another varietal blush wine to satisfy the tastes of the beginning wine drinkers (they were often referred to as “wines with training wheels,” since they served to introduce drinkers of beer and mixed drinks to the idea of wine as a beverage). Now, with over 50 varieties of grapes grown in our area, someone, somewhere, offers each of them as either a varietal wine or part of a blend.

Even though this is predominantly red wine country, it’s still important to have a selection of white wines for people who either can’t drink or just don’t like red wines. The most popular are still Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc, with Pinot Grigio as a fast-rising contender. Others will go off the beaten path to explore newer whites like Viognier

and its Rhone Valley-derived cousins Roussanne and Marsanne, or even the Portuguese Verdelho among their white offerings.



Required Reds

For red wines, Zinfandel still reigns supreme, and it's very hard to find a Fair Play or El Dorado winery that doesn't offer one (in Amador County, where Zinfandel is considered a "native plant," angry visitors may burn the shape of a grape leaf in the lawn of a winery that doesn't offer it). Although fading in prominence, Merlot and Cabernet are still seen in most tasting rooms, with Syrah in increasing frequency. Petite Sirah, long a favorite here, has traditionally been in short supply, but is also appearing more frequently as more of these peppery, flavorful, dark purple grapes have been planted locally. The Italian varieties Sangiovese and Barbera are increasing in popularity as more people try and enjoy them, and many wineries have recently chosen to specialize in wines from grapes originating in the Rhone Valley of France (the so-called "Rhone Rangers"), with wines or blends from Syrah, Mourvedre, Grenache and others. Blends of the traditional Bordeaux varieties Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Cabernet Franc (sometimes with one or two more thrown in) have maintained their popularity, and are known as "Meritage" if the winery joined that Association, or by another fanciful name if they didn't.

The Greatest and the Least

And then you have the various grades of wine—many wineries separate out their very best to make a "Reserve" or "Special Selection" of a particular wine, whether from their estate vines or just an especially good vintage (there is no need to disparage those wineries who label ALL their wines as "Reserve"—they are clearly unable to tell the very good from the ordinary). Some of the snottier wineries try to outdo themselves with ever-grander names (and more elevated prices) as they escalate from "Special Reserve" to "Ultra-Super-Special Estate Private Preserve Owner's Selection" (and it often seems that each word added to the pedigree adds another twenty dollars to the price). At the lower end of the price range (although often not of quality) are blended wines, usually termed "red table" or "white table" wines. These range from the "leftovers" that either didn't fit into the varietal production (or weren't quite good enough to stand unblended) to carefully-crafted wines where the blend varies each year to maintain an established quality standard.



Great Finishes

Sweet or dessert wines fall into several categories. A number of wineries offer a slightly to very sweet wine made from Muscat varieties—Muscat Canelli (sometimes called white Muscat), Orange Muscat or Black Muscat, prized for their floral aromas and pleasing taste. Others will leave a portion of Zinfandel or other grapes on the vine a few weeks longer to produce a “late harvest” sweet wine, or in warmer years, make a traditional Port. This wine is made differently from all the others, in that grape brandy is added to arrest the fermentation while the juice still retains some sugar—generally in the range of four to eight percent. When made from fully ripe grapes, these are often the most delectable of all the dessert wines, whether made from the traditional Portuguese Port varieties with names like Tinta Cao, Touriga Nacional, and Bastardo, or crafted from a single variety or a blend of more common local grapes.

Stand Out From the Crowd

As the prospect of numbing sameness looms over tasting bars with the explosion of new wineries, there has also been a trend to establish a less-common variety as a showpiece that helps to distinguish a winery from the crowd, and innovators are offering wines like Semillon (a white wine from a grape that started out in Bordeaux), a “White Port,” and even less-known varieties like Pinotage (the national grape of South Africa), Malbec (another Bordeaux emigrant) or Tempranillo, the great grape of the Spanish red Rioja wines.

Those who have been to the Other Wine Region (sometimes referred to as the wine N-word) and have seen the crowds, the high tasting charges, and the lack of variety are often delighted when they finally visit our small, family-run wineries and have a chance to taste an unusual variety of wines and styles. Regardless of whether emerging wineries follow or buck the trends, there will be an increasing range of delightful diversity in wine to try in our local tasting rooms, and the best rule for new wineries is: make as many really good wines as you can, but remember that not everyone can grow or make every wine the best wine, so don't compromise quality for variety.