

HI, MY NAME IS XINOMAVRO

Meet quaffable, indigenous varietals from around the world

By Jessica Yadegaran
Contra Costa Times

Summer's around the corner, which means that the year is almost half over. Have you found your Next Big Wine? Face it, everything gets old -- yes, even pinot noir -- and not in a good way. Why not try something new, even exotic? Wine is about exploring. And while many long for new and exciting aromas and flavors, few look farther than the supermarket shelves.

Open your palate to the multitude of indigenous varietals from around the world that are making their way to California, many in our stores, some even in our soil. Sommeliers already adore them for their versatility and food-friendliness, and the fact that some have grown since ancient times certainly adds a wow factor.

Chances are you're familiar with a few already. They range from bright and food-friendly reds from the Iberian Peninsula to complex and age-worthy whites from the Loire Valley and seductive, aromatic roses from Greece.

In fact, pronouncing them might be the only obstacle. "Half the people come in here and say 'What's Greek wine, is it good?,'" says Telly Topakas, owner of Parea Wine Bar & Cafe in San Francisco. "They're choking on it a little, so I'll say it slowly and break it down for them phonetically, and they get it."

Allow us. Here are some grapes to say, try, buy, and ultimately, embrace. They're all vying to be your Next Big Thing. So, if you find a white to rotate with your staple chardonnay, or a new blend for July's barbecues, we've done our good deed. See you on the beach.

Vinho Verde, Portugal

Aptly named, the grapes for these "green" wines are picked early and drunk very young. They grow south of Porto and up to the Spanish border. While the Portuguese market consumes more red, we've found a soft spot for the white. Glistening pale green in color, crisp and refreshing with a natural effervescent character, they are zippy on the palate. The best part? Vinho Verde is low in alcohol -- around 9 percent -- which means lower in calories, and almost always under \$10. It's bikini wine.

Pronounce it: VEEN-yoh VEHR-day.

Eat it with: Simple shellfish.

Producers: Avelada, Broadbent, Famega.

Where to find: The Spanish Table, 1814 San Pablo Ave., Berkeley, 510-548-1383; BevMo! stores.

For fans of: Toned-down California sparklings and Spanish cavas.

Xinomavro, Greece

Xinomavro is the king of native red grapes in northern Greece, and means "acid black." Don't let that deter you. Whether blended or on its own, Xinomavro can produce wines of great range and character -- from a modern, fresh and clean style (even a great rose) to its unmistakably age-worthy and complex characteristics of red fruit, sun-dried tomatoes, kalamata olives and spices. Greece's wine renaissance is in full swing, and a new crop of talented winemakers is making it easy to forget the pine nightmare that was Retsina.

Pronounce it: KSEE-no-mav-ro.

Eat it with: Greek salad. It stands up to the olive oil and lemon.

Producers: Kir-Yianni, E. Tsantali, Alpha Estate.

Where to find: Parea Wine Bar & Cafe, 795 Valencia St., S.F., 415-255-2102; Du Vin Fine Wines, 2526 A Santa Clara Ave., Alameda, 510-769-9463.

For fans of: Dry, tannic reds.

Gruner Veltliner, Austria

Already a staple on the wine lists of San Francisco's trendy Vietnamese restaurants, Gruner Veltliner, or Gru-Vee, has taken the spotlight from Rieslings in its native Austria. Fitting, since it's the most widely planted varietal in the country. Sommeliers may say it's expensive and so last summer, but Gruner's naturally high acidity makes it one of the world's best food wines, especially spicy cuisine. And, like Reisling, it has a variety of expressions. It can be light and easy, or with lower yields and higher ripeness, it is capable of an intensity that bursts with aromas of white flower and flavors of grapefruit, herbs, mineral and fresh ground white pepper.

Pronounce it: GREW-ner felt-LEE-ner.

Eat it with: Asparagus and artichoke. That's how food-friendly it is.

Producers: Laurenz und Sophia Singing, Loimer, Glatzer.

Where to find: Wine Thieves, 3401 Mt. Diablo Blvd., Lafayette, 925-299-9070 (also in Clayton); Solano Cellars, 1580 Solano Ave., Albany, 510-525-9463.

For fans of: Dry Reisling, spicy whites.

Vouvray, France

Vouvray is the largest white wine appellation of the Anjou-Saumur-Touraine region of the Loire Valley, home to another 18 white wines you've probably never tried -- Gros Plant, anyone? The wine is made from the chenin blanc grape, grown in the region since the fourth century. The siliceous-clay and limestone-clay soils ensure mineral qualities, while the cool climate (a marker of good acidity) and distinctly fruity character make chenin blanc capable of both dry wines and elegant sparklings. In years when botrytis cinerea, the mold responsible for sweet whites, hits, harvest is delayed in order to pick the grapes at their peak ripeness, and produce a rich dessert wine.

Pronounce it: Voov-RAY.

Eat it with: Lobster, foie gras.

Producers: Champalou Brut NV, Bourillon-Dorleans, Francois Chidaine, Francois Pinon.

Where to find: Kermit Lynch, 1605 San Pablo Ave., Berkeley, 510-524-1524; Paul Marcus Wines, 5655 College Ave., Oakland, 510-420-1005.

For fans of: Age-worthy whites.

Aromatic whites, Greece

If you crave medium- to full-bodied wines with exotic floral and white fruit aromas yet crisp acidity, the whites of Greece are for you. Assyrtiko hails from the island of Santorini, where the volcanic soil produces wines of body and high acidity. Think juicy wines that can cleanse even the most difficult-to-pair South Asian meal. Malagousia is a rare variety grown mainly in Macedonia; imagine white peaches spritzed with jasmine. Moschofilero, a gray-skinned grape grown in central Peloponnese, has vibrant acidity, violet aromas and makes a superb rose. These are the wines of romantic myths.

Pronounce it: Assyrtiko: a-SEER-tee-ko; Malagousia: mah-lah-gou-ZYA; Moschofilero: mos-ko-FEE-le-ro.

Eat it with: Vegetarian Indian dishes.

Producers: Domaine Gerovassiliou (Malagousia); Ktima Pavlidis (Assyrtiko); Antonopoulos (Moschofilero).

Where to find: Parea, S.F.; Du Vin Fine Wines, Alameda; Allaboutgreekwine.com has useful audio pronunciations.

For fans of: Viognier, Torrontes.

Iberian blends, Spain/Portugal

Porto may be the first great wine region in the world to be demarcated, but it doesn't mean people seek the sweet stuff as much as red table wines. The Spanish and Portuguese took note. Grapes such as Touriga Nacional and Souzao, traditionally used to make Port, yield incredible fruit characteristics when made as a classic table wine. They are juicy, drink-me-now wines, particularly those from Douro, which stretches across northern-central Spain and Portugal. You

need not travel that far. Murrieta's Well in Livermore produces Zarzuela, an excellent blend of Souzao, Tempranillo, Touriga Nacional and Touriga Francesca grown right on its sustainable estate. Spanish for "operetta," its peppery nose, earthy flavors and bold tannins will surely make you sing.

Pronounce it: Souzao: suh-ZAH-oh; Touriga Nacional: too-REE-gah nah-syoo-NAHL;

Tempranillo: Temp-rah-NEEL-yo; Zarzuela: Sar-SWAY-la.

Eat it with: Paella, natch.

Producers: Altano, Lavradores de Feitoria, Murrieta's Well.

Where to find: The Spanish Table, Berkeley; Murrieta's Well, 3005 Mines Road, Livermore, 925-456-2390.

For fans of: Everyday reds.

Basque bonus: For the truly adventurous, try Txakoli (chac-o-lee), the fresh white wine from Basque country traditionally poured high in the air into flat-bottomed tumblers and consumed before it loses its slight sparkle. Find it at the Spanish Table as well as Vintage Berkeley (510-665-8600).