



WINNING WHITES

THESE FOOD-FRIENDLY WHITE VARIETALS MIGHT BE UNDER THE RADAR, BUT THEY'RE POISED TO BECOME CUSTOMER FAVORITES.

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BY DEBORAH GROSSMAN



Wine names that are familiar from print media, online sources and TV ads dominate the restaurant dialogue.

“Most of our guests are loyal to their favorite varietals,” says Steven Krueger, wine director at The Westin La Cantera Hill Country Resort, San Antonio. “For white wine, chardonnay is first, pinot grigio a distant second and sauvignon blanc trailing in third.”

Yet Krueger and others know that creative hand-selling works with underappreciated white wines.

In Fairbanks, Alaska, the award-winning wine list at Lavelle’s Bistro includes a few chenin blanc labels. “Chenin blanc has a difficult identity up here. But I like the diversity of the wine,” says chef/owner Kathy Lavelle. “People listen when I describe the chenin blanc as chardonnay’s little sister, a heavier-bodied white wine but with the possibility of a sweet note.”

Like fashion labels, wine from specific grape varieties cycle from acclaimed success to secondary status to renewed interest. Among the white wines that are reemerging to intrigue wine-makers and sommeliers are chenin blanc, native to France’s Loire Valley, and grenache blanc, the French Rhone Valley star and Spanish favorite from the Rioja region. Both share food-friendly attributes.

CHENIN BLANC, PRE-CHARDONNAY DOMINANCE

From the late 1960s through the early 1980s, chenin blanc was the best-selling and most widely planted white grape in the California coastal areas, recalls Phil Wente, vice chairman of Wente Family Estates in Livermore Valley. His family produced a proprietary label called Le Blanc de Blanc, which featured chenin blanc and ugni blanc in an off-dry (slightly sweet) style. “An aromatic wine with peaches, apricots, citrus and floral notes, Le Blanc de Blanc was our top seller at the time,” says Wente.

Sal Galvan is owner/winemaker at Galvan Family Cellars, Fairfield, Calif., in the Solano County Green Valley American Viticultural Area (AVA), and a wine consultant. He says he belongs to the informal wine movement of ABC: anything but chardonnay. “How did chardonnay overtake chenin blanc? It just became unfashionable. Chardonnay evolved into the fashion star,” says Galvan. “But in the last two to three years, chenin blanc is coming back. It won’t be the next chardonnay, but personally, I like it.”

At Pine Ridge Vineyards, Napa, Calif., in the Stags Leap AVA, Jason Ledbetter, assistant winemaker, underscores the attraction of chenin blanc to new white-wine imbibers. “For those exploring wine, chenin blanc is so aromatically distinct with aromas of candied apricot, vanilla and grapefruit, and good value. It has much to offer. Winemakers often add oak to chardonnay to add flavor, but chenin blanc has such a clean, interesting profile on its own.”

SHORT LIST OF CHENIN BLANC AND GRENACHE BLANC PRODUCERS

CALIFORNIA



Chenin Blanc

Dry Creek Valley \ Dry Creek Valley
Navarro \ Mendocino County
Pine Ridge Vineyards \ Napa Valley

Grenache Blanc

Casa de Arcilla Garnacha Blanca,
Middleton Family Wines \ Paso Robles
Galvan Family Cellars,
Nicolasa \ Solano County Green Valley
Niner Wine Estates \ Paso Robles
Tablas Creek \ Paso Robles
Tower 15 \ Paso Robles

FRANCE



Chenin Blanc

Wines from the Loire area, especially Vouvray
and Savennieres; sweeter styles from
Quarts de Chaume and Coteaux du Layon

SOUTH AFRICA



Chenin Blanc

De Morgenzon \ Stellenbosch
Cederberg \ Cape area

REFRESHING ACIDITY

When Michael Beaulac joined Pine Ridge two years ago as winemaker, he came from a sauvignon blanc background. “Chenin blanc can be made in a crisp style like sauvignon blanc, but with chenin blanc, you get that lychee flavor profile and the acid floats over your tongue, a dynamic tension that the French call ‘nervosité.’”

Chalone Vineyard, Soledad, Calif., owns some of the oldest vineyards in Monterey County, and its chenin blanc vines, planted in 1919, continue to produce. The winery, the only one in the Chalone AVA, produces unique wines because of the soil of decomposed granite over limestone at 1,800 feet on Chalone Peak in the Gavilan Mountain Range.

The Chalone chenin blanc, says winemaker Robert Cook, is not big and flashy, but subtle, with a vein of minerality and floral notes from the small addition of viognier. “The crunchy minerality gives texture, and the fresh-cut pineapple flavors add intrigue. With thicker skins giving off phenolic compounds, chenin blanc grapes enable longer aging than most whites.”



Despite the history packed into Chalone chenin blanc, which has a modest price of \$26 retail, Chalone produces fewer than 100 cases a year. Owned by London-based Diageo, Chalone concentrates on chardonnay and pinot noir production.

At Pine Ridge Vineyards, chenin blanc/viognier is the fast-growing and top-selling white wine, sold at \$10 retail. “We make 60,000 cases, compared with 6,000 cases of chardonnay,” says Beaulac. “We’ll make more as we find additional grapes in the Clarksburg area. We’ll produce more. We call Clarksburg the Loire Valley of California, with its warm days but cool breezes from the Sacramento Delta levees.”

Timing for harvest is critical. Poorly made chenin blanc can be aromatic but carry the raw flavor of rubbing alcohol. Wine-

making choices at harvest lead to the level of acid and sweetness in the wine. If the grapes are picked too late, the wine becomes uninteresting and cloying. Beaulac picks chenin blanc with lower sugar levels to keep the fresh, aromatic elements.

In his travels, Beaulac meets diners who appreciate Pine Ridge chenin blanc/viognier in Asia, Norway, even Germany, land of aromatic whites.

At Francesca’s at Sunset in The Westin La Cantera, Krueger serves French chenin blanc and also showcases local Becker Fleur Sauvage Bogar Vineyard 2008. The off-dry chenin blanc from older vines in the Texas High Plains carries fruit flavors with a distinct mineral and earthy complexity in the finish.

Krueger pairs Texas Gulf brown shrimp and kiwi with the Becker Fleur Sauvage. The brown shrimp are less sweet than other Gulf shrimp, which counterbalances the wine’s bright and lightly sweet flavors. He sums up the pairing by noting that the kiwi and coconut milk sauce on the shrimp combines with the wine’s pineapple and orange flavors to create “a full island sensation.”

In Fairbanks, Lavelle pairs sweeter-style chenin blanc with seared ahi or shrimp Thai curry. A dry, crisper chenin blanc, she says, matches well with her chicken champignon with a wild mushroom medley and brandy cream sauce.

At Fifth Floor at the Hotel Palomar in San Francisco, sommelier Amy Goldberger takes full advantage of chenin blanc in its sparkling, dry, off-dry or dessert sweet styles. To play off full-bodied starters such as oysters with bearnaise and caviar, she may reach for sparkling Domaine Champalou Vouvray NV Brut. She partners the richness and honey tones of Domaine de Belliviere L’Efraie with a signature dish, uni flan.

MEETING UP WITH NEW WHITE WINES

FINDING “NEW” WHITE WINES IS A BONUS OF DINING WITH AN OPEN MIND.

Sauvignon gris

Recently, sauvignon gris was served with an antipasti platter at Rutherford Hill Winery, Napa Valley, Calif. It paired well with most items on the platter, including prosciutto and aged cheeses as well as hard-to-match vegetables such as grilled asparagus. Elizabeth Vianna, winemaker at Chimney Rock Winery in the Stags Leap AVA, crafted the wine, a natural genetic variant of sauvignon blanc. Vianna notes that the gris is a bit heavier, with more floral and fewer grassy notes than sauvignon blanc. Chimney Rock Winery produces a tiny amount of sauvignon gris compared with popular sauvignon blanc. Yet, the winery maintains the vines and bottles sauvignon gris as a single varietal and as a blender for its high-end Elevage Blanc proprietary blend. Sauvignon gris holds acidity well, even in warmer growing seasons.

Gavi di Gavi

Dining at Aquarello in San Francisco translates to adventures in Italian food and wine. The restaurant carries a deep list of Italian white wines, including Arneis, arguably the best-known white wine from the Piedmont region of Northwest Italy, and Barolo from the Nebbiolo grape, a Piedmontese popular red wine. Gavi di Gavi, made from the Cortese grape, has a higher quality control status DOCG (*denominazione di origine controllata e garantita*), which confines the grape growing and production to the best Cortese vineyards in the Gavi region. Medium-bodied with delicate apple and citrus notes and floral bouquet, the Beni di Batasiolo Gavi di Gavi pairs well with the first- and second-course menus at Aquarello. It serves as an excellent foil for the rich creaminess of a risotto of Grana Padano, fried artichokes, torpedo onions, cauliflower and parsley bagna cauda.

GRANACHE BLANC AWAKENS PALATES

Galvan would like to produce more chenin blanc at Galvan Family Cellars, but with increased demand for the grape, he can't find local sources. But he is grateful to his Paso Robles, San Luis Obispo County, grower for the grenache blanc sourced for Nicolasa, the blend he named for his mother. The Paso Robles fruit enables him to craft what he calls a "zingy" white wine with notes of key lime and grapefruit. He has asked his source to graft over red grapes to grenache blanc.

A mutation of the Spanish red garnacha grape, the white version spread to France's Rhone Valley and Châteauneuf-du-Pape. Grenache blanc is the fourth most widely planted white grape in France.

As a passionate supporter of Rhone varietals, Tablas Creek Vineyard, Paso Robles, in partnership with Château de Beaucastel, Courthézon, France, first brought grenache blanc vines to the U.S. in the early 1990s. Tablas Creek propagated vines for sale to other wineries, and in 2002, successfully petitioned the government to recognize the varietal for U.S. wine production. Grenache blanc is the base of Tablas Creek's flagship wine, Esprit de Beaucastel Blanc.

Grenache blanc makes a farmer happy, says Blake Kuhn, winemaker at Middleton Family Wines. At the winery's 6.1-acre Red Cedar Vineyard in Paso Robles, Kuhn closely monitors the growth of grenache blanc. "The grape is innately vigorous," he says. "This means that you technically have a thoroughbred that wants to run, but you need to contain it in the field. Once in the winery, it's critical to preserve freshness and keep the fermentation cool and steady."

In early 2012, the Pali Wine Co., Paso Robles, launched Tower 15 Winery, an affordable, food-friendly option for wine adventurers. Winemaker Aaron Walker sources grenache blanc from Paso Robles. "The hot days and cool nights of the coastal area bring balanced acid development," he says. "Grenache blanc can be rich and full, showing beautiful floral and mineral notes without new oak. We age it in neutral oak barrels to allow the flavors to blossom on their own."

Though often used as a blender in France, Walker prefers to bottle granache blanc as a single varietal. After describing the wine with aromas of herbs and lavender and even a rustic note, he recommends pairing with sage and butternut squash pasta or roast chicken.

Kuhn at Middleton Family Wines began making grenache blanc three years ago and remembers his initiation to the project. "Grenache blanc tastes like no other grape," he says. "You cannot compare it with other varietals. If picked at higher brix (sugar), there is a ripe golden-fig character. Otherwise, it's more green apple and citrus."

As a blender in Clayhouse Adobe White, a leading Middleton brand, the grenache blanc boosts mouthfeel and weight without



making the wines insipid or flabby. Kuhn previously produced Clayhouse Estate grenache blanc from Red Cedar Vineyard. But in 2011, Middleton switched the wine to a new label, Casa de Arcilla, labeling it by its Spanish name, garnacha blanca, targeted for on-premise sales. The wine is the counterpoint for Casa de Arcilla Tempranillo.

Middleton's marketing manager Rusty Eddy adds that production of Casa de Arcilla garnacha blanca will increase substantially. In distribution only a year, the wine has attracted attention at restaurants in California and Arizona.

Sommeliers maximize the attributes of grenache blanc with their menus. Krueger hand-sells Tablas Creek Côtes de Tablas Paso Robles 2007, a traditional Rhone Valley style blend with grenache blanc. He says the peach, citrus and honeysuckle blossom flavors complement multiple items on the Francesca's at Sunset menu. Goldberger reaches for the "creamy and rich" Châteauneuf-du-Pape white blend from Jean Pierre Boisson, La Mirande Chateaneuf-du-Pape Blanc 2009, to pair with lobster with pipérade and Choron sauce at Fifth Floor.

With the versatility and interest from lesser-known white wines, options for new wine sales abound. Rather than reaching for expensive, cult chardonnay bottles, consider food-friendly chenin blanc or grenache blanc from the New World or Europe. Menu items will find a refreshing partner, and guests may leave with a smile and a new wine to order. ■

DEBORAH GROSSMAN IS A SAN FRANCISCO BAY AREA JOURNALIST WHO WRITES ABOUT PEOPLE, PLACES AND PRODUCTS THAT IMPACT THE FOOD-AND-WINE WORLD.

Opposite, Red Cedar Estate Vineyard; top right, Chalona Vineyard