

Grape Vine

A monthly Internet newsletter about wine, wine buying, wine tasting, and wine collecting – V.Pina, Publisher – Vol. 1 Issue 4

This month in *Grape Vine* we'll introduce you to the wines of Spain. We will also tackle two other wine-related topics. First, how to order wine in a restaurant (and what is going on with the prices of wines by the glass? Second, we will discuss recent studies about wine and health. Lastly, we will introduce you to some lesser-known red and white wines.

Wine 101 – Where grapes are grown and wines are made

Spain

When we think of Spain, it conjures up images of bullfights, tapas bars, and history. It should also bring to mind wine. In the last 10 years, Spain has recommitted itself to making quality wine across the board. You can and will find Spanish wines rated 90 or higher with a price tag below \$10. There are three quality levels of wine produced in the major wine regions (Rioja and Ribero del Duero mainly) of Spain (you are likely to see these on the labels):

- ❖ **Crianza** – Everyday drinking (house) wines
- ❖ **Reserva** – Fuller, more concentrated wines
- ❖ **Gran Reserva** – Only made in the best years

Like the European countries we've discussed before, you have to know a little geography to understand a Spanish wine label. Certain regions in Spain specialize in growing certain grapes that go into wine. Once you know the region, you'll have a better idea of the grapes that went into the wine.

Spain's main grape wine growing regions:

- √ **Rioja** – Most famous for red wines made from the **Tempranillo**, or **Graciano**, or **Garancha (Grenache)** grapes and white wines made from the **Viura** and **Malvasia** grapes.
- √ **Navarra** – Most famous for red (and rosé) wines made from the **Grenache (Garnacha Tinta)**, or **Tempranillo**, or **Cabernet Sauvignon** grapes. White wines are made from **Chardonnay** or the **Malvasia** grapes.
- √ **Ribero del Duero** – Most famous for red wines made from the **Tempranillo**, **Garancha (Grenache)**, **Cabernet Sauvignon**, or **Merlot** grapes.
- √ **Catalonia** – includes the wine regions of **Penedés** and **Priorat**.
 - **Penedés** – Most famous for white wines made from local grapes **Parellada**, **Macabeo**, **Xarel-lo** and red wines made from the local grape **Monastrell**, **Tempranillo**, **Garancha (Grenache)**, and **Cabernet Sauvignon**. Sparkling wines (known as **Cava**) and rosé wines are

also made in this region. **Cava** is the Spanish equivalent of Champagne. More affordable than Champagne, it can be a quality alternative.

- **Priorat** – Most famous for red wines made from the **Grenache (Garancha)** and **Cabernet Sauvignon** grapes.
- √ **Jerez** – Most famous for the fortified wine **Sherry** made from the local grape, **Palomino**. Sherry is made into three main varieties: **Palomino Fino** (a white wine), **Palomino Amontillado**, and **Palomino Oloroso**.
- √ **Galicia** – Most famous for white wines made from the **Albariño** grape.

Wine 102 – Ordering wine in a restaurant

Ordering wine in a restaurant can be a rather simple process. First of all, if the restaurant doesn't have a wine list, that's not a good sign. If they do have a wine list, take some time to review it. Try to see if you recognize any of the wine types offered. Any Cabernet Sauvignon? Any Merlot? Any Chardonnay? Any Pinot Grigio? Can you spot the lighter reds from the heavier reds? Also think about the food you will be having as your meal. If it's a hearty meal, you will likely need a hearty wine that can hold its own and not be overshadowed. If you are having a light meal, a low-alcohol wine can be an ideal match. How about you and your dining companions each ordering a different wine by the glass? You can sample and compare.

When it comes to wines by the glass, this can be a mixed bag. Some restaurants offer only poor-quality wines by the glass. In these cases, sometimes no wine is better than what they offer. If the restaurant does offer quality wines by the glass, and you order the house red or white, always ask for the name and/or wine type. You may find you like it and want to buy some from your local wine store.

Further compounding the wine by the glass dilemma, are the prices some restaurants are currently charging for wines. A 100% or 200% markup over retail is not uncommon and hard to rationalize. This ultimately results in wines sometimes costing upward of \$10 per, which is, in my opinion, rarely justifiable. The point is the price of a glass or bottle of wine is as important as the quality of the wine. It may be a great glass but at \$10 or \$15 a glass in a restaurant, you could use that money to buy a **bottle** of high-quality wine on your own. The same can be said for a \$50 bottle of wine at a restaurant. There are alternatives, however.

Options to consider when ordering wine at a restaurant:

- ❖ Some restaurants offer 375 ml bottles, aka half bottles, which can often be a better value, especially if dining alone or with one other person.
- ❖ Dine at BYOB restaurants that either do not have a liquor license or have one but do not prohibit diners from bringing their own bottles of wine. They may charge a "corkage" fee of \$2-\$4 per person but this is still less than buying a bottle at the restaurant. Some states can provide a list of BYOB restaurants. It's a good list to have.
- ❖ Talk to the owner of your favorite restaurant about wine list prices and/or ask if he/she has ever considered allowing customers to bring their own wine but charging a corkage fee.

If you do decide to order wine at a restaurant, you will do so by either purchasing a bottle of wine or purchasing a glass of wine. In either case, make sure you look, smell, and taste the wine before the waiter runs away. If something does not seem right, ask your waiter or sommelier to check the wine. Most

reputable restaurants, sommeliers, and waiters would not have a problem doing this because they want to keep you satisfied.

Wine 103 ~ Wine and Health

I get lots of questions about wine and its impact on health. I think the wine and health buzz started in the U.S. in 1991 when *60 Minutes* did a report titled “The French Paradox.” That report revealed that French people have a high-fat diet but very low rates of coronary heart disease. I believe the health benefits of wine have existed for a long time but in the United States this reality is clouded by the existence of “temperance communities,” as Dr. Curtis Ellison of Boston University termed it. Temperance communities have been traditionally common in the U.S. and northern Europe (not so coincidentally, many of these were “Puritanical” communities). In these places, alcohol is consumed more commonly in beer and hard spirits and more likely to be abused. Kind of ironic that the conservative Puritanical countries seemed to be the ones where alcohol was most likely to be abused (“protect me from myself”). Why? That’s a long story.

I believe the change in America from a country with a wine culture to “alcohol means I should get drunk,” took place in the post-Civil War period. Prior to the Civil War, wine was generally associated with grape-growing, farming, and the healthy, agrarian life. Many immigrants at that time came from France, Italy other wine-making countries in Europe. These immigrants settled in America, started farms, grew grapes, and enjoyed wine as part of a healthy life.

After the Civil War everything changed. During this time, westward expansion led to Wild West towns where long, hard days were followed by long, hard nights of cards, smoking, and the abuse of alcohol. Bystanders and the religious community would see the ruinous effect of alcohol abuse and this led them to form temperance groups.

From 1865 to 1900, the temperance movement grew and culminated in Prohibition being imposed from 1920 to 1933. Any Americans born during or after Prohibition grew up when alcohol was frowned upon and the wine companies were bent on marketing and selling cheap, inexpensive, sugar water disguised as wine, to resurrect alcohol sales from the depths of Prohibition. Those Americans were our parents and grandparents. As a result, many of us have grown up with little or no wine culture, appreciation, or historical perspective.

Back to wine and health. A distinction should be made between wine and other forms of alcohol. Danish researchers have found that wine drinkers are healthier than nondrinkers and beer drinkers. Not to mention some of the same research indicates wine drinkers are smarter, wealthier, and more stable psychologically than beer drinkers and nondrinkers. Another interesting finding is that wine drinkers consume fewer servings of alcohol per week than beer or hard spirits drinkers – and were less likely to abuse alcohol. Are you getting the picture? Wine drinkers are generally more moderate drinkers of alcohol and therefore are less likely to abuse it. The point is that the research indicates that regular consumption of moderate amounts of wine reduces the risk of certain maladies like heart disease, strokes, Alzheimer’s disease, and cancer.

What is it in wine that is so special? Compounds in wine like ethanol, flavonoids, and tannins have been proven to inhibit the development of coronary heart disease and stroke/atherosclerosis (plaque of the arteries) by decreasing the stickiness of blood platelets, which can form clusters that lead to blood clots. Wine plays a major part in the so-called “Mediterranean diet” of southern European countries. In many of these countries, the incidence of heart disease is lower than their northern European and American counterparts.

What is moderate wine consumption? Research indicates two to four glasses of wine per day but it depends on your gender and size. The key seems to be in the regularity of moderate wine consumption and not just the amount. It is important to note that drinking zero alcohol during the week and drinking large amounts on the weekends does not achieve the optimum health benefits of wine. It should also go without saying that consuming wine with food is more beneficial than drinking wine on an empty stomach.

There we have it! Moderate consumption of wine has time and again been proven to be an important part of a healthy diet. Furthermore, moderate wine consumption is part our history, part of the history of the U.S. For many years, during the early history of this country, moderate wine consumption was associated with the agrarian lifestyle of farming, grape-growing, and wine-making. The point is that when it comes to wine and health, let's go back to the future!

For more information on wine and health visit the following sources:

<http://wineserver.ucdavis.edu/cuttingedge/research/winehealth.htm>

<http://www.waldensian.com/health.htm>

<http://www.thewineman.com/FrenchParadox.htm>

September's Vine Cuttings (recommended wines)

White Wine

2000 Navarro Vineyards Gewürztraminer Anderson Valley, Mendocino, California

From one of the best producers of Gewurztraminer in the U.S. If you have any prosciutto, pair it with some melon, and have a glass of this dry, spicy white wine. Goes equally well with smoked fish or cold cuts. You should be able to order it if you can't find it on the shelf of your finer wine stores. At just under \$20, a chilled glass of this will remind you of summer.

Red Wine

2000 Viña Borgia Grenache, Campo de Borgia, Spain

Since the mid-1990's this winery has produced some of the best value red wines in the world. Made from the Grenache grape, this wine boasts an attractive dark-purple color, cherry bouquet, and bursting fruit on the palate. This wine craves food made on the grill. At \$5.99 a bottle it's a deal that's hard to pass up.

I leave you with a list of some of the lesser-known wine types. Some of these you may be familiar with and others you may not. All of them are worth your getting to know. See you next month.

Next month: Chile and Dessert Wines! Tune in to find out more!

WINE TYPES

Red wine (grapes) – Most Commonly Known Names

Barbera (the primary grape in wines labeled Barbera, Barbera d’Asti, and Barbera d’Alba)

The other great red grape of the Piedmont region (Nebbiolo being the most famous) of northeast Italy is made into wines of varying styles. It can be made into a New World style, that is, it can be an early drinking wine, with cherry-fruit flavors. It can also be made into a brooding, developing, hearty style, which over time shows its true fruit flavors. Regardless of style, it almost always has good color, high acidity, and low tannin. A few countries like Australia, Argentina, and the U.S. have successfully made Barbera. But its true home is in Piedmont, in the villages of Asti and Alba. More affordable than some Italian red wines, Barbera is a perfect match for pasta with red sauce, veal, grilled pork chops, or swordfish.

Tempranillo (the primary grape in wines labeled Ribera del Duero, Rioja, La Mancha, and Toro)

Spain’s most famous red grape is also found in Portugal, where its name is Tinta Roriz or Aragonez. In Spain the wine flourishes in the Duero river valley and neighboring Rioja. It can be made into a wine that is 100% Tempranillo or it can be blended with Cabernet Sauvignon. The color is a dark purple and the taste is reminiscent of strawberries and black cherries. The flavor matches the in-your-face bouquet. Among the most affordable of quality red wines, it can be matched with smoked ham, spicy sausage like linguica or chorizo, as well as roast lamb. There are deals on this wine out there. If you find a good bottle you won’t be disappointed in the price or the quality.

Dolcetto (primary grape in wines labeled Dolcetto, Ormeasco, or Charbono)

Another quality red wine from the Piedmont region in northeast Italy. Not the strongest bouquet, but the black cherry flavor makes up for it. It is a dry red wine that is made to be consumed young (within 2-4 years), not unlike Beaujolais in this regard. You should be able to find quality bottles of this wine between \$12 and \$15. Try it with beef, chicken, veal, or soft Italian cheeses like mozzarella.

Malbec (primary grape in wines labeled Malbec, Cahors, and [red] Auxerrois)

Argentina has become the biggest producer of wines made from Malbec. The French can use it as a blending grape in red wines made in Bordeaux. The only place in France you will find it as a stand-alone wine is in the Cahors region in the southwest. In Argentina, Malbec is the country’s proudest and most consumed red wine. Perfect with marinated steak on the grill or other grilled meats. Argentine versions are affordable and worth seeking out.

WINE TYPES

White wine (grapes) – Most Commonly Known Names

Roussanne (primary grape in wines labeled Roussanne, Châteauneuf-du-Pape Blanc, and Coteaux du Languedoc Blanc)

One of the two major dry white wine grapes of the Rhone Valley of Southern France is often blended with Marsanne (the other major white wine grape of this region). Some Roussanne-based wines are heavy on the oak (as in oak barrels for aging). Unoaked versions have more upfront flavors like dried pears and herbal tea. Prices begin at \$15 and go up as high as \$30 and even higher. Try it with poached salmon, flounder, or shrimp.

Marsanne (primary grape in wines labeled Marsanne, St. Joseph Blanc, Crozes-Hermitage Blanc, and Hermitage Blanc)

The other dry white wine grape of the Rhone Valley, it can be blended or made into a stand alone wine. It is made quite successfully in Australia as well. The bouquet smells of honeysuckle and the taste brings forth honey, pear, and spice. It is a heavier white wine with a touch of oiliness. French versions are usually blended and generally more expensive. The French also make it into a dessert wine. Australian versions are usually 100% Marsanne and more affordable. Goes well with pork roast, grilled shellfish, lobster in cream sauce, and roast duck.

Albariño (primary grape in wines labeled Albariño, Rias Baixas, or Alvarinho)

The great white grape of Galicia in the northwest of Spain, it is also grown in northern Portugal. It is a lighter, dry white wine with an exotic, spicy, bouquet. Its taste is reminiscent of dried peaches or apricots. This wine is typically consumed young (not suitable for long-term aging) and is best matched with fresh water fish and shellfish. Very affordable it can be hard to find because of its obscurity.

Pinot Blanc (primary grape in wines labeled Pinot Blanc, Pinot Bianco, and Weissburgunder)

Pinot Blanc is grown and made into wine in France (Alsace and Burgundy), Germany, Italy, Austria, Canada, and the U.S. Not as aromatic as many other white wines, Pinot Blanc has a spicy, creamy, dried-nut flavor. A subtle, dry white wine, it is considered very much a “food” wine because of its higher alcohol content, although it can hold its own as an aperitif. It goes well with cold cuts or fresh-water fish. French versions are considered the best but the price is higher than you would expect.