

WINE GUIDE 101: Grape Varietals

The grape variety used to make wine is the single most important factor in how the wine ultimately tastes. After that, climatic factors and winemaking practices also impact the style of the finished wine, so a single grape variety can taste wildly different depending on where it's grown and what happens to it in the winery. The choice of grape variety is inextricably linked to where it is grown, since different types of grapes have different needs. Riesling and Sauvignon Blanc, for example, prefer cool climates, therefore they can be grown successfully in Germany and Northern France. Syrah, on the other hand, likes the heat and, in fact, wouldn't ripen at all in a cool, northerly climate. The following is a short list of some of the main grape varieties and the styles of wine you can expect from them.

Red Grape Varieties

Cabernet Sauvignon

Perhaps the noblest of them all, cabernet Sauvignon makes big, dense, structured wines capable of long aging. It forms the backbone of the top red wines of Bordeaux, where it is usually blended with Merlot and Cabernet Franc, among others. But Cabernet also travels well and great examples are found the world over, most notable in California, Australia and Chile. Both its aroma and taste are reminiscent of ripe blackcurrants with, often, a hint of chocolate, cedar or mint.

Merlot

Where Cabernet Sauvignon is structured and firm, Merlot is more fleshy and lush. Again, it produces wonderful wines in Bordeaux and the south of France, but also in California, Washington State, Australia, Chile and many others. It can taste of ripe plums and chocolate and feels like velvet.

Syrah/Shiraz

Wonderfully rich and spicy, Syrah is responsible for the great wines of the northern Rhone and many southern French wines. In Australia, where it is known as Shiraz, it produces rich, ripe voluptuous wines. It seems very much at home in Washington State and parts of California. It can display a range of flavors from leather to pepper and from violets to chocolate. Always a crowd pleaser.

Pinot Noir

Smooth and silky Pinot Noir impresses with elegance rather than power. It's the grape behind the great red wines of France's Burgundy region. Flavors of strawberry, raspberry, and cherry are common in wines, becoming earthy and gamey as the wine matures. Outside of Burgundy, Pinot Noir does very well in cooler climate areas of New Zealand, Australia, California and Oregon.

Zinfandel

A native of California, Zinfandel is a big, heartwarming wine with full flavors of blackberry, blueberry and spice. The wines tend to be ripe and high in alcohol, but very easy to drink.

White Grape Varieties

Chardonnay

Chardonnay grows successfully practically everywhere wine is made, so it's no surprise that it's so abundant and popular. The grape itself is relatively neutral and takes on its individual character from the climatic conditions where it is grown and from winemaking techniques. In the cool, northerly region of Chablis in France, the wine can be steely and lean. Here it traditionally sees no oak, but that has been changing in recent years. Further south, in Burgundy, Chardonnay makes some of the finest and longest-lived white wines in the world. Flavors range from light, floral and lemon through to hazelnut, butter and toast. Oak plays a large role

in how chardonnay tastes as the grape has a particular affinity for it. Warmer climate Chardonnays from Australia and California can display lush, tropical fruit. How do you like your Chardonnay.

Sauvignon Blanc

A very distinctive grape variety giving very zesty, grassy, refreshing wines. Traditionally, the best examples have always come from the Loire region in France, where they are labeled by location (Sancerre and Pouilly Fume) rather than by grape variety, but in recent years New Zealand has earned quite a reputation with this grape. Here the wines are riper, more pungent and thoroughly irresistible. The above examples are pure, unoaked Sauvignon Blanc, but other areas use a little oak to soften the edges a little bit. California often does this, as does Bordeaux, where the Sauvignon Blanc is often blended with other variety: Semillon.

Riesling

An aromatic grape variety reminiscent of peaches and flowers in its youth, developing weight and an almost kerosene quality with age. Germany makes the variety in all styles from bone dry all the way through the spectrum to late harvest dessert wines. What the Germans do so well is achieved a delicate balance between sweetness and refreshing acidity. Australia produces wonderfully refreshing Rieslings bursting with lime-juice.

Pinot Grigio / Pinot Gris

A very popular grape variety known as Pinot Grigio in Italy and Pinot Gris elsewhere. Its popularity is due in part to its essentially neutral character, giving it wide appeal and making it easy to sip and match with food. In the Alsace region of France and in Oregon, Pinot Gris tends to be weightier with more smoke and spice than the simpler Italian versions.