

Pinot Lightens Up Critics may disparage it, but Pinot Grigio's undemanding nature captivates consumers

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Thursday, June 16, 2005

I want Chardonnay," the gentleman perusing the wine list in the New Yorker cartoon confesses to his dining companion, "but I like saying 'Pinot Grigio.' "

Millions like him have sent sales of this latter variety soaring in recent years and made Italian Pinot Grigio among the hottest imported table-wine varietals. According to an annual report by Impact, which publishes beverage industry statistics, Pinot Grigio was the top-selling imported varietal from 2001 through 2003, besting even Chardonnay. Acres planted to Pinot Grigio -- also known as Pinot Gris -- in California climbed from 5,908 in 2003 to 7,097 in 2004, a gain of 20 percent, according to the California Agricultural Statistics Service.



For a grape that few experts consider capable of greatness and that rarely yields much character in the glass, Pinot Grigio has an eye-popping trend line. Mark Ellenbogen, the wine buyer for San Francisco's Slanted Door restaurant, where white wines dominate the list, calls Italian Pinot Grigio "that sea of innocuous foot wash." Wine writer and Chronicle contributor Jancis Robinson, slightly more circumspect, acknowledges that the grape suffers from "rapid loss of nerve" when fully ripe.

So what gives?

Apparently consumers and producers are finding a lot to like in this mild-mannered varietal, which thrives not only in northeast Italy and cooler parts of California but also in Alsace and Oregon. Matt Kramer, an Oregon-based columnist for Wine Spectator magazine who has lived in northeast Italy, speculates that what wineries particularly appreciate is the grape's profit potential. Unlike Chardonnay, Pinot Grigio "doesn't respond well to oak," says Kramer, so a vintage can be in the bottle and out the door within six months.

Consumers, for their part, not only like to say it -- Pinot Grigio does trip off the tongue -- they also like to drink it. Although styles vary dramatically, most mid-priced Pinot Grigio is relatively lightweight, modestly aromatic, dry, crisp and cleansing -- a pleasant and undemanding fish wine, which is how most Italians see it.

But one of the varietal's more remarkable traits, says Kramer, is how well it accompanies a variety of foods.

"It's a very accommodating taste," he says. "It makes you relax. You don't feel like you have to wonder what food goes with it."

The grape's raging popularity is all the more surprising given the confusion inherent in its name. Alsatians call it Pinot Gris, Italians call it Pinot Grigio, but both use the exact same grape -- a pale-skinned mutation of Pinot Noir. California producers use both names, usually choosing the one that fits their marketing plan better. Oregon allows only Pinot Gris on the label, a practice the state's wineries adopted years ago to avoid perplexing consumers.

But thanks in part to the Italian restaurant boom, Pinot Grigio has far more name recognition, causing some Oregon winemakers to second-guess their earlier decision.

"Some people in Oregon are pounding the table, wanting to call it Grigio for marketing purposes," says David Lett winemaker and owner of Eyrie Vineyards, who planted the first Pinot Gris in Oregon in 1965.

Kramer admits he grimaced when he looked back at his 1994 column predicting -- too early, as it happens -- a surge in California Pinot Gris and disparaging wineries that were "foolishly planning to use the Italian name, Pinot Grigio."

Consumers might sensibly conclude that a California or Oregon winery making Pinot Gris produces wine in the spicier, lush Alsatian style, perhaps with a touch of residual sugar, while a winery calling its product Pinot Grigio follows the leaner, crisper Italian model. But they would be wrong.

Not only is there little correlation between grape name and style domestically, but Alsatian and Italian bottlings often confound expectations today. For consumers, it's increasingly difficult to know what to anticipate from a Pinot Gris or Pinot Grigio.

Eyeing the critical success of Zind-Humbrecht, an Alsatian domaine whose sweet, high-alcohol Rangen Pinot Gris commands just under \$100 a bottle, many Alsatian producers are ramping up their style, observers say. Both Lett and David Adelsheim of Oregon's Adelsheim Vineyards say they remember, wistfully, the days when Alsatian Pinot Gris bottlings were dry and low in alcohol -- "gorgeous wines, the kind you could drink with a meal," says Lett.

The wines are bigger today but not better, says Adelsheim.

"Everybody has followed the Zind-Humbrecht lead, to wines with ever-increasing amounts of residual sugar and over-ripeness," says Adelsheim.

Kermit Lynch, the Berkeley-based Zind-Humbrecht importer, disputes the characterization.

"To say there's a Zind-Humbrecht style, I don't get that," he says. "(Olivier Humbrecht) makes every style you can possibly imagine because his theory is that each wine will find its proper balance, so he lets it do what it wants."

As for the mounting alcohol levels (the 2002 Rangen is 15 percent alcohol), "Where is that not true?" says Lynch. "And thanks to who?" The tastes of critic Robert Parker, who tends to favor high-alcohol wines, have not been lost on Alsace.

"The Alsatians are no different than the Californian," says Lynch. "If they think high alcohol is going to get them a Mercedes, they'll go for higher alcohol."

In Oregon, too, Pinot Gris now defies any attempt to pigeonhole it. Lett and Adelsheim, the state's Pinot Gris pioneers, prefer to make a wine that's relatively brisk, dry, moderate in alcohol and showing little or no oak. The vast majority of Oregon Pinot Gris is made in that fruit-forward style, says Adelsheim, but by no means all of it. Some of the newer players, such as King Estate Winery, are shooting for a creamier style in at least some of their bottlings. By fermenting the wine in the barrel, stirring the lees (the spent yeast cells that fall to the bottom of the tank or barrel after fermentation), aging the wine on the lees or leaving residual sugar, winemakers can add texture to this naturally lean wine, practices that Adelsheim views as heavy-handed.

Even in Italy, where few people have a taste for lush white wine, producers such as Jermann and Vie de Romans are barrel-fermenting and oak-aging Pinot Grigio as if it were serious white Burgundy -- and putting a Burgundian-style price tag on it.

California wineries, not surprisingly, steer the varietal in numerous different directions. At Luna Vineyards in Napa Valley, the Pinot Grigio is barrel fermented and spends several months in French oak. At J Vineyards & Winery in Sonoma County, winemaker Oded Shakked took a mixed approach to his 2004 Russian River Valley Pinot Gris, barrel-fermenting and oak-aging a small portion of the crop and keeping the rest in stainless steel to preserve some tropical fruit notes. Steve Edmunds, proprietor of Edmunds St. John winery in Berkeley, who makes the only Pinot Grigio (or Pinot Gris, for that matter) on the Slanted Door list, says the lean, fresh Pinot Grigios of Italy's Friuli region are his model. His 2004 Witters Vineyard Pinot Grigio is fully dry, fragrant, relatively low in alcohol and virtually oak free.

Whether California winemakers will coalesce around a style is doubtful, but shoppers can definitely expect to see more brands popping up as the state's new plantings come into production. Few are more bullish about the varietal than Steve Cousins, a former Freemark Abbey executive who recently purchased La Famiglia from Constellation Brands.

Originally launched by Robert Mondavi to make Italian varietals, the La Famiglia brand is now about 90 percent Pinot Grigio, says Cousins, "and that's frankly the reason I purchased it."

According to Impact's report, shipments of California Pinot Grigio/Pinot Gris grew by 50 percent between 2000 and 2001, to 600,000 cases; by 62 percent the following year and by 75 percent the year after that, numbers that caught Cousins' eye.

Consumers are flocking to the varietal, he believes, because it's "high on the drinkability index," in the way that Chardonnay used to be before winemakers began weighing it down with oak and alcohol. "Now you've got this new, fun wine that is crisp and fruity and very refreshing," says Cousins about Pinot Grigio. At least that's the style he's after. And if his instincts are right, this up-from-nowhere varietal may be a lead player for years to come.

Tasting notes

The following wines are the best of 21 Pinot Grigio and Pinot Gris bottlings sampled for this story.

Light- to Medium-Bodied

Pinot Grigio/Pinot Gris

2003 Adelsheim Vineyard Oregon Pinot Gris (\$17) -- A pleasant, fully dry wine with a faint dried-flower aroma. Made in a brisk style, but a touch rounder and silkier than the 2004.

2004 Adelsheim Vineyard Oregon Pinot Gris (\$17) -- Delightful pear and citrus blossom aromas, followed by clean, bright, fresh flavors of moderate intensity. Fully dry and easy to drink.

2003 Alois Lageder Alto Adige Pinot Grigio (\$15) -- Textbook Pinot Grigio, with the fresh brightness one expects from this varietal. Not abundantly perfumed but the aromas are clean and inviting. Dry, sprightly and balanced, with some flavor intensity but not a trace of heaviness.

2004 Chehalem Willamette Valley Pinot Gris (\$17) -- Pleasing peach aroma; off-dry and round on the palate. Well chilled, it would make a likeable summer aperitif.

2004 Edmunds St. John Witters Vineyard El Dorado County Pinot Grigio (\$16) -- Floral/orange blossom scent with hints of peach; moderate weight and intensity; completely dry; very enjoyable drinking.

2004 J Russian River Valley Pinot Gris (\$18) -- Forward tropical fruit aromas, especially pineapple. Silky on the palate. Not completely dry but fresh, clean and appealing. Try with sliced prosciutto, with or without melon.

2003 Meridian Vineyards California Pinot Grigio (\$11) -- A simple, not- too-serious poolside wine with honeyed aromas and flavors; slightly sweet but fresh, clean and pleasant.

2004 Alois Lageder Riff Pinot Grigio (\$10) -- Pale in color; fresh, clean aromas; light, lemony and cleansing on the palate. A brisk, refreshing style.

Full-Bodied Pinot Grigio/Pinot Gris

2003 Alois Lageder Benefizium Porer Alto Adige Pinot Grigio (\$20) -- A little more ponderous than the regular bottling (above); aromas are subtle, neither obviously fruity nor floral, followed by a delightful creamy texture.

2002 Domaine Zind-Humbrecht Clos Saint Urbain Rangen de Thann Pinot Gris (\$98) -- A curious wine. Golden in hue; aromas are more honeyed and floral than fruity. Luscious texture and enough sweetness to complement foie gras. A harsh, bitter finish detracts from the lush first impression.

2002 Josmeyer Vin d'Alsace Pinot Gris (\$32) -- Deeper color than you might expect, with honey and orange blossom aromas; fleshy, silky texture; finish is off-dry but with good acidity

2002 Vie di Romans Dessimis Friuli Isonzo Pinot Grigio (\$29) -- Golden color; aromas of honey and ripe fruit, possibly botrytis; texture is creamy and full; leaves a dry impression; oak is apparent but not excessive; could use a touch more acidity.

-- Janet Fletcher