

California Oddities

By Sheila & Bennet Bodenstein

We are all familiar with the popular wine varieties; chardonnay, merlot, cabernet sauvignon and sauvignon blanc. There are others that are becoming more familiar such as zinfandel, riesling and gewürztraminer. We move around these varieties, picking up nuances here and telltale flavors there and eventually settling on one as your standard. Unfortunately, all of our searching among the varieties that we are familiar with results in overlooking some truly interesting wines.

It is universally acknowledged that California is the finest grape growing region in the world. Varieties that grow sparsely in other parts of the world do magnificently in California. We would like to introduce our readers to some of these “other” varieties. These varieties are not the easiest to obtain but the search can be fun.

Up to several years ago, *viognier* was an endangered species: endangered of disappearing completely from the face of the earth. In its native land of France, less than 35 acres of the shy growing, mildew sensitive variety were under cultivation. California to the rescue, where there are now over 2000 acres planted with *viognier* and that number is growing steadily.

Wine from this grape is outstanding. The main attraction of *viognier* is its potentially powerful, rich, and complex aroma that often seems like overripe apricots mixed with orange blossoms. It has a similar mouth feel to a chardonnay but the flavors are stronger and more pronounced. Apricot, mango, pineapple, anise, mint, guava, kiwi and tangerine dominate the flavor. This wine is a great escape from the familiar white wines and we must admit that we are very partial to this variety.

Another French varietal that is gaining in popularity as more and more of it is being planted is the *petite verdot*. Wine from this grape is often used as a blender with cabernet sauvignon to add intensity and more fruit flavor. It is not often seen as an individual variety because it has always maintained its station as a blending grape. Currently there are wines showing up in the market place made from 100% *petite verdot*; Valley of the Moon being one of the best. *Petite verdot* produces very complex wines heavy with the aromas of currant, blueberry and cherry with cedar and spice in the background. This is a really fine and expansive wine that should be gaining in popularity in coming years.

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In mountainous Portugal, there grows a grape that has found favor in that country but little acceptance anywhere else; *verdelho*. *Verdelho* is most recognized as the main ingredient in the sweet, Sherry-like fortified wine called Madera. When made as a dry table wine, *verdelho* produces a sharp, highly acidic wine that is somewhat reminiscent of a French Chablis. Personally, we have found little to recommend the variety, as in our opinion, it is not suited to the American palate.

The E2 Family Winery of Lodi California has taken up the challenge to claim this difficult wine and produce not only a very drinkable *verdelho* but a very enjoyable one to boot. The highly acidic tendencies of this wine are held in check so as to allow aromas of honeysuckle and pineapple to invite the first sip. Rather than sharp and acidic the wine has a soft, full flavor which displays tropical fruits such as pineapple and guava with a delightful spiciness in the finish. A very interesting wine.

Twin Fin 2006 California Sunset Rosé is a wine that is somewhat of a paradox; a true California rosé made from a very Italian and not too widely planted grape, the *sangiovese*. The grape is famous for some of the finest wines coming out of Italy, but unfortunately, it has not been fully accepted by the California grape growers and winemakers. This wine may just change all of that. While this wine is a rosé, it is not in the style of most of the American rosé wines, super sweet. While there is a bit of residual sweetness in the wine, it is not overpowering or cloying. It is the flavor and aroma that makes this wine special. The aroma is resplendent with rhubarb and vanilla, the flavor a fiesta of strawberries. This wine is an interesting departure from the “usual” fare.

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