

Beginner's Guide to Red Wine Grapes

Introduction

After the vineyard site has been chosen, the starting point for any wine is the grape variety selected by the winemaker. This alone is the most important factor determining the character of the liquid swilling around in our glasses. To the complete beginner the familiar names of Chardonnay or Shiraz may represent the first tentative steps into the world of wine - but do you know what tastes and aromas to expect from the bottle? Discovering your personal wine tastes and the art of matching food & wine all depend on a basic knowledge of grape varieties. A little background reading in this area should be the starting point for all newcomers to wine, and will soon reap its rewards...

Varieties of vine

There are 20 or so different varieties of vine within the genus *Vitis*, but only one, *Vitis vinifera*, is capable of producing decent wine with any regularity. *Vitis lambrusca* is a wilder variety that is grown in some parts of the Eastern USA but invariably produces disappointing wine. *Vitis rupestris* is a parent of many commercially important rootstocks due to its resistance to Phylloxera – the troublesome little bug that infests the roots of vines and decimated the French vineyards in the 1860s and Australian vineyards in the 1880s.

There are about 5000 varieties of *Vitis vinifera*. We are not going to describe them all – partly because we're lazy but mainly because only 60 or so of these varieties will produce wines with a recognisable and enjoyable flavour. Of all of the factors that can influence the character of a wine – such as soil type, viticulture, microclimate and time of grape picking – the most easily detected is the variety of grape. This guide aims to introduce you to some of the commoner grapes you are likely to encounter.

Common Red Grape Varieties

Barbera

This is natively a Piemontese grape from the north-west of Italy, but is now just about the most prolific variety across the country. It has gorgeously round, plummy fruit but also shows a high level of natural acidity that has no doubt helped its popularity in warmer climates. Over-production on the vine encourages acidity, but top wineries with low yields are producing beautiful, balanced wines. Great examples of Barbera are now also coming from South America and certain Aussie producers, notably Brown Brothers. Barbera also blends nicely with Cabernet Sauvignon or Sangiovese.

Cabernet Franc

Most will have drunk Cabernet Franc without even realising it, as one of the five varieties legally allowed in Bordeaux reds (the others being Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Malbec and Petit Verdot). Cabernet Franc suffers from an image problem in comparison to its cousin, Cabernet Sauvignon, which is a crying shame as it is capable of producing very attractive wines. Typically having lighter colour and less dominant tannins than Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc produces fragrant, slightly green wines with more than a hint of blackcurrant leaves. To taste pure Cabernet Franc at its best, head for the wine of Bourgueil, St-Nicolas de Bourgueil, Chinon and Saumur in France's Loire Valley. These light wines have great berry flavours and are lovely served slightly chilled. The grape is rarely seen in New World varietal wines but often makes an appearance with Cabernet Sauvignon and/or Merlot in areas such as California or Australia's Margaret River.

Cabernet Sauvignon

This grape is planted just about everywhere that wines can be made (with the exception of really cool areas that don't provide this late-ripening variety with enough sun and warmth to ripen sufficiently). Cabernet Sauvignon (Cab Sav) grapes have relatively thick skins, which impart a deep colour and flavour to wines and give them a strong tannic backbone that can bend gracefully with age. The best examples have a distinct blackcurrant flavour, with hints of cedar wood, pencil shavings, cigar boxes, and violets. If grown in marginal, cool, areas the wines can have a hint of leafiness or green peppers. Cabernet Sauvignon seems to have a natural affinity for French oak, which brings out the fruit and spice nuances of the grapes, although certain Australian Cab Savs, notably those from the Barossa and Coonawarra may be aged in American oak, which gives them luscious vanillin smoothness.

Bordeaux is undeniably the home of Cabernet Sauvignon, where it is blended with other grapes to a greater or lesser degree (the wines of Pauillac are dominated by Cabernet Sauvignon). Other fine examples are available from Spain (Navarra), Bulgaria (Suhindol), California, South Africa, and Australia, where Margaret River is challenging Coonawarra for the title of best Cabernet Sauvignon region.

Although Cabernet Sauvignon is often drunk as a pure varietal, some examples are somewhat 'hollow' in the middle palate and for this reason it is often blended with Shiraz or Merlot, both of which help to give add more character and complexity.

Dolcetto

This is another Italian native of Piedmont but, unlike Barbera and Nebbiolo, both of which benefit from bottle aging, Dolcetto has light tannins and is meant to be drunk within a few years of vintage. An early ripening, low-acid red, it produces vibrantly soft and fruity wines with liquorice, bitter almond and black cherry flavours. As with many other Italian varieties, a number of Aussie producers are starting to have considerable success with this grape.

Gamay

Gamay will never make a massive tannic beast of a wine but produces deliciously vibrant, pear-drop scented, light reds. Gamay is the sole red grape of Beaujolais in

South Burgundy. Here the grapes undergo carbonic maceration (fermentation takes place in whole bunches of grapes, under a carbon dioxide seal and in the absence of yeast) to produce wines with very little tannin and smooth fruit flavours of berries and even bananas that are best-drunk young. For better wines head for the 38 communes grouped under the Beaujolais Villages appellation or step even further up the ladder for one of the 10 Beaujolais crus (Brouilly, Chénas, Chiroubles, Côte de Brouilly, Fleurie, Juliénas, Morgon, Moulin-à-Vent, Régnié and St Amour). Other good Gamay wines are produced in California, South Africa and Australia.

Grenache

Perhaps surprisingly, this is the world's second most widely planted grape variety, growing across huge areas of southern France, Spain (where it is called Garnacha) and Australia. This is a very high-yielding variety, and if over-cropped, can produce thin wines with little character. However, if subjected to fairly heavy pruning and even bunch-thinning the vines produce fruit that makes dense, peppery, earthy wines. In Rioja, Garnacha is blended with the more austere Tempranillo, and in nearby Navarra it is by the far the dominant grape variety and is used to make much lighter styles. In France, Grenache appears in two guises – in age-worthy vin doux naturels such as Banyuls and Rivesaltes, and in the spicy wines of the southern Rhône and Midi. In the Rhône valley, Grenache is used, either as a varietal or blended, to produce reds such as Châteauneuf-du-Pape, Gigondas and Vacqueras and also rosés in Lirac and Tavel.

Due to its affinity for warm climates, Grenache is often grown in the New World but is typically over-cropped and under-rated. Only recently have a handful of Australian vignerons paid due attention to their gnarled old Grenache vines and are making some great wines such as Charles Melton's NinePopes and Rose Of Virginia. Grenache tends to produce wines with high alcohol content.

Malbec

Malbec is officially one of the five Bordeaux red grape varieties but is playing an increasingly smaller part in the blends. This is largely because it is prone to poor fruit set and is susceptible to rot, frost and downy mildew (the same difficulties are encountered when growing Merlot). It is, however, also widely planted in Argentina, the Loire (where it's known as Côt), Cahors (known as Auxerrois) and Australia. The wines have a spicy, earthy, almost rustic quality, and can be particularly dark in colour.

Merlot

Merlot, when grown under decent conditions, has an inherent plummy, silky suppleness that can make great varietals or else is blended, typically with Cabernet Sauvignon, to produce less aggressively tannic wines that are more approachable when young. However, as with Malbec, Merlot is very sensitive to growing conditions (and as such it seems crazy that so much Merlot is being planted on unsuitable land in California's Central Valley).

Merlot dominates Bordeaux blends in all appellations except the particularly well-drained soils of the Médoc and Graves, and is especially prominent in the silky wines of Pomerol and St-Émilion. There are huge amounts of Merlot planted in northern Italy, where it produces thin, vaguely fruity wines. The variety is also important to Italian vignerons in Switzerland but quality is highly variable. Other notable growing regions

include Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria and Moldova. Outside of these traditional strongholds winemakers have been slow to utilise Merlot, particularly in warmer Mediterranean areas where the lack of acidity in the grapes can tend to produce flabby wines. That said, Merlot produces some lovely plummy wines in Chile and is starting to look interesting in New Zealand.

Nebbiolo

Also known as Spanna, Inferno and Grumello. This small, thick-skinned Piemontese grape from northwest Italy produces the famously individual, tannic, acidic and brutish wines of Barolo and Barbaresco. Notably late ripening, this is often left on the vine well into October. These wines are almost undrinkable when young but after 4 years in bottle they mature into perfumed (roses, bitumen, roasting meat), complex, full-bodied and expensive reds (Barolo is the 'larger' of the two wines). There are experimental plantings in the New World regions, though for now Nebbiolo remains an Italian classic.

Pinot Noir

Chardonnay and Pinot Noir are the two grapes of Burgundy, but whereas Chardonnay is kind to both producers and drinkers, Pinot Noir can be a nightmare to cultivate – growing well on one hill but failing miserably on the next. In Burgundy the main problem tends to be a lack of sufficient warmth, resulting in thin wines with little tannin to help them age gracefully. The opposite problem can afflict New World producers – excessive heat can lead to jammy, characterless wines. However, if you find a good bottle of Pinot Noir it can entirely seduce you with its velvety, berry-fruit flavours and farmyard/undergrowth/game undertones! Burgundy produces some beautiful wines but you will have to pay dearly for the quality. Elsewhere in France, head for the Loire (Sancerre rouge or rosé) or Alsace. Italy makes a few good examples, otherwise try Australia (Mornington Peninsula, Gippsland, Yarra Valley – best are Bass Philip and Mount Mary), New Zealand (Martinborough), Oregon and Chile.

Pinot Noir also makes an appearance in Champagne, where it is often used to add length and body to the blend of Chardonnay and Pinot Meunier.

Sangiovese

As Italy's most common grape, this is responsible for many of the wines of Tuscany (particularly Chianti), Brunello di Montalcino, Emilia-Romagna and a host of popular Vino da Tavola wines. Sangiovese can produce lightly fragrant wines with a distinct bitter cherry taste, tight tannins (best enjoyed with food) and the capacity to age. Blending often softens its austerity. Varietal Californian examples are a bit disappointing but Australia is doing well, particularly in warm areas such as McLaren Vale (where it is sometimes blended with a little Cabernet Sauvignon).

Syrah

There are two main strongholds for this stunning grape: The Rhône Valley, where it is known as Syrah, and Australia, as Shiraz. In both areas Syrah is famous for producing big spicy blockbusters, exemplified in the Rhône by Hermitage and Côte Rôtie (sometimes blended with up to 20% Viognier (a white grape) to give a hedonistic perfumed nose of orange peel, cinnamon and plums). These wines tend to have an intense, almost inky black colour, and are capable of considerable aging.

It was fortunate that one of the founding fathers of the Australian wine industry, James Busby, visited the Rhône in the early 1800's as Shiraz loves the warm Australian climate and is now the country's most planted variety (though Chardonnay produces a higher volume of wine). Some table wine was made with the early Shiraz plantings although the majority was used to produce fortified wines such as port. When Australia's fortified wine exports declined in the 1950's and 1960's there was such a glut of Shiraz grapes that many old vines were torn from the ground and grapes were even made into muffins! Then people started to clamber over the handful of Shiraz wines that had been produced during the difficult periods and a new style was born. The really big Australian Shiraz wines hail from Barossa Valley, Eden Valley, McLaren Vale, and Clare Valley, with slightly more elegant wines coming from Coonawarra, Margaret River, the Grampians, Bendigo and Langhorne Creek (among others).

Shiraz can produce far more than spicy fruit-bombs - it also produces some leaner reds with white-pepper characters in cooler areas and is also used to make superb sparkling reds that are great partners for chocolate, fruit desserts or duck. Shiraz has a great affiliation with American oak, giving the wines an unctuous vanilla richness and full mouthfeel. French oak can also be used and this tends to let the fruit shine through, exaggerating the spice notes.

South Africa produces a few good Shiraz wines, as does California, but neither of these areas have been able to produce wines that have the concentration or character of the Australian wines. New Zealand is starting to produce some very interesting examples.

Tempranillo

Grown throughout Spain under various pseudonyms (Cencibel, Tinta de Toro), this grape forms the backbone of famous Iberian wines such as Rioja and Ribera del Duero. Its ability to thrive in the most unfavourable climates has led to Tempranillo now being cultivated in nearly all major red wine producing regions. A versatile grape, Tempranillo can produce light, early drinking wines right through to full-bodied, age-worthy styles. Its thick skin is largely responsible for the latter, giving deep coloured, tannic wines with tobacco, spice and strawberry flavours. It is most often found in blends with juicier varieties (commonly Grenache) and takes well to oak giving the smooth vanilla notes commonly found in the wines of Rioja.

Zinfandel

The origins of American Zinfandel are unclear, though DNA testing has shown it to be related to Italy's Primitivo variety from the southern region of Puglia. It has now become California's very own grape variety, producing port-style fortified wines, sweet 'blush' rosés (produced by blending with white Muscat) and big 'Zins' red-berry, blueberry-fruited reds. Many everyday wines hail from Central Valley, with the finest bottles being produced in Sonoma. Since the 1980's there has been a considerable improvement in the quality of red Zinfandels and many are capable of medium term cellaring. Cape Mentelle, in Australia's Margaret River region, produces a dark, rich, fruitcake Zinfandel and fledgling plantations are appearing in South Africa and South America.