

## Beginner's Guide to White Wine Grapes

### Common White Grape Varieties

#### Chardonnay

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This ubiquitous, fashionable white grape is now found growing in almost every wine producing country. However, this popularity can make it hard to define due to the myriad variations in soil type, climate, clone and viticulture that influence the final wines. Chardonnay is particularly user-friendly to the winemaker, growing almost anywhere and able to be moulded into various styles ranging from classy long-lived white Burgundy, to Champagne, to rich buttery Aussie whites. The flavours associated with Chardonnay depend upon the winemaking. While there is an enormous amount of non-descript peachy, oaky dry white made from the grape, better examples taste of lemon, green apples and grapefruit in unoaked and lightly oaked styles, through to melon, white peach and cashew nuts in medium-bodied wines, and on to rich butter and toast in the barrel-fermented or barrel-aged wines. Chardonnay may also be put through malolactic fermentation - when harsh malic acid (think green apples) is converted to lactic acid - thus giving the wine a more creamy finish. While many Chardonnay aficionados look to Burgundy for their tippie, there are a number of producers in other countries that arguably make wines of similar complexity at more reasonable prices. South African stars include Vergelegen, Rustenberg, De Wetshof, Hamilton Russel, and Bouchard Finlayson, while great Aussie wines are made by Leeuwin Estate, Petaluma and Coldstream Hills, among numerous others.

#### Colombard

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Widely grown in California and South Africa (where it is also known as Colombar), the origins of this grape stem from its' distillation for the famous brandies of Cognac and Armagnac in France. Its susceptibility to rot in France's moderate climate led to the decline in plantings for still wine production. However, the hot climates of California and South Africa have welcomed the grape, where it produces plain, crisp, dry whites. These are often blended with Chenin Blanc or Chardonnay.

#### Chenin Blanc

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Chenin blanc is one of the mainstays of the Loire Valley in France, and is the most widely planted variety in South Africa (where it is occasionally called Steen), with a few wines hailing from California, Australia, and New Zealand. When made well, Chenin Blanc wines can taste superb, but often they are unripe, flabby, or over-sulphured. The grape has a naturally high acidity and thus lots of sun is required to bring out the fruit

flavours. Chenin Blanc is very versatile and can be used to produce sparkling wines or dry, demi-sec and sweet still wines. The latter wines from Vouvray, Bonnezeaux, Quarts de Chaume, Jasnières and Coteaux du Layon in France's Loire Valley, can have incredible sublime flavours of beeswax, marzipan, honey, pralines and spice with a tremendous capacity to age. South Africa also occasionally makes great long-lived sweet wines. In the New World Chenin is often used to bulk up blended white wines, as it is often fairly neutral, fruity stuff.

## **Gewürztraminer**

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One of the most easily recognised grapes, both on the vine and in the glass. The grapes are characteristically pink while the wines have an unmistakable aroma of flowers and spice (in German *Gewürz* means spice), flavours of lychees, rosewater, ginger, and cinnamon, and an oily mouthfeel. Good *Gewürztraminer* is so obvious that people either love it or hate it. Unfortunately, most *Gewürz* is drunk as a sweet blend with Riesling and, while this is a fabulously easy-drinking style, it does not let the true nature of the grape shine through. The best examples, from Alsace and Germany's Pfalz region, are dry wines that combine the amazing perfume with a complex spicy palate, and make perfect partners to Asian food. To experience truly outstanding *Gewürztraminer* wines, try a late harvested (*vendange tardive*) or botrytised example (*sélection des grains nobles*) from Alsace, both of which are unctuously sweet. Outside these regions, *Gewürztraminer* is also grown widely in Italy and Austria, with New World plantings in California, Chile and New Zealand.

## **Grenache Blanc**

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The white grape sister of the red-skinned *Grenache Noir*. While originally a Spanish variety (where it still play a role in north-eastern whites from Rioja, Navarre, etc.) this grape is now most widely planted in France's Rhône Valley (especially as the most important grape in white *Châteauneuf-du-Pape*) and Languedoc-Roussillon. Frequently blended with other southern French varieties such as Marsanne and Viognier, the grape can produce good quality, fat, richly flavoured wines.

## **Marsanne**

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Not one of the most widely-seen varieties, but justifies inclusion due to its importance as a key grape in the white wines of the Rhône Valley. It has a floral, herby, limey flavour and is quite aromatic (again floral). In the Rhône, Marsanne is usually blended with a host of other white grapes, as in the long-lived *Hermitage* wines, or may even be blended with Syrah to give red wines a floral lift. Marsanne may also be encountered as a varietal, especially from Aussie producers in the Goulbourn Valley (*Chateau Tahbilk* or *Mitchelton*), and in this guise it can age well to produce wines with intense honeysuckle aromas.

## **Muscat**

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The dead-giveaway for wine made from grapes of the *Muscat* family is that they actually smell of grapes. In those areas where *Muscat* is made into dry table wines - northeast Italy, Southern France, and Alsace - flavours and aromas of grapes, apples and mandarins may be encountered. *Muscat* grapes are also used to produce fizzy styles of wine, as in *Asti*, *Moscato d'Asti* and *Clairette de Vie*. However, to my mind, the

most exciting Muscats are the sweet ones. There are two styles of sweet Muscat - the unfortified, as in Moscatel de Valencia (Spain), and the many fortified wines of Australia, the Rhône (notably Muscat de Beaumes-de-Venise) and Southern France. The Australian examples in particular can taste strongly of raisins and Demerara sugar, while French *vins doux naturels* may have more barley sugar and orange character.

## **Pinot Blanc**

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Pinot Blanc could perhaps be likened to a light, unoaked Chardonnay, without the upfront fruit. If over-cropped it can produce very neutral, acid wines – a perfect base for sparkling wines such as Crémant D’Alsace. However, good examples of still Pinot Blanc wines from Alsace or Italy (where it is known as Pinot Bianco) are attractively creamy, often with a nutty flavour. Germany also produces some Pinot Blanc, known as Weissburgunder, but the majority of Californian Pinot Blanc is actually Muscadet.

## **Pinot Gris**

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This grape is also known as Tokay Pinot Gris, but bears no relation to the Tokay found elsewhere in the world (Hungarian Tokaji being made from a variety of grapes, while Australian Tokay is Muscadelle). In Italy, Pinot Gris (called Pinot Grigio) is used to make light-bodied, fairly neutral wines that are good partners for seafood. Alsace vigneronns make an entirely different beast of a wine - most is dry, full-bodied, aromatic, spicy stuff, while some is beautiful, sweet late harvested (*vendange tardive*) or botrytised (*sélection des grains nobles*) with a characteristic smoky smell. A number of wineries in Oregon, Australia and New Zealand are experimenting with this variety.

## **Riesling**

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Without doubt the king of white grapes, and one that best reflects *terroir* (the special vineyard combination of soil, climate, aspect etc. that gives a wine its’ particular character). Yet despite this it remains surprisingly unpopular on the world market. The grape has a high acidity and is best without the influence of oak. It can be grown in a wide variety of climatic conditions and is susceptible to infection by *Botrytis*, thus leading to a huge variety of different styles. The best examples hail from Germany, usually from the slate soils of the Mosel and Rhine. These typically have a low alcohol (~8%) and very fresh taste of crunchy green apples, lime, flint, and floral notes. The advanced honeyed fruit flavour (and occasional petrol nose - not a fault!) of mature German Riesling is deliciously memorable. New World examples from hot climates have noticeably higher alcohol levels and much bolder fruit flavours of lime and passion fruit, though easily become too fat. Australian examples often develop a very strong kerosene nose after a few years in bottle - a trait not to everyone’s liking. Irrespective of its origin, all Riesling should have a racy balanced acidity, which confers good quality wines with substantial capacity to age.

## **Sauvignon Blanc**

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If you like really fresh and clean wine then you’ll love Sauvignon Blanc – the perfect antidote to fat, over-oaked Chardonnay. The best Sauvignon Blanc is produced in cool areas, where the grapes retain enough acidity to make great crisp, zingy whites. The two main strongholds are the Loire Valley in France, and New Zealand (Hawkes Bay

and further north in the North Island and Wellington regions in the South Island). Wines from North Island New Zealand tend to be richer, with more passionfruit and gooseberry character whereas those from the South Island, particularly Marlborough, are often 'greener', with blackcurrant leaf aromas and flavours of green pepper and cut grass. The Loire wines, such as those of Sancerre and Touraine, are typically more subdued, displaying flavours of nettles and asparagus, and often smelling quite strongly of cat's pee on a gooseberry bush (a classic description - just try to imagine it!) South Africa and Chile also make some nice wines. While most Sauvignon Blanc is drunk as an unoaked varietal, it may also be encountered as an oaked varietal or as a blend. The oaked wines, such as Cloudy Bay's Te Koko are slightly softer, with a smoky edge and creaminess. Sauvignon Blanc is often blended with Sémillon and has become a regional speciality for Margaret River in Western Australia. The grape may also be blended with a range of other varieties, such as Chardonnay and Viognier, in Southern France.

## **Sémillon**

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There are two main homes for this variety. In Bordeaux it is used both for dry wines (often blended with Sauvignon Blanc) and sweet botrytised Sauternes (blended with Sauvignon Blanc and Muscadelle). Secondly, in Australia, where it is also used for dry wines, both oaked (Barossa Valley) and unoaked (Hunter Valley), and for amazing botrytised styles from Riverina. The thin skin of this grape makes it particularly susceptible to Botrytis cinerea infection, making it the perfect starting point for some of the world's finest dessert wines. Good sweet Bordeaux and Aussie Sémillons are bursting with flavours of candied peel, but many suffer from being over-sulphured. The hallmark flavours of dry Sémillon are lemon, beeswax and honey. The unoaked Australian wines of the Hunter Valley are especially noteworthy, which, although taking between 10 and 20 years to develop, can show incredibly complex flavours of toast, lanolin and honey - almost tasting oaked.

## **Viognier**

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Pronounced vee-yon-ee-ay, this grape is an absolute stunner. Originally hailing from the tiny Northern Rhône appellations of Condrieu and Château Grillet, Viognier produces rich, memorable wines bursting with musky peach blossom aromas and a palate of apricots and spice. The vine is a poor yielder and difficult to grow. This, coupled with demand for wines from these two appellations, makes for rare and expensive wines. Luckily Viognier is rapidly becoming fashionable and is now grown in a whole host of countries such as Australia, California, Chile and South Africa. Unfortunately, a lot of these wines are pretty plain. To be guaranteed a decent, affordable example, try Fairview from South Africa, Yalumba from Australia, Chile's Cono Sur, or Fetzer from California.