



A Tantalizing Trio For great whites, try Marsanne, Roussanne and Viognier

By: Catherine Fallis

In the Rhône Valley, as in most parts of France and the "Old World" wine-producing countries, different grapes are blended together to achieve a balanced wine -- one that expresses regional character, a traditional style and functions as a part of a meal.

Alternatively, in California and other "New World" regions, it's mostly about varietally labeled wines that express the characteristics of a single grape type. True, there are multigrape blends from California, but the emphasis remains on varietal expression....

Philip Bohorofoush, wine specialist at the Wine Club retail store in San Francisco, says he sells quite a bit of Chateauf-neuf-du-Pape Blanc and Hermitage Blanc to a regular group of white Rhône diehards. A Francophile when it comes to wine, he says the synergy of these blends is better than the grapes on their own. He says California Marsanne and Roussanne must be hand-sold; Viognier sells well, yet he finds the wines "so fat and rich and dressed up like wanna-be Chardonnays."

Andy Peay, who produces

Marsanne, Roussanne and Viognier at Peay Vineyards on the Sonoma Coast, disagrees.

"(California Marsannes, Roussannes and Viogniers) are excellent wines for food due to their crisp, clean fruit and structure," he says, "yet they're also quite versatile and can stand alone as a cocktail."

Peay, his brother Nick and Nick's wife, winemaker Vanessa Wong, have 5-year-old Alban clone Roussanne plantings at Peay Vineyards in Annapolis.

"We chose our site on the far western Sonoma Coast because it is ideal for growing cool-climate Pinot noir," Peay says, "and we planted Viognier, Roussanne and Marsanne simply because we love drinking the wines."

In fact, while the majority of the California single-varietal versions lean toward the rich, tropically fruity and even obviously oaky "cocktail" style, a new, softer, more balanced style is emerging despite some influential wine critics' love of blockbuster white wines.

"We find that high-end restaurants are drawn toward this (leaner) style of wine as they can pair it with diverse styles of food," says Tim Spencer of St. Amant Winery near Lodi. He produces a Viognier/Roussanne blend called Le Mystere (\$18), from fruit grown

in Amador County. "In the early 1990s, we used a lot of new French oak, but now only use 2- to 4-year-old barrels so our wines don't end up just trying to emulate Chardonnay."

Tim's son and assistant winemaker, Stuart, adds, "We prefer a style that showcases fruit from the vineyard rather than emphasizing oak or winemaking."

So, too, do French wine importer Martine Saunier, with her Martine's Viognier (\$15) from Madera in the Central Valley; Renaissance Winery in North Yuba (\$16), and Yolo County's Capay Valley Vineyards (\$15), which lead this movement with medium-bodied, clean, vibrantly fruity and balanced Viogniers.

Round and dry with a slight almond and herbal flavor, high alcohol and low acidity, wines made from Marsanne grapes are distinguished from Viognier and Roussanne by their lack of exotic perfume, tropical fruit and finesse. Lumped into the "workhorse" category in France, they don't get much respect on their own, aside from their role in Hermitage Blanc, a blend of Marsanne and Roussanne. Marsanne is the staid one of the Rhône white trio, strong, big and bold, reliable.