

Don't Call Them "Lesser"

OBSCURE CALIFORNIA GRAPES WORTH DISCOVERING

by Meg Houston Maker

Not Chardonnay or Pinot Noir, not Zinfandel or Merlot or either of the Sauvignons. Not Syrah, Pinot Gris or French Colombard. Not Rubired. Those are the ten most-grown wine grapes in California, and according to the USDA, they carpet 83% of the state's 473,000 vineyard acres.

I'm talking about the best of the rest, grapes with big personality but tiny footprints. Some might surprise you: Cabernet Franc, a current varietal darling, occupies less than 1% of acreage. Ditto Malbec and Viognier. Mission, the grape that launched California wine, is merely 0.1%.

Larkmead winemaker Dan Petroski values rare varieties. He launched his Massican label in Napa Valley to celebrate the charms of Italian whites like Tocai Friulano, Ribolla Gialla and Greco di Tufo. "I was attracted to the grapes because they are very floral in their aroma profiles and saline on their palates," he says—qualities that make them uncommonly friendly at the table.

Since availability of oddball grapes is small, champions like Petroski often work with mainstream grapes, too—in his case, Sauvignon Blanc and Chardonnay, a little of which finds its way into Cal-Ital blends. Steve Matthiasson of Matthiasson Wines in Napa makes Ribolla Gialla, Schioppettino and a vermouth from the Flora grape, alongside his Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Chardonnay.

Petroski says such a mixed portfolio offers customers a safe entrée to the obscure. "Eventually, everyone seems to gravitate back to the uniqueness and deliciousness," he says of his unfamiliar wines. "When their curiosity is piqued, it is easier to start explaining the origins of the grapes."

Adventurous palates deserve to taste these grapes—even if the world's not ready for a Mission revival.

The wines are listed according to the grape's rank in the total 2016 California crush, from #15 Chenin Blanc to #88 Ribolla Gialla.

Lang and Reed 2014 Chenin Blanc, Napa Valley (\$27)

Winemaker John Skupny has long championed Chenin Blanc (#15/1% of total crush), and his is an ample mouthful of melon, citrus, stone fruit and quince paste.



Smith-Madrone 2014 Riesling, Spring Mountain District, Napa Valley (\$30)

This waxy, stone-scented mélange mingles citrus, guava and passion fruit and offers a succulent finish. This Riesling (#16/1%) was grown on 42-year-old vines.



Gundlach Bundschu 2015 Gewürztraminer, Sonoma Coast (\$25)

Spice cake, white flowers and laurel ornament this Gewürz (#24/0.5%). It's bone dry, enlivened by prickly acidity and a savory finish.



Fields Family Wines 2013 Tempranillo, Lodi, Mokelumne River (\$25)

A lively Tempranillo (#27/0.3%), fresh and plummy with a breath of herbs. The tannins are modest, and the fruit inclines toward cranberry and red currant.



Y. Rousseau 2014 Tannat, Russian River Valley, Sonoma County (\$35)

Concentrated and muscular, redolent of herbs, meat, leather and red currant. The Tannat (#33/0.2%) gets a tiny dose of Cabernet Sauvignon (#2/14%). Age-worthy.



Gallica 2015 Albariño, Rorick Heritage Vineyards, Calaveras County (\$36)

Gallica's Albariño (#42/0.1%) includes a dash of White Muscat (#9/4%) for richness. It's silken and complex, offering honeysuckle, Meyer lemon and nectarine.



Summers Estate 2013 Charbono, Calistoga (\$34)

A varietal Charbono (#68/0.01%) with soft black and blue fruits smoldering with plum skin and earth. Oak aging imbues it with a smoky, wood-steeped grip.



Massican 2016 Annia, Napa Valley (\$30)

Mostly Ribolla Gialla (#88/0.001%), with Tocai Friulano (#77/0.002%) and a dollop of Chardonnay (#1/17% of crush), it's a mouthful of herbed white peaches, honeydew and citrus.



Matthiasson 2014 Ribolla Gialla, Napa Valley (\$45)

The Ribolla Gialla was grown in Matthiasson's Napa estate vineyard; it reads like honeyed apricots doused with Tahitian vanilla. ■■■

