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Aromatic Varietals

Classic versus Contemporary Styles

AROMATIC VARIETAL WINES HAVE GAINED MUCH POPULARITY IN RECENT TIME, YET ARE THERE DIFFERENCES AMONG THOSE OF TRADITIONAL ORIGINS AND WINES MADE IN THE NEW WORLD REGIONS? LIM HWEE PENG, CSW INVESTIGATES.

In February 2011, in an interview prior to accepting the honour of induction into Culinary Institute of America's (CIA) Vintners Hall of Fame, Bob Trinchero of Trinchero Family Estates (TFE), firmly announced "Moscato (wine) is 'big and 'it is exciting to watch'. For the unaware, Trinchero Family Estate is the fourth largest winemaking venture in United States. The Napa Valley estate has continuously produced wines from a wide range of price points, and more importantly, has a history of shaping consumers' palate and keeping their fingers on the pulse of wine trends. Thus, those seemingly short comments were not uttered for casual reasons. It was a strong endorsement on the arrival of an aromatic grape that was treated with limited respect in the past. Also, such approval accorded a 'pop' status, almost instantly, to a wine style crafted from aromatic varietals. Despite the huge popularity of aromatic varietal wines, it was no secret that most wine professionals see a wine of fragrant grape origin as a 'dumb blonde' wine; useful on mostly entertaining occasions, or in any seriousness, a wine to be served in a 'please-your-better-half' situation. These days, several obscure aromatic varietal wines can be seen in offbeat wine lists, while key aromatic varietal wines have found their presence in most restaurants' wine menu. Yet, such break came about only a decade ago, as wine lovers seek out alternatives to bottles made from the usual suspects such as Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc. In later days, it was the new wine market, namely in Asia continent, where aromatic varietal wines were used as an effective introduction to wine appreciation. Asia's diverse cuisine provided additional platform for aromatic varietal to grow exponentially, simply because those fragrant wines were evidently food-friendly.

Managing Classic Aromatic Varietal

Aromatic varieties, generally and most commonly, refers to white grapes that have pronounced aromas emitting perfume, fragrant, floral and grapey notes. Those were the enchanting bouquet that will immediately charm wine lovers on their first whiff. Most aromatic varietal wines were also made in a unoak fashion, as barrel contact would mask the true and unique expression of those grapes. More often than not, they do not undergo malolactic fermentation as the process would soften the much needed acidity and dull the grape's flavour; also, not all aromatic varietal possess sufficient natural acidity to be made into a fresh and vibrant wine. Although aromatic varietal wines were distinguishable by their strikingly delightful characters, specific varietal expression can vary from one grape to another. Interestingly, most aromatic grape varietals have a versatile character; they could be made in a wide range of style from dry to dessert wines, thus benefiting many drink joints and eateries.



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Aromatic Varietals In Old World

IN THE OLD WORLD WINE-PRODUCING COUNTRIES, AROMATIC VARIETALS CAN BE FOUND IN MOST PARTS OF THEIR KEY WINE REGIONS.



Motherland Of Fine Wines

French wine regions such as Alsace, Rhone Valley, as well as parts of Loire Valley were the proud homeland of prominent aromatic grapes. The four noble Alsace grapes – Riesling, Gewürztraminer, Pinot Gris and Muscat were aromatic in nature, and were commonly used to make Alsace's renowned dry and sweet white wines. The perfume and floral-like Viognier rules the dry and blended white wines of northern Rhone Valley, especially in Château Grillet and Condrieu; while Muscat is the preferred aromatic grape for southern Rhone Valley's Muscat de Beaume de Venise, a Vin du Naturel sweet white wine. Chenin Blanc may be exorted in South Africa, yet this fragrant grape originates in Touraine, Loire Valley, crafting dry white wines such as Vouvray and Savennieres, and also the source of traditional sweet Loire white wines – Coteaux du Layon, Bonnezeaux and Quart de Chaumes.

Land Of Wine

From north to south Italy, some of the fragrant varietals include Arneis and Muscat (Piedmont), Friulano (Friuli), Falanghina (Campania), as well as Vermentino from Liguria and Sardinia. Though Piedmont is renowned for its robust red wines, the village of Asti is famed for its light and grapey white wine – Moscato d' Asti, which is currently spearheading the popularity of aromatic grape varietals in the wine world. Muscat, commonly regarded as one of the most ancient of wine varieties, due to the hundreds of strains and variations to the grape, is also considered as one of the most recognisable aromatic grape. Of the multiple Muscat strains, Muscat Frontignan is the varietal responsible for Moscato d' Asti in Piedmont, as well as those used in southern Rhone's VdN Muscat wine; while Muscat Ottonel is primary used in Alsace, and Muscat of Alexandria is commonly used in sherry wine production.



A Dynamic & Exciting Wine Nation

In the Galicia region, Albarino is grown primarily in Rias Baixas. It has a lovely peach fruit flavours, and when fermented in barrel, exudes great texture. Malvasia is best known for sweet fortified wines in Spain, offering a natural grapey softness, and seems to cope well in an oak-ageing environment. Pedro Ximenez (PX) is widely grown in Spain, especially in Jerez, where it is a key grape for sweet sherry production. As a wine, PX's flavours bear a strong resemblance to black raisins. Although lately, there is a trend to produce dry, fresh and aromatic PX wine.

Similar But Different Wine Styles

In Germany, Riesling reigns supreme purely because they are a hardy grape that can sustain the cold temperature of the German wine regions, especially in Mosel, considered as the northern-most fine wine region in the world. This elegant and refined noble grape has also caught on in Austria, where it offers more aromatic notes, a touch drier than the German's, with floral expression. In Austria, its unique white grape – Gruner Veltliner can also be considered as an aromatic varietal. Until recently, Gruner Veltliner wine was perceived as a high-production commercial quality wine, where it flows freely in Heurigen, Austrian's traditional wine joint. Subsequently, with better viticulture management, Gruner Veltliner produces stunningly intense wines, with a hint of spicy fragrance.



Traditional Vs Contemporary Styles

WITH SUCH POPULARITY AMONG CONSUMERS, IT IS LOGICAL FOR MODERN WINE PRODUCERS IN AUSTRALIA, UNITED STATES, SOUTH AFRICA, ARGENTINA AND CHILE, TO QUICKLY ADOPT SOME OF THOSE AROMATIC VARIETALS IN THEIR VINEYARDS. THEREFORE, FROM AN APPRECIATION PERSPECTIVE, WILL THERE BE DIFFERENCES IN TRADITIONAL AROMATIC VARIETAL WINES VIS-À-VIS THOSE MADE OUTSIDE OF THEIR ORIGIN?

Riesling

Riesling is a classic aromatic wine that can be made in a wide range of styles, from refreshingly crisp, bone-dry to more complex, rich, sweet styles. In Alsace, they were dry wines with flavour intensity, except for some spätlese ('late-harvest') wines. In Germany, they vary from light, dry and enjoyable Qualitätswein bestimmter Anbaugebiete (QbA) Riesling, to the increasingly complex flavour sweet Riesling in Qualitätswein mit Prädikat (QmP). Intense and mineral Riesling can also be found. In the New World, Riesling has found new home in Washington State, United States parts of New Zealand, as well as in Barossa Valley, Australia. Those Riesling were usually made in a dry or off-dry style, though some Australia Riesling can be bone-dry, too.

Gewürztraminer

Gewürztraminer has its origin in the town of Tramin in Alto Adige, northern Italy. It exudes floral aromas, ripe peach, honey, lychee and tropical fruit flavours; can be intense and a long lived wine. New Zealand has increasingly been a newfound playground for a modern expression of the varietal, with classic perfume note, but a light, dry, fresh and fragrant version.

Viognier

Rhone was once the only place where Viognier could be found but its recent fame has led the varietal travelling to many vine-growing regions outside of France, such as California, Australia, South Africa, New Zealand, Chile and Argentina. In France, Viognier has a characteristic violet aroma, with intense ripe fruit of peach, apricot and spicy note. Some of the New World versions varied greatly, especially when winemakers prefer to make a powerfully alcoholic, oak-infused wine that pander to certain wine critics or publications. But at its best, some of those modern Viognier can have similar expression to the Rhone version, albeit with an alcohol warmth at its finishing. Interestingly, I have also encountered Chilean Viognier that offers salivating acidity in lifting a weighty and lush palate.

Chenin Blanc

Chenin Blanc's trademark character is best expressed in Loire, and thus far, it seems difficult to emulate elsewhere. Classic Chenin can be a great and long-lived wine, with remarkably complex flavours exuding mineral notes. Although Chenin sprouts in few places beyond Loire, namely California and South Africa, where it is growing in importance, much of modern Chenin Blanc expression were varietal in nature, with few exceptions of remarkable Chenin being made in the new world.

Pinot Gris

A great Pinot Gris, such as those from Alsace, exhibit silky fruit ripeness balanced with crisp acidity, resulting in a complex array of flavours; though some can be weighty and full on the palate. Pinot Grigio, as it is known in Italy, is not of the same quality, as it produces a style that is forgettable – lightly flavoured wine with crispness, but uninspiring wine. One can find the good expression of Pinot Gris in Oregon State and parts of New Zealand, though I found most of those wines a distance away from the welcoming style of Alsatian Pinot Gris.

Muscat

The Muscat grape is superb for those who like its signature grapey and floral aroma. It thrives in almost all Mediterranean countries – France, Italy, Spain and Greece; while California, Australia and South Africa also welcome it with open arms. Almost universally, the commercial Muscat wines produced are in a dessert wine style, though some fortified wines may also be made. With much versatility and ease in the field and cellar, it is not surprising that of all the aromatic varietals, Muscat based wine, regardless of the place of origin, could retain its original expression with little variations.

Final Analysis...

In my opinion, the biggest limitation of classic aromatic wines is the burden of adhering to traditional benchmark, and meeting wine world's expectation of 'terroir' elements.

While the Old World domaine brood over their conundrum, New World wine producers rejoiced over the arrival of a new wine type. In a relax and less-regulated environment, they have the flexibility to make a wine that improves on the lacking of those varietals' character, whether **it is in enhancing the lemon acidity, or taming the fruit intensity of the aromatic grapes.**

With no heritage burden to weigh down on their aspirations, they could focus on crafting an enjoyable and varietal expressive wine that is applicable in many occasions. Nevertheless, we should celebrate the newfound fame for this group of grape varietals, especially when they have been greatly under appreciated by the wine world for too long. LHP

