

Getting to Know the Grapes

excerpted from The Wine Bible, by Karen MacNeil

The Classic Whites

CHARDONNAY

One of the most successful white wines in the world, this grape offers appealing, big flavors – vanilla, butter, butterscotch, buttered toast, custard, green apple, tropical fruit, lemon, pineapple matched by creamy, lush and full-bodied textures.

CHENIN BLANC

Soft, round flavors reminiscent of pears, melons, apricots, red apples, peaches and fruit-cocktail syrup. A fuller wine than a Riesling, a fully sweet chenin blanc can be phenomenal.

RIESLING

Considered by many experts to be the most noble and unique white grape in the world. Rieslings have soaring acidity, often low in alcohol and light in body. The right components can lead to intensely flavorful wines of ravishing delicacy, transparency and lightness. Delicate flavors of fresh ripe peaches, apricots and melons, sometimes with a vibrant mineral quality, like the taste of water running over stones in a mountain stream. Rieslings can be dry or have various levels of sweetness.

SAUVIGNON BLANC

Taut, lithe and herbal, with a keen stiletto of acidity, sauvignon blancs are the polar opposite of chardonnay. Wild tastes of straw, hay, grass, meadow, smoke, green tea, green herbs and gunflint charge around in your mouth with wonderful intensity.

SEMILLON

Broad, pure, and similar to the smell of cotton sheets on a clothesline these grapes can be made into magnificent dry white wines. Age often transforms Semillon into a rich, honeyed flavor and a lush, almost lanolin-like texture. An ideal grape for Sauternes.

The Classic Reds

CABERNET SAUVIGNON

The preeminent classic red has vast ranges of quality, structure and maturity. A bit angular and introverted when young, age can metamorphose this grape into a satiny, rich and complex wine. Aromas and flavors of blackberry, black currant, cassis, mint, eucalyptus, cedarwood, leather and plum.

MERLOT

Very similar to cabernet, the name means little blackbird. Its aromas and flavors include blackberry, cassis, baked cherries, plums, chocolate, mocha and sometimes, leather. When merlot fully ripens, the tannin can come across as relatively soft and round on the palate, however, many examples of merlot are anything but soft.

PINOT NOIR

More than any other wine, pinot is described in sensual terms. It's remarkably supple, silky textures and erotically earthy aromas exude warm baked cherries, plums, damp earth, mushrooms, cedar, cigars, chocolate, worn leather, sweat, and dry leaves. Lighter in body and far less tannic than cabernet, merlot or zinfandel.

SYRAH

Also known as shiraz, this is a rustic, manly, and yet elegant grape. It's exuberant aromas and flavors lean toward leather, damp earth, wild blackberries, smoke, roasted meats, and especially pepper and spice. The best syrahs have a kinetic mouthfeel with flavors that detonate on the palate like tiny grenades. Petite sirah is not exactly the same, but its history is interwoven with syrah.

Important Whites

GEWURZTRAMINER

Perfumed aromas, saucy, bold, kinetic and extroverted flavors. Litchi nuts, gingerbread, vanilla, fruit-cocktail syrup, grapefruit, smoke, stones, minerals, and honeysuckle do not simply rest in the glass – they rage about it. Massive fruitiness is sometimes mistaken for sweetness, but many gewürztraminers are bone-dry.

PINOT BLANC

Generally good, but not great wines. A soft, easy-drinking white, this grape is an ancient mutation of pinot noir.

PINOT GRIS

Can be a simple, light, crisp wine or an intense, dramatic wine, depending on where it is grown. Ranges from tasty wines with pear and spice-cake flavors to majestic, opulent and sometimes spicy. Possibly with an intriguing edge of pepperyness or arugula-like bitterness. Also known as pinot grigio.

VIOGNIER

One of the finest, but rarest French white grapes. Exotic, honeysuckle, musky fruit, its round body and, most of all, its mesmerizingly lanolin-like texture.

Important Reds

BARBERA

A mouthfilling, rich wine packed with just about every fruit flavor imaginable: blackberry, black cherry, black raspberry, and black plum. A vivacity and vibrancy that comes from the grapes' high natural acidity.

GAMAY

The source of all French Beaujolais, its one of the most important red grapes and utterly the simplest. Its blatant fruity flavor is a dead ringer for melted black cherry Jell-O. Because of its uninhibited fresh fruitiness and lack of tannin, it is meant to be served slightly chilled.

NEBBIOLO

Massively structured and adamantly tannic when young, nebbiolo can simply close your palate down and cause your taste buds to shrink away. With age, however, it becomes a delicious combination of suppleness and power. To Italians, nebbiolo is the king. Particular flavors and aromas of tar, violets and often a rich, espresso-like bitterness.

SANGIOVESE

Closer to pinot noir than to cabernet in flavor and structure, when young it has the wonderful appeal of a fresh, warm cherry pie. As it ages it can take on dried leaf, dried orange peel, tea, mocha, and earthy flavors.

TEMPRANILLO

A fairly refined red – when young bursts with cherries. After being aged (2 years or more) it takes on an earthy sweet vanillin flavor.

ZINFANDEL

Range of wines, it can appear as a white (pink) sweet wine to a port-style wine, however, true zinfandel is a mouthfilling dry red wine crammed with jammy blackberry, boysenberry, and plummy fruit. Made in traditional styles it can be thick and chewy.