

QUARTERLY EXTRA

EXTRA POUR*Virginia Wine Time*

VIOGNIER---VIRGINIA'S FLAGSHIP WHITE WINE

by Warren Richard

Virginia's success with the viognier grape has been the garnered headlines in 2009. Just this past summer, Washington Post wine critic, Dave McIntyre, reported the results of a blind tasting which pitted Virginia and Maryland wines against French and California wines. The judges were surprised that the local wines bested their French and California counterparts, and a white wine varietal that earned accolades was viognier produced from Virginia. So is viognier poised to be designated Virginia's flagship white wine? We asked some local wine makers to weigh in on the question. However, before we present the various responses, a bit of history might put the question in a better context.

France First...

As the name might suggest, the viognier varietal is native to France; however, the viognier grape may have originated in Dalmatia. The grape was then brought to the Rhone region of France by the Romans toward the end of the third century A.D. The Northern Rhone valley remains the main producer of viognier in France, but its production there is quite limited and is grown almost exclusively in Condrieu and Chateau-Grillot. Other areas in France that produce viognier include Languedoc-Rousillon and Vin de Pays. In all, only 35 acres of vineyards in France produce the grape; therefore, due to its limited production, French-produced viognier wines tend to be rather expensive.

...then Virginia

In the American wine market, though, California prevails. Better-known varieties such as chardonnay, cabernet sauvignon, and merlot are all familiar to American palates, because the Golden State is able to produce top-quality wines from these varieties. California vineyards even boast plantings of viognier; however, these tend to be less well received by wine critics and wine drinkers. Hot, dry weather and lengthier growing seasons coupled with heavy oak treatment render the California viogniers too alcoholic and viscous to enjoy. However, in the early 1990s, Dennis Horton saw the potential for viognier in Virginia to best those made in California. Horton recognized that Virginia's climate, cooler than that of California's, resulted in viognier grapes with lower sugar levels thus lower alcohol levels. Also, the thick-skinner viognier seemed more tolerant of Virginia's wetter weather. His viognier wines, produced in a sleeker French style, earned awards through the decade. Since Horton's successful efforts to produce quality viognier, many other local wineries have followed his lead. In 2009, numerous Virginia wineries grow and produce wines made from the viognier grape with several earning top honors when tasted against national and international competitors.

Why Viognier?

Wine drinkers are familiar with the refrain, "ABC"—Anything But Chardonnay (and Cabernet). Viognier offers the alternative to chardonnay. Like chardonnay, it is a rich, full-bodied wine and can be treated in either stainless steel or oak (or even a combination of the two) to produce a wine that is versatile and crowd-pleasing. However, in the aroma



and flavor profile department, viognier is far more distinctive and interesting than chardonnay. To the nose, first impressions can be perfume and honeysuckle with waves of fruit notes like pineapple, peach, and even coconut; terroir may even impart minerality to the mix. In the mouth, tropical fruit characteristics should prevail with textures that range from crisp to creamy depending on whether fermentation occurs in tank, barrels or both.

In Virginia, winemakers have indeed proclaimed viognier to be the state's answer to chardonnay in the quest to find Virginia's standard-bearer. Furthermore, they praise viognier's versatility; it can produce a quality, single-varietal wine, or it can be mixed with other varietals to produce lush blended wines. Winemaker Michael Shaps of Virginia Wineworks sings viognier's praises and notes that the grape's thick skins allows it to more easily handle Virginia's humid climate; in addition, he has observed its ability to easily ripen and maintain its acidity. According to Shaps' expert palate, some Virginia viogniers are similar to those produced in France and thus Virginia's critical success with the grape. His own viognier is fermented in stainless steel tanks with his Shaps-labeled wines reserved for premium grapes. These are grown in limited quantities from leased acres that are best able to express viognier's unique qualities. Viognier clusters are then usually harvested in early September and then soaked on the skins to maximize aromatic intensity and mouth feel. Fermentation is then conducted in stainless steel tanks to avoid the overpowering effects of oak barrels; however, the result is a full-bodied, aromatic wine that would pair well with shell fish, poultry and any dish that included a cream sauce.

Other winemakers do prefer to ferment viognier either in oak-barrels or to blend oak-aged and stainless steel fermented viognier. Matthieu Finot at King Family Vineyards ferments and ages his viognier wines in neutral French oak barrels. This produces a wine that is still very aromatic yet possesses the mouth feel characteristic of a wine that has undergone some malolactic fermentation. Andy Reagan at Jefferson Vineyards opts to find the best of both worlds--the heady aromas, fruitiness and minerality preserved by stainless steel tanks and the weightiness imparted by oak barrels. The result is an award-winning cuvee that could grace any dinner party that featured white meats or fish. Reagan's own favorite pairing includes bacon-wrapped tuna steaks topped with a fruit salsa.

Shaps, Finot, and Reagan all produce blended white wines that include viognier. Shaps' entry-level white wine, the Wineworks White is a blend of viognier with the similarly aromatic vidal blanc. Finot blends viognier with chardonnay to present King Family's Roseland, and Reagan completes a fruity trifecta with his Vine Trois, a mix of viognier, petit manseng, and traminette. Any of these wines could compliment either a sophisticated dinner party menu or a simple gathering around cheese and conversation.

Virginia's Flagship?

So is viognier the flagship white wine grape for Virginia? Shaps gave an enthusiastic affirmation, and he cited the expanding recognition that Virginia is receiving for its quality viognier wines. However, Regan and Finot think that viognier still needs some time before it is declared the standard-bearer in Virginia. Finot boiled it down to one simple factor--it's not nationally recognized like chardonnay and its name is hard to pronounce. He encounters wine tasters who ask, "Vio-what?"



Without a doubt, Virginia winemakers are producing top-quality viognier. Will it put Virginia on the map in the same way that chardonnay and cabernet sauvignon brought international recognition to California? Perhaps this remains to be seen, but all of our winemakers (and many tasters) agree that viognier has a bright future in Virginia.