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# WINE BUSINESS MONTHLY

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## Insight and Opinion: Grape Varietal Diversity is the Spice of Life

by Mark L. Chien

**There has been** a lot of fussing recently over the homogenization of wine as flying winemakers zoom around the planet dispensing their sage (and costly) advice and wine pooh-bahs such as **Robert Parker** and the *Wine Spectator* who wield their scores like guillotines over winemakers and, intentionally or not, guide them into a particular stylistic niche. *Mondovino* (the documentary) was a further, albeit weak, attempt to prosecute the case for a world of boring wines. This worry about wine uniformity may be good or bad depending on what you like to drink, but from where I sit in Pennsylvania, the concern is a bit overwrought. There is no disagreement that these wine pundits are experts at what they do, and in fact, they do it very well. The concern, instead, is the certainty about exactly what constitutes a good wine so vociferously voiced as to shape our palates and tempt wine lovers to trust more in numerical scores and descriptive terms like hedonistic and meaty than their own good taste.

After growing grapes in Oregon's Willamette Valley for 16 years, my own palate was firmly entrenched in *Vitis vinifera* and, more specifically, Pinot Noir. So it was quite a rude awakening when I moved to Pennsylvania to become the state viticulturist to be confronted by names like Seyval and Concord. But my own varietal epiphany came on a warm summer evening at **Nissley Vineyards** during one of their weekend summer concerts. More than a thousand people gathered to enjoy the music, and for the most part, they were a youthful group--just the demographic the wine marketers salivate over and wish to lay claim to. I could not help but notice that everyone was having a very good time, and almost everyone was drinking sweet to semi-sweet wines of the hybrid or native variety. *Mon dieu!* These disreputable wines were providing enjoyment to the uneducated masses! But in the end what was I to think? The wine was delivering exactly the experience that we all hope for--a perfect partner for good food, fellowship, conversation and fun. Would their experience have been enhanced if they were drinking a \$50 "real" wine? I think not. To add injury to insult, as a judge at local wine competitions it is excruciatingly difficult not to give a Concord wine of such great purity of flavor that it represents the grape as much as the color blue is blue, a gold medal. Yes, it is possible to make (and enjoy) a great Concord wine.

There is a wonderful world of wine variety diversity out there, and it is only the poor sods who fancy themselves as wine connoisseurs that are limited to the dozen or so socially

acceptable varieties and even further restricted by the particular style that is currently in vogue. Wine has been part of human culinary and social culture for 9,000 years when the Chinese made wine from hawthorn berries. Oh, did I forget to mention fruit wines? Try visiting **Nashoba Valley Winery** in Bolton, Massachusetts if you want to taste the subtle and delicious flavors of dry peach and varietal apple wines. They would be as comfortable on the dinner table as any overwrought Pinot Grigio. The grape breeding program at **Cornell University** has just released three new hybrid varieties, a white called Valvin Muscat, and two reds called Corot Noir and Noiret. Add these to the list of varieties such as Cayuga White, Traminette and Chardonnay, which have all established themselves as commercial wine varieties in the U.S. And there is the unique story of Chambourcin, a hybrid variety developed in response to the phylloxera crisis in Europe in the late 1800s. At one time there were thousands, perhaps tens of thousands, of acres of the grape in France, servicing the wine consumer until the rootstock solution was able to take hold and bring back the vinifera varieties. Now Chambourcin is a key red variety in the Eastern U.S. In Eastern Europe there are dozens of lesser-known grapes that make interesting wines. And, you know what, they are cheap! Why not try one?

If you are worried about the future of varietal diversity, just visit **Vynecrest Vineyards & Winery** in Pennsylvania, **Chrysalis Vineyards** in Virginia or **Jewell Towne Vineyards** in New Hampshire. At Vynecrest, **John Landis** has never met a grape he would not stick into the ground to see what comes out of the tank. He may have more experimental varieties with only numbered-designations than named varieties. It's nouveau time; how about a terrifically fruity nouveau made from Dornfelder? **Peter Oldak** at Jewell Towne is on a mission to bring Landot Noir back to respectability. And why not use a heritage table grape called Alden to make a wonderful fresh, crisp and delicious light-bodied red wine? At Chrysalis Vineyards, **Jennifer McCloud** is on a mission to make Norton, a red grape from *Vitis aestivalis*, the signature American grape since Zinfandel's true origin has been revealed. Jenny also grows Petit Manseng and Albarino in ...Virginia? And they make gorgeous wines!

I do not fret about the loss of varietal diversity in the wine world. I would much prefer a crisp, dry Vidal Blanc from coastal Rhode Island to yet another dull Chardonnay from a too-hot climate. I think the issue is that most wine snobs are lazy and not intellectually curious about wine. I feel sorry for those who succumb to the allure of 90s and social acceptance in wine. The truth is that even with all the influence wielded over our palates by Mr. Parker, the *Wine Spectator* and flying-around winemakers, there will never be enough of them to put even a small dent in the amazing diversity of wine in even a small area such as Eastern North America, much less the world! I am not arguing against Cabernet in Napa or Riesling by the Finger Lakes, it's just that there is so much more to discover and enjoy if curiosity and sense of adventure allow.

Moving to Pennsylvania opened my eyes to a few interesting human traits related to wine. People love wines everywhere, and a lot of people decide that they want to make wine even in places where certainly even God would question if grape culture was meant to be-- Minnesota, for example, where low winter temperatures typically reach -35C (*vinifera* survives to -18C); so they have bred varieties such as Marquette and La Crescent to survive, thrive and make wine. Is it wine that a wine snob would ever allow touch his lips? Oh, the humanity! Oh, the acidity! People outside of the generally accepted great wine regions like where they live and want to try to grow wine there. There is a tremendous sense of place in our human nature. Many of them could easily pack up their lives and move to Napa or Oregon, but they want to stay where they feel at home. The other thing about our wine world is once you get outside the city limits the palate gets sweeter as the distance

increases. That's the rural palate, and wineries in the woods learn to make wines to suit those preferences because, as a rule, a small local winery sells retail and can hand-sell just about anything.

After almost 30 years in this business, both doing and teaching viticulture, I find wine to be one of the most intellectually challenging products that I have ever encountered. I have spent a lifetime trying to figure out how to grow a good grape, and countless generations before me have done the same. Before it was Pinot Noir in Oregon, and now it is Cabernet Franc and Chambourcin in Pennsylvania. The sheer complexity of the wine "system" demands a thoughtfulness and natural curiosity that can coax a fine wine in a new terroir. Every day presents new challenges, and that is the joy in growing wine that is passed on to the wine consumer.

How to find these unique and interesting wines may be a challenge depending on the infrastructure that gives you access to wine. If you live in Pennsylvania, you can forget about going to a state-controlled store to buy any wine that an actuarial has deemed unprofitable. Instead, try the smaller wine shops with owners who have a natural curiosity about the world of wine and are willing to bring in non-traditional names (producers and grapes) to expose their customers to the big wide world of wine. Again, intellectual curiosity is the motive for discovery.

The catalyst for this commentary was an article in *The New York Times* by **Eric Asimov** about an encounter with **Jancis Robinson** at a none-too-trendy Village restaurant with a creative wine list. He was nervous about the choice, trying to impress Ms. Robinson as any of us would naturally attempt to do; but she found the mix and match of Southeast Asian foods and non-mainstream wines a delight. Well, she should know, having authored a few of the authoritative guides on wine grape varieties. I recommend you browse through her book *Vines, Grapes and Wines* to get a sense of the tremendous diversity of grape varieties we have to choose from and how we have allowed ourselves to fall into that reductionist mentality and trap that offers security but not much challenge or surprise.

I would be the last person in the world to deny a glass of fine Cabernet Sauvignon, Pinot Noir or Riesling, and I readily admit that I have my own stylistic preferences that I can become belligerent about. These are great wines and the measure of great wine in the international marketplace. We live in an inescapably loud marketing world where we are constantly being told what to like and buy. Our only weapon against all the bluster is our freedom of choice. I simply argue that as wine lovers we should seek to expand our horizons and, now and again, take the plunge into a wine grape we do not know and probably cannot even pronounce or have the courage to drink. **wbm**



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