

12 Reasons to Look Beyond the Usual Wine Selections

by Eric Asimov

IT'S entirely possible to go through life eating nothing but the most familiar foods, reading books by the customary best-selling authors or listening to a stock set of composers. Taking great pleasure in the same things over and over is not a bad thing.

Similarly, many people are content to drink only well-known wines. Why not? They satisfy again and again. Alas, producers around the world learned years ago that they could exploit the desire for the familiar, planting a lot of cabernet sauvignon, chardonnay and other international grapes, regardless of the local traditions, to appeal to a global market.

I understand the thinking, yet the world of wine has so much more to offer. For anybody truly curious about the glorious extent of wine, now is the greatest time in history to be a wine lover. Never before has such a vast diversity of wines been available to so many people. Many are made from unfamiliar grapes, grown in little-known places, yet they offer thrilling drinking for those eager for new experiences.

Like sea creatures discovered at colossal depths, these unfamiliar wines are not new at all. Many represent traditions that reach back centuries. Sadly, in some cases, these traditions barely hang on. The survival of the diversity we now enjoy depends partly on building appreciation of these little known grapes and wines. In other cases, the grapes, though uncommon, have already gained a following.

Either way, here are a dozen obscure grapes that are the foundation of some wonderful wines and will reward intrepid explorers.

ASSYRTIKO, from the volcanic island of Santorini in the Aegean Sea produces dry, deliciously mineral wines that are superb with seafood and just about any other light dish that smacks of the Mediterranean. If you like assyrtiko, it's worth exploring other Greek white-wine grapes like moschofilero and roditis. Top producers: Gaia, Sigalas and Spyros Hatziziannis.

BLAUFRÄNKISCH, a red grape grown mostly in the Burgenland region of eastern Austria, can produce gorgeously savory wines that combine the grace of pinot noir and the spice of syrah. Producers worth seeking include Moric, Paul Achs, Umathum and, from Carnuntum, a region north of the Burgenland, Muhr-Van der Niepoort.

FRAPPATO, from southeastern Sicily, makes lovely, fresh and lively wines that are delicious summer reds, especially when lightly chilled. When frappato is combined with nero d'Avola, it makes the slightly more substantial Cerasuolo di Vittoria, which goes wonderfully with a wide range of foods. Producers to seek out include Arianna Occhipinti, **COS** and Valle dell'Acate.



FUMIN comes from the Vallée d'Aoste, the peculiar Alpine borderland that is technically Italian, though the language is French. In the hands of a top producer, like Grosjean, fumin makes a spicy, floral red that can be complex and structured. I love these Alpine wines, and a bottle of the Grosjean fumin may cause you to seek out other little-known grapes, like the superb red cornalin and the racy white petite arvine. Around \$35 a bottle, these wines are not cheap but are stunningly good.

FURMINT, not to be confused with fumin, is the great white grape of Hungary. It's a crucial constituent in the lavish sweet wine Tokaji aszu, and increasingly is being used in distinctive dry wines with rich textures and complex floral aromas. Look for producers like Kiralyudvar, Royal Tokaji, Dobogo, Oremus and Disznoko.

GRIGNOLINO, mostly from the Piedmont region of Italy, makes a pale, easy-drinking red that is fresh, slightly bitter and somewhat akin to frappato, but even lighter. A delicious wine for casual drinking, perhaps with salumi or pizza. I very much like the grignolino from Cascina 'Tavijn. Strangely, Heitz Cellar in Napa Valley also makes a little from an old eight-acre vineyard. I've yet to find it, but am looking forward to trying it.

LAGREIN from the Trentino-Alto-Adige region of northeastern Italy produces earthy, mineral reds with the flavor of dark fruits that are enjoyably spicy and fresh. Look for wines from **J. Hofstätter** or Elena Walch.



MENCIÁ is the source of excellent red wines from the regions of Ribeira Sacra and Bierzo in western Spain. The dense Bierzo reds have a haunting wild fruit flavor, but I'm partial to the lighter, more mineral wines from the steep, terraced vineyards of Ribeira Sacra. Look for Guimaro, Dominio do Bibeiro, Raúl Pérez and D. Ventura.

PINEAU D'AUNIS, an ancient red grape from the Touraine region of the Loire Valley, is once more finding favor in the more avant-garde wine bars of France and among discerning wine lovers. The wines can be spicy, peppery and, depending on the producer, attractively funky. Look for Domaine le Briseau, Domaine de Bellivière and Thierry Puzelat.

ROMORANTIN, another ancient grape from the Touraine, can make utterly succulent whites that are perfect balances between sharp citrus freshness and rounded floral, honeyed flavors. Cour-Cheverny is a tiny appellation that has been carved out to showcase Romorantin. François Cazin makes two versions: Le Petit Chambord is dry, while Cuvée Renaissance is slightly sweet.

TREIXADURA, when meticulously grown and vinified in the Ribeiro region of Spain, can make profound whites, richly textured and mineral-flavored, especially in the hands of a producer like Emilio Rojo. Wines from the godello grape are also well worth sampling.

TROUSSEAU, from the Jura region of France, makes lovely reds with a presence at odds with their light body. Top producers include Jacques Puffeney, Ganevat and Philippe Bornard.

Well, that's a dozen, and I'm just starting. We haven't even mentioned poulsard and savagnin from the Jura, or kerner from Germany, or even duras from Gaillac in southwestern France. Cabernet sauvignon and chardonnay, even riesling and syrah, are only the beginning.