

American wines vs. European: a primer

by David C. Ludwig

While California produces about 75 percent of all the wine annually consumed in this country, most Americans know more about French, German, and Italian wines than those produced here.

The reason for this phenomenon may be that the word domestic on any product carries a somewhat negative connotation; more likely, however, this situation exists because in a sense California's wine industry is less than 40 years old.

Now it is certainly true that Franciscan monks were planting grapes in California over 200 years ago, and it is also true that many immigrant European vignerons established vineyards and experimented with various grape types in California throughout the 19th and the early years of the 20th century. Unfortunately, the prohibition of the 1920's forced the closing of all but a handful of California wineries and those who were able to remain open were forced to switch to the making of sacramental wines or the production of thick skinned grapes of the table and raisin variety to be used for home winemaking, which was still legal.

Although prohibition was repealed many years ago, the legacy of that period still haunts the wine industry in this country; for example, fully 60 percent of the wine presently produced in California is still made from table variety grapes.

Progress is being made, however, and through the efforts of such men as Agoston Harasthy (who in the 1850's

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brought 100,000 vine cuttings from Europe to California and published the results of his experiments on them) and the research conducted at the University of California on the suitability of sites for the planting of various grape types, California now produces some outstanding wines.

Labels can lie

Table wines from California may be grouped into two general categories,

according to the way they are marketed: generic wines, labeled with famous European place-names, and varietal wines, labels with the name of the particular grape from which each wine is primarily made.

Generic names have been used almost from the beginning of California winemaking to suggest, broadly, the kind of wine contained in the bottle. The most familiar generic names for red wines are Burgundy, Claret,



Wines from California vineyards such as Los Hermanos offer some of the best bargains in the world.



Grapes grown among the lakes of New York State produce a different flavor from those of California.

and Chianti; and for white wines Chablis, Sauterne(s), and Rhine wine. These wines have only the vaguest resemblance, if any, to the wines that actually come from these specific places in Europe, and each producer will decide for himself which characteristics each of his generic wines will have. For example, a bottle of French Sauternes will contain a sweet, luscious white wine made in a special way; yet a bottle of California Sauterne will often be dry, making the use of this generic name especially illogical. It is not even unheard of for a winery to label identical wines as Chablis and Sauterne.

Even though this method of labeling wines leaves much to be desired, it is nevertheless at the level of generic wines that excellent values are to be found among the many offerings of California. If you experiment with the many varieties on the market, you are bound to find some brands that are less expensive and more consistent in quality than many imported wines. It is interesting to note that many California generic wines are bottled with a small amount of sweetness in them, which may or may not be to your customers' tastes.

Varietal wines have more recently come into their own and are slowly being adopted by many California wineries.

These grape types imported from the most famous wine districts of Europe produce the best of the California wines. These varieties include Cabnet Sauvignon, Pinot Noir, Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, and so forth, and a given wine must contain a minimum of 51 percent of a particular varietal for its name to appear on the label.

Varietals flourish best in the cool

north coast counties around San Francisco Bay, and this area produces less than 10% of California's wine harvest. Even within this area, despite extensive new plantings of these varieties, they still account for less than half of the crop. Because high-yield varieties grown elsewhere in California can produce four or five times as much wine per acre as these varieties and because the best grapes are also the most expensive, the finest varietal wines will never be cheap. Furthermore, an important factor in the quality of a varietal wine is the percentage of the named grape being used above the legal minimum. Since it is the specific character of each grape variety that distinguishes these wines and gives them their richness, depth of flavor, and so on, the extent to which a Cabernet Sauvignon or Pinot Noir is diluted will have a tremendous effect on its taste. Because the best California wines are marketed by brands rather than by individual vineyard names, it is necessary to compare the same varietal wine from several wineries to determine your preference.

The following lists well-known California varieties in order that you might have some idea of what to expect when purchasing them:

Cabernet Sauvignon — the classic grape of Bordeaux produces the best red wines of California. It is the well-aged examples of Cabernet Sauvignon that have most impressed the experts with their quality. Unfortunately, production of the best examples of this wine is limited and consequently you should expect to pay over \$20.00 a bottle for this truly fine wine.

Ruby Cabernet — a cross between the Cabernet Sauvignon and the Carignane that attempts to combine

the quality of the former with the high productivity of the latter. The wines it produces, while agreeable, lack the style of the Cabernet Sauvignon.

Pinot Noir — this grape, used to make the great wines of the Cote d'Or, is generally considered less complex, less fine, and in general, less similar to the Burgundy original than is the Cabernet Sauvignon to red Bordeaux.

Red Pinot — is not a true Pinot but rather the Pinot St. Georges, and its wines are considerably less fine.

Zinfandel — one of the most widely planted of all the wine grapes in California. While of European origin, it has never been traced back to a specific European wine district. While Zinfandel has become the darling of many "wine authorities," I find it to be somewhat heavy and cloying, especially when it has been aged in redwood.

Napa Ganay — the grape used to make the popular wines of southern Burgundy and produces light, refreshing, if somewhat less complex, wines in California.

Gamany Beaujolais — not a true Gamay at all, but is now thought to be related to the Pinot Noir. The wines produced from this grape are not considered to be on par with those made from the true Gamay.

Pinot Chardonnay — this varietal produces the best of the California white wines and while this is the true Chardonnay of Burgundy (the word Pinot has been dropped in Burgundy because recent studies have found that this grape is really not a true Pinot) it is inadvisable to make comparisons between the wines produced in California from this grape (or any other for that matter) and those produced in, for example, Chassagne-Montrachet or Meursault.

Pinot Blanc — the second classic grape used in white Burgundies is less widely planted in California than the Chardonnay, but it still produces some very good white wines.

Johannisberg Riesling — the true Riesling planted in the best vineyards along the Rhine and Moselle. It is also called, in California, the White Riesling. A Johannisberg Riesling has much of the flavor and fruit for which this grape is noted, and the wine is often a bit mellow in taste.

Riesling — on a California wine

“The French especially make a great to-do over the similarities, or lack of them, between one year and another . . .”

label usually refers to a wine made from the Sylvaner and is less flowery, but often delightful in its own way.

Grey Riesling — not a true Riesling at all, but the Chauce Gris, and often produces a wine of indifferent quality.

Emerald Riesling — a cross of the true Riesling and the Muscadelle and produces a mild, very agreeable wine.

Chenin Blanc — the grape used to make Vouvray in the Loire Valley. This wine can be more or less dry according to the style adopted by the individual wineries. Chenin Blanc is also marketed as *White Pinot*, which is obviously misleading. The name probably originated as a corruption of the Chenin Blanc's local name along the Loire-Pineau de la Loire.

Savignon Blanc — the famous grape used in such different French wines as Graves and Pouilly-Fume, and in California too its excellent wines can be either dry or sweet. Normally relative mellowness of the wine will be noted on the label.

Semillon — the grape that gives Sauternes its special character when attacked by the noble rot. The dry climate of California prevents this beneficial fungus from forming naturally on grapes and consequently Semillon is often marketed as a dry wine.

Grenache Rose — the best-known varietal rose and is made from the same grape that predominates in the Tavel district of France.

Business considerations affect wines

One of the major problems that has faced those California wine-makers who are trying to produce the best varietal wines from the soil to which each variety is best suited is that the nature of commercial distribution forces each winery to market a complete line of wines. The best vineyards in Europe, however, produce only a single wine. What this means is that each winery in California is not permitted to concentrate on making those wines that it can do best. One result of this sorry situation has been the appearance in the past few years of small wineries that specialize in just a few varietal wines in limited quantities.

Another area where California and European vineyards differ concerns

vintages. As you probably know, the French especially make a great to-do over the similarities or lack of similarities between one year and another, while in California little, if any, attention is paid to a wine's particular vintage. This lack of attention given to California vintages, even for the best of varietals, is based on several factors. For one thing, a California wine marketed with a vintage year must be made up entirely from grapes grown that year. Many wineries would prefer to maintain their flexibility by blending wines of different years to produce a consistent wine for the public, rather than drawing the consumer's attention to factors that will only complicate his wine selection. This attitude is certainly shared by wholesalers and retailers for whom vintages necessarily create problems with inventory and continuity.

A further problem in the marketing of vintage California wines is that the best of these red wines naturally need the same bottle aging as do the best wines of Europe. The California winemaker faced until fairly recently, however, a problem that his European counterpart did not share: if he decided to hold back his best wines until they had achieved a certain amount of age, they were subject to an annual California floor tax.

Despite these problems, there is an increasing tendency on the part of California wineries to market wines that state the year of the vintage. Some of them are actually putting a part of their annual production aside to be marketed only after these wines have achieved a certain maturity.

Apart from the year of the vintage and the varietal name, there are other specific indications on a California wine label that are useful to know. The geographical origin of a California wine can be stated on its label only if 75 percent or more of the grapes come from the named district, such as Napa. This is a useful guide to selecting some of the best varietals from the north coast counties, but you should also realize that some of the most respected winemakers have acreage in more than one district. Consequently, they can make excellent wines without being legally entitled to state anything more than

the name of the winery and the grape used.

Made and bottled, when used on a California wine label, means only that 10 percent of the wine was produced by the winery itself. *Bottled by* indicates that all the wine may have been bought in bulk from other sources. The phrase *estate-bottled* on a California wine indicates, as it does in Bordeaux and Burgundy, that all of the wine was produced by the winery from grapes grown on its own property. This designation is rare, however, because it is traditional for even the best wineries to buy grapes from other growers.

Why N.Y. wines are different

While California is by far the largest producer of domestic wines, all the grape vines presently growing there had to be brought in from other states or countries. When the earliest settlers came to New York State, they found a variety of native grapes growing wild throughout the countryside. Encouraged by this profusion of vines, a number of colonists imported cuttings of the European *vinifera* grape varieties during the 17th and 18th centuries and tried to establish vineyards on the east coast. Invariably these vines died, and we now know that this was the result of the *phylloxera* fungus and temperature extremes to which *vinifera* vines were not resistant.

In the 19th century successful experiments were carried out with existing native varieties, notably the Catawba, and native American wines began to be produced commercially. These native grapes, made up for the most part of *vitis labrusca*, impart a pungent aroma and distinctive flavor to the wines made from them. This may make their taste seem strange to those who are accustomed to California or European wines. This flavor is described as foxy, and its tangy and grapey character is most typically exemplified by the Concord, which is also the most widely planted grape in New York.

The New York vineyards, then, are planted for the most part with native American grapes that are not grown in any other wine district in the world, and its wines should be approached with this fact in mind. In order to



Grapes harvested in New York vineyards are mostly varieties native to American soil.

grapes. It is, therefore, not unfair to say that the enophile who normally imbibes European or California wines is in for a bit of a surprise upon tasting New York State Chablis or Burgundy. Nevertheless, many people who enjoy the distinct flavor of certain table grapes find these wines very pleasant indeed.

A number of New York State wines are made entirely from specific native grapes and are so labeled. The most common of these varieties are: Delaware, Niagara, Vergennes, Isabella, Diamond, Missouri Riesling (not to be confused with the Riesling of Germany), and Catawba. While all these wines naturally have the typical labrusca taste, their precise labeling makes it easier for the consumer to choose among them.

Some very worthwhile work has been done by Dr. Konstantin Frank, who has demonstrated that vinifera grapes can be successfully grown in the climate of New York State. Pinot Noir, Riesling, Chardonnay, and Gamay are some of the wines he has made, and the best of the white wines can be very good. As a result of his pioneering work, other wineries have also begun experimentation with viniferas.

In recent years, however, the most important trend in the Finger Lakes vineyards has been toward the French-American hybrids. These are crossings that combine the hardiness of the American vines — their resistance to disease and extreme cold — with the more delicate flavor of the vinifera grape.

These hybrids were originally named after the men who developed them, along with the serial number of the original seedling — such as Baco 1, Seibel 5279, and Seyve-Villard 5276. These names and numbers, of course, lacked sufficient cachet to be used by themselves as varietal wine titles, so they are being adopted for use on wine labels. Thus, Baco 1 is labeled as Baco Noir; Seibel 5279 is now called Aurora, and Seibel 10878 is (happily) styled Chelois. While some of these wines in which the labrusca flavor is considerably diminished are blended with native wines, certain bottlings are now totally composed of wines from French-American hybrids.

Various other states have taken to

planting these hybrids along with vinifera and native American grape varieties. Some of them are: Oregon, Washington, Missouri, Ohio, Maryland, Virginia, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey.

As more and more of these hybrids will be appearing on the market, it should be useful for you to have some idea of their names, encapagements, and characteristics. The following represent the most widely planted of these new varieties:

Baco Noir-Red — the driest of hybrids. Baco Noir is quite full and robust in character, with a deep red color somewhat reminiscent of Burgundy. This wine will continue to acquire complexity and mellowness with bottle age.

Chancellor Noir-Red (80 percent Chancellor Noir, 1 percent Marechal Foch, 4 percent Chelois Noir, 7 percent Banco Noir, 2 percent Cascade Noir, 3 percent Rougeon Noir) — a smooth full-bodied wine with a rich finish. When aged in small oak casks, this wine acquires a bouquet many find comparable to a Cabernet Sauvignon.

Chelois-Noir-Red (55 percent Chelois Noir, 22 percent Cascade Noir, 17 percent Colobel Noir, 6 percent Marechal Foch) — a vinous, extremely dry red wine that will benefit noticeably from several years of bottle age.

Seyval Blanc-White (100 percent Seyval Blanc) — recognized as the most successful of the French varieties grown in the U.S. The Seyval Blanc produces very dry, clean, and fresh wines with a soft lingering taste. Some find this wine comparable to a Chardonnay.

Aurora Blanc-White (100 percent Aurora Blanc) — a light, fragrant wine with a semi-sweet taste and a slightly drier aftertaste.

Please remember that each producer of these wines will vary the encapagements to suit his own taste.

It might be a good idea to ask your wholesaler what wines are available from your own or neighboring states. You could then schedule a wine tasting of each of these wines from various producers to determine which your members or customers would prefer. □

diminish this labrusca character, New York wineries are permitted to add a sugar-and-water solution to their wines during fermentation to reduce the natural acidity of native grapes, and the finished wine may be blended with as much as 25 percent of wines from California.

By far the biggest American wine-producing area outside of California is the Finger Lakes district of New York State, about 300 miles northwest of New York City. The region gets its name from several elongated lakes that resemble an imprint made by the fingers of a giant hand. Although the region is subject to great extremes of temperature, these lakes exert a moderating influence on the climate of the vineyards situated along their sloping shores.

The first vines were planted in this district in 1829 in a clergyman's garden in Hammondsport at the southern tip of Lake Keuka. A number of commercial wineries were established in the decades that followed, but four wineries established in the second half of the 19th century now dominate the production in the Finger Lakes district: Taylor, Great Western (Pleasant Valley), Gold Seal, and Widmer. Although the Finger Lakes account for less than 10 percent of the table wines consumed in this country, New York State fortified wines and sparkling wines account for a considerably bigger share of the American market.

As is the case in California, the least expensive New York State wines are marketed under generic place-names of European origin: Rhine wine, Chablis, Claret, etc. Because labrusca grapes are used to make up these wines, they do not bear any resemblance whatsoever to their French and German counterparts all of which are made from vinifera