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CALIFORNIA'S *new* COOL WHITES

**VIIGNIER, PINOT GRIS AND ROUSSANNE
FILL THE RANKS OF FRUITY SIPPERS FOR
SUMMERY DAYS • BY MARYANN WOROBIEC**

as picnic and barbecue season approaches, many consumers will head down the aisle of their favorite wineshop toward the tried-and-true California Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc selections. But don't overlook some of the Golden State's less familiar whites; these unsung



wines are better than ever, and their diversity of styles and flavors make it easy to bring variety to your go-to white wine list.

Over the past year, we've tasted nearly 300 of these up-and-coming California whites in *Wine Spectator's* Napa office. Most of the bottlings are Viognier or Pinot Gris, with Roussanne, Gewürztraminer and Riesling also making strong showings. In addition, there has been a surge in varieties such as Albariño, Verdelho and Grenache Blanc, though these categories are still mostly under the radar. (An alphabetical list of all wines tasted for this report is available at www.wine-spectator.com/063008.)

The highest-rated wines illustrate the diversity of whites available to those willing to explore beyond the state's big two. Three of the alternative whites under review rose to 92 points: the Alban Roussanne Edna Valley Alban Estate Vineyard 2005 (\$44); the Beringer Alluvium Blanc Knights Valley 2006 (\$16), a Sémillon-based blend; and the McPrice Myers Viognier Santa Ynez Valley Larner Vineyard 2005 (\$24). And California's lesser-known white varieties often carry attractive price tags, with many costing less than \$20 a bottle.

If you like a medium- to full-bodied profile, a creamy texture and rich, ripe flavors, Rhône-style whites, such as Viognier, Marsanne and Roussanne, might appeal to you. A group of vintners that call themselves the "Rhône Rangers" first started promoting Rhône varieties in the 1980s, but the white grapes were slow to take off in terms of consumer interest. In recent years, the wines have been more accepted, and they're better than ever.

One of the original Rhône Rangers is Bonny Doon founder Randall Graham, who stopped making Chardonnay in 1990. "I was bored," he says. "I felt like I didn't have anything to contribute." Graham has taken an alternative marketing approach for the alternative whites, using a mix of humor and irreverence that would do the *Monty Python* crowd well.

His Rhône-style white blend is called Le Cigare Blanc, which obliquely refers to UFOs, and he also makes non-Rhône whites such as Muscat and Albariño. "I'm not going to turn a California Chardonnay drinker into an Albariño drinker overnight," Graham says. The Bonny Doon Albariño Monterey County Ca' del Solo Estate Vineyard 2007 (88 points, \$20) is a fragrant, juicy wine, with notes of honeysuckle and white pepper.

Viognier is the most popular and effusive of the Rhône whites, known for distinctive floral, spicy aromatics (think honeysuckle).

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—RANDALL GRAHM, BONNY DOON



Bonny Doon has helped lead the way among California estates looking to produce white wines beyond Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc. The winemaking team includes (from left) associate winemaker Nicole Walsh; founder Randall Graham; associate winemaker Jillian Johnson; and director of viticulture Philippe Coderey.

The wines often have peach and apricot flavors and a rich, lush texture. Viognier is known as a tricky grape to grow, which means that some of the better bottlings might cost a bit more, but there are flavorful examples from Lodi, Mendocino and Paso Robles that offer solid value, such as the Bonterra Viognier Mendocino-Lake Counties 2006 (89, \$18) and the Praxis Viognier Lodi 2006 (88, \$15).

Other choices transplanted from the Rhône include Marsanne and Roussanne, and there are an increasing number of these bottlings popping up in California. Marsanne is known more for spice, mineral and melon flavors, while Roussanne has pear and honey characteristics. One of the state's

most consistent producers of Roussanne is Bonterra, and its Roussanne Mendocino County 2006 (87, \$18) is an intense, mouth-watering example. Then there's Grenache Blanc, a full-bodied white that when made well balances its richness with crisp acidity. One of the best versions is the Curran Grenache Blanc Santa Ynez Valley 2006 (88, \$24).

A number of recent bottlings also blend two or more grapes together, be they more traditional combinations of Rhône white siblings or fun-to-drink kitchen-sink blends. Some interesting examples include the Treana Mer Soleil Vineyard Central Coast 2006 (91, \$25), a blend of Viognier and Marsanne, and the Black Bart's Bride Napa Valley 2006 (88, \$50), a Marsanne-Viognier-Chardonnay blend from Krupp Brothers.

Crisp and refreshing, Pinot Gris, also called Pinot Grigio, has enjoyed a wave of popularity recently. The use of the name Pinot Gris harks to the grape's home in Alsace, where the wines are spicy and tropical, like the Taz Pinot Gris Santa Barbara County 2005 (87, \$15); whereas Pinot Grigio evokes northern Italy's crisp, light-bodied wines, whose fragrant floral notes sometimes take on mineral or peppery accents. Good examples of this style include the Sanford Pinot Grigio Santa Barbara County 2005 (87, \$19) and the Montevina Pinot Grigio California 2005 (86, \$10).

Chenin Blanc is one of the most widely planted white wine grapes in California, but it is used primarily as a blending grape for generic table and jug wines. Producers that take Chenin more seriously are making versions that are vibrant and refreshing, with melon, peach and spice flavors. Pine Ridge blends Chenin with Viognier to make the Chenin Blanc-Viognier Clarksburg 2005 (87, \$14).

Muscat, Riesling and Gewürztraminer each offer varying styles and flavor profiles. These days, most California Rieslings feature a dash of residual sugar that gives the wines added richness. Look to the Handley White Riesling Mendocino County 2006 (87, \$19) or the J. Lohr White Riesling Monterey County Bay Mist 2005 (86, \$9). Muscats make spicy and floral dry wines such as the Bonny Doon Muscat Monterey County Ca' del Solo Estate Vineyard 2007 (87, \$17). Some of the best Gewürztraminers from the Golden State aren't sweet, but instead feature the wine's wonderful spiciness and aromatics, as in the Navarro Gewürztraminer Anderson Valley Dry 2006 (87, \$19).

A word of general caution about oak and white wines: It seems that no matter what the variety, some producers insist on lavish oak barrel (or oak chip) treatment. Sometimes this adds positive

textural components and complexity. At worst, it can mask a wine's fruit characteristics and make it taste dull, muddled or just plain boring. Keep an eye out for clues on the labels and read our tasting notes to help you determine a wine's style before you buy. The good news for some consumers is that a current call for refreshing, food-friendly wines without a heavy oak influence is resulting in plenty of non-oaky examples.

The range of choices in white wines from California is broader than ever, and still growing. For the adventurous, there are plenty of flavors and textures waiting to be discovered on the "other" shelf. And it's always fun to be the one to introduce an interesting new bottle to friends.

Napa Valley–based tasting coordinator MaryAnn Worobiec has been with Wine Spectator since 1997.