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CALIFORNIA'S new COOL WHITES

VIognier, Pinot Gris and Roussanne
Fill the Ranks of Fruity Sippers for Summery Days

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
The 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.winespectator.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 varietals 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).
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.

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