

Sauvignon blanc fortunes sag, but quality is still there

Pinot gris is overtaking sauvignon blanc in popularity, and it's a shame because the West Coast, especially California, still has plenty of quality sauvignon blanc. In California, every region is producing quality, including Napa, Dry Creek and Lake County. In Washington, the stars are from Novelty Hill, Woodward Canyon and Upland Estates.

Paul Gregutt

Special to the Seattle Times

A FEW YEARS ago, a wine writer for a well-known website attacked one of my favorite grapes. He had the nerve (insert Stooze voice here: "da noive!") to say that sauvignon blanc was "a dud, wholly devoid of complexity and depth."

Never one to shy away from a good scrimmage, I responded with (I thought) an eloquent plea to readers to not "give up on the grape."

Sadly, many of you have. You've swapped it out for pinot gris/grigio, which isn't a bad trade, per se. Plenty of good PG's are out there, and the big wine companies have added them to their basic, line-priced offerings. At the same time, the popularity of domestic sauvignon blanc is plummeting. Here in Washington, production of the grape has slid from 5,100 tons in 2008 to 4,300 tons in 2009. In just that same year, pinot gris has jumped from 4,100 tons to 6,300 tons. Unbelievably, Gewürztraminer (steady at 4,000 tons) may pass it next.

When you ask those in the trade why consumers are abandoning sauv blancs from California and Washington these days, fingers generally point in the direction of the southern hemisphere. Chile and New Zealand have absconded with the market for inexpensive sauvignon blanc, they tell you. The scoundrels have done it, improbably enough, not with colorful labels adorned with exotic southern-hemispheric beasts, but with really good wines at affordable prices.

I like those SoHem wines. But are they really that much better? To see if the West Coast can compete, I tasted sauv blancs from California and Washington, ranging in price from \$27 (Grgich) on down to \$7 (Woodridge). I looked high and low for Oregon sauv blanc — there used to be some good ones — but they seem to have vanished. Don't know why. Into the tasting I also tossed a cheap New Zealand offering (poured out of a 3L carton) just for fun. And here's what I came up with.

First, domestic sauv blancs are delicious across all price ranges. They no longer taste like cheap chardonnay, nor are they ripened past varietal character. The grassy/herbal flavors are there in proportion, with juicy acidity, spice, pepper and tangy flavors of melon, green apple and grapefruit. These are affordable quaffers, moderate in alcohol (averaging a full percent lower than comparable chardonnays) and perfect for hot weather. Compare a winery's sauv blanc alongside its pinot gris and you may find the PG is less herbal but often sweeter, more manipulated and less varietal.

Here in Washington the sauv blanc superstars are Novelty Hill, Woodward Canyon, Efesté and Upland Estates. Merry Cellars, Woodinville Wine Cellar, Barrister, Ste. Michelle, Alexandria Nicole, Gordon Brothers and Guardian Cellars have excellent varietal versions, too. Some outstanding blends are also made (especially Buty and Cadaretta).

What about California? I found excellence in every region: Lake County, Dry Creek, Napa, even the most generic bottlings. All fine values in their price range:

Grgich Hills 2008 Estate Fumé Blanc (\$27). Best of tasting, biodynamic, earthy and complex.

Matanzas Creek 2008 Sauvignon Blanc (\$16). Classy, with details of barrel spice.

Franciscan 2008 Sauvignon Blanc (\$16). Succulent and spicy.

Beckman 2009 Estate Sauvignon Blanc (\$16). Smooth, lightly peppery.

Silver Birch 2009 Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc (\$24). The New Zealand entry, four bottles worth of wine in this 3-liter box; genuine, herbal and fresh.

J 2009 Pinot Gris (\$17). The alternative grape; nicely done; fruity, smooth and delicious.

July 17, 2010

Pick of the week

Woodbridge 2009 Sauvignon Blanc; \$7

This is a fine bottle, with surprising depth and minerality. The mouthfeel is rich and persistent, with melon, green apple and sweet grass. The alcohol is just 12.5 percent, yet the wine is dry, not faked up with residual sugar or vanilla. In the blend is a bit of verdelho and semillon. (Young's-Columbia distributes)