

*Sam Sez: “A bottle of white? A bottle of red? Perhaps a bottle of rosé instead?”*

Not so many years ago (Billy Joel wrote those lyrics in 1977) white, red, or pink were about the extent of the wine offerings at many local eateries. Today’s Northwest wine scene is a world apart from those humble beginnings, due, in large part, to the growth of the Washington wine industry. It is now the second largest in the country. It’s not uncommon to open a wine list these days and be confronted with a choice of half a dozen Northwest Viogniers. VIOGNIERS for crying out loud! In the course of one week I recently tasted a Petite Verdot, a Carmenere, a single vineyard Cunoise, and the usual assortment of Black Muscats, Rousannes, and the like. Many of our local wineries have jumped into the fray by offering unique wines made from lesser-known grape varieties. A recent tour of nearby tasting rooms uncovered a wealth of opportunities to sample these intriguing wines.

In Coeur d’Alene, the aptly named **Coeur d’Alene Cellars** have carved a niche for themselves by focusing on one red varietal (Syrah) and one white varietal (Viognier). Not so many years ago most wine drinkers had never even heard of Viognier (pronounced VEE-own-yay). Once an obscure grape grown almost exclusively in the tiny French appellations of Condrieu and Chateau-Grillet, Viognier moved in and has quickly become the darling of winemakers seeking an alternative to Chardonnay or Sauvignon Blanc. Unfortunately, Viognier can be a bit of a problem child. The grape is difficult to grow and often the result is a wine with heady, overbearing aromas of overripe fruit and orange blossoms combined with high alcohol, low acid and a healthy dose of residual sugar. Some outspoken wine critics have gone so far as to brand this newcomer “the scourge of our times”. Happily, Coeur d’Alene Cellars crafts a lovely, well-balanced Viognier that captures the best qualities of the variety; lively, fresh tropical fruit flavors combined with pretty floral aromas, a lush creamy texture, and a bright, crisp citrus finish. Try it with spicy curry dishes.

**Grande Ronde Cellars** utilizes the storied variety Grand Vidure in one of their most popular wines, “Cellar Red.” Once grown in the Bordeaux region of France it was blended with Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Malbec and Petite Verdot in the great reds of that region (think Chateau Latour, Chateau Lafite-Rothschild, etc.). Wiped out during the phylloxera plague in the late 1800’s it has been rediscovered in Chile where it is known as Carmenere. It has dark berry or cherry flavors with distinct smoky, spicy, and earthy qualities. Grande Ronde Cellars blends theirs’ with Cabernet Sauvignon resulting in a wine that successfully exploits the best qualities of both grapes. Ripe and plummy with subtle spice it pairs well with casual fare such as pasta, pizza or grilled foods.

Meanwhile, **Latah Creek Wine Cellars** has recently released their first “Winemakers Reserve Red” of which only 11 barrels were produced. It is something of a rarity in that it is crafted from Petite Verdot, another of the lesser known Bordeaux grape varieties.

Typically used in very small percentages in blends it is fascinating to see what the grape can attain on its own when grown in the favorable climate of Washington State.

On the subject of the Bordeaux varietals, **Townshend Cellars** rounds out the list by producing both a Cabernet Franc and a Malbec (not to mention a Lemberger). As one would expect from the affable Mr. Townshend, the wines are lushly oaked and bursting with ripe fruit flavors while allowing the distinctive personalities of the grape varieties to shine through.

Mike Scott of **Lone Canary Winery** has long been a champion of lesser known grape varieties. One of the most intriguing is his Barbera. This grape is widely grown in the Piedmont region of Northern Italy where it is prized for its affinity for full-flavored food. The people of Piedmont are a hearty lot who work hard, enjoying physical activity and the fresh air of the mountainous region in which they live. With regards to their dining habits, suffice it to say they are not inclined to delicate fare. The opulent food of the region calls for a quaffable, racy wine that will complement, not overwhelm the meal. The Lone Canary Barbera is just that. With ripe raspberry fruit, leather, tobacco and a zesty finish it is perfectly at home with rich food whether it be tajarin with white truffles or roast Turkey with all the accoutrements.

As it turns out, our local wineries offer a host of interesting new wines to sample. We have only scratched the surface here. Some of these are only available at the winery tasting rooms, so venture out and give them a try. You just might discover a new favorite.