

This list is not all-encompassing, but is a pretty good representation.

Varietal Characteristics

By James Laube, Wine Spectator Senior Editor
with James Molesworth, Wine Spectator Tasting Coordinator

In order to appreciate wine, it's essential to understand the characteristics different grapes offer and how those characteristics should be expressed in wines. Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Zinfandel are all red grapes, but as wines their personalities are quite different. Even when grown in different appellations and vinified using different techniques, a **varietal wine** always displays certain qualities, which are inherent in the grape's personality. Muscat should always be spicy, Sauvignon Blanc a touch herbal. Zinfandel is zesty, with pepper and wild berry flavors. Cabernet Sauvignon is marked by plum, currant and black cherry flavors and firm tannins. Understanding what a grape should be as a wine is fundamental, and knowing what a grape can achieve at its greatest is the essence of fine-wine appreciation.

In Europe, the finest wines are known primarily by geographic appellation (although this is changing; witness the occasional French and Italian varietals). Elsewhere, however--as in America, Australia, South Africa and New Zealand--most wines are labeled by their varietal names; even, sometimes, by grape combinations (Cabernet-Shiraz, for example). To a large extent, this is because in the United States, the process of sorting out which grapes grow best in which appellations is ongoing and Americans were first introduced to fine wine by varietal name. In Europe, with a longer history for matching grape types to soil and climate, the research is more conclusive: Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, for instance, are the major grapes of Burgundy. Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Malbec and Petite Verdot are the red grapes of Bordeaux. Syrah dominates northern Rhône reds. Barolo and Barbaresco are both made of Nebbiolo, but the different appellations produce different styles of wine. In Tuscany, Sangiovese provides the backbone of Chianti. A different clone of Sangiovese is used for Brunello di Montalcino.

As a result, Europeans are used to wines with regional names.

In time, the New World's appellation system may well evolve into one more like Europe's. Already California appellations such as Carneros and Santa Maria Valley are becoming synonymous with Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, Oregon's Willamette Valley is known for Pinot Noir and Australia's Hunter Valley for Shiraz; back in California, Rutherford, Oakville and the Stags Leap District are all associated with Cabernet-based red table wines. Wineries with vested financial interests in these appellations and the marketing clout to emphasize the distinctive features of the wines grown in these areas will determine how the appellation system evolves and whether specific wine styles emerge. The appellations themselves will also determine which grapes excel and deserve special recognition. Following are descriptions of the most commonly used *Vitis vinifera* grapes. American wine is also made from native *Vitis labrusca*, especially the Concord grape. For information about wine growing regions mentioned, please see the country descriptions.

BARBERA (Red) [bar-BEHR-uh]

Most successful in Italy's Piedmont region, where it makes such wines as Barbera d'Asti, Barbera di Monferato and Barbera di Alba. Its wines are characterized by a high level of acidity (meaning brightness and crispness), deep ruby color and full body, with low tannin levels; flavors are berrylike. However, plantings have declined sharply in the United States. A few wineries still produce it as a varietal wine, but those numbers too are dwindling. Its main attribute as a blending wine is its ability to maintain a naturally high acidity even in hot climates. The wine has more potential than is currently realized and may stage a modest comeback as Italian-style wines gain popularity.

BRUNELLO (Red) [broo-NEHL-oh]

This strain of Sangiovese is the only grape permitted for Brunello di Montalcino, the rare, costly Tuscan red that at its best is loaded with luscious black and red fruits and chewy tannins.

CABERNET FRANC (Red) [cab-er-NAY FRANK]

Increasingly popular as both stand-alone varietal and blending grape, Cabernet Franc is used primarily for blending in Bordeaux, although it can rise to great heights in quality, as seen in the grand wine Cheval-Blanc. In France's Loire Valley it's also made into a lighter wine called Chinon. It is well established in Italy, particularly the northeast, where it is sometimes called Cabernet Frank or Bordo. California has grown it for more than 30 years, and Argentina, Long Island, Washington state and New Zealand are picking it up.

As a varietal wine, it usually benefits from small amounts of Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot, and can be as intense and full-bodied as either of those wines. But it often strays away from currant and berry notes into stalky green flavors that become more pronounced with age. Given its newness in the United States, Cabernet Franc may just need time to get more attention and rise in quality.

Much blended with Cabernet Sauvignon, it may be a Cabernet Sauvignon mutation adapted to cooler, damper conditions. Typically light- to medium-bodied wine with more immediate fruit than Cabernet Sauvignon and some of the herbaceous odors evident in unripe Cabernet Sauvignon.

CABERNET SAUVIGNON (Red) [cab-er-NAY SO-vin-yon]

The undisputed king of red wines, Cabernet is a remarkably steady and consistent performer throughout much of the state. While it grows well in many appellations, in specific appellations it is capable of rendering wines of uncommon depth, richness, concentration and longevity. Bordeaux has used the grape since the 18th century, always blending it with Cabernet Franc, Merlot and sometimes a soupçon of Petite Verdot. The Bordeaux model is built around not only the desire to craft complex wines, but also the need to ensure that different grape varieties ripen at different intervals or to give a wine color, tannin or backbone.

Elsewhere in the world--and it is found almost everywhere in the world--Cabernet Sauvignon is as likely to be bottled on its own as in a blend. It mixes with Sangiovese in Tuscany, Syrah in Australia and Provence, and Merlot and Cabernet Franc in South Africa, but flies solo in some of Italy's super-Tuscans. In the United States., it's unlikely any region will surpass Napa Valley's high-quality Cabernets and Cabernet blends. Through most of the grape's history in California (which dates to the 1800s), the best Cabernets have been 100 percent Cabernet. Since the late 1970s, many vintners have turned to the Bordeaux model and blended smaller portions of Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Malbec and Petite Verdot into their Cabernets. The case for blending is still under review, but clearly there are successes. On the other hand, many U.S. producers are shifting back to higher percentages of Cabernet, having found that blending doesn't add complexity and that Cabernet on its own has a stronger character.

At its best, unblended Cabernet produces wines of great intensity and depth of flavor. Its classic flavors are currant, plum, black cherry and spice. It can also be marked by herb, olive, mint, tobacco, cedar and anise, and ripe, jammy notes. In warmer areas, it can be supple and elegant; in cooler areas, it can be marked by pronounced vegetal, bell pepper, oregano and tar flavors (a late ripener, it can't always be relied on in cool areas, which is why Germany, for example, has never succumbed to the lure). It can also be very tannic if that is a feature of the desired style. The best Cabernets start out dark purple-ruby in color, with firm acidity, a full body, great intensity, concentrated flavors and firm tannins.

Cabernet has an affinity for oak and usually spends 15 to 30 months in new or used French or American barrels, a process that, when properly executed imparts a woody, toasty cedar or vanilla flavor to the wine while slowly oxidizing it and softening the tannins. Microclimates are a major factor in the weight and intensity of the Cabernets. Winemakers also influence the style as they can extract high levels of tannin and heavily oak their wines.

CARIGNAN (Red) [karin-YAN]

Also known as Carignane (California), Cirnano (Italy). Once a major blending grape for jug wines, Carignan's popularity has diminished, and plantings have dropped from 25,111 acres in 1980 to 8,883 in 1994. It still appears in some blends, and old vineyards are sought after for the intensity of their grapes. But the likelihood is that other grapes with even more intensity and flavor will replace it in the future.

CARMENERE (Red) [car-men-YEHR]

Also known as Grande Vidure, this grape was once widely planted in Bordeaux, but is now associated primarily with Chile. Carmenere, along with Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon, was imported to Chile around 1850. According to Chilean vintners, Carmenere has been mislabeled for so long that many growers and the Chilean government now consider it Merlot.

CHARBONO (Red) [SHAR-bono]

Found mainly in California (and possibly actually Dolcetto), this grape has dwindled in acreage. Its stature as a wine was supported mainly by Inglenook-Napa Valley, which bottled a Charbono on a regular basis. Occasionally it made for interesting drinking and it aged well. But more often it was lean and tannic, a better story than bottle of wine. A few wineries still produce it, but none with any success.

CHARDONNAY (White) [shar-dun-NAY]

As Cabernet Sauvignon is the king of reds, so is Chardonnay the king of white wines, for it makes consistently excellent, rich and complex whites. This is an amazingly versatile grape that grows well in a variety of locations throughout the world. In Burgundy, it is used for the exquisite whites, such as Montrachet, Meursault and Pouilly-Fuissé, and true Chablis; in Champagne it turns into Blanc de Blancs. Among the many other countries that have caught Chardonnay fever, Australia is especially strong.

Chardonnay was introduced to California in the 1930s but didn't become popular until the 1970s. Areas such as Anderson Valley, Carneros, Monterey, Russian River, Santa Barbara and Santa Maria Valley, all closer to cooler maritime influences, are now producing wines far superior to those made a decade ago.

Though there is a Mâconnais village called Chardonnay, no one agrees on the grape's origin--it may even be Middle Eastern.

When well made, Chardonnay offers bold, ripe, rich and intense fruit flavors of apple, fig, melon, pear, peach, pineapple, lemon and grapefruit, along with spice, honey, butter, butterscotch and hazelnut flavors. Winemakers build more complexity into this easy-to-manipulate wine using common vinification techniques: barrel fermentation, sur lie aging during which the wine is left on its natural sediment, and malolactic fermentation (a process which converts tart malic acid to softer lactic acid). No other white table wine benefits as much from oak aging or barrel fermentation. Chardonnay grapes have a fairly neutral flavor, and because they are usually crushed or pressed and not fermented with their skins the way red wines are, whatever flavors emerge from the grape are extracted almost instantly after crushing. Red wines that soak with their skins for days or weeks through fermentation extract their flavors quite differently.

Because Chardonnay is also a prolific producer that can easily yield 4 to 5 tons of high-quality grapes per acre, it is a cash cow for producers in every country where it's grown. Many American and Australian Chardonnays are very showy, well oaked and appealing on release, but they lack the richness, depth and concentration to age and have in fact evolved rather quickly, often losing their intensity and concentration within a year or two. Many vintners, having studied and recognized this, are now sharply reducing crop yields, holding tonnage down to 2 to 3 tons per acre in the belief that this will lead to greater concentration. The only downside to this strategy is that lower crop loads lead to significantly less wine to sell, therefore higher prices as well.

Chardonnay's popularity has also led to a huge market of ordinary wines, so there's a broad range of quality to choose from in this varietal. There are a substantial number of domestic Chardonnays, which can range from simple and off-dry to more complex and sophisticated. The producer's name on the wine, and often its price, are indicators of the level of quality.

CHENIN BLANC (White) [SHEN'N BLAHNK]

This native of the Loire valley has two personalities: at home it's the basis of such famous, long-lived whites as Vouvray and Anjou, Quarts de Chaume and Saumer, but on other soils it becomes just a very good blending grape. It is South Africa's most-planted grape, though there it is called **Steen**, and both there and in California it is currently used primarily as a blending grape for generic table wines. Chenin Blanc should perform better in California, and someday it may. It can yield a pleasant enough wine, with subtle melon, peach, spice and citrus notes. The great Loire whites vary from dry and fresh to sweet, depending on the vintage and the producer. In South Africa, Chenin Blanc is even used for fortified wines and spirits.

DOLCETTO (Red) [dole-CHET-to]

Almost exclusive to northwest Piedmont, this produces soft, round, fruity wines fragrant with licorice and almonds that should be drunk within about three years. It's used as a safety net for producers of **Nebbiolo** and **Barbera** wines, which take much longer to age. There are seven DOCs: Acqui, Alba, Asti, Dinao d'Alba, Dogliani, Langhe Monregalesi and Ovada.

FUMÉ BLANC (White) [FOO-may BLAHNK]

see Sauvignon Blanc

GAMAY (Red) [ga-MAY]

Beaujolais makes its famous, fruity reds exclusively from one of the many Gamays available, the Gamay Noir à Jus Blanc. Low in alcohol and relatively high in acidity, the wines are meant to be drunk soon after bottling; the ultimate example of this is Beaujolais Nouveau, whipped onto shelves everywhere almost overnight. It is also grown in the Loire, but makes no remarkable wines. The Swiss grow it widely, for blending with Pinot Noir; they often chaptalize the wines.

California, meanwhile, grows a variety called **Gamay Beaujolais**, a high-yield clone of Pinot Noir that makes undistinguished wines in most places where it's grown. In the United States the grape is used primarily for blending, and acreage is declining, as those serious about Pinot Noir are using superior clones and planting in cooler areas.

GEWÜRZTRAMINER (White) [geh-VERTS-trah-mee-ner]

Gewürztraminer can yield magnificent wines, as is best demonstrated in Alsace, France, where it is made in to a variety of styles from dry to off-dry to sweet. The grape needs a cool climate that allows it to get ripe. It's a temperamental grape to grow and vinify, as its potent spiciness can be overbearing when unchecked. At its best, it produces a floral and refreshing wine with crisp acidity that pairs well with spicy dishes. When left for late harvest, it's uncommonly rich and complex, a tremendous dessert wine.

It is also popular in eastern Europe, New Zealand and the Pacific Northwest.

GRENACHE (Red) [greh-NAHSH]

Drought- and heat-resistant, it yields a fruity, spicy, medium-bodied wine with supple tannins. The second most widely planted grape in the world, Grenache is widespread in the southern Rhône. It is blended to produce Châteauneuf-du-Pape (although there are some pure varieties) and used on its own for the rosés of Tavel and Lirac; it is also used in France's sweet Banyuls wine. Important in Spain, where it's known as Garnacha Tinta, it is especially noteworthy in Rioja and Priorato. Grenache used to be popular in Australia, but has now been surpassed by Syrah; a few Barossa Valley producers are making wines similar to Châteauneuf-du-Pape. In California it's a workhorse blending grape, though occasionally an old vineyard is found and its grapes made into a varietal wine, which at its best can be good. It may make a comeback as enthusiasts of Rhône style seek cooler areas and an appropriate blending grape.

Also, **Grenache Blanc**, known in Spain as Garnacha Blanca, which is bottled in the Southern Rhône. It's used for blending in France's Roussillon and the Languedoc, and in various Spanish whites, including Rioja.

GRÜNER VELTLINER (White) [GROO-ner VELT-linner]

The most widely planted grape in Austria, it can be found to a lesser extent in some other parts of eastern Europe. It achieves its qualitative pinnacle in the Wachau, Kremstal and Kamptal regions along the Danube River west of Vienna. Gruner, as it's called for short, shows distinct white pepper, tobacco, lentil and citrus flavors and aromas, along with high acidity, making it an excellent partner for food. Gruner is singularly unique in its flavor profile, and though it rarely has the finesse and breeding of the best Austrian Rieslings (though it can come close when grown on granite soils), it is similar in body and texture.

MALBEC (Red) [MAHL-beck]

Once important in Bordeaux and the Loire in various blends, this not-very-hardy grape has been steadily replaced by Merlot and the two Cabernets. However, Argentina is markedly successful with this varietal. In the United States Malbec is a blending grape only, and an insignificant one at that, but a few wineries use it, the most obvious reason being that it's considered part of the Bordeaux-blend recipe.

MARSANNE (White) [mahr-SANN]

Popular in the Rhône (along with Grenache Blanc, Roussanne and Viognier). Australia, especially in Victoria, has some of the world's oldest vineyards. At its best, Marsanne can be a full-bodied, moderately intense wine with spice, pear and citrus notes.

MERLOT (Red) [mur-LO]

Merlot is the red-wine success of the 1990s: its popularity has soared along with its acreage, and it seems wine lovers can't drink enough of it. It dominates Bordeaux, except for the Médoc and Graves. Though it is mainly used for the Bordeaux blend, it can stand alone. In St.-Emilion and Pomerol, especially, it produces noteworthy wines, culminating in Château Pétrus. In Italy it's everywhere, though most of the Merlot is light, unremarkable stuff. But Ornellaia and Fattoria de Ama are strong exceptions to that rule. Despite its popularity, its quality ranges only from good to very good most of the time, though there are a few stellar producers found around the world. Several styles have emerged. One is a Cabernet-style Merlot, which includes a high percentage (up to 25 percent) of Cabernet, similar currant and cherry flavors and firm tannins. A second style is less reliant on Cabernet, softer, more supple, medium-weight, less tannic and features more herb, cherry and chocolate flavors. A third style is a very light and simple wine; this type's sales are fueling Merlot's overall growth.

Like Cabernet, Merlot can benefit from some blending, as Cabernet can give it backbone, color and tannic strength. It also marries well with oak. Merlot is relatively new in California, dating to the early 1970s, and is a difficult grape to grow, as it sets and ripens unevenly. Many critics believe Washington State has a slight quality edge with this wine. By the year 2000, vintners should have a better idea of which areas are best suited to this grape variety. As a wine, Merlot's aging potential is fair to good. It may be softer with age, but often the fruit flavors fade and the herbal flavors dominate.

There is also an unrelated Merlot Blanc.

MOURVEDRE (Red) [more-VAY-druh]

As long as the weather is warm, Mourvèdre likes a wide variety of soils. It's popular across the south of France, especially in Provence and the Côtes-du-Rhône, and is often used in Châteauneuf-du-Pape; Languedoc makes it as a varietal. Spain uses it in many areas, including Valencia. In the United States it's a minor factor now, pursued by a few wineries that specialize in Rhône-style wines. The wine can be pleasing, with medium-weight, spicy cherry and berry flavors and moderate tannins. It ages well.

MUSCAT (White) [MUSS-kat]

Known as Muscat, Muscat Blanc and Muscat Canelli, it is marked by strong spice and floral notes and can be used in blending, its primary function in California. Moscato in Italy, Moscatel in Iberia: This grape can turn into anything from the low-alcohol, sweet and frothy Asti Spumante and Muscat de Canelli to bone-dry wines like Muscat d'Alsace. It also produces fortified wine such as Beaumes de Venise.

NEBBIOLO (Red) [NEH-bee-oh-low]

The great grape of Northern Italy, which excels there in Barolo and Barbaresco, strong, ageable wines. Mainly unsuccessful elsewhere, Nebbiolo also now has a small foothold in California. So far the wines are light and uncomplicated, bearing no resemblance to the Italian types.

PETITE SIRAH (Red) [peh-TEET sih-RAH]]

Known for its dark hue and firm tannins, Petite Sirah has often been used as a blending wine to provide color and structure, particularly to Zinfandel. On its own, Petite Sirah can also make intense, peppery, ageworthy wines, but few experts consider it as complex as Syrah itself.

There has been much confusion over the years about Petite Sirah's origins. For a long time, the grape was thought to be completely unrelated to Syrah, despite its name. Petite Sirah was believed to actually be Durif, a minor red grape variety first grown in southern France in the late 1800s. However, recent DNA research shows Petite Sirah and Syrah are related after all. A study done at the University of California at Davis determined not only that 90 percent of the Petite Sirah found in California is indeed Durif, but also that Durif is a cross between Peloursin and Syrah. Just to make things more confusing, in France, growers refer to different variants of Syrah as Petite and Grosse, which has to do with the yield of the vines.

PINOT BLANC (White) [PEE-no BLAHNK]

Often referred to as a poor man's Chardonnay because of its similar flavor and texture profile, Pinot Blanc is used in Champagne, Burgundy, Alsace, Germany, Italy and California and can make a terrific wine. When well made, it is intense, concentrated and complex, with ripe pear, spice, citrus and honey notes. Can age, but is best early on while its fruit shines through.

PINOT GRIS or **PINOT GRIGIO** (White) [PEE-no GREE or GREE-zho]

Known as **Pinot Grigio** in Italy, where it is mainly found in the northeast, producing quite a lot of undistinguished dry white wine and Collio's excellent whites. As Pinot Gris, it used to be grown in Burgundy and the Loire, though it has been supplanted, but it comes into its own in Alsace--where it's known as Tokay. Southern Germany plants it as Ruländer. When good, this varietal is soft, gently perfumed and has more color than most whites.

PINOT NOIR (Red) [PEE-no NWA]

Pinot Noir, the great grape of Burgundy, is a touchy variety. The best examples offer the classic black cherry, spice, raspberry and currant flavors, and an aroma that can resemble wilted roses, along with earth, tar, herb and cola notes. It can also be rather ordinary, light, simple, herbal, vegetal and occasionally weedy. It can even be downright funky, with pungent barnyard aromas. In fact, Pinot Noir is the most fickle of all grapes to grow: It reacts strongly to environmental changes such as heat and cold spells, and is notoriously fussy to work with once picked, since its thin

skins are easily bruised and broken, setting the juice free. Even after fermentation, Pinot Noir can hide its weaknesses and strengths, making it a most difficult wine to evaluate out of barrel. In the bottle, too, it is often a chameleon, showing poorly one day, brilliantly the next.

The emphasis on cooler climates coincides with more rigorous clonal selection, eliminating those clones suited for sparkling wine, which have even thinner skins. These days there is also a greater understanding of and appreciation for different styles of Pinot Noir wine, even if there is less agreement about those styles--should it be rich, concentrated and loaded with flavor, or a wine of elegance, finesse and delicacy? Or can it, in classic Pinot Noir sense, be both? Even varietal character remains subject to debate. Pinot Noir can certainly be tannic, especially when it is fermented with some of its stems, a practice that many vintners around the world believe contributes to the wine's backbone and longevity. Pinot Noir can also be long-lived, but predicting with any precision which wines or vintages will age is often the ultimate challenge in forecasting.

Pinot Noir is the classic grape of Burgundy and also of Champagne, where it is pressed immediately after picking in order to yield white juice. It is just about the only red grown in Alsace. In California, it excelled in the late 1980s and early 1990s and seems poised for further progress. Once producers stopped vinifying it as if it were Cabernet, planted vineyards in cooler climates and paid closer attention to tonnage, quality increased substantially. It's fair to say that California and Oregon have a legitimate claim to producing world-class Pinot Noir.

RIESLING (White) [REES-ling]

One of the world's greatest white wine grapes, the Riesling vine's hardy wood makes it extremely resistant to frost. The variety excels in cooler climates, where its tendency to ripen slowly makes it an excellent source for sweet wines made from grapes attacked by the noble rot *Botrytis cinerea*, which withers the grapes' skin and concentrates their natural sugar levels.

Riesling is best known for producing the wines of Germany's Mosel-Saar-Ruwer, Pfalz, Rheinhessen and Rheingau wines, but it also achieves brilliance in Alsace and Austria. While the sweet German Beerenauslese and Trockenbeerenauslese wines, along with Alsace's famed Selection de Grains Nobles, are often celebrated for their high sugar levels and ability to age almost endlessly, they are rare and expensive.

More commonly, Riesling produces dry or just off-dry versions. Its high acidity and distinctive floral, citrus, peach and mineral accents have won dry Riesling many fans. The variety pairs well with food and has an uncanny knack for transmitting the elements of its vineyard source (what the French call *terroir*).

The wines from Germany's Mosel region are perhaps the purest expression of the grape, offering lime, pie crust, apple, slate and honeysuckle characteristics on a light-bodied and racy frame. Germany's Rheinhessen, Rheingau and Pfalz regions produce wines of similar characteristics, but with increasing body and spice.

In Alsace, Riesling is most often made in a dry style, full-bodied, with a distinct petrol aroma. In Austria, Riesling plays second fiddle to Gruner Veltliner in terms of quantity, but when grown on favored sites it offers wines with great focus and clarity allied to the grape's typically racy frame.

In other regions, Riesling struggles to maintain its share of vineyard plantings, but it can be found (often under synonyms such as White Riesling, Rhine Riesling or Johannisberg Riesling) in California, Oregon, Washington, New York's Finger Lakes region, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, South America and Canada.

SANGIOVESE (Red) [san-geeo-VEHS-eh]

Sangiovese is best known for providing the backbone for many superb Italian red wines from Chianti and Brunello di Montalcino, as well as the so-called super-Tuscan blends. Sangiovese is distinctive for its supple texture and medium-to full-bodied spice, raspberry, cherry and anise flavors. When blended with a grape such as Cabernet Sauvignon, Sangiovese gives the resulting wine a smoother texture and lightens up the tannins.

It is somewhat surprising that Sangiovese wasn't more popular in California given the strong role Italian immigrants have played in the state's winemaking heritage, but now the grape appears to have a bright future in the state, both as a stand-alone varietal wine and for use in blends with Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and maybe even Zinfandel.

Expect sweeping stylistic changes as winemakers learn more about how the grape performs in different locales as well as how it marries with different grapes. Worth watching.

SAUVIGNON BLANC (White) [SO-vin-yon BLAHNK]

Another white with a notable aroma, this one "grassy" or "musky." The pure varietal is found mainly in the Loire, at Sancerre and Pouilly-Fumé. As part of a blend, the grape is all over Bordeaux, in Pessac-Léognan, Graves and the Médoc whites; it also shows up in Sauternes. New Zealand has had striking success with Sauvignon Blanc, producing its own perfumed, fruity style that spread across North America and then back to France.

In the United States, Robert Mondavi rescued the varietal in the 1970s by labeling it **Fumé Blanc**, and he and others have enjoyed success with it. The key to success seems to be in taming its overt varietal intensity, which at its extreme leads to pungent grassy, vegetal and herbaceous flavors. Many winemakers treat it like in a sort of poor man's Chardonnay, employing barrel fermentation, sur lie aging and malolactic fermentation. But its popularity comes as well from the fact that it is a prodigious producer and a highly profitable wine to make. It can be crisp and refreshing, matches well with foods, costs less to produce and grow than Chardonnay and sells for less. It also gets less respect from vintners than perhaps it should. Its popularity ebbs and flows, at times appearing to challenge Chardonnay and at other times appearing to be a cash-flow afterthought. But even at its best, it does not achieve the kind of richness, depth or complexity Chardonnay does and in the end that alone may be the defining difference. Sauvignon Blanc grows well in a variety of appellations. It marries well with oak and Sémillon, and many vintners are adding a touch of Chardonnay for extra body. The wine drinks best in its youth, but sometimes will benefit from short-term cellaring. As a late-harvest wine, it's often fantastic, capable of yielding amazingly complex and richly flavored wines.

SÉMILLON (White) [SEM-ih-yon]

On its own or in a blend, this white can age. With Sauvignon Blanc, its traditional partner, this is the foundation of Sauternes and most of the great dry whites found in Graves and Pessac-Léognan; these are rich, honeyed wines. Sémillon is one of the grapes susceptible to *Botrytis cinerea*. Australia's Hunter Valley uses it solo to make a full-bodied white that used to be known as Hunger Riesling, Chablis or White Burgundy. In South Africa it used to be so prevalent that it was just called "wine grape," but it has declined drastically in importance there.

In the United States, Sémillon enjoys modest success as a varietal wine in California and Washington, but it continues to lose ground in acreage in California. It can make a wonderful late-harvest wine, and those wineries that focus on it can make well balanced wines with complex fig, pear, tobacco and honey notes. When blended into Sauvignon Blanc, it adds body, flavor and texture. When Sauvignon Blanc is added to Sémillon, the latter gains grassy herbal notes.

It can also be found blended with Chardonnay, more to fill out the volume of wine than to add anything to the package.

SYRAH or **SHIRAZ** (Red) [sih-RAH or shih-RAHZ]

Hermitage and Côte-Rôtie in France, Penfolds Grange in Australia--the epitome of Syrah is a majestic red that can age for half a century. The grape seems to grow well in a number of areas and is capable of rendering rich, complex and distinctive wines, with pronounced pepper, spice, black cherry, tar, leather and roasted nut flavors, a smooth, supple texture and smooth tannins. In southern France it finds its way into various blends, as in Châteauneuf-du-Pape and Languedoc-Roussillon. Known as **Shiraz** in Australia, it was long used for bread-and-butter blends, but an increasing number of high-quality bottlings are being made, especially from old vines in the Barossa Valley.

In the United States., Syrah's rise in quality is most impressive. It appears to have the early-drinking appeal of Pinot Noir and Zinfandel and few of the eccentricities of Merlot, and may well prove far easier to grow and vinify than any other red wines aside from Cabernet.

TEMPRANILLO (Red) [temp-rah-NEE-yo]

Spain's major contribution to red wine, Tempranillo is indigenous to the country and is rarely grown elsewhere. It is the dominant grape in the red wines from Rioja and Ribera del Duero, two of Spain's most important wine regions. In Rioja, Tempranillo is often blended with Garnacha, Mazuelo and a few other minor grapes. When made in a traditional style, Tempranillo can be garnet-hued, with flavors of tea, brown sugar and vanilla. When made in a more modern style, it can display aromas and flavors redolent of plums, tobacco and cassis, along with very dark color and substantial tannins. Whatever the style, Riojas tend to be medium-bodied wines, offering more acidity than tannin.

In Ribera del Duero, wines are also divided along traditional and modern styles, and show similarities to Rioja. The more modern styled Riberas, however, can be quite powerful, offering a density and tannic structure similar to that of Cabernet Sauvignon.

Tempranillo is known variously throughout Spain as Cencibel, Tinto del Pais, Tinto Fino, Ull de Llebre and Ojo. It's also grown along the Douro River in Portugal under the monikers Tinta Roriz (used in the making of Port) and Tinta Aragonez.

TREBBIANO or **UGNI BLANC** (White) [treh-bee-AH-no or OO-nee BLAHNK]

This is Trebbiano in Italy and Ugni Blanc in France. It is tremendously prolific; low in alcohol but high in acidity, it is found in almost any basic white Italian wine. It is so ingrained in Italian winemaking that it is actually a sanctioned ingredient of the blend used for (red) Chianti and Vino Nobile di Montepulciano. Most current Tuscan producers do not add it to their wines, however.

The French, who also often call this grape St.-Émilion, used it for Cognac and Armagnac brandy; Ugni Blanc grapevines outnumbered Chardonnay by five to one in France during the '80s.

VIOGNIER (White) [vee-oh-NYAY]

Viognier, the rare white grape of France's Rhône Valley, is one of the most difficult grapes to grow. But fans of the floral, spicy white wine are thrilled by its prospects in the south of France and the new world. So far most of the Viogners produced in the United States are rather one-dimensional, with an abundance of spiciness but less complexity than they should have. Still, there are a few bright spots.

It is used in Condrieu's rare whites and sometimes blended with reds in the Northern Rhône. There are also a variety of bottlings available from southern France, most of them somewhat light.

ZINFANDEL (Red) [ZIHN-fan-dell]

The origins of this tremendously versatile and popular grape are not known for certain, although it is thought to have come from Southern Italy as a cousin of Primitivo. It is the most widely planted red grape in California (though Australia has also played around with the grape). Much of it is vinified into white Zinfandel, a bluish-colored, slightly sweet wine. Real Zinfandel, the red wine, is the quintessential California wine. It has been used for blending with other grapes, including Cabernet Sauvignon and Petite Sirah. It has been made in a claret style, with berry and cherry flavors, mild tannins and pretty oak shadings. It has been made into a full-bodied, ultraripe, intensely flavored and firmly tannic wine designed to age. And it has been made into late-harvest and Port-style wines that feature very ripe, raisiny flavors, alcohol above 15 percent and chewy tannins.

Zinfandel's popularity among consumers fluctuates. In the 1990s Zinfandel is enjoying another groundswell of popularity, as winemakers took renewed interest, focusing on higher-quality vineyards in areas well suited to Zinfandel. Styles aimed more for the mainstream and less for extremes, emphasizing the grape's zesty, spicy pepper, raspberry, cherry, wild berry and plum flavors, and its complex range of tar, earth and leather notes. Zinfandel lends itself to blending.

Zinfandel is a challenging grape to grow: its berry size varies significantly within a bunch, which leads to uneven ripening. Because of that, Zinfandel often needs to hang on the vine longer to ripen as many berries as possible.

Closer attention to viticulture and an appreciation for older vines, which tend to produce smaller crops of uniformly higher quality, account for better balanced wines.