

# The Unique Charms of ‘Miscellaneous Wines’

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From left: Domaine Ostertag Les Vieilles Vignes de Sylvaner; 2010 Jean-Charles Girard-Madoux Chignin; 2010 Bruno Lupin Cuvée du Pepe Roussette de Savoie Frangy; **2010 Dr. Frank Rkatsiteli**; 2011 Terre Blanche Riviera Ligure di Ponente Pigato (see details below).

MOST WINE LISTS are organized according to popular regions or grapes, although an additional category is often tacked on at the end. This is where wines that won't easily fit in one place or another are assigned—a category that's invariably and, some might say, ignominiously entitled "Miscellaneous Wines."

### **Oenophile**

#### **2010 Domaine Ostertag Les Vieilles Vignes de Sylvaner, \$22**

André Ostertag is probably one of the most unusual winemakers in Alsace (as well as one of the best). He makes a wide range of wines under his own personal classification system (Vins de Fruit, Vins de Pierre, Vins de Temps, etc.) and manages to wrest character and complexity out of an otherwise ordinary grape like Sylvaner. This wine is a zesty dry white that's wonderfully fresh and bright.

#### **2010 Jean-Charles Girard-Madoux Chignin, \$21**

The Jacquère grape is the star of this beautifully crisp, almost steely (think Chablis) white from the Savoy region of France. Produced at a small, up-and-coming estate in the village of Chignin (one of the best Savoy appellations), it's a terrific aperitif or a match with most seafood or shellfish.

#### **2010 Bruno Lupin Cuvée du Pepe Roussette de Savole Frangy, \$27**

The Savoy region is home to several notable white grapes—and one of the undisputed stars is Roussette aka Altesse. Bruno Lupin's version of the grape, produced in Frangy (one of the region's top crus), is reminiscent of a good Chenin Blanc: dry and mineral, yet rich, rather lush and full-bodied. It's an impressive wine at a very fair price.

#### **2010 Dr. Frank Rkatsiteli, \$18**

There aren't many (any?) winemakers I can think of who would stake their reputations—successfully—on a Russian grape planted in New York's Finger Lakes. But that's what Dr. Frank did back in the 1960s, to great effect. This is a lovely, dry white with a long, mineral finish.

#### **2011 Terre Bianche Riviera Ligure di Ponente Pigato, \$27**

The Pigato grape (a clone of the more famous Vermentino) is the most important wine grape in Liguria (a tiny region on Italy's northwestern coast) and Terre Bianche has long been considered one of its top producers. This is a soft, almost savory white with distinctly flowery aromas.

Both reds and whites are grouped in this manner and the latter might include such disparate offerings as a New York Rkatsiteli, a Pigato from Liguria, a Sicilian Grillo and a Jacquère or two from the Savoy region of France. Why put such wines in the same place? The most likely explanation is space—most restaurants don't want a wine list that's overly long, often because of the wine drinkers themselves. Not many people are patient enough to leaf through page after page of grapes they've never heard of or wine regions they're unlikely to visit.

Some wine directors, finding their customers aren't moved by the word "miscellaneous," might craft a more flattering title: "Interesting Wines" is one I've seen fairly often, though as Cat Silirie, wine director of No. 9 Park in Boston, pointed out, that particular rubric would seem to imply that everything else is rather dull. Ms. Silirie, who won the 2012 James Beard wine program award, found this kind of categorization "demeaning" to wines like Traminer, Muscat and Godello. (Ms. Silirie organizes her list according to both region and grape.)

I'm not sure if the miscellaneous category is actually demeaning, especially since I often find wines listed there that I want to try. One reason is price. The obscure and uncurated will almost always cost less than the well known and well placed. If you don't know what a wine is, you're unlikely to pay a high price for it. (There are exceptions of course—for example, an obscure Trebbiano from Abruzzo made by Valentini can cost almost as much as a premier cru Burgundy.)

A miscellaneous wine is likely to be one that a sommelier loves and feels personally connected to, especially since it's a wine that's not likely to sell itself. A miscellaneous wine often pairs well with food—for the same reason as above. (Sommeliers rarely favor non-food-friendly wine.) And yet miscellaneous wines, broadly speaking, don't seem

to get a lot of attention or love. That's one reason why I embarked on a summer-friendly all-white-miscellaneous-wine tasting earlier this month.

I turned first to Italy and France, two countries that produce a lot of wines that end up in the miscellaneous section of wine lists. This is hardly surprising since there are thousands of different varieties in Italy alone and hundreds of different grapes officially recognized in France.

In both countries, famous grapes are often cultivated alongside lesser knowns. For example, in Italy's Piedmont region there are familiar white grapes like Moscato and Gavi, as well as lesser known varieties like Erbaluce and Arneis. Ditto the Savoy region in southeastern France, where white grapes like Jacquère and Mondeuse Blanche coexist with the more popular globe-trotting Pinot Gris.

But it's Italy that offers a veritable roll call of world-class "miscellaneous" white grapes—in fact, the obscure whites of Italy could fill an entire wine list. From north to south, the country is thickly planted with consonant-rich grapes like Pecorino, Asprinio, Fiano, Pigato, Catarratto and Grillo, to name just a (very) few. And thanks to a recent resurgence of interest in native varieties, these grapes are responsible for some of the most interesting wines made in Italy today.

The Pigato grape grown in Liguria has long been one of my favorites. Though it's recently been named a clonal cousin of Vermentino—a far more famous grape—a good Pigato from a top producer like Bruna or Terre Bianche can be even more nuanced, with aromas of almonds and citrus. A good Pigato can also age particularly well. Further south, in Sicily and Campania, there are lots of terrific "miscellaneous" grapes, like the crisp Grillo and the ancient Fiano with its distinctive scent of hazelnuts.

The wines of Savoy, in the Alpine region of eastern France, have become so popular in recent years that they may be elevated beyond the miscellaneous category sometime soon. With a characteristic bright acidity and a profile that ranges from light and flowery with mineral notes (whites made from the Jacquère grape) to a richer, more rounded profile (wines made from Roussette aka Altesse), Savoy wines also pair well with food. They also tend to be very good deals; some top Savoy wines are priced at less than a generic bottle of village Burgundy, often under \$20 a bottle. There aren't any famous names (yet) though one of the best-known Savoy producers is Pierre Boniface, whose Apremont bottling is fairly easy to find—and to drink. There are even more complex offerings from producers like Jean-Charles Girard-Madoux and Domaine Lupin.

There are plenty of other pockets of French obscurity, to be sure. For example, in Languedoc and the Rhône, the Picpoul grape is the source of some fresh, uncomplicated whites. In Alsace, grapes like Chasselas and Sylvaner are planted near well-known grapes like Riesling and Gewürztraminer. While the first two aren't particularly prized, in the hands of a great producer like André Ostertag, Sylvaner can actually achieve a rare measure of distinction. The Ostertag Sylvaner is a stainless-steel-fermented wine with a long, mineral finish—and at \$22 a bottle, it's a lot cheaper than wines made from more recognizable Alsace grapes.

Spain and Portugal are also fine sources for worthy obscurities. The grapes Xarel-lo in the Penedès and Godella in Galicia produce appealing whites that can sometimes be found in the miscellaneous section of wide-ranging wine lists, as can Rabigato, a high-acidity white grape grown in Portugal's Douro Valley.

The United States is the one country that doesn't produce many miscellaneous wines (a bit of an irony considering we popularized the category on wine lists). There are exceptions, of course, and two of my favorites are both produced in New York: the Channing Daughters Tocai Friulano, a crisp dry white made from a Friulian grape, **and a mineral white Rkatsiteli, a Russian grape grown**

**by Dr. Konstantin Frank Vinifera Wine Cellars in the Finger Lakes district.**

I tasted the latter in the company of Charles Massoud, owner of Paumanok Winery (where he makes Long Island's only Chenin Blanc). When Mr. Massoud commented favorably on the wine, I asked if he'd consider making a Rkatsiteli too. He demurred. There were many wines that he liked but he didn't want to "lose focus."

My miscellaneous tasting was far from focused but yielded lots of delicious results. From Alsace Sylvaner to Altesse from Savoy, Arneis in Piedmont, Scheurebe from Germany and Pigato in Liguria (and more), I found characterful wines that were as distinctive as they were well-priced. Perhaps more people would order from the miscellaneous section of a wine list if it were retitled. Wines for the Adventurous? Or Wines You'd Probably Never Consider (but Should). I'd call them Wines I'd Drink Again and Again.