

Viognier



By George Parkinson
Certified Sommelier

I was attending a wine event earlier this year, and, as I sipped various blends and single varietals, moving from table to table around the event, I kept hearing others ask these questions, "How do you pronounce it?" and "What type of wine is it?", followed by the declarative statement, "I have never heard of that."

Simply pronounced [vee - un - yea], the word will twist up anyone's tongue just reading it silently. Once spoken, the next most difficult thing about it is finding one you don't like. This wine speaks "Springtime" better than most other things. Known to many wine enthusiasts and found all over the world, it still does not surprise me when I hear people proclaim that they have never heard of this wine grape.

A well-made Viognier will offer rich aromatics of peach, stone fruit and wildflowers, followed by a medium



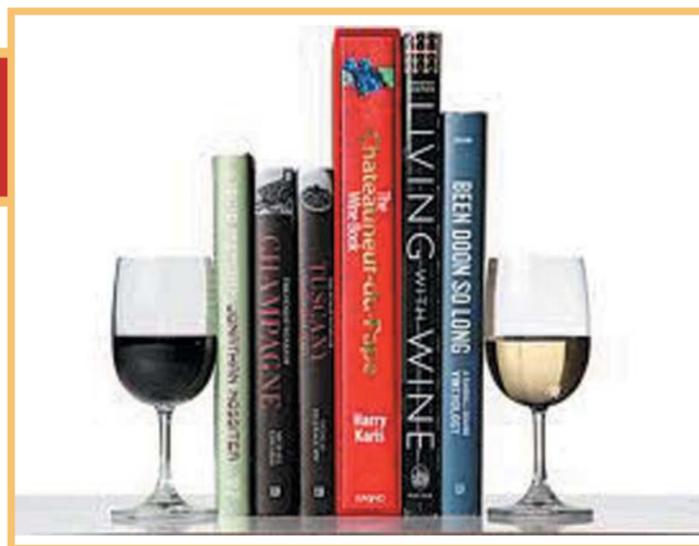
to full body that can be lush and viscous with the right amount of acid. The grapevine has some issues in the vineyard, and its fruit can be a bit of a challenge in the winery as well; but difficulties aside, the wines from the best fruit can be one of the finest wines on the planet for the spring season.

Viognier is thought to be an ancient wine grape, but its actual birthplace is unclear. Legend has it that the Romans brought it from the Dalmatian coast in Croatia and planted it as they conquered Europe. It is related to the Freisa grape found in Piedmont, Italy and a genetic cousin of the Nebbiolo grape, which is famous for the great Barolos of that region.

The vine may take up to 15 years to reach its production peak, and, in the Rhone region, you will find producing vines 50 years old and more. It produces lower yields as opposed to Chardonnay, and the fruit can quickly lose its aromatics if fermentation isn't controlled very closely. Those aromatics and the richness of body make the wine a perfect alternative to Chardonnay, and a perfect food pair to spring diets.

While the vine is grown all over the world, as late as 1965, it was close to becoming extinct, with only around 30 acres existing on the planet. Those vines thrived in the French wine region of the Côte du Rhône. In this area, Viognier is the only white grape permitted to grow in the AOC of Condrieu. It makes a tremendous white wine here and at times a blend partner for Syrah as an aromatic and softening addition. After it was found in Condrieu, the Viognier grape was planted in other areas around the world. It is grown and produced in Australia, across the U.S., and in Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, Brazil, and New Zealand.

Where the growing season is shorter and the fruit has less time to fully ripen, Viognier will often show a pale to straw yellow color, higher acidity, and muted aromatics of stone fruit. In warmer conditions where the growing



season is longer, the fruit can produce higher alcohol, more honeyed fruit notes, and much lower acids along with a deeper golden hue in color. Styles of wine range from sparkling or Méthode Champenoise, late harvest to dry and semi-dry. Viognier is a great blending grape and also offers those aroma notes to two other white varieties found in the Côte du Rhône, Marsanne, and Roussanne. You will also find it blended with Chardonnay and a few reds such as the aforementioned Syrah.

Foods perfect for this wine begin with fresh spring green salads, sorrel, arugula, spinach, and kale. Scallops, tiger prawns, lobster, and halibut are great partners along with roasted chicken and grilled pork loin and veal. There may not be a cheese that won't like this wine either, but any triple cream or ripened brie will be great. Desserts of fresh spring straw-berries and pastry as well as yogurt parfaits pair well with it as a finish to the meal.

Viognier will show you an impressive range of flavor from regions around the world. Sharing the wine is a great way to liven up the patio with friends on a warm spring afternoon, as well as impress guests with a wine they may not know or find easy to pronounce.

Try any of these Viogniers this spring season. They will not disappoint.

\$15 Cambria Estate Winery - CA
Some citrus bound by a creamy texture and notes of pear. The wine is a fuller style grown in Santa Maria Valley, which has the longest growing season in the U.S.

\$25 Horton Vineyards - VA
Blended with 5% Roussanne, this is a fuller body with lush flavors of tropical fruit. The wine is partially barrel fermented, which adds a note of vanilla and caramel.

\$18 McPherson Cellars - TX
Fermented entirely in stainless steel, the wine is a light body style with notes of nectarine and orange blossom.

\$25 Unionville Vineyards - NJ
I offer this wine on the wine list at The Peacock Inn, and it never disappoints. It is 50% Viognier blended with 25% Roussanne and 25% Marsanne as one would find in France. The wine shows notes of peach, honeysuckle, and apple.

\$60 Yves Cuilleron La Petite Côte - Condrieu FRA
Grown near the village of Chavanay, France, this wine shows notes of apricots and honey. Nine months of oak age and stirring of the lees gives the wine a creamy note on the palate.

George Parkinson is presently the Sommelier for the historic Peacock Inn, Princeton NJ. He is an active member of the Court of Master Sommeliers, Americas and is studying for his advanced level. George has over 30 years of experience in the wine and hospitality industries and lives in Hilltown Township PA with his family.

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