

# GRENACHE

## THE GRAPE YOU KNOW, YOU JUST DON'T KNOW IT

Widely planted, and a contributor to some of the world's greatest wines, Grenache is all too often overlooked in favor of more glamorous varieties. **Tim Atkin MW** reports from an ambitious recent event that highlighted why this grape deserves greater recognition and how it might be secured

Seminars—or symposia, if you prefer—dedicated to individual grape varieties are increasingly common in the world of wine. Pinot Noir is the most popular—largely, one suspects, because it is hedonistic, tricky to grow, and has five-star nerd appeal—but it's not alone. Over the years, I've attended events focusing on Syrah, Cabernet Sauvignon, Sauvignon Blanc, Grüner Veltliner, Riesling, Sangiovese, Nebbiolo, Petite Sirah, Zinfandel, Tempranillo, and Huxelrebe. (I made the last one up, but you wait.)



Alvaro Palacios and Telmo Rodriguez from Spain; and Vincent Avril and Daniel Brunier from nearby Châteauneuf-du-Pape is doing fine, thank you. The only significant absentee was Emmanuel Raynaud of Château Rayas, who still sent wine to represent his legendary domaine.

The Grenache Symposium was created by two Brits and an American. The former are the debonair wine writer Steven Spurrier and Walter McKinlay of Domaine de Mourchon in Séguret; the

latter, the dynamic, multilingual Nicole Rolet, owner of La Verrière and producer of Chêne Bleu. Significantly (and I think all too predictably), local winemakers were initially skeptical about the idea of promoting a grape that helps pay their utility bills, accusing the organizers of self-promotion. But as G-Day—June 6—approached, more and more of them decided to get involved. The same could not be said for the French press, alas. Michel Bettane, the co-president of the Grenache Symposium, was the only representative of the Gallic Fourth Estate.

The aim of the two-day event was to “give Grenache its proper place in the world of wine,” according to Spurrier. “It’s the southern grape par excellence. No other variety is more reliable or versatile than Grenache.” Rolet introduced a quasi-spiritual dimension to the proceedings: “We are here for a slightly higher purpose—to achieve something that is greater than what we could achieve individually.”

To do so, the symposium broke with tradition. Instead of papers, delivered *ex cathedra* from a podium by a single individual, or panel discussions chaired by a moderator, it began with a day of brainstorming. Delegates split into groups to debate different facets of Grenache and, where

appropriate, to propose a series of action points. These findings were presented to the delegates the next day. There was a viticulture panel (“Grenache Vines: Ubiquitous but Uneven?”), two winemaking panels (“Grenache versus Other Varietals” and “Taming the Beast: The Art of Good Grenache”), two press panels (both called “Grenache in the Eyes of the Opinion Makers”), an on-trade panel (“Can Grenache Pull Its Weight at the Table?”), and an off-trade panel (“Grenache: Friends and Foes”).

### Strengths and weaknesses

What are the variety's strengths and weaknesses? On the plus side, Grenache is a good blending grape (with Syrah, Mourvèdre, Carignan, Cinsaut, and even Cabernet), though it can also produce excellent varietal wines. It is frequently produced in unirrigated vineyards (useful for climate change and its reputation as an *eco-cépage*), is widely planted (number four for reds in the world, though in decline), is easy to grow, expresses its terroir, has lots of old vines, makes a number of different styles—from white, to pink, to red, to fortified—and has three famous appellations where it has long been the dominant grape variety (Châteauneuf-du-Pape, Gigondas, and Priorat), even if they don't publicize the fact, though they may do so more. Grenache is a quintessentially Mediterranean grape. It's also approachable relatively young, consumer-friendly, and it makes reasonably priced wines.

And the downside? Apart from the lack of consumer recognition, Grenache's weaknesses are that it is sometimes perceived as a second-tier variety, that it's planted in (some of) the wrong places, that it can make overly alcoholic head-banger wines, that it has few star names (apart from Rayas and Priorat's Ermita, delegates found it hard to name any pure Grenache wines with an international following), and that it is oxidative, potentially high-yielding, and hard to grow well. More than one producer mentioned Pinot Noir and Nebbiolo, not necessarily in a positive way. Grenache is neglected and, worse, targeted by the EU's vine-pull scheme, suffers by comparison with that ultimate *cépage améliorateur* Syrah, and is often vinified by couldn't-care-less cooperatives in France and Spain.

### Forward fruitfully

What's the way forward? We agreed that it's important to get more people to taste Grenache (and recognize its contribution to certain blends), to emphasize its Mediterranean links, to talk about its diversity as a one-stop grape, and to use the fame of its most celebrated home, Châteauneuf-du-Pape, to promote the variety as a whole. The producers from Châteauneuf who were at the symposium didn't dismiss the idea of the appellation urging producers to list the proportion of Grenache on their back labels, but nor were they overly enthusiastic about it. *On verra*, as the French say—“We'll see.”

Suggested slogans to promote Grenache included: “The grape you know, you just don't know it,” “Drink Grenache, drink the Mediterranean,” “Grenache: the perfect partner,”

“You'll look posh if you drink Grenache,” “Grenache: the Pinot Noir of the south,” and “Grenache: the other noble grape.” There was also talk of information packs for sommeliers, an annual Grenache Day in September, neck labels, and turning Grenache into an Internet and social-media presence.

Another topic was proper service temperature—a subject all too relevant later that afternoon, when producers struggled to keep their reds from turning into alcoholic soup. The tastings were held in a sweltering tent surrounded by fans and full of ice buckets after French customs stopped La Verrière using its own cellars. Don't you love that legendary French spirit of cooperation?

### Tasting Grenache

There were two opportunities to taste a range of Grenache and Grenache-based wines, poured in many instances by the people who made them. In no particular order, my highlights were 2007 Clos des Fées La Petite Siberie from the Roussillon, 2007 Domaine Richaud Cairanne, 2009 Alvaro Palacios Sierra de Yerga Rioja, 2007 Clos Mogador Espectacle Montsant, 2001 Torbreck Les Amis Barossa Valley, 2007 D'Arenberg Ironstone Pressings McLaren Vale, 2007 Domaine de la Janasse Cuvée Chaupin Châteauneuf-du-Pape, 1998 Beaucastel Hommage à Jacques Perrin Châteauneuf-du-Pape, 2007 Tablas Creek Grenache Paso Robles, 2007 Baigorri Rioja Garnacha, 2008 Nekeas El Chaparral Navarra, 2007 Huellas Priorat, 2007 Gourt de Mautens Rasteau, 2004 Terre Inconnue Vin de Table, 2007 Clos de Trias Côtes du Ventoux, 2007 Cros de la Mûre Gigondas, and 2007 Château Simian Les Grandes Grenachières d'Hippolyte Châteauneuf-du-Pape. Many of these wines were pure Grenache; but blended or unblended, I have no doubt the grape belongs in the front rank.

Sadly, not everyone agrees. According to Claude Bourguignon, who chaired the viticultural think tank, Grenache has lost 40,000ha (100,000 acres) of vineyards in the past decade, many of them precious old vines in Spain and France. Peter Schultz of Turkey Flat in Australia argued that we are at “crunch time” for the variety in other countries, too. “Winemakers have to be prepared to pay prices that insure economic viability for old, low-yielding vineyards, or those vineyards will disappear.” Hervé Bizeul of Clos des Fées argued that “not enough producers are proud of the fact that they make Grenache. If you tell consumers it's an inferior grape, they will believe you.”

### Aux armes, citoyens!

The first gathering of Grenache lovers ended on an upbeat note, however. Michel Bettane, France's leading wine writer, concluded the symposium with a call to arms. “Our first job,” he said, “is to protect old-vine Grenache and stop people pulling them out. Then we need to get producers to put Grenache on front and back labels, where it belongs. As we've discovered this weekend, Grenache really is the perfect partner—or *l'ami de tous*, as we say in French. Now as a matter of urgency, it's time to tell the rest of the world.” ■