



Looking Past Big Names

Little-Known Wines Can Reap Big Benefits; A Genuine Appreciation

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Andrew Barker grew up near Napa Valley with a wine called Charbono and still has a soft spot for it, not to mention one last bottle of Inglenook's 1968 Charbono. Ask Mr. Barker, who now lives in Seattle, what's so special about Charbono and he links adjectives: "tradition, great structure, cachet," just for starters. And we know how he feels. We, too, remember the Charbono of our youth -- big, spicy and proud. The most memorable bottle we ever had was a 1977 Inglenook that we drank in 1987 with veal chops. "Delicious," we wrote. "Lots of black fruit, yet a real dryness. Mature, but not at all over the hill." Never tried a Charbono? It's not too late. There is still some out there. They're hard to find, but they exist, along with some made-in-the-U.S.A. Valdiguié and Cinsault and even Rkatsiteli.

The world is full of interesting, different grape types. Walk into just about any store and you might think every acre is planted with only Chardonnay, Merlot, Sauvignon Blanc, Shiraz, Pinot Noir and Cabernet Sauvignon. But passionate, committed American vintners continue to make small amounts of all sorts of wine, often for their own amusement, because they personally like the wine or for sentimental reasons. These are wines that you will rarely read about because they are so quirky and made in such small quantities. As a group, though, there are quite a few of them out there. Some are made from grapes that are simply obscure. Others are made from grapes that are common somewhere else in the world, but rare in the U.S.

An Important Lesson

We can't stress this too strongly: When you see a varietal on the shelves that you've never seen before, give it a try and you're likely to have a fun, interesting experience. It's impossible to know if you will like the wine, but part of the fun of wine is experiencing the unknown. One important lesson on the road to a genuine love of wine is appreciating wines that might not be exactly your cup of tea.

We spent a little while visiting wine stores in New York and Florida recently to see what kind of unusual American varietals we could find. We tasted them over several nights -- not blind, because we only had one or two of each type -- and here's a half-case of our favorites. We list them only to give an idea of the very unusual stuff on shelves and some sense of the interesting stories behind them. We have listed the price we paid, but prices, especially on unusual stuff, vary widely.

● **Mahoney Vineyards Vermentino 2006 (Las Brisas Vineyard, Carneros).** \$22.99. If you've never heard of Vermentino, you're not alone. It's better known in Sardinia, for instance, than in the U.S. This was dry, crisp, clean, refreshing and fun. Why use choice land in Carneros for such an odd grape? Francis Mahoney told us that he makes Vermentino because of a vow to his wife, Kathy, during a visit to her family home in Liguria, Italy, in 2000. "I made a promise to my wife that I'll plant every varietal that your family puts in front of us," said Mr. Mahoney, whose winery is better known for its Pinot Noir. He searched for some cuttings and eventually planted 300 vines. "We just loved the bright, fresh taste of it. It's like a white peach. When we introduced it in our tasting room, we had to teach people to spell it and then to pronounce it. Two years later, we ran out of it in seven days. It was unbelievable." The winery makes around 1,400 cases and it's distributed in about 10 states.

● **Shooting Star Aligoté 2005 (Washington State).** \$18.95. Aligoté is the "other" white grape in Burgundy, where Chardonnay rules. This was charming and earthy, with some weight, and clearly meant for food. There are just five acres of Aligoté in Washington. Why is Jed Steele, who first became famous as the winemaker at Kendall-Jackson, making one? An old friend made an Aligoté in Washington and used to send some to Mr. Steele. "He was so proud of it and I became a fan," Mr. Steele said. In time, the winery in Washington was bought by a large company that had no use for the Aligoté, so Mr. Steele decided to purchase the grapes himself. He makes from 1,000 to 1,500 cases and it's distributed across the country.

● **L'Ecole No. 41 "Bottle Fermented" Sémillon 2003 (Columbia Valley).** \$18.99. Sémillon is a traditional blending partner with Sauvignon Blanc, both for dry and sweet wines -- it adds richness and some weight -- but it's unusual to see it as a varietal in the U.S. (this is 13% Sauvignon Blanc). This was quite a wine, with earthy richness that demanded attention. L'Ecole produces four Sémillons, including a late-harvest one. "Sometimes I joke that that's three Sémillons too many," said Martin Clubb, who owns the winery with his wife, Megan, whose parents, Baker and Jean Ferguson, founded the winery. It has been making Sémillon since 1983, Mr. Clubb told us, because his father-in-law loved white Bordeaux from Graves "and that kind of set us down that road." He explained that "after years of hand-selling the wine, hoping that some day it would garnish some recognition, the last several years have been rewarding for our Sémillon. We always felt we were pushing a new wine onto people. It doesn't feel that way anymore. We're known for it now. It's our niche white wine." It's distributed in about 46 states and a little more than half of it goes to restaurants. The winery produces from 3,000 to 4,000 cases of this Semillon each year.

● **Konstantin D. Frank & Sons Vinifera Wine Cellars Rkatsiteli 2006 (Finger Lakes).** \$23.99. *And you thought Viognier was hard to pronounce. This is pronounced something like "R Cat Si Telly." It's crisp and floral, with peaches, kiwi and lychee and a shake of white pepper. It's planted throughout Eastern Europe, but is very rare in the U.S. This has been a little specialty of this New York winery for years. Frederick Frank, who inherited the winery, started by his grandfather, after his father's death last year, says the wine has become so popular that the family added acreage of it, so it now has 10 acres. The winery produces about 3,000 cases that are distributed in 30 states. "There's a lot of interest in this varietal because it is one of the oldest known wine grapes, going back thousands of years. They have found seeds of it in early clay pottery used for winemaking and at one time it was one of the most widely planted grapes," Mr. Frank said.*

● **St. Amant Winery Tempranillo 2003 (Amador County).** \$17.95. Tempranillo is the great grape of Spain's Rioja, but it's pretty unusual in California. The St. Amant was exceptionally smooth, with blueberries, blackberries, plums and a dash of lemon, with a very nice earthiness underneath. In 1979, the late Tim Spencer, who loved Port, grafted more than two acres of Zinfandel vines to five traditional Douro Valley Port varietals. His first "Port" was bottled in 1981 and he was so happy with it that he eventually started experimenting with Tempranillo, his son Stuart, co-owner and winemaker, told us. "It was a natural progression. He was always looking for alternative things to do," Mr. Spencer said. "Our opinion has always been that there are thousands of wines in the marketplace and thousands of wineries and you need a niche. We found this one and we think our wines do well with our soil and our climate." The winery makes about 500 cases of Tempranillo a year that are distributed to five states and, like many unusual wines, shipped directly from the winery to consumers in states where that's allowed.

● **Summers Winery Charbono 2005 (Villa Andriana Vineyard, Napa Valley).** \$31.00. This takes us full-circle, and it's a good example of our point that these wines are out there somewhere. We weren't looking for Charbono, but happened to see this on a shelf in New York. We've been fans of Summers' Charbono since we first tasted it at the winery a few years ago. It's like an old friend. It has a beautiful deep red-purple color and tastes of ripe, red berries with a surprising vitality from good acidity. It reminds us of a very drinkable Italian red. There are just about 80 acres of Charbono in California. Jim Summers, the co-owner, says that in 1996 he saw an advertisement for the winery in The Wall Street Journal and "purposely bought the wine property because it had Charbono on it. I was fascinated with it. But it was the Rodney Dangerfield of wine for the first couple or three years." In those first years his primary buyers were the members of the Charbono Society at Inglenook. Now Summers has to limit purchases at the winery to two bottles per customer. The winery distributes the 1,400 to 2,000 cases it makes in 20 states. "Sometimes I joke that we're the Ernest Gallo of Charbono," Mr. Summers says, because he says no other California winery makes that much. In fact, Mr. Summers said he always wondered how many wineries produced Charbono, so a few years ago they all got together and there were 15, producing a total of around 4,000 cases. "We love the wine," he says. "It's a big part of who we are."