

# The Anti-Chardonnay

What to drink now? The Rhone whites of California -- Viognier, Marsanne, Roussanne, and the like -- are lovely wines for summer sipping, and perfect with summer food.

BY PATRICK COMISKEY

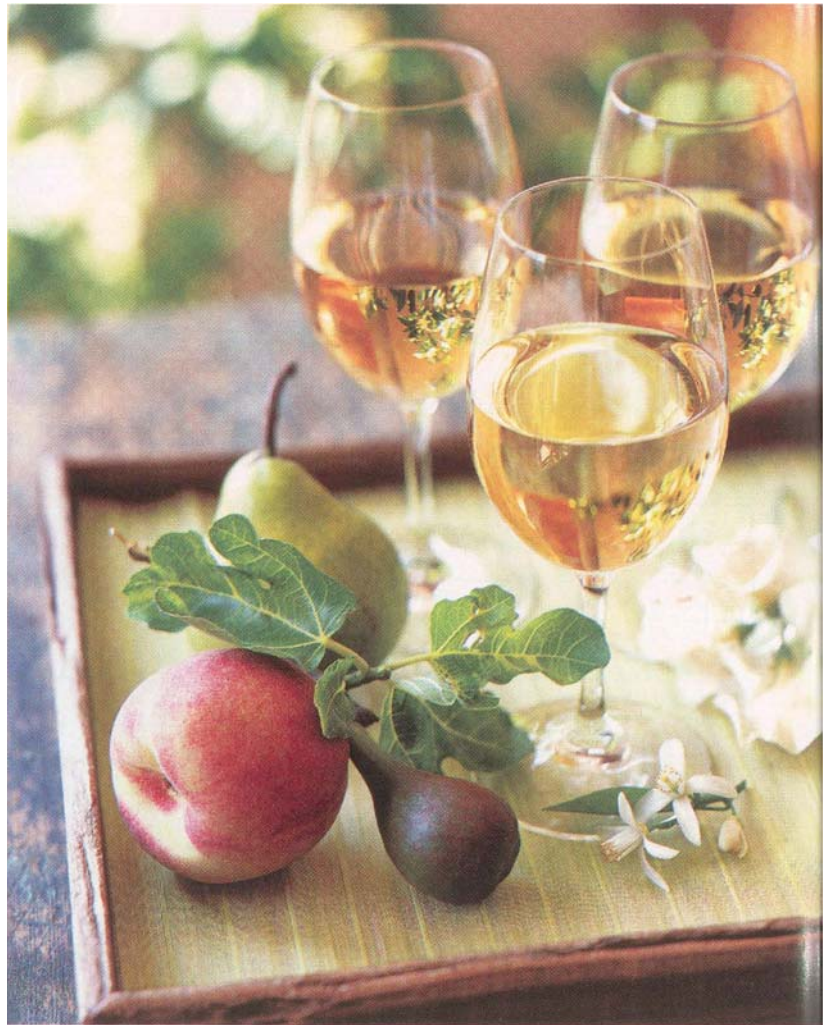
If you've never tasted an American Rhône-style white wine, your first sip might feel like a shock to the system. The flavors are so unlike the usual American whites – buttery Chardonnay, citrusy Sauvignon Blanc, lean Pinot Gris — that nothing really prepares you for the strangely exotic aromas of hothouse flowers and orange blossoms and flavors of fresh peach, apricot, or mango. Or for the weight of the wine as it takes over your mouth, and for the finish that lingers, from honeycomb to hibiscus. These are the aromas and flavors we've come to love in our desserts, gardens, and greenmarkets this time of year. They are equally alluring in the glass.

The French have long enjoyed these refreshing whites – made mostly from Viognier, Marsanne, and Roussanne – though perhaps not as universally as the better known reds of the Rhône Valley. The region is home to 22 grape varieties, 9 of them white. But while the Roussanne-driven wines of the Southern Rhône region, the Marsanne-based blends of Hermitage, and the famed Viogniers of Condrieu are certainly less well known than white wines from Burgundy or Champagne, they're every bit as good. In fact, our country's first connoisseur-in-chief, Thomas Jefferson, praised the white Hermitage in his collection as “the first wine in the world, without exception.”

In this country, Viognier, Marsanne, and Roussanne plantings are increasingly common (a fourth, Grenache Blanc, is rapidly gaining currency). But aside from turning up in the odd experimental vineyard, they haven't been around long – less than 20 years. And all of them, Viognier especially, might have been lost forever, even in the Rhône Valley, had it not been for an American named John Alban.

When Alban started his wine studies at Fresno State in the early '80s, Viognier plantings in the Northern Rhône region of Condrieu had shrunk dramatically, because many winemakers had begun to abandon the grape. Then one evening in Fresno, Alban and a fellow enology student celebrated their birthdays together and tried to stump each other with obscure wines. His friend brought something called Condrieu, made from a grape neither of them knew how to pronounce – the mysterious “vee-own-NYAY.”

Alban says that the experience of tasting Viognier was mind-



altering. Within a year he was in Condrieu, knocking on doors to learn more about this grape variety with the funny name and if possible, how to grow it. After a year in France, and several more spent gathering plant material, Alban laid down his first vineyard in Arroyo Grande on California's Central Coast, and founded a winery, Alban Vineyards. In doing so, he believes, he doubled the worldwide acreage for the grape, almost certainly rescuing Viognier from oblivion.

Alban's winery was the first in the US to devote itself entirely to Rhône grapes – a considerable risk, since most Americans had never heard of those varieties. But other Rhône Rangers were catching the white Rhône bug: Calera's Josh Jensen planted Viognier on his estate on Mt. Harlan; soon other California vint-

## Wine & Spirits

ners like Joseph Phelps, Qupé's Bob Lindquist, Steve Edmunds of Edmunds St. John, and Bonny Doon's Randall Graham all started to experiment with white Rhône varieties, adding Marsanne and Roussanne to the repertoire.

The movement got a huge boost in 1989 with the founding of Tablas Creek Vineyard in Paso Robles. Tablas Creek is a joint venture between the family of longtime wine importer Robert Haas and the Perrin family of Châteauneuf-du-Pape, which owns Château de Beaucastel. Tablas Creek transported estate vine cuttings of every grape variety planted in Châteauneuf, which they later offered for sale to help offset the expense of the project. Rhône aficionados all over California and Washington could finally purchase vines, impeccable selections from one of the region's most revered estates. Acreage for these varieties has since exploded; they're not exactly household names, but no one, not even John Alban, could have predicted the revolution he inspired.

Of the three main varieties, Viognier is probably the best known. Many possess an exotic floral nose of camellia, tuberose – ever paperwhite – and tropical fruit flavors of peach and apricot, with leaner versions, tending toward pear and ripe apple. “Viognier doesn't have the screaming signature of, say, New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc,” explains Jason Haas, Tablas Creek's general manager (and Robert's son), “but it's not as neutral as Chardonnay. It has a character all its own.”

Roussanne is a little trickier. Like a child with a short attention span, its flavors doesn't seem to stay in one place. Take one sip and it tastes like apricot marmalade; take another, and you might find honey or hazelnut. “It's so hard to nail it down,” says Steve Beckmen of Beckmen Vineyards. “One minutes it's one thing, and the next it's completely different.”

Marsanne, meanwhile, is the plain Jane of the group; usually it feels broader in the mouth than the others, with flavors that also tend toward stone fruits, as well as tangerine and orange peel. However, its seeming neutrality makes it quite versatile with food like grilled shrimp or piquant crab cakes. That's Marsanne's subtle gift. In fact, all of these wines are a marvel with shellfish; their rich-

ness and weight make them ideal for seafood pastas, and they can hold up to cream sauces.

Both here and in the Rhône Valley, these grapes are frequently blended, which often leads to something more interesting and complex; it's also a way for one grape's strength to play off that of another. Roussanne's gravity, for example, grounds Viognier's more exuberant tendencies in a blend called “Shell and Bone” from Edmunds St. John. Or you can find other combinations for unique, complex blends, like Beckmen's Le Bec Blanc, a blend of Marsanne, Roussanne, and Grenache Blanc. Better yet, experiment with one of these exciting white wines at your next dinner party, and watch your guests' faces as they discover a new summer crush.

*Patrick Comiskey is a senior correspondent at Wine & Spirits magazine.*

### TASTING CALIFORNIA'S RHÔNE WHITES

The rich, fruity flavors of these full-bodied wines are refreshing summer sippers that pair well with grilled chicken or pork, seafood, and spicy cuisines.

**Qupé 2005 Marsanne, Santa Ynez Valley (\$18)** Blended with 16 percent Roussanne, this Marsanne is rich with orange oil aromas and a nutty pear flavor.

**Beckmen Vineyards 2005 Le Bec Blanc, Santa Ynez Valley (\$20)** A blend of Roussanne, Marsanne, and Grenache Blanc, this lively wine has peach blossom aromas and a hint of wild fennel and honey.

**Edmunds St. John 2005 “Shell and Bone” White, Paso Robles (\$20)** This blend of Viognier and Roussanne combines the best of each, with a scent of peach blossom, orange oil, and honey.

**Alban Vineyards 2006 Central Coast Viognier, Arroyo Grande (\$23)** Ripe and exotic, with peach blossom and fruit flavors like candied peach and mango.

**Zaca Mesa 2005 Roussanne, Santa Ynez Valley (\$25)** From a Rhône pioneer, this ripe and succulent Roussanne gives off aromas of peach and honey and tastes of peach marmalade.

**Peay 2005 Marsanne/Roussanne, Sonoma Coast (\$35)** Aromas of peach and honey give way to a waxy, lemony, layered palate.

**Tablas Creek Vineyard 2005 Esprit de Beaucastel Blanc, Paso Robles (\$35)** A blend of Roussanne, Grenache Blanc, and Picpoul Blanc, with aromas of sweet pea and ripe fig, and rich nectarine and honey flavors.