

A White of a Different Color

Two unfamiliar grapes to pair to create rich, unusual white wines. Meet the “Rhône Rangers.”

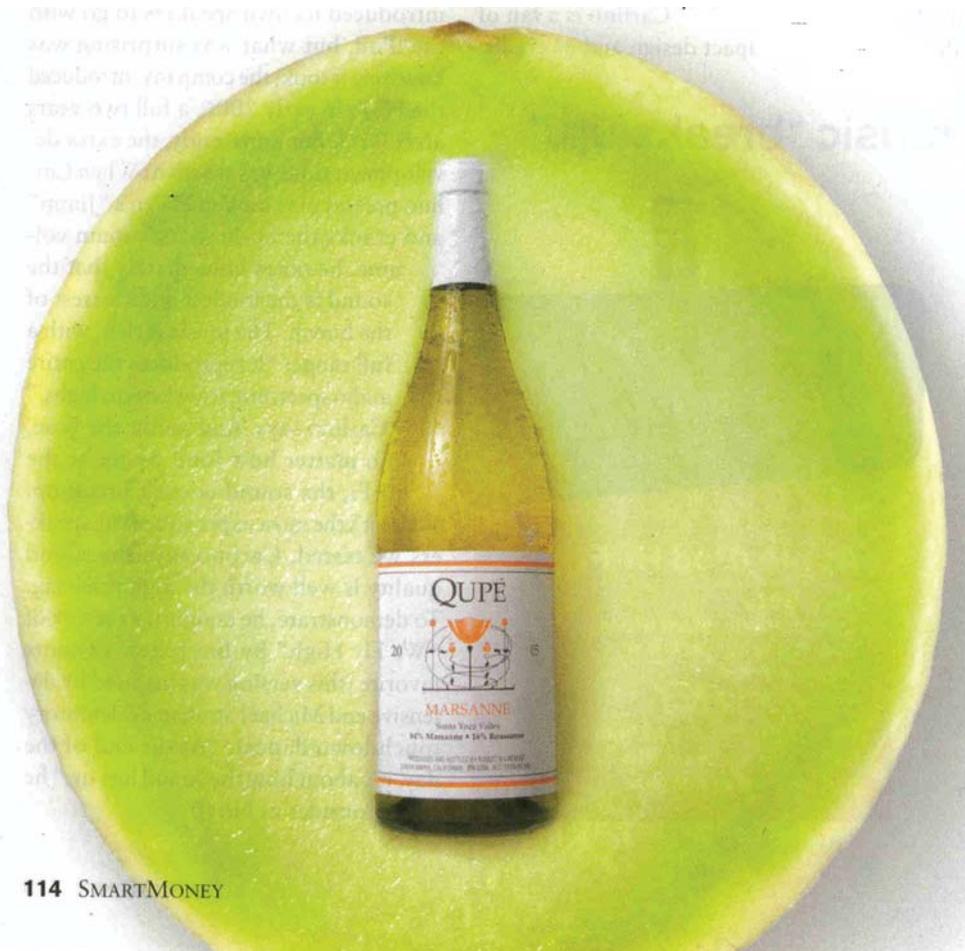
The weather is changing from cooler to warmer, so it's time for transition wines – lighter reds, heavier whites. Over the years, we have recommended all sorts of transition wines, but we have a new suggestion that reflects some of the delicious trends coursing through the world of wine: Find one made from roussanne and marsanne grapes.

The names might be unfamiliar, but they're not nearly as obscure as they were just a little while ago. Roussanne and marsanne are white-wine grapes from the Rhône Valley of France that usually appear together. Roussanne is considered the more elegant of the two, adding acidity and aroma, while marsanne is easier to grow. They create white wines of serious weight and

texture. Think of fleshy fruits, like white peaches and honeydew melons. These wines offer those kinds of tastes and textures, but something more, a honeysuckle richness and sometimes even a nuttiness that's quite special. Have you ever tried grapefruit cut in half, sprinkled with sugar and then broiled until it gets caramelized or slightly charred on the top? That's what these can sometimes taste like. If this sounds unusual, yes, it is.

Marsanne and roussanne are used in white wines from Saint-Joseph, Hermitage and Crozes-Hermitage in the Rhône Valley, but unless you happened to know that, you would never have realized you were drinking them. Things are changing, though. In the U.S., a band of California winemakers who call themselves “the Rhône Rangers” have embraced all sorts of Rhône varietals. Some are familiar, such as syrah, but these winemakers are trying their hand at roussanne and marsanne, too, and making some very distinctive wines. In 2005 there were only 66 bearing acres of marsanne and 165 of roussanne in California, but well-known Rhône-varietal producers such as Alban, Beckmen, Tablas Creek and Qupé are doing a fine job with the grapes.

This wave has circled the globe and come back to France, where some French wines now display the name of the grapes prominently on the label, which was virtually unheard of just a few years ago. At the same time, more roussanne and marsanne wines are arriving from Australia, which has some very old vineyards of those varietals. Some years ago we ate at a new Italian restaurant in our neighborhood that didn't have much interesting stuff on its wine list except for a marsanne from an Australian winery called Tahbilk. We ordered it, of course, and were interested to see on the label that it claimed to have some of the world's oldest marsanne vines. The wine itself was, well, different – dark-colored, nutty, and very heavy for a white.



It was memorable, but all wrong with our light Italian meal.

And that's an important point. Wines made from marsanne and roussanne can be challenging. These days most people are happy with the comforting tastes of chardonnay and sauvignon blanc. Rhône-varietal wines are very different, with tastes that are darker, heavier and for more serious. These are wines of real texture, great for transitional weather and perfect with foods such as veal stew, wiener schnitzel, roast chicken, fried shrimp and salted cod. These are whites that also can age quite nicely.

At right, we have focused on just a few wines made from roussanne and marsanne from the U.S., France, and Australia. None of these – nor, in fact, any wine made from these grapes – is available everywhere, but many good wineshops will have at least one example. Which brings us to the last reason why we're writing this now: It's a whole new world for the wine consumer. Wine-shops are better than ever. Hundreds of stores offer outstanding Web sites, and many will ship to most states. It's easier to find unusual wines than ever before (for starters, check out wineaccess.com, winesearcher.com and winezap.com).

We'd like to assure you that if you seek out one of these wines, you will absolutely love it. But we can't. Distinctive and different, they might be an acquired taste, like sweetbreads, which, come to think of it, would pair nicely with these wines. But different is good, and these offer qualities – tastes of earth and ripe grapes, and the adeptness of committed winemakers – that you might well find charming, if not with the first glass, perhaps the second. It's important on your wine journey to expand your tastes, to experience something a little far afield. Just as with any art, you don't have to love it to appreciate it.

DOROTHY J. GAITER and JOHN BRECHER's most recent book is *Wine for Every Day and Every Occasion: Red, White and Bubbly to Celebrate the Joy of Living*.

The Marsanne-Roussanne Challenge

Take a new route in your wine journey with these different, distinctive wines.

\$25 and under

Qupé Marsanne 2005 (Santa Ynez Valley). \$18

Crisp and clean, with white-peach flavors and weight. Distinctive, yet not totally unfamiliar. Very drinkable and quite juicy, with abundant acids that lift it, especially on the finish. Always a good name in Rhône varietals.

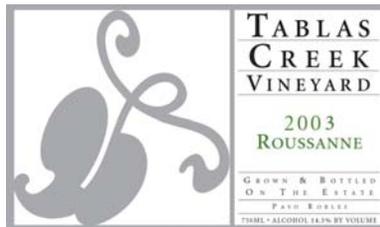
Eric Texier Côtes du Rhône "Brézème" Roussanne 2005. \$20.

Honeysuckle on the nose, with apples, grapefruit and pineapple tastes, real mouth feel and significant fullness – but all, remarkably, in a dry, almost sleek package.

D'Arenburg "The Money Spider" Roussanne 2003 (McLaren Vale). \$22.

Nose is rich and honeyed, and the wine tastes like that – a white of significant weight. At first, it's so heavy it seems ponderous, but give it some air and warmth, and it becomes voluptuous, with kiwi and melons and a long, mouth-coating finish.

Tablas Creek Vineyard Roussanne 2003. \$25.



Earthy, with some minerals and weight. A nice hint of funk and a touch of pine tar make it more rustic than most, the kind of white wine that goes with a lusty beef stew.

Domaine des Remizières Crozes-Hermitage Blanc "Cuvée Christopher" 2004. \$25.

This is a wine for a fine dinner, with rich tastes and an almost chewy texture. Very fine and beautifully integrated. Rich and round, with flowers and honey.

\$50 and under

Alban Vineyards Roussanne "Alban Estate Vineyard" 2004 (Edna Valley). \$50.

Majestic wine, a real blockbuster. Pineapple, lychee and dirty lemon on the nose, with vibrant acidity that just about bites you. Soulful, with rich tastes of ripe, toasted grapefruit. Weight and nuance. Not an ordinary wine.