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New California Wine Varietals Quench America's Thirst for Diversity

By Punchin

Although California Chardonnay, Cabernet and Merlot are still by far the most popular varietal wines in the U.S., comprising more than half of all California table wine sold in the U.S last year,* recent data shows that the state's winegrowers and vintners are increasingly catering to wine enthusiasts' thirst for varietal diversity. From winegrape acreage to the annual crush, a new crop of "emerging" varietals such as Pinot Gris/Grigio, Riesling, Pinot Noir and Tempranillo are gaining in wine production all over the Golden State. Vintners are also increasingly blending new combinations of popular and less-familiar varietals.

"Because of the cultural diversity of California's growers and vintners, it's only natural that the state would become a "melting pot" of varietal wines," says Karen Ross, President of the California Association of Winegrape Growers, who notes that today the state grows more than 110 winegrape varietals. "As winegrape growing passes from generation to generation, California growers' understanding of which varietals grow best in their regions, AVAs and vineyards has increased exponentially, resulting in the introduction and resurgence of a wide range of varietals."

"American wine consumers are branching out. They still enjoy their favorites – Chardonnay, Cabernet, and Merlot – but have become more adventurous and are more willing to try other varietals such as Pinot Grigio, Riesling and Petite Sirah to name just a few," says Robert P. (Bobby)

Koch, President and CEO of Wine Institute, who points out that one of the best places to find out which wineries are producing these varietals is on Wine Institute's web site at <http://www.discovercaliforniawine.com/wineries> where consumers can search California wineries by 43 different wine varieties and blends. This site's database brings up producers of varietals such as: Grenache, 48 wineries; Gewurztraminer, 32 wineries; Muscat/Moscato, 57 wineries; Petite Sirah, 136 wineries; Pinot Gris/Grigio, 82 wineries; Pinot Noir, 234 wineries; Riesling, 41 wineries; Sangiovese, 98 wineries; Syrah, 315 wineries; Tempranillo, 36 wineries; Viognier, 123 wineries; and the listings are growing.

Emerging Varietals of California

Although best known for Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Zinfandel, California grows more than 110 varieties of winegrapes. Below is a summary of varietals that are enjoying new found popularity.

Red Varietal Wines

Petite Sirah (peh-teet see-rah)—With sturdy, long-lived vines, Petite Sirah (sometimes seen as Petite Syrah on wine labels) is prized as a blending grape for its dark, inky color and intense tannin. On its own, it's a dark purple, full-bodied and full-flavored wine that can age for ten years with proper cellaring.

