



THE STATE OF THE GRAPES 2008



PINOT NOIR ASCENDS THE THRONE, CHARDONNAY AND MERLOT ARE STILL VIBRANT, NEW ZIN STYLE EMERGES—A CALIFORNIA WINE VARIETY GROUP PORTRAIT.



As we approach the end of another year, it's time again to look back and ahead concerning California's grape varieties and wines.

Aromatic Whites. 2008 may well be remembered as The Year of the Whites, as Americans finally moved beyond Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc to embrace a world of alternative varieties: Albãrino, Verdelho,

Pinot Gris/Grigio, Torrontés, Vermentino, Tocai Friulano, Grüner Veltliner, Cortese, Edelzwicker, Muscat Blanc and good old Chenin Blanc.

Petite Sirah. Give credit to the Sirah producers and fans for pushing the wines into the spotlight. "Pet" has earned its rightful place in the spectrum, a California red wine of heft, depth and volume. The ultimate BBQ wine.

Chardonnay. No matter how much the critics knock Chard, Americans (including this critic) remain stubbornly addicted to it. The best continue to hail from California's cool coastal regions—Santa Barbara up through Mendocino County—while the best of the best are single-vineyard versions whose winemakers play the grapes like a maestro conducts a symphony orchestra. Unoaked Chardonnay has found its modest place in our culinary vocabulary.

Merlot. It remains America's best-selling red table wine, and there are some fabulous Merlots out there. My favorites this past year have been from Duckhorn, Rutherford Grove, Fife, Frazier, Barnett, Whitehall Lane and Kendall-Jackson's Highlands Estate Taylor Peak.

Petite Sirah. Give credit to the P.S. I Love You group of Petite Sirah producers and fans for pushing the wines into the spotlight. "Pet" has earned its rightful place in the spectrum, a California red wine of heft, depth and volume. The ultimate BBQ wine.

Pinot Noir. The bloom is not yet off the rose, and probably never will be. Pinot Noir is now firmly established, with Cabernet, as the state's great red grape and wine. Call the difference between them

King and Queen (and take your pick of which is which). Coming on the heels of the great 2005 vintage, the '06s—another cool harvest—look to be as good, if not better. We're getting further proof of a hierarchy of vineyards, and one of the most satisfying developments, from the point of view of a critic, is the rise of the great négociant houses—winemakers who craft Pinot Noir from multiple vineyards, allowing us the pleasure to discern minute differences that cannot be due to technique.

Sauvignon Blanc. This wine is caught in a classic squeeze play between Chardonnay (with whom it can never compete) and the aromatic whites referred to before. Still, it's widely available, and produced in a variety of styles, from crisp and clean to complex and Burgundian.

Sparkling wine. I tasted through most of the state's sparklers in August, which is the big release month so the reviews can be in for the holidays. What a treat it was to find the quality of California bubbly been higher and, at the same time, more diverse than in previous vintages. This selection of the coolest grapes in the state is a testament to the quality of California wine.

Syrah. The chameleon of the vineyard, Syrah can be made from both warmer and cooler climates, and its attitude is as variable as its flavor (see the 2007 Syrah index, it's going quite well). Producers competing for the title of "Best Syrah" in the state are Morgan, Luko) it's a long way to be taken much further.

Zinfandel. Seems like Zin is neither here nor there, emerging that's more and less brawny and exploring it further.

