



A Note About Varieties

It has been estimated that there are about 10,000 grape varieties, and yet most of us can recognize the names of no more than a dozen, at best: Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, Pinot Noir, Syrah, and then ... (?). Today, these are among the few known as “International Varieties”—international, because they have found homes in wine-growing regions all over the world, from France to Chile, California, and even China.



CAIN VINEYARD MANAGER ASHLEY ANDERSON-BENNETT IN SEPTEMBER 2024 WITH HER JUST-HARVESTED PETIT VERDOT, FROM VINES SHE AND HER TEAM PLANTED IN 2021—THEIR FIRST HARVEST!

However, over the last twenty years, many wine-growing regions, especially in the Old World, are rediscovering their own local varieties, that had been traditionally grown for centuries but, beginning in the 1970s’s and 1980’s, were nearly forgotten in the move toward those few international varieties.

There’s much to say about varieties of winegrapes. Think of them as you would varieties of apples. A few decades ago, it seemed that almost all apples were “Red Delicious” or “Golden Delicious”—at least those grown in my home state of Washington. Today, we know several more varieties of apples, “Granny Smith,” “Jonathan,” “Pippin,” and new varieties such as “Fuji,” and “Honey Crisp.” Moreover, we are all vaguely aware that there must be dozens of heritage and local varieties from the 19th Century, that we sometimes encounter in our farmer’s markets.

—A NOTE ABOUT VARIETIES, CONTINUED—

We didn't always think of wine based on the grape variety. For thousands of years, people knew wine by where it was grown—the region, the village, or sometimes, even the vineyard. Today, there may be on the order of a million different wines grown all over the world, often coming from places whose names we don't recognize and can't even pronounce. So, there's been a tendency to simplify.

The names some of the best-known places, such as Chablis, Burgundy, Champagne, and Chianti, have been co-opted by wine-growers the world over—even if those wines bear little resemblance to those of the places to which they refer, and often are not derived from the same grape varieties.

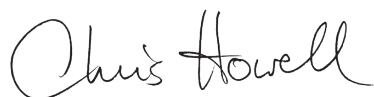
So, in an effort to get closer to the truth of these wines, beginning in the 1940's, the finest wines from California began to identify themselves with the grape variety from which they were made. We got "Varietal Wines"—Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, Cabernet Sauvignon, and Riesling. While this was a positive step, it also had the intended effect of simplifying wines, reducing them to the common denominator of the grape variety.

But fine wine is inherently complex, always a function of many factors, the climate, the exposure, the soil, the variety and how it's grown, the vintage, and the winemaking. Expect each wine—at least each fine wine—to be different. That's what keeps it interesting—that's why we love it!

The varietal cards included with this mailing are derived from the best-known references on grape varieties, written by Pierre Galet. Galet was a professor of Ampelography, who traveled throughout France and the world, verifying and identifying the varieties grown in specific vineyards, often clearing up mysteries and correcting mistakes. The information on these cards—especially the appearance of the leaves and the growing shoot tips—are some of the keys that he developed to identify each variety.

Today, most of us have learned about wine by the grape variety and we think we know how it "should" taste. What we have learned through our work in the Cain Vineyard is that sometimes the site can have a stronger influence than the variety on the taste of the wine. This is what we'll be exploring in this upcoming session of our tasting group. I can't wait to get started!

Christopher Howell, Wine-Grower



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