

Grape Finds

Hot Varietals on Wine Lists Generate Buzz

While some varietals are mainstays on wine lists, others wax and wane in availability and popularity due to the whims of wine writers and ever changing tastes of wine drinkers. Of course, you can't help but wonder if trendy grapes become that way due to well-deserved mentions in the media or if the chatter fuels a buzz that compels wine directors to include them on their menus. Perhaps it's a little of both.

Operators offering these wines, or increasing existing options, furnish their lists with a contemporary vibe. Moreover, pouring them by the glass or in even smaller amounts sparks confidence in guest experimentation while increasing operators' sales. Across the country and across the board, wine professionals weigh in about what's hot right now in the glass.

Malbec and Syrah

South American wines have grown increasingly fashionable in the last few years, and no varietal has taken greater hold than Argentina's signature grape, Malbec, a spicy and robust varietal traditionally used in Bordeaux blends. Andrew Stover, sommelier and director of wine marketing at Washington, D.C.'s OYA Restaurant & Lounge and SEI Restaurant, reports that guests still can't get enough of this grape. He believes diners gravitate towards Argentinean Malbec because of its similarity to Merlot or Cabernet, although he considers Malbec to be more food-friendly.

"Malbec is the new Merlot," proclaims Haley Guild, wine director at Bacar in San Francisco, where at any given time the 1,200-bottle wine list includes a handful of high-end Malbec bottles. Stover favors producers Andeluna and Urban Uco by O'Fournier, which "offer loads of dark fruit notes yet have an elegance that some Argentine Malbecs are lacking." He pairs these Malbecs with lamb or grilled pork dishes, while partnering more extracted

bottles with red meat.

Domestic versions of inky and brooding Syrah also have a prominent place on wine menus today. At Michael Mina's four Bourbon Steak locations, wine and cocktail lists vary depending on the market, but San Francisco-based Mina Group Inc.'s wine director Rajat Parr offers plenty of Syrahs in all the restaurants to keep up with demand. He likes wines from California's Peay Vineyards, Copain Winery and Qupe Wine Cellars, and recommends them with meat dishes—especially lamb.

While California Syrahs tend to be fruit-forward and full-bodied, Washington bottles more closely resemble a more refined French style, with restrained fruit and increased minerality. At Purple Café & Wine Bars' three Washington state locations, the staff and customers are loyal to the state's wines. In fact, one-third of the wine list is dedicated to the local juice, and director of liquids Christine Prentice features many local Syrahs.



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— Haley Guild, Wine Director, Bacar, San Francisco



Washington state Syrah is popular at Purple Wine Bar locations.

Again, the logical pairing is meat; Prentice recommends fatty options like roasted pork loin or filet mignon wrapped in bacon, which serve as a foil for the wine's powerful backbone.

The Virtues of Variety

Traditional French grape Viognier also has its share of fans at Purple, and it has become a popular "alternative" selection on many other wine lists across the country. Prentice is pleased that the higher-alcohol, more bloated style that she says had been the norm in Washington has evolved into one that is more balanced and more easily matched with food.

Viognier has recently been positioned as Virginia's signature white varietal, and bottles there tend to have more in common with those from France than from the West Coast. Stover has several on OYA's list, and believes that Virginia's Chrysalis Vineyards' balanced Viognier is the best one produced domestically.

"Viognier is a great alternative to Chardonnay, and that's how many restaurants position it," Stover explains. With its enticing floral aroma and a weight similar to many Chardonnays but without the oakiness, Viognier can hold up to heavy soups, triple crême cheeses and fleshy fishes.



Eastern Standard guests willingly explore lesser-known varietals.

Crisp and peppery Grüner Veltliner has been the darling of many a wine list over the last few years. It's still popular, although it's losing momentum because it's no longer a novelty. At Eastern Standard Kitchen & Drinks in Boston, a 200-seat establishment with \$100,000 in monthly wine sales, beverage manager Jackson Cannon markets a lesser-known Italian white that may be destined to become Grüner 2.0.

"Erbaluce is a great white wine getting a lot of attention from people wanting to move beyond Grüner

Veltliner. Erbaluce has sex appeal! Very

food friendly," he explains. The Erbaluce di Caluso from Ferrando in Piedmont has been a hot seller for \$12 a glass, which Cannon loves for its citrus notes and mineral quality.

Consumer Confidence

As wine drinkers become more confident with unpronounceable wine regions and grape names, operators are adding more off-the-beaten-path Italian varietals alongside traditional favorites like Pinot Grigio, Chianti and Barolo. Cannon has successfully introduced light red drinkers to Sicilian grapes such as the Nero d'Avola-based 2005 Cos Cerasuolo di Vittoria, positioned to sip with roasted meats, charcuterie and heartier seafood like striped bass or scallops. Since Italian cuisine now is often marketed with a focus on region, it makes sense to offer local varietals alongside native dishes.

No matter the grape, education and sample tastes are paramount to marketing new or less familiar varietals to guests. On most nights at Bacar, management opens a few bottles not typically poured by the glass, offering samples to guests seeking something different but unwilling to commit to a full glass or bottle sight unseen. At OYA, monthly wine sales are about \$75,000, and promotion is a big focus. With really obscure wines, Stover likens them to something familiar, describing, for example, Basque Txakoli as similar to Pinot Grigio. Guests can taste any of the by-the-glass options; in this section of the highly descriptive wine menu is where patrons find most of the unfamiliar grape varietals.

Menu wording and placement definitely draw attention to noteworthy but yet unexplored wines. At Bourbon Steak, Parr lists such wines under sections labeled "Secrets of the Sommelier" and "Wines of Consequence." Bacar offers 60 wines by the glass, and some of the lesser-known grapes appear on the "Fifty Under \$50" section or flights such as "Staff Favorites" and "Exotics."

How can operators stay ahead of the wine curve yet maintain consumer satisfaction? Cannon recommends focusing on terroir and winemaker style in addition to varietal. Stover agrees, and adds, "I focus mainly on the quality and food pairing-ability of the varietal. I like to think of myself as a trendsetter and therefore like to show guests up-and-coming wines that may be trendy in the future." Indeed, rather than selling wines solely because they are buzz-worthy, constant tasting and researching by the wine director assures abundant options that live up to any surrounding hype. **NCB**