

The Rise of Wine Grape Diversity

– *vinifera et alia*

Abstract

Motivation

There has been a change in the landscape of wine in terms of grape varieties. Whereas only a decade ago choices were mostly limited to a handful of international varieties, today it is common to see Albariño, Assyrtiko and Vermentino alongside Chardonnay, Riesling and Sauvignon Blanc. Tasting events for wines made with unconventional varieties and from less known regions such as Georgia are regularly being held, and sommeliers nowadays recommend Xinomavro as often as Syrah. Market participants, including producers, distributors and consumers alike, appear to embrace the trend.

Objective/methodology

This paper examines the factors that contribute to the rise in wine grape diversity. It aims to answer the questions of why and what are being done, and how and whether the trend will persist. Besides *Vitis vinifera*, the grapevine species that is associated with wine culture for the longest time, the scope of this study extends to other non-*vinifera* species and hybrids as they are firmly an integral part of the landscape. A closer look at four regions offers practical examples of the journey taken. In addition to relevant books, the paper draws references from magazine articles, publications and resources from research institutes.

Content

A review of the sources suggested that producers, local governments, official agencies, private associations and research centers have all contributed to the current interest in grape diversity and the renaissance of local and native varieties. The reasons for each player vary, and may include culture expressions, market differentiation, economical

benefits and environmental concerns. Furthermore, rich variety diversity together with a vast gene pool from various grapevine species are hailed as a key to finding solutions to issues faced by the industry today, such as water shortage, pollutions from sprays and climate change.

As illustrated by the history of the four countries, wars, diseases, governmental policies and consumer tastes, among other factors, had conspired to restrict wine grapes to a few varieties. As well as official initiatives to promote the local varieties, resurrection of these grapes depended heavily on the many producers who took an interest in making quality wine from them. Moreover, researchers have been invaluable in providing guidance regarding their viticulture and oenology properties.

Facing an unfamiliar variety, winegrowers oftentimes have to experiment before finding the best expression for the particular grape. Especially with non-*vinifera* varieties, producers may choose to either minimize the unconventional flavors or embrace their unique profiles. An enquiry into recent trends indicated that consumers are more open to experimenting with different tastes, and many are even proactively seeking novelty. In addition, they are paying more attention to other aspects such as authenticity, background stories, environmental credentials, and localism, all of which fit into the narrative of local and native varieties.

On the research front, wine grape varieties are continuing being identified and catalogued. At the same time, breeding centers are working on hybrids that are more drought tolerant, disease resistant, and cold hardy. To speed up the breeding process, the idea of genetic editing has been raised, but so far it has not been looked upon positively.

Conclusion

The expanded catalogue of wine grape varieties has become an immeasurable aid to combat issues in the vineyards – including from the ongoing climate change – and will continue to prove useful. Furthermore, with a curious and engaged consumer base that is in pursuit of novelty, it is in producers' interests to press on with exploring the wide range of wine grape varieties. One can therefore expect the upward trend of grape diversity to persist.