

Weinakademie Österreich
D7 Weinakademiker Thesis
By: Laura Villanueva

The Return of the Forgotten Four:
Champagne's Cepage Oubliés

I. Motivation

The motivation behind the topic was due to the fact that during the harvest in 2023, more and more winemakers were either picking the forgotten four grapes or discussing that they had planted the vines to create future cuvées. This was thought provoking as winemakers in the Montagne de Reims and Côte des Blancs with grand cru soils were going outside the traditional route and replanting either one or all of the forgotten four varieties. An even larger percentage were open to planting these forgotten grapes in order to either help raise acidity levels or to add different characteristics to their wines. As more and more winemakers are looking to create single parcel wines, the idea of the forgotten four varieties has seemed to have peaked their interest.

II. Objective

The objective of the thesis is to dive deeper into the four forgotten grapes of the Champagne region: Petit Meslier, Arbane, Pinot Blanc, and Pinot Gris. These four grapes make up a small percentage in the region (under 1%); however more and more winegrowers have been planting these grapes over the past 20 years. The winegrowers are making unique cuvées including both a single variety or a unique blend. The thesis will look at why the winegrowers are interested in growing these grapes by focusing on the following questions:

- Why is there a resurgence of interest in these varieties?
- Is it due to climate change?
- What does each variety contribute to the blend
- Where in Champagne are the varieties being planted?

III. Methodology

In order to dive deeper into the subject at hand, the research methodology was based on a multifaceted approach in order to fully examine the role of the forgotten grape varieties in Champagne. An investigation among multiple resources was conducted in order to fully understand the motivations behind replanting these varieties. Multiple sources from the CIVC were collected about the history of these grape varieties in order to provide a background on why they almost completely disappeared to why they are showing up more and more today.

Furthermore, multiple books were referenced written by multiple Champagne experts to further understand the history of the region and to provide an insider's point of view to these varieties. Additionally, personal experience from working the harvest, prior visits and interviews of winegrowers, and certifications on Champagne were helpful in creating a foundation for the research. Moreover, the research also involved multiple emails and interviews with winegrowers in order to understand the motivation behind the plantings and the future of these varieties.

IV. Content

The content consists of an Introduction, Brief History of the Champagne region and varieties, Overview and Breakdown of Each Variety, Co-plantation of the varieties, and Future Outlook of the Varieties. Each grape variety has its own section in order to examine its variety to its own accord. The deep dive into each variety showcases the nuances and the unique characteristics of the variety and why some varieties are being planted more frequently than others.

V. Conclusion

The findings have led to the conclusion that more and more winemakers are interested in experimenting with the forgotten four grapes in large part due to climate change. During the research period alone, one of the houses of Champagne launched an exclusive cuvée with three of the forgotten four varieties. In addition, a new restaurant under the name of Arbane opened in Reims by an award-winning chef. These examples, along with many others which are discussed throughout the thesis, point towards a slow but mighty resurgence of the four forgotten grapes in Champagne.