

Chicago Tribune

Meet food-friendly, fruity Pinot Gris

Bill Daley - October 14, 2009

Pinot noir has long been the king of Oregon wine, making reputations and fortunes. Yet on a trip to Oregon's Willamette Valley last year, the winemakers I met around the dinner table weren't talking about or initially drinking their famous reds.

On their lips and in their glasses was a white wine. Pinot gris.

The grape is the Beaver State's leading white variety, according to the Oregon Wine Board, with plantings of pinot gris more than doubling in the last decade to 2,736 acres, 14 percent of Oregon's total wine grape acreage.

"Oregon is home to the first pinot gris plantings in North America, and the industry has for some time been waving the flag for a very different style," said Stephany Boettner, the board's marketing and communications director. Producers are intent on using "pinot gris" on the label, versus "pinot grigio," as the grape is known in Italy, she said. And they are "championing a full-bodied, fresh, fruit-forward wine with acidity that makes it particularly food friendly."

Pinot gris is named for its grayish hue. "Gris" is French for "gray." The grapes are now grown around the world in most major wine regions. The resulting wine comes in a multitude of styles. Pinot gris is hot because it also goes great with many foods.

"Many of the classic styles of pinot gris are incredibly good with new American cuisine and Asian cuisine," said Jake Kosseff, a sommelier at Seattle's Wild Ginger restaurant and a wine consultant.

Washington's Chateau Ste. Michelle makes the perfect pinot gris for fried chicken. Gustave Lorentz Pinot Gris Reserve from Alsace is a natural with French bistro fare, especially garlicky escargot. Italy's pinot grigio rises to the occasion when it's a Tiefenbrunner Delle Venezie served with scampi.

But I do find myself again and again being drawn to Oregon pinot gris. The wines tend to fall between the French and Italian styles and work not only with the usual seafood suspects but also roast chicken, baked ham, green Thai curries and even homemade macaroni and cheese.

Cole Davis, co-owner of Americano at One Bra-tenahl Place in Bratenahl, Ohio, reports selling more Oregon pinot gris at his Lake Erie-shore restaurant than any other two white wine varieties combined.

He describes Oregon pinot gris as "owning the weight and texture of bigger, pricier wine styles," without the "peculiarities" of Alsace and a price-to-quality ratio that is not "all over the map, as in Italy."

Pinot gris from Oregon has "the lushness of a New World wine supporting a floral minerality, with enough stuffing to weather a few years in the basement," he added.

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Winning whites from Oregon

Oregon pinot gris bested its California competition in a blind tasting of seven newly released wines. Indeed, the wine panel gave these whites from the Beaver State the top three positions.

2008 King Estate Pinot Gris Signature Collection: From Oregon, a lively white with a very aromatic nose and softly ripe flavors of pear and honey spiked with a green apple zip. Serve with fried chicken, scampi, seafood quiche. **Three corkscrews, \$17**

2008 Acrobat Pinot Gris: A lower-priced pinot gris from Oregon's King Estate, this white has a voluptuous profile, with a creamy texture, a buttery peach flavor and a tangy finish. Serve with broiled trout, barbecued chicken, grilled halibut. **Three corkscrews, \$12**

2008 Sokol Blosser Pinot Gris: This white from Oregon's Dundee Hills wine region has a spicy nose and a tart, refreshing flavor redolent of green apples. Good citrusy finish. Serve with chicken tikka, knockwurst, grilled salmon. **Three corkscrews, \$20**

2008 Lake Sonoma Winery Pinot Gris: California's Russian River Valley is home to this fragrantly floral white. Clean and crisp, plenty of lime notes. Serve with fried fish, baked ham, seafood stew. **Two corkscrews, \$17**

2008 MacMurray Ranch Pinot Gris: A crisp white from California's Sonoma Coast region. Look for grapefruit, green apple and lime on the palate. Serve with pasta primavera, Swedish meatballs, sweet and sour pork. **Two corkscrews, \$18**

2008 Alma Rosa Pinot Gris: More like a chardonnay than a pinot gris stylistically, this white from California's Santa Barbara region is a big wine ripe with melons, apricots and peaches. Serve with steamed mussels, grilled chicken, bacon-wrapped scallops. **Two corkscrews, \$18**

2008 Taz Pinot Gris: Another Santa Barbara pinot gris, this white is crisply tart; too tart for some tasters. Notes of green apple, citrus and melon. Serve with macaroni and cheese, fried calamari. **Two corkscrews, \$15**