

WHITE KNIGHT

Will the fashion for lighter, brighter reds bring back the much misunderstood practice of adding white grapes to red wines, wonders **JACOPO MAZZEO**

The wine world is full of practices that are accepted in one place but considered obsolete in others. Field blends, for instance, are warmly welcomed in port, yet are highly unfashionable anywhere else. Likewise, intra-regional cuvées are Champagne's bread and butter, while the rest of the world favours single estate or even single-plot expressions.

The use of white grapes in red wine is much the same. 'Consumers don't really understand it,' says somm-turned-consultant Lionel Periner. 'So I can see why those that are more casually into wine would find it a bit strange and a bit of a turn-off, as they might perceive it as cheap.'

Miseducation is partly to blame, but what really had a detrimental effect on people's perception is the dispute over the use of white grapes in Chianti Classico DOCG, which culminated with the appellation banning the practice in 2006.

However, the addition of overcropped Trebbiano and Malvasia to Sangiovese-based blends was merely part of a much bigger problem – too much Chianti was of pretty poor quality. Nevertheless, with most wine critics cheering at the ban, a simplistic message made its way to the public: that the use of white grapes in red winemaking was wrong.

In itself however, the practice is far from responsible for poor wine. In the Rhône Valley, a small addition of white varieties

in red winemaking is common practice, as long as these are all co-planted and co-fermented with their darker counterparts. Light-skinned grapes are employed to add pleasant aromatics, soften harsh vintages and, importantly, help fix the wine's colour.

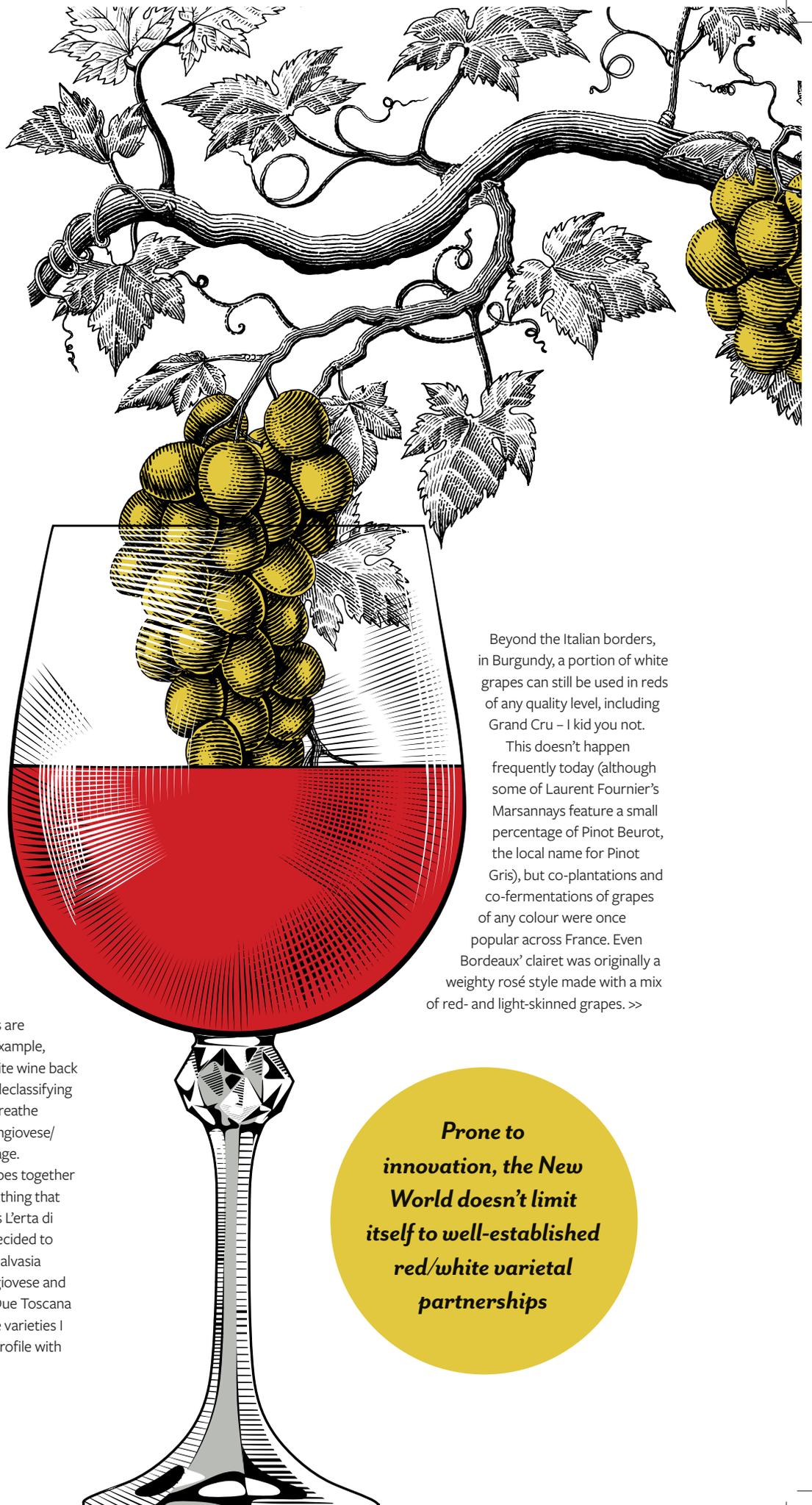
MIXING IT UP

This approach is particularly common in the Côte-Rôtie, where growers can use up to 20% Viognier with Syrah. Likewise, reds from Saint-Joseph and Hermitage are allowed a little white grapes, while Châteauneuf-du-Pape vintners enjoy even more freedom, with a wide range of pale varieties at their disposal.

'Most other Southern Rhône appellations also allow a small percentage, usually around 10%, though it's not that common,' says Rhône expert Matt Walls. 'An example of someone who does it well would be Domaine Saint-Amant in Beaufort-en-Vallée. Its red cuvée Grangeneuve typically uses 10% Viognier in the blend alongside Grenache, Syrah and Carignan to add a little softness and fragrance.'

This particular Rhône style has been widely replicated across the New World, where vintners are free to blend at their fancy. 'I love not only the aromatic lift that 2% or 3% of Viognier co-fermented with Shiraz can add but also the vibrancy it adds to the colour of the wine,' explains Sam Wigan, winemaker at Australia's Yalumba Estate.





And, with a mindset naturally prone to innovation, the New World doesn't limit itself to well-established red/white varietal partnerships. 'As a winemaker I am a big fan of the power of co-fermentation and co-pigmentation to fix and saturate colour,' says Colorado winery consultant Jay Christianson. 'I did Chardonnay with Syrah, for instance.'

OLD WORLD PRACTICES

In Europe, maverick producers are following suit. In Tuscany for example, where Chianti used to be a white wine back in the 14th century, some are declassifying certain wines to IGT level, to breathe new life into the traditional Sangiovese/Trebbiano and Malvasia marriage.

'Blending red and white grapes together to make a unique wine is something that has always fascinated me,' says L'erta di Radda's Diego Finocchi. 'I've decided to vinify 30% of Trebbiano and Malvasia together with my base of Sangiovese and Canaiolo [to make my Due & Due Toscana IGT]. By using those two white varieties I intensify the wine's aromatic profile with some nice floral notes.'

Beyond the Italian borders, in Burgundy, a portion of white grapes can still be used in reds of any quality level, including Grand Cru – I kid you not.

This doesn't happen frequently today (although some of Laurent Fournier's Marsannays feature a small percentage of Pinot Beurot, the local name for Pinot Gris), but co-plantations and co-fermentations of grapes of any colour were once popular across France. Even Bordeaux' clairet was originally a weighty rosé style made with a mix of red- and light-skinned grapes. >>

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South of the Pyrenees, the tradition thrives in Rioja's Basque Alavesa. Winemakers often use up to 5% of local Viura or Malvasia to round off their younger tintos, and up to 15% for crisp and fruity carbonic-maceration jovens. 'Tempranillo is a variety that can have a very high pH,

which brings the acidity down. Viura, with its higher acidity and lower pH helps bring the wine into balance,' explains Edu Saracibar Iturbe of Ostatu winery.

Similarly, but to a lesser extent, a handful of producers in the small Valdepeñas DO bottle a tinto tradicional made with a blend of 85% red grapes and 15% whites – the progeny of a style known as clarete, once made by mixing light and dark varieties in equal parts.

To complete this blush Iberian picture, a very pale Portuguese wine called palhete, the history of which can be traced back several centuries and is linked with that of port, was – and still is – vinified with grapes of any colour. Sir John Croft was writing that large quantities of this tittle were exported to Britain as early as in 1727 in his *Treatise on the Wines of Portugal*.

MODERN TASTES

The freshness and characteristic aromatic profile of wines made with both dark and pale grapes is rarely advertised. Yet the growing trend for crisper, lighter reds might mean we'll be seeing more of these expressions in the near future.

'All the buyers we met were extremely intrigued by this wine and its winemaking process,' confirms Luigi Cappellini of Chianti Classico-based winery Castello di Verrazzano, while pointing at his Toscana IGT Verrazzano Rosso, made with a blend of Sangiovese, Merlot and Trebbiano. 'This is a time when the market appreciates wines of lower abv and lighter body. It seems to me that the fashion of super-concentrated wines has gone.'

TOP OF THE CROP

From Portugal to New Zealand, here are a few of our favourite red and white blends

APHROS PHAUNUS PALHETE AMPHORA 2018, VINHO VERDE, PORTUGAL

Loureiro/Vinhão

Hailing from Portugal's northern Minho region, this wine is a fresh, exuberant, aromatic expression made with biodynamically grown native grapes. The blend stays on the skins in a beeswax-lined amphora for seven months before bottling without fining or filtration. The scents are of pomegranate, violet, rose petals, cherry and a touch of herbs, with a hint of smoke on the palate. £16.20, *Les Caves de Pyrene*, lescaves.co.uk

CASTELLO DI VERRAZZANO ROSSO 2016, TUSCANY, ITALY

Sangiovese/Merlot/Trebbiano Toscano

Merlot and Trebbiano Toscano represent modernity and tradition respectively, in this unusual Sangiovese-based blend. It's bottled unoaked, relatively young, to allow the fruit expression to shine in the glass. It definitely tastes 'red', with plenty of red berries, cherries and plum aromas, though there are some attractive floral notes, too, that add to the complexity.

£8.88, *Le Bon Vin*, lebonvin.co.uk

OSTATU TINTO 2019, RIOJA, SPAIN

Tempranillo/Graciano/Mazuelo/Viura

A very classic Rioja Alavesa blend made through carbonic maceration. It's clean and fragrant, with both red and dark berry notes. On the palate it's surprisingly structured, showing ripe tannins and fresh acidity.

POA, *H2Vin*, hzvin.co.uk

THE HERMIT RAM FIELD BLEND 2018, NORTH CANTERBURY, NEW ZEALAND

Riesling/Chardonnay/Pinot Noir/Cabernet Sauvignon/Gewürztraminer

Officially a rosé, this totally unconventional field blend has its roots in Portugal's palhete as much as in Bordeaux's claret. For winemaker Theo Coles, 'the act of fermenting whichever varieties are planted in your vineyard together is intriguing and the results can be a delicious and unique picture of a particular vineyard. This wine shows lovely acidity, abounds with aromatics and it's unlike anything you've ever tasted before.

POA, *Uncharted Wines*, unchartedwines.com

Like Cappellini, a number of 'colour blind', unconventional winemakers, as put by Les Caves de Pyrene's Doug Wregg, are finding in pale varieties the ideal means to turn red wine into a more approachable drink. And as the earth warms up, climate change might represent a further incentive for producers to embrace this historical

practice. 'As the climate heats up,' says Walls, 'more and more Châteauneuf-du-Pape growers who need to replace vines within individual blocks are opting for grapes such as Clairette, which gives more juice and freshness to their reds, instead of replanting Grenache.'

Need more chillable, quaffable reds for the spring? A splash of white will do it. ♡

