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Bonjour, roussanne!

Say hello to a great white wine you've probably never heard of

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October's falling temperatures and crisp nights trigger a hunger in all of us for richer, heartier fare. There is no better time for a glass of roussanne.

This white wine grape from France's Rhone Valley has the gumption to tackle fall's sturdy fare just like a chardonnay, but without leaving you feeling like you've just gnawed through an oak tree. While its style can vary depending on the country and the maker, roussanne is classically reserved and minerally, but with a charming floral bouquet.

Chances are, however, that roussanne is the best white wine you've never heard of. It is hugely overshadowed by sauvignon blanc, pinot grigio and, above all else, chardonnay.

"I can't think of a white grape that's less hot right now," said Diana Hamann of Wine Goddess Consulting. "And it's a shame, as roussanne can be a champion among whites with its peachy-honeyed hedonism and snappy acidity."

Hamann said that most American wine drinkers interested in Rhone wines stick to the reds. The only white to catch on in the U.S. has been viognier.

That's reflected in the requests fielded by Randolph Wine Cellars. Jason Given, store manager, said that Chicago drinkers in experimental moods have been asking for more Rhone-style whites but not roussanne specifically.

Roussanne is one of four white grape varieties that can be blended into the red wines of Chateauneuf-du-Pape. It is one of two major grape varieties used to make "the rare white wines" of Hermitage and Chateauneuf-du-Pape, according to The Sotheby's Wine Encyclopedia. Roussanne is described in the reference work as making "the finer, more delicate wines," while those of the second grape varietal, marsanne, "tend to be fatter and richer."

Roussanne and marsanne are traditionally blended in France; each brings out the best in the other as master sommelier Alpana Singh explained.

"Marsanne can be described as the more full-bodied twin with sexier curves and more weight on its frame while roussanne is its thinner, leaner and more sinewy sister. It is understandable why winemakers have decided to use roussanne to thin out some of marsanne's fatness," said Singh, host of "Check, Please!" on WTTW-Ch. 11 and director of wine and spirits for Lettuce Entertain You Enterprises.

This tradition of blending roussanne with other wines is more than just a flavor thing. Roussanne is a notoriously poor performer, numerous Chicago wine experts said.

"It's awfully susceptible to rot, powdery mildew and irregular yields," Hamann said. "As of 2002, only 177 acres had been planted to roussanne in California, and one assumes only due to the sheer determination of California's 'Rhone Rangers,' the group of winemakers whose insistence on the merits of home-grown Rhone varietals have made grapes like grenache and syrah household names."

Unlike French winemakers, the Californians tend to produce 100 percent roussanne, in keeping with the Golden State's varietal tradition.

"Versions with oak treatment tend to fatten up roussanne's lighter frame and the results are beautiful with aromas of honey, marzipan and burnt citrus fruit," Singh said of the Californians. "Extremely well-done examples are reminiscent of white Burgundy."

Dean Schlabowske, in charge of the French wine section at Sam's Wines & Spirits, said well-made roussanne can be "one of the great wine experiences."

Drinkers familiar with chardonnay, sauvignon blanc and pinot grigio will find roussanne and her Rhone sisters to be a very different taste experience," he said.

"People have a hard time getting their heads around the fact [that these wines] have very distinct flavors," Schlabowske added.

Old World vs. New World

Two strong styles emerged in an informal blind tasting of roussannes from France, California, Washington and Australia. Some were pale in color and flintily elegant while others, fattened up with oak aging, were more golden and buttery. These differences were not geographical, interestingly enough, but a reflection on how the winemaker helps shape the wine.

The lighter, drier style appealed to our panel, resulting in a rare three-way tie for first place among the Australian, a Californian and the wine from Washington.

2002 d'Arenberg Roussanne "The Money Spider"

Don't let the oily, almost rubbery nose keep you from this Aussie wine's lovely mix of mineral, floral and citrus notes. The long, long finish was something most Rhone winemakers dream of. D'Arenberg is considered one of the top New World producers of roussanne.

(3 corkscrews) \$20

2002 Tablas Creek Vineyard Roussanne

This Paso Robles winemaker also has made a name with its roussanne. No wonder. Each sip was an intoxicating mix of flint, salt, cream and just enough spritz to keep things lively. Again, an oily nose but worth it.

(3 corkscrews) \$21

2004 McCrea Roussanne Red Mountain

Crisp and acidic, this Washington wine balanced pear notes with an almost peppery heat and lingering finish. The nose was citrusy.

(3 corkscrews) \$24

2002 Domaine Font-De Michelle Chateauneuf-du-Pape

Classically lean and elegant, with a damp stone aroma, this French wine had a light but definite presence and a graceful tartness.

(2 corkscrews) \$33

2000 Domaine de Caillou Chateauneuf-du-Pape

Smooth as silk with a nutty, sherrylike flavor and a nose like burnt caramel. The wine cut quite the figure, but some panelists thought it too oaky.

(2 corkscrews) \$56

2002 Mas Des Bressades Roussanne-Viognier

Golden yellow with a nose of earth leavened with sweetness, this French blend surprised with plenty of minerally snap. But panelists complained the fruit notes faded too rapidly and that the wine was so woody as to be almost dank.

(2 corkscrews) \$14

2001 Garretson Roussanne Santa Barbara County

Notably darker in color than all the rest, this roussanne was extremely aromatic, smelling of apricots and nuts. Some tasters liked the wine's dry, spicy flavor, but others thought the taste didn't deliver on the nose's promise.

(2 corkscrews) \$27

2002 Mas Carlot Marsanne-Roussanne

This French wine from Pay d'Oc had a tart melon-lime aroma, but the taste was too harsh for panelists.

(1 corkscrew) \$9

Sources: We found these wines at Sam's Wines & Spirits; Binny's Beverage Depot stores; Howard's Wine Cellar, Antioch Fine Wines & Liquors, Antioch; SavWay Fine Wines & Spirits stores. Not every wine may be in stock at your local stores; prices may vary from store to store. Prices are rounded off.

(4 corkscrews)

(3 corkscrews)

(2 corkscrews)

(1 corkscrew)

(No corkscrews)

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Bill Daley answers questions on wine, beer and spirits every Sunday in Q. Hear him on WBBM Newsradio 780 at 6:21 p.m. and 10:22 p.m. each Tuesday and 7:52 p.m. each Saturday and Sunday.

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