

Focus Varietal: Tannat

Although we specialize in Rhône varieties, we continue to experiment with other grapes that we feel might thrive in the shallow rocky soils and dramatic summer climate of Tablas Creek. Tannat is one varietal that was suggested to us by the Perrins' French nurseryman, and it has indeed thrived here. Tannat's intense fruit, spice and tannins produce powerful wines capable of long aging.

Early History

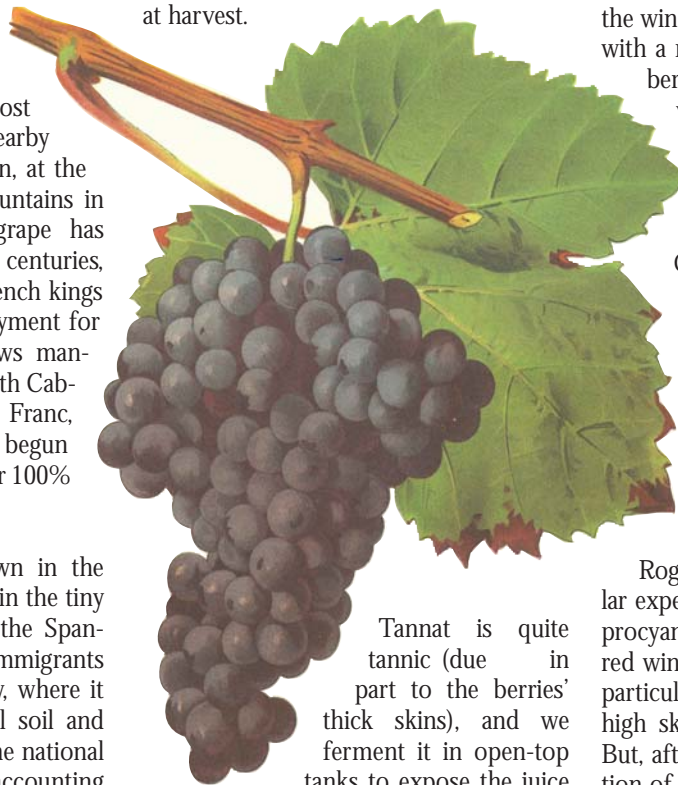
Though many scholars believe Tannat originated in the Basque region, Tannat is most closely associated with the nearby winemaking region of Madiran, at the foothills of the Pyrenees Mountains in southwestern France. The grape has been grown in that region for centuries, and 17th and 18th century French kings accepted Madiran wines as payment for taxes. Madiran appellation laws mandate that Tannat be blended with Cabernet Sauvignon or Cabernet Franc, but producers have recently begun receiving notable press for their 100% Tannat Madiran wines.

Tannat continues to be grown in the Basque country, most notably in the tiny appellation of Irouléguay, on the Spanish border. In 1870, Basque immigrants brought the grape to Uruguay, where it adapted perfectly to the local soil and climate. It has since become the national red grape variety of Uruguay, accounting for approximately one third of all wine produced in that country; more Tannat is grown in Uruguay than in the varietal's native France.

Tannat at Tablas Creek

We did not originally intend to produce a Tannat. When the Perrins' French nurseryman suggested we do so, we brought cuttings in and entered them into quarantine at the USDA station in Geneva, New York. In 1993, they were declared virus free and released to us. We planted just under an acre of Tannat in 1996, and received our first significant harvest in 2002.

In the vineyard, Tannat is one of the easiest varieties to grow. It is late ripening, frost hardy and a solid producer. Unlike other varieties (such as Grenache and Syrah), it is not prone to overproduction, and we do not have to thin the shoots to keep production down. Its berries have thick skins, which make it resistant to powdery mildew and botrytis. The sole difficulty with growing Tannat is its thick stems, which cling tightly to the berries and can be difficult to remove at harvest.



Tannat is quite tannic (due in part to the berries' thick skins), and we ferment it in open-top tanks to expose the juice to more oxygen and soften the tannins.

As is traditional in Madiran, we blend a small percentage (usually about 10%) of Cabernet Sauvignon from our nursery block into each year's Tannat bottling.

Tannat and the BATF

Although Tannat had existed in the University of California's vine collections since the 1890s, it had not yet been recognized by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms when we produced our first vintage in 2002.

When we decided to bottle it, we petitioned the BATF to recognize Tannat as a separate varietal, a process we had recently undergone with both Grenache Blanc and Counoise. In September of 2002, our petition was formally approved.

Aromas and Flavors

Tannat makes decidedly robust wines, with pronounced aromas of smoke and plum, significant tannins and a wonderfully spicy finish. Here at Tablas Creek, we've found the wines to be dense purple-red in color, with a nose of tobacco, smoke, and ripe berries. The rich palate has juicy flavors of plum and raspberry, with a long, generous finish. The tannins are impressive, but nicely balanced with the intense fruit and spice flavors of the wine. Our 2005 *Tannat* is wonderful now, but we believe that it will benefit from three to five years of bottle aging. Its smoky character makes it a perfect match for roasted meats and game, as well as sausages and strong aged cheeses.

Tannat and Health

Recent research, led by Dr. Roger Corder (a London cardiovascular expert) makes the case for oligomeric procyanidins (OPCs) as the source of red wine's health benefits. All red grapes, particularly those with thick skins and high skin-to-pulp ratios, contain OPCs. But, after measuring the OPC concentration of several common red wine grapes, Dr. Corder identifies Tannat as the grape with the greatest concentration. The real-life evidence of Tannat's benefits can be seen in the surprisingly long life spans of residents of the département of Gers in southwest France, whose local wine appellation is Madiran. Gers contains more than double the national average of men in their nineties. Madiran's principal grape is Tannat.

You can read a detailed analysis of the link between Tannat, heart health and longevity on the Tablas Creek blog. 🍷