

Focus Varietal: Grenache Noir

Grenache Noir is the most widely planted “cépage noble” in the southern Rhône Valley, and the second most widely planted varietal in the world. It is most often blended (with Syrah in France and Australia, and with Tempranillo in Rioja), but reaches its peak in the wines of Châteauneuf-du-Pape. Château de Beaucastel uses between 35 and 50% Grenache in its Beaucastel red, and some producers (most notably Château Rayas) produce Châteauneuf-du-Pape wines that are virtually 100% Grenache.

Early History

Grenache appears to have originated in Spain, most likely in the northern province of Aragon, and ampelographers believe that Grenache was the foundation of Aragon’s excellent *vin rouge du pays*. From Aragon, it spread throughout the vineyards of Spain and the Mediterranean in conjunction with the reach of the kingdom of Aragon, which at times included Roussillon and Sardinia. By the early 18th century, the varietal had expanded into Languedoc and Provence.

The phylloxera epidemic of the late 19th century indirectly increased European plantings of Grenache. In Rioja, for example, vineyards were replanted not with the native varieties but with the hardy, easy to graft Grenache. A similar trend occurred in southern France, as the percentage of Grenache plantings after the phylloxera infestation increased significantly, replacing the previously abundant Mourvèdre.

Grenache was brought to California in the 1860s, where its erect carriage, vigor and resistance to drought made it a popular planting choice. It came to occupy second place in vineyard planting after Carignan and was an element in wine producers’

branded field blends. Unfortunately, this usage encouraged growers to select cuttings from the most productive vines, increasing grape production but reducing the overall quality of the vines. In recent years, Grenache plantings in California have declined, as the varietal is replaced by the more popular Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot; currently there are 9,600 acres planted in California.



Grenache at Tablas Creek

When we began Tablas Creek Vineyard in 1990, we were not completely satisfied with the quality of California Grenache vines. As a result, we imported our Grenache Noir cuttings (along with its close cousin, Grenache Blanc) from France, where Jacques Perrin at Château de Beaucastel had worked tirelessly to regenerate high quality Grenache vines.

Grenache is a vigorous variety with upright shoots that lends itself to “gobelet” or “head

pruning”; it is widely cultivated in this manner in France and in Spain. At Tablas Creek, our steep hillsides preclude cross cultivation, so we cultivate it in double cordon fashion with six fruiting canes, each with two buds. The varietal’s vigor gives it the potential to be a heavy producer. Despite our shoot thinning, we are usually obliged to fruit-prune during the growing seasons to keep the bunch count to ten or twelve clusters per vine. This practice means that we harvest approximately three tons of fruit per acre of vines.

Flavors and Aromas

Grenache produces wines with high concentrations of fruit, tannin, and acids. Its flavors are most typically currant, cherry, and raisin, and its aromas are of black pepper, menthol, and licorice.

Although many California Grenache clones produce simple, fruity wines which tend to be pale in color, our French clones produce brilliant ruby red wines which are heady in alcohol (usually 15% or higher), and intensely fruity and fat.

For our signature *Esprit de Beaucastel*, we combine Grenache with Syrah and Mourvèdre to open up those more closed varieties. The varietal can also make a delightfully fruity and forward wine as in our newly released Grenache-based 2004 *Côtes de Tablas* (which received a 90 from Steve Tanzer in August 2006). 🍷