

Focus Varietal: Picpoul Blanc

Picpoul Blanc (also spelled *Piquepoul Blanc*) is one of the lesser-known Rhône varieties, but one that we think has a tremendous future in California. It is one of the thirteen permitted varieties in Châteauneuf-du-Pape, where it is used primarily as a blending component to take advantage of its acidity. Like the better known Grenache and Pinot, Picpoul has red, white and pink variants, though Picpoul Noir and Picpoul Gris are very rare. Literally translating to “lip stinger”, Picpoul Blanc produces wines known in France for their bright acidity, minerality, and clean lemony flavor.

Picpoul in France

Most scholars believe Picpoul is native to the Languedoc region of Southern France, where it is still found today. Records from the early 17th century indicate that it was blended with Clairette (another white Rhône variety) to form the popular Picardan wine, which was then exported throughout Northern Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries. After the *phylloxera* invasion at the end of the 19th century, Picpoul was not widely replanted. Today it is best known from Picpoul de Pinet, the crisp light green wine of the Pinet Region in the Côteaux de Languedoc.

Picpoul at Tablas Creek

We did not import Picpoul with our initial eight varieties. After the original eight were established in the vineyard, we decided that the consistent sun and long growing season at Tablas Creek might allow varieties that in France are lean and high in acidity to show character impossible elsewhere. Picpoul, with its reputation for sharp acidity, was the first of these high-acid whites that we brought into quarantine, and was in fact the first supplemental variety we brought in of any sort. It was released from quarantine

in 1998, and we spent the next two years propagating and grafting it. We planted approximately one acre of Picpoul in 2000, and received our first significant harvest in 2003. It has been such a success that we plan to triple our acreage in the next few years.

In the vineyard, Picpoul is not a difficult variety to grow. It pushes early, making



it somewhat susceptible to frost, but ripens relatively late. In the past two years, Picpoul was the last white variety to be brought in, just before Mourvèdre (the last red of the season) at the end of October. In the winery, we ferment it in neutral barrels to complement the grape's brightness with a bit of roundness.

When we first bottled Picpoul, it was necessary to petition the Tax and Trade Bureau to recognize the variety, a process we had undergone with several other varieties, including Grenache Blanc, Cunoise and Tannat. We amassed literature on Picpoul

to demonstrate that it was a recognized variety in other countries, and compiled descriptions of its characteristics to satisfy the TTB's requirement that it have distinct value as a wine grape in the United States. In February of 2004, our petition was formally approved.

Aromas and Flavors

We have found that, in California, Picpoul maintains its bright acidity, but also develops an appealing tropical lushness. It is quite rich in the mouth, with an exceptionally long finish. When we have enough fruit, we bottle *Picpoul Blanc* as a single variety, and the wine shows a rich nose of pear, pineapple and spice. In the mouth, buttery flavors of pineapple and orange are balanced by crisp acids, and the long, rich finish shows flavors of piña colada.

Beginning in 2004, we have included Picpoul in our *Esprit de Beaucastel Blanc*, where it lifts the aromatics of the wine in much the same way Viognier might, and its bright acids highlight the richness of the Roussanne and Grenache Blanc.

Whereas in previous vintages Viognier had played the role of lifting the aromatic profile, including Picpoul instead in the *Esprit Blanc* means that the wine includes only grapes approved for Châteauneuf-du-Pape. (Viognier, while a Rhône variety, is not permitted in Châteauneuf-du-Pape). The 2004 *Esprit de Beaucastel Blanc* was included in the Fall 2005 VINSider shipment, and will be released nationwide in early 2006. 🍷