

Focus Varietal: Tannat

Although we specialize in Rhône varietals, 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 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 varietals to grow. It is late ripening, frost hardy and a solid producer. Unlike other varietals (such as Grenache and Syrah), it does not overproduce, 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.

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 decided to bottle it, we petitioned the BATF to recognize Tannat as a separate varietal, a process we had undergone with both Grenache Blanc and Counoise. We amassed literature on Tannat to demonstrate it was a recognized varietal in other countries, and compiled descriptions of its characteristics to show that it had positive value as a wine grape in the United States. 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 2004 *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.