

FOOD

California vintners branch out to Italian grapes



3/5 Italian wines typically have high acidity, pairing well with food. (Al Seib / Los Angeles Times)

By S. IRENE VIRBILA NOV. 2, 2013 | 12 AM

Italian immigrants were instrumental in founding the California wine industry, yet when winemakers sought to upgrade the image of their wines in the mid-20th century, they followed the then-current fashion and went with French grapes — Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon. Though perhaps better suited to California's climate, Italian varietals didn't have much cachet at the time and were basically relegated to blends and low-cost jug wines.

Steve Matthiasson of Matthiasson Wines in Napa Valley thinks that was shortsighted. "There are thousands and thousands of Italian varietals, but for the most part they are Mediterranean varieties and can handle very dry summers and heat," he says. Perfect for California.

He cites Aglianico and Vermentino, both well suited to the hot climate of the Central Valley. He thinks the red grape Teraldogo could do great along the coast. He's planted the minerally white Greco di Tufo in Rutherford and will make the first wine from it next year. He's excited about Ribolla Gialla from Friuli too, and blends some Tocai Friulano into his Matthiasson Napa Valley white.

He's not alone among the Italian converts.

Steve Clifton, co-owner of Pinot Noir and Chardonnay specialist Brewer-Clifton, has had Italian varietals on his mind since 1995, when he founded Palmina, his Central Coast winery dedicated exclusively to Italian varietals.

He always appreciated their acidity, which is characteristic of wines meant to go with food. And when he started making wine in Santa Barbara, he found what he thinks is the ideal climate — the coldest wine region in California — for Italian varietals.

At Palmina, Clifton says he tries hard to “not make emulations of Italian wines but translations.” If his wines don’t taste grown in Santa Barbara County, then he’s somehow missed the mark. In all, he makes nine Italian varietals, ranging in price from about \$18 for the rosé to \$90 for the single-vineyard Nebbiolo.

Another early pioneer was Jim Clendenen of Au Bon Climat, who has been making Italian varietals under the Clendenen Family Vineyards and Il Podere dell’Olivos labels for more than two decades. After years of working with Italian varietals, he’s more optimistic about the whites. “If we understand that Italian varietals have to be much more delicate than California Chardonnays and pick with balance, with fruit as a focus and don’t get too intricate, we can make delicious white wine.”

Red wines, he feels, are a much more difficult proposition. “You’re going to have to have patience. You can’t have products that are hard or mysterious, or years from drinkability.”

Inspired by the Teroldego of Elisabetta Foradori in Trentino, Clendenen admits that he probably makes it with more of a Pinot Noir sensibility. He also thinks Tocai Friulano is a wonderful grape. At one point, he worked with some Sicilian varietals. They did brilliantly in California, but he couldn’t sell them.

One new producer to jump on the bandwagon is Bill Sanger, a first-generation Italian American. When he bought an old property near Santa Ynez primarily planted with olive trees, he planted a fairly large block of Sangiovese, Tuscany's red grape. The climates are nearly identical, Sanger says.

His first wines under the Marianello label (a name that combines the first names of his grandparents Maria and Nello) are just out. Marianello Cielo Rubio is a blend of 75% Sangiovese with Petit Verdot, Petite Sirah and Cabernet Sauvignon.

That's pretty mainstream compared with what Matthiasson is doing. He's even planted the oddball red grape Schioppettino around his house in Napa Valley. "I could grow Pinot, but with Pinot you pretty much know how it's going to turn out." With Schioppettino, he doesn't have a clue. "That's why it's so much fun!"

irene.virbila@latimes.com