

V is for Viognier

This Rhône variety is gaining popularity in Washington and around the Northwest.

BY ANDY PERDUE PHOTOGRAPHS BY JACKIE JOHNSTON

AS RECENTLY AS TWO YEARS AGO, WE WOULD NOT HAVE DREAMED OF putting together a tasting of Pacific Northwest Viogniers. Simply put: There weren't enough of them.

But this difficult-to-pronounce white wine whose traditional home is in France's northern Rhône Valley, is quickly gaining strength in the Northwest — especially in Washington — as a good transition wine for Chardonnay lovers.

A half-century ago, Viognier was nearly extinct, with perhaps a dozen acres planted in France. Since then, interest in the grape has risen, with plantings having reached more than 700 acres, primarily in Condrieu, the appellation just south of Côte-Rôtie.

Viognier (pronounced "vee-own-YAY") arrived on the West Coast within the past two decades, first in California, where about 500 acres are planted, then to Washington and Oregon. Today, Washington Viognier is closing in on 400 acres. In Oregon, Viognier plantings have grown to 154 acres.

Our judging of Northwest Viognier comprised 39 wines from Washington, Oregon and Idaho. Leading the list was the 2006 Viognier from Vin du Lac, a winery in Washington's Lake Chelan region. Owner/winemaker Larry Lehnbecker gets about half of his Viognier from the Yakima Valley and half from the Chelan area.


"With our northern fruit, we're getting a lot of acid retention," he said.

Viognier is notoriously low in acidity, which can give it a flabby mouth feel if the grapes get overripe. Lehnbecker tends to watch acid levels more than sugar, then ferments the wine in stainless steel.

"A lot of guys are using some oak with Viognier," Lehnbecker said. "I think that's a mistake, as it takes away from the acids."

Viognier has quickly come into its own because of its exotic aromas and flavors. It can show off peach, apricot and tropical fruit notes. And some of the best reveal aromas and flavors of orange Creamsicle.

Lehnbecker suggests pairing this delicate white wine with lighter foods, such as seared fish topped with a mango salsa or tropical fruit chutney. He also likes to serve Viognier with mild desserts.

The judges for this competition were: Vanessa Bailey, a soil scientist at Pacific Northwest National Laboratory in Richland, Wash., and a member of Wine Press Northwest's tasting panel; Ken Robertson, columnist for Wine Press Northwest; Gabe Roth, an international wine judge, a grape grower on Red Mountain and member of Wine Press Northwest's tasting panel; and Eric Degerman, Wine Press Northwest's managing editor. 

WINE RATINGS

All rated wines are tasted blind, then placed in the following categories.

Outstanding

These wines have superior characteristics and should be highly sought after.

Excellent

Top-notch wines with particularly high quality.

Recommended

Delicious, well-made wines with true varietal characteristics.

Prices are suggested retail and should be used as guidelines.

OUTSTANDING

Vin du Lac \$18
2006 Vie! Viognier, Columbia Valley
 Owner/winemaker Larry Lehnbecker shows his versatility by crafting a delicate white that is mind-bogglingly delicious. Up front, it's loaded with delicate aromas of orange blossoms, apples, peaches and lemons, followed by bright flavors of starfruit, lemons, cantaloupe and oranges. This is a great example of what Viognier should be. Pair with bruschetta alternatives. — Jeff Gorton

D'Estefero Winery \$22
2006 Viognier, Columbia Valley Owner Mark Newton and winemaker Hillary Spikard have crafted one of the finest Viogniers you'll likely come across. It opens with classic aromas of orange Creamsicle, dried pineapples and lemon bars. On the palate, this big, creamy wine is loaded with exotic tropical and citrus flavors and balanced with ample acidity. Pair with seared scallops or corried chicken. — Jeff Gorton

Spangler Vineyards \$16
2006 Viognier, Southern Oregon Pat and Loree Spangler have revived the former La Grana Cellars in Southern Oregon and are producing a wide array of superior wines.