

Grenache Is Great

In early June, I had the honour of co-chairing, along with French wine guru Michel Bettane, the first symposium ever held on Grenache, at Le Chêne Bleu, a magnificent estate near the historic town of Vaison-la-Romaine in the southern Rhône. Over 240 delegates from 23 countries attended this three-day event packed with workshops, presentations and tastings of over 300 wines in favour of "the unsung hero of the wine world." Although my free ballpoint told me "Grenache is Groovy," I don't think until that moment Grenache knew it has so many friends. Of the seven "think tanks" made up of international experts who covered every aspect from growing to drinking, it was remarkable how similar were the conclusions, how clearly each panel described the strengths and weaknesses of Grenache and how focused they were on how to move forward.

The Viticulture panel showed that Grenache is eco-friendly, long-lived, with more old vines than any other varietal, economical to farm, adapted to small production and the perfect grape on its own or for blending. With 200,000 hectares it is the world's fourth most planted red grape, but, down from 240,000 in 1998, it is in need of preservation. Two Winemaker panels featured top names from France, Italy, Spain, Australia, California and South Africa. The first answered the question, "What is Grenache?" Friendly, diverse, rural, real, rich yet balanced, captivating but not perfect, so it needs commitment and is best made in the smaller wineries. The second, chaired by the iconoclastic Randall Grahm of Bonny Doon Vineyards, characterised the grape as a chameleon for its many colours, often seeming on the fringes of wine culture while actually being central to it. Grahm described Old World Grenaches as *vins de terroir* and New World Grenaches as *vins d'effort*.

There were two Media panels, one discussing the taste profile of Grenache: warm, smooth, ripe but not jammy with the spicy *garrigue* aromas of Provence

and, since it can be white, rosé, red, sweet, fortified, even sparkling, it can be considered a "one-stop grape variety." Comparisons were made to a 4-by-4 vehicle ready for any road, and to actors: Gerard Dépardieu for Frenchness, Clint Eastwood for reliability, while Pancho Campo MW, recognising that his local Garnacha was feminine, selected Penélope Cruz. The second panel, with input from Brazil, China, India, Israel and Hong Kong, discussed the appeal of Grenache in emerging markets, noting that it makes perfect wines for the novice drinker, since food matching mattered little in these countries and high alcohols even less.

The Restaurant panel stated that, due to its round fruit and low tannins, Grenache shows great compatibility with food, that there is a Grenache for every part of a meal, recommending that the reds be served no warmer than 60 degrees Fahrenheit. The Retail panel insisted that Grenache should be on the label, on the front if possible within appellation rules, on the back if not. All panels agreed that there should be an International Grenache Day, the first being planned for September 24. ■■



PHOTO: DECANIER

From the 300 wines tasted, here are my red winners; satisfaction absolutely guaranteed.

France

Clos de Trias Vieilles Vignes 2007 Ventoux
Domaine de la Janasse Chaupin 2007 Châteauneuf-du-Pape
Domaine Gauby Coume Gineste 2002 VdP Côtes Catalanes
Domaine La Soumade Dore 2004 Rasteau VDN
Domaine Bressy-Masson Rancio NV Rasteau VDN
Domaine Mas Amiel 1969 Maury

Spain

Domaine Lupier El Terroir 2008 Navarra
Clos Mogador Espectacle 2007 Monsant
Terroir al Limit Les Maynes 2007 Priorat
Portal del Montsant Trossos Tros Negre 2007 Monsant

California

Tablas Creek Vineyard 2007 Paso Robles
Bonny Doon 2009 Clos de Gilroy, Monterey County

Australia

D'Arenberg The Derelict Vineyard 2007 McLaren Vale
Yalumba Tri-Centenary Vineyard 2005 Barossa Valley