

{ grape variety }



A Wine for Every Occasion

GARNACHA/GRENACHE IS THE NEW HIT GRAPE FROM THE OLD WORLD

by Cliff Rames

POP QUIZ: What noble European grape variety can produce wines of virtually every style, among them thirst-quenching sparklers; plump, mineral-driven whites; creamy, watermelon-kissed rosés; ruby-toned or darkly-spiced reds; and luscious fortified dessert wines? Hint: It's one of the world's oldest and most widely-planted cultivars, a grape that splendidly channels the nuances of its Mediterranean terroir and also happens to produce one of the most food-friendly wines in the world.

The answer should come as no surprise (or perhaps it will!). Garnacha—also known as Grenache in France—is no stranger to being overlooked and underestimated. While many sommeliers and wine lovers will recognize the variety as a stalwart workhorse and ensemble player in Côtes du Rhône, Châteauneuf-du-Pape, and GSM blends, a new generation of

winemakers in the Aragón and Catalonia DOs of eastern Spain, as well as the Roussillon region of southern France, seek to cast the grape in an attention-grabbing, award-winning starring role.

By restricting yields, preserving and nurturing old vines, and balancing tradition with modern viticultural and vinification techniques, these producers are steadily emancipating the grape from its (sometimes dodgy) reputation as a blending component. Instead they are crafting innovative, high-quality varietal wines of exceptional character, concentration, and finesse. Even the venerable Robert Parker has taken notice, writing in *The Wine Advocate* that "Grenache has basically been disregarded for the last century," noting that in recent years he's found himself "buying more and more Grenache wines."

Decades of wine experience or a famous palate are certainly not prerequisites to taste that today's European Garnacha/Grenache wines hit all the right notes. From versatility to value, from simple refreshment to profound complexity, these "new wines from old vines" often overdeliver for their price points. Sopexa Senior Account Manager Bertrand Blanchet says the marvel of European Garnacha/Grenache is that many of the grapevines are ancient, yet they yield wines at affordable prices. "Gnarly, 100-year-old bush vines are common, but many wines retail for \$8 to \$15," he adds. "Where else can you experience this? These are truly great values!"

The newfound accolades and appreciation for the grape, as well as increased sales in the United States—up by 34 percent in five years, according to Nielsen

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CAMPAIGN FINANCED WITH AID FROM THE EUROPEAN UNION



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At left, Christy Canterbury, MW, speaker, and wine judge, offers her take on Garnacha/Grenache to The SOMM Journal. At right, gnarled Garnacha vines in Spain.

ScanTrack—couldn't have manifested without the investment of serious financial and sweat equity by vintners. In 2014, winegrowers from five Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) growing regions in Spain—Calatayud, Campo de Borja, Cariñena, Somontano (Aragón), and Terra Alta (Catalonia)—united to establish the *Asociación para la Promoción del Vino de Garnacha* (Garnacha Origen) with the mission to improve quality standards and promote the PDOs as the cradle of Garnacha. Today, Garnacha Origen represents 5,500 winegrowers and 144 wineries, which collectively cultivate nearly 35,000 hectares of vineyards and produce 750,000 hectoliters of wine—40 percent of which is Garnacha.

On the other side of the Pyrenees mountains in the Roussillon region of southern France, the *Conseil Interprofessionnel des Vins du Roussillon* (CIVR) set out to accomplish a similar mission. A trade organization comprised of 2,200 winemaker families, 25 cooperatives, and 350 private cellars, CIVR counsels and represents the region's 15 PDO regions and three PGI wines, including Grenache-based fortified *Vins Doux Naturels* of Banyuls, Rivesaltes and Maury. In partnership with Garnacha Origen, these producers spearheaded a European Union-financed campaign to celebrate their common heritage and to assist wine

consumers and professionals in rediscovering the versatile, vivacious, and terroir-driven Garnacha/Grenache wines of their regions.

THE MANY FACES OF GARNACHA

Perfectly suited to the warm Mediterranean climate, European Garnacha/Grenache thrives in the hot, dry, well-drained schist and granite soils found on the slopes, plateaus, and amphitheatres of Aragón, Terra Alta, and Roussillon. In these conditions, the roots must drill down deeply for water, which concentrates flavor in the bunches. Like ancient sentinels twisted by time and the brutal *cierzo* winds, these old bush vines ripen late, usually after Cabernet Sauvignon, and are plump with sugar and robust flavor. The variety's skin, however, is thin and lightly pigmented, rendering moderately-colored and consumer-friendly low-tannin wines.

Not all European Garnacha/Grenache is created equal—that is its charm. Over the centuries Mother Nature has worked her wonders, mutating the variety into three genetically-identical, yet characteristically-distinct, versions: Grenache Noir, Grenache Gris, and Grenache Blanc. In the glass, red Garnacha/Grenache can convey juicy, ruby fruit characteristics or a full, robust, and darkly-spiced expression best paired with hearty dishes like curries, burgers, and grilled sausages.

Grenache Gris, meanwhile, produces

lovely and vibrant yet creamy rosé wines with notes of strawberry, rhubarb, and watermelon that delightfully pair with grilled tuna or charcuterie. Grenache Blanc, with its fleshy orchard fruit, honeysuckle, and saline mineral notes, is best suited for shellfish, seasonal salads, or white meats. Sofia Gonzalez, Managing Director of Garnacha Origen, recalls a memorable pairing she enjoyed at Piperade in San Francisco: white gazpacho with almonds and garlic, served with Garnache Blanc. "But why stop there?" she asks with a laugh. "You can pair a multi-course meal with just Garnacha!"

Fernando Mora, Spain's newest Master of Wine, says he enjoys the wide variation of styles Garnacha/Grenache yields: from the crisp, floral and mineral whites of Somontano and Terra Alta to the deep, black, meaty reds of Campo de Borja. "There are many faces of Garnacha," he observes. "Food-pairing opportunities are nearly infinite."

Speaker and wine judge Christy Canterbury, MW, concurs with Mora, adding that the magic of Garnacha/Grenache lies its delightful ability to complement a cornucopia of seasonal dishes—both savory and sweet. "With Garnacha/Grenache wines from both sides of the Spanish-French border, you experience everything from affordable, slurp-worthy quaffers to premium, mind-bendingly complex wines," she says. "It's a variety that virtually does it all." ❧