vinetur

Varieties shape global wine

From European classics to American hybrids, grape selection and terroir drive diversity in wine styles and regional identities

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WRITTEN BY ROBERT BEIR



The world's wine industry is fundamentally defined by the grape varieties used in its production. Understanding the types of grapes employed globally for winemaking is essential for anyone interested in wine, from the consumer to the professional. Each grape variety possesses a unique genetic identity that influences the style, structure, and aromatic profile of the wine it produces. This genetic foundation interacts with geography, climate, soil, and human intervention, producing the remarkable diversity

that defines wine.

Almost all the world's quality wines are made from a single species, Vitis vinifera. Native to the Mediterranean, Central Europe, and Western Asia, Vitis vinifera has been cultivated for thousands of years. Its balanced levels of sugars, acids, and phenolic compounds make it uniquely suited for fermentation and aging. This species is the basis of Europe's prestigious wines, from Burgundy's Pinot Noir to Bordeaux's Cabernet Sauvignon, and has been exported globally. However, other Vitis species, primarily from North America, have also played a crucial role in modern viticulture. In the late nineteenth century, the phylloxera plague devastated European vineyards. The pest, native to North America, attacked the roots of Vitis vinifera, but American species such as Vitis riparia and Vitis labrusca had developed resistance. The industry was saved by grafting European grapevines onto American rootstocks, a practice that remains standard worldwide.

This process, which creates a chimeric plant, means the majority of the world's fine wines are produced from vines with European fruiting bodies and American roots. The rootstock provides resistance to pests and certain diseases, while the European scion delivers the desired fruit and flavor profile. Other Vitis species are used directly for certain niche products. Vitis labrusca, for example, is important in North America for table grapes and juices and produces the distinctive "foxy" wines like Concord. In recent decades, hybrid varieties—crosses between Vitis vinifera and American species—have gained ground, especially in regions with challenging climates or disease pressure. These hybrids offer enhanced disease resistance, cold hardiness, and can be essential tools in the ongoing adaptation of viticulture to a changing environment.

When analyzing global vineyard plantings, a clear distinction emerges between grapes destined for wine and those grown for other purposes. The world's most planted grape, Kyoho, is an Asian table grape hybrid, valued for its size and flavor in China and Japan. Similarly, Sultanina (Thompson Seedless) is grown worldwide for raisins and as a table grape. However, among wine grapes, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Tempranillo, Chardonnay, and Syrah are among the most planted globally, each having established an international presence and defined wine styles in multiple continents.

Cabernet Sauvignon is the most famous red grape globally. Originating in Bordeaux as a cross between Cabernet Franc and Sauvignon Blanc, it has small, thick-skinned berries that produce wines with strong tannins, deep color, and good acidity. These qualities make it well-suited for aging, often in oak barrels. Cabernet Sauvignon is synonymous with the left bank of Bordeaux, where it forms the backbone of the region's renowned blends, but it has also flourished in California's Napa Valley, Coonawarra in Australia, Chile's Maipo Valley, and beyond. Each region brings its own signature to the grape, from Bordeaux's earthiness and structure to Napa's opulence and ripeness, to Australia's characteristic mint or eucalyptus notes.

Merlot, another Bordeaux native, is softer and earlier-ripening than Cabernet Sauvignon. Its wines are rounder, more approachable, with flavors of plum, cherry, and chocolate. Merlot is essential in the right bank of Bordeaux, particularly in Pomerol and Saint-Émilion, and has become popular globally, appreciated for its texture and versatility both as a varietal wine and in blends.

Pinot Noir, originally from Burgundy, is challenging to cultivate. It requires specific climatic and soil conditions, is prone to disease, and has thin skins that produce lighter-colored, aromatic wines with fine tannins. In Burgundy, Pinot Noir achieves legendary complexity and expresses the minute differences of terroir. Elsewhere, from Oregon to New Zealand, producers have embraced the challenge of this "heartbreaker" grape, yielding distinctive wines that have gained international acclaim.

Syrah, or Shiraz as it is known in Australia, is celebrated for its dual expression. In France's Rhône Valley, it yields structured, spicy, and age-worthy reds with notes of black pepper, violets, and smoked meats. In Australia, Shiraz takes on a fuller, richer, fruit-driven style with jammy berry flavors, chocolate, and licorice, shaped by climate and winemaking decisions.

The Mediterranean region is home to key native grapes that define their regions' identities. Tempranillo is Spain's principal red grape, forming the base of Rioja, Ribera del Duero, and Toro wines. It ripens early, combines good color, tannin, and acidity, and responds well to barrel aging, acquiring complexity and finesse. Garnacha (Grenache) is native to Aragon in Spain and widespread in France's southern Rhône, producing

warm, full-bodied, fruit-forward reds with high alcohol and soft tannins. Sangiovese dominates Tuscany, responsible for Chianti, Brunello di Montalcino, and Vino Nobile di Montepulciano, offering cherry-driven, savory, high-acid wines. Nebbiolo, from Piedmont, is the grape of Barolo and Barbaresco—wines renowned for their aromatics, pale color, firm tannins, and longevity.

Certain grapes, although originating in Europe, have become emblematic of New World countries. Malbec, once a minor blending grape in Bordeaux, now represents the face of Argentine wine, especially in Mendoza, where altitude and climate allow for intense color, ripe fruit, and floral aromas. Carménère, long thought extinct in Bordeaux, was rediscovered in Chile, where it has become a signature variety, producing deeply colored wines with characteristic notes of red fruit, spice, and subtle green pepper.

Zinfandel in California, genetically identical to Primitivo in southern Italy, produces bold, spicy, fruit-driven wines, often with high alcohol, and a particular jammy character. Its historical confusion with other varieties and eventual genetic identification highlight the complexities of grapevine history and migration.

The white grape spectrum is equally broad. Chardonnay, perhaps the most adaptable grape, thrives in numerous climates and responds dramatically to terroir and winemaking choices. In Chablis, Chardonnay yields steely, mineral wines; in California, it can become full-bodied, oaky, and creamy; in Champagne, it is essential for sparkling Blanc de Blancs. Sauvignon Blanc, originally from Bordeaux and the Loire, produces zesty, aromatic, citrus- and herb-scented wines. In the Loire, it delivers elegance and minerality; in New Zealand, it offers exuberant tropical fruit and green notes.

Riesling, primarily associated with Germany and Alsace, is highly aromatic, with searing acidity and an ability to range from bone-dry to lusciously sweet. Its hallmark is its transparent expression of site and capacity to develop complex aged aromas, sometimes described as petrol.

Other whites have strong regional identities. Pinot Grigio/Pinot Gris, a mutation of Pinot Noir, is associated with both light, crisp Italian styles and richer, spicier versions from Alsace and Oregon. Albariño is Galicia's calling card in Spain, producing highly aromatic, saline, and vibrant wines that pair perfectly with seafood. Verdejo from

Rueda is Spain's answer to fresh, herbaceous white wine, showing wild herb and stone fruit aromas, with a characteristic bitter finish.

Chenin Blanc stands out for its versatility, excelling in dry, off-dry, sparkling, and sweet wines, especially in France's Loire Valley and in South Africa, where it is known as Steen. Airén, although little-known to consumers, has been historically significant as Spain's most widely planted grape. Its neutral character made it suitable for brandy and bulk wine, but a new wave of winemakers is seeking to show its true potential in quality dry whites.

The choice of whether to vinify grapes as varietal wines or to blend them is shaped by philosophy, tradition, and the characteristics of the grapes and region. In Burgundy, the tradition is to allow Pinot Noir and Chardonnay to express their terroir without blending. In Bordeaux and many other regions, blending is seen as a tool to achieve balance, complexity, and consistency. Blending allows winemakers to combine the strengths of different varieties and mitigate the risks of difficult vintages, as in Bordeaux, where Merlot and Cabernet Franc can compensate for under-ripe Cabernet Sauvignon in cooler years.

The role of terroir cannot be overstated in shaping wine style. Climate, soil, topography, and the choices of the grower and winemaker interact to define the finished wine. Chardonnay demonstrates this plasticity clearly: in Chablis, it is tense and mineral; in Napa Valley, it is rich and buttery; in Champagne, it is elegant and linear.

As climate change alters the environment, viticulture is adapting by exploring new varieties, rediscovering old ones, and developing new techniques in both vineyard and winery. Regions like Bordeaux have authorized new grapes such as Touriga Nacional to ensure future resilience. At the same time, there is a growing movement to reclaim local, ancestral varieties, bringing greater diversity and authenticity to the wine world.

Every bottle of wine tells a story rooted in the unique genetic identity of its grape, shaped by centuries of adaptation, human ingenuity, and a changing world. From the noble classics to the rediscovered local treasures, the vast and evolving atlas of wine grapes continues to inspire exploration and passion across the globe.