

# Know your grapes



The primary flavour of all wine is dictated by the grape variety.



## Know the basics

There are over 4,000 types of 'Vitis Vinifera', the species of grape used to make wine.

In truth, only about 70 grapes are important worldwide and as far as retail sales are concerned, just 15 account for around 80% of all sales.

## Understand varietal characters

Currently you may not have wines from all of these in your range, but it is a fair bet that you will have some, or all, in the future.

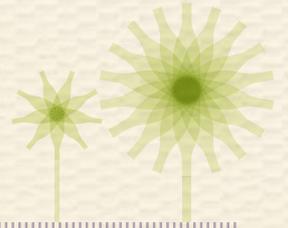
It is useful to have a basic understanding about the character and flavours of each different grape variety. The wines in your range will change over time but the main character of each grape won't.

Although a Cabernet Sauvignon from Australia will have some characteristic differences to one from South Africa, basically both will taste quite similar.

So a little understanding of grapes will help you advise your customers in store.



# Whites



## Chardonnay 'Shar-don-nay'

Growers like Chardonnay as it is relatively easy to grow, winemakers like it as they can create various styles of wine, and customers simply like the taste as, although it is dry, it has no aggressive acidity or hard edges.

But, not all Chardonnay tastes the same. If it is from hotter countries such as Australia or the USA, the fruit will be riper and will produce higher alcohol, so it responds well to oak ageing. These wines are often referred to as 'Tropical' with flavours such as pineapple, mangoes, nectarines and hints of butter, nuts and the vanilla character that come from oak. These are the flavours that most people associate with Chardonnay and these wines are likely to be among the biggest sellers for you.

In cool climates, such as France, Chardonnay is often unoaked and the flavours are more restrained, with hints of apples, melons and pears.

Unoaked versions are becoming popular and these are fresh and citrusy.

In order to offer consumers variety, Chardonnay is often blended, either with Semillon, which adds richness and grapefruit flavours, or Colombard, which gives a drier crisper style.

## Sauvignon Blanc 'So-veen-yon Blonk'

This is popular with customers who favour wines that may be very dry and mouth watering. It is the most herbaceous of all the white grapes and the predominant flavours are gooseberries, asparagus, blackcurrant leaves and occasionally passion fruit.

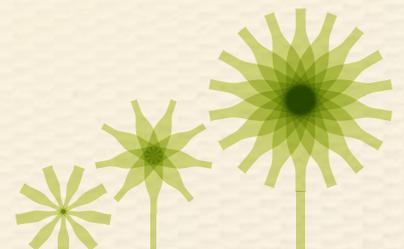
Like Chardonnay, this grape migrated from France to most of the new world regions. The cooler areas produce the most individual wines. Currently some of the best examples come from New Zealand, Chile and the South of France. Sauvignon Blanc is very rarely oaked and is always dry.

## Semillon 'Sem-ee-yon'

This grape forms the major part of the blend for Sauternes, the great sweet wine of the Bordeaux region of France, but elsewhere in the world it is frequently used for blending.

It has waxy, pineapple and pink grapefruit character which adds depth and richness. Currently most of the best individual Semillons hail from Australia; the Hunter Valley leads the way, with Barossa running a close second.

Its favourite partner is Chardonnay. These blends are still dry and are likely to be oaked.





### **Chenin Blanc** 'Shen-in Blonk'

Chenin is a real chameleon. Winemakers love it as it can be used to make sparkling wines, wines which are crisp and dry or honeyed and very sweet.

Commercially most examples are straightforward, off dry, with flavours of apples, nuts and hints of honey.

### **Riesling** 'Ree-sling'

Riesling has a personality all of its own, with wonderful acidity and a vibrant fruity character with the flavours of green apples, spicy baked apples, orange zest and a mineral edge. It also ages brilliantly.

### **Pinot Grigio** 'Pee-no Gree-ge-oh'

Pinot Grigio's great advantage is that it is very neutral, has little aroma and not very much taste. If that sounds a disadvantage - it's not. As with food, some folk like hot spicy concoctions, others like blander less intrusive dishes.

At its best it is fresh, dry with apple skin flavours and it is very easy to drink. That's why it is popular. It is known as Pinot Grigio in Italy but in other parts of the world it is known as Pinot Gris. Pinot Gris from Alsace and New Zealand can have far more intense flavours.

### **Viognier** 'Vee-on-ee-ay'

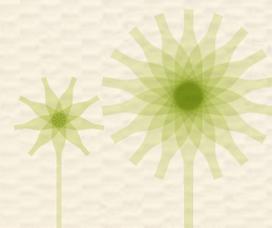
It is dry and spicy with flavours of apricots and almond stones. It is an excellent alternative to Chardonnay and brilliant with 'East meets West' fusion food.

### **Colombard** 'Col-om-bard'

An aromatic variety when grown in countries such as California and Australia, where it gets the benefit of more sunshine. The resulting wines are fresh, dry and fruity with green skinned apple flavours that are pleasant and easy to drink. It is particularly successful when blended with Chardonnay.



# Reds



## Merlot

'Mer-low'

In customers' minds Merlot is the red equivalent to Chardonnay as it is a tad softer, fatter and less tannic than Cabernet. This makes it an easier and less challenging wine to drink. It is sometimes called the 'Christmas Cake' wine as it often has flavours of plums, vanilla, spice and sometimes a toffee edge.

Like Cabernet Sauvignon it is grown almost everywhere and Chile, the USA, Argentina, Australia along with the South of France have some excellent examples.

## Syrah / Shiraz

'Si-rah' / 'She-raz'

This grape is known by two names. In France it is 'Syrah' and is the mainstay of the big red wines from the Rhone Valley. In Australia, South Africa and most of the other 'New World' winemaking countries it is known as 'Shiraz'.

This is one of the 'Big Boys' in grape terms. It produces huge, spicy peppery wines in France and in Australia it can produce world class 'stonkers', packed with flavours including spice, pepper, plums, damsons and sometimes chocolate, vanilla and molasses. This is a wine that appeals to keen wine enthusiasts. Although it is a pleasure on its own, it really shines with food.

It is now grown in almost all 'warm' areas, so new plantings are to be found in South Africa, Argentina and southern Spain, but it is Australia and the Rhone Valley in France that still produce the best examples.

In Australia it is often blended with Cabernet or Mataro and in France it is often blended with Grenache.

## Cabernet Sauvignon

'Cab-bear-nay So-veen-yon'

Cabernet is very popular because it is grown almost everywhere in the World. It is the major component of the blend of grape varieties used to make the classic wines of Bordeaux in France.

It also works well with other grape varieties, such as Merlot and Shiraz in the New World, but you will often find it produced as a single variety. Because these countries are

hotter and the grapes come to full maturity and ripeness, single varietal Cabernets have great character and complexity.

It is nearly always oaked and has a wonderful dark colour, aromas of blackcurrants, mint or eucalyptus and often of cedar and tobacco. Australia has some of the best examples, particularly from Coonawara, McLaren Vale and Margaret River.

## Pinot Noir

'Pea-no Nwar'

Pinot Noir is difficult to grow but delicious. At its best in the Burgundy region of France, Pinot is temperamental, fickle and difficult to grow and yet when everything 'goes well' it can produce the most delicious, soft and seductive of red wines.

Because it is difficult to grow, the best wines are always expensive. Currently Chile is producing some good inexpensive Pinots, and they are a fine introduction to the style.

Many countries are experimenting with Pinot, but the best are from Burgundy in France, Oregon in the USA, Monterey in California and the Martinborough and Central Otago regions of New Zealand.

## Zinfandel

'Zin-fan-dell'

California claims it as its own but it came from Croatia and is popular in Italy under the name of Primitivo.

Most of the commercial wines still hail from California and at its best 'Zin' produces a powerful spicy tannic red, full of black and red berry fruits.

It is also used to produce Rosé wines, which confusingly, are labelled 'White Zinfandel'. These are medium sweet, lower in alcohol, refreshing and taste of strawberries and candyfloss. This style is served well chilled and very popular.

## Tempranillo

'Temp-ran-knee-yo'

It is the main grape variety used to produce Spain's most famous wine, Rioja. Almost always oaked, it has a gamey nose and flavours of strawberries, spice and toffee and occasionally a hint of coconut.



## Sangiovese

'San-geo-vay-see'

Like Tempranillo, the name may be unfamiliar, but this is the backbone of Italy's most famous wine Chianti.

The wines have a wonderful bitter cherry nose and taste of cherries, coffee, fruit tea and sometimes plums. It always has high acidity, so these wines are best served with food.

## Grenache

'Gren-nash'

Grenache only thrives in warm climates. Most famous in the Rhone Valley in France it also helps to flesh out Rioja from Spain.

It is now grown in many regions of Australia and is at its best when blended with Shiraz, which is its natural partner, although there are a few excellent single varietal Grenaches that are really terrific.

It can also be produced as a rosé wine to give White Grenache, produced largely in the USA.

## Gamay

'Gam-may'

Almost exclusively grown in Beaujolais in central France, this grape is used to make the wine of the same name. It is soft, low in tannin and stuffed with fruit gum flavours. The wines of Beaujolais are so light with high acidity that you can chill them like white wine.

## Malbec

'Mal-beck'

Originally from France it is now widely grown in Argentina and produces an affordable easy drinking soft red wine with plum and damson flavours. If you have tried famous wines from southern France, such as Corbieres, you will have drunk Malbec. It is a major part of the blend of grapes used but, of course, never appears on the label.

