

Types of wine

What's on the label

Wine "varietals" simply means wine made from a specific grape. Varietal wines in the United States are often named after the dominant grapes used in making the wine. Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Chardonnay, Riesling, Pinot Noir, and Chenin Blanc are examples of grape varieties. When a wine bottle shows a varietal designation on the label (like Merlot) it means that the wine in the bottle is at least 75% that grape variety (at least 75% Merlot, for example).

Showing a varietal on the label tells the consumer what to expect from the flavor of the wine. That's why learning about basic varietals is important.

Wines are not required to carry varietal designations and cannot legally do so if the wine is a blend where no varietal is dominant (more than 75%). This is often the case. Then labels (in the U.S.) will often show the percentages of grapes used to make the blend.

Other more generic names are used to identify wine without any information on the type of grape used or where it was grown. Examples are Red Wine, White Wine, Table Wine, Blush Wine, etc..

COMMON WINE TYPES

Albariño

Spanish white wine grape that makes crisp, refreshing, and light-bodied wines.

Aligoté

White wine grape grown in Burgundy making medium-bodied, crisp, dry wines with spicy character.

Amarone

From Italy's Veneto Region a strong, dry, long-lived red, made from a blend of partially dried red grapes.

Arneis

A light-bodied dry wine the Piedmont Region of Italy

Asti Spumante

From the Piedmont Region of Italy, A semidry sparkling wine produced from the Moscato di Canelli grape in the village of Asti

Auslese

German white wine from grapes that are very ripe and thus high in sugar

Banylus

A French wine made from late-harvest Grenache grapes and served with chocolate or dishes with a hint of sweetness. By law the wine must contain 15 percent alcohol.

Barbaresco

A red wine from the Piedmont Region of Italy, made from Nebbiolo grapes it is lighter than Barolo.

Bardolino

A light red wine from the Veneto Region of Italy. Blended from several grapes the wine garnet in color, dry and slightly bitter, sometimes lightly sparkling.

Barolo

Highly regarded Italian red, made from Nebbiolo grapes. It is dark, full-bodied and high in tannin and alcohol. Ages well.

Beaujolais

Typically light, fresh, fruity red wines from an area south of Burgundy, near Lyons, in eastern France. Areas: Beaujolais-Blanc, Beaujolais Villages, Brouilly, Chénas, Chiroubles, Fleurie, Juliéna, Mouliné-àVent, Morgon, Regnie, Saint Amour.

Blanc de Blancs

Champagne or white wine made from white grapes.

Blanc de Noirs

White or blush wine or Champagne made from dark grapes.

Blush

American term for rosé. Any wine that is pink in color.

Boal or Bual

Grown on the island of Madeira, it makes medium-sweet wines.

Brunello

This strain of Sangiovese is the only grape permitted for Brunello di Montalcino, the rare, costly Tuscan red. Luscious black and red fruits with chewy tannins.

Cabernet Franc

Red wine grape used in Bordeaux for blending with Cabernet Sauvignon. It is an earlier-maturing red wine, due to its lower level of tannins. Light- to medium-bodied wine with more immediate fruit than Cabernet Sauvignon and some of the herbaceous odors evident in unripe Cabernet Sauvignon.

Cabernet Sauvignon

Currant, Plum, Black Cherry & Spice, with notes of Olive, Vanilla Mint, Tobacco, Toasty Cedar, Anise, Pepper & Herbs. Full-bodied wines with great depth that improve with aging. Cabernet spends from 15 to 30 months aging in American & French Oak barrels which tend to soften the tannins, adding the toasty cedar & vanilla flavors.

Carignan

Known as Carignane in California, and Cirnano in Italy. Once a major blending grape for jug wines, Carignan's popularity has diminished though it still appears in some blends. Old vineyards are sought after for the intensity of their grapes.

Carmenere

Also known as Grande Vidure, once widely planted in Bordeaux. Now primarily associated with Chile. Carmenere, was imported to Chile in the 1850's. Carmenere has been frequently mislabeled and many growers and the Chilean government consider it Merlot.

Cava

Spanish sparkling wine. Produced by the méthode champenoise.

Charbono

Mainly found in California (may possibly be Dolcetto), this grape has dwindled in acreage. Often lean and tannic. Few wineries still produce it.

Champagne

Champagne is the only wine that people accept in such a multitude of styles. Champagnes can range from burnt, caramelized to full bodied fruit and yeast characters to light and citrusy, and everything in between. Then each of these wines can be altered in its amount of residual sweetness from a bone-chilling dryness to sugar syrup. Bottle age will also alter the weight and character of each of these styles.

Chardonnay

Apple, Pear, Vanilla, Fig, Peach, Pineapple, Melon, Citrus, Lemon, Grapefruit, Honey, Spice, Butterscotch, Butter & Hazelnut. Chardonnay takes well to Oak aging & barrel fermentation and is easy to manipulate with techniques such as sur lie aging & malolactic fermentation.

Châteauneuf-du-Pape

The most famous wines of the southern Rhône Valley, are produced in and around the town of the same name (the summer residence of the popes during their exile to Avignon). The reds are rich, ripe, and heady, with full alcohol levels and chewy rustic flavors. Although 13 grape varieties are planted here, the principal varietal is Grenache, followed by Syrah, Cinsault and Mourvèdre (also Vaccarese, Counoise, Terret noir, Muscardin, Clairette, Piquepoul, Picardan, Rousanne, Bourboulenc).

Chenin Blanc

Native of the Loire where it's the basis of the famous whites: Vouvray, Anjou, Quarts de Chaume and Saumer. In other areas it is a very good blending grape. Called Steen in South Africa and their most-planted grape. California uses it mainly as a blending grape for generic table wines. It can be a pleasant wine, with melon, peach, spice and citrus. The great Loire wines, depending on the producer can be dry and fresh to sweet.

Chianti

From a blend of grapes this fruity, light ruby-to-garnet-colored red may be called Chianti Riserva when aged three or more years.

Chianti Classico

From a designated portion of the Chianti wine district. To be labeled Chianti Classico, both vineyard and winery must be within the specified region.

Claret

British term for red Bordeaux wines.

Colombard (French Colombard)

The second most widely planted white variety in California, nearly all of it for jug wines. It produces an abundant crop, nearly 11 tons per acre, and makes clean and simple wines.

Constantia

This legendary sweet wine from South Africa, was a favorite of Napoleon. It comes from an estate called Groot Constantia.

Cortese

White wine grape grown in Piedmont and Lombardy. Best known for the wine, Gavi. The grape produces a light-bodied, crisp, well-balanced wine.

Dolcetto

From northwest Piedmont it produces soft, round, fruity wines fragrant with licorice and almonds.

Eiswein

“Ice wine,” A sweet German wine, made from grapes that have frozen on the vine. Freezing concentrates the sugars in the grapes prior to harvesting.

Frascati

An Italian fruity, golden white wine, may be dry to sweet.

Fumé Blanc

see Sauvignon Blanc

Gamay

Beaujolais makes its famous, fruity reds exclusively from one of the many Gamays available, the Gamay Noir à Jus Blanc. Low in alcohol and relatively high in acidity, the wines are meant to be drunk soon after bottling; the ultimate example of this is Beaujolais Nouveau, whipped onto shelves everywhere almost overnight. It is also grown in the Loire, but makes no remarkable wines. The Swiss grow it widely, for blending with Pinot Noir; they often chaptalize the wines.

Gamay Beaujolais

A California variety that makes undistinguished wines. Primarily used for blending.

Gattinara

A Piedmont red made from Nebbiolo blended with other grapes. Powerful and long-lived.

Gewürztraminer

A distinctive floral bouquet & spicy flavor are hallmarks of this medium-sweet wine. Grown mainly in Alsace region of France & Germany, and also in California, Eastern Europe, Australia, and New Zealand.

Grappa

An Italian spirit distilled from pomace. Dry and high in alcohol, it is an after dinner drink.

Grenache

Used mainly for blending and the making of Rose and Blush Wines in California, while in France it is blended to make Chateauneuf-du-Pape. Originally from Spain is the second most widely grown grape in the world. It produces a fruity, spicy, medium-bodied wine.

Johannisberg Riesling

See Riesling

Kir

An aperitif from the Burgundy Region of France. A glass of dry white wine and a teaspoon of crème de cassis make this popular drink. To make Kir Royale, use champagne or sparkling wine.

Lambrusco

A fizzy, usually red, dry to sweet wine from northern Italy, made from the grape of the same name.

Liebfraumlch

A blended German white, semisweet and fairly neutral, which accounts for up to 50 percent of all German wine exports.

Madeira

A fortified wine named for the island on which its grapes are grown. The wine is slowly heated in a storeroom to over 110°F, and allowed to cool over a period of months. Styles range from dry apéritifs, from the Sercial grape, to rich and sweet Boal and Malmsey.

Malbec

Once important in Bordeaux and the Loire in various blends, this not-very-hardy grape has been steadily replaced by Merlot and the two Cabernets. However, Argentina is markedly successful with this varietal. In the United States Malbec is a blending grape only, and an insignificant one at that, but a few wineries use it, the most obvious reason being that it's considered part of the Bordeaux-blend recipe.

Marc

A distilled spirit made from pomace that is known by different names around the world. Italy calls it grappa; in Burgundy, Marc de Bourgogne; in Champagne, Marc de Champagne. Dry and high in alcohol, typically an after dinner drink.

Marsala

Made from Grillo, Catarratto, or Inzolia grapes, this Sicilian wine may be dry or sweet and is commonly used in cooking.

Marsanne

A full-bodied, moderately intense wine with spice, pear and citrus notes. Popular in the Rhône & Australia (especially Victoria) has some of the world's oldest vineyards. California's "Rhône-Rangers" have had considerable success with this variety.

Mead

Common in medieval Europe, a wine made by fermenting honey and water. Wine makers now making flavored meads.

Meritage

Registered in 1989 with the U.S. Department of Trademarks and Patents by a group of vintners, who sought to establish standards of identifying red & white wines made of traditional Bordeaux grape blends. They needed a name for these wines since 75% of a single variety is not used, therefore the label could not state a particular variety of grape. Meritage was chosen because it was a combination of two words, merit and heritage. To be called a meritage, the wine must: Blend two or more Bordeaux grape varieties: Red wines/ Cabernet Franc, Cabernet Sauvignon, Carmenere, Gros Verdot, Malbec, Merlot, Petite Verdot & St. Macaire. White wines/ Sauvignon Blanc, Muscadelle and Sémillon. Have less than 90% of any single variety. Be the winery's best wine of its type. Be produced and bottled by a United States winery from grapes carrying a U.S. appellation. Be limited to a maximum of 25,000 cases produced per vintage.

Merlot

Herbs, Green Olive, Cherry & Chocolate. Softer & medium in weight with fewer tannins than Cabernet and ready to drink sooner. Takes well to Oak aging. It is frequently used as a blending wine with Cabernet to soften

Montepulciano

A medium to full-bodied wine, with good color and structure. Known for its quality and value.

Moscato

see Muscat

Mourvedre

A pleasing wine, of medium-weight, with spicy cherry and berry flavors and moderate tannins. Often used in Châteauneuf-du-Pape.

Müller-Thurgau

A cross of two grapes, Sylvaner and Riesling. Mainly grown in Germany, Northern Italy, and New Zealand. Light in color, and can be dry to medium dry.

Muscat

Also known as Muscat Blanc and Muscat Canelli. With pronounced spice and floral notes it can also be used for blending. A versatile grape that can turn into anything from Asti Spumante and Muscat de Canelli to a dry wine like Muscat d'Alsace.

Nebbiolo

The great grape of Northern Italy, which excels there in Barolo and Barbaresco, strong, ageable wines. Mainly unsuccessful elsewhere, Nebbiolo also now has a small foothold in California. So far the wines are light and uncomplicated, bearing no resemblance to the Italian types.

Petit Verdot

From the Bordeaux Region of France it is used for blending with Cabernet Sauvignon.

Petite Sirah

Plum & blackberry flavors mark this deep, ruby colored wine. Usually full-bodied with chewy tannins. Used in France & California as a blending wine. Not related to the Syrah of France.

Pinot Blanc

Similar flavor and texture to Chardonnay it is used in Champagne, Burgundy, Alsace, Germany, Italy and California and can make excellent wines. It can be intense, and complex, with ripe pear, spice, citrus and honey notes.

Pinot Grigio/Pinot Gris

At its best this varietal produces wines that are soft, perfumed with more color than most other white wines. Grown mainly in northeast Italy, but as Pinot Gris it is grown in Alsace & known as Tokay.

Pinot Meunier

Grown in the Champagne region of France, it is blended with Pinot Noir and Chardonnay to add fruit flavors to champagne.

Pinot Noir

This is the great, noble grape of Burgundy. Difficult to grow but at its best it is smooth & richer than Cabernet Sauvignon with less tannin. Raisin like flavors with undertones of black cherry, spice & raspberry. Widely used in the making of champagne sparkling wines.

Pinotage

A cross between Pinot Noir and Cinsault. Grown in South Africa. Fermented at higher temperatures and aged in new oak for finesse and wonderful berry flavors.

Port

Fortified wine from the Douro region of Portugal. Styles include: Late Bottle (LB), Tawny, Ruby, Aged, and Vintage. Mostly sweet and red.

Retsina

Dry white Greek wine flavored with pine resin. Dating back to ancient Greece, it is an acquired taste. Dominant flavor is turpentine. Riesling Flavors of apricot & tropical fruit with floral aromas are characteristics of this widely varying wine. Styles range from dry to sweet.

Rosé

Sometimes called blush. Any light pink wine, dry to sweet, made by removing the skins of red grapes early in the fermentation process or by mixing red and white

Roussanne

A white wine grape of the northern Rhône Valley, mainly for blending with the white wine grape Marsanne.

Sangiovese

Known for its supple texture, medium to full-bodied spice flavors, raspberry cherry & anise. Sangiovese is used in many fine Italian wines including Chianti.

Sauternes

A blend of mostly Sémillon and Sauvignon Blanc grapes, affected by Botrytis cinerea, which concentrates the wine's sweetness and alcohol.

Sauvignon Blanc

Grassy & herbaceous flavors and aromas mark this light and medium-bodied wine, sometimes with hints of gooseberry & black currant. In California it is often labeled Fume Blanc. New Zealand produces some of the finest Sauvignon Blancs in a markedly fruity style.

Sémillon

The foundation of Sauternes, and many of the dry whites of Graves and Pessac-Léognan. It can make a wonderful late-harvest wine, with complex fig, pear, tobacco and honey notes.

As a blending wine it adds body, flavor and texture to Sauvignon Blanc. It may be blended with Chardonnay, but does not add much to the flavor.

Sherry

Fortified wine from the Jerez de la Frontera district in southern Spain. Palomino is the main grape variety, with Pedro Ximénez used for the sweeter, heavier wines. Drier Sherries are best served chilled; the medium-sweet to sweet are best at room temperature. Ranging from dry to very sweet, the styles are: Manzanilla, Fino, Amontillado, Oloroso, Pale Cream, Cream, Palo, and Pedro Ximénez. Shiraz/Syrah Black cherry, spice, pepper, tar & leather with smooth tannins & supple texture make this wine a growing favorite. With early drinking appeal it also has the ability to age well to form more complex wines.

Soave

A straw-colored dry white wine Italy's Veneto Region. Symphony Symphony is a U. C. Davis clone. In 1948, the Muscat of Alexandria and Grenache Gris grapes were combined to create this delicate Muscat flavor. It's very distinctive

Tokay

See Pinot Gris.

Traminer

German word for grapes. See Gewürztraminer.

Trebbiano

Trebbiano in Italy and Ugni Blancin France. Found in almost any basic white Italian wine, and is actually a sanctioned ingredient of the blend used for Chianti. In France, it is often called St.Émilion, and used for Cognac and Armagnac brandy.

Ugni Blanc

See Trebbiano

Valpolicella

A light, semidry red from Italy's Veneto Region, typically drunk young.

Verdicchio

Italian white that produces a pale, light-bodied, crisp wine.

Viognier

Viognier, is one of the most difficult grapes to grow. It makes a floral and spicy white wine, medium to full-bodied and very fruity, with apricot and peach aromas.

Zinfandel

With predominant raspberry flavors and a spicy aroma, Zinfandels can be bold and intense as well as light and fruity. It takes well to blending bringing out flavors of cherry, wild berry & plum with notes of leather, earth & tar. It is the most widely grown grape in California. Much of it is turned into White Zinfandel, a blush wine that is slightly sweet.