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Sauvignon Blanc's American Makeover

Grass, sagebrush and herbs.
Slate, wet stones and mouth-puckering citrus.
Mango, kiwi and ruby-red grapefruit.
Flavorless viscosity, like vodka without the fun.

What do those four wine descriptions have in common? They're all about Sauvignon Blanc made in America, and they're reflective of the grape's identity crisis in this country. Buying American Sauvignon Blanc is still a hit-or-miss affair, but the good news is that an attractive style has emerged in the past several years, and it is delicious, food-friendly and generally not expensive.

You will not be surprised to hear that the best of these newcomers hail from familiar regions such as California's Napa Valley or Washington's Columbia Valley. But you might be shocked to learn what region is poised to make the next big statement with this wine.

Sauvignon Blanc is a versatile grape. In the Loire Valley of northern France, its spiritual homeland, it seems to carry a glint of limestone and steely structure in the wines of Sancerre and Pouilly-Fumé and a whiff of meadow grass in the exuberant, inexpensive wines of Touraine. In New Zealand, it can be aggressively grassy and vegetal – “cat's pee on a gooseberry bush,” as the expression goes. (Never mind that hardly anyone in this country knows what a gooseberry tastes like, with or without the adornment.)

In California, Sauvignon Blanc often tastes of . . . well, not much. Two decades ago, most wineries followed their chardonnay recipe of barrel fermentation and aging and managed to strip Sauvignon Blanc of much of its character. When New Zealand's wines became all the rage in the mid-1990s, the trend swung back toward grassiness in the wine.

The flavor profile that is emerging today – the distinctly American style of Sauvignon Blanc – features tropical flavors of mango, passion fruit, kiwi and guava, often with a note of ruby-red grapefruit. Mason Cellars and St. Supéry in Napa Valley have been leading exponents of that style.

And they're winning converts. **Dry Creek Vineyard, a champion of Sauvignon Blanc** since its founding in 1972, consistently has produced one of California's best-value whites with its Sonoma County Fumé Blanc, combining the slightly grassy character of the Loire with California ripeness and exuberance. But with the release of its 2008 Sauvignon Blanc in June, the winery is tacking toward the tropical flavor profile with its flagship wine. The 2008 comes entirely from the warmer vineyards of the Dry Creek Valley, while previous vintages, labeled Sonoma County, came primarily from the cooler Russian River Valley. The extra ripeness adds to the tropical flavors and tames the grassiness.

The winery is also phasing out the use of “Fumé Blanc,” a name for Sauvignon Blanc coined by legendary Napa winemaker Robert Mondavi in the late 1960s. Meant to distinguish wines in the French style from their nondescript competitors, the name is still used by a handful of wineries in California, but usually with “Sauvignon Blanc” also on the label. The growing popularity of Sauvignon Blanc might render the Fumé Blanc moniker obsolete.

“The new generation of wine drinkers, sommeliers, wine buyers and consumers doesn't understand Fumé Blanc,” said Kim Stare Wallace, vice president of Dry Creek Vineyard. “It's their father's Oldsmobile.”

With this new style of Sauvignon Blanc emerging on the West Coast, where will the grape make its next big statement? My guess is, right here in our own back yard. A handful of Virginia wineries are making excellent Sauvignon Blanc. The best of them, from Linden Vineyards and Glen Manor, can stand proudly against competitors from around the world. Veritas, Barboursville and Breaux are nipping at their heels.

Virginia's wet climate makes the grape tough to grow and even tougher to fit a style. “Some years we have left more than half our crop on the vines, because it rotted before it could ripen,” said Jeff White, owner and winegrower at Glen Manor, on the west-facing slopes of the Shenandoah Valley just south of Front Royal. “But we've learned to control the crop and leaf canopy to encourage ripening.”

White's 2007, still available on the market, shows the fat ripeness of a long, dry, hot growing season. The newly released 2008, on the other hand, was picked during the five-day window between tropical storms Fay and Hanna. A decade ago, that one-two punch from Mother Nature might have ruined the vintage, but with vine age and experience, White was able to produce a wine that not only tastes ripe and tropical, but also features the grassy edginess that characterizes the grape.

So with Sauvignon Blanc, don't just think California. You might be overlooking a gem next door.

Dry Creek
V I N E Y A R D

