

Wineries look to diversify their offerings

By MARGARETT WATERBURY
For the Capital Press

In the global market, Oregon wine is virtually synonymous with Pinot noir. But that may be about to change. A new generation of winemakers is on the hunt for different grape varieties, and the Oregon grape growing industry is just starting to catch up.

Pinot noir remains the undisputed king of Oregon grapes in terms of acreage planted and tons of grapes crushed. In 2014, there were 17,146 acres planted to Pinot noir in Oregon, representing 63 percent of harvested acreage and 58 percent of all vineyard production.

Yet those dominant statistics mask another discomfiting reality: For the past several years, demand for Pinot noir seems to have softened.

"For at least five years, there has been a lot of fruit that just hung on the vines. It never found a home," says Chad Stock, partner at Craft Wine Co. and winemaker at Minimus Winery. "The oversupply on Pinot noir is so severe."

At the same time, many newer winemakers who can't afford to grow their own grapes are searching for unusual or alternative varieties to help their businesses stand out. Those winemakers say tracking down alternative varieties is getting more challenging, and more competitive.

"It's always fun to have an adventure or two," says Kate Norris, co-owner and winemaker at Southeast Wine Collective. Under her labels, Division Winemaking Co. and Gamine, she



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Northwest Chenin blancs are served alongside wines from France and South Africa at the third annual #DrinkChenin event at the Southeast Wine Collective. Winemaker Kate Norris says Chenin blanc is one of her favorite grapes, but it can be a challenge to source.

uses a wide range of grape varieties, including standbys

like Pinot noir and Chardonnay as well as Gamay noir, Grenache and Chenin blanc.

"Chenin blanc and Gamay have been the hardest to source," says Norris. "You have to be really respectful, because you don't want

to be stealing somebody else's contract or knocking somebody else off the vineyard."

"What's getting harder, from my perspective, is finding the other odd grapes that are not spoken for," says Corey Schuster, winemaker

at Jackelope Wine Cellars, who uses Viognier and Cabernet Franc, among other unusual varieties. "Some cool varieties are being grown, but in really small quantities that are hard or impossible to access without the necessary relationships. It's kind of like a treasure hunt."

One way that winemakers are helping growers take the risk of planting something like Viognier rather than Pinot noir is through the use of multi-year contracts. "Growers want to grow fruit that will sell," says Shuster. "And if they get a long-term contract from a buyer, it's more likely they'll plant something 'odd.'"

Stock has been using the contract model for seven years, entering into long-term agreements with growers throughout Oregon to plant or graft varieties like Vermentino and Trousseau noir where, in many cases, Pinot noir once grew. He says the economics of replacing Pinot noir with other in-demand varieties like Gamay noir, Cabernet Franc, and Trousseau noir pencil out just fine.

"One thing that's appealing about these varieties is they yield higher amounts of fruit per acre," says Stock. "They are much more productive, so farmers can generate a lot more product. Even if their pricing is less than Pinot noir, they will make more money at the end of the day."

While some write off these long-tail varieties as a trendy flash-in-the-pan, Stock doesn't think so. "It's not just a micro niche among a bunch of geeky wineries," says Chad. "I think the demand for diversification is real across the entire industry. We need it bad — the wine industry in general needs it — and this is a very good thing."

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