

HEARD IT ON THE GRAPEVINE

Tempranillo —The southern Oregon appellation's rising star

BY CHRIS DENNETT

Everyone who drinks wine is familiar with the big varietal names in the local wine industry: syrah, viognier, merlot, cabernet sauvignon, cabernet franc, and pinot gris, to name a few. But there is another, less well-known outsider that may have one of the brightest futures in southern Oregon. It is a thick-skinned grape with tight blue-black clusters when ripe that hails from Spain, and it is known here as tempranillo.

For those of you familiar with Spanish wines, this newcomer is no stranger. Tempranillo is almost synonymous with Spanish wine, and is referred to by many as "Spain's Noble Grape." It is grown widely throughout Spain, and comprises the majority of blends in the famous growing regions of Rioja and Ribera del Duero, where it also is known as tinto, or tinto fino. It is, however, relatively new to commercial cultivation in the United States.

The word "tempranillo" is a diminutive of the Spanish word "temprano," meaning "early," and is a reference to the fact that it is an early ripening grape among the other Spanish varietals. As we will see, this is one of the things that makes it so well suited for our particular region. It first landed in the Americas with Spanish conquistadors in the 17th century, but was not planted for commercial use until the late 20th century, where it had little success in California's Napa Valley because the growing season wasn't quite right. And, as a wine, it was getting lost next to the exceptional cabernet sauvignons coming out of that region, which were juicier and better suited to the new American palate.

Then something changed in the 1990s: tempranillo pioneer and visionary Earl Jones came on the scene.

Jones and his wife long had had

an affinity for Spanish wines in general, and particularly the tempranillo grape, which was the main variety in their favorite wines from the Ribera del Duero region in north central Spain. Jones had been visiting Spain for years and could not understand why Americans had never been able to grow and market Spanish grape varietals successfully. In 1989, he decided to take matters into his own hands. He began a search that he hoped would find the perfect terroir (soil) in the U.S. to produce a quality tempranillo commercially. It was a search that would ultimately land him in southern Oregon's Umpqua Valley where, in 1995, his groundbreaking Abacela Winery planted tempranillo alongside other varieties never before seen in the Pacific Northwest.

So what's so attractive about southern Oregon for tempranillo? In short, it's the weather. Jones made an extensive climate study, trying to find places in the U.S. that mirrored the climatic conditions in Ribera del Duero, widely accepted as one of Spain's finest regions for tempranillo production. He discovered that it was southern Oregon and, more specifically, the Rogue Valley, Applegate Valley, and Umpqua Valley.

To get elegance and acidity from tempranillo you need a cool climate. But to get high sugar levels and the thick skins that give the rich deep color, you need heat. The Ribera del Duero region has both of these aspects in what is known as an inland Mediterranean climate. It is typified by relatively short mild winters, variable wet springs, long mild autumns, and hot dry summers. It is common during the summer there to have extreme daily temperature variations of more than 40 degrees, with days reaching 100 or higher, and nights in the mid to high 60s. This should sound familiar to southern

Oregonians. Our climate appears to be an almost direct copy of Northern Spain's temperature patterns.

To put it in layman's terms, some grapes are not yet done maturing when our weather begins to cool (think Cabernet Sauvignon), leaving them with long hang times and low sugar levels. Other grapes that thrive in the cooler climes (think Pinot Noir) have a difficult time dealing with the hot weather of July and August. But Tempranillo ripens quickly, getting to the desired sugar levels sooner, making it more suitable for our sweltering summer months. It is a grape that could just as easily have been indigenous to southern Oregon.

The wine it produces is a rich ruby color, and has flavors and odors of berries, plum, tobacco, herb, and leather. It can be slightly tannic and is best served alongside big foods with strong flavors—it can be paired with lamb, beef or strong cheeses.

As we move toward the end of this first decade of the 21st century, tempranillo continues to get new plantings and take over blocs in existing vineyards. Don't be surprised if you start seeing more local tempranillos at stores and restaurants. As this varietal comes into its own in southern Oregon, you are sure to see more of it. Here is a list (probably not complete, so please forgive) of who is doing what with this varietal in southern Oregon.

Abacela. The cornerstone of their winery and the first importer to the southern Oregon AVA (American Viticultural Area). They produce a wonderful, easy-to-drink Umpqua Cuvee, and an award-winning Reserve version. They also use the grape in their Rosado, which is a blend of tempranillo and grenache (known in Spain as garnacha).

Eden Vale. These locals produce a wonderful, rich tempranillo that is

reflective of the tinto style from Spain. A particular standout is their 2002 vintage.

Red Lilly. This is, in fact, the only wine that this craft producer and custom crush client of Roxy Ann makes. It is a quality wine, and has consistently won awards everywhere it has been placed. In Spain it would be a reserva (aged at least three years in cask or bottle). The 2003 is somewhat tighter than the 2004. Both are good now, and undoubtedly better in seven to 10 years.

Roxy Ann. They just recently planted more tempranillo, and word has it they will be releasing their first one this fall. It will be extremely limited, but they expect production to increase over the next few years.

Valley View. Winemaker John Guerrero's Spanish heritage had him thinking about these grapes years ago. They are now producing two different tempranillos, one from Applegate fruit and one from Rogue Valley fruit. Both are quality wines, although my favorite is the Applegate Valley tempranillo.

We should expect to see more from this varietal rising star of southern Oregon. Pour a glass, raise it, and repeat after me, "Viva tempranillo!"

Chris Dennett

Chris @elementsmedford.com
541-779-0135

Chris Dennett is proprietor of Elements Tapas Bar and Lounge on Main



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