Viognier

Synonyms

In France, Viognier is called Bergeron, Barbin, Rebelot, Greffou, Picotin Blanc, Vionnier, Petiti Vionnier, Viogné, Galopine, and Vugava bijela.

Source

Viognier is from Southern France, in the Rhône Valley districts of Condrieu and Château-Grillet. Some people believe that the vine originally was brought to France by the Roman Emperor Probus from the Dalmatia region where it is now cultivated under the name Vugava bijela. The areas now planted to Viognier are increasing worldwide.

Description

Clusters: medium, long-cylindrical with broad shoulders, well-filled to compact; medium peduncles.

Berries: small; round to short oval; yellow and amber when ripe; distinct aromatic flavor when fully ripe.

Leaves: medium; mostly 3-lobed with wide U-shaped petiolar sinus and reduced inferior lateral sinuses; medium-length, sharp teeth; slightly bullate surface; light- to moderately tufted hair on lower surface.

Shoot tips: downy to felty white with rose margin; green, young leaves with slight bronze highlights.

Growth and Soil Adaptability

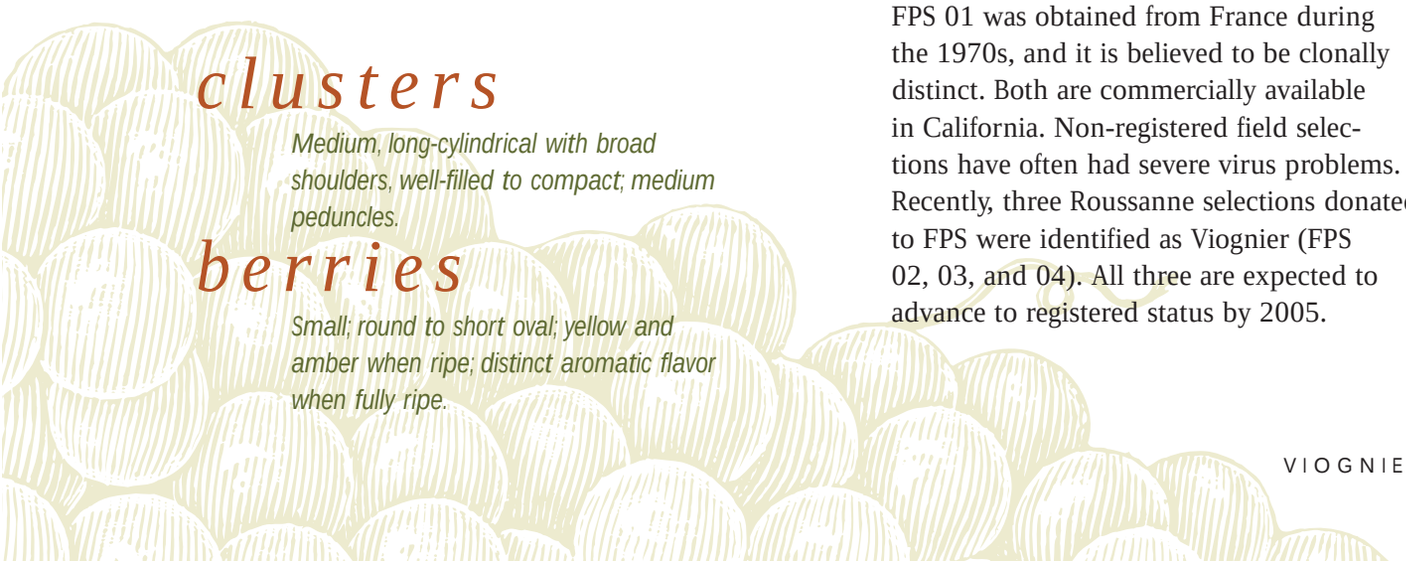
Viognier is a low-moderate vigorous vine, but it can be productive under vigorous conditions. In France, it is planted on steep, shallow granitic soils. In the North Coast of California, it is usually planted on deep, alluvial soils. Viognier is not a good choice for shallow, dry soils. The canopy is somewhat open, with slender, pendant canes that need support. Since the vines are only moderately vigorous, close spacings are suitable: in moderate soils plant 4 to 6 feet in row, and in deep soils plant 6 to 8 feet in row.

Rootstocks

In France, Viognier is most often propagated on 110R rootstock. In the United States, Teleki 5C, SO4, 3309C, and 101-14 Mgt rootstocks are used in coastal regions. In inland valleys and on fertile soils, Freedom, Kober 5BB, SO4, Teleki 5C, 110R, and 101-14 Mgt are all good choices depending on spacing, trellising, and soils.

Clones

There is a single French clone certified, ENTAV-INRA® 642. In addition, Viognier FPS 01 was obtained from France during the 1970s, and it is believed to be clonally distinct. Both are commercially available in California. Non-registered field selections have often had severe virus problems. Recently, three Roussanne selections donated to FPS were identified as Viognier (FPS 02, 03, and 04). All three are expected to advance to registered status by 2005.



clusters

Medium, long-cylindrical with broad shoulders, well-filled to compact; medium peduncles.

berries

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Production

Viognier is a moderate- to good-yielding cultivar. In France, yields are among the lowest of any wine grape, averaging about 1.3 tons per acre. In California, yields of 1.5 to 4 tons per acre have been reported in coastal regions while 5 to 8 tons are possible in the northern interior valley and foothills. The most productive coastal vineyards might reach a yield of 5 tons per acre in a good season.

Harvest

Period: An early variety, ripening around the same time as Chardonnay; in the North Coast, this is early to mid-September. A late September harvest may be needed to satisfy many winemakers' demand for 25 to 26º Brix maturity.

Method: The clusters are small, making hand harvesting slow. Canopy shaking is easy to medium, with whole berries and many cluster parts removed, and light to medium juicing.

Training and Pruning

In France, the Guyot system is used. In the United States, both cane and spur systems are used, canes particularly in cooler regions. A commonly used system is bilateral cordons with closely spaced spurs (4 to 6 inches), each spur with two nodes. Cane pruning is less common. Two canes up to 30 inches long with 8 to 12 buds each are typical, along with two renewal spurs pruned to two nodes. Viognier is well adapted to a vertical-shoot-positioned system but does well on standard bilateral with foliage catch wiring with a "T" or "Y" top.

Trellising and Canopy Management

In California, vertical-shoot-positioned systems work well. Some growers have tried divided-canopy trellises on deeper soils, but the vines usually don't appear to be vigorous enough for this system except on very fertile soils or with the most vigorous rootstocks such as 140Ru, 110R, 1103P, or Freedom.

leaves

Medium; mostly 3-lobed with wide U-shaped petiolar sinus and reduced inferior lateral sinuses; medium-length, sharp teeth; slightly bullate surface; light- to moderately tufted hair on lower surface.

shoot tips

Downy to felty white with rose margin; green, young leaves with slight bronze highlights.

Insect and Disease Problems

Viognier is moderately sensitive to powdery mildew. The French consider it resistant to Botrytis bunch rot; California experience seems to confirm this.

Other Cultural Characteristics

Viognier can have clusters with both small and large berries (known as “hens and chickens”). To achieve maximum flavors, this variety should be planted in warm areas, such as high Winkler Region II, Region III, and low Region IV, and thoroughly ripened to above 24° Brix.

Winery Use

Viognier produces very fragrant (floral and fruity aromas) wines with good acidity, tannin structure, and relatively high alcohol. The best examples are produced fairly simply and cleanly, often going from stainless steel fermentation to the bottle. When properly made, these wines age well in the bottle. Techniques used for Chardonnay (barrel fermentations, malolactic fermentations, aging on lees) may mask the unique flavor and fragrance of this variety, probably due to a high terpene content of the fruit. However, some vintners prefer to use oak fermentation for an alternative and desirable wine style. Viognier is sometimes blended with Syrah (up to 20 percent) to give the resulting wine more fragrance and elegance. Some French Château Viogniers are considered to be among the best and most expensive white wines in the world.

—Glenn McGourty