

SNOW ON WINE

“POPULARITY”

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January 2021

Couped-up at home, having little contact with friends and family, I've begun to wonder if I'm unpopular. No one drops by for a glass of wine these days. But could it be the wine's fault? Perhaps I'm not offering the most popular grape variety? Just when I needed to find out what grapes were most popular, the Jancis Robinson wine blog² alerted me to the work of two wine researchers at the University of Adelaide. Kym Anderson and Signe Nelgen¹ have compiled data on changing wine grape popularity, based on vineyard area, with the best comparable worldwide data for 1990, 2000, and 2016. This massive 800+ page work astounded me with surprise after surprise. They look at plantings of both “international varieties,” which are familiar to wine drinkers worldwide, and the hundreds of “local indigenous grapes,” whose names are unfamiliar to most of us.



My first surprise was to learn that in 1990 and 2000 the most widely planted wine grape in the world was **Airen**. This little-known brandy grape dominated the planes of La Mancha. But, by 2016 the Spanish were uprooting the indigenous Airen and replanting **Tempranillo**, relegating Airen to the 4th most planted grape worldwide. **Cabernet Sauvignon**, an international varietal known to us all, became #1 in 2016 with its planting, up from 2% of the earth's vineyard area in 1990 to 7% in 2016. This despite being shunned by Australians in favor of **Shiraz**, and by Argentinians in favor of **Malbec**. And while not even being in the top 10 in 1990, Tempranillo has rocketed to 3rd in worldwide vineyard area, mostly in Spain. And in 2016, **Chardonnay** moved up, just behind Airen as #5 in total worldwide acreage, making it the world's most popular white, and bringing me more in tune with popularity. Yes, Chardonnay plantings have TRIPLED since 1990, in a large part due to its use in sparkling wine. **Merlot** at #2 has also gained overall but has lost ground to Cabernet Sauvignon.

Another surprise – between 2000 and 2016 total global vineyard acreage *declined* by 8%. If you (like I) thought the opposite, it may be because here at home in the USA (and also Chile and New Zealand where vineyard area quadrupled), “masses of new vineyards^{1,2}” were planted. But Europeans, especially French and Spanish, “are drinking so very much less”² that their decrease overbalances the New World trend. They also found that hot climate vineyard area worldwide decreased from 51% to 44%. While the greatest percentage increases occurred in cooler countries: China, Kiwi land (quadrupled), the UK (doubled – who knew), and Canada.



What about red vs white? In 2016 red wine grape plantings were 65% outside of Europe but only 53% inside white wine loving Europe (but up from 48% in 2000). And Europe looks even less red loving when you consider that many of those red grapes become rose'. The highest % of acreage in red grapes goes to China at 86%, and the lowest to New Zealand at 22% (think Sauvignon bl.).

The internationally famous varieties have become increasingly dominant, especially in France, USA, Chile and Australia. Indigenous variety plantings do dominate in several European nations, ranging from 100% down to 66% in Cyprus, Georgia, Spain, Greece, Croatia, Portugal, and Italy.

Other international grapes with surging popularity include **Syrah/Shiraz** now at #6, **Sauvignon Blanc** at #8, and **Pinot Noir** at #10. The biggest loser title belongs to **Grenache/Garnacha Tinta**, (blending partner to rising star Syrah), having plummeted in popularity from #2 in 1990 to #7 today.



So now I'm torn. Is it better to hang with "the King" Cabernet, now the most popular? Or even with 2nd place Merlot, it's blending buddy. Or even better, go with **Bordeaux-style red blends** to cover both 1st and 2nd base. Then there is the meteoric rise of **Tempranillo**, from off the charts to #3 -- so maybe join the smart set hobnobbing with "next great new grape." Then again why not "taste the stars" with a sparkling Chardonnay³.

No, I think loyalty to my old best friends **Pinot Noir**, though only #10 on the chart, and **Grenache** (although sliding from #2 to #7), is my stand. It is fun to see what the rest of the world finds popular. And each of us, with our individual taste and preference, need not make any changes.

But, seeing these trends in grape popularity may jolt us out of our "rut" and prompt us to taste something new and possibly expand drinking variety a bit.



That is, after all, why we have Spokane Enological Society, and it is what we do so well.

REFERENCES:

- 1) Kym Anderson & Signe Nelgen, Which Winegrape Varieties are Grown Where (revised ed.), Univ. of Adelaide Press, 2017.
- 2) editorial@jancisrobinson.com, October, 2020.
- 3) "Come quickly, I am tasting Stars", Snow on Wine, Wineminder December 2020.