

Snow on Wine



Dr. Jeff Snow
SES Director of Education
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Our special thanks to Dr. Jeffery Snow for sharing his knowledge and wine experiences with the SES over all these years!
You are our go-to leader for wine education!

No worries mate! A Retsina³ review this is not. No! With apologies to the Bard⁴, it is a response to several SES board members who reported last meeting. They were encountering “new” wine grapes, about which they knew little. Names that were “all Greek to them”⁵! The big name international grapes (Cab Sauv, Merlot, Chardonnay, Sauv Blanc, etc., etc., etc.) and that distinctly California grape Zinfandel were of course familiar. But they tossed out some names that surprised me. In my humble opinion SES membership should arm us to fearlessly face the fabled supermarket “wall of wine” and the “erudite” restaurant “carte du vin” -- full of understanding and devoid of trepidation! It seems your education director has been slacking. Well, let’s fix that! Starting here and starting now!

Primativo was on their list. Would it surprise you that Primativo has been with us, probably since Southern Italians arrived in sunny California. I first saw it at Marty Griffin’s Sonoma County winery in 1980, but thought it meant a “primitive” style of winemaking rather than a grape. Later I learned it to be a grape from Southern Italy, almost exclusively in Puglia, the heel of the boot. California Primativo plantings were typically intermixed. About 20% Petit Sirah (called Durif in Fr. – more later) scattered between 80% Primativo, then harvested as a “field blend”; that is they are picked together then crushed and fermented together in the same tank.



Over the years the Primativo name (but not the wine I later learned) disappeared from the wine market. There were likely two reasons. Like me many folks probably assumed Primativo meant primitive. The wine sold poorly, perhaps since wine drinkers of the time felt sophisticated, not primitive⁶. Then, from the magic of DNA analysis, came the surprising fact that Primativo and Zinfandel were the same grape and also the same as Tribidrag in Croatia (motherland of all three). Since at the time Zin was wildly popular, it must have seemed a better marketing strategy (and now acceptable to ATF) to label Primativo as Zinfandel.

So why is Primativo suddenly back on the wine scene? Again, probably two reasons. Our era is notable for the tendency to look for the “next new thing”. Since Primativo had really been forgotten, it has become trendy to again so label it! Is there nothing new under the sun? Also, as I learned in reading “Wine Wars II” (see Snow on Wine March 2023 “Are You A Terroirist?”) we now have a truly global wine market.



Primativo wine from Puglia, Italy is pouring into our markets. Traditionally most European wines are labeled by region. So it would be labeled as Salento or Salice. But being shrewd marketers, Italians are starting to adopt new world ways and label by grape name for the U.S. And in our Italian restaurants it is a wine to seek out. Being of lesser known AVA, it cannot command as high a price so is often a real bargain. And Salento is also home to Negroamaro, sometimes made as monovarietal wine and sometimes blended with Primativo in a similar way that Petit Sirah is in California.

So what can you expect when you pop the cork on a Primativo? Just another Zin perhaps? Well no, and with good reason. The Primativo clone of Tribidrag^{1,2} arrived in Puglia in the dim and distant past. Much later it followed Italian immigrants to America. It is noted for having smaller thicker skinned grapes than the clone called Zinfandel. The Zin clone was brought to America from Croatia in the 1850’s by Hungarian Agostano Haraszthy².

To experience Primitivo, invite this world traveler over for dinner and relish the flavors; “creamy-rich ripe red cherry, strawberry jam, plum macerated in alcohol.” “In some more traditionally made wines there are obvious tobacco and underbrush notes, and it can actually be rather herbal and tarry.”¹ Many “differ from California Zins due to less of the ultraripe and sweet fruit of some Zins. But the emerging trend may be to “out Zin the Zins”. And do expect generous alcohol -- 16% and up. Oh -- and the name? Primitivo turns out to mean “early ripening” in Italian – who knew?

Like Cal Primitivo with it's Petit Sirah, the Ital version improves with blending. Negroamaro has long been their choice. So you might suspect similarities between the two “blenders.” First let me tell you about Petit Sirah (Durif). For years most of us thought of it as a little Syrah grape. That is why I stored it with Rhone grape wines in my cellar. It requires age to drink well, so time passed before it got to our glasses. Then we finally got it. There was much more tannin and much darker color than any Syrah we knew. Also, more full bodied with fruit having more of a sense of sweetness. And very dark red cherry and blackberry with no hint of the pepper Syrah usually shows. To me a flavor profile similar to



Monastrell. Identified in 1884 in the East France vineyards of Francois Durif, a botanist, it was Charles McIver of Linda Vista Winery near San Jose, who inadvertently imported it in 1884. The name Petit Sirah may have been due to a labeling error². It has died out in France, but in Mexico L.A. Cetto produces it. (Possibly the favorite Mexican wine for Julie and I in Puerto Vallarta). Wine authorities agree its proper name is Durif.



OUTSIDE THE WINERY OF LINDA VISTA MISSION SAN JOSE

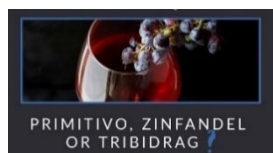
Like Petit Sirah, Negroamaro also is steeped in confusion and a clouded origin. Its name suggests the black grape it is (Negro is Italian for black). But the Amaro part, is firmly believed by many to derive from Mavros, the Greek word for



black. Making its name as black black. Indeed it is the blackest of grapes. Puglia was always the historic port of contact for Greek traders and genetics suggest the grape may have had Greek origin lending support to this belief. However, Ian A'Gata¹ claims that Amaro is similar to the Italian word for bitter. Perhaps, a reference to its very tannic structure¹. It has flavor and tastes of black fruit, tobacco, and sometimes the characteristic note of shoe polish and is known for

alcohol galore and for late ripening. Sound a bit Petit Sirah-ish to you? On Puglia's Salento Peninsula it is grown only on the East facing slope, while Primitivo grows on the West side of the same slope of the ridge running down the center. Its range extends a bit farther around Southern Italy than Primitivo and it is often blended with other grapes. Like Primitivo it is widely imported here and can also be a great bargain at Italian restaurants.

So we now know that Primitivo is genetically the same as Tribidrag and Zinfandel, but with noticeable clonal differences.



It is usually blended and becomes a better wine when mingled with either fast friend -- Petit Sirah or Negroamaro. All are great wines to know -- whether California or Salento natives. Although they dwell a bit in the shadows, authentic family-owned Italian restaurants in San Francisco and Seattle and elsewhere have long had them. Perhaps like me you object to the huge wine markups of U.S. restaurants, unlike France and Italy where restaurant prices

approximate store prices. Please enjoy these wines. They deliver the great taste and food compatibility we want at more reasonable prices. Once you try these wines it would surprise me if you didn't come back for more. So don't let these fine wines remain “all Greek to you”! Become, with me, Italian in spirit and “beviamo alla tua salute!”⁷ with that Italian world traveler, Primitivo.

References and notes:

- 1) Ian D'Agata, Native Wine Grapes of Italy, Pp 1 – 548, University of California Press, Berkely, Los Angeles, London, 2014.
- 2) Robinson, Jancis; Harding, Julia; Vouillamoz, Jose', Wine Grapes, Pp 3 – 1176, ECCO (Harper Collins Publishers) New York, 2012.
- 3) Retsina: A traditional Greek wine flavored with pine resin which is often said to smell and taste similar to turpentine.
- 4) A Celtic term for a professional storyteller. William Shakespeare is popularly called the Bard of Avon, or for short simply the Bard.
- 5) “All Greek to Me” is a remark from Shakespeare's probably best-known work, Julius Caesar. Brutus inquires of Casca as to the content of Cicero's speech which was given in Greek and Casca who doesn't know Greek so replies meaning everything in a foreign language sounds the same. Americans commonly use the phrase to describe anything unintelligible to them.
- 6) Remember that historically wine was finally finding its way back onto the American table through the 1970's and so was drunk primarily by leaders of society who indeed felt sophisticated.
- 7) Let's (all) drink to your health!