

The world's best Grenache buys

Decanter's experts from around the world nominated the best Grenache or Garnacha in their respective regions. Oz Clarke tasted them all and selected his favourites



Oz Clarke is a multiple award-winning wine writer, broadcaster and author renowned for his tasting skills

THE MARCH OF the Mediterranean varieties is steadily gaining strength. Their numbers swell, their chorus grows. As climate change sinks its talons into region after region, as drought becomes a recurrent nightmare and vineyards annually gasp for water that is more and more difficult to find, these drought plants, these dry-land experts, these hardy old-timers are coming into their own.

In different parts of the world Carignan, Cinsault and Mourvedre are stirring and demanding attention. But the leader of the pack is Grenache, or Garnacha – until recently the most widely planted black grape variety in the world. And also until recently, largely ignored as a variety whose name might deserve any prominence on the label.

We should thank Châteauneuf du Pape and Priorat for kickstarting Grenache's current rise to popularity, if not yet eminence, and for prodding us into paying significant amounts for exceptional wines. Remember, areas need star producers to wake everybody up, and our tasting showed that Avril in Châteauneuf and Palacios in Priorat are worthy flag wavers. Acústic in Priorat's neighbour Montsant is also a passionate, focused producer, intent upon making wines that are not just baby Priorats but have their own lively personality.

These may be the big-money labels, but the wide availability of old Garnacha/Grenache vines across much of Spain and southern France means that grapes can be bought, or

land can be leased, relatively affordably. This is massively important for the new wave of winemakers. Grapes that used to be carted off to the local co-op for barely more than production costs are now being properly valued and cherished.

These are also areas where high alcohol makes sense. From our Spanish selection, Madrid was marginally more restrained at 14%, but the rest were 14.5% or 15%. Is that too high? That's where Priorat mostly sits; so does an awful lot of Châteauneuf. I wish it didn't. But it's a difficult balance; Grenache builds up alcohol very easily. It can also lose its balance easily and descend into a high pH, jammy mediocrity of questionable cleanness. (I had high hopes of the submissions from Sardinia, but too many lacked balance and style.)

And how much new oak should be used? Again, I don't think new oak works very well with high-strength Grenache unless it is very skillfully employed. Grenache can suck out wood tannins far too quickly, and its fruit is quite rich enough not to need help. And should it be blended? There's no doubt in my mind that Grenache appreciates a bit of help from some of the higher-acid varieties like good Carignan. When made as a 100% varietal, Grenache needs skill and commitment.

Not surprisingly we can find some decent Grenache in the New World – though we saw few top Australian examples here. I suspect there is a bit more lurking in South America (especially in Chile, where only 1ha seems to be recorded), but the potential here to explore the variety's flavours, textures and aromas without any traditional baggage is exciting. And in South Africa they're even checking out low-alcohol Grenache: our tasting proves that 12.5% or 13% can taste very good indeed.

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1 **Acústic Celler, Auditori, Montsant, Catalonia, Spain 2014**

96

£42.99-£44.95 **Cambridge Wine Merchants, Lea & Sandeman**

Wonderfully exhilarating Garnacha from the fringes of Priorat. Shimmering blackcurrant and apple fruit, mouthwatering acidity and the slap of herbs, and yet you can still taste the heat in the grapes. Delicious! **Drink 2018-2025 Alcohol 15%**



1

2 **Alvaro Palacios, L'Ermita, Priorat, Catalonia, Spain 2016**

96

POA **Berry Bros & Rudd, WoodWinters**

Priorat is finally making its wines more drinkable, rather than merely being the darlings of tasting panels. This is a fine example of the new style: delicious red cherry and raspberry fruit, a light blossom scent and just enough rasp of herbs to remind you of its seriousness. **Drink 2018-2025 Alc 14.5%**



3

3 **Mas Amiel, Vers le Nord, Maury Sec, Languedoc-Roussillon, France 2016**

96

£14.99 **Bancroft Wines, Georges Barbier**

Ripe, scented, stewed raspberries and loganberries pile out of the glass in friendly combat with herbs, peppercorns and lemon zest acidity. Quite a surprise for Maury, but a real pointer for the future. Excellent value. **Drink 2018-2021 Alc 15%**

4 **Clos des Papes, Paul Avril et Fils, Châteauneuf-du-Pape, Rhône, France 2015**

95

£72 **A&B Vintners, Laithwaite's**

Grenache at its best manages to walk a tightrope between lovely raisiny richness and an unlikely but tempting red fruit perfume. The palate here is rich with luscious prunes and crystallised plums which blend irresistibly with bright warm red berries and a scratch of herbs. **Drink 2018-2025 Alc 15%**



5

5 **Coume del Mas, Schistes, Collioure, Languedoc-Roussillon, France 2016**

95

£25-£29 **Bottle Apostle, Hedonism, Noel Young, Swig, Vinoteca**

A marvellous example of warm-blooded, sun-soaked Grenache, just holding the line between indulgence and corruption. A Mediterranean orange grove scent floats over deliciously stewy fruit and a savoury, meaty streak. This is a smashing glass of red! **Drink 2018-2021 Alc 14.5%**

6 **David and Nadia, Swartland, Western Cape, South Africa 2016**

95

£21.59-£34 **Handford, Justerini & Brooks, Noel Young,**

Vin Cognito, Vincisive

Rich, ripe yet tart cranberry and redcurrant fruit, then raspberry strides in later. Marvellously dry, yet provocatively scented and intriguing. Those slight chewy tannins are simply the skins of the fruit you're enjoying so much. **Drink 2018-2025 Alc 13%**



7

7 **AA Badenhorst, Raigras, Swartland, Western Cape, South Africa 2016**

94

£31-£40 **Handford, Harvey Nichols, Hedonism, Lay & Wheeler, Swig**

Fresh, breezy, bright strawberry and cherry fruit but, crucially, slightly underripe to give it freshness. Attractively grainy tannins and an appetising undertow of warm earth on the palate. The way forward for easy-drinking Grenache.

Drink 2018-2023 Alc 12.5% ➤