Emerging Regions and Varietals from California Wine Country

Americans have been embracing wine in growing numbers in the past decade, and are thirsty for new adventures in wine types and regions – which California is perfectly positioned to deliver.

Although California Chardonnay, Cabernet and Merlot are still by far the most popular varietal wines in the U.S., comprising more than half of all California table wine sold in the U.S. last year, recent data shows that the state’s winegrowers and vintners are increasingly catering to wine enthusiasts’ thirst for varietal diversity.

Satisfying consumers’ curiosity and evolving palates is easy to do in California, since growers and vintners here enjoy complete flexibility in matching winegrapes to the state’s diverse soils and microclimates, resulting in more than 117 varieties of winegrapes grown across the state. This variety is especially appealing to the young and hip Millennials, born after the mid 1970s who are experimental and interested in exploring new tastes. Because of this trend, other varietals are gaining ground in California sales, from Moscato, Pinot Gris/Grigio, Riesling and Viognier in whites to Pinot Noir, Syrah, Petite Sirah and Tempranillo in reds.

In addition to wines that established the reputation of the state’s most famous regions, such as Napa Cabernets and Sonoma Pinot Noirs, wine lovers of all generations are now enjoying different but equally fabulous wines from a broader palette of grapes and regions. Emerging regions from Humboldt in the north to Temecula in the south are infusing their own personalities into some of the most popular varietals. Adventurous consumers are increasingly interested in finding out how the unique terroirs of emerging regions from Mendocino down to the southern central coast create distinctly different but delicious versions of Chardonnay, while Cabernet lovers are checking out the wonderful offerings from regions like Santa Cruz Mountains and Livermore.

These emerging wines and regions are a natural result of California’s diverse climate and soil that’s ideal for growing winegrapes. With 114 American Viticulture Areas (AVAs) featuring 2,000 distinct soil types, the state’s 4,600 winegrape growers and nearly 3,400 wineries have the resources to produce increasingly wide selection of wines. California’s abundant wines and wine experiences have contributed to the state’s status as the top wine and food destination in the U.S.

California restaurants are seeing more consumers requesting local menus and wines, and are leading the charge in featuring and promoting lesser-known varietals from nearby regions. “Restaurants find that putting unconventional varietals on the wine list is a competitive advantage; they use it to attract customers,” says Ronn Wiegand, MW, MS, and publisher of Restaurant Wine, who notes the trend has taken hold at fine dining establishments from coast to coast. “Like a chef always trying new ingredients, restaurants use these “discovery” wines to increase excitement about the dining experience.”

One of the best places to learn about California wines and regions – both established and emerging is the Wine Institute’s web site at: www.discovercaliforniawines.com where consumers can search California wineries by 29 different wine varietals and blends.
This site’s database includes producers of varietals such as: Grenache, 57 wineries; Gewürztraminer, 33 wineries; Muscat/Moscato, 60 wineries; Petite Sirah, 141 wineries; Pinot Gris/Grigio, 71 wineries; Pinot Noir, 214 wineries; Riesling, 51 wineries; Sangiovese, 87 wineries; Syrah, 269 wineries; Tempranillo, 41 wineries; Viognier, 113 wineries; and the listings are growing.

Below is a brief summary of varietal wines that are enjoying new found popularity and gaining consumer and critical recognition:

**White Varietal Wines:**

**Moscato** — Experiencing dramatic growth and popularity, Moscato is the Italian name for Muscat, a grape variety that produces a light dessert wine with creamy peach, melon and citrus flavors and a bright, crisp finish. It can also be found as a sparkling wine. Currently, the wine is providing a new gateway to wine consumption and is receiving endorsement in Hip Hop song lyrics.

**Pinot Gris/Grigio** — One of the fastest-growing varietals in California, Pinot Grigio and Pinot Gris are two names from the same grape. Depending on the producer and where it’s grown, this grape can be something of a chameleon. Often the wines are crisp, sleek and refreshing with delicate lemon flavors, but in some cases, they can be unctuous, spicy and full-bodied.

**Un-oaked Chardonnay** — Ever popular Chardonnay is receiving new buzz with its crisp and lighter un-oaked style. In food stores, the Nielsen Company reported 101% change in volume for un-oaked offerings in 2011.

**Riesling** — Sometimes called White Riesling, this varietal can tolerate colder winegrowing climates. Rieslings are known for their delicate floral and fruit flavors, and depending on the winemaking process, can be made in a range of styles from bone dry to very sweet.

**Red Varietal Wines:**

**Pinot Noir** — Known as a somewhat finicky wine grape, Pinot Noir thrives in the cooler, coastal climates of California. Prized for its smooth, velvety texture and range of aromas and cherry, berry and spice flavors, the wine remains a high growth category.

**Sweet Red Wines** — A new and growing category of sweet red wines and red wine based blends, such as Sangria and chocolate-infused wine, has emerged attracting new consumers looking for a flavor profile different from traditional table wine.

**Malbec** — Malbec has deep red colors and flavors, with blackberry, plum and pepper notes. In California, one can find much of the acreage in Napa, Sonoma, Lodi and Monterey. The Nielsen Company reports a 40% increase in volume in U.S. food stores in 2011.

To search for California wines by varietal and blend, visit www.discovercaliforniawines.com.

**About** [www.discovercaliforniawines.com](http://www.discovercaliforniawines.com)

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Established in 1934, the Wine Institute is the public policy advocacy group of 1,000 California wineries and affiliated businesses that initiate and advocate state, federal and international public policy to enhance the environment for the responsible production, consumption and enjoyment of wine. California wineries produce 90 percent of U.S. wine and are the fourth leading wine producer in the world. For more information about Wine Institute, go to [www.wineinstitute.org](http://www.wineinstitute.org).