



A SAUVIGNON SUCCESS STORY: HOW A MYSTERY VINE IN A PRIVATE TRIAL IN MONTEREY BECAME THE PREDOMINANT SAUVIGNON EXPRESSION IN CALIFORNIA

Sauvignon blanc in California has always suffered from a low-grade identity crisis. Planted to the wrong clone in the wrong place, sauvignon was the wine equivalent of a fashion disaster, forced into some incredibly bad outfits in the '80s and early '90s by well-meaning winemakers, who for years dressed it up with oak like a chardonnay wannabe, or worse, a tart: lean, green, vegetal and fruitless. Neither mode was terribly appealing. "We knew only the one thing," says Chris Howell of Cain Vineyard. "Winemakers had no coherent sense as to what the grape was supposed to taste like in California." But a recently discovered clone known as musqué, now being farmed in sufficient quantity in the state, is showing such a natural affinity for California terroir that perhaps, at long last, sauvignon has found the identity it never had.

Prior to 1980, nearly all of the sauvignon planted in the state came from a clone propagated by the Wentes of Livermore Valley (who have done much to develop and propagate many other varieties, including what are probably the most highly regarded chardonnay variants in the state). Wente sauvignon is notoriously hard to ripen, however, particularly in very cool parts of the state like Monterey. When it doesn't get to full ripeness, the grapes are left with high levels of pyroline, a compound that makes vegetables taste vegetal.

This was an especially vexing problem for Doug Meador of Ventana Vineyard in Arroyo Seco, who came into the grape-growing business as a sauvignon fanatic. He knew, of course, that sauvignon could grow in some pretty cold places in France, including Menetou-Salon; it seemed to him that somewhere in the world there should be a version of sauvignon that could ripen in cool Monterey.

Meanwhile, in 1978 he set up some budding trials with UC-Davis professor Curt Alley and, he says, just to try something different, "I told him to bring some of the weirder-assed varieties they had from their experimental vineyards." Come harvest, Meador noticed a golden-hued white grape that looked enticing. Curious, he tasted it, and realized he'd found what he was looking for: "There was almost a floral taste of the fruit," he says, "that was just so exciting in the mouth, and not a hint of bell pepper. Clean, precise

flavors of lemon, lime zest, fig and melon when riper—this was sauvignon blanc, real sauvignon blanc." The tag on the vine, however, read "Sauvignon Musqué." Meador contacted Davis professor Harold Olmo to learn more about his find, and Olmo believed that this wasn't sauvignon at all but savagnin musqué, and that it had arrived with other obscure cuttings from Alsace. Obviously, thought Olmo, someone decided to "correct" the spelling.

Meador was undaunted. He actively propagated the variety, calling it musqué, until he had enough to make and to sell; Napa's Cain Vineyards bottled the very first wine with Ventana Vineyard Musqué on the label, a bright, rose-scented/white tasting remarkably different from any other California sauvignon, so different that many thought it might be something else altogether. But Meador persuaded the French ampelographer Pierre Galet to conduct a study, and in 1985 Galet confirmed Meador's hunch that the clone was indeed sauvignon blanc.

Meador's discovery has since been propagated and disseminated all over California, extending well beyond the cool climate sites of Monterey, from Santa Ynez to the warmer reaches of Dry Creek Valley. Dry Creek Vineyard recently released its first sauvignon musqué from 3.24 acres of vines near West Creek Road, recommended in this issue (see p. 56). Larry Hyde has planted seven acres at his vineyard in Carneros, and Mia Klein uses most of those grapes in her Hyde Vineyard Sauvignon. "Musqué typically has a little less of that *savage* quality than other clones," says Klein. "It ripens a little sooner, and has a golden tint much earlier." But it's the flavors and the acidity that excite these winemakers. "It's higher in acid, but there's lots of juicy, rich fruit," says Rosemary Cakebread of Spottswoode Winery in St. Helena. Klein agrees. "It has a rich viscosity that you can't get in other clones," she says.

Meador remains fairly modest about his find ("Even a blind pig will find a truffle once in a while," he says), but he believes that in a relatively short period of time, nearly half of the 6,000 acres of sauvignon blanc planted in the state became musqué. "The Kiwis have their own style," he says, referring to New Zealand, "perhaps this will be the style for California." —PATRICK J. COMISKEY