

INTRODUCTION TO WINE

MODULE 1: Grape varieties

Vitis vinifera, the common grape vine, is a species of flowering plant, originating in the Mediterranean region, Central Europe, and southwestern Asia, from Morocco and Portugal north to southern Germany and east to northern Iran. There are currently over 10,000 varieties of *Vitis vinifera* grapes though only a few are of commercial significance for wine.

The wild grape is often classified as *Vitis vinifera sylvestris* (in some classifications considered *Vitis sylvestris*), with *Vitis vinifera vinifera* restricted to cultivated forms. Domesticated vines have hermaphrodite flowers, but *sylvestris* is dioecious (male and female flowers on separate plants) and pollination is required for fruit to develop.

Noble grapes' history

The history of noble grapes is intertwined with the history of winemaking itself. Centuries of tradition, innovation, and craftsmanship have elevated these varieties to their esteemed status. They've been the subject of poets, artists and sommeliers, leaving a legacy of taste and culture that continues to inspire wine lovers around the world. The most basic wine knowledge involves an understanding of a very limited set of Noble Grapes or International Varietals. These are the grapes that make the dominant proportion of fine wines around the world. This set of 7 grapes is just scratching the surface of grapes used to make great wine. We could easily add another dozen popular grapes. Even at 20 grapes, realize that Italy alone has over 1000 indigenous grapes that are used to make wine, so it depends how far you want to extend your knowledge. For now, it's going to be 7 grapes.

The Seven Noble Grapes are:

Chardonnay / Sauvignon Blanc / Riesling / Cabernet Sauvignon / Pinot Noir / Merlot / Syrah

You've probably had wine made from each of these grapes and they exist in almost every significant wine growing country. What changes in a Chardonnay from France when compared to one from Napa? Well, it's the growing conditions and the impact of the climate and the terroir (or the local expression of the earth). It can be great fun to try two bottles of exactly the same grape but grown in different parts of the world to see the impact.

Chardonnay

Thin skinned grape, makes for relatively light wine. Nicely aromatic when grown in a warm climate, more austere when grown in a cool climate (like France). You'll find Chardonnay based wine from France (Chablis, Champagne, Burgundy), South America, Australia and California (Sonoma, Napa)

Sauvignon Blanc

Thin skinned grape with intense aromatics. The most distinct aromas are gooseberries and cut grass. It is grown in France (Loire, Bordeaux), New Zealand, California, Italy, Chile and South Africa

Riesling

Intensely aromatic grape that has a lot of skin influence due to the small clusters. We find Rieslings in Germany, France (Alsace), Italy, Austria, Australia, New York State and Canada. Many times, it is made into sweeter versions (although not always) by harvesting late in the season.

Cabernet Sauvignon

Thick skinned grapes, making an opaque wine. Intense flavours from the grapes and the typical oak aging. You'll find Cabernet Sauvignon in France (Bordeaux), Napa, Washington, Australia, Italy, Spain, South Africa and Chile.

Pinot Noir

Thin skinned grape makes for lightly coloured wines. Has delicate flavours of non-fruit elements. You'll find this difficult to grow grape in France (Burgundy, Champagne), Oregon, California, New Zealand and Chile.

Merlot

Thick skinned grape, producing a deeply coloured wine. Can be used alone or as a blending element with Cabernet Sauvignon, where it adds a softening and suppleness to the wine. It is most popular in France (Bordeaux), Italy, California, Washington, Australia, South Africa and Chile.

Syrah

Thick skinned grape, making intensely coloured wines. Syrah or Shiraz (as they call it in Australia) has a range of expressions from elegant and refined with lots of non-fruit notes to fruit bombs with high alcohol. We find Syrah in France (Northern Rhone), Australia, California (Paso Robles) and Washington State.

...So, if you want to get a start on your wine knowledge, taste your way through these seven grapes from a variety of locations. You'll probably find something new you like and get a better appreciation of the versatility of these amazing grapes.

Enjoy and make notes, the best way of increasing collective knowledge is to talk!