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Pinot grigio is fresh and crisp for spring

By Paul Gregutt

PINOT GRIGIO (same grape as pinot gris) is the most popular white-wine import from Italy, and in many ways the perfect wine for spring. Though it may sometimes be faulted for being innocuous and thin, its lightness can be an asset. Alcohol levels rarely reach 13 percent, and the percentage of new oak is low, if any is used at all.

The best of these wines are beautifully aromatic, with scents of white fruits and highlights of flower and spice. A personal favorite is made by Alois Lageder and sells for around \$15. Lageder also makes a single-vineyard pinot grigio called Benefizium Porer, which is bigger, riper and more full-bodied than the regular bottling. It sells for \$20. Roughly 20 percent of this wine is barrel-fermented and aged.

Pinot gris is a latecomer to Washington state, but pioneering Oregon winegrower David Lett introduced it to the Willamette Valley almost 40 years ago. Today, pinot gris is that state's most-planted white grape, and at least one producer — King Estate — has made it the company's signature wine.

Oregon pinot gris is significantly riper, rounder and fruitier than those from Italy. These domestic wines are more likely to show new oak flavors as well, though some producers prefer to keep the wine in stainless-steel tanks, and emphasize its crisp, fresh-fruit flavors, much like an unoaked or unwooded chardonnay. Not all Oregon pinot gris is totally dry, but rarely do you find one so sweet as to taste off-dry.

The dominant fruit flavor of this grape is pear, often accented with baking spice. For fresh, clean, no-frills examples, look for current releases from Acrobat (\$12), Duck Pond (\$12), Erath (\$15), David Hill (\$15), and Willamette Valley Vineyards (\$15).

For a few dollars more, you can drink the best of show. My top five from the 2008 vintage:

Chehalem 2008 3 Vineyard Pinot Gris (\$19). Stainless-steel fermented, vivid and fresh, with complex flavors of orange peel, citrus, ginger and even (as the winery points out) sea spray!

Adelsheim 2008 Pinot Gris (\$19). Crisp, spicy pear and melon fruit take center stage in this medium-bodied, focused effort.

SolÃ©na 2008 Pinot Gris (\$20). Fresh pear, green-apple and pink-grapefruit flavors are buoyed by juicy acidity, and finished at 13 percent alcohol.

ArborBrook Vineyards 2008 Croft Vineyard Pinot Gris (\$18). Organically farmed, this offers a luscious mix of pear, pear skin and grapefruit; tangy and refreshing.

Lemelson 2008 Tikka's Run Pinot Gris (\$19). Nicely textured and lightly spicy, with round, fleshy, apple and pear fruit and a streak of orange candy.

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Pinot gris does not show up in Washington state harvest statistics until 2003, when 1,700 tons were picked. Six years later, those numbers had almost quadrupled, to 6,300 tons, and it had become the No. 3 white-wine grape — a very distant third behind chardonnay and riesling, but clearly an up-and-comer.

Value-priced selections from this state's biggest producers — Columbia Crest, Columbia, Hogue, Ste. Michelle — are competent, clean and refreshing, though not especially distinctive. From a few smaller boutiques come more interesting versions, though in much smaller case quantities.

Look for pinot gris from Chatter Creek (\$14), blended with viognier and sourced from the excellent Evergreen vineyard. Ross Andrew's Celilo vineyard pinot gris is a classic oyster wine, with lemony fruit and highlights of ginger, celery and mineral. And the Boomtown pinot gris (\$13), which also gets its fruit from Evergreen and nearby Ancient Lakes, two of Washington's best white-wine vineyards, is another tasty bottle, lemony and tart, with refreshing minerality.

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