

A Treasure and A Tasting

Written by Terry Connor

Tuesday, 22 October 2013 10:32

The wine you see here is called a Tannat and discovering it was like finding buried treasure. In all my years of studying wine I'd completely missed out on it. But I have an excuse – the grapes come from Uruguay and France. There was a stimulus to plant Tannat in The US, and it was successful. So let's go back and see what happened.

Tannat is a red grape wine, historically grown in southwest France and Uruguay. As a matter of fact, it is called "the national grape of Uruguay." Tannat is commonly found in the Basque region of France near the Pyrenees. It is characterized by a firm tannic structure with raspberry aromas and the ability to age well.

Tannat was introduced into Uruguay by Basque settlers. There the grape is blended with Pinot Noir and Merlot to produce a variety of styles reminiscent of Port and Beaujolais.

Next comes our turn. In the late 19th century, Tannat was planted at the University of California-Berkeley. A gentleman named Professor Eugene Hilgard imported the Tannat vine from France. He planted the vines at the university's vineyard. Success was slow to arrive; however, it did happen. South American varietals of Tannat received International acclaim and at the same time plantings in California's region of Paso Robles and the Santa Cruz mountains AVA's were officially recognized. In 2002, The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives approved Tablas Creek Vineyard's petition to add Tannat to the list of grape varieties that could be made into a varietal wine. By 2005, total acreage for Tannat in California had increased to 140.

I have enjoyed two Tannat bottlings over the last six weeks. The first was from Sextant, located in Paso Robles. I discovered it by chance, which was fortunate for me. The wine was full-bodied, with a backbone of blackberries and sweet spices. The tannins had softened which made for a terrific finish. The second Tannat came from Tablas Creek Winery. The wine carried flavors of spice, smoke and black fruit. The winery claims that the wine will age for at least 10 years.

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Now, you ask, where is Terry going with this? That is the good news! Tannats are coming. Over the next year they will be stocked on a regular basis in the Lowcountry. Tannats are now found in Charleston. I am told that the Distributor is located in Alabama. If you find one; try it. You will not be disappointed.

The second item on our list today is a tasting. I was fortunate to be invited to a tasting for the "trade"(i.e. the folks that own the retail stores and restaurants. The invitation was from a distributor who shall remain nameless.) The tasting was held at The Crazy Crab Restaurant on Hilton Head. The distributor was introducing her Fall Line-up of wines that will very shortly appear in our local retail shelves and restaurant wine lists. The setting for the tasting was spectacular. The back porch of the Crazy Crab restaurant overlooks hundreds of acres of beautiful South Carolina Marsh. The wineries that the distributor represents arranged their tables facing the marsh and after some set-up time, Voila! 17 wineries displaying over 150 wines available for tasting. Talk about a kid in a candy store. All kidding aside; this event turns out to be a terrific learning experience when you consider the number of choices and price ranges that the consumer will have available. A good number of retailers follow up these tastings by sponsoring in-store tastings of their own.

I found a favorite winery at the tasting. I cannot say who it was as the other 16 wineries would throw me into the marsh. Suffice it to say we have some terrific wines headed our way. The Lowcountry should fare very well for the coming Fall Season and the Holidays.

I am off to Portugal to study Port Wine for a few days. Somebody has to do it. I will report back to you in the issue for November 20.

WINESPEAK

I featured the above wine tasting for a reason. Arranging and coordinating these events is just plain hard work. However, there are many distributors in our area, perhaps six or seven, doing the same thing. What is the message? Stay in touch with your favorite retailer! Find out when the Distributor tastings will happen and GO. You might just discover the wine you have been looking for and, at the same time, meet some exceptional people who possess a passion for wine.

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