

Giving Pinot Grigio Another Go

By JAY MCINERNEY

Oddly enough, the first time I encountered Pinot Grigio was at Elaine's, the legendary Manhattan restaurant, back in the 1980s, when the literary lions of the silver age were roaring and preening there...Most of the writers who frequented the place drank scotch mixed with testosterone. Mailer, George Plimpton, William Styron, Peter Maas, Gay Talese, Kurt Vonnegut—these guys were the highball generation, and they seldom bothered with anything as wimpy as white wine. Nevertheless there were usually women present, and I recall a lot of Santa Margherita Pinot Grigio on the tables. Not being much of a scotch fan, I drank gallons of it myself, though I tried not to do so when Mailer was watching. Many others, apparently, were doing the same.

Santa Margherita Pinot Grigio is one of the great marketing success stories of modern times, the reason that Pinot Grigio is virtually a brand name. Pinot Grigio was pretty much unknown in the U.S. when Tony Terlato, a young importer of Italian wines, went to Italy in 1979 in search of the next great white varietal. The story goes that at a hotel in Milan he was charmed by a glass of something called Pinot Grigio and promptly drove to Alto Adige, in northeastern Italy, the source of the wine. "Upon arriving," according to the Terlato Wines website, "Tony sat down at a small restaurant in a local inn and ordered 18 bottles of Pinot Grigio off of the wine list." The winner was a wine called Santa Margherita. He promptly set off to visit the winery and secure the rights to import the wine. Thirty years later, Santa Margherita exports 600,000 cases to the States, selling at around \$30 a bottle retail, while other brands like Cavit and Ecco Domani have taken advantage of demand with lower priced wines.

Pinot Grigio found a niche in part because it's more versatile and less assertive than oaky chardonnay. But popularity comes at a price. (Just ask the members of Coldplay.) Most serious wine drinkers shun Pinot Grigio the way they once shunned Soave. And not entirely without reason. One should never underestimate the power of snobbery, but the fact is that 99% of what's called Pinot Grigio from Italy is dilute and flavor-challenged, a refreshing, lemonade-like food lubricant/buzz-delivery system.

Like many of my peers, I turned my back on Pinot Grigio early in the 1990s, and I remained slightly embarrassed about my early enthusiasm, as I did about my earlier reverence for the music of the Monkees. Pinot Grigio seemed like the vinous equivalent of the novels of Paulo Coelho. As its popularity grew, its identity became more nebulous and it was planted all over Italy, far beyond its natural home in the northeast. Then about 10 years ago, I visited Friuli, the Italian province just east of Alto Adige, and I drank some very good, in fact some really excellent, Pinot

Grigio. I wondered if the grape was worth a reconsideration. After all, it's a mutation of Pinot Noir, universally acknowledged to be one of the greatest wine grapes on the planet. (Pinot Gris, as it's called in France, thrives in Alsace, where it is, don't ask me why, called Tokay. But that's another story.) In Friuli I had really stunning examples from Lis Neris and Vie di Romans, but of course we all know the syndrome of the little country wine that tastes unbelievably great in context, on the home court, when one is on vacation, surrounded by scenic ruins and charming rustics. But a few years ago I dined at Gramercy Tavern with Alois Lageder, a fifth-generation gentleman winemaker from the Alto Adige region, and I was really impressed by his Pinot Grigios, notably a single vineyard bottling called Benefizium Porer. More recently on a visit to the Breslin Bar, a fashionable and calorific Manhattan hotspot, I encountered a Pinot Grigio that blew my mind and encouraged me to reopen the question: Can Pinot Grigio possibly be serious? The wine was a 2007 Pinot Grigio from Movia, a winery founded a year before Lageder's in 1820, which is in Slovenia just across the Italian border adjacent to some of the best vineyards of Friuli.

I had met Movia's winemaker/proprietor Ales Kristanc in Friuli and again in New York and he'd impressed me as one of the most energetic, not to say manic, characters of my acquaintance. Here's one of my notes from that first encounter, a quotation from Ales: "We are solar men. Our power is not money. We can find solar energy in a dark place." I believe he was speaking about marshalling the sun's energy in the dark recesses of a wine cellar, but who the hell knows. He also makes up a lot of words. At any rate, his wines are incredibly expressive and singular and already, in his mid 40s, he's a legendary figure in wine circles. Like almost everything about Ales, his Pinot Grigio is larger than life, rich and concentrated with a host of exotic fruit flavors and mineral notes. Was this a one-off, or was it possible that real men could drink Pinot Grigio again? I started buying and tasting as many PGs as I could find, subjecting myself to the derision of sommeliers and wine store clerks.

I consulted Henry Davar, the wine director at Manhattan restaurant Del Posto, who helped me to organize a tasting. Mr. Davar was enthusiastic about the project, though he informed me, somewhat ominously, "We don't serve PG by the glass. We don't want our guests to order something just by default." We stuck mostly to bottles from northeast Italy, to see if we could find regional as well as varietal characteristics. And I'm sorry to say we had more misses than hits, although the hits gave us hope and a few wines to put into rotation on our drinking cards. We were hard pressed to find any flavor at all in the '09 Santa Margherita.

A hint of lemon drop? But flavor abounded in the '09 Palmina, winemaker Steve Clifton's Cali-Itali project. Or is that Itali-Cali? Whichever—he grows Italian varietals in Santa Barbara and his Pinot Grigio is really impressive, especially at \$20 a bottle.

"I tasted some great Pinot Grigios in Friuli," Mr. Clifton says, "and I wanted to make one that wasn't just a water substitute. It has to be grown on a good site that expresses minerality, but at its best it's a bridge between Sauvignon Blanc and Chardonnay. Pinot Grigio hits the middle for seafood dishes that are too delicate for Chardonnay."

A certain stony element characterized the PGs Mr. Davar and I liked the best—and sometimes stone fruits like peaches—most of them from the Collio region of Friuli. ("Pinot Grigio from Friuli always has a strong mineral element," says Maurizio Castelli, who makes the excellent Scarbolo PGs.) The standouts were three successive vintages of Movia's Pinot Grigio, the 2005, 2006 and 2007, the latter being a spectacular wine, which had nose suggestive of a young red burgundy, reminding us that PG is indeed a relative of that noble grape. Mr. Davar, for one, was impressed. "You can drink Pinot Grigio as a thirst quencher on a terrace. Then there a few wines like these, which are on a level with the great whites of France."

Anyone who's ever had a Zind Humbrecht Pinot Gris will believe that nobility is possible with this grape. The best Italian examples come from small, deeply committed producers in Friuli, especially the Collio region, and Alto Adige. I'm going to seek out Pinot Grigios by Schiopetto, Lis Neris, Lageder, Jermann, Vie di Romans and Long Island winery Channing Daughters, sneers of my peers be damned. But I don't recommend that anyone undertake this course lightly. One of the scents I sometimes imagined in nosing certain Pinot Grigios was hay, which brings to mind the all too apposite maxim about the needle in the you-know-what.



Movia 2007 Pinot Grigio

On the nose this is a wild medley of herbs and spice and is strangely reminiscent of a great young red Burgundy. In the mouth it explodes with honey and peach flavors as well as a firm streak of minerality. Del Posto Sommelier Henry Davar suggests pairing it with pork.