

## An Aromatic Quintet of Alternative Whites

By Nick Hoskins and Geoff Thorpe

***In recent years, alternative aromatic white varieties have generated interest from wine writers, found a niche on restaurant wine lists, and, in some cases, moved toward mainstream status. That raises a question: which variety will become the “next big thing”?***

Virtually every winegrowing region in the world offers a selection of aromatic white wine-grape varieties. Some seem to thrive only in their place of origin, by virtue of their climatic conditions, vine/fruit characteristics or winemaking style. Others, however, turn into world travellers.

New Zealand is already the major beneficiary of one transplanted aromatic – Sauvignon Blanc, originating from the Loire in France – and we have a history of successful experimentation with a handful of others, including Riesling, Gewürztraminer, Viognier, and, most recently, Pinot Gris.

A quick glance at the table listing New Zealand’s top white varieties (in terms of producing area) highlights the changing fashions and fortunes for wine varieties. Some, like the hybrid Müller-Thurgau, probably have their best years behind them, others are in the ascendant, and others are stable, or perhaps waiting for their turn in the spotlight.

Of course, it’s impossible to predict the “next big thing,” but when we embarked on our grapevine importation programme in 2002, we had already read international market reports to spot new trends and polled many leaders in the wine industry, both at home and overseas. Perhaps not surprisingly, we imported more accessions of alternative aromatic white varieties than any other wine category. That’s because New Zealand’s cool-climate viticulture can successfully grow aromatics from practically every region in Europe – from Albariño (Spain), to Muscat à Petits Grains (France), to Grüner Veltliner (Austria), to Pinot Grigio (northern Italy), to Vermentino (Sardinia and Corsica), to . . . well, the list goes on.

Starting at the top of the alphabet, Albariño immediately generated a waiting list among Riversun customers eager to trial Spain’s most famous white wine grape. The variety, which is known as Alvarinho in Portugal, has commanded premium prices in restaurants for some time – so much so that Oregon and Australia began growing and selling their own versions of the wine.

Australia, however, discovered after the fact that the cuttings imported and sold as “Albariño” were Savagnin Blanc – a



*Grüner Veltliner A1-2 Austrian Selection at Riversun source block*

specialty variety from the Jura region of France. Then the rather cruel jokes began, with suggestions for labels like “Albari-Not” and “Albari-No.”

Riversun has four accessions of this variety: one is a vineyard selection from Spain and three are registered clones from Plansel Nursery in Portugal. With the resultant controversy raging in Australia, we decided to verify all of our imports for this variety, first with preliminary DNA tests conducted at Linnaeus laboratory. We then sent samples to the leading vine identification authority, ENTAV-INRA®, for further DNA analysis against the French agency’s reference material. ENTAV-INRA® confirmed that Riversun’s imported vines are “true to type” for the Albariño variety, and with renewed confidence we began propagation.

This variety thrives in the maritime northern regions of both Spain and Portugal, producing fresh, crisp, and flavourful wines. Albariño definitely thrives at our Gisborne source block, and its very loose, open bunches and thick skins offer great disease tolerance. This year, we were impressed by the flavours of lime and gooseberry, with lovely juicy acids.

Grüner Veltliner, Austria’s very own variety, also arrived to pent-up demand. Like Albariño, Grüner is currently enjoying renewed interest on the international scene and can be found on many top restaurants’ wine lists. Nicknamed “Gru-Vee,” the variety will produce dry, refreshing wines that are perfumed and spicy, often with a peppery note. Riversun imported two vineyard selections from Austria, both of which

are performing extremely well at our source block. Our Grüner A1-2 and A1-3 selections are both very productive, with large open clusters. The vines remain clean throughout the season and are very vigorous – some management will be needed in the vineyard, as higher yields are known to produce inferior wines.

Although the two varieties just mentioned already have a waiting market, it's worth noting that any "new" variety requires its champions: growers and winemakers who are dedicated to exploring all the variety has to offer, plus extra resources from the sales and marketing department. Coopers Creek and Trinity Hill wineries, to name just two examples, have been pioneers in this regard, reaping the benefits of being first to market in New Zealand with alternative varieties such as Arneis and Tempranillo.

One variety that's much closer to the tried and true is Sauvignon Gris. This a variety in its own right, not a blend of Sauvignon Blanc and Pinot Gris, as some wine consumers might think. With growth habit, budburst and ripening all very similar to Sauvignon Blanc, this variety is gaining some traction in New Zealand, thanks in part to the 2009 launch of the Montana Showcase offering by Pernod Ricard.

Riversun imported ENTAV-INRA® Clone 917 of this variety from France. Sauvignon Gris' bunches and berries are smallish and rose in colour, and the variety tends to have higher sugar production potential and lower acidity than Sauvignon Blanc (the ENTAV catalogue also notes that it is earlier to ripen). It will make wines that are more perfumed and textural than regular Savvy, but still offering crisp and herbaceous characteristics.

In the realm of the exotic, some of the newcomers generating the most excitement are Italian in origin. The sidebar to this article lists many of the new white varieties now available at Riversun, but we wanted to highlight two Italians that we think show real promise. They are more recent arrivals through post-entry quarantine, and plantings at our source block are still very young.

The first is Fiano, a strongly flavoured white variety responsible for Campania's Fiano di Avellino in southern Italy. Jancis Robinson notes that wines from this variety are "capable of developing for many years in bottle, and can mature from honeyed through spicy to nutty flavours."

Interest in the variety is already strong in California, where it is being produced by Seghesio Family Vineyard and Solis Winery, among others. A dozen or more Australian wineries are also experimenting with Fiano, and it has consistently shown well at the Australian Alternative Varieties Wine Awards, held each year in Mildura. In 2009, Beach Road Wines claimed the trophy for Best White Wine in the show with their Fiano of the same vintage. Riversun's import of the variety comes by way of Western Australia and is a mass selection.

Another Italian creating a favourable name for itself is Vermentino, an attractive, aromatic white grape widely grown in Sardinia and Corsica, and increasingly in the

Languedoc-Rousillon region of France. The variety is thought to be identical to a Provençal variety known as "Rolle"; others believe it is related to the Italian Malvasia family. In Sardinia, Vermentino is picked deliberately early to retain acid levels, but wines still manage to show lively character, with body and perfume.

The first Australian version of Vermentino was released by Chalmers in 2004, to immediately favourable reviews. The wine style is bone dry and extremely refreshing, and a number of Ozzies have followed the Chalmers' lead.

Riversun imported ENTAV-INRA® Clone 766 of this variety, which is noted as having medium sugar content, medium bunches and regular cropping. We think Vermentino offers great potential for New Zealand viticulture and winemaking.

We may never see another aromatic white variety that can rival the meteoric rise of Sauvignon Blanc in New Zealand. Nonetheless, an increasing number of growers and winemakers believe there are niche markets for new and interesting white aromatic wines. As a point of difference, such varieties help to raise the profile of wine companies and add an attractive "alternative" crop in the vineyard.

## An alternative world of choice

Riversun's catalogue of alternative aromatic white varieties is extensive. For more information on the varieties listed below, please visit our website at [www.riversun.co.nz](http://www.riversun.co.nz):

- Albariño (Alvarinho)
- Arneis
- Chenin Blanc
- Fiano
- Grüner Veltliner
- Malvasia Bianca
- Marsanne
- Mtsvane
- Muscat à Petits Grains
- Pinot Blanc
- Sauvignon Gris
- Verdelho
- Vermentino
- Vernaccia
- Viosinho

### Major White Varieties in New Zealand

Variety	2005 Producing Area in Hectares (Actual)	2007 Producing Area in Hectares (Actual)	2009 Producing Area in Hectares (Actual)
Sauvignon Blanc	7,277	10,491	16,205
Chardonnay	3,804	3,918	3,911
Pinot Gris	489	1,146	1,501
Riesling	811	868	979
Gewürztraminer	257	293	311
Semillon	240	230	201
Muscat Varieties	139	139	135
Müller-Thurgau	137	106	79
Chenin Blanc	58	50	50

Source: New Zealand Winegrowers

## **Gruener Veltliner** *Selection A1-2*

- Origin: Austrian vineyard
- Very productive, large open clusters, perhaps more open than A1-3, with riper berries
- Clean, very vigorous vines



## **Gruener Veltliner** *Selection A1-3*

- Origin: Austrian vineyard
- Very productive, large open clusters, slightly advanced ripening to A1-2
- Clean, very vigorous vines



## **Sauvignon Gris** *ENTAV-INRA® Clone 917*

- Origin: Gironde, France
- Growth habit, budburst and ripening are very similar to Sauvignon Blanc
- Bunches and berries are small
- Higher sugar production potential and lower acidity than Sauvignon Blanc

