



Want New Wine Choices? Look Back to the Old World

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AP

Fancy some furmint? How about a nice glass of grillo? If you've never heard of either, chances are you will. Wine lists are getting a makeover as producers all over the world make a play for U.S. palates.

"There are so many new wines coming from around the world, Americans' choices have increased exponentially," says wine expert Mike DeSimone, co-author with Jeff Jenssen of "Wines of California: The Comprehensive Guide," scheduled for release in September.

Among the emerging varieties: "Definitely mavrud from Bulgaria and malvasia Istriana from Croatia. Also, we're seeing more nero d'avola and grillo from Sicily," says Jenssen. (Mavrud is a red wine, malvasia a white.) "The funny thing is, none of these is new. They are just new to the American wine market."

Take Sicily, a region primarily known for cheap bulk wine until relatively recently, when producers started focusing on quality. "International varieties" such as merlot and cabernet sauvignon can and do grow here.

But there also are interesting local grapes such as nero d'avola (neh-row DA-vo-lah), a red, which is beginning to make a name for itself in the U.S. market, and grillo (GREE-low), a white grape, that is showing up in imports like Stemmari's "Dalila," an 80/20 mix of grillo and viognier.

Some of the new choices in wine are due to political changes; the break-up of the Soviet Union has led to the emergence of a number of wines from Eastern and Central Europe.

Furmint, for instance, is a white grape from Hungary, which usually goes into that country's somewhat better-known tokaji (to-KAY) dessert wine, but also is made as a dry white.

Bulgaria has benefited from entrance to the European Union and access to financial support, says Christy Canterbury, a wine writer and educator who is one of the few women to have attained Master of Wine status. "Some of the wineries that I have seen in Bulgaria are as sophisticated as the top 'first



growth,' in Bordeaux," she says, referring to the French classification system which puts 'first growth' at the top.

And while Eastern European wines can be uneven in quality, Canterbury says the wines she's tasted from Moldova so far have been "off the charts good." Though it's a small country in between Romania and Ukraine, Moldova is a wine-producing powerhouse that used to provide a fifth of the wine consumed by the former Soviet Union, Canterbury says.

A red wine to look out for is rara neagra from the Purcari winery. Rara neagra is a red wine grape grown in the Republic of Moldova and Romania, which also has a region called Moldova that produces wine.

Of course, selling wines with unfamiliar names can be a challenge.

That's where someone like Michael Madrigale, head sommelier at New York's Bar Boulud, comes in.

"I'm there to help people not be afraid of a wine that begins with 'x'," he says, referring to the Greek red wine xinomavro (ksee-NO-mah-vroh), a savory red that is growing in popularity in the United States; a producer Madrigale likes is Karydas in the Naoussa region of Northern Greece.

Meanwhile, assyrtiko (a-SEER-ti-koh), a crisp Greek white wine, also is making inroads. Madrigale calls it "just the perfect versatile wine for Mediterranean food."

What's the next malbec? (The Argentine red that took the wine world by storm a few years back.)

"Winemakers from all over the world ask us this all the time, and our answer is 'Nothing,'" says DeSimone. "Wine has become like television and music; the market is fragmented. And while there are a lot more stars than there used to be, none of them dominates the airwaves. Malbec is the last big star of the studio system. Every other unknown grape entering the market can hope at best to become the darling of the indie set."