



Grignolino: A Rare but Exciting Choice for Thanksgiving

By Michael Apstein

I never gave much thought to Grignolino, an obscure grape from Piedmont, until Marchesi Cattaneo Adorno Giustiniani poured one, a 1971, from his winery, Castello di Gabiano, at dinner last month. It was show-stopping. One of the qualities that determines greatness for a wine, at least for me, is its ability to develop over time. Wines start their lives redolent of fruit, but with proper aging, the fruit flavors fade and are replaced by non-fruit flavors, such as leather, coffee, mushrooms—it really doesn't matter how you describe them—while remaining fresh and harmonious. Well, at 46 years of age, Castello di Gabiano's 1971 Grignolino ticked that box.

More practically, tasting Castello di Gabiano's younger versions, their 2014, 2015 and 2016 Grignolino del Monferrato Casalese "Il Ruvo," other producers' Grignolino at an event in New York City last year, and a visit in July of this year to the Monferrato hills, where the bulk of the grape is planted, reminded me that Grignolino can make a wine that gives great pleasure when drunk young; hence my suggestion to try one at Thanksgiving.

Grignolino, the wine, which Jancis Robinson, the renowned British wine writer, described as "the flirtatious aromatic side of Piemonte's ...wines," has fallen out of favor. Consumers clamor over round robust reds. Grignolino, by contrast, is the opposite. This lightly colored wine—just a shade darker than many rosés—takes on orange hues with only a year or two of bottle age. (Thankfully, though, it bears no resemblance to the "orange" wines currently revered by hipster sommeliers.) With high acidity and firm tannins, it isn't a good choice as a stand-alone aperitif when your Thanksgiving guests arrive, but it will be a fine choice for the plethora of flavors found on the table.

When young, the Castello di Gabiano's 2016 Il Ruvo, for example, exhibited a light cherry-red color and aromas of wild strawberry or cherry-like fruitiness. On the palate, the wine's delicate fruitiness is apparent, buttressed by firm, not hard, tannins and a sour cherry-like acidity. With even a year or two of bottle age, the wine can deliver herbal or spicy notes that complement the delicate red fruit flavors. The Italians insist Grignolino is the perfect wine for charcuterie because its firmness balances the richness of the meats. Similarly, Grignolino's lovely austere quality, light body and vibrancy pairs well with turkey and the sweet/savory foods on the Thanksgiving table without overwhelming them.

From an economic point of view, it is easy to why growers have abandoned Grignolino for other varieties. Grignolino produces less juice than most other grapes because it has lots of seeds, typically six or seven rather than two, and less pulp, so yields are inherently low. (Indeed, it takes its name from "grignole," which means many seeds in the Piemontese dialect.) Lowering yields further is what is known as asynchronous maturation: The berries in any given bunch do not ripen simultaneously, which means lots of manual sorting at harvest and discarding grapes because bunches contain both ripe and unripe ones.

To make matters worse, this lightly colored red grape with abundant tannin and lots of acidity is difficult to grow, requiring plenty of sun and southern exposure, precisely the requirements for Nebbiolo. That explains why less and less Grignolino is found in the Langhe around Alba, which includes the Barolo or Barbaresco zones. You don't need to be an economist to understand why growers there opt to plant Nebbiolo and make either Barolo, Barbaresco or Langhe Nebbiolo—all of which command a higher price in the market—than Grignolino. Nonetheless, Cavallotto, one of the top Barolo producers located in Castiglione Falletto, still has Grignolino planted in their prized Bracco Bocchis vineyard alongside Nebbiolo...and makes an excellent wine from it.

The best Grignolino comes, not from the more famous Langhe hills, but from the Monferrato hills around Asti in the DOC zones of Grignolino di Asti and Grignolino del Monferrato Casalese. Grignolino di Asti comes from the area's sandy soil, which means it's lighter compared to Grignolino del Monferrato Casalese, which has more structure and a fuller body because of that zone's loamy clay and limestone soil. The distinction is relative since Grignolino from both areas are lightly colored, light-bodied reds.

Another challenge for winemakers using Grignolino is to get more color into the wine, since the paleness of it resembles a rosé, not a plus for a red wine among most consumers. To extract more color from Grignolino, winemakers must perform a longer maceration, which extracts even more tannin. Clearly, a tough line to walk.

One advantage of Grignolino for consumers is its narrow stylistic range. Unlike Chianti, where the wines can be diverse depending on whether the producer includes Cabernet Sauvignon or Syrah in the blend or opts to use small French oak barrels (barriques) for aging, most growers in Grignolino di Asti and Grignolino del Monferrato Casalese do not blend significantly and avoid barrique aging, so consumers are faced with fewer surprises after they pull the cork.

The Grignolino likely to be the most familiar to American consumers is the delightful one from Heitz Wine Cellars in Napa Valley. Although the famed Heitz's Martha's Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon gets all the attention, Grignolino was the first wine they made—it was the only grape planted when Joe and Alice Heitz purchased the property in 1961—and they have made it in every vintage since.

Despite all the hurdles, dedicated winemakers still make Grignolino, either because it's their tradition, or because they just like the wine, or because it's what generations preceding them planted in their vineyards. Whatever the reason, we are the better for it.

Availability of Grignolino is limited, but finding one you like is worth the effort. Winesearcher.com lists 34 producers whose Grignolino ranges in price from \$14 to \$38. In addition to the aforementioned Cavallotto, who grows Grignolino, other well-known Langhe producers buy grapes from growers in Grignolino del Monferrato Casalese and Grignolino d'Asti zones, so consumers will see Grignolino from the likes of Francesco Rinaldi and Pio Cesare, to name just two. In addition to those, I have listed alphabetically below growers whose wines I can recommend highly. The ones listed in bold I find particularly notable. If your local wine merchant doesn't have one of these, ask him or her for suggestions.

Davide Beccaria "Grignò," Marco Botto "Barba Carlin," Marco Canato "Celio," **Castello di Gabiano "Il Ruvo,"** Castello di Uviglie "**San Bastiano Terre Bianche,"** Tenuta Tenaglia, **Gaudio-Bricco Mondalino,** Vini Angelini "Arbian," (all Grignolino del Monferrato Casalese), **Crivelli, Marchesi Incisa della Rocchetta,** and Tenuta dei Re, all Grignolino d'Asti.

I am indebted to Ian D'Agata, whose book, Italian Grape Varieties, is an indispensable reference that should be on every Italian wine lover's shelf, for his explanation of the quirks of Grignolino at a seminar in New York City last year, and to Marchesi Cattaneo Adorno Giustiniani for sharing his 1971 Grignolino with me.

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E-mail me your thoughts about Grignolino or what you plan to drink at Thanksgiving at Michael.Apstein1@gmail.com and follow me on Twitter @MichaelApstein

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