

ORANGE WINES

Will Never Be Mainstream

But a case for why they're more than a dying trend.

BY ANNA LEE C. IJIMA



The explosive popularity of so-called orange wines among trendsetting sommeliers has been questioned of late. Critics dismiss them as faddish, extolled for their novelty, rather than their quality. Yet, despite all of the hype (both pro and con), the jury's still out for the majority of American wine drinkers, as they've never tasted them.

To make most modern white wines, the grapes are crushed, and the solids are quickly separated from the juice to maintain the wine's pale color. Orange wines are white wines produced more like reds, with prolonged maceration of crushed grape skins and seeds.

Often made in clay vessels or wooden barrels, they are relics of ancient winemaking traditions that trace back to the Caucasus. They've been popularized recently by Italians and Slovenians, and are produced today by enterprising winemakers worldwide.

Rather than being orange, these skin-fermented white wines range from bright gold to tawny brown. On the palate, they often possess the texture, body and tannins of red wines and the fruit and minerality of white wines. Stylistically unique, many offer earthiness, funk and a savory, richly textured mouthfeel.

Fad or not, the wines offer a wealth of virtues. Orange wines may never make it to the mainstream, but it's unlikely any of their producers had any such expectations.

A Sommelier's Perspective

Levi Dalton, a veteran New York City sommelier who has worked closely with acclaimed chefs like Daniel Boulud, Masa Takayama and Michael White, was one of the earliest—and is still one of the most vocal—devotees of orange wines.

To the uninitiated, their initial charm was their challenging nature, says Dalton: "You couldn't sell them the way you do normal wines. If you put a big skull and dagger on them, or warning signs telling people they can't handle them, they sell out the roof."

Dalton's interest in these wines developed from their versatility in navigating a meal's progression of courses. Traditionally, a white wine would accompany fish and a red wine would accompany meat, but, says Dalton, "these wines offer a delicacy of flavors that complement fish, but are structured enough to stand up to a meat course."



Furthermore, should a meat course (accompanied by red wine) precede a fish course, "an orange wine pairing won't fall apart after serving a big red wine the way that a white wine would."

Faced with a table of guests, each ordering a different entrée, skin-contact wines offer maximum dexterity. "They're like a get-out-of-jail-free card," he says.

But to truly appreciate their full potential, they need to be served correctly.

"The more you treat them like a Barolo, the better these wines are," Dalton says.

To maximize their appeal, Dalton serves these wines at cellar temperatures, preferably after decanting, to allow their aromas and structure to open.

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Gravner

Perhaps the person most responsible for reintroducing orange wines is Friulian Josko Gravner. Once a producer of crisp, easy-drinking white wines, he became disillusioned with the technological practices rampant in modern winemaking.

Through the 1990s, Gravner pared his winemaking back to the basics, looking to ancient Georgia for inspiration. In the late '90s, he invested in a *qvevri*, a traditional Georgian clay vessel. He buried it and emulated ancient techniques, fermenting and macerating white wines on the skins. The results were spiced with earthen honey and dried fruit flavors, and rippled with minerality and tannin.

Elements of his skin-contact winemaking can now be seen in wines throughout Italy, neighboring Slovenia and beyond. In less than a decade, Gravner's wines, and those of many of his colleagues, became ubiquitous in high-end restaurants and wine bars.

Despite how quickly these wines emerged, Courtney Hughes, the national operations and marketing manager for Gravner's U.S. importer, Domaine Select Wine Estates, believes the wines are not a fad.

"There is both an intellectual and an emotional component to these wines that people are able to appreciate and respond to, if provided the opportunity to experience them in the proper setting, not unlike with artwork," she says.



Pheasant's Tears

The sudden popularity of orange wines didn't go unnoticed in Georgia, where *qvevri* wines have been produced for at least 5,000 years. Lined with beeswax and buried in the ground, *qvevri* provide natural temperature control and slow, oxidative aging that produces earthy, texturally distinct skin-contact wines.

In Georgia, many export-minded wine producers have readily embraced modern, international-style winemaking. But a handful of small, independent *qvevri* enthusiasts are captivating new audiences, especially within the burgeoning natural wine movement. John Wurdeman, an expatriate American painter who founded Pheasant's Tears, is one of the most outspoken advocates.

"When we first started marketing these wines, we didn't realize there was such a difference between the natural wine world and the conventional wine world," he says.

But his traditionally crafted "amber" wines—a term he prefers to orange—unintentionally found a place in the natural wine category.

Chris Terrell, the U.S. importer for Pheasant's Tears, admits that these wines are niche products.

"They will never be poolside drinkers," Terrell says, "but that's what makes them so special. Wine is a journey, and these wines capture the essence of Georgia—something very moving and intense."



Channing Daughters

Inspired by Friulian examples, J. Christopher Tracy, partner and winemaker at Channing Daughters Winery on Long Island, New York, began experimenting with skin-fermented white wines in 2004.

"Before there was even an orange wine category in the U.S.," he says.

Like some counterparts in Italy and Slovenia, Tracy ferments his white wines on their skins before maturing them in Slovenian and/or French oak. Channing Daughters' three skin-contact wines are musky, with sweet vanilla-spice and orange-cream notes, intense fruit and floral flavors and bristling tea-leaf tannins.

"In our tasting room, often these are love-it-or-hate-it sort of wines," he says. "But what's interesting is how often people who think they don't like white wines fall in love with the structure, the tannin and the mouthfeel—the red wine experience that these white wines can provide."

"You're never going to find them at discount prices at large retail stores," Tracy says, "because they're simply not made at that scale. That's what will always keep things niche."

As for whether these wines are a fading trend, "They've been around for thousands of years," he says. "They may come in and out of favor, but they're not going anywhere. These wines bring too much to the table. They taste too damn good to go away."

RECOMMENDED SKIN-CONTACT WINES

ITALY

94 Gravner 2005 Amfora Ribolla Gialla (Venezia Giulia). Domaine Select Wine Estates. —M.L. abv:13% Price: \$120

91 Vodopivec 2006 Classica Vitovska (Venezia Giulia). Domaine Select Wine Estates. Cellar Selection. —M.L. abv:13% Price: \$85

SLOVENIA

92 Movia 2007 Veliko (Brda). Domaine Select Wine Estates. —A.I. abv:12.5% Price: \$50

90 Edi Simčič 2010 Sauvignon (Goriška Brda). August Wine Group. —A.I. abv:14.5% Price: \$45

90 Kabaj 2006 Amfora (Goriška Brda). Blue Danube Wine Co. —A.I. abv:12.7% Price: \$90

GEORGIA

92 Alaverdi Monastery Cellar 2010 Qvevri Traditional Kakhuri Unfiltered Amber Rkatsiteli (Kakheti). Terrell Wines. —A.I. abv:13% Price: \$25

90 Pheasant's Tears 2009 Dry Unfiltered Amber Rkatsiteli (Kakheti). Terrell Wines. —A.I. abv:12.5% Price: \$18

UNITED STATES

91 Channing Daughters 2009 Meditazione (Long Island). —A.I. abv:12% Price: \$40