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PINOT CHINE

No longer is New Zealand solely a Sauvignon Blanc zone; the country's PINOT GRIS wines are also causing quite a stir, says Simon Tam

HONGKONGERS ARE always sniffing out information on which wines to pair with Chinese food and other types of Asian cuisine. The city is filled with all manner of restaurants, but guidance can be lacking on which wines to pair with both Cantonese cuisine and the spicier dishes found elsewhere around the continent. A combination of the food's potent flavours, the lack of the food-pairing lore that European cuisines enjoy, and the fact that most wines are grown a long way from the foods they're trying to complement, together make it notoriously hard to match Asian food with wine.

Help is at hand, however. Pinot Gris (also known as Pinot Grigio), one of the family of grape varieties that also includes Pinot Noir and Pinot Blanc, is emerging as New Zealand's latest vinous wunderkind. This vibrant, aromatic wine adds colour to simple dishes, and there are also styles that have enough residual sweetness to defuse fiery Asian feasts.

Positioned between Pinot Noir, which lies at the darkest end of the Pinot family, and Pinot Blanc, at the lightest, Pinot Gris is a zesty varietal that displays varying levels of stone fruit (peach and nectarine) and pear characters. Its olfactory allure includes delicate honeysuckle blooms, peppercorns, cinnamon and nutmeg.

The word "gris" is French for "grey," and the fruit ranges in colour from white to grey-blue, pink or black. The wines it produces also vary in colour from a deep

golden yellow to a light shade of pink.

Most New Zealand wine devotees adore the country's pristine Rieslings and worship its fruity Sauvignon Blancs. For almost 30 years New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc has dominated the category and built up the country's wine industry more than any other grape. The reputation is well earned; New Zealand winemakers transformed a Bordeaux variety that was difficult to understand and hardly identifiable into a household name. Growers from both of the country's islands pay homage to the famous varietal, with Sauvignon Blanc making up 50 percent of all vines planted in New Zealand.

Pinot Gris, on the other hand, occupies just 5 percent of New Zealand vines, although plantings have been steadily increasing in recent years, doubling every year since 2006. Whereas formerly it was the country's best-kept secret, now it is emerging as its finest boutique varietal.

New Zealand's geography is dramatic and diverse, and winemakers carefully select vineyard sites to give their grapes the best possible natural conditions. Pinot Gris from the northern part of the country, including Hawke's Bay and Gisborne on the North Island, and Marlborough (famous mainly for Sauvignon Blanc) on the northern tip of the South Island, vary from those that derive from the South Island's Central Otago region. The north has more sunshine, so its Pinot Gris ripens swiftly and tends to be rich and lush with concentrated flavours.

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Central Otago's volcanic landscape is dotted with lakes that are fed by melting snowcaps. Those conditions create racy, zesty Pinot Gris that clean and refresh the palate. The cooler growing conditions make for fruity wines with strong, fragrant characters.

New Zealand winemakers enhance Pinot Gris' innate characteristics and capture its regionality using techniques and technologies that nurture and preserve its essence, such as picking the grapes early in the morning – or even at night – to concentrate their aromatics, and preserving fruit characteristics by fermenting at low temperatures (about 12 degrees). Differences in winemaking processes account for its

differences in flavour from Pinot Grigio – Pinot Gris' Italian counterpart. Pinot Grigio is much lighter in flavour because its vines host excessive amounts of plump grapes. The flavour is spread thinly and can be diluted. Compounding that, conservative Italian winemaking techniques remove the skin and pulp, further reducing fruitiness. The result is a light, refreshing and only vaguely fruity wine.

Pinot Gris production in New Zealand is limited and yields are small, making wines concentrated and full of character. With little or no oak influence, Pinot Gris' pure fruit notes strike a balance between earthy tones, spiciness, acidity and sweetness,

complementing both simple Cantonese and other, spicier Asian cuisines.

New Zealand Pinot Gris varies in flavour, richness and residual sugars. The drier styles, where all the sugar has fermented into alcohol, pair well with light, elegant food, such as Japanese dishes: sushi, sashimi and tempura, for example. Other styles, in which grape sugars are deliberately left unfermented, go well with heavy, savoury, oily Shanghainese and northern Chinese cuisines. These wines complement rich dishes; the residual sugars can compete with powerful flavours such as sweet soy sauce and chilli, in the latter case providing relief to burning palates.

A general rule when selecting Pinot Gris to pair with your next Asian meal is to remember that styles from New Zealand's North Island are rounder, fatter and more lush, whereas wines from the south are more fragrant and penetrating, and can have greater levels of residual sweetness. Asian cuisine is popular in New Zealand, and that helps contribute to Pinot Gris' popularity there, but it is in Hong Kong and mainland China where the varietal's export future clearly lies. It has enormous potential to quench the expanding thirst of China's wine lovers for quality wines to pair with Asian food – whatever style of Asian food that may be. ■

