

Tempranillo in Marlborough

Tessa Nicholson

This famous Spanish grape is best known for its inclusion in Rioja, the country's most famous wine. But it is also making an appearance in Marlborough, as a stand-alone variety.

History

Tempranillo is thought to have been in Spain since the 800s and is grown primarily in the Rioja and Ribera del Duero regions.

While it is a little-known variety in New Zealand, it is famous as a blending wine in its home country. As Jancis Robinson cleverly explains; "To make parallels with the most celebrated blended red wine, red Bordeaux, Tempranillo plays the Cabernet Sauvignon part."

Viticulture in Marlborough

Gareth Goodsir is the vineyard manager at Yealand's Seaview vineyard and has been involved with the Tempranillo vines since the first block was planted back in 2005.

Despite being told that it wouldn't grow here or if it did it would grow badly, Yealands have persisted with the variety. Not just because it provides a wine of interest, but Gareth says, because it is easy to grow.

"It is considerably easier than Pinot Noir. It doesn't require anywhere near the same amount of manual work, such as shoot thinning or as much crop reduction. It always seems to set well, I don't think we have had a year when it hasn't set well."

An extremely vigorous vine, Gareth says it is similar if not more vigorous than Sauvignon Blanc.

"It has humungous leaves and the bunches are huge, averaging between 280 and 400 grams. They are very, very big berries in quite a loose bunch. And the skins are extremely thick."

That may be one of the reasons birds apparently by pass the Tempranillo vines. Gareth says while they will attack the neighbouring Gewurztraminer, Pinot Gris and Sauvignon Blanc fruit, they leave the Tempranillo alone.

"We don't have to net it or bird scare which is one less hassle."

It does require crop reduction, as if left on two canes, it could produce up to 10 to 12 tonnes per hectare. Yealands thin it back to between four and a half to six tonnes.

"That's where it needs to be so we achieve the level of

brix that we want. But also so it gets physiologically ripe in time.

"It is a very late ripener, 99 times out of a 100, it is the last variety to come off."

While a number of articles about the variety as grown in Spain suggest the fruit is disease prone, that does not appear to be the case at Yealands.

"We have never had botrytis in it, even in a year like this with all the rain we got, we could only find the odd berry. You never find a half or quarter bunch with botrytis, just the odd singular berry. So it is very resistant. Maybe because of that thick skin."

The Winemaking

For Yealand's winemaker Tamra Kelly-Washington, the fruit she is looking for will have flavour, concentration and tannins. Brix levels she says are fairly irrelevant, as often they can be achieved, when the fruit is still green.

Machine harvested, with the select pick de-stemming harvester, the whole berries undergo a period of cold soaking in open top fermenters.

"The tank is then warmed up and we try to ferment around 32 deg. It will spend some extra time on skins, vintage dependent."

The juice is then pressed off into barrel where it undergoes malolactic fermentation.

"The barrel regime is usually around 10 percent new and the balance in second and third fill barrels. In some years I wonder if the fruit actually warrants new oak, but it does seem to help lift the wine and add structure if the wine is lacking."

The wine is aged for anywhere from eight to 11 months in small French 225 litre barrels and released the following year.

Describing Tempranillo as vintage sensitive, Tamra says she has to be adaptable in terms of winemaking to cater for it. For example, this year, she wanted to achieve more concentration, so after a couple of days of cold soaking she saigned around 20 percent and made a Tempranillo Rosé.

"It has fermented and looks great."

Vintage sensitivity means it is difficult to maintain consistency in terms of style.

"It is challenging to make, in particular on our site because we are in a cooler sub region of Marlborough. In saying that it is fun to have the challenge and rewarding when we make a wine much more concentrated and structured than we expected."

The Master of Wine Perspective – Emma Jenkins MW

Spanish Tempranillo is most often part of a blend, usually with garnacha (grenache) and mazuela (carignan), which help counter its natural low acid and sugar levels and benefit from its structural framework. However, the combination of a warm continental climate combined with cooler high altitudes sites seems to bring out the variety's best, and wines from renowned sites can contain nigh on 100% Tempranillo.

The name references its early ripening habits (*temprano* being Spanish for 'early') and it can ripen up to several weeks ahead of partner grapes such as garnacha. As expected from an ancient Iberian variety, there are many synonyms; perhaps the best known is Tinta Roriz, one of Port's principal grapes and the second most planted variety in Portugal's Douro Valley, where it contributes colour and body as well as spice and florals. It is also a common variety in the table wines of nearby Dão.

Ruby red with aromas and flavours of plum, cherry, tomato paste, leather, tobacco and spice, Tempranillo is robust in flavour if not especially assertive in character (hence its effective role in blends). An affinity with American oak often results in a distinct strawberry character. Generally medium bodied, though the typically hearty Spanish oak treatment can give an impression of fuller body and the extended aging an orangey hue. Alcohol is moderate/plus, tannins firm and acidity low-to-moderate, depending on climate. New World examples tend to be denser, more fruit-driven with chunkier, chewier tannins.

Tempranillo is fairly widely planted globally, including seemingly unlikely locations such as Switzerland, Malta, Mexico, Turkey and Canada. A burst of US popularity resulted in vines in California as well as seemingly disparate Washington and Texas. Argentina has sizable plantings (it's the fifth most planted grape in Mendoza) as does (South) Australia. New Zealand's handful of Tempranillo producers span the growing regions, with wines of very good character and quality beginning to emerge.