

# Ribolla Gialla: an agent for change in white wine

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Photo: Samanda Dorger, Special To The Chronicle



## IMAGE 1 OF 3

George Vare stands in his Napa vineyard Tuesday, September 7, 2010, where he grows an Ribolla Gialla, an Italian grape varietal.



The Ribolla Gialla grape is an obscure little thing from the cool northern reaches of Italy. High in acid and finicky in the vineyard, it has achieved a mild sort of fame as Friulian white wines have gained currency - even more so as a backbone for so-called orange wines (white wines fermented on their skins like a red) made by the likes of Italian iconoclasts Josko Gravner and Stanko Radikon.

Why, then, would it find a home in Napa Valley? Pin that one on **George Vare**. Vare's vineyard, surrounding his house west of the city of Napa, is apparently the sole U.S. source of Ribolla Gialla, a modest 2 1/2 acres worth.

At first, Vare seems an unlikely advocate for this difficult, cold-climate grape. A wine industry veteran since 1972, when he acquired **Geyser Peak Winery for Schlitz Brewing**, he has run a major wholesale firm (**Henry Wine Group**) and helped buy Beringer back from Nestle before founding Luna Vineyards in 1996 on the Silverado Trail. After building a career on California staples, he has become an incubator of sorts for the avant-garde.

"I love to see some innovative activity going on," Vare says. "I think the huge focus on Cabernet and Chardonnay has probably served its purpose, but there's other things going on out there as well."

His Ribolla is being parceled out to eight winemakers. In turn, they are using the tiny lots to create some of California's more compelling white wines.

The roster includes viticulturist **Steve Matthiasson**, who helps Vare with the vineyard and adds Ribolla into his Matthiasson white blend, a mix of Friulian and Bordeaux traditions that was one of the most compelling wines I encountered last year.

There's also **Duncan Meyers** and **Nathan Roberts** of Arnot-Roberts, whose 2009 might be the first varietally labeled Ribolla Gialla in the nation. Vare has been bottling it for several years, but only this year did the federal government approve the grape's name on the bottle.

**Michael Chiarello** of Bottega in Yountville asked for some; so did **Leslie Rudd**. Pax Mahle of Wind Gap got a bit, as did Enrico Bertoz, a Friulian native and assistant winemaker at Flora Springs who has his own **Arbe Garbe** label.

Some of Vare's Ribolla also found its way into the hands of **Dan Petroski**, who by day crafts Cabernet for Larkmead in Calistoga but in his free time is launching his own new label, Massican, which offers a range of white wines. The Ribolla lands in two of Petroski's blends; in the 2009 Annia it's combined with Tocai Friulano and Chardonnay, while in the 2009 Gemina it's mixed with Viognier and Chardonnay. It's often in a blend that Ribolla finds its best place, even in Friuli.

Petroski and Vare campaigned the feds to legitimize Ribolla as a U.S. varietal. And Petroski still recalls his encounter with Vare vividly. The wine veteran had but one request: Help make a name for Ribolla Gialla in the United States. "It was like Patton in Africa," recounts Petroski.

For Petroski, the addition of Ribolla to Friulano from 63-year-old vines in Chiles Valley - those two grapes are a classic matchup in Friuli - adds a needed vibrancy. That in particular is a selling point for Ribolla. If Napa can be a tough place to make lively white wines - witness the standard-issue Chardonnay profile - there's an innate appeal in the freshness provided by Ribolla's acidity.

"When I go home at night, I don't drink Napa Valley Cabernet," says Petroski, who apprenticed at Sicilian winery Valle dell'Acate. "So what I did was look at wines I like to drink, and I pursued varieties from Italy."

Ribolla may be an unlikely choice for Napa, and I can't imagine it's going to become a runaway hit. Even in its native soil it can be finicky; its acidity often a bit extreme, its tannic skins needing tender handling. But, Ribolla has the potential to make dramatic, noteworthy wine, especially when blended. And it embodies the desire by an increasing number of winemakers pushing beyond California's obvious successes.

Besides, Vare's own interest stems from one of those success stories. Luna's specialty has been Pinot Grigio, but to refine the winemaking, Vare arranged annual trips to Friuli, where Pinot Grigio is serious stuff, far more than a synonym for lemon water. It was on a 1997 trip there with winemaker **John Kongsgaard** that Vare encountered Grav-ner and Radikon.

The winemaking in Friuli - treating white wines as seriously as red - was a revelation. But so was Ribolla, and so as Vare honed his Pinot Grigio efforts, Ribolla became a side project. He grafted some vines over in 2001, and by 2004 was experimenting with "how to handle this funny grape," he says. Subsequent trips brought more converts, including Matthiasson.

Hence Vare has become a catalyst of sorts, earlier this year even holding a symposium to sort out how best to make a Californian Ribolla, tasting samples against the finest examples from Friuli and Slovenia, just across the Italian border, where the grape is also native. At best he's breaking even on his vineyard, but he's content to use Ribolla as an evolutionary tool to sail beyond the sea of Chardonnay.

"I don't see it as a major varietal in the future," Vare says. "But I love the fact people are doing really interesting things with white wines."

### **From the notebook**

**2009 Massican Annia Napa Valley White Wine** (\$25): A bit of a shape-shifter. Almondy at moments, with lemon confit and sea salt, and a lively floral tone. Fresh and a bit austere, there's a quiet intensity to it that almost commands food.

**2009 Arnot-Roberts Napa Valley Ribolla Gialla** (\$30): There's pretty weight from riper citrus flavors, but a nervy profile remains, accented by green almond, iris and chive aromas.

- *Jon Bonné*