

UNDERSTANDING DESIGNATIONS AND VARIETIES

THE VQA (VINTNER'S QUALITY ALLIANCE)

The *Vintner's Quality Alliance* or VQA is a controlled appellation system that has been in use since 1988. It is the Canadian equivalent of France's *Appellation D'Origine Controlée* or AC or AOC system. In Italy a similar appellation system exists called the *Denominazione di Origine Controllata* or DOC. Portugal and Spain too, have DOC appellations in place. Germany's appellation system is known as the *QBA* or *Qualitätswein bestimmter Anbaugebiete* or *QMP, Qualitätswein mit Prädikat*. These are but a few of the more well known systems in use throughout the winemaking world. The oldest such *controlled appellation* and *geographical delimitation* system is the one created in Portugal's Douro Valley in 1756. While Canada's VQA may seem a very recent development, Italy's DOC is also fairly recent in its inception; it was established in 1963. Italy's system also recognizes food products such as olive oil, cheeses and prosciutto.

The main purpose of a geographical delimitation and/or controlled appellation (the two terms are sometimes used interchangeably) system is to guarantee the origin, character, and level of quality of the wine being produced in the designated growing/producing area. These systems are typically administered by a governing body composed of individuals from the wine industry itself and have usually been enacted into wine legislation and subsequently into law by the governments of each respective country and region. Almost everything from the grape varieties permitted in a particular region to the way in which and length of time a wine must age is controlled. Strict limits are placed on things such as yields and sugar levels at harvest. All of this serves to ensure that every wine produced under these systems has met or surpassed the quality levels stipulated for it. Curiously, wines designated as "controlled appellation" or "geographically delimited" are *not necessarily* of the highest quality. They simply need to be of a *certain level* of quality. These systems have become political "hot potatoes" in some countries as many producers existing outside of the designated regions sometimes cry 'foul' as their wines of higher quality end up being relegated to "non-appellation" status. In fact, it is entirely possible, and not all that uncommon, for a "non-appellation" wine to be of higher quality than an "appellation" wine. This, however, is generally the exception and not the rule.

Canada's VQA system is in operation in two of the country's wine growing regions: Ontario and British Columbia. The VQA has been enacted into law. From a consumer standpoint the VQA designation in both provinces serves two main purposes. Those are, first, to indicate the wine has met or surpassed the quality standards set for it and, second, that the wine was produced entirely from Ontario-grown grapes from the region stated on the label (in the case of Ontario VQA wines), or entirely from British Columbia-grown grapes from the region stated on the label (in the case of B.C. VQA wines). Canada's other wine regions, Nova Scotia and Quebec, have yet to acquire appellation status.

GRAPE VARIETIES OR “VARIETALS”

Of the thousands of grape varieties and hybrids in existence, fewer than 30 are well known commercially in the New World (the wine producing regions outside of Europe). Well-known varieties have become so due to the fact that most New World wines are produced and labelled as varietals or varietal blends. In fact, many “unknown” varieties are consumed as wine on a regular basis because many wines, particularly those produced in the Old World (Europe), are not labelled as varietals.

The following chart outlines the most common varieties.

RED VARIETIES	WHITE VARIETIES
<p>Best Known:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cabernet Franc Cabernet Sauvignon Gamay Noir Merlot Pinot Noir Shiraz (Syrah) Zinfandel 	<p>Best Known:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Chardonnay Chenin Blanc Gewurztraminer Muscat (several varieties) Pinot Blanc Pinot Gris Riesling Sauvignon Blanc Semillon
<p>Lesser Known:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Baco Noir (French-American hybrid) Barbera Carmenère Grenache Malbec Marechal Foch (French-American hybrid) Montepulciano D’Abruzzo Petite Syrah Pinotage (varietal crossing of Pinot Noir and Cinsault) Ruby Cabernet (varietal crossing of Cabernet Sauvignon and Carignan) Sangiovese Tempranillo Zweigeltrebe (Zweigelt) 	<p>Lesser Known:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Aligote Auxerrois French Colombard Gruner Veltliner Kerner Seyval Blanc (French-American hybrid) Silvaner Trebbiano Vidal Blanc (French-American hybrid) Viognier

VARIETAL WINE PROFILES

Best-Known Reds

Cabernet Franc: Red currant, raspberry, cedar and herb spice notes. Light to medium/full bodied wines. Moderate tannins. Moderate to high acidity.

Cabernet Sauvignon: Cassis, raspberry, cedar and peppercorn notes. Medium to very full bodied wines with firm tannins. Moderate acidity.

Gamay Noir: Red cherry, peppercorn and licorice nuances. Light to medium bodied wines with crisp acidity. Soft tannins.

Merlot: Red plum, cassis, blackberry, black cherry and peppercorn. Slightly smoky on occasion. Medium to full bodied wines with soft tannins. Moderate acidity.

Pinot Noir: Strawberry, red currant, raspberry, black cherries and earth with nuances of violets and spice. Medium to medium/full bodied wines with soft tannins. Moderate acidity.

Shiraz (a.k.a. Syrah): Cassis, plum, mulberry, chocolate, black pepper and leather. Medium to very full bodied wines with soft tannins and soft acidity. (Firm tannins and crisper acidity in the case of Syrah.)

Zinfandel: Blackberry, black cherries, red plum, blueberry, peppercorn and leather. Medium to very full bodied wines with moderate to firm tannic structure. Moderate acidity.

Lesser-Known Reds

Baco Noir: Blackberries, cassis, blueberries, smoke and spice hints. Medium to full bodied wines with high acidity and moderate tannins.

Barbera: Sour cherry, and spice notes along with nuances of earth and leather. Crisp acidity with moderate tannins. Light to medium/full bodied wines.

Carmenère: Red plum, mulberry and passionfruit with hints of chocolate, black pepper and cedar. Medium to very full bodied wines with supple tannins. Soft acidity.

Grenache: Red cherries, slight citrus hints with a touch of earth. Light to full bodied wines with moderate tannins and moderate acidity.

Malbec: Cassis, cedar, and blackpepper hints. Medium to full bodied wines with structured tannins and moderate acidity.

Marechal Foch: Red berry, black cherry, plum and black pepper profile with smoky nuances. Medium to full bodied wine with high acidity and moderate tannins.

Montepulciano D'Abruzzo: Cassis, blackberries and white pepper with a slight earthiness. Medium to full bodied wines with moderate tannins and moderate to high acidity.

Petite Syrah: Grapey/raisiny aromas against a backdrop of cassis and spice. Medium to full bodied wines with moderate tannins and moderate acidity.

Pinotage: Distinct, almost peculiar profile of acetone, raisins, white pepper and blackberries. Medium to full bodied wines with soft tannins and moderate acidity.

Ruby Cabernet: Candy-like profile of black cherry with hints of licorice and chocolate. Medium to full bodied wines with moderate to high tannins and moderate acidity.

Sangiovese (a.k.a. Brunello): Red cherry, raspberry and spice character with hints of earth and leather. Medium to very full bodied wines with high acidity and moderate to firm tannic structure.

Tempranillo: Cassis, cedar, blackberry, black pepper and ripe plum aromas. Medium to very full bodied wines with moderate to high acidity and firm tannins.

Zweigeltrebe (or simply Zweigelt): Black cherry, raspberry, vanilla/spice and smoke nuances. Light to medium bodied wines with soft tannins and moderate acidity.

Best-Known Whites

Chardonnay: Ripe pear, apple, butterscotch and pineapple/tropical fruit aromas. Medium to very full bodied wines with soft to moderate acidity.

Chenin Blanc: Granny Smith apple, pear and citrus notes are the hallmark of this varietal. Light to medium bodied wines with moderate to crisp acidity.

Gewurztraminer: Distinct, lychee, rose, and tropical fruit profile. Light to full bodied wines with moderate to crisp acidity.

Muscat: Distinct, floral, grapey character with spice undertones. Light to medium/full bodied wines with soft to moderate acidity.

Pinot Blanc: Very elegant apple, melon and tropical fruit aromas. Light to medium/full bodied wines with moderate acidity.

Pinot Gris: Apple, pear and melon notes with hints of tropical fruit and spice. Slight mineral notes on occasion. Light to medium/full bodied wines with moderate acidity.

Johannisberg Riesling (or simply Riesling): Unique floral, peach, apricot and petroleum nuances. Light to full bodied wines with crisp to very crisp acidity.

Sauvignon Blanc: Unique profile of grapefruit, gooseberry, passionfruit and freshly cut grass. Undertones of black currant. Medium to very full bodied wines with moderate to high acidity.

Semillon: Golden Delicious apple, melon and tropical fruit character. Medium to very full bodied wines with low to moderate acidity.

Lesser-Known Whites

Aligote: Relatively neutral profile of green apple, pear and wet stone. Light to medium bodied wines of moderate to moderately high acidity.

Auxerrois: Green apple and pear with slight citrus notes. Wet stone (flinty) nuances. Light to medium bodied wines of moderate to high acidity.

French Colombard: Apple, melon and pear notes. Medium to full bodied wines of moderate acidity.

Gruener Veltliner: Floral, spice and mineral notes when growing conditions are right. Light to medium/full bodied wines with moderate to high acidity.

Kerner: Very similar to Riesling with floral, peach and apricot nuances but less sophisticated. Medium to medium/ full wines with high acidity and a slightly astringent mouthfeel.

Seyval Blanc: Green apple and lemon aromas with tropical fruit undertones. Slightly grassy. Light to medium bodied wines with high to very high acidity.

Silvaner: Relatively neutral profile with slight floral and apple accents—sometimes flinty. Medium to full bodied wines of moderate acidity.

Trebbiano: Relatively neutral aromas of apple and pear. Light to medium bodied wine with moderate to high acidity.

Vidal Blanc (or simply Vidal): Workhorse cold climate grape with floral and tropical fruit character—slight citrus notes. Light to medium bodied wines with high acidity.

Viognier: Floral and peach profile with melon and smoke hints. Sometimes slightly mineral in character. Medium to medium/full bodied wines with moderate acidity levels.

DEFINITIONS

Varietal: A singular grape variety, for example, *Cabernet Sauvignon* or *Chardonnay*. Also used to denote a wine made from a singular grape variety.

Vintage: A wine made in a given year. For example, if the year “2000” appears on the wine label, the wine in the bottle was produced using grapes harvested, crushed and fermented into wine in the year 2000. The year on the label, however, is not necessarily the year in which the wine was bottled.

Non-varietal: A non-varietal wine is a wine made from more than one varietal or grape variety. Non-varietal wines are sometimes referred to as “varietal blends” when the combination of grape varieties used are listed on the label.

Non-vintage: A non-vintage wine is usually a wine produced by blending wines from different vintages. The year of production will therefore not appear on the label.

Regional designations: Regional designations would include wines such as *Bordeaux*, *Burgundy*, *Chablis*, *Champagne*, *Beaujolais*, or *Chateauneuf-du-Pape* (in France), *Barolo* or *Chianti* (in Italy), *Rioja* (in Spain), *Rhein* or *Mosel* (in Germany), *Douro* or *Dão* (in Portugal), etc.

“Fantasy” designations or names: These are wines which call themselves (unfairly) “*Chablis*” or “*Burgundy*” or “*Champagne*,” or something even more abstract such as “*Vintner’s Red*” or “*Harvest White*,” etc.

Old World vs. New World: The term “Old World” refers specifically to the wine producing regions of Europe, the Mediterranean basin, and the Near East. Wine produced anywhere else is designated as having been produced in the “New World.”

Wines produced in New World regions are predominantly varietals. Wines produced in Old World regions are predominantly varietal blends or non-varietals.