

GAMAY

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BACKGROUND

Gamay Noir, or just plain Gamay (pronounced gam-MAY) as it is most commonly known, is a natural progeny of Pinot Noir and Gouais Blanc. Therefore, it has at least 20 siblings, including Chardonnay. It arose somewhere in Burgundy—the first record there was at the end of the 14th century. Numerous spellings have been used, including Gamey, Gamé, and Gamez, until the current form was adopted in 1896. There are mutants with coloured pulp such as Gamay Teinturier de Bouze—this is why Gamay is sometimes known as Gamay Noir à Jus Blanc. There are many synonyms including Bourguignon Noir and Petit Gamai. France has the largest area with 30,000 ha (2009) of which approximately two-thirds is in Beaujolais and environs – there is little else grown there as far as red grapes are concerned. Most Beaujolais wine is 100% Gamay Noir. There is also some in the Cote d'Or but the area is small because it has always been considered to be inferior to Pinot Noir—in fact, there have been several attempts in the past to limit the plantings for this reason. It is planted widely across the Loire, particularly in Loir-et-Cher, and also in Savoie where it is the main red variety. In Switzerland it is the second most important red variety after Pinot Noir. There are small areas in eastern Europe where it has been confused with Blaufränkisch—in part due to the use of the synonym Gamé in some countries. There is little grown in the New World other than small areas in Oregon, Canada, New Zealand and South Africa. In Australia, the first introductions from California turned out to be Pinot Noir (introduced as 'Gamay Beaujolais' in 1962) and Valdiguié (introduced as 'Napa Gamay'). Subsequently, clones of true Gamay have been introduced since the early 1970s; and there are now at least 12 clones here. Soon after the initial introductions of true Gamay, a single vine of it was discovered in an old mixed vineyard at Great Western—so it was probably introduced more than 100 years ago. The total area in Australia is unknown. There are more than 24 wine producers, predominantly in cool regions: mainly Tasmania with the remainder across 14 other regions, each with one or two producers.

VITICULTURE

Budburst and maturity are early. Vigour is low to moderate with semi-erect growth habit. Bunches are small to medium, well-filled to compact with medium berries. Yield is moderate to high. The large crop may inhibit shoot growth. Pruning is generally to short spurs as a means of yield control. Although susceptible to spring frost damage due to early budburst, it has good recovery due to very fruitful secondary buds. It is susceptible to sunburn and fungal diseases, particularly bunch rot due to its compact bunches.

WINE

Fruit has ripe berry and spicy characters giving light bodied savoury wines with firm acid and low tannin. Descriptors include strawberry, red currant and herbal. Wines have good consumer appeal and are not usually aged in bottle. Carbonic maceration is commonly used in Beaujolais.

For further information on this and other emerging varieties, contact Marcel Essling (viticulture@awri.com.au or 08 8313 6600) at The Australian Wine Research Institute to arrange the presentation of the Alternative Varieties Research to Practice program in your region.