



California Central Coast Wine Tour

Class V – Viognier

For the fifth part of our tour, we focused on Viognier, a white Rhône varietal that is growing in popularity in the United States. In the Paso Robles area, many vineyards grow this lesser-known grape, which does well in warm, dry climates. We paid a visit to a diverse group of wineries, ranging from very large to very small: Wild Horse Winery & Vineyards, Scott Aaron Wines, and Tablas Creek Vineyards

Wild Horse Winery & Vineyards

We began our visit to Wild Horse Winery & Vineyards outside of the tasting room, where we met Stacy Miller, the hospitality manager. Stacy told us a bit about the history of Wild Horse, which is about 15 miles from the coast as the crow flies. She explained that this proximity makes for warm daytime temperatures and cool nighttime temperatures - ideal for growing Viognier, since the warm weather brings out the sugars in the grapes, and the cool weather helps maintain the acidity. Stacy also mentioned a few of Viognier's most common flavors and aromas, including peach, apricot and honeysuckle.

Next, we headed out into the vineyard, where we met Shayne Kline, the Vice President of Operations. Shayne explained a bit more about what we should expect from a Viognier. "The wine is generally straw colored," he told us, "and the aromas can be anything from minerals or limestone, to stone fruits like peaches, nectarines or apricots." He added that sometimes even honey or fig characteristics appear in Viognier, especially when it's picked slightly later. Shayne explained that at Wild Horse, they age half of their Viognier in neutral oak barrels, and half in stainless steel. Neutral oak barrels are generally over two years old, and therefore don't impart oak flavors on the wine – they mainly serve as a storage vessel.

As we explored the winery and vineyards, Shayne told us a bit more about the production process for Viognier. At Wild Horse, the grapes are picked early in the morning when they are still cool, and pressed full-cluster right away to separate the juice from the skins. Next, the winemakers add yeast to the juice to help the fermentation process get started. Fermentation happens at cool temperatures, around 50-60 degrees Fahrenheit. Shayne explained that this protects the aromas of Viognier and allows the minerality and stone fruit flavors to really shine.

We took a walk to the irrigation ponds at the back of the property with Kyle Coots, the tasting room manager at Wild Horse. As we walked around and met the winery's llama, Kyle told us about the strong sustainable program at Wild Horse. Byproducts of the production process, like pumice, seeds and stems, are all composted and converted to fertilizer, and all wastewater is pumped into a series of ponds and eventually treated with ozone and reused.

We ended our visit by chatting with Stacy one more time. Stacy reminded us that Viognier is traditionally used as a blending grape in France, but recently it has been becoming more popular on its own. She recommended pairing Wild Horse Viognier with spicy Thai dishes or creamy pasta dishes with scallops or crab. Before we left, we learned another interesting fact about Viognier: Winemakers sometimes add small amounts of Viognier to Syrah before fermentation, which makes for a Syrah with stronger aromas and a brighter color. We also reviewed the definition of vintage: A term used to describe the grapes or a batch of wine from a particular year.

Scott Aaron Wines

The tasting room of Scott Aaron Wines, located in downtown Templeton, is housed in a chocolate shop that sells homemade treats to both visitors and local customers. We had a great time visiting with Scott Tobin, the owner and winemaker of this small label. Scott has been in the business with his family at Casa de Caballos Vineyard for many years, but only recently did he branch out to create his own wines. Scott explained that he focuses on some of his favorite grapes – Viognier and Cabernet Franc – so he had fun getting his business started.

Scott explained that Viognier looks much like any other white wine. “Viognier is a great wine to swirl around and get your nose in, to really get those aromas out,” he said. He told us that many people, after smelling Viognier, are convinced that it's going to be a sweet wine, but that in reality it is usually a dry wine with great acidity. He also mentioned the tropical aromas that people tend to pick up in Viognier – often both fruity and floral.

Scott told us that some Viogniers tend toward the sweet side, while others are very acidic. He prefers to make a style that is somewhere in between, though he admitted that the exact style he makes changes year to year based on the grapes themselves. Scott makes a 100% Viognier, but he said that the wine is great blended with other Rhône varietals like Roussanne and Marsanne. He also let us know that Viognier tends to be high in alcohol compared to other wines – sometimes up to 15%. “Some people learn it the hard way,” he joked. Scott recommends pairing Viognier with spicy food or any light meal. “It's great with fish, it's a good appetizer and salad wine, and good on a hot summer day sitting out just on its own.”

Before we headed to our next stop, we talked a bit more about the advantages of visiting Paso Robles. Scott explained that because Paso Robles has so many

microclimates, the fruit at different vineyards can be very different. A Viognier from a hot climate, like the vineyard at Scott Aaron, might have very different flavors than a cooler climate Viognier from nearby Santa Maria Valley. Therefore, in order to get a good sense of what Viognier is like, Scott recommends visiting several wineries and trying the Viogniers at each one. Since there are so many styles, he thinks we are bound to find one that we like.

Tablas Creek Vineyard

Our third stop was at Tablas Creek Vineyards, where we spoke with winemaker Neil Collins. Tablas Creek is a certified organic vineyard, high in the western hills of Paso Robles, that specializes in Rhône blends. One of the best-selling blends at Tablas Creek, the Côte de Tablas Blanc, features Viognier as the main grape variety, and there is also a limited production of 100% Viognier. Neil explained that although blending is not as common in the United States as it is in Europe, it is starting to become more popular, and people are beginning to recognize the value of blended wines.

Neil told us more about the growing popularity of Viognier in the United States. “Viognier was very much championed as an alternative to Chardonnay at a time when people were looking for something different,” he explained. Since Viognier is adaptable to most any climate, it was a good choice. Neil described cool-climate Viogniers as “more austere, maybe more mineral and acidic, with a lot more pear and apple characteristics.” He described riper, warm-climate Viognier as having more stone fruit flavors like peach, apricot and nectarine.

As we walked through the barrel room, Neil explained that they normally do not use any oak on Viognier, or on their white blends. “We don’t use much wood because we want to keep the bright fruit and pretty aromas,” he said. “We don’t want to mask any of that with wood.” The strategy is different with red wines, however, and Neil showed us the giant wood foudres that are used for aging many of Tablas Creek’s red blends. Neil explained that even in their red wines, they don’t like too much oak influence, but that aging in wooden vessels still has the advantage of allowing for a transfer of oxygen. The immense 1,200 gallon foudres are a great compromise, since the contact between the wine and the oak is diminished but the wine is still aged in wood.

We ended our visit with some advice from Neil about choosing and buying wine. “I think one of the best things you can do is to find a good local wine store, with a good professional who works there,” he explained. When an expert knows what you like and dislike, he or she will be able to suggest other wines that you might enjoy. So forming a good relationship with a wine shop is a great idea for anyone who is serious about wine.

Fun Facts about Viognier:

Viognier is known to have been cultivated in France since at least the 5th century.

According to legend, the Roman Emperor Probus brought Viognier grapes to the Rhône region in 281 AD.

Viognier is drought resistant, and does well in warm, dry climates.

The introduction of phylloxera insects to France in the mid-1800s destroyed many Viognier vineyards.

In 1965, there were only 30 acres of Viognier planted in the Rhône Valley, while today there are approximately 2,000 acres planted.