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Giving Pinot Grigio Another Go

The grape's popularity has come at a price: lots of plonk. But great vintages are out there

.... More recently on a visit to the Breslin Bar, a fashionable and calorific Manhattan hotspot, I encountered a Pinot Grigio that blew my mind and encouraged me to reopen the question: Can Pinot Grigio possibly be serious? The wine was a 2007 Pinot Grigio from Movia, a winery founded a year before Lageder's in 1820, which is in Slovenia just across the Italian border adjacent to some of the best vineyards of Friuli.

I had met Movia's winemaker/proprietor Ales Kristancic in Friuli and again in New York and he'd impressed me as one of the most energetic, not to say manic, characters of my acquaintance. Here's one of my notes from that first encounter, a quotation from Ales: "We are solar men. Our power is not money. We can find solar energy in a dark place." I believe he was speaking about marshalling the sun's energy in the dark recesses of a wine cellar, but who the hell knows. He also makes up a lot of words. At any rate, his wines are incredibly expressive and singular and already, in his mid 40s, he's a legendary figure in wine circles. Like almost everything about Ales, his Pinot Grigio is larger than life, rich and concentrated with a host of exotic fruit flavors and mineral notes. Was this a one-off, or was it possible that real men could drink Pinot Grigio again? I started buying and tasting as many PGs as I could find, subjecting myself to the derision of sommeliers and wine store clerks.

I consulted Henry Davar, the wine director at Manhattan restaurant Del Posto, who helped me to organize a tasting. Mr. Davar was enthusiastic about the project, though he informed me, somewhat ominously, "We don't serve PG by the glass. We don't want our guests to order something just by default." We stuck mostly to bottles from northeast Italy, to see if we could find regional as well as varietal characteristics. And I'm sorry to say we had more misses than hits, although the hits gave us hope and a few wines to put into rotation on our drinking cards. We were hard pressed to find any flavor at all in the '09 Santa Margherita. A hint of lemon

drop? But flavor abounded in the '09 Palmina, winemaker Steve Clifton's Cali-Itali project. Or is that Itali-Cali? Whichever—he grows Italian varietals in Santa Barbara and his Pinot Grigio is really impressive, especially at \$20 a bottle.

"I tasted some great Pinot Grigios in Friuli," Mr. Clifton says, "and I wanted to make one that wasn't just a water substitute. It has to be grown on a good site that expresses minerality, but at its best it's a bridge between Sauvignon Blanc and Chardonnay. Pinot Grigio hits the middle for seafood dishes that are too delicate for Chardonnay."

A certain stony element characterized the PGs Mr. Davar and I liked the best—and sometimes stone fruits like peaches—most of them from the Collio region of Friuli. ("Pinot Grigio from Friuli always has a strong mineral element," says Maurizio Castelli, who makes the excellent Scarbolo PGs.) The standouts were three successive vintages of Movia's Pinot Grigio, the 2005, 2006 and 2007, the latter being a spectacular wine, which had nose suggestive of a young red burgundy, reminding us that PG is indeed a relative of that noble grape. Mr. Davar, for one, was impressed. "You can drink Pinot Grigio as a thirst quencher on a terrace...

2007 Movia Pinot Grigio, \$25

On the nose this is a wild medley of herbs and spice and is strangely reminiscent of a great young red Burgundy. In the mouth it explodes with honey and peach flavors as well as a firm streak of minerality. Del Posto Sommelier Henry Davar suggests pairing it with pork.

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