

PINOT GRIS / GRIGIO

By Paul Foster

Italian winegrowers call it Pinot Grigio while the French go for Pinot Gris. Australian winegrowers use both but they're all referring to the same grape, the 'grey' pinot. It is a curious variety in some ways and it has often been said to be so mixed up that it barely knows whether it's a white or a black grape. It makes the most beautiful white wines but its skins can be anything from a greyish blue to pink, all this the result of its being an historic mutation of the 'black' pinot, Pinot Noir.

This grape's wines can be dramatically different, too, and it is hard to believe that the vibrant grapefruit and almond Pinot Grigio whites of Friuli in northern Italy come from the same variety as do the rich, textured golden pear Pinot Gris of Alsace in France. In Australia we're about as mixed up as the grape itself and 'Gris' or 'Grigio' on a label is no guarantee as to the nature of the wine in the bottle. In New Zealand, though, where climate has more to say about suitable style, 'Pinot Gris' is usually a wine that is fresh but smooth and a little sweet that tastes of pears and baked apple.

Part of the story of style, of course, is to do with viticulture and in particular the point of time that the grapes are picked. The variety has a tendency for rapid loss of acidity at full ripening and in Italy growers of pinot grigio, afraid of this, developed the practice of picking fruit early. Hence the zesty style. The French winemakers, on the other hand, were prepared to risk lower acidity and went for wines of higher extract and fuller flavour. Even the colours of the two are different, the Italian typically a bright pale green and the French more brassy.

Two very drinkable examples of the contrasting styles.

Nepenthe Adelaide Hills Pinot Gris 2007

Fresh and crisp; more 'Grigio' than 'Gris'. Just slightly pink in colour. Green pear, lemon and apple aromas. Similar flavours. Nicely defined and elegant palate, long and lingering. Positive acidity. Generally available, about \$18.

Wild South Marlborough Pinot Gris 2008

Rich and softly textured with gentle acidity and a little residual sugar. Very varietal and true to style; plenty of golden pear, baked apple and pineapple qualities. Long, beautifully balanced palate. Quality Kiwi, available through The Wine Society, \$16.