

# Don't Overlook Roussane

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*by John C. Dvorak*

**One of the most interesting** varietal wines to emerge on the California wine scene is Roussane – a famous grape from the Rhone Valley in France. Both the history of this grape and the wine it can produce are fascinating. With its unique flavors, there is no reason this wine cannot eventually challenge Chardonnay as the queen of California white wine.



Roussane was historically the grape that made the legendary white Hermitage of the 19th century. It was when Phylloxera wiped out most of the French vineyards that it was replaced with the more productive Marsanne during replanting. Roussane, which was a harder grape to grow, never regained its prominence.

Roussane when produced in California produces an incredibly fruity big wine with a dreamy bouquet that is appealing and fascinating. There is nothing to compare it to. My favorite Roussane comes from Zaca Mesa, a winery that wins a lot of awards for its astonishing, yet overlooked, Roussane wine.

Unfortunately, nobody is quite sure what the Hermitage Blanc of 19th-century tasted like so it's hard to say if we're even making the wine with the right technique.

**Here is an excerpt** from the book *Modern Wines* by the fabled 19th-century wine-writer Cyrus Redding (1851).

*“The white Hermitage is made of white grapes only and divided into three growths. This is the finest white wine France produces, and little or none of the first growth is exported. Its colour should be straw-yellow; its odour is like that of no other known wine. It is of a rich taste, between that of dry and luscious wines. It is often in a state of fermentation for two years...It keeps much longer than the red to the extent of a century, without the least deterioration, though after twenty-five or thirty years old it assumes somewhat the character of old Spanish wines, and its perfume and taste undergo a change.”*

**So in the 19th century** the Roussane-based Hermitage was considered France's greatest white wine. Later in the book Redding equates White Hermitage with the great white burgundies of the era, which was topped by Montrachet. Today Montrachet still rules the roost as far as white wines are concerned. Thus there is every reason to believe that Roussane can regain a foothold

## Roussane Goes Grilling

by Roger Mummert

**S**ending a wine out into the world to meet its match in food is a bit like shipping a shy child off to summer camp. You hope he or she mixes well with the kids in the bunk, then finds that special friend for years of cozy sleepovers and giggle sessions.

Fortunately, Roussane has a shot at being camper of the year.

The wine is immediately friendly to the palate,



guaranteeing that it will make friends when you hand a chilled glass of it to your guests as they tromp through your door, tracking sand back

from the beach. But will the wine stay friendly once your guests sit down at the table?

**To find out, I checked out the wine's lineage** on the website of Zaca Mesa Vineyards, which produces a leading Roussane. Then I chatted with the winery manager Jeff Maikin. Naturally, he's in love with the honeyed aroma and rich mouth feel of the wine, and we discussed his own pairings of Roussane with grilled dishes like marinated sea bass and grilled pineapple, as well as with salads and spicy Thai noodles.

Jeff graciously overnighted me a bottle of the 1998 Zaca Mesa Roussane, and it arrived just as I was packing the tennis racquets for a weekend in the Hamptons. I called ahead to our weekend hosts and requested two things: an assortment of grillable seafood and vegetables and a full tank of gas for the Weber.

That evening, as the guests cum deputized food critics were seated, the Roussane was poured and the seafood procession commenced: skewers of colossal shrimp marinated in a soy/orange/ginger

sauce, salmon steaks brushed with olive oil and chopped cilantro, and grilled tuna and swordfish steaks rubbed with chile spices. Accompanying the fishy bounty were grilled strips of zucchini, fresh sliced tomatoes and grilled sweet Vidalia onions, served over long grain basmati "dirty rice," speckled with bits of roasted yellow and red peppers and pan-fried corn kernels with cumin and jalapenos. A salad of mixed greens with warm potatoes roasted with olive oil and tarragon took a side position at the overloaded table.

**Our gastronomic jury of peers drew silent.**

There was munching, sipping and furtive glancing as platters circulated a second and third time. Then the verdict came in. Those who liked the wine best were those who were drawn to the sweet and the spicy foods: the grilled swordfish, the Vidalia onions and the dirty rice, in particular.

**Waving singed skewers for emphasis,** I presented my theory that the success of this match-up lies in two elements found in the Roussane. First, the wine gives a sweet impression, somewhere between a Riesling and a Pinot Gris, two wines that often appear sweet but aren't. Roussane's piney scent and suggestion of honey and peach on the tongue add drama to blander foods, and these refreshing qualities also relieve the lingering burn of spicy foods and the often bitter char of grilled foods. Second, the wine has a high-acid level, which cuts through rich foods and finishes a meal much the way it starts it: in a refreshing and palate-cleansing manner.

When I pack my bags for that week-in-the-pines fantasy sleepaway camp, don't tell the counselors, but a contraband of Roussane will be securely stowed away inside my bedroll.

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at the highest echelon of connoisseur-grade wines.

**I should note here** that Roussane is not dead in France; it's just not planted where it used to be, except in the Savoie where it is believed to have originated. Wines from this Northern part of France are hard to find in the U.S. The most notable is the Chignin Bergeron, described by the French as both

rare and fragile. This means it doesn't travel well, so bottles in the U.S. are probably damaged. In the Rhone, Roussane tends to be used to enhance both white and red blends. It, for example, is one of the 13 allowable grapes used in red and white Chateauneuf-du-Pape.

I have never tasted a bad Roussane, although I've had a few that weren't as fruity as I expected. In California, experimentation with the grape has been mostly in the South Coastal regions – the superstar wineries in the Napa and Sonoma Valleys have not yet seriously taken on this grape. I'd suggest even trying to grow this grape in Mendocino County. I would like to see some activity further north, since some of the southern growing areas have produced Roussane with alcohol levels that are simply too high.

**Alban, the winery** that credits itself with introducing the grape to California, recently released a Roussane with 14.8-percent alcohol. I personally don't like wines that are laced with this much ethanol. This could have resulted from overripeness and high sugars, or the use of the newer high-tech yeasts that produce more alcohol than older strains.

Whatever the case, try to find a couple of Roussane wines and taste them for yourself. The Zaca Mesa is the first one I'd try. If you see any Roussane on a wine list order it and impress your friends. This grape could easily become the next Merlot, emerging from obscurity into a staple. Merlot was hardly grown in California in the 1960's and 1970's; now it is overplanted. Let's see what happens with Roussane. 

*This grape could easily become the next Merlot, emerging from obscurity into a staple.*



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*John C. Dvorak's work appears in several magazines and newspapers, including Boardwatch, Computer Shopper, PC Magazine and PC Computing. He is the author of several books on computing including Dvorak's Guide to Telecommunications. His radio show, Real Computing, can be heard on public radio.*