

## Think a shrew can be tough, just try to tame Tannat

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San Francisco Chronicle  
Sunday, February 8, 2009

"I just call it winemaker ennui," says Eric Laumann, explaining what drove him to plant 2 acres of Tannat in a cooler corner of Monterey County.



Erick Wong / The Chronicle

As you might have surmised, Tannat gets its name from the word tannin, and tannin defines this often fiercely uncooperative red grape. Its roots appear to be Basque, and it can still be found in the Pyrenees that border France and Spain, including in the wines of Irouleguy. But its defining home is just north, in the Madiran area, and also in Uruguay, which has claimed Tannat as its own.

California, thus far, hasn't. Just 195 acres were planted here in 2007, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. That puts Tannat somewhere just behind the runaway success of, say, Touriga Nacional.

Even the heartiest palate would find only tough love coming from this thick-skinned specimen. Tannat typically requires more than a year in barrel to soften to the point of drinkability. And take one guess which grape inspired the 1990 invention of micro-oxygenation, in which tiny amounts of oxygen are bubbled through wine to round its edges?

So Laumann, a veteran winemaker who worked with Chalone's Dick Graff at Edna Valley Vineyards, Bonny Doon Vineyard's Randall Graham and even briefly with Fred Franzia, must have been really, really bored with Chardonnay to chose Tannat as his muse.

"I wanted to pick a varietal that would over stimulate me," he says by way of explaining how it became the defining grape for his Cambiata label.

I'm dwelling on Laumann's efforts not simply for the sake of novelty. No one has made the grape such a focal point, but plenty of others have put California Tannat in bottle, including such wineries as negociant Cameron Hughes. It has

become a minor tasting-room hit for Rhone specialist Tablas Creek Vineyard in Paso Robles, which brought some of the first Tannat cuttings into the country.

Plenty of other homegrown obscurities lurk on shelves. In Ukiah, Chiarito Vineyard has bet on Negroamaro, which in versions from its native Puglia struggles to clear \$15 a bottle. Jim Clendenen of Au Bon Climat has for years been dabbling in obscurities like Mondeuse and Teroldego. The workhorse German red grape Dornfelder is making inroads. Lagrein. Aglianico. Gruner Veltliner. The list keeps growing.

There's always potential for a breakout hit. Though the white Rhone variety Marsanne boasts just 84 acres in California, its reputation far exceeds that. But most never rise beyond sideshow.

So it's a noble experiment when small vintners go all open-source and commit real money to the obscure just because they can't bear to make the exact same thing as their neighbor.

Let's be clear: Tannat is not Laumann's livelihood. He also makes wine as the general manager of Monterey Wine Co., a large custom-crush winery in King City; indeed, part of his compensation package when hired in 2002 was that his new bosses would plant him varietals of his choosing.

He chose Tannat. It went into a parcel just outside Greenfield and south of the Arroyo Seco appellation, amid rows of Merlot and Pinot Noir. A first vintage was harvested in 2004. Then came the pain, which Laumann knew well, having helped Grahm with Heart of Darkness, Bonny Doon's imported Tannat-based wine from Madiran.

"People say Pinot Noir is the toughest grape to make, and I disagree with that," Laumann says. "Pinot Noir is the easiest grape to screw up. Tannat is the toughest grape to make because it's impervious to your cellar treatments."

The wine's lengthy 30-month trip to potability begins in one-half new oak barrels, and it's moved to different barrels each quarter. Month after month, it tastes more astringent before finally relaxing to allow even the first signs of generous fruit. Curiously, though haters of the controversial micro-ox process might forgive its use for Tannat, Laumann steers clear. The result, at least for the 2005 that was released last fall, is clean and floral, with just a specter of the rustic inkiness that so defines Madiran. (See "From the Notebook.")

True, Tannat is a totally unlikely choice to make a point about the virtues of variety. But it can be tamed, enough that Madiran's Chateau Montus has become a breakout hit at \$35 and up. Its prospects improve when matched to the rib-sticking food of Southwest France - think cassoulet and confit.

And its tannins, plus its general unwillingness to behave, serve as counterpoint to what Laumann calls "baroque compositions" of modern winemaking - familiar grapes pumped up into generic hedonism. "It's not going to send us into a spiral of redundancy and boredom," he argues.

Tannat may not be an ideal vehicle for that message, but it says all the right things about the virtues of innovation.

## **From the notebook**

**Cambiata Monterey Tannat (\$30)** Combines a floral, high-strung profile with darker notes of aniseed, thick plum and asphalt. Just a touch of inkiness and oakiness, but with lots of racy energy and refined red fruit. Tannins? A touch aggressive, but well under control considering the grape source.

- J.B.

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This article appeared on page **E - 6** of the San Francisco Chronicle