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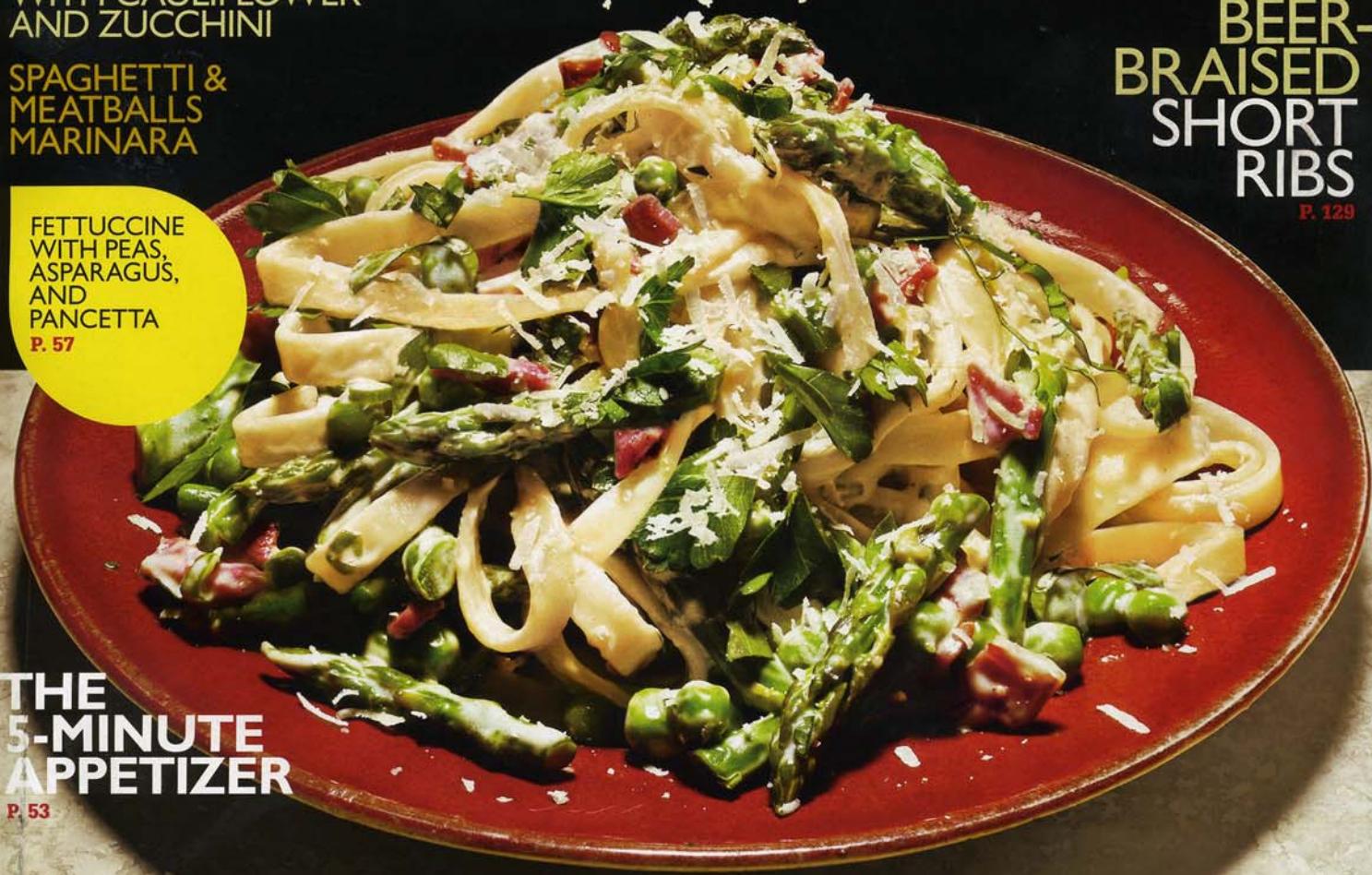
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SPRING
DESSERTS

STRAWBERRY CRUMBLE
RASPBERRY TART
FRESH LEMON PUDDING

the best grape you've never heard of...

...and you're drinking it all the time. Grenache is one of the most widely planted red grapes in the world, bringing body and flavor to some of our favorite wines. BY HEATHER JOHN



WINE TRENDS COME AND GO. AFTER WORKING IN A COUPLE OF Napa Valley wineries in the '90s, where the most overheard phrase was "I'll try the Merlot," even if we didn't produce one, I was somewhat relieved when the noble grape was dethroned

by Pinot Noir. Of course, now all we're talking about is Riesling. And yet, what we've been *drinking* all along is Grenache.

Despite being rather challenging in the vineyard, Grenache is one of the most widely grown grapes in the world and—whether or not it's announced on the label—is often an important player in some of the world's great wines. These wines tend to be spicy and medium- to full-bodied, and are frequently described as tasting of freshly cracked pepper. Which is why they're fantastic with hearty, well-seasoned meat dishes.

Although Grenache originated in Spain (where it is called Garnacha), the grape is perhaps best known as the darling of the wines of the Southern Rhône region of France, specifically those from the Châteauneuf-du-Pape region. Here,

red wines are made primarily from Grenache, but can be blended with up to 13 Rhône varietals. Winemakers will typically blend Grenache with small amounts of Syrah and Mourvèdre for structure because Grenache has a tendency toward softer tannins and lower acid.

Of course, there are exceptions to every rule. The famed Château Rayas produces what is arguably the superlative of Châteauneuf-du-Pape reds, which is made exclusively from Grenache. In the Tavel region of France, Grenache produces vibrant ruby-hued rosés, while in Spain you'll find the grape at the center of the Priorat's inky reds and earthy Rioja rosés. Australia uses the grape in GSM (Grenache, Shiraz, Mourvèdre) blends, and in Sardinia, Italy, where it's known as Cannonau, it's used to produce rich, fruity reds.

Here in the United States, we owe the grape's success to a few renegades, who rescued Grenache from near oblivion. Bonny Doon's Randall Grahm has been one of the more influential—and rogue—vintners behind planting traditional Rhône grape varietals such as Grenache in California. Twenty-five years ago, the grape was decidedly out of vogue, but Grahm became intrigued by the challenge of producing a big, full-bodied red from Grenache after stumbling upon a bottle of 1970 David Bruce Grenache that was gathering dust on a shelf at Hi-Time Wine Cellars in Costa Mesa, near Los Angeles.

"That I was still able to find a bottle [from 1970] in 1984 gives you an idea of Grenache's commercial viability in California," Grahm says of the bottle from the pioneering Santa Cruz Mountains winemaker David Bruce. "But the wine was still surprisingly dark, fragrant, and lovely." And it inspired him to plant and produce his own Rhône-style blends.

"It's kind of a chameleon grape," says Grahm. "It's site-sensitive and extremely vigorous. If you grow it in rich soil, it will completely take over, like a weed," resulting in wines ▶

that lack concentration. Which is why the sandy, gravelly vineyards of Châteauneuf-du-Pape or the volcanic soils in the Priorat region provide ideal growing conditions for Grenache. These low-fertility soils create stress for the vines, which results in more balanced, fragrant, and acidic wines. Following the European model, Grahm is a proponent of dry farming (farming without irrigation) to stress the vines.

Another consideration for winemakers is that if grape clusters are allowed to get too big and are exposed to too much sunlight, the grapes get bleached out, and that affects the color and vibrancy of the wines. Winemaker Mark Crawford Horvath of Kenneth-Crawford Wines in the Santa Ynez Valley in Southern California says that allowing more

leaves to shade the grapes has resulted in the development of "some more interesting spices" in the wine. And if you've ever wondered what freshly cracked black pepper over ripe black cherries might taste like, one sip of Kenneth-Crawford's Larner Vineyard Grenache will put that question to rest. It's interesting, for sure, and delicious.

Like Grahm, Horvath thinks Grenache shines most brightly when it's blended with other grapes. "I think of Grenache as a doughnut-hole wine," he says. "It has all this great character up front, and then lots of structure on the finish, but it's missing that mid-palate fruit, and Syrah seems to fill that gap." Horvath and his winemaking partner, Kenneth J. Gummere, blend in 10 to 13 percent Syrah with their Larner Vineyard Grenache to "fill the doughnut hole."

But sometimes Grenache can stand up very nicely on its own. There are exquisite 100 percent Grenache wines coming out of Australia, such as Torbreck's fabled "Les Amis" or Clarendon Hills' "Romas." You're likely to find their roots in limestone and red clay soils and in vineyards more than a century old. Torbreck winemaker Craig Isbel uses minimal, low-impact winemaking techniques to turn out wonderfully smoky, spicy Grenache. "It's a gentle process," he says. "We have quite small berries grown from old bush vines, and we just de-stem the berries. We don't crush them in order to get the most out of the fruit." The vines in Torbreck's "Les Amis" Homes vineyard date back to 1901. These old vines have deep root systems that have to struggle through layers of old soil to source water. Anything worth drinking, it would seem, is worth fighting for.

And here, even Grahm is willing to concede that Grenache is capable of standing alone. "I'm generally not a super-envious person. I'd never wanted to burn down someone's winery and take their wife until I saw the old-vine Grenache coming in at Charles Melton in the Barossa [Valley in Australia]," Grahm says. "It was so beautiful—I couldn't stand it!"

But such is the enduring allure of Grenache. Sure, we might chase every Riesling in a short skirt, but at night we come home to Grenache.

hot bottles

GREAT GRENACHE FROM AROUND THE WORLD



Sella & Mosca 2006 Cannonau di Sardegna Riserva, \$14
SARDINIA, ITALY
Made with Cannonau (Grenache), this rustic red features juicy, sweet plum flavors.



Beckmen Vineyards 2008 Purisima Mountain Vineyard Grenache Rosé, \$18
SANTA YNEZ VALLEY
Strawberry and cherry flavors with a hint of cinnamon spice.



d'Arenberg 2005 "d'Arry's Original" Shiraz Grenache, \$19
MCLEAREN VALE, AUSTRALIA
This Shiraz-Grenache blend is loaded with blackberry, licorice, and pepper.



Château d'Aqueria 2008 Tavel Rosé, \$20
FRANCE
Fruity and floral with hints of pepper and raspberry flavors.



R. López de Heredia 1998 "Viñia Tondonia" Gran Reserva Rosé, \$25
RIOJA, SPAIN
A complex rosé with lovely apricot, cherry, and nutty notes.



Scala Dei 2005 "Prior," \$27
PRIORAT, SPAIN
A true bargain from the Priorat region, with lush berry and dried cherry flavors and hints of cedar and spice.



Bonny Doon 2005 "Le Cigare Volant," \$32
CALIFORNIA
Earthy with cocoa, black cherry, and peppery spice.



Kenneth-Crawford 2007 Larner Vineyard Grenache, \$32
SANTA YNEZ VALLEY
Cocoa and coffee with dark berry flavors and black pepper notes.



Domaine de la Côte de l'Ange 2007 "Tradition" Châteauneuf-du-Pape, \$37
FRANCE
An elegant wine with smoky, spicy aromas and velvety dark fruit flavors.



Torbreck 2006 "Les Amis," \$185
BAROSSA VALLEY, AUSTRALIA
A pricey but spectacular example of 100 percent old-vine Grenache, with juicy blackberry flavors and exotic spice aromas.

Heather John is a contributing editor at Bon Appétit and blogs at thefoodinista.com.