

BC GUILD OF WINE JUDGES

2023

CLASS J1 - COUNTRY TABLE WINES

Presented by (Mainland Chapter)

AFTER COMPLETING THIS SESSION, YOU SHOULD KNOW:

- How a country wine is defined
- The different approaches and styles of country wines
- Where country wines are made
- What the typical ingredients are in a country wine
- A brief history of country wines
- Why people make country wines
- About the development of the country wine industry
- The difference between the main acids in grape vs country wines

WHAT IS A 'COUNTRY WINE'?

The word wine alone, legally speaking, only applies to wine made from grapes. Country wines, however, are fermented alcoholic beverages made from ingredients other than grapes, with a far wider variety of flavours given the broad range ingredients used. To a greater degree, fruit wines make up the largest contingent of non-grape wines. In France, country wine refers to a simple, unclassified grape wine. The term country wine, as we use it, originates from Britain, where it refers generally to fruit wine.

Country wines will always be defined as a 'something' wine, as to use the word 'wine' alone usually connotes a beverage made only from grapes. While fruit ingredients constitute the vast majority of country wines, they can be made from vegetables, flowers, honey and even legumes (in the early 20th century, peanut butter was commonly used to make wine in the American south).

BCAWA DEFINITION OF CLASS J – COUNTRY WINES

A country wine might fit the purpose of any of the other wine classes and would thus have the technical characteristics of that particular class.

Technical Characteristics:

Ingredients: 95% non-grape
Alcohol: Readings will vary according to the class for which the wine is made
Colour: ditto
Sugar: ditto
S.G: ditto
PH: ditto
Acid: ditto, should balance sugar

THE DIFFERENCES IN STYLE AND APPROACH

There are two basic approaches in making country wines. One is to approximate the flavour and appearance of grape wines made in the table or social style; the other is not to. Many home and commercial country wine makers desire a product that can be enjoyed as a table or social wine. The other option opens up seemingly endless possibilities: to make the wine in a port or sherry style, dessert or even an aperitif. The appeal of the sweeter fruit wine is enormous. The bouquet of a fruit wine is rarely subtle and usually carries through to the palate. Dozens of fruits have been fermented to wines, but the following seem to have the most success as a beverage that can be drunk with a degree of enjoyment: blackberry, white, red and black currants, raspberry, strawberry, pear, peach, apple, blueberry, cherry, gooseberry, cranberry, kiwi and plum.

HISTORY

Several millennia have proven that grapes have (all things being equal) a nearly perfectly balanced quantity of sugar, acid, tannin and water to produce a stable, drinkable wine, while country wines invariably need greater adjustment of one or more of these aspects. Sucrose, honey, and even sap from maple, birch or palm trees have been used to provide sufficient sweetness to ensure the onset of fermentation in non-grape wines.

While it is clear that wine making from grapes has ancient roots, mead making, according to lore, if not fact, claims to have predated wine making by hundreds of years. Fruit wines are more likely, however, to have evolved after grape wines, in an effort to produce 'wine' in places where grape growing was impractical. Likewise, this was sometimes the impetus for the growth of beer and cider making (as well as root beer, ginger beer and ginger ale, which were once alcoholic as their names suggest).

Rice wine is also included in this category. Sake, however, refers to a variety of different beverages, depending on whether it is in Okinawa or the main island of Kyushu, where it is a distilled drink, or in other parts of Japan, where it is true rice wine.

Commercial winemaking does not generally incorporate non-grape ingredients (with the notable exception of aperitif wines), although home winemakers have often added such things as elderberries to enhance the fruitiness of some wines. As for herbs, probably the oldest non-grape wines to include them would be mead, which is then referred to as metheglin.

THE INDUSTRY TODAY

In March 2000, a Canadian national industry association was established – FRUIT WINES OF CANADA – to develop national quality standards. The industry has devised a system similar to the VQA. Known as QC (Quality Certified) standards, it will act in the same way as the VQA, providing a guarantee of quality for consumers.

Fruit wine is produced commercially by more than 60 licensed wineries in nine provinces. Canada is regarded as one of the world's leading fruit wine producing countries. Most of the country wine is sold from winery premises, but it is slowly becoming more available in liquor stores and restaurants. Until recently, the mainstream industry has not taken fruit wine producers seriously, but the situation is starting to change. The industry is also fighting the traditional perception of

fruit wine as being heavy and syrupy. As fruit wine producers are starting to market wines that are more sophisticated, consumers appear more receptive to giving them a chance. For a lot of producers this represents a new and more profitable way of using their fruit.

One appeal to those sensitive to the higher level of histamines in grape wines is the virtual absence of them in fruit wine.

There are 15 registered meaderies in Canada, five in Ontario and eight in Quebec. We have two in B.C. – Middle Mountain on Hornby Island and Tugwell Creek in Sooke. They have an informal association which currently does not set standards.

Wines made from vegetables such as potato, parsnip and rhubarb are not, according to our research, produced commercially.

VINTNING DIFFERENCES BETWEEN GRAPE AND FRUIT

The essential difference between grapes and all the rest of the fruits is the type and balance of acids found in each. Grapes contain a mixture of malic and tartaric acids. Most non-grape fruits contain predominantly malic or citric acid, or a blend of the two. Both are stronger than tartaric. Fruits that are predominantly malic tend to have bland flavours. Those that are mostly citric tend to be strong and aggressive. Therefore, it is often best to blend two or more kinds of fruits to achieve an appropriate balance of flavours.

TODAY'S FLIGHT

A range of ingredients and styles have been selected. There is often a strong correlation between the aroma and the taste. A non- grape wine, whether it mimics the flavour of a grape wine or exhibits flavours unique to its source ingredient(s), should be judged, for the most part, as any other wine. Is it well balanced? Does it have an inviting bouquet? What about the finish? This is complicated by the fact that unlike any other class, these wines can be table style, or dessert, or most everything in between. When judging, the wines are usually grouped according to ingredients, although two strawberry wines could vary significantly in their sweetness. Of course, two port style country wines would be grouped together, even if one were black currant and the other blackberry.

Some home winemakers may be hesitant to make a non-grape wine, given the task they face to produce a well-balanced wine. Others see it as a challenge. Most that make them, however, do so often because of the wide range of flavours and a readily available (and often relatively cheaper) source of fruit, honey, herbs and the like.

We all know that there are first class wines to be had from the cellars of home winemakers. Today with more knowledge about the various characters of the main acids in fruits, the importance of pH and people's changing tastes, farmers, orchardists, commercial and home wine makers are increasingly making fruit or country wine s that are more than just drinkable, they are quite appealing. If you have not tried to make a non-grape wine before, perhaps this flight might encourage you to do so.

REFERENCES:

- Making Wild Wines & Meads
- Patie Vargas and Rich Gulling
- Home Wines of North America
- Dorothy Alatorre Interesting Web Sites:
- <http://winemaking.jackkeller.net/>
- Jack Keller: Extensive information on country wine making, including recipes
- <http://www.brsquared.org/wine/>
- Ben Rotter: Advanced information on many aspects of wine making, including country wines. The "Calculations" section contains sugar and acidity data on many common fruits.