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## THE CHRONICLE'S WINE SELECTIONS

### West Coast Viogniers

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In 1991, few people in the United States had even heard of Viognier, the grape of the great white wines of Condrieu, France. California had less than 80 acres of it, according to the California Agricultural Statistics Service, and half had been planted in the previous two years.

Now it's trendy. There are more than 2,000 acres of it in California, as well as significant plantings in Washington and Oregon. Wine bloggers chatter about it, sommeliers recommend it, and we had no problem obtaining 75 Viogniers from the three West Coast states for a taste-off.

We discovered, not surprisingly, that a cool climate is crucial for good fruit flavors, and also that there's a big divide over wood. Some wineries ferment Viognier in stainless steel tanks to preserve its ripe apple fruit character, while others treat it similarly to Chardonnay, with months in oak barrels giving it a toasty appeal.

The two styles are so different that it's hard to compare them. We found some virtue in both, though our favorite wines let the fruit speak for itself.

We sometimes call Viognier "the Zinfandel of whites" because of its naturally high alcohol levels in the wines made in the United States. Only one recommended wine has less than 13 percent alcohol, and several reach 15 percent. A balanced wine can carry that much without tasting hot, but if your tolerance is low, be sure to look at the small print before having a second glass.

**TWO AND A HALF STARS 2006 Alexandria Nicole Columbia Valley Viognier (\$18)** Owner-winemaker Jarrod Boyle was inspecting vineyards in the mid-1990s for his former employer, Hogue Cellars, when he fell in love with a barren slope of land in Washington's Horse Heaven Hills. He soon talked childhood friend Rob Mercer, manager of the large Mercer Ranch farm, into going into business with him. Some of the fruit from vines they planted on that slope made their way into this strongly floral wine, which has citrusy fruit and mineral notes. If you like dry Gewurztraminer, you'll love this.

**TWO AND A HALF STARS 2005 Anna Maria Rogue Valley Viognier (\$17)** Established in 1972, Valley View Winery is one of Oregon's oldest wineries. It has the quirky habit of calling its reserve wines "Anna Maria." This wine tastes like spring: It's pretty, with lush citrus flavors, floral notes and a long finish. A slightly discordant savory note doesn't ruin the overall harmony, and it's only 12.8 percent alcohol.

**TWO STARS 2005 Bonterra Vineyards Mendocino County Viognier (\$18)** To its credit, Kentucky-based Brown-Forman organically farms all 2,000 acres of its estate vineyards, but most brands in its stable include some non-organic purchased grapes. Created in 1990, Bonterra is Brown-Forman's all organically farmed label and produces up to 200,000 cases annually. This is an intense wine, delivering a rush of apple and citrus fruit with floral notes. Let's hope Brown-Forman's Hopland winery can maintain this level of quality without the 14 production employees who, along with 10 people at Sonoma-Cutrer winery, were laid off at the end of April.

**TWO AND A HALF STARS 2005 DiStefano Columbia Valley Viognier (\$22)** If you want to taste the pure flavor of Viognier, this is a good choice. Made from 100 percent Viognier grapes from the Willard vineyard in Prosser, it was fermented in stainless steel with no malolactic fermentation. It's delicious and varietally correct: bright Granny Smith apple fruit and mineral, with vibrant acidity

and a long finish. Winemaker Hillary Sjolund says the wine tastes just like the grapes tasted on the vine; you won't notice the 14.3 percent alcohol. Fewer than 300 cases were made.

**TWO STARS 2005 Domaine des Deux Mondes Saints and Sinners Sanford and Benedict Vineyard Santa Rita Hills Viognier (\$30) This is a collaboration between Morgan Clendenen, winemaker of Santa Barbara County Viognier specialist Cold Heaven, and Yves Cuilleron, well-respected winemaker from Condrieu. It's a skillfully made wine with good oak management that confers interesting anise, almond and toast flavors.**

**TWO STARS 2006 Eberle Mill Road Vineyard Paso Robles Viognier (\$20) Owner-winemaker Gary Eberle is an enthusiastic private pilot, often flying to wine events as far away as Florida. This straightforward wine soars into the mouth on wings of bright apple fruit with some notes of shredded wheat before executing a smooth landing on the back of the palate. The 15 percent alcohol isn't noticeable.**

**TWO STARS 2005 Jorian Hill Santa Ynez Valley Viognier (\$25) Jorian Hill owners Gary and Jeanne Newman are TV bigwigs; he's president of 20th Century Fox Television, she's a lawyer who has helped foreign-created shows like "Big Brother" enter the U.S. market. They bought a 20-acre estate in Santa Barbara County's Ballard Canyon in 2005 that included a Syrah and Viognier vineyard and hired winemaker Bruno D'Alfonso, formerly of Sanford Winery. This spare-no-expense wine has great Granny Smith apple fruit as well as an appealing leafy green herb note, but the 14.2 percent alcohol is noticeable.**

**TWO STARS 2005 Perry Creek El Dorado Viognier (\$15) Former San Franciscans Dieter Jurgens and Michele Wilms bought Perry Creek winery last year. Wilms says they intend to make good wine that can be a standard for El Dorado County, a favorite area for home winemakers because of the quality of grapes that is not always matched by quality in bottles. This wine could teach a lesson in the toasty style of Viognier with its good balance, golden apple and lemon fruit and gentle finish.**

**TWO STARS 2006 San Sakana Cellars Catie's Corner Vineyard Russian River Valley Viognier (\$36) San Sakana, which means "three fish" in Japanese, is a virtual winery started by three Silicon Valley tech workers who buy grapes and make their wines at Crushpad in San Francisco. None of**

them is Japanese, but inscrutably, they like to call each other "Fish A, Fish B and Fish C." They made less than 500 cases of Rhone-style wines last year, including just 100 cases of this one. Bright green and golden apple flavors make this wine simple but delicious, though pricey.

**TWO STARS 2005 Shadow Canyon Cellars Larner Vineyard Santa Ynez Valley Viognier (\$20)**  
Cinematographer-turned-grapegrower Stevan Larner was a key figure in helping many Santa Barbara County winemakers get their starts. He and his wife, Christine, worked their 34-acre Ballard Canyon vineyard themselves, Stevan often driving the tractor, and they preferred to let young enthusiasts buy their grapes. In 2005, Larner had 26 different small wineries buying his grapes. Larner harvested these Viognier grapes for Shadow Canyon Cellars on Oct. 5; the resulting wine has a creamy mouthfeel with layers of flavor, including toast, candied apple and toasted almond.

**TWO STARS 2005 Terra Blanca Yakima Valley Viognier (\$15)** Owner-winemaker Keith Pilgrim is a geologist who grew up in Fairfield and had various summer jobs in vineyards in the area. He moved to Washington's Red Mountain region in 1993 for the white, calcium carbonate-rich soils. This light-bodied wine, which includes 12 percent Roussanne, starts citrusy, then gets toasty with golden apple notes and a hint of caramel, though it's not sweet.

**TWO STARS 2006 Zaca Mesa Estate Santa Ynez Valley Viognier (\$18)** Zaca Mesa has been making Rhone varietals for nearly 30 years, and that experience shows in this wine made from grapes sustainably grown on the winery's 750-acre estate vineyard. While you smell some toast in the aroma from three months in neutral oak barrels, on the palate it's all golden apple and Asian pear fruit with a few floral notes. It's 14.5 percent alcohol, but you'd never guess that from the flavor.

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**KEY: FOUR STARS...Extraordinary, THREE STARS...Excellent, TWO STARS...Good**

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