

MY TOP 20: VIOGNIER BEYOND THE RHONE

Have you discovered it yet? Its peachy, food-friendly versatility has made Viognier something of a cult-favourite among the Anything-But-Chardonnay circles, but what are the best-value options? **Fiona Beckett** picks her favourites from beyond its home region

For many of us, Viognier is inextricably associated with the Rhône – and especially, perhaps, the iconic wines of Condrieu and Château-Grillet. But it is of course produced elsewhere, so we thought it would be intriguing to explore what other countries have to offer.

Records show that Viognier was planted and harvested in the Rhône region back in the late 18th century, though it wasn't until the 1980s – when it became widely planted in areas that suited Rhône varieties, including the neighbouring Languedoc – that it really took off and gained a foothold.

It's certainly not a cool-climate variety, and it needs sun and warm Mediterranean-style temperatures to express its heady perfume. The key to success with the grape is not picking too early or too late, agree Louisa Rose of Yalumba and Laurent Miquel, two winemakers who have devoted their winemaking careers to Viognier and whose wines dominated this tasting (we could have justifiably included all of them).

Many of the cheaper wines, mostly under the Pays d'Oc IGP – and produced, I suspect, to add interest to an entry-level range – lacked the grape's seductive peach and apricot character, while some of the more expensive examples were more about the oak than the fruit. 'I think the exposure to oxygen you get in oak barrels is beneficial to Viognier, but it is very easy to overdo it,' says Miquel. 'We are using larger and larger oak tanks to make sure the wines are not over-oaked.'

It's obviously a question of taste, too. California, which has significant plantings (more than 1,000ha), is inclined to produce wines with higher alcohol and a more marked oak influence than other countries, including Australia, which impressively occupies five slots in our top nine wines at 91 points and above.

Youthful pleasure

It can take time for Viognier to express its character in the glass. Of the 2020 vintage wines I tasted – all from the New World – only one, Queen Bee (see p59), was firing on all

cylinders. Most, tasted at the tail-end of 2020, were 2019s, which suggests they might take several months from bottling to get into their stride. With a few notable exceptions, Viognier is not a wine to hang on to, often developing an oily character with age which is less attractive than in Riesling, and even a slightly bitter note. It's interesting that the majority are now bottled under screwcap, which certainly seems to help preserve their freshness.

Viognier is affected more than other wines by the way you drink it. Like Chardonnay, it's not a wine for serving too cold or in too small a glass. Most producers recommend a serving temperature of 10°C, but Laurent Miquel suggests 12°-14°C, and even decanting it. I personally find a Burgundy-style glass also makes the better Viogniers more expressive – Rose favours a Shiraz or Tempranillo glass.

In terms of pairings, Viognier makes a particularly flattering companion to gently spiced foods such as creamy curries and sauces (coconut as much as dairy, which makes it vegan friendly too). It also goes with rich shellfish such as scallops and lobster, along with some quite robust pork dishes.

'When I think about Viognier, I think of it more like a red wine than a "typical" white wine,' says Rose. 'The way the grapes behave in the vineyard, its higher alcohol and low acidity, its reliance on the tannins and phenolics to give the palate length and freshness, the serving, decanting and glassware that suits it, and the food it goes with – although, in the end, it is more versatile than just red. Perhaps it's the ultimate wine variety!'

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Fiona Beckett is a *Decanter* contributing editor, also publishing at www.matchingfoodandwine.com

Laurent Miquel, La Verité, Pays d'Oc, Languedoc, France 2018 96

£17.99 Waitrose Cellar

The flagship wine of Languedoc Viognier specialist Laurent Miquel, this comes from a single plot on schist and is matured in French oak. Handsomely bottled, heady and sumptuously perfumed, it's like biting into a perfectly ripe peach. Immediately gratifying, but with staying power too. Exceptionally good value for money. **Drink 2021-2026 Alcohol 14.5%**



Yalumba, The Virgilius, Eden Valley, South Australia 2017 95

£35-£40 Harrods, Soho Wine Supply, Vinvm, Wine Direct

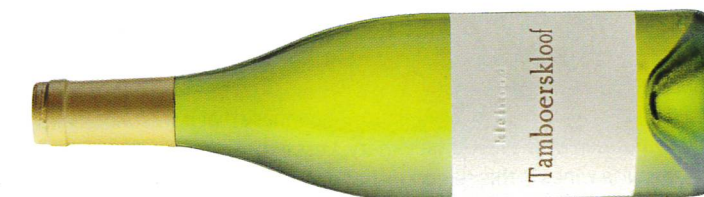
Ironically you'd think this was the Old World wine if you compared it with Laurent Miquel's Verité (above), though winemaker Louisa Rose has spent a lifetime working with the variety. There's that almost overripe apricot flavour of a Condrieu. Takes time to reveal its character and complexity – you could even decant it. And serve it in a Burgundy glass. **Drink 2021-2027 Alc 13.5%**



Kleinood, Tamboerskloof, Stellenbosch, South Africa 2019 93

£16.95-£19.75 (2020) Exel, GP Brands, The Great Wine Co

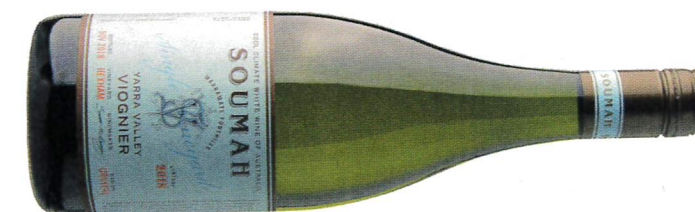
There's not much left of the 2019 vintage that impressed so much, but if it's an indicator of the way the 2020 from this small family-owned farm will develop, it's something to look forward to. Blended with 14% Roussanne, this is smooth, textured and elegant with a citrusy freshness and lovely ripe apricot and peach fruit, and a slight touch of spice on the finish. **Drink 2021-2024 Alc 13.5%**



Soumah, Yarra Valley, Victoria, Australia 2018 93

£18.95 The Vinorium

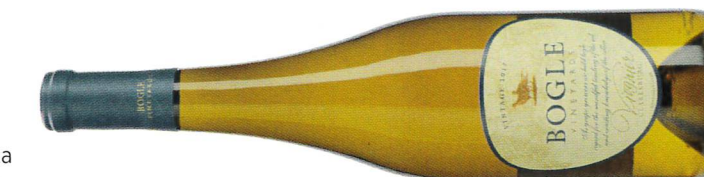
Gorgeously creamy textured Viognier from a Decanter Platinum award-winning producer (for its Hexham Vineyard Equilibrio Chardonnay 2018). Strikingly expressive given the modest level of alcohol, with a lovely fresh acidity still present three years after harvest. Almost Chardonnay-like, but with an exotic twist. Made with yeast and a smidgen of new oak. **Drink 2021-2024 Alc 12.5%**



Bogle Vineyards, Clarksburg, California, USA 2019 91

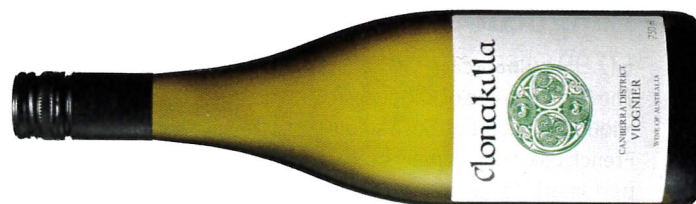
£14.95-£19.17 Exel, The Fine Wine Co, The Great Wine Co, Vinum

A very attractive mid-priced Viognier from a Californian, family-owned winery. Plenty of those characteristic apricot kernel/Hunza apricot flavours that typify the variety, and an appealing touch of muskiness. Nice texture and weight without the heaviness that often accompanies a 14.5% wine. **Drink 2021-2023 Alc 14.5%**



Clonakilla, Canberra District, New South Wales, Australia 2018 91

£33.50-£44.99 Champion Wines, Exel, Harrogate Fine Wines, Philglas & Swiggot, The Fine Wine Co, The Wine Reserve, VinQuinn
A powerful wine made from vines planted by Viognier pioneer Dr John Kirk in 1971. The barrel fermentation (in French oak) gives it a certain sweetness, which very slightly masks the Viognier character, but this is a seriously impressive wine nonetheless. Needs a big pork chop to show it off. **Drink 2021-2025 Alc 14.5%**



Domaine Gayda, Pays d'Oc, Languedoc, France 2019 91

£10-£11 Cambridge Wine Merchants, Haynes Hanson Clark, Highbury Vintners, JN Wine
Textbook Viognier character from innovative Languedoc producer Gayda – unusual in a basic varietal range. Apricot, peach, a touch of mango muskiness, perfumed and balanced with a surprisingly long finish. Well priced and widely available. Just the wine you need with a Friday night korma. **Drink 2021-2023 Alc 13.5%**



Kaesler, Love Child, Barossa Valley, South Australia 2018 91

£18.40 Tanners
Another great Australian Viognier, this time from the Barossa. 'Love child' refers to an in-joke at the winery that it was winemaker Stephen Dew's favourite variety. Less expressive on the nose than some wines in this selection, but opens up beautifully in the glass. A rich, barrel-fermented character, though it finishes bright and crisp. **Drink 2021-2023 Alc 13.5%**



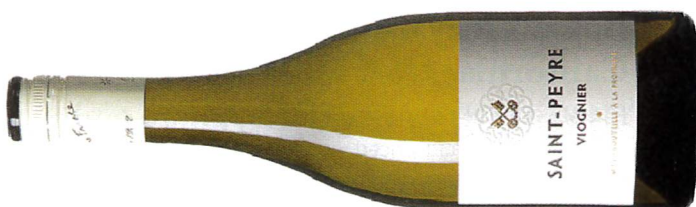
Tahbilk, Nagambie Lakes, Victoria, Australia 2019 91

£12.25-£14.99 All About Wine, Corking Wines, Exel, Hallgarten Wines, Hay Wines, Hic, Oz Wines, Strictly Wine, Wine Direct, Wine Poole
Tahbilk is better known for its Marsanne, but its Viognier, which is blended with a little Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc, is worth buying too, with all the seductive peach and apricot character you could wish for. Note that they recommend it 'for immediate enjoyment', so not one to stash away. **Drink 2021-2022 Alc 13%**



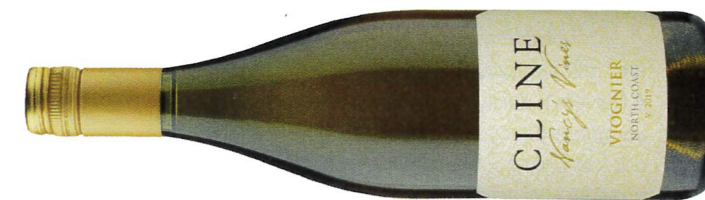
Les Costières de Pomérols, St-Peyre, Côtes de Thau, Languedoc, France 2019 90

£10.27-£11.99 Christopher Piper, Ocado
An impressive, smartly bottled offering from the Pomérols co-op which delivers well above its price point. Quite complex, with an exotic touch of muskiness and attractive floral notes overlying its trademark apricot fruit. Nice wine-pairing recommendation with the local tielles (seafood pies) from Sète. **Drink 2021-2022 Alc 13%**



Cline, Nancy's Vines, North Coast, California, USA 2019 90

£17.99 Majestic
Fresher than many Californian Viogniers, but still with the rich, peachy fruit you'd expect from the Sunshine State, plus a good dash of pineapple and other tropical fruit. Fred Cline was one of the original Rhône Rangers and the Nancy's Vines is named after his wife. They recommend matching it with Thai food. **Drink 2021-2023 Alc 14.5%**



Fina, Vola Vola, Terre Siciliane, Sicily, Italy 2019 90

£12.90 Tanners
This Sicilian Viognier is made in a fresher, crisp-edged style than some others in this tasting, which would make it a good match for seafood such as swordfish or crab linguine. Tanners also suggests coronation chicken! A really food-friendly style, though with that characteristic peachy character. **Drink 2021-2022 Alc 13%**

Gabb Family, Queen Bee Viognier, Western Cape, South Africa 2020 90

£12.99 Avery's, Laithwaite's
This South African Viognier (with 10% Chardonnay) from a sustainably run estate is very forward for a 2020 – Viognier can often be quite closed when young – with a seductive peaches-and-cream character. A great wine to give someone who's never tasted Viognier before, and rather delightfully named after the Cape honey bee. **Drink 2021-2022 Alc 12.5%**

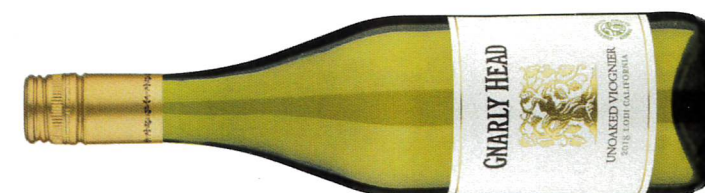


Laurent Miquel, Vendanges Nocturnes, Pays d'Oc, Languedoc, France 2019 90

£9.39 Waitrose, Waitrose Cellar
It's hard to pick just one of the many excellent Viogniers that Laurent Miquel produces around this price point, but for the money this is hard to beat, with its voluptuous white peach and nectarine fruit (harvested at night, as the name of the wine suggests). Enjoy it young and fresh. **Drink 2021-2022 Alc 13%**

Gnarly Head, Lodi, California, USA 2018 90

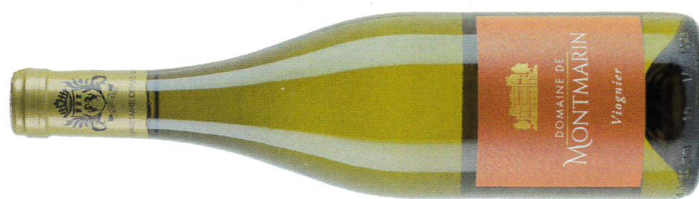
£14.50-£18.49 Bancroft, Simply Wines Direct, Vino Fandango, Vinvm
Unoaked Viognier is unusual for California, but it's good to see this wine's peachy character fully expressed. The brand is owned by Delicato and made in Lodi but still retains its freshness, even as a 2018. A gently charming wine you could sip on its own or drink, as they suggest, with chicken curry or grilled scallops. **Drink 2021-2022 Alc 13.5%**



Domaine de Montmarin, Côtes de Thongue, Languedoc, France 2019 89

£12.50 Private Cellar

A fresh and elegant Viognier from an IGP region down near Languedoc's Mediterranean coast near Béziers, so a good style to drink with seafood, even oysters. Impressive varietal typicity but a good level of acidity too. Its length belies its relatively modest price. **Drink 2021-2022 Alc 13.5%**



Fairview, Paarl, South Africa 2018 89

£14.99 Eton Vintners, Frontier Fine Wines, Liberty Wines, The Fine Wine Co, Wine-Man

A little surprising that this is the current release – it's already quite evolved, but it has the classic Viognier character you'd expect from Charles Back, an early adopter of the variety. Rich and deep, with sundried apricots rather than fresh, and a nice touch of spicy oak. Perfect, they say, with spicy Asian cuisine. **Drink 2021 Alc 13.5%**



Pierre Jaurant, Vin de France 2019 89

£4.49 Aldi

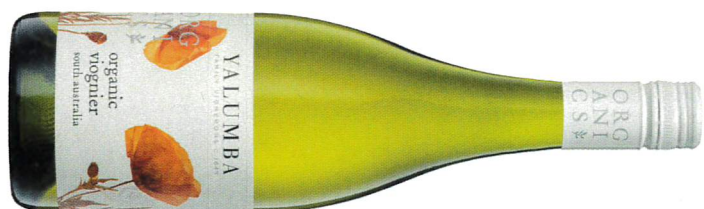
It's amazing to find a wine of such character at this price with that slightly musky flavour of apricot kernels, though I'm not sure I pick up the 'subtle hints of acacia flowers'. Strikingly aromatic, though, and extraordinary for under £5. Well done, Aldi! **Drink 2021 Alc 13.5%**



Yalumba, Organic, South Australia 2019 89

£9.99-£11.99 Connolly's, Ocado, Tesco, Waitrose Cellar

The next wine up from its basic Viognier, and a definite step up in quality – thanks mainly, winemaker Louisa Rose says, to wild yeasts rather than organic viticulture, though that obviously contributes. Her tasting note of honeysuckle, fennel and apricot nectar is spot-on. It's widely available, and very fairly priced. **Drink 2021-2022 Alc 13.5%**



Los Coches, Central Valley, Chile 2020 88

£7.49-£8.30 Frazier's, Gusto Wines, House of Townend, SW Bottle Shop, Tanners, Weavers

Chile is beginning to produce some interesting examples of Viognier with good varietal character. This is another that has that slight musky apricot kernel flavour that can be elusive at this price, but there is an attractive rounded peachiness too. Drink it with mildly spiced curries or rich, creamy soups. **Drink 2021-2022 Alc 13.5%**

