

Wine: Esoteric grapes and California wines

By Laurie Daniel | POSTED: 10/20/2014

In a landscape where most consumers are buying chardonnay and cabernet sauvignon, what prompts a California winemaker to produce wines from cinsault, ribolla gialla or chenin blanc?

"I think this cinsault rocks," says winemaker Jillian Johnson, who focuses on both red and rosé cinsault at her **Onesta Wines in Lodi**. "People should be drinking cinsault all the time."

A little more seriously, Johnson explains that **the source is the oldest vineyard in Lodi, planted in 1886**. She got to know the grapes -- the variety is common in southern France -- when she worked at Bonny Doon Vineyard. "It was really the vineyard that spoke to me," she says.

She makes about 400 cases of red wine and 330 of rosé from the grapes. The 2011 Cinsault (\$29) is full-bodied yet elegant, with pretty berry and rhubarb and subtle spice, while the 2013 Cinsault Rosé is very fresh, with pretty strawberry.



Onesta's cinsault (Onesta)

For some, such as Johnson, the love affair with an esoteric grape variety began with a vineyard. In other cases, an inquisitive winemaker simply wanted to stretch and try something different. And there always seems to be at least a small audience for such wines.

Some of these grapes are grown in such tiny quantities that they aren't even listed in the annual California grape acreage report. Some that are listed were once more plentiful but now account for less than 100 acres. (Cinsault, also spelled cinsaut, weighs in at about 80 acres.) Still others -- chenin blanc is a good example -- aren't all that rare, but most of the supply is used in inexpensive blends, and high-quality versions are relatively few.