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Winemakers tame Uruguay's irascible grape

By Ellen Bhang | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT SEPTEMBER 23, 2014

Tannat is a thick-skinned, dark-hued varietal with a longstanding reputation for producing rough reds full of prickly tannins. Winemakers in Uruguay, tucked between Argentina and Brazil, are challenging that notion, eager to recast tannat as their signature grape.



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is easier to approach, with vibrant, ripe fruit that does not sacrifice its dry, chewy character. That's what makes it steak's best friend. Reds are mostly around 13.5 percent alcohol by volume, a point lower than most Napa Valley cabernet sauvignon.

Tannat is originally from Madiran in southwest France. A French-originating malbec grape, now thriving in Argentina, vines were brought to Uruguay in 1870 by Basque immigrant Pascual Harriague (the majority of the country's inhabitants are of European descent). Many of the first arrivals from Europe also brought vine cuttings and winemaking traditions.

To tame tannins — components found in the skins and seeds of grapes that give reds their drying pucker — winemakers allow the fruit to hang on the vines as long as possible, ensuring seeds reach a crunchy, fully ripe state. Cold maceration, in which crushed grapes and their juice soak together at cool temperatures before fermentation, also softens irascible tannins.

Sommeliers around town are showcasing tannat. Patrick Gaggiano of La Brasa in Somerville thinks tannat is an up-and-coming grape. He is pouring a juicy, vivid bottle from Bodega Garzon, a pioneering producer in the new Uruguayan wine region of

has changed over the years," says just a blending grape, but now we're seeing more 100 percent tannat on the market." He



WINES of
URUGUAY

Pueblo del Sol Tannat 2013 Simple yet pretty nose of cherry with a whiff of brambly berries. The palate of this unoaked bottle offers ripe red fruit with warm spices and a lingering lavender sachet note. From Familia Deicas, Establecimiento Juanico, Uruguay's largest fine wine producer. Around \$10. At Beaver Brook Bottles, Waltham, 781-609-2576; Sudbury Wine & Spirits, Sudbury, 978-443-1300.

Marichal Tannat 2011 Aromas of spicy red plum combine with high-toned balsamic notes in this unoaked red. Bright acidity undergirds ripe red fruit, a generous dollop of rounded tannins, and a dry white pepper finish. Crafted by a fourth-generation winemaking family who also makes a lovely tannat-pinot noir blend. Around \$16. At Golden Goose Market, North End, 617-367-8134; Seiyo Wine Shop, South End, 617-447-2183.