



**Liquor Watch**  
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# The other, other, other Bordeaux red varietal



*The runt of Bordeaux's five red wine varietals, the troublesome little Petit Verdot grape had been all but given up on last century by the French, who tired of its need for warmth and dryness, as well as its proclivity for ripening impractically late. However, it has had some success in some of its newer homes in regions throughout Australia and California. Brent Balinski reports.*

## A wine not in decline

Many an article written about Petit Verdot will tell you that it is a wine that is being abandoned in France and gaining traction in places with warmer regions like Australia and California. Courtesy of statistics from the AWBC, the total amount of Petit Verdot grapes produced for 2007/08 was 23,989 tonnes. The year previous saw 16,333 tonnes produced.

For 2007/08, in terms of region, Riverland had the most coverage, with 544 hectares by bearing area. It was followed by Riverina (166), Murray Darling - Victoria (71), McLaren Vale (61) and Murray Darling - NSW (55). In terms of warm climate vs cool climate, there were 20,445 tonnes and 3,544 tonnes of Petit Verdot produced respectively (an 85/15 breakdown).

By state, SA was the clear leader (16,791 tonnes), followed by NSW (4,806), Victoria (2,165), with WA and Queensland bringing up the rear.

Elsewhere, in its home region, Petit Verdot has been on the decline in the last half of the

20th century, as more and more Frenchmen tired of its refusal to consistently bear good fruit, or so the received wisdom goes. However, an article from *Decanter* magazine at the end of August 2007 suggested that there had been a small increase in plantings in recent years, which had been put down to warmer conditions.

Petit Verdot has also been referred to by names including Carmelin, Petit Verdeau and Verdot Rouge.

## Little green grapes

The five red Bordeaux varietals include Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Malbec, Merlot and Petit Verdot. Blended red wines from the region are made from various combinations of these grapes. Petit Verdot often has a support role in these, stiffening up the middle palate and providing colour, tannin and flavour to blends that need it.

The name Petit Verdot came from its pesky ripening habits, according to a South African wine producer's guide, *Wynboer*. "Petit Verdot is... inclined to have small, green, seedless berries if weather conditions during flowering are unfavourable."

Its tendency to late ripening and its appreciation of a warm climate are things that saw it fall out of favour in its home country.

A company championing the relatively obscure varietal is Kingston Estate, which takes great pride in its efforts boosting the profile of



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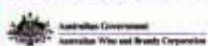


TOP 5 REGIONS BY BEARING AREA 2007/2008			
PETIT VERDOT	HECTARES	PETIT VERDOT	HECTARES
Riverland	544	McLaren Vale	61
Riverina	166	Murray Darling - NSW	55
Murray Darling - Victoria	71		

WINEGRAPE PRODUCTION BY CLIMATE 2007/2008			
PETIT VERDOT	TONNES	PETIT VERDOT	TONNES
Cool climate	3,544 (15%)	Total	23,989 (100%)
Warm climate	20,445 (85%)		

Source: Australian Wine and Brandy Corporation ABS Vineyard Survey Data

winefacts 

Petit Verdot in Australia. "Eleven years ago we planted Petit Verdot, which at the time raised a lot of eyebrows because it was hardly grown in the Riverland, or anywhere in Australia for that matter," recalled Bill Moularadellis, CEO and Chief Winemaker, Kingston Estate Wines.

Jancis Robinson, MW and critic, wrote in *The Oxford Companion to Wine* that Petit Verdot is, "One of Bordeaux's classic black grape varieties," which ripens even later than Cabernet Sauvignon and "is equally resistant to rot." The grape also has thick skins and very high tannin levels.

Grown properly, with excess bunches removed and in the right soils and climate, it can produce good fruit. Grown with volume in mind, it can fail. "Planted in the right soils and region it will prosper," explained Mike Brown, Winemaker, Gemtree Vineyards. "When grown purely for tonnes it makes weedy, highly acidic, tannic wines."

Gareth Trickey, Director, Warrumbungle Wines, also noted that the varietal required a bit of attention to make into a good wine. "To get the best out of Petit Verdot it requires a lot of hard labour," he said. "It is very fruitful and therefore requires shoot thinning and or bunch thinning. Hand picking is also important since it can have green, un-ripened berries, especially

when the wines are young."

The grape is believed to have originated from the Garonne in south western France, but this is not completely clear. The State Library of South Australia's *Grapes and Wines of the World* collection says that Petit Verdot was among the collection taken back to Australia in 1832 by James Busby, wine pioneer, from his Franco-Spanish expedition. Cool climates can be a problem and they don't always agree with such a late ripener. This is probably why Bordeaux growers only expect one decent vintage every four years or so.

### Purple people pleaser

Petit Verdot is commonly described as having violet aromas. If it ripens fully and properly, it will have firm tannins and an intense, purple colour.

Young Petit Verdots are often remarked on for their banana and pencil shaving scents and older PVs can develop leather, cigar and violet notes. The flavours displayed can be richly perfumed, with violets, blueberries, pepper, smoke and spice present.

As mentioned above, the tannins in Petit Verdot can be found in high levels, which might be off-putting for some experimenting with it. As with other heavy wines, such as Nebbiolo and



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Durif, it can make an excellent companion to foods such as a thick steak or pastas with creamy sauces. "In good years it can be quite full-bodied with ripe spice and cherry flavours," commented Bob Franchitto, Managing Director, Salena Estate. "It makes an excellent wine to accompany rich, wholesome foods." Petit Verdot's dark fruit and well integrated tannins, "Marry well with red meat and game dishes and it deserves to be on many more restaurant menus," said Trickey (Warrumbungle Wines).

An interesting expression of Petit Verdot is the sparkling style, practiced by Sirromet. "We make it into a sparkling red; we do not use it in a Cab Sauv Merlot style," said Adam Chapman, Chief Winemaker, Sirromet. "We have found that the tannins, colour and consistency of the varietal are great for sparkling red year after year."

### Blended vs straight

Petit Verdot's original role in wines, as previously stated, was as a backbone to Bordeaux blends. "Petit Verdot is a great wine for blending. It has a natural ability to bring the best out in other red wine varieties," said Lynda Schenk, Marketing Manager, Kingston Estate. "It makes the lovely peppery flavours of Shiraz more pronounced and it does the same with Cabernet Sauvignon's predominant flavours."

The Australian climate gives Petit Verdot's small black grapes a chance to reach their potential and as a result, "We get to explore its potential as a standalone wine," said Trickey (Warrumbungle Wines). "As such we have found that Petit Verdot can produce wonderfully elegant wines with great ageing potential... I believe Petit Verdot can produce among the very best wines in Australia." Trickey (Warrumbungle Wines) cited his acquisition of the domain name [www.petitverdot.com](http://www.petitverdot.com) many years ago as a personal vote of confidence in the varietal's ability.

"We use it as a blend and a standalone," said Brown (Gemtree Vineyards). The blend is with Cab or Cab Franc and Merlot, but always as the second highest percentage variety to give it fragrance and tannin structure." And as a standalone? "The 100% is a monster. Layers of flavour and complexity and will live for a decade at least."

Franchitto (Salena) believes that the straight version of the varietal has not been taken up by the market as well as it might have been. "But Salena Estate will certainly be

continuing with it as an important blending component," he said. His company has seen success with its 2005 Bookpurnong Hill Block 267 blend, a Cabernet, Shiraz and Petit Verdot combination. He says the Petit Verdot is clearly discernible in the mix, which he points to as an example of how well Petit Verdot can harmonise and synergise with the other varietals.

Margot De Bortoli, Marketing Manager, De Bortoli Wines, believes that there's a future for both blended and straight Petit Verdot wines. "As a single variety wine [it can be successful]. It suits our warm climate, producing wine with great colour and flavour," she explained. "But it will probably prosper more in blends made in Claret styles."

It has, however, been gaining a little bit of traction as a standalone wine, where its intensity and floral notes are earning it a reputation as a serious drink. "Petit Verdots have intense colour with a perfumed bouquet, vibrant flavours and a firm tannin finish," said Julie Mortlock, Winemaker, De Bortoli Wines. They can be, "A viable alternate stand-alone varietal to the mainstream varieties."

A [www.quaff.com.au](http://www.quaff.com.au) blog review for Kingston Estate's Petit Verdot is representative of what a good PV in standalone form is capable of being: "Wonderful floral aromas with a touch of spice, ripe, rich, concentrated redcurrant and blackberry jube flavours."

### What does the future hold for PV?

[www.vinodiversity.com](http://www.vinodiversity.com) suggests that Petit Verdot is starting to be viewed by some as an alternative to Shiraz. Some, like Franchitto (Salena Estate), would be cautious about such a claim. Others, for example Trickey (Warrumbungle Wines), would embrace it. Brown (Gemtree Vineyards) believes that variety can enjoy success both straight and blended, as long as it is nurtured and treated properly during growing to get the most out of it.

Petit Verdot production has grown over the last recorded year, but remains a fringe player. Nobody predicts that it will grow furiously any time soon in the way Pinot Gris has, for example, but it will continue to be an important varietal in the stocks of those championing the brand, such as Kingston Estate and Pirramimma. I am in love with the variety," said Moularadellis (Kingston Estate), who refers us to Kingston's Riverland plantings, the largest in the country. "I challenge you to try the wine and you too will be hooked."