

# SevenFiftyDaily

## WINE

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published  
November 2, 2020

## The New Conversation About White Wine and Tannins

More winemakers are using partial skin contact to create whites with firmer tannin structures and greater complexity



*Photo courtesy of Clos Mogador.*

Words such as “grip” and “astringency,” are creeping into the tasting notes of a growing number of white wines from Portugal, Spain, and California. Historically, tannins have been an evaluation point exclusively for red wines when describing texture and mouthfeel. Now, however, more winemakers are focusing on the tannin structure of their whites.

“I don’t like white wines that are too fruity. It’s boring,” says René Barbier Meyer of [Clos Mogador](#) in Spain’s Priorat region. Since becoming head winemaker at his family’s estate in 2011, Barbier Meyer has worked to build more structure in the white wines of Mogador, as well as [Venus la Universal](#), a label he owns in partnership with his wife, Sara Pérez, by introducing a small amount of skin contact.

Not to be confused with orange wines, the amber-hued wines that are made by fermenting white grapes with 100 percent of their skins for, in some cases, many months, this growing trend employs only partial skin contact; in other words, just enough time to impart some beneficial texture and firmness.

For Mogador's Nelin white, for example, approximately 25 percent of the grapes (Grenache Blanc, Viognier, Roussanne, Macabeo) spend one week with their skins, and 5 percent spend one month. The technique brings more gravitas to the wine without sacrificing freshness.

Of course, there are other ways to achieve complexity, according to Barbier Meyer, namely, long aging—"sometimes 30 years, like López de Heredia Viña Tondonia." But he believes partial skin contact is another highly effective, not to mention less time-consuming, method.



*Clos Mogador team. Photo by Ferran Martí for Clos Mogador.*

## How Tannins Bring Structure, Flavor, and Terroir

Tannins contribute both structure and flavor to a wine. A tannin is a phenolic—a chemical compound—that interacts with a protein and amplifies mouthfeel, explains Anita Oberholster, cooperative extension specialist in oenology at the University of California, Davis. “In wine, it’s one of the main components that gives you body, texture, and bitterness,” she says. “There are other components that do this as well: sugar, alcohol, the pH, the organic acids in a wine.”

In a grape, 95 percent of tannins reside in the skin and seeds, with very little in the pulp, adds Oberholster. In traditional white wine production, the juice is pressed off almost immediately, allowing for hardly any contact with these tannin-rich materials. Overall, white wines have fewer tannins than red wines; for example, a Sauvignon Blanc with no skin contact could have one-tenth the amount of tannins of a red made from Cabernet, and a Chardonnay that spends time on its skins could have less than a quarter, says Oberholster.

Yet the presence of tannins in white wines “give the wine a little bit more of a spine, a better posture, so to speak,” says Ryan Zepaltas, winemaker at California’s [Copain](#), which sources Chardonnay from Anderson Valley, Mendocino County, and the Sonoma Coast. “Tannins can have a lot of presence.”

Zepaltas perceives tannins as a light chalkiness on the palate. Starting in 2009, he began experimenting with skin contact, exploring variables such as time on skins before pressing, different percentages of destemmed versus whole cluster skin contact, and skin fermentation before pressing. He’s found that between four to six hours on the skins is ideal for Copain’s Chardonnay.



Ryan Zepaltas. Photo courtesy of Copain.

Zepaltas also considers tannin maturity as a factor in deciding when to pick his white grapes. Copain tends to be an “early harvester” for its Chardonnay, he reports, and not just to retain acidity, but also because the skins tend to be more “al dente,” which results in more structure and backbone in the finished wine.

Filipa Pato in Portugal’s Bairrada region believes that tannins can channel terroir. The tannins from limited skin contact recreate the texture of the region’s chalky limestone soils in Pato’s wines. Through the skins, “you get that sensation of the soil, that stony character,” she says.

Pato is a proponent of exposing wine to oxygen throughout her winemaking. She finds it not only makes such wines as her Nossa Calcario Bical resistant to oxidation down the line, but it also helps the tannins polymerize—a process whereby small molecules bond together and create a chain—which improves the mouthfeel.



*Filipa Pato. Photo courtesy of Filipa Pato.*

Oberholster explains the science behind this phenomenon: Smaller tannins tend to express bitterness (bitter being a flavor), while larger tannins are more astringent (astringent being a mouthfeel). By creating these polymer chains, tannins seem bigger, and the wine seems less bitter and more textural. Both Pato and Oberholster also note that the exposure to small amounts of oxygen keeps tannins, as well as color, stable.

Tannins in the wine can come from oak as well as skins, says Don Burns, winemaker at [Turtle Rock](#) in Paso Robles, California. His grapes—Grenache Blanc, Roussanne, Viognier, and Picpoul—spend up to two days on the skins in order to extract some tannins, then ferment and age in oak, allowing the different types of tannins to polymerize. “I feel like the more tannins available, the easier it is for them to bind together,” Burns says. “They start to form a longer chain tannin, which actually lays in your mouth differently than a short chain tannin, so it kind of drapes across, rather than ‘pokes,’ your tongue. You’re not really losing structure. It just creates a creamier texture.”

## Looking to the Past to Innovate

The revival of orange wine takes cues from centuries-old winemaking practices, most famously from ancient Georgia, but other cultures have their own skin-contact traditions, which provide inspiration for current iterations.

In Priorat, Barbier Meyer is working to bring back an obscure style of skin-contact white wine called Breset, which was produced in Catalonia about 50 years ago. As Barbier Meyer explains it, Breset came about when reds and white wines were both pressed and macerated in the same manner, meaning that whites spent a few days on the skins. “It’s not as extreme as an orange wine, not so tannic or oxidized,” he says, but a style he describes as “soft.”

As technology developed, the style fell out of fashion, but Barbier Meyer has formed a small collective of producers in Terra Alta and Tarragona to revive Breset. They’re working to standardize practices, such as duration of time on skins, and create a Breset category in order to distinguish it from traditional white wines. Barbier Meyer will be releasing a Breset next year. Called Venus Macabeu, it’s made from grapes that spent three to six months on their skins.

Barbier wants his Breset wine to convey complexity and soul. “This production method for white wine is interesting because it’s not as tannic as an orange wine, but [it’s] not just dominated by fruity flavors either.” He believes the style offers wine drinkers a middle ground, one that links Catalanian tradition with current palates and tastes.

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