

# 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

**F**or 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!'



Fiona Beckett is a *Decanter* contributing editor, also publishing at [www.matchingfoodandwine.com](http://www.matchingfoodandwine.com)

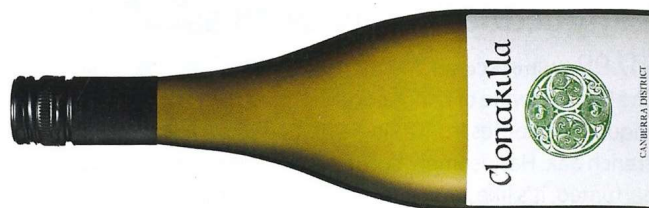
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Louisa Rose, Yalumba



## 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%

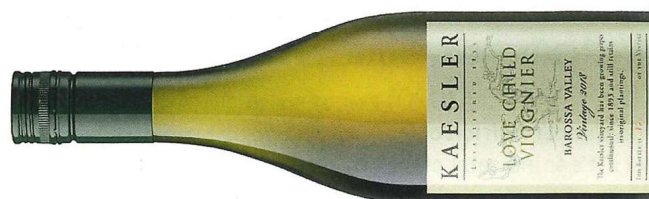


## Domaine Gayda, Pays d'Oc, Languedoc, France 2019 91

£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%



# Decanter

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## Domaine Gayda Collection Viognier 2019, IGP Pays d'Oc

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91 points



DOMAINE  
GAYDA

