

Mislabeled vines cause stir among wineries

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Call it a case of viticultural identity theft.

Beginning in 2012, a newly available grapevine — Monastrell, a Spanish clone of the grape variety most commonly known as Mourvedre — surged in popularity among Paso Robles wine growers. More than 200,000 Monastrell vines were sold, the equivalent of about 200 acres. It's not known how much wine those vines have produced, but if you've drunk Central Coast Mourvedre from the last few vintages, there's a chance those Sunridge Monastrell vines were its source.

“The consensus was that it was a good selection,” says Andrew Jones of Sunridge Nurseries, which sold the Monastrell vines. “People liked it better than other selections of Mourvedre — it had better color, better flavors.” The Monastrell became 90 percent of all Sunridge’s Mourvedre sales.

Only it wasn’t Monastrell at all. It wasn’t even a clone of Mourvedre.

As Jones informed his clients in a letter in July, the vines sold as Monastrell were actually Graciano — a minor grape variety from Spain’s Rioja region.

“It’s a pretty awkward thing,” Jones admits.

The whole debacle has Central Coast wine growers scratching their heads and asking: How did we fail to catch this? The fact that Graciano is called “Morastell” in certain corners of France may offer a partial explanation: Could this debacle have been one big elaborate typo?

“The Graciano leaves are different, the berries are different and the wine is very different,” says Jordan Fiorentini, winemaker at Epoch Estate, which has 3 acres of the Graciano vines. “Mourvedre wine is unlike anything else. You can’t mistake it. That should have been a dead giveaway.”

Yet despite the availability of precise genetic testing, wine grape mix-ups are not unprecedented.

Throughout history, Monastrell and Graciano have frequently been mistaken for each other. Spain has done it; Italy has done it. It’s been suggested that Graciano was labeled as Mourvedre when it arrived on Sardinia in the 19th century. And only relatively recently have scholars discovered that a number of grape varieties — Bovale Sardo, Cagnulari, Parraleta and Tintilla de Rota — are, in fact, Graciano.

Many have speculated that old Monastrell plantings in certain parts of Spain, installed before the advent of genetic testing, are Graciano, based on the appearance of the vines and the taste of the wines. How else to explain the fact that, according to Jancis Robinson’s “Wine Grapes,” in Spain, Graciano is sometimes called “Monastrell Menudo” (little Monastrell) or “Monastrell Verdadero” (true Monastrell)?

It's happened in America, too. In the 1980s, UC Davis discovered that grapes it had certified as Pinot Blanc were, in fact, Loire Valley variety Melon de Bourgogne. Famously, that same decade, Bonny Doon's Randall Grahm brought cuttings of white grape Roussanne from the Rhone Valley to California, only to discover later that it was actually a different white Rhone variety, Viognier. That was all well and good until, in 2000, Napa's Caymus Vineyards sued a nursery that had sold it 6,400 erroneously labeled Roussanne vines. The nursery blamed Grahm, who settled the suit with Caymus out of court.

Luckily for Sunridge and Jones — who is also a winemaker, and owns the labels Field Recordings, Fiction and the [Alloy line of canned wines](#) — Paso Robles vintners seem willing to roll with the misunderstanding. No one has threatened to take legal action against Sunridge, which has offered to replace the vines for free. (Any wines bottled and labeled after receipt of Jones' letter must identify the variety as Graciano, but earlier bottlings can still say Monastrell or Mourvedre.)

It's easy to see why the Monastrell vines appealed so much to Paso Robles winemakers. Usually associated with France's Rhone Valley, Mourvedre has boomed in popularity throughout California in recent years. If French clones of Mourvedre work well in Paso Robles, surely Monastrell — which thrives in Spain's warm, arid climates — would work even better in its sometimes-extreme heat. Once influential wineries like Saxum and Epoch bought Monastrell from Sunridge, others quickly followed suit.

From the beginning, something seemed off. "Early on, I called Andrew up and I was like, "This is not Mourvedre,"" says Justin Smith, Saxum's owner-winemaker. "We were growing it side by side with regular Mourvedre, and it just looked like a different plant."

The Graciano leaves were a different color from Mourvedre leaves, and the grapes produced a wine that was much more acidic, and much darker.

"Where Mourvedre is always moderate sugar and moderate acid, this came in high sugar, high acid, high tannin," says Cris Cherry, owner of Villa Creek Cellars, who planted the Monastrell grapes after learning about them from Smith.

But Jones told Smith he was confident the vines were Mourvedre. First of all, he'd bought the cuttings from a reputable source: the Portuguese company Plansel, which has supplied Sunridge with many cuttings of Iberian grape varieties over the years. Once Sunridge imported the cuttings from Plansel, it sent them — as it always does — to UC Davis, where the vines went through a requisite quarantine program, to ensure that they would not bring any virus or disease into U.S. vineyards.

That quarantine process doesn't include genetic testing, but it does involve some inspection of veracity. "They are looking to see how it looks in the field, checking that it looks true to type," Jones explains. Davis released the material back to Sunridge, christening the new selection Mourvedre clone #571.

Jones and his clients reasoned that the difference between this Monastrell and their more familiar Mourvedre clones was like that of Zinfandel and Primitivo — two genetically identical grapes that nevertheless look different in the vineyard.

But more than anything, the winemakers went along with it because they liked this new Mourvedre selection. In fact, some liked it better than actual Mourvedre.

"It was making the top-tier cut for our wines," Smith says. "It had better acidity, better color, and was a much healthier plant than Mourvedre." He planted 7 additional acres of Sunridge's Monastrell in 2016, despite suspecting that it was an imposter.

Word started to spread. "Whisperings had been going around during the '16 vintage," Fiorentini says. "We were like, OK, this is probably Graciano." That year, instead of blending it with Syrah and Grenache — Mourvedre's typical companions — she co-fermented the grapes with Tempranillo, creating a classic Rioja-style blend. It worked well: The high acidity of the Graciano made the lower-acid Tempranillo brighter and fresher.

But it wasn't until a group of Spanish winemakers visited Saxum in 2017 that Smith took any action. "They said, 'That doesn't look like Monastrell — but it does look like Graciano,'" Smith recalls. He sent cuttings to UC Davis for proper genetic testing, and sure enough, they were an exact match for Graciano.

Davis has since bestowed a new name on Mourvèdre clone #571: Graciano clone #8.

Since sending the letter to his clients, Jones has been surprised to learn that most winemakers are eager to keep their Graciano in the ground.

“Honestly, I need another year to decide, because I still want to play with it,” Fiorentini says. “But I feel like we’ll keep it.”

Smith didn’t think twice. He knew he wanted to keep the vines. “It doesn’t really matter what it’s called, as long as it’s producing good wine,” he says.

And the more you consider the vast family tree of wine grape cultivars, their adaptations and mutations over thousands of years, the more the urge to understand precisely each one’s genetic identity starts to feel a little bit futile.

“You hear about all these grapes and how they’ve evolved and bred over time — fuzzy Tempranillo, pink Clairette,” Cherry says. “They acclimate to their surroundings, they reproduce, it’s a natural process.

“Then we get involved and start calling it one thing or another. And it’s like, these plants have been here generations before we have. What are we really trying to control?”