



Getting to know... Charbono.

Written by Ashley Hausman

Many people, in fact many wine connoisseurs even, might wrinkle their foreheads and cup their ears for a second try if they heard the term 'Charbono'. And that is understandably so. This obscure, black-skinned varietal is nearly extinct, though it has found security in a very small, devoted population of growers, sellers, and consumers who salute its unique style and will do everything they can to ensure that the enchanting Charbono grape will not be laid to rest.

In fact, this varietal has been taken under the protective wing of the Slow Foods movement's 'Ark of Taste' program, which is designed to promote awareness and the continued production of select endangered foods that meet a specific criterion. These foods must be 'outstanding in terms of taste,' 'at risk,' 'sustainably produced,' 'culturally or historically linked,' and 'produced in limited quantities'¹. The Slow Foods movement began in 1986 by an Italian named Carlo Petrini who took a stand against fast food by protesting the opening of a McDonalds in Rome². Since then, chapters have blossomed around the world and include over 100,000 members. They are built on ethical and ecological standards that systematically work to preserve and instill better health, nutrition, and sustainable lifestyle choices through food.

In times like these, education is in order. Often, it is simply lack of knowledge, production, and availability that widdles a wine into extinction. Trends taint taste and lesser-known varietals begin to fade on the radar. Higher acid, tannic grapes like Charbono that can stand to use a little time in the bottle quickly fall to the wayside for more accessible, 'drink now' reds. In a fast-paced world, the art of ageing is growing obsolete. But Charbono has a fascinating history, a truly compelling story to tell. So take a moment...and listen.

A very American grape, the 'immigrant' Charbono travelled from Italy in the late 1800's. It was then thought to be the Barbera variety. After a rather prolonged identity crisis, DNA testing finally confirmed that Charbono was not interchangeable with Barbera, Dolcetto, or (yes, wince) even Pinot Noir (which it so mistakenly was one year in the '30's by the Parducci winery). Though Charbono was deemed independent of these other grapes in the '30's, it wasn't until 1999 when Carole Meredith of UC-Davis traced its heritage to the Corbeau varietal of the alpine Savoie region in France, where it is predominantly used for blending only.

Charbono has always been a 'cult' grape, a specialty wine that has seen production in limited quantities. It is a varietal that was really taken in by Inglenook in the '70's, which consequently influenced several other producers as well. Inglenook was responsible for about half the production of Charbono—35 acres. This was Charbono's heyday. Unfortunately, when Inglenook sold their properties, these vines were replaced with more profitable varieties that spoke to the current trends. Charbono has since then been in danger.

Charbono needs time—it is a slow-ripening, late harvest varietal. Its sure-handed acidity and tough tannins allow for the wine to exhibit remarkable structure and age-worthiness. Very traditional styles would even propose waiting 10-20 years before consumption. It is held together by an austere, muscular framework, but the execution of its song is undeniably elegant, silky, and more feminine in style. It has an unmatched knack for pairing well with a variety of food, from game and beef to chicken and seafood.

¹ http://www.slowfoodusa.org/index.php/programs/details/ark_of_taste/

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slow_Food



The most ideal location for growing Charbono is Calistoga—the sweet spot of Napa Valley. In Calistoga, the microclimates and soils are optimal for this tough little grape. It's about 10 degrees warmer here compared to the lower parts of Napa Valley. Also, Calistoga benefits from the fog that comes from the Russian River, making the day and nighttime temperature differential significantly pronounced, allowing for the fruit to maintain its signature acidity. Calistoga's Charbono grapes come off more concentrated and focused. Currently there are less than 100 acres of production. About half are in the Napa Valley while the rest are scattered to the north in Mendocino, Monterey, and Madera. Roughly 6,500 cases are released to market each year. Seldom, if ever, can one find Charbono on a wine list. Most wine shops have probably never even heard of it. And it's a shame. For all its food pairing potential, intriguing history, and incomparable flavor profile, Charbono is like a great classic that gathers dust and sits abandoned on a quiet shelf, waiting to be read.

Unity Selections is proud to carry one of the top Charbonos left in this country from Shypoke Vineyards. They have some of the oldest vines, planted back in 1904 by Michael Heitz, an immigrant from the German region of Alsace, which is now considered France. He planted several 'suitcase cuttings,' including Charbono³. They were almost totally wiped out during Prohibition, but fortunately a few acres remained. It wasn't really until the late '80's when Gary Heitz and his wife Ginny inherited the property, striving to bring back the Charbono before it was too late. The family tradition continues today. Since 2001, their son, Peter Heitz, has taken over winemaking at Shypoke, where he and his wife, Meg, now have 12 acres of Charbono, which is hand-picked, de-stemmed, and cold soaked for about 2 days. Shypoke utilizes top fermentation methods and manual punch-downs, allowing for a balanced Charbono that is extremely accessible in its youth, but still possesses impeccable ageing capacities due its acid and tannin levels. It is aged for 8 months in both American and French oak.

The **2006 Shypoke Charbono** wears a dark, inky outfit giving off notes of black cherries and plum in the nose. On the palate, these aromas are confirmed along with savory spices and the essence of chocolate. The mouthfeel is surprisingly silky and soft for its age, though incredibly full. A lovely, lasting finish will have you pining for the next sip just to experience Charbono all over again. This is the wine to try if you gravitate towards big, California reds. Only 630 cases made.

³ <http://shypoke.com/>