



The Verjus Solution

Green harvest, now taking place in many vineyards, can have its own food product.

By Roger Morris

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A standard Bordeaux-style bottle with a cork finish ended up in my sample bin the other day, yet it was not your typical wine. In fact, it was not a wine at all, but verjus, an ancient condiment that continues to be neglected even though it is such a natural product.

Simply put, verjus is the pressed juice of under-ripe grapes, its prized virtue being its acidity. For an imaginative chef, it has dozens of uses – a substitute for vinegar, a liquid for sautéing and deglazing and thus an ingredient in sauces, a dressing plain or emulsified for salads, a tempering element for over-ripe fruits in desserts, even a cocktail ingredient. Although it has acidity, verjus is generally more-floral and fresh-fruity than vinegar and does not have the latter's tanginess.

My bottle came from Kokomo Winery in Sonoma's Dry Creek Valley, whose owner/winemaker, Erik Miller, I met in Healdsburg earlier this year. My bottle of Kokomo verjus was 100 percent Zinfandel grapes, picked at 5-7 Brix sugar, or about a quarter of the ripeness at which most wine grapes are harvested, hence its strong acidity. Grapes can be grown just to make verjus, as Chefs Brian Shaw and Phil Pyle did at Maryland's Fair Hill Inn, but it is more standard to use the grapes that would be dropped to the vineyard floor during green harvest during the summer months, an exercise to reduce crop size and increase flavor intensity. Using these grapes to make verjus is a great practice in the waste not/want not sustainability.

I have not made a scientific count (or any count at all, for that matter), but I am convinced that more wineries plant olive groves to secure a secondary food product than produce a verjus. In fact, I can't remember the last time I visited a winery that sells it.

Verjus is just that – green juice. It is not fermented, and thus has no alcoholic content. You probably would not want to drink it neat. Sometimes, citrus

flavors or herbs are added to the mix, but the Kokomo product, I believe, is just jus.

I once decided to make vinegar from my leftover wine, but soon found I opened more wine bottles and thus had more leftover wine than I had occasions to use vinegar. Maybe that's the reason wineries don't take their green harvests and make verjus as a product. At this point in time, it's possible that not enough chefs and home cooks are eager to get verjus for wineries to offer it. However, for those who try it, go to www.kokomoculinary.com. Or visit your local winery and follow along with a basket or two when they are doing green harvesting.