ALMOST RED

THE RETURN OF VALDIGUIÉ

California's Light Red

by PATRICK J. COMISKEY

No one goes looking for valdiguié. In California vineyards, it's a variety you come across in search of other things. Kenny Likitprakong found it at Lolonis Vineyard in the Redwood Valley, years before there was a Folk Machine: He noticed a photogenic parcel of head-trained vines while he was checking on cabernet blocks for a client. Lioco's Matt Licklider stumbled upon it in the same vineyard eight years later, on a quest for carignane.

At Fresno State in the late 1990s, Broc's Chris Brockway grabbed a bottle of J. Lohr's Wildflower not because it was valdiguié but because, well, it was $7, and he was a student, and it fit his budget. Michael Cruse, still years from founding his own winery, inhaled the variety's lively, lightly floral bouquet from a tank in a Napa Valley cellar and thought, "That smells delicious! I wonder what would happen if you picked it earlier?"

For most of its time in California soil, valdiguié has gone unnamed or misnamed, hidden behind commercial schemes, labeled gamay, then scorned for being the wrong gamay, the false gamay, the pretender.

But in the last decade, a dozen young producers have embraced valdiguié for what it is—a historic variety growing in old, established vineyards, possessed of dark berry fruit, midweight body and tense acid-driven flavors. "It's exactly the kind of stuff we get excited about," says Licklider, "a legacy variety, one that gets ripe at low alcohols."

Chris Brockway, who works with valdiguié vines planted in 1948 at Wirth Ranch, in Solano County's Green Valley, shares his enthusiasm. "We work with a vineyard whose fruit was sold to Christian Brothers, to Brother Timothy," he says. "It has history: History is part of the reason we're doing this."

Valdiguié has been in California for most of the state's post-Prohibition era, imported in the early 1930s by UC Davis staff, along with a handful of other varieties thought to be the red grape of Beaujolais, *gamay noir à jus blanc,* though that variety never gained a foothold in the state. Instead producers blended valdiguié and a lesser clone of pinot noir into a commercial bottling they called "gamay Beaujolais," a light red wine crafted to be vaguely Beaujolais-like, "a casual wine, a wine for outdoor dining, a wine that's best when chilled." That is how Bob Trinchero of Sutter Home described the wine to Dan Berger, the *Los Angeles Times* columnist, in 1992.

Gamay Beaujolais became a staple of the American marketplace for nearly six decades. At its height, Gamay Beaujolais was produced by Louis M. Martini, Paul Masson, Glen Ellen, Sutter Home, Charles Krug, Sebastiani, Larkmead and others, with valdiguié serving as the blend's workhorse variety. It was a wine for early release and early income, and a worthy counterpoint to more robust zinfandels and cabernets. California plantings of valdiguié, at their apex, reached nearly 6,000 acres.

But both academics and growers were troubled by the vagueness of the term "Gamay Beaujolais." UC Davis viticulture professor Harold Olmo tried to address the problem by giving valdiguié a new name, Napa gamay, in 1970, but this only confused matters further, and added a regional descriptor that became irrelevant as the years passed. Finally, in 1980, the French ampelographer Pierre Galet identified Napa gamay as valdiguié, and the matter appeared settled.

But given the commercial advantages of maintaining the status quo, few producers were motivated to change the name. Five years later, in *The Book of California Wine,* then a benchmark report on the state of the state's viticulture, the editors laid out the problem, and their exasperation: "The other Gamay—some think it is the true Gamay, others think it is the grape known in France as valdiguié—is, to make matters worse, known in California as both Gamay and Napa Gamay. Wine from the grape has been bottled under both names and as Gamay Beaujolais, the latter with reference to the wine's style rather than its grape."

Eventually, vignerons in Beaujolais and viticulturists at Davis compelled the BATF to sort out the nomenclature. Producers were given until the end of the century to cease using Gamay Beaujolais on their labels. Those who continued to make a "Gamay Beaujolais" blend renamed it. But many more wineries phased out the category altogether; in an era privileging wines of extract, power and alcohol, it was easy to get rid of a lightweight.

To this day, the confusion is stubbornly entrenched: The California Grape Acreage Report, an annual census last published in April of this year, still does not list valdiguié among its reported varieties; the remaining 250 acres are listed as "Gamay (Napa)."

ATHAN POULOS OF LOLONIS FAMILY VINEYARD AND MATT LICKLIDER OF LIOCO

PHOTO: JEFF BRAMWELL

Throughout this tumult, J. Lohr Winery, in Monterey County, remains one of the few producers to continue making valdiguié on a commercial scale. Since 1976 they've produced a varietal bottling called Wildflower, drawn from a vineyard in the Arroyo Seco Valley where the Lohrs originally farmed eleven varieties. "We planted seven reds in Greenfield," says Jerry Lohr, now 83 years old and not planning to retire anytime soon. "The only one we kept was the gamay." It has been a mainstay of the brand, consistently winning accolades at competitions, including a "Best in Show" at the California State Fair in 1989.

Today, the winery farms nearly 30 acres of valdiguié in Greenfield, one of the largest parcels in the state. The mature vines self-regulate their yields, which remain abundant; the team machine-harvests most of the fruit, selecting about one-third to pick by hand, a portion they vinify using carbonic maceration to soften and point up the fruitiness of the blend. In 2007, winemaker Steve Peck was presented with a dog-eared playbook for making the wine, a method that's essentially remained unchanged for 44 years. It yields a brambly, peppery, mildly meaty, deeply colored red with dark berry character and a jolt of tannins.

"It can be quite tannic," says Peck, a fact that surprised him given its association with Beaujolais. "It calls for a nice balance between carbonic and traditional ferments." He builds the entire production around early and middle press cuts, "the sweetmeat," as he calls it, leaving out the

final third of press cuts altogether. At $10 a bottle, often less, it's one of California's most appealing red-wine values.

Valdiguié is an odd grape. It bears little resemblance to gamay noir à jus blanc, starting with its berries, which are enormous (compared to those of gamay), as are its clusters—"they're the size of babies," says Michael Cruse. The grape skins are firm and unyielding, like table grapes. "When you're processing it, if a cluster drops on the ground, the berries will roll around like marbles," he says. "It's the only grape I know that will go through some carbonic even when it's not on the stem." Otherwise, in the vineyard, it is stable and disease-resistant, with yields substantial enough to keep it economically viable. Its best feature, perhaps, is how the grapes retain their acidity at full ripeness. "There's lots of green, crunchy acid," says Chris Brockway. "More than in most of the other historical California reds."

David Wilson, whose family has farmed valdiguié at Rancho Chimiles in the Napa Valley since the mid-1970s, is always impressed and a little daunted by the high levels of malic acid the grape carries late in the season. For his Wilson Foreigner valdiguié (which he makes in partnership with South African winemaker Chris Alheit), he watches the juice of the grapes as the color it extracts from the skins begins to change. "When they're mature the color goes to magenta," he explains. "Superbright and electric and intense. That's when you know the malic [acid] has softened, the pH has come up a little bit, and you start tasting those tart cherry, red berry flavors. That's when we pick."

The Wilson's family ranch, Rancho Chimiles, is in a small enclave northeast of the town of Napa known as the Wooden Valley. When Wilson's father, Terry, was first starting out in 1974, he had heard that a man named Warren "Warinsky" was looking for Napa gamay, so he headed to the Stags Leap District to introduce himself. Warren Winiarski, the founder of Stag's Leap Wine Cellars, met him, corrected him, and did business with him for more than a decade, producing Gamay Beaujolais, "a soft, fruity wine with good color and a pronounced varietal nose," wrote Winiarski in a 1975 sales brochure. "To be released shortly after bottling, it will be drinkable then, although it has sufficient body to age."

Rancho Chimiles is one of the few places left in the Napa Valley where the grape once known as Napa gamay is still grown. Set out on the eastern fringe of the Valley, closer to Vacaville than to the Silverado Trail, it's the kind of out-of-the-way place where valdiguié has endured, on the periphery of North Coast wine regions, under the care of multigenerational families whose devotion to their property has prevailed over modish planting decisions.

That certainly describes the Lolonis Vineyard in Mendocino's Redwood Valley, where Athan Poulos farms a 106-acre property on behalf of his wife's family, now well into its third generation. Tryfon Lolonis, the patriarch, settled in the valley because it reminded him of Greece's Peloponnese region, where he grew up. His son Nick converted the property to organic farming in the 1950s, well before such practices were commonplace. Poulos believes that valdiguié was one of the first varieties planted on the property, near the original homestead. There is an old photograph of two figures standing in the vineyard, one in coveralls, the other wilting in a wool suit. No one is certain how old the picture is; Antigone Lolonis, Athan's mother-in-law, thinks it was taken the forties, but the clothing suggests the thirties. At any rate the vines already look quite mature.

Even for a variety known for acidity, the valdiguié from Lolonis is especially nervy. Poulos attributes this to the daily incursions of marine air channeled into the area by the surrounding hills. "In the dead of summer," he says, "the valley's in the nineties. By the end of the day it's down to forty or fifty."

In its modern iterations, valdiguié seems to accommodate a range of expressions. On one level, the wine can make a fine rosé, like the *pét-nat* rosé Cruse has made with valdiguié since 2013, a wine with a crisp berry flavor limned with a textbook valdiguié tension, like biting into sprigs of freshly picked herbs.

JERRY LOHR FARMS 30 ACRES OF VALDIGUIÉ IN GREENFIELD, ONE OF THE LARGEST PLANTINGS OF THE VARIETY IN CALIFORNIA. HIS WILDFLOWER BOTTLING, PRODUCED SINCE 1976, IS A MAINSTAY OF HIS WINERY.

But on another level, the tension is like a live wire, needing to be channeled, a process that starts with harvesting at the proper ripeness. Valdiguié reaches full ripeness at a low potential alcohol, but if it's harvested early the wine will come off as painfully austere. If it's too ripe, the resulting wine feels bland and nondescript, like lackluster zinfandel.

Beaujolais remains a point of comparison, even if it isn't meant to be. Likitprakong has Beaujolais in the back of his mind when he's making valdiguié—he's after that level of charm and exuberance of fruit.

"Learning it was the variety that was once Napa gamay has some meaning," he says, "even if there's no connection [to gamay]. It got me interested in experimenting with whole clusters, and with carbonic." He now submits about 40 percent of the fruit to whole-cluster fermentation, at least some of which goes through a carbonic phase.

Others feel comparisons to Beaujolais are amiss. "My takeaway, after six years," says Licklider, "is that [valdiguié] has more in common with cool-climate syrah than gamay noir. It comes in more black-fruited, and the way the tannins work with the black fruit had me thinking more of Crozes than Morgon."

Or valdiguié's saturated flavors and briny tannin might resemble dolcetto, or the red wines of the Jura, wines with both sunny charm and edgy tannins.

But these are early days—an odd thing to say of a heritage variety. There are so few in the market that when Cruse hears people talk about a bottle of valdiguié he can usually tell who made the wine. "If they mention fruit, it was probably mine," he says, "but if they think it's green, they've probably had Broc's. Kenny's [at Folk Machine] and Matt's [Lioco] are usually somewhere in the middle."

Aside from Steve Peck at J. Lohr, none of the winemakers I spoke to have been making valdiguié for more than a decade. The latest generation to take on valdiguié is still experimenting, tinkering with what they want their wines to say. Whatever style they settle on, they've breathed new life into a variety whose heritage, once hidden in anonymity, is coming into view. ■