

thecrush  
CROSSING CHRONICLES

# BACO NOIR

A cold-hardy grape thrives under the heat of the California sun.

## The

story of Baco Noir may sound similar to many a hybrid's tale. This cross of Folle Blanche and an unknown indigenous North American *Vitis riparia* variety was created in 1894 by François Baco for its—you guessed it—disease resistance. And like several hybrids before and after, most plantings of this thin-skinned, early-ripening red grape are found in the cool climates of Canada and along the U.S.'s northeastern border.

Except for one: a small three-quarter acre of Baco Noir found in the heart of California's Sonoma Coast, where the cold-hardy grape is thriving in the region's Mediterranean-like climate under the care of Matt Niess, winemaker and owner of North American Press.

"Native California plants ... require less resources; they've thrived here without any inputs or hand-holding for millennia," says Niess. "One day I was wondering, all the irrigation, spraying and inputs required in viticulture—what about native grapes?" It wasn't necessarily Baco Noir specifically that Niess sought out—in fact, in his research, he found that there are several native grapes planted all over Sonoma—but a fortuitous encounter with a grower looking to sell his blocks of Baco allowed Niess to take over that farming in 2019 and "try this hybrid grape thing."

His vineyard is located in the Green Valley AVA, where the pass-through of the Russian River, dense weeds and high levels of fog and dew mean high disease pressure throughout the growing season. But after farming the Baco Noir for just six months, Niess realized, "I literally don't have to spray these vines." They are *that* disease resistant. "With all the talk about regenerative viticulture—why are hybrids not at the table?" he asks. "They should at least be a part of the conversation."

Another bonus: The shorter growing period of Baco means it's ready to harvest ahead of what's become known as California's "fire season." "I'm picking grapes at end of September, fairly consistently," comments Niess.

**GRAPE:** Thin-skinned, early-ripening red variety

**CROSS OF:** Folle Blanche and an unknown indigenous North American *Vitis riparia* variety

**WINE STYLES:** Still, single-varietal and blends; both reds and rosés produced

**AROMAS/FLAVORS:** Blackberry, blueberry, boysenberry, smoke and a meaty umami

**FOOD PAIRING:** Grilled or barbequed meat dishes

But Baco is not without its challenges in the vineyard. It's quite vigorous, meaning Niess spends more time suckering these vines than he has any other he's worked with. Long shoot growth that naturally "flops over" means a traditional vertical shoot position (VSP) trellising system isn't the most viable option, and Niess is currently in the process of transitioning to a four-arm Kniffin system, which he finds helps tame this vigorous hybrid.

In the cellar, Niess prefers a hands-off, low-intervention approach. One area he does have to monitor is the grape's tendency to ferment hot and fast. "I do small-lot ferment so there's not a thermal mass that will overheat. If it gets too warm, I'll do a punch down to dissipate heat and break up the cap." He also plays with different fermentation styles, including carbonic, various percentages of whole cluster and completely destemmed, ultimately blending batches for a balanced resulting wine.

In terms of tasting, Niess's Baco is similar to Zinfandel, with intense, ripe brambly fruits—but sans any raisin or prune notes and with a notable elevated acidity, keeping the full-bodied red light on its feet. "And Baco is an excellent California barbeque wine," adds Niess, "with its high acidity to cut through rich, fatty meats, an inherent smokiness and a really intense iron-like sanguine quality on the finish." —Stacy Briscoe

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