

AMBER CHAMPIONS: TOP 30 ORANGE WINES

Though divisive, orange wine is a style that's finally gaining real popularity among winemakers and drinkers alike. **Simon J Woolf** endeavours to put any remaining scepticism to rest, explaining the traditions behind the technique and recommending 30 of his favourite skin-contact discoveries

Five years is a long time in wine. When I first wrote at length about orange wines in *Decanter*, in 2015, many wine pundits still viewed the style with suspicion – if not downright derision. It felt slightly bleeding edge, even if these wines had been appearing on our shelves for more than a decade.

Now, in 2020, the fourth wine colour has elbowed its way into the hearts and minds of exponentially more adventurous drinkers around the globe, with orange wines produced and enjoyed on every continent. And justly so – with four possible combinations of red or white grapes with or without skins, why ignore 25% of wine's possibilities?

Some are still perplexed by the style – or, more particularly, the name. If you accept the lexicon of red, white and rosé, then why not orange too? In actuality, all four terms describe the winemaking technique (grape colour, plus skins or not) rather than colour or style, *per se*.

It follows that not all orange wines are dark-amber coloured, tannic and cidery, just as not all red wines are mega-purple hued, grippy and oaky. Each of these four categories of wine offers up a multitude of taste, aroma and weight profiles.



Let's tie down that definition: orange wines aren't made from oranges any more than rosé wines are made from roses. The term, first coined in 2004, concisely describes wines made from white grapes that have been fermented with their skins, unlike mainstream white wines, where skins will be discarded beforehand (even if a pre-fermentation cold soak is part of the equation). These are white wines made like red wines, the perfect food-friendly marriage of a white grape's acidity and freshness with the texture and structure more often experienced in reds.

A style with history

The concept is timeless. Georgia boasts archaeological finds indicating that wine has been fermented in amphorae (qvevris) made of clay for at least 6,000 years – and amber wines (made from white grapes) have always formed the cultural backbone of this important wine nation. Historical records and winemaking books from Austria and Slovenia show that skin-fermenting white grapes was common in many parts of the old Austro-Hungarian empire.

As New Zealand winemaker Theo Coles (The Hermit Ram) notes, 'these are basically pre-technology wines'. The modern-day

concept of a light-coloured, fresh-tasting white wine requires a press, a destemmer and most probably a temperature-controlled stainless steel tank and a filtration system. Orange wines have simpler needs: just perfect grapes and a vessel (be it clay, wood, steel or plastic) for fermentation.

Such simplicity in wine is a virtue that has come into much sharper focus with the increased interest in minimal-intervention or natural wines. The modern revival of orange wine overlaps with and has been underpinned by the natural wine community – it shouldn't be forgotten, though, that the term 'natural wine' represents an overarching philosophy, whereas 'orange wine' describes a specific production technique.

The genius of modern-day Collio pioneers Joško Gravner and the late Stanko Radikon was breathing new life into an older style of winemaking that the world had largely forgotten by the 1950s. Their daring presentation of vino bianco macerato (macerated white wine) as fine wine rather than rustic *vina da tavola* acted as a catalyst.

It's given a whole generation of younger Slovene and Italian winemakers the confidence to make similar stylistic decisions – and to take risks, knowing that there's now a receptive audience for their output.

What's old is new

While the technique of skin-fermenting white grapes has its deepest cultural roots in Georgia and central Europe (Slovenia, Croatia, northern Italy), many other countries and regions are now rediscovering their own similar traditions. In Portugal's hot Alentejo region, making wine in large amphorae called talhas has a history that dates back to the Romans, yet its practice took place behind closed doors until very recently. As with Georgia, skin-fermented white grapes and thus amber or orange-tinged wines have always been to the fore – Alentejo's reputation as a red wine region is a recent development.

Talha wines are traditionally consumed straight from the clay, with the cellars transforming into ad-hoc social spaces during the winter. However, since the creation of a talha wine DO in 2010, bottled examples also exist. Amphorae of all shapes and sizes are

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common in Spain too, and increasing numbers of artisan winemakers have equipped (or re-equipped) their cellars with tinajas in recent years. Staying in the Spanish-speaking world, Chile has an old tradition of producing roughly destemmed, barrel-fermented wines called pipeño, now being revitalised by producers such as Roberto Henríquez in Bío Bío. Both red (chiefly País) and white (Moscatel) varieties are skin-fermented.

Winemakers in New World countries are enthusiastically taking to the style – and often repurposing skin-fermentation in new or innovative ways. In Stellenbosch, Mick and Jeanine Craven use it as part of the blend, rather than going for a no-holds-barred 'orange' style. Deirdre Heekin, based in cold-climate Vermont, uses skin contact to add vital depth to her hybrid grape varieties. And in Central Otago, Japanese winemaker Yoshiaki Sato skin-ferments to create silky smooth, Burgundian-style cuvées where fruit and aromatics don't overwhelm the other elements. The possibilities are endless.

Orange wine as a genre can now claim a number of seminal producers. Notable examples include Gravner, Radikon and Dario Prinčič in Oslavia; Mlečnik, Movia and Cotar in western Slovenia; and Vodopivec and Sker in the Italian Carso.

For the recommendations here, though, I'm sharing recent discoveries, lesser-known producers and exciting new projects. The wines I've selected run a very broad gamut, whether your taste extends to lighter or heavier, aromatic or savoury, structured or supple. Uncork them with an open mind, don't chill too much (12°C-14°C is about right) and if possible, combine with sustenance. Have fun, and let's talk again in another five years? ➤



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① **Gernot Heinrich, Graue Freyheit, Burgenland, Austria 2017** 95

N/A UK www.heinrich.at

Since Gernot Heinrich fell in love with skin contact whites, this blend of Pinots Gris and Blanc, plus a seasoning of Chardonnay, has gone from strength to strength. From 2017, it's fermented in amphorae, allowing the juicy tangerine and peppery berry fruit to shine even more. Its crystalline purity and silken texture are simply sensational. That this is all achieved with zero added sulphites is testament to skilled winemaking and perfect fruit. Biodynamic. **Drink 2020-2027 Alcohol 12.5%**

② **Zorjan, Dolium Muscat Ottonel, Podravje/Stajerska, Slovenia 2015** 95

£41.99 [Les Caves de Pyrene, The Smiling Grape Co](#)

The qvevri (and other amphorae) at Božidar Zorjan's bucolic estate in Slovenian Styria are buried under the stars. This Muscat spent six months on skins and stems, then two years of ageing in qvevri and barrel. It's stunning and satisfying, with expressive elderflower aromatics, a lively citrus kick and a big, chewy texture full of spicy, nutty depth. Biodynamic. **Drink 2020-2035 Alc 13%**

③ **Blazic, Rebula Selekcija, Goriška Brda, Slovenia 2015** 94

POA [Riding Wine Co](#)

Thick-skinned Rebula needs only 10 days of skin contact (as here) to create a seriously structured, complex wine. This standout vineyard selection from Borut Blažič is a textbook example of Brda/Collio Rebula – dense, slightly honeyed and full of twiggy underbrush and flavours – yet the pin-sharp acids keep it wonderfully fresh and alive. Long ageing in barrel and bottle has really paid off here. **Drink 2020-2030 Alc 13.5%**

④ **Dakishvili Family Selection, Kisi, Kakheti, Georgia 2018** 94

POA [Clark Foyster](#)

Giorgi Dakishvili and sons continue to turn out brilliant traditional qvevri wines, even if it's a challenge to keep up with their label changes (what was Vita Vinea is now Dakishvili Family Selection). Here, Kisi's typical ripe papaya and sharon fruit are really exuberant, and the tannins good and grippy but not in-your-face. A textbook example of Georgian amber wine. **Drink 2021-2028 Alc 13%**

⑤ **Herdade do Rocim, Amphora Branco, Alentejo, Portugal 2018** 94

£19.25-£21.29 [Exel, Fintry Wines, Great Wines Direct, Hallgarten Wines, Strictly Wine](#)

This stunning effort from winemaker Catarina Vieira stays on its skins (and some stems) in the talha for six months – too long to qualify for the Vinho de Talha DOC. A blend of 40% Antão Vaz, 20% Manteúdo, 20% Perrum and 20% Rabo de Ovelha, it's fresh and exciting, with a gooseberry tang that leads to ripe citrus and apricot fruit, and a silken texture. **Drink 2020-2028 Alc 12%**

⑥ **Casreli, Chitistvala, Kakheti, Georgia 2017** 93

£18.99 [The Georgian Wine Society](#)

Five doctors created Casreli in 2015, initially just to make wine for themselves. Using entirely their own organically farmed fruit, in a blend based on the rare Tetri Chitistvala variety, they've created a thrilling wine made in the traditional Kakhetian manner – six months in the qvevri with skins and stems. Rosemary and sage aromas open into baked fruits, honey, woodsmoke; tight structure, all brought together by a delicious streak of acidity. **Drink 2020-2025 Alc 11.7%**

⑦ **Donkey & Goat, Stone Crusher, California, USA 2017** 93

£44 [Nekter Wines](#)

Jared and Tracey Brandt started skin-fermenting their Roussanne in 2007. This open-vat fermented 2017 has a wonderfully aromatic nose, full of apricot and ripe peach. Where Roussanne in its Rhône habitat sometimes loses acidity, there's no shortage of freshness here. With two weeks of skin contact, the tannins are grippy but beautifully integrated. **Drink 2020-2030 Alc 11%**

⑧ **Quinta da Costa do Pinhão, Branco, Douro Valley, Portugal 2016** 93

£29.50 [Alliance Wine, The Fine Wine Co](#)

Miguel Morais' family property historically sold grapes to the major Port shippers, but since 2014 he has made a small range of table wines including this elegant Burgundian-style field blend. Two weeks of skin contact serves to accentuate the camomile and gunflint aromas, and adds a fine, tingling texture that knits the wine together. Full of drive and electricity. **Drink 2020-2026 Alc 12%**

⑨ **Supernatural Wine Co, Green Glow, Hawke's Bay, New Zealand 2015** 93

£19.95 [Vintage Roots](#)

Kiwi Sauvignon takes on new garb here. The aromas span mango, papaya and toffee-apple, but it's the texture that really grabs the attention – velvety, smooth and caressing with a tiny prickle of tannins. Citrusy freshness reins in the considerable ripeness, and gives way to a superb, long finish. Three-week skin contact – and the label glows in the dark! **Drink 2020-2025 Alc 13.5%**

⑩ **Andreas Gsellmann, Exempel Neuburger, Burgenland, Austria 2016** 92

£20.75 [Connolly's](#)

For Andreas Gsellmann, skin contact is a component of all his white wines. Here, 100% of the blend fermented on the skins for seven days. The result is a gorgeously nutty and rather luxuriantly textured wine, loaded with ripe orchard fruit but showing restraint too – Neuburger can get overbearing and lack acidity, but that's not a problem here. The 2016 vintage was difficult, verging on disastrous in Burgenland, with quantities down but quality and concentration up. Biodynamic. **Drink 2020-2026 Alc 12.5%**

⑪ **Aphros, Phaunus Loureiro, Vinho Verde, Portugal 2018** 92

£21.30-£24.99 [Exel, Iden Village Stores, Les Caves de Pyrene, Real Ale, The Wine Scout, Vinvm, Wineboy, Woodhead Shop](#)

Vasco Croft and team keep pushing the envelope with this talha-fermented Loureiro. This year it stayed on the skins for seven months, and emerges with fascinating flavours of smoked honey, tangerine and a balsamic hint. The nose plays more to sage and whitecurrants, and there are very subtle, ripe tannins underpinning the whole thing. Biodynamic. **Drink 2020-2033 Alc 11.5%**

⑫ **Cà de Noci, Notte di Luna, Emilia Romagna, Italy 2016** 92

£29 [Wayward Wines](#)

The Masini brothers are situated in the middle of Reggio-Emilia (Lambrusco land), and as well as some wonderful ancestral bubbles they also make this delicate, aromatic blend of Spergola, Malvasia de Candia and Moscato. With about a week on the skins, there's just enough texture to offset the perfumed nose and delicate palate. An absolute charmer. **Drink 2020-2026 Alc 11%** >





13 Marco Merli, Mosco, Umbria, Italy 2018 92

POA **Naturally Wines Sheffield**
This youngish winemaker is doing great things at his family's tiny estate near Perugia, using cement tanks in lieu of barrels. Among a clutch of macerated wines, this Moscato Giallo-Trebbiano blend stands out for its expressive grapey aromas, perfectly offset by savoury, herbal tannins and a fresh, mineral finish. The pleasing rusticity of the texture and colour is typical of this region's highly drinkable traditional wines. **Drink 2020-2028 Alc 13%**

14 Papari Valley, 3 Terraces Chinuri-Rkatsiteli, Kakheti/Kartli, Georgia 2018 92

£18.99 **The Georgian Wine Society**
Lovely lift in this unusual blend of Chinuri from the Kartli region and Rkatsiteli from Kakheti. Exotic fruits (kiwi, rambutan) do battle with perfectly ripe, nutty tannins. It's a nil-nil draw as this is a beautifully balanced wine that really shows off the traditional qvevri style. Organic. **Drink 2020-2028 Alc 12.5%**

15 Ruth Lewandowski, Mahlon, California, USA 2017 92

£31.49 **Christopher Keiller, Harringay Local Store, L'Art du Vin, Lechevalier, Les Caves de Pyrene, Salthouse Bottles, Wine Freedom**
You couldn't make it up: harvest some Arneis in Mendocino county, then truck it to Utah while it's fermenting in plastic vats. Throw in some skin contact and a crack winemaking team and the result is this gorgeously nutty, lively wine with lip-smacking fruit and creamy texture. Evan Lewandowski is the man behind this bizarre cross-state effort, and the name of his winery merely reflects his favourite book in the bible. **Drink 2020-2027 Alc 12.7%**

16 Baia's Wine, Tsitska-Tsolikouri-Krakhuna, Imereti, Georgia 2018 91

£21.50 **The Oxford Wine Co**
Baia Abuladze is emerging as one of westerly Imereti's best winemakers, working at her family's estate. Her sister Gvantsa also makes wine. This blend of the region's three best-known white varieties is typically subtle and refreshing. The texture feels leesy and creamy, with spiced apple fruit, fresh herbs and delicate tannins. Something of a hybrid here, with only 30% of the wine fermented on its skins. **Drink 2020-2028 Alc 13.5%**

17 Bojador, Vinho de Talha Branco, Alentejo, Portugal 2018 91

£23.95 (2016) **Davy's**
Pedro Ribeiro is winemaker and general manager at Herdade do Rocim (see p20), but Bojador is his personal project. A field blend of local varieties such as Perrum, Rabo de Ovelha and Roupeiro spends nine months in the talha, to create this spicy and almost fino-like effort. The nose is briney, but then balsamic-tinged fruit emerges on the palate. Very fine phenolics – overall, there's a great deal of finesse here. **Drink 2020-2028 Alc 12.5%**

18 Ferdinand, Brutus, Goriška Brda, Slovenia 2016 91

N/A UK **www.ferdinand.si**
A 12-month macerated gem from talented winemaker Matjaž Cetrtič. There are beguiling aromas of autumnal, stewed fruits with a fresh sensation of sage. The palate grips with thrilling tartness and assertive but very fine tannins. The use of oak (24 months in barrel in total) is deft and unobtrusive. Laser-sharp, bone-dry – yet, thanks to the texture, not austere. **Drink 2020-2026 Alc 12.5%**

19 Intellego, The Sleeping Co-pilot, Swartland, South Africa 2018 91

£26.49 **Dvine Cellars, Les Cave de Pyrene, Philglas & Swiggot**
Jurgen Gouws' skin-contact Chenin Elementis is a cult classic in orange wine circles. This new whole-bunch fermented Viognier is every bit as charming, and has a similarly lovable label. It overflows with ripe pear fruit, yet the subtle stemmy grip reins it in beautifully, making it feel tight and sculpted. Gouws harvests early, so it's a joyfully refreshing Viognier. **Drink 2020-2025 Alc 11%**

20 Momento Mori, Staring at the sun, Heathcote, Victoria, Australia 2018 91

£34.99 **Block & Bottle, Christopher Keiller, Dvine Cellars, Harringay Local Store, Hop Burns & Black, L'Art du Vin, Les Caves de Pyrene, Noble Fine Liquor, Wineboy, Wine Freedom**
Made from the Italianate blend of Vermentino, Fiano, Malvasia and Moscato Giallo, you'd never know this has seen three months of skin contact. Dane Johns likes to ferment in a closed stainless steel tank, and this preserves incredible vitality and soft texture. The final result is packed full of juicy citrus fruit with a lick of ginger and salt on the finish. **Drink 2020-2023 Alc 10.5%**

21 Pranzegg, GT, Trentino-Alto Adige, Italy 2018 91

£57 **Newcomer Wines**
Proof, if any were needed, that aromatic varieties take to skin contact (here five days in steel tank) like a duck to water. This is Gewurztraminer nicely reined in, with showy aromatics but a light, alpine edge to the body, and pin-sharp definition to the fruit. Skin contact here just nicely rounds out the texture, without stealing the show at all. Matured in chestnut barrels and then concrete. Cries out for a spicy stir-fry. **Drink 2020-2028 Alc 11.5%**

22 Roberto Henríquez, Molino del Ciego, Itata Valley, Chile 2018 91

£26.60 **161 Food & Drink**
It's wonderful to see winemakers like Roberto breathing new life into Chile's old pipeño tradition: grapes roughly destemmed and then skin-macerated. In this case, a parcel of Semillon grown on granitic soils gets about a month of skin contact. The nose teases with subtle herbal and aniseed aromas, while the palate is superbly fresh and citrusy – but also pretty grippy. A fascinating style, big on structure but not a bit overbearing. **Drink 2020-2028 Alc 12%**

23 Yann Durieux, Recrue des Sens, Les Ponts Blancs, Burgundy, France 2016 91

£75-£89 (ib) **Cru, My Wine Cellar, Wineye**
One of two macerated Aligotés from cult winemaker Yann Durieux, this spicy, hay-tinged wine shows very clearly that Aligoté doesn't have to be an inferior variety – and also that it takes to long skin contact (here 30 days) like a charm, fleshing out just enough to add textural interest. The freshness and fruit purity are impressive. Organic, no added sulphites. **Drink 2020-2026 Alc 11%**

24 Ancre Hill Estates, Orange Wine, Wales 2017 90

£34.95 (2018) **Ancre Hill Estates, Handford**
Albariño isn't such a crazy idea in Wales – it's just about as wet as its homelands in Galicia! With 45 days of skin contact during a whole-bunch fermentation, this emerges featherlight and fresh as a daisy, with bruised apple and pear fruit plus hints of hay and camomile. One of the few orange wines that really is quite shockingly orange in colour: delicious and great fun. A small part of the blend is 2016 Chardonnay. Biodynamic. **Drink 2020-2025 Alc 10%** ➤





25 **Craven Wines, Clairette Blanche, Stellenbosch, South Africa 2018** 90

£18.50-£19.50 Berry Bros & Rudd, Butlers Wine Cellar, Specialist Cellars, Wine & Greene

Take one forgotten old plot of the once-popular (in Stellenbosch) blending variety Clairette Blanche; add an Australian/South African winemaking couple; skin ferment 65% of the blend for two weeks and barrel ferment the rest. Combine to achieve a tightly wound, nervy creature with bright citrus peel, some chalky texture and a delicately salty finish. The 2017 was equally assured, but much fatter and more lees-influenced. **Drink 2020-2028 Alc 11%**

26 **Slobodné Vinárstvo, Cutis Deviner, Nitrianska, Slovakia 2016** 90

£31 Forest Wines

Translating as 'free winery', a group of friends restarted production at this family estate in 2010. Their wines have a nervous energy and pungent aromatics, finding their best expression in this blend of 70% Traminer with 30% Devin (a Slovakian modern crossing of Gewurztraminer and Malvasia). Five weeks of skin contact help to flesh out this citrusy, almost verbena-scented wine. Organic. **Drink 2020-2026 Alc 11%**

27 **Vignoble du Rêveur, Un Instant sur Terre, Alsace, France 2016** 90

£31.99 (2017) Butlers Wine Cellar

Mathieu Deiss ferments this Pinot Gris/Gewurztraminer-based blend in amphorae, where it spends a total of six months. Invitingly rose-scented, the fruit is ripe and the texture dense and structured – yet there's some Alsatian magic going on here, with serious varietal character and freshness, despite the high alcohol and full body. Biodynamic. **Drink 2020-2026 Alc 14.5%**

28 **Yetti & The Kokonut, Mt Savagnin, McLaren Vale, South Australia 2018** 90

N/A UK www.yettianthekokonut.com.au

Made by winemaking duo Koen Janssens (the Kokonut) and Dave Geyer (the yeti), from a biodynamic plot of Savagnin, head-grafted onto Cabernet Sauvignon roots in 2005. Thyme and sage-infused apple aromas, with soft orchard fruits and a vegetal tinge that adds loads of character. No added sulphites. **Drink 2020-2023 Alc 12.2%**

29 **Emeran Reya, Rebula, Goriška Brda, Slovenia 2017** 89

N/A UK www.reya.eu

A five-day macerated Rebula from this new-on-the-scene producer shows just how well-suited this grape variety is to skin contact. The lightness and deftness is charming, with a fresh herbal nose, hints of lemon peel and candied fruits. An attractive chalky quality knits together an admittedly lean yet super-typical and thirst-quenching wine. Organic in conversion. **Drink 2020-2025 Alc 11%**

30 **Zorah, Heritage Chilar, Vayots Dzor, Armenia 2018** 89

POA Liberty Wines

First release of this amphora-fermented Chilar – an almost forgotten Armenian grape variety, growing at very high altitude. Despite 60 days of skin contact, what emerges is a pale-coloured, silky creature, with dusty peach and apricot fruit. Full and plump, with a long finish and subtle mineral tinges that add interest. **Drink 2020-2028 Alc 13%** 