

# San Francisco Chronicle

## Southern Hemisphere bottles shake off the vacation blues

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Do you demand varietal character in your bargain wines? We've got some, but it might not be varietal character you recognize.

The so-called lost grape of Bordeaux, Carmener, was widely planted there in the 1700s but growers lost interest in it because it's susceptible to a condition called coulure, in which the smallest grapes in the bunch fall off.

This is actually a pretty good thing for a wine; the remaining grapes will ripen more easily and have more intensity. But it was a bad thing if you were a French farmer of the 1800s (or the 1970s, for that matter) being paid by the ton, with no extra pay for the quality of your grapes.

After the phylloxera louse, devastated Bordeaux in the 1870s, farmers needed cash flow and didn't replant Carmener. Like the ivory-billed woodpecker, Carmener seemingly all but disappeared from the world. But in 1994, French viticulturalist Jean-Michel Boursiquet discovered that a lot of what farmers in Chile called Merlot was actually Carmener, presumably exported from France in the 1850s.

Now that they know what they have, Chilean vintners, in search of an identity, are trying to tell the world. Who better to do it than Norman Schwartz, president and CEO of Schwartz Olcott Imports in New York state, who has on his resume the marketing launch of a little product called Yellow Tail.

Copying the brackets around the wine name from Yellow Tail, (oops) wines all contain Carmener -- the "oops" refers to the grape's long-mistaken identity. My favorite, I'm slightly embarrassed to say, is the one with the least Carmener in it: the 2005 (oops) Valle Central Cabernet Franc Carmener (\$12). It has plenty of varietal character, but that's Cab Franc character: cherry flavors with notes of chocolate and green herbs. Tannins are present but under control through the medium-long finish. Try it with grilled red meat.

I also liked the 2005 (oops) Valle Central Carmener Merlot (\$12), which will appeal to fans of northern Rhone wines more than Bordeaux drinkers because of its cherry flavors with nice peppery spice. This is an excellent burger wine.

