

Gavi: Does a Wine Beloved in the '80s Hold Up Today?

Our columnist uncorks a few bottles of Gavi to see if the Italian white retains the romance it held decades ago—and is still a perfect warm-weather wine

By

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EVERY OENOPHILE I know remembers the first wine he or she loved; and yet none of them still loves that same wine today. As wine drinkers gain knowledge and experience, the world of wine invariably widens and that first object of affection is almost always forgotten—relegated to the status of a fond memory. That was the story of Gavi and me.

I had my first taste of Gavi more than 25 years ago, when I was new to wine, and the white wine of Italy's Piedmont region was at the peak of its fame. Gavi offered a more stylish alternative to other Italian whites such as Frascati and Orvieto, was almost as popular as Pinot Grigio and it was just as easy to say ("Gah-vee"). But perhaps more important, it was the favorite wine of my boyfriend back then. (Love stories of wine often begin with love stories of a different kind.)

La Scolca Black Label Gavi dei Gavi was the most famous Gavi of all, perhaps in part because of its name. Anything with a black label seems classy, as with Giorgio Armani's Black Label line or Johnnie Walker Black Label Scotch. And the wine was not merely called Gavi but "Gavi dei Gavi," which sounds like the very best of its type. Never mind that the words just mean the wine is made in the commune of Gavi, one of several districts where Cortese di Gavi, the Gavi grape, can be legally grown.

La Scolca also made a much cheaper White Label Gavi that was sold as the everyday alternative to Black Label. The White Label is roughly half the price of the Black today—as it was then. But they weren't the wines I was drinking then. The Black Label was too expensive, and settling for the White Label just seemed like defeat. The Gavi I drank with that boyfriend was Principessa Gavia, a wine of romance with a romantic tale of its own.

The label was Delft blue and adorned with a cameo portrait of a princess who, according to the legend on the back label, was an actual sixth-century royal who fell in love and ran away with a non-nobleman. The local white wine that they drank while in hiding was later named Gavi in her honor.

Principessa was reasonably priced and distinctively packaged, and we drank it whenever we could. It was available but not ubiquitous, just the right formula for a favorite wine. Easy to drink, crisp and bright, it was also kind of unchallenging—without a great deal of flavor, like Pinot Grigio.

As more interesting and ambitious Italian alternatives were produced (white wines from all over Italy were just beginning to make their mark in the 1990s), I forsook Gavi in favor of wines such as Vermentino, from Sicily; Verdicchio, from Marche; and even Petite Arvine, from Valle d'Aoste. Interesting white wines from other places in the world, particularly Spain, also beckoned—as did a new and more interesting boyfriend.

But with spring comes a reawakening that can stir memories of the past. I was curious how Gavi had fared while I was busy drinking just about everything else. And so I went looking for a few bottles, including Principessa, of course.

It turned out to be quite easy to locate. Principessa was in wine shops everywhere and even in grocery stores. But the bottle was different—slimmed down from its squat flagon shape to a standard Bordeaux-style bottle. The cameo of the princess seemed smaller as well—even less blue. My favorite wine was now indistinguishable from all the others on the shelf. But out of loyalty and curiosity, I bought a bottle, along with nine bottles of other Gavis to see how Gavi tasted a couple of decades on.

The first few bottles were less than exciting—thin, light and watery. Was this what Gavi had become? But the wines got a bit better, although one friend actually defended the wateriness of some of the wines. “It’s what I like about Pinot Grigio, too,” she said. I hoped Principessa hadn’t come to that.

In fact, the Principessa wasn’t watery at all but quaffable and bright, with good acidity—and well-priced at \$14. A fairly light body makes it a better aperitif wine than a companion for food. A few wines were better: The 2012 La Scolca Black Label Gavi dei Gavi was full-bodied and rich, if a bit pricey at \$40 a bottle, while the 2013 Pio Cesare Cortese di Gavi (\$18) was pleasingly citrusy and light. The 2013 Il Poggio di Gavi had real presence and weight in the mouth—even a rather minerally finish—and was definitely worth \$20 a bottle.

Maybe Gavi isn’t quite the magical drink I remembered, but then few first loves improve over time. On the other hand, there were some very nice bottles that brought back warm memories. And while I won’t be looking up any old flames, I might buy another bottle of Gavi—and offer a toast to the good old days.

Oenophile | Jump-Start Summer With These Three Gavis



From left: 2013 Il Poggio di Gavi, 2013 Pio Cesare Cortese di Gavi, 2013 Principessa Gavia Gavi

PHOTO: F. MARTIN RAMIN/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

2013 Principessa Gavia Gavi, \$14

The bottle may have become a bit more conventional over the years, but the Delft blue label and the romantic story on the back label remain. My favorite Gavi of long-ago is still a very pleasant white—a poolside drink or aperitif.