

A Nichols Worth of Wine

November 2009

Lure of the Loire

Wine lovers will often speak of a *grape “epiphany,”* some transformative wine they’ve had, a walk among the vines of a revered vineyard, or perhaps the musings of a passionate winemaker speaking of their land and the wines they produce. I’ve had a few of these “OMG” wine moments over the years, quite a few come to think of it, but the latest enophilic awakening took me by surprise. It was a sauvignon blanc, a grape, as a writer, I have not been especially kind to. There I’ve come clean and feel all the better for it!

Somewhere along the way, I began lumping all sauvignon blancs together as if this grape - any grape really - but sauvignon’s in particular, could be judged on any one style or place of origin. It began more than twenty years ago when I had my first sip of *Cloudy Bay*, the iconic sauvignon blanc from New Zealand. I remember thinking that it was unlike anything I had ever tasted, full of explosive grapefruit flavors and cutting acidity. What followed was a decade and a half of Cloudy Bay wannabe’s that seemed to get progressively tarter and increasingly boring. So I stayed away.



Sure there are the occasional exceptions. A few of the high-end California interpretations like Lail, Merry Edwards, Araujo and Spottswoode produce world-class sauvignon blanc and there’s a handful of value producers who do an admirable job with the varietal. Dave Guffy, of Hess, produces a great low-priced style from vineyards in Lake County. Chile’s Ledy Valley seems to have found the right combination of sun, soil, and climate to make great sauvignon (think Montes). But ultimately, it was a game-changer of a wine, Didier Dagueneau, ’s *Pur Sang*, from France’s Loire Valley, that brought me back to the grape.



The Loire Valley, the *Garden of France*, is an enchanted land with historical villages, magnificent old castles, remarkable landscapes, and 16th century grand chateaux, numbering more than a thousand. The Loire has survived a revolution, two world wars, and a mass migration of royalty back to Paris when Louis XIV built the Palace of Versailles. But much of France’s nobility stayed behind and continued to build lavish estates as summer homes - and they planted vineyards.

More than 600 miles long, running from just beyond Lyon in Burgundy to the Atlantic Ocean, the Loire is France's largest wine region, producing a wide range of varieties and styles. Best known for crisp dry white wines, the Loire also makes rich aromatic



whites, as well as fruity and rustic reds, rosés, and sparkling wines. There are sixty-eight appellations, all with varying soils and climates. There are five major wine regions (and many smaller ones) in the Loire, but it is three white wines - muscadet, chenin blanc and sauvignon blanc, and a single red, Chinon, that define the region.

At the far western reaches of the Loire, where vineyards meet the Atlantic Ocean on the Brittany Coast, muscadet is the signature wine. Produced from the *Melon de Bourgogne* grape, in vineyards around the city of Nantes, this is the only place on earth the melon grape is grown with any real success. Muscadet is the perfect shellfish wine. Served with oysters, it is an incomparable food and wine match, maybe more so than with Champagne!



Chenin Blanc, the widely planted white grape of the middle Loire, grows the world's best of this varietal, especially the wines coming from the villages of Vouvray and Savennières. If there is a single issue I have with chenin blanc from the Loire, it's that they run the gamut of styles from bone-dry to lusciously sweet, and the label on the bottle doesn't always reflect the style of the wine. One

thing is certain though, Savennières is considered the greatest dry chenin blanc in the world, with an unmatched concentration and depth.

Chinon, Loire's cabernet franc based red wine, is seldom seen outside of France. Little ever makes it to the US markets, but it is immensely popular in Paris bistro's.



For me though, my bond with Loire is all about incredible sauvignon blancs, with their refreshing acidity, and flinty, grassy and herbaceous flavors. This land is the benchmark for the grape. Yes, sauvignon blanc is grown in a number of countries and in both hemispheres, but comparisons always point back to the Loire, and to Sancerre in particular. The best do come from Sancerre, and from Pouilly Fume, on

the opposite bank of the Loire River, while the lesser-known appellations of Menatou-Salon, Quincy, and Reuilly consistently make exceptional wines that are generally priced lower than their more easterly neighbors - when you can find them. The US needs to see more of these delightful wines!

I find myself drinking more white wine than red lately. I'm not sure whether it's the tropical Florida climate I live in; that I am eating more seafood and white wine-friendly foods, or it could be that I tend to look for lower alcohol wines that most whites provide. Or maybe it's just a phase. Most wine consumers find that their palates change



from time to time, but I've definitely rediscovered sauvignon blanc after swearing off the grape for so long. Beyond the few I mentioned above, I just couldn't find many new world versions that weren't mouth-puckering, over-the-top lime or grapefruit bombs,.

I had the opportunity to travel to Miami a few weeks ago to attend a trade tasting sponsored by the “*Les Vins du Centre Loire*,” the Loire Wine Bureau, and hosted by its Directeur, Benoit Roumet. Benoit tutored the small group of sommeliers and wine writers with passionate anecdotes of the Loire’s diverse soils, the contrast of climatic and vintage influences, and a history of this captivating land.

Here are a few of the delicious Loire sauvignon blancs I tasted and that are worth seeking out. All are widely distributed throughout the states.

2007 Domaine de Reuilly. From the appellation of Reuilly, just southwest of Sancerre, and a Kermit Lynch selection (an importer who is always a safe choice when choosing wines), this is pure sauvignon with flavors of gooseberry and lime, good acidity and without being overly tart.

2006 Phillipe Portier. From a small vineyard parcel on the Le Cher River, near Bourges, this wine is filled with citrus, cream, flint and herbs - all classic attributes of Loire sauvignons. Again, if I am ever unsure of a new (to me) wine, I’ll check the importer. This one is from Robert Kacher, a name to be trusted.

2007 Domaine de la Perrière. The 2007 was generally a difficult one in the Loire, but a handful of vigneron’s like Perrier produced wines like this one with its floral, well-balanced and restrained fruit. At about \$20, this is an amazing introduction to what a wine that reflects its sense of place.

2006 Régis Minet “Vielles Vignes” Pouilly Fume. My hands down favorite of the eight wine flight, it is a wine that is almost lush in texture with a certain oily mouthfeel of ripe peaches and lime. It flooded me with alluring memories of my Dagueneau’s *Pur Sang* experience. Not that the two wines were all that similar, just that both exploded onto the palate and lingered for many minutes. Another incredible Loire wine for under \$25!

Manger, boire et s'amuser!
(Eat, drink, and be merry!)

Cheers!

Bruce