

## Chablis

10 Sep 2008 by Jancis Robinson

**In a nutshell:** Pure, steely whites.

**Main grapes:** Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc (white).

Burgundy's white wine outpost is one of France's most northern and it is hardly surprising therefore that the wines are naturally relatively sinewy, high in acidity and steely rather than luscious and oaky. This is an archetypally refreshing, long-lived style of white wine which very few wine regions, possibly none other than Chablis, can produce.

We Chablis enthusiasts treasure the purity of flavour, the modest dimensions and the rapier-like effect on the palate of the region's better examples, and cannot understand how the word Chablis ever came to be used, particularly in the United States, for sweetened up blends of the most basic white.

For the consumer, Chablis prices are annoyingly inconsistent. This is partly because the volume of Chablis produced can vary considerably from year to year thanks to spring frosts, which annually threaten to freeze off a sizeable proportion of the year's crop. It is also because Chablis is so well known that it tends to be traded as a commodity and is therefore all too subject to pressures quite unrelated to the wine itself.

Chablis comes in four very distinct quality levels. **Petit Chablis** is the principal, often vapid, product of the plantings on the outskirts of Chablis proper undertaken when the Chablis growers found they were unable to keep up with international demand. Most wine produced around the pretty little village of Chablis qualifies for the straightforward **Chablis** appellation, which can vary considerably in quality (beware of Chablis bottled outside the region) but should usually be drunk young. Some particularly well-sited vineyards, comprising about a quarter of total Chablis production, are designated **Chablis Premier Cru** and represent some of the district's most reliable buys. The very best vineyards are on the west-facing hill immediately above the village and qualify as **Chablis Grand Cru**. These are the vineyards, particularly Les Clos, that have made Chablis' reputation as offering a remarkable combination of refreshment and longevity.

Grand Cru and some of the best Premier Cru Chablis can improve in bottle for more than a decade. Indeed its extra acid can make top-quality Chablis a better candidate for ageing than many **Côte d'Or** whites. But such wines can sometimes smell almost dirty in youth, or if not dirty then at least reminiscent of wet wool or dogs. Wet stones is what I like to smell from young Chablis.

**St-Bris** is regarded administratively as part of greater Chablis but the razor-sharp style of this Sauvignon Blanc is pure **Loire** in taste.

**Some favourite producers:** La Chablisienne co-operative's top bottlings, Dauvissat, Defaix, Droin, Laroche, Louis Michel, Christian Moreau, René et Vincent Raveneau.