Sauvignon Blanc

10 Nov 2004 by JR

Sauvignon Blanc is a strange grape. It evokes strong reactions. Those who love it, love it with a passion. Those who find its flavours less than subtle, tend to be less than subtle in their criticism of it.

This is a grape characterised by its aroma and its refreshingly fruity acidity. If it is picked too late, it loses both acidity and the all-important pungent, grassy, leafy aroma that can vary from cat's pee to nettles to gooseberries. (Indeed one branded Sauvignon Blanc on sale in Britain is actually sold under the brand name Cat's Pee on a Gooseberry Bush.) This means that it can be difficult to make lively Sauvignon Blanc in hot climates. On the other hand, if Sauvignon Blanc vines are grown somewhere too cool, or are loaded with too heavy a crop, that characteristic leafiness, closely associated with compounds known as methoxyprazines, will be excessive. For Sauvignon vines are notable for being much more interested in growing new leaves and shoots than in ripening grapes. They need a stern hand and, often, severe canopy management, training the vine to achieve a perfect balance between green parts and fruit.

Most Sauvignon Blanc is fermented at relatively low temperatures in stainless steel with the intention of preserving every bit of youthful fruit. The wines are in general designed to be drunk as young as possible, although some of the fruit from particularly low-yielding vineyards can be concentrated to withstand oak ageing and may need a year or so in bottle before showing their best. I have tasted Sauvignon Blanc that has survived more than five years in bottle but hardly any that have actually improved as a result.

The most classical European Sauvignon Blanc comes from the twin appellations of Sancerre and Pouilly-Fumé on opposite banks of the Loire just east of the centre of France. The best of these wines, such as the Poully-Fumé of Didier Dagueneau and Baron de Ladoucette and Sancerre from the likes of Henri Bourgeois, Lucien Crochet and Vincent Pinard, have a minerality to them which distinguishes them from New World Sauvignon Blanc.

Some of France's best-value Sauvignon Blanc is made in the Loire's less famous appellations. Sauvignon carrying the straightforward Touraine appellation can be absolutely delicious in a good vintage - often more so than a Sancerre or Pouilly Fumé from overcropped vines (a common problem). The three small appellations just west of Sancerre - Menetou Salon, Reuilly and Quincy - can also offer excellent value. Sauvignon is also the grape of Burgundy's most unusual appellation, Sauvignon de St Bris, an exception to the general rule of Chardonnay or Aligote as the region's white wine grapes.

Sauvignon Blanc, often blended with the much fatter and complementary Semillon, is one of the two dominant white grapes of south-west France. Most white bordeaux is based on one or both of these with the most common blend for a sweet white Sauternes or Barsac being four parts Semillon and one part Sauvignon, sometimes with some Muscadelle, the Sauvignon adding vivacity to the richness of unctuous, often botrytised [nobly rotten], Semillon. Sauvignon Blanc is also grown in the Entre-Deux-Mers where it is increasingly important in improving Bordeaux Blanc as well as in Graves and Pessac-Leognan where, with Semillon in varying proportions, it results in substantial dry, oak-aged white wines. (One rare example of an all-Sauvignon example of this style of wine is Ch Couhins-Lurton, which even I have to admit ages extremely well.)

As in Bordeaux, Sauvignon is frequently blended with Semillon in neighbouring Bergerac where winemaking standards have been improving enormously. Indeed all over the world, Semillon may be used as a blending partner for Sauvignon and, curiously, slightly unripe Semillon can smell disconcertingly like Sauvignon Blanc.

Sauvignon Blanc has another highly successful sphere of influence which extends from Friuli in north-east Italy eastwards through Slovenia and Styria in southern Austria. Here piercingly clean, racy wines are made and the best producers are managing to make them more interesting with every vintage. The German synonym for Sauvignon Blanc is Muskat-Silvaner.

But some of the world's most famous Sauvignon Blanc is grown a very long way from Europe. New Zealand burst on the international scene in the 1980s with an extravagantly forceful, fruity style of Sauvignon Blanc and has never looked back. One region, Marlborough at the north end of New Zealand's South Island has set a benchmark for this style, in which bold flavours are thought by some scientists to have been encouraged by the notorious holes in the ozone layer in this part of the world. Here extremely vigorous Sauvignon Blanc vines seem particularly at home in the dry gravels of Marlborough's Wairau Valley. Cloudy Bay is the most famous producer but there are now countless others producing wines that either

impressively consistent or a touch boring, depending on your point of view.

Sauvignon Blanc is one of the few grapes with which New Zealand has had more conspicuous success than its overbearing neighbour Australia. But as the vine moves into ever cooler spots in Australia, so increasingly crisp and successful Sauvignon Blanc is made. The Adelaide Hills and such cool parts of New South Wales as Orange and Canberra District are clearly well suited to Sauvignon Blanc, and Western Australia has evolved a distinctively refreshing style of Semillon/Sauvignon Blanc blends.

New Zealanders may not be happy about it, but South Africa can produce some surprisingly elegant Sauvignon Blanc for such low latitude vineyards. Here there is a tradition of blending it with Chardonnay which I have yet to get to grips with but the vines are obviously very much at home here, particularly in the cooler coastal Overberg region, and the resulting wines can offer an attractively smoky halfway house between New Zealand and the Loire.

Sauvignon is the most common name seen on labels of Chilean white wine, but it does not necessarily signify Sauvignon Blanc. Much of what has grown there as Sauvignon is in fact Sauvignon Vert, or Sauvignonasse, a less distinctively aromatic variety, and there has not been too much discipline about identifying the difference between the two, unrelated varieties. Nowadays, however, it is only Sauvignon Blanc that is planted and the new, cool wine region of Casablanca Valley is clearly the variety's ideal spot in Chile.

A high proportion of North America's vineyards are too hot for appetising Sauvignon Blanc but California has its own style of full-bodied, slightly sweet Sauvignon, often enriched by oak ageing and, typically, called Fumé Blanc (although producers vary according to the style they label as Fumé Blanc and what sort of wine is labelled Sauvignon Blanc). Washington state can make some fine, racy Sauvignon Blanc and so, one day, may British Columbia across the Canadian border to the north.

Suggested labels:

Cloudy Bay, NZ
Isabel Estate, NZ
Sancerre Les Belles Dames, Henri Bourgeois
Pouilly Fumé Silex, Didier Dagueneau
Henri Pellé, Menetou Salon
Babcock Vineyards, Santa Barbara