

## Chenin Blanc

In my 1986 book *Vines, Grapes and Wines* (*Reben Trauben Weine*, Hallwag 1987 in German) - the world's first consumer guide to wine grapes I believe - I divided them into three categories: Classic, Major and Other (Klassische, Wichtige and Sonstige). Many wine lovers were doubtless puzzled that I included Chenin Blanc in the first category.

Certainly anyone whose knowledge of this chameleon of a white grape was based on the oceans of very ordinary Chenin Blanc for California or South Africa that was available then must have been very mystified indeed. But what earned and still earns Chenin Blanc its place with the greatest of grape varieties for me is its finest incarnation, as extraordinarily long-lived, uniquely-flavoured botrytised sweet wines in the Loire Valley.

Chenin has been grown around the town of Angers on the Loire for centuries, perhaps for more than a millennium. Rabelais mentions it both as Chenin and by its common Loire synonym Pineau. The wine it produces is notably high in acidity, which can be quite useful in a warm climate but can verge on the painful in the Loire's coolest vintages. In fact the one brake on Loire Chenin's reputation has been the sometimes dire quality of Chenin produced when the grapes just haven't ripened sufficiently to coax the unique Chenin flavours of flowers, damp straw and honey into the resulting wine, leaving little but acid and sulphur in the bottle.

Thanks to global warming, disastrous vintages are becoming a rarity in the Loire, and growers are, thank goodness, using less and less sulphur to stabilise these often off-dry to medium-sweet wines. A truly great Chenin Blanc is typically a Moelleux, the product of a hazy autumn on the schists of the Loire which encourages noble rot and results in a toasty golden wine that has all of the complexity of any botrytised wine but with the Chenin grapes' particular layers of molten honey and crisp, dancing acidity. Beware, however. For the moment French law is much more lax than German and the sweetness in some producers' Moelleux wines can owe more to cunning winemaking than genuine noble rot concentration.

Bonnezeaux, Coteaux de l'Aubance, Coteaux du Layon, Montlouis, Quarts de Chaume and, especially, Vouvray are all likely appellations for such wines, with Vouvray and Quarts de Chaume producing some of the most intense examples. On the other hand, Vouvray is such a large and varied appellation that the name can also be found on bottles of extremely lacklustre wines whose only attributes are a certain sweetness and a certain acidity and nothing in the middle to knit them together.

These are wines made very similarly to fine German white wines - low, slow fermentations in large old oak or stainless steel, no malolactic fermentation, no *barrique* ageing (although the indefatigable Bernard Germain is experimenting with 400-litre casks), pure fruit flavours - and so it is perhaps no surprise that they can last every bit as long. I have certainly enjoyed 80-year-old examples of these marvels.

But there are fine dry (Sec) Loire Chenin Blancs too, most famously Savennières, a tiny appellation famous for making stern whites that can take a decade to be approachable but have so much mineral extract that they can make great partners for quite flavourful foods. Jasnières and Anjou are both names that can be found on bottles of serious dry Chenin Blanc too (although Anjou is another very varied appellation).

Some Chardonnay and sometimes Sauvignon Blanc may be blended in to Chenin in Anjou and Saumur, but Saumur is more readily associated with sparkling wines, increasingly labelled Crémant de Loire. Chenin Blanc is usually the base and makes fizz that lacks the savoury depths of a great champagne but can be very pretty and delicate. Chenin's naturally high acidity makes it a particularly suitable base for sparkling wine. Sparkling Vouvray and Montlouis is made in much smaller quantities than sparkling Saumur but with age, these wines can become something very special indeed - not remotely like champagne; more like a deliciously rich champagne cocktail.

One of my favourite styles of Loire Chenin Blanc in general and Vouvray in particular is that labelled Demi-Sec, with some natural sweetness as well as all that refreshing acidity. (In fact so high is the acidity in many a young Loire Chenin that it can mask the sweetness.) Again, bottle age transforms this wine into something much more subtle and drier, so that it can be a perfect accompaniment to creamily sauced fish.

Today far more Chenin Blanc is planted in both California and South Africa than in France, but all too little of it is made with serious intent. California's vast acreage of Chenin Blanc came to the wine industry's aid in the 1970s and early 1980s

when it had a serious shortage of other white grapes, but now that there is a Chardonnay like Chenin is generally reviled as a rather bland, off-dry wine suitable only for the bottom end of the wine market. This is largely because it is irrigated to produce such high yields in California's Central Valley - up to four times as high as in the Loire - that it really does taste not unlike sugar water. But it need not, as some more conscientious vinifiers of fruit grown in Clarksburg in the Sacramento Delta have proved.

The South African wine industry is even more dependent on Chenin Blanc which, as a grape known locally as Steen, represented about one vine in every three not that long ago. Today it lacks the glamour of more recent European imports such as Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc but some producers have managed to coax serious wines out of some of the older, dry-farmed bushvines. Chief among these is Ken Forrester who has managed to produce a full range of well-made Chenins from the exceptionally good-value Scholtzenhof Petit Chenin right up to a Noble Late Harvest (much improved since Forrester did a vintage in the Loire and realised that you don't have to pick all the nobly rotten grapes at the same time).

Elsewhere Chenin Blanc is grown, if not exactly respected, throughout South America (where it has sometimes been known as Pinot Bianco) and in both Australia and New Zealand. The Millton Vineyard represents virtually a lone outpost of Chenin Blanc veneration in NZ; Can Rafols dels Caus its counterpart in Spain's Penedes. Long may they prosper.

Suggested wines:

- Huet's Vouvray Moelleux Le Haut Lieu
- Ch de Fesles Bonnezeaux
- Domaine du Closel Savennières Les Coulées
- Quarts de Chaume, Domaine des Baumard
- Clos Naudin Vouvray effervescent
- Joel Gigou Jasnières
- Forrester Grand Chenin, South Africa
- Chappellet Old Vine Chenin Blanc, Napa Valley