

Pinot Blanc

Useful rather than 'exciting' would be a fair description of this versatile grape variety. It is part of the vast family of vaguely Burgundian vines whose parents have recently been revealed by DNA analysis to be the noble, dark-skinned Pinot Noir and a rather obscure, ordinary white grape widely planted in Burgundy in mediaeval times, Gouais Blanc. Pinot Blanc's siblings include Chardonnay, Pinot Gris, Gamay, Aligoté, Sacy, Auxerrois and the Muscadet grape, Melon de Bourgogne. Of all these grapes, Auxerrois is the most similar to Pinot Blanc - the main difference being Auxerrois' tendency to ripen even more easily than Pinot Blanc.

The main characteristic of wines made from Pinot Blanc (and Auxerrois) is a certain roundness of flavour, verging on apparent sweetness sometimes because the acidity is relatively low. They are gently rather than demandingly appealing, having even fewer distinguishing marks than Chardonnay, and generally rather less body. This means that yields have to be really quite low before a Pinot Blanc can stand up to barrel ageing. These are wines to be drunk young while such acidity as there is is most obvious.

In the 1980s Pinot Blanc acquired extra glamour in certain regions, particularly north eastern Italy, because it was mistaken for Chardonnay, then the most fashionable grape in the world. South Africa had its own problems when the great majority of the early vines thought to be Chardonnay proved to be Auxerrois - and only those imported illegally, avoiding the official quarantine process - could truly, if somewhat incriminatingly, be sold as Chardonnay.

Pinot Blanc - often blended with Auxerrois and called Clevner or Klevner - is Alsace's everyday white, though it is not planted as widely as more 'noble' varieties in this most Germanic of French wine regions. The best examples have the sort of smoky perfume common to virtually all Alsace whites.

The grape is also planted in Luxembourg but Auxerrois is valued more highly in this northern wine region because it is naturally lower in acidity.

As Weissburgunder, the vine's influence in Germany has been increasing, like all three grapes with 'burgunder' in their names. By 2001 there were 2,795 hectares of Weissburgunder planted, many of them in Baden and Pfalz with some in Sachsen and Saale-Unstrut. Here, these usefully easy-to-ripen grapes are sometimes treated to barrel ageing, though this has to be done with a hand as light as that of Weingut Rebholz in Siebeldingen before the effects are truly pleasing. Spaetlese trocken is the most successful ripeness level for this grape in these southern German wine regions. Eastern German Weissburgunder tends to be much lighter and tarter.

Austria is perhaps the country which values Weissburgunder the highest - particularly around the shallow Neusiedlersee where grapes can ripen to exceptional ripeness and botrytis is almost an annual occurrence. The variety is also grown in Styria where Alois Gross makes an attractively crisp example in Kittenberg and in Lower Austria as well as by some in the vineyards around Vienna. The Austrians also treat their ripest Weissburgunder, often blended with other grape varieties, particularly Chardonnay, to oak ageing. Some of Burgenland's finest Weissburgunders are made around the little town of Gols by the likes of Matthias Beck, Gernot Heinrich and Matthias Leitner.

But it is probably in Italy that, as Pinot Bianco, this vine is most widely grown, and produces the greatest diversity of styles. It is widely used by the sparkling wine business for blending with Chardonnay and on the sub-alpine terraces of the Alto Adige it can produce refreshing, lively wines such as Alois Lageder's Haberlehof Pinot Bianco, usually untroubled by oak ageing.

On export markets the name Pinot Bianco hardly has the cachet of Pinot Grigio but in Collio and Isonzo in Friuli hard up by the border with Slovenia (where it can also produce similarly dazzling wines) it seems particularly at home. Here the grape's natural body and breadth of flavour combines well with the lively raciness that results from the climate and super-clean winemaking methods here and the wines are much in demand from Italians seeking interesting whites, both oaked and unoaked, from the likes of Mario Drius, Felluga, Jermann and Schioppetto.

Perhaps the most ambitious Pinot Blanc on the planet is made by the intense Sebastiano Castiglioni of Querciabella in Chianti. This estate's Batàr is modelled on Bâtard Montrachet, no less, and is made from a blend of Pinot Bianco and Chardonnay given extremely expensive and, it has to be said, sometimes extremely obvious French oak ageing.

In Slovenia, Croatia and Vojvodina, Pinot Blanc is quite widely grown, as Beli Pinot, and is sometimes treated too barrels, particularly in Slovenia which copies the Friuli habit of blending several grape varieties together in some of its best whites.

A smattering of Pinot Blanc is grown all over the New World - although Pinot Blanco is a common misnomer for Chenin Blanc in Latin America. Some of the best is grown in British Columbia in western Canada where the naturally high acidity and well-delineated fruit flavours suits this sometimes too amorphous variety.

Much of the older plantings of 'Pinot Blanc' in California, particularly in Monterey, have turned out to be the Muscadet grape Melon de Bourgogne - although the newer plantings in Carneros, mainly for the sparkling wine industry, are true Pinot Blanc. The Bien Nacido vineyard in Santa Maria in the Central Coast grows some especially good Pinot Blanc, as has Chalone in its time. Au BonClimat makes a particularly deep-flavoured, ambitious blend of Pinot Gris and Pinot Blanc with a little Aligote (all siblings) called Hildegard after the woman who supposedly encouraged Charlemagne to plant white grapes in Burgundy's Corton vineyard of so as to make his wine-stained beard less unappetising.

Today, Pinot Gris is more fashionable than Pinot Blanc almost everywhere, perhaps because it is more perfumed, fuller-bodied and distinctive. But for easy, good-value drinking in a style that is likely to offend no-one, I often find myself recommending a good quality Alsace Pinot Blanc such as one of those below as a choice for a large party of drinkers without a particular interest in wine.

Some top Pinot Blancs

Rudi Pichler, Kollmuetz Weissburgunder Smaragd 2001, Wachau
Marcel Deiss or Meyer Fonne Pinot Blanc, Alsace
Rebholz Wiessburgunder Spaetlese trocken EG (unoaked), Pfalz
Schioppetto Pinot Bianco, Collio
Querciabella Batàr, Toscana
Jermann Pinot Bianco, Collio
Felluga Pinot Bianco, Collio
Au Bon Climat Hildegard, Central Coast, California