Semillon

18 Oct 2006 by JR

Semillon (Sémillon in French) is one of those grapes like Riesling which tends to be much more appreciated by wine insiders than by the average wine drinker. They know that, were it not for the richness of Semillon the wine and the thin skins with their propensity to be nobly affected by botrytis/Edelfaule of Semillon the grape, we would not have the truly great category of wines that is Sauternes and Barsac, the longest-living wines in the world. (I have been lucky enough to taste a Ch d'Yquem from the early 18th century that was far from dead.)

They also know that Semillon grapes, underrated in much of the world, can produce arguably much more interesting, subtle and long-lived dry white wines than the Sauvignon Blanc that is so often grown alongside - not least in Sauternes and Barsac where the standard recipe is 80 per cent Semillon to 20 per cent Sauvignon Blanc plus a dash of the local Muscadelle. In many warmer wine regions Semillon with its naturally relatively low acidity can need the nerve and crispness provided by Sauvignon Blanc, but made well, dry Semillon can be an intriguing, full-bodied wine with a satisfying combination of citrus, honey and grassiness. Indeed underripe Semillon smells so like Sauvignon Blanc than one is tempted to believe that they must be closely related even if DNA analysis has not yet proved this.

Semillon's homeland is undoubtedly south west France, not just Bordeaux but the many surrounding wine regions such as Bergerac (although here some of the finest producers of sweet white Monbazillac treasure the Muscadelle vine even more). It is an ingredient with Sauvignon Blanc, both major and minor, in both basic Bordeaux Blanc and the great, dry, oaked whites of Graves and Pessac-Léognan – indeed some would say wines such as Château Haut Brion Blanc and Laville Haut Brion (both about two-thirds Semillon) express the grape at its very finest in a dry wine. These wines are immensely rich yet dry and can last for decades, taking on an extraordinary depth, density and lanolin smoothness with wonderfully lemony acidity, with age. Other fine dry white wines from the gravely soils south east of the city of Bordeaux can have a similar quality in good vintages although in some there is a tendency to oily oakiness, and not always with great age.

But it is the sweet wines of this part of the world that are a true miracle. To harvest grapes that have been perfectly affected by botrytis, their sweetness and acidity concentrated to extraordinary levels and an extra layer of longevity added to boot, can involve many different passages through the vineyard to harvest each bunch at an optimum stage of infection (often looking disgustingly as though they are coated in ash). Careful vinification and long ageing in new oak barrels can result in some of the world's most luscious, long lived wines which are never light in the way that a great botrytised Riesling can be, but should always be appetising and taste as though they contain the elixir of life itself. Such wines can be surprisingly good matches with a wide variety of savoury foods, most notably blue cheese, foie gras and shellfish but with many other dishes too. There are still too many simple sweet white wines made in Bordeaux, however, which owe their sweetness not to the mysteries of noble rot but to simple arrested fermentation or added grape concentrate. Other sweet wines on the fringes of Sauternes and Barsac which owe much to Semillon include Loupiac, Cerons and Ste Croix du Mont.

Semillon is not difficult to grow. In fact, unless its yield is decimated by botrytis, it is naturally quite productive, and its characteristic bright green leaves earned it the title 'green grape' for many years in South Africa where it was by far the most planted grape variety in the early 18th century – so much so that then it was actually just called 'the wine grape'. It is now only the fifth most planted white wine grape but South Africa still producers a wide range of varietal dry Semillons as well some dessert wines. Some of the more admired exponents of dry varietals include Steenberg, Cape Point Vineyards and Landau du Val. It is increasingly found, though not always labeled, as a blending component with Sauvignon Blanc, and other varieties as in Vergelegen's much garlanded blended white.

Semillon's modern New World stronghold is Australia. In the mid 20th century the grape was most famous for a wide range of great, low-alcohol, long-living dry whites produced in the Hunter Valley north of Sydney. Variously called Riesling, Chablis and White Burgundy depending on smallish variations in style, the wines were made from Semillon grapes picked early (before the Hunter's frequent summer rains) and developed the most distinctive burnt toast characters in bottle. In today's fast-forward age, this particular style of Semillon designed to age is rare, although the Hunter Valley specialises in this style of wine made from grapes picked early enough to yield a wine with only about 11 per cent alcohol. These wines are quite austere in youth but can age magnificently for 10 years or more. In the rest of Australia Semillon is picked much riper and given oak ageing and malolactic fermentation to produce a much richer, earlier-developing wine, particularly in the Barossa from the likes of Grant Burge, Peter Lehmann and St Hallett. The cooler, southern vineyards of Western Australia produce one or two fine varietal dry Semillons such as those of Fermoy Estate. And Australia's most expensive Semillons are the sweet ones made in the image of Sauternes, almost exclusively in the irrigated Riverland vineyards of the interior such as De Bortoli's Noble One. They can be very impressive (and good value) when young but can become blowsy fairly quickly.

But Semillon is most in demand today with Australian wine drinkers as an important ingredient in the popular wine style, "Sem-Sav", Semillon blended with Sauvignon Blanc. Drinkers appreciate the refreshing aroma of the Sauvignon Blanc on top of the weight and ballast of the Semillon. The style was born in Western Australia but has become popular throughout the country. In fact over the past 20 years or so it has been Semillon's fate to play second fiddle to a more popular blending partner. In the 1980s when there was a chronic shortage of Chardonnay grapes in Australia, the popular way to deliver the C-grape to the consumer without breaking the bank was to create blends of 'Sem-Chard'. A little Semillon is also grown in New Zealand, notably on the east coast of the North Island.

Until quite recently, Semillon was very widely planted in Chile, even if it was rarely seen as a varietal wine there. Recently Chardonnay and Sauvignon have become much more popular however and few producers really take the variety seriously. In Argentina too it is mainly encountered as an ingredient in a blend.

In North America it is infrequently encountered on a wine label although noble exceptions include Ecole 41 in Walla Walla which has produced an interested, full bodied, lemony dry varietal Semillon for years and Manfred Kunkel of Mr K who makes a sweet version from Semillon grapes grown in California's Central Coast.

Semillon, with its long history in Bordeaux, is such a familiar part of the wine world's furniture that it pops up all over the place – in Greece, in Turkey and in parts of eastern Europe. It is, without doubt, an under-used resource.

Some top Semillons (or Semillon-dominated wines)

Château d'Yquem

Chateau Climens

Chateau Laville Haut Brion

Chateau Haut Brion Blanc

Tyrrells Vat 1 Semillon Hunter Valley

McWilliams Mount Pleasant Semillon, Hunter Valley

Margan Semillon, Hunter Valley