Loire

20 Aug 2008 by Jancis Robinson

In a nutshell: France's most varied, and neglected, wine region. Most wines notionably crisp.

Main grapes (going downriver): Sauvignon Blanc, Cabernet Franc, Gamay; Chenin Blanc, Melon de Bourgogne.

Outside northern France, the Loire, with the exception of Sancerre and Pouilly-Fumé, has been consistently overlooked by modern wine enthusiasts. Perhaps it's because at this northerly limit of commercially viable viticulture the grapes have had to struggle to ripen, at least until global warming kicked in, so the wines' hallmark is relatively high acidity.

Long, hot summers have traditionally been the exception, so relatively few of the reds conform to the current expectation of high density, alcohol, tannin and obvious oak ageing although climate change and better vineyard management are contributing to riper versions of Cabernet Franc.

Most of the whites here are made to the recipe of trapping the fruit in the bottle as early as possible, without exposing them to new wood but dry, barrel-fermented Chenin Blanc is a growing phenomenon. It may perhaps seem strange that the wine regions with easiest access to the best oak in France (the forests of the Nevers, Allier and Tronçais are all in the upper Loire) are not great users of it, but grapes have to be really quite ripe before their fermented juice can take the weight of an oak barrel.

Another factor may be the relative complication of wine names and identities here. The same name, Saumur or Anjou for example, may be applied to a range of wines that includes all three colours and a confusing range of grape variety possibilities and sweetness levels.

France's longest, laziest river joins not only some of the most beautiful châteaux and what was once the playground of the French court and is now that of well-heeled Parisians, but also scores of wine districts which can, very roughly, be divided into three zones: the Sauvignon-dominated vineyards of the Upper Loire; the Muscadet region at the mouth of the river (more than 300 miles downstream from Pouilly-sur-Loire and Sancerre); and the vast and varied vineyards in between, which produce some great sweet and some useful sparkling white wines as well as a host of still reds, whites and rosés from a host of grape varieties of which Chenin Blanc, Cabernet Franc, Gamay and Sauvignon Blanc are the most important.

Upper Loire

Sancerre and **Pouilly-Fumé** (sometimes called Blanc Fumé de Pouilly) are the Upper Loire's, indeed the Loire's, most famous ambassadors. The two wine districts are separated only by the river, and the hilltop town of Sancerre is just 10 miles north west of the decidedly unspectacular Pouilly-sur-Loire. Both of these much-exported wines are made exclusively from Sauvignon Blanc grapes into lean, green, sappy, aromatic palate-sharpeners. Such has been demand for them in the world's restaurants that most of the wines made under either appellation are remarkably similar.

Neatly hedged rows of Sauvignon vines traverse the gentle slopes above the river, where vineyards are interspersed with cereal crops and sunflowers for this is an area of mixed farming. Mechanical harvesting has been the norm for some time and the combination of a damp climate and generous yields can result in almost aggressively aromatic, light-bodied, relatively tart wines reeking of nettles and cats' pee.

Only at the highest quality level is the particular nature of the various terrains in the appellations apparent. Serious restaurants in Sancerre, for example, list their local wines under the names of the appellation's best-favoured communes such as Bué, Ménétréol and Chavignol, where some of France's best *crottins*, or miniature drums of goat's cheese, are made.

The region's *enfant terrible* was Didier Dagueneau, a gifted and energetic producer of Pouilly-Fumé based in a modest cottage in St-Andelain just north of its grandest building, the Château du Nozet, home farm of the Upper Loire's best-known wine producer, Baron de Ladoucette. Dagueneau, who died at a tragically early age, believed passionately in reducing average yields, in restoring soil texture and quality through *biodynamic viticulture*

, an extreme form of *organic viticulture*

. A few, though not many, producers followed him in a move towards making wines concentrated enough to benefit from fermentation and ageing in new oak.

However similar the wines may be, locals argue that the inhabitants of Pouilly and Sancerre are creatures from two different planets, or at least from two different French regions, which amounts to much the same thing: greater Burgundy and Berry respectively. In wine terms the two districts differ because Sancerre produces some light red and rosé appellation contrôlée wine from Pinot Noir grapes, while Pouilly-sur-Loire is the name of a much lighter, blander wine made from Chasselas, more often grown as a white table grape.

Other superior producers include Henri Bourgeois, Cotat, Lucien Crochet, Gitton, Joseph Mellot, Henry Pellé, Vincent Pinard and Vacheron.

Reuilly, Quincy, Menetou-Salon are wine districts to the west of Sancerre producing wines of a very similar style to Sancerre and Pouilly-Fumé but sometimes with more appealing craftsmanship. Their names are so much less well known that the wines have to find a market purely on the basis of their inherent quality. Claude Lafond, Jean-Michel Sorbe and Pierre Clément make reliably good wines.

Some favourite producers: Gérard Boulay, Henri Bourgeois, Cotat, Lucien Crochet, Didier Dagueneau, Gitton, Alphonse Mellot, Henry Pellé, Vincent Pinard, Château de Tracy, Domaine Vacheron.

Middle Loire

Wine geography is at its most complicated along the central, westbound stretch of the Loire. Travelling upriver from the Muscadet region, the wine enthusiast is first bamboozled by **Anjou**, the name of the region around the city of Angers, associated with the often grimly sweet commercial **Rosé d'Anjou**; the extraordinarily long-lived fine pink **Cabernet d'Anjou**; the distinctly variable, dry and medium dry, Chenin Blanc-dominated **Anjou Blanc**; crisp, light reds under the names **Anjou Rouge and Anjou-Gamay**; and, finest of all when the region is blessed with a hot summer, smooth, silky Cabernet-moulded reds under the **Anjou-Villages** appellation.

The grape which reaches its apogee in the Middle Loire is the often underrated Chenin Blanc. In cool years it may simply produce a tart, relatively aromatic medium-dry white (historically with too much sulphur), but when nature co-operates in producing thoroughly ripe grapes and, ideally, the magic mould *noble rot*

, such appellations as **Coteaux de l'Aubance, Coteaux du Layon** and, especially, the particularly well-favoured enclaves **Chaume**, **Quarts de Chaume** and **Bonnezeaux** within it, can produce great, honeyed, long-living sweet white wines to rival some of the best in the world. Some ultra-sweet Sélection de Grains Nobles wines are also made.

Savennières is Anjou's minuscule but world-famous dry white Chenin Blanc appellation. Nicolas Joly at Coulée de Serrant keeps the famous flame alight and is one of France's most vociferous proponents of *biodynamics*. These minerally, age-worthy wines can be hard to appreciate when young, and the combination of high demand and low production neatly restricts the wines to their greatest enthusiasts.

Some favourite producers: Domaine de Baltiet, Domaine des Baumard, Pascal Cailleau, Château de Chamboureau, Philippe Delesvaux, Château de Fesles, Domaine des Forges, Christian Papin at Domaine de Haute Perche, Claude Papin at Château Pierre-Bise and Vincent Ogereau.

Saumur is the next region upstream and the eponymous town is best known for its usually dry and racy sparkling wines, whose tiny, often persistent bubbles can demonstrate considerable winemaking skill. All that prevents these wines from finding a wider market is the decidedly un-champagne-like flavours of the Chenin Blanc grape which dominate **Saumur Mousseux** and the more ripe-ously made **Crémant de Loire**, although increasing quantities of Chardonnay used in these traditional-method wines are beginning to 'internationalise' them. Three outposts of Champagne houses perform particularly well here: Bouvet-Ladubay (Taittinger), Gratien & Meyer (Alfred Gratien) and Langlois-Château (Bollinger).

Saumur's other claim to wine fame is **Saumur-Champigny**, the Loire's most fashionable, and therefore often overpriced, Cabernet Franc-based red. In particularly ripe years these fragrant, silky-textured, gulpable liquids can benefit from careful maturation in small oak barrels. Filliatreau,Foucault and Ch de Hureau are some of the better producers, and superior bottlings can continue to evolve for years in bottle.

The Loire's most famous reds, **Chinon**, **Bourgueil** and **St-Nicolas de Bourgueil**, are made to the same recipe as Saumur-Champigny, indeed Chinon is virtually an eastern extension of it. Bourgueil can be the beefiest, longest-living Loire red of all while the lighter St-Nicolas de Bourgueil is even more rarely seen outside its own parish. All three appellations fall within the Touraine wine region, around the city of Tours, where the landscape is dotted with wine cellars and even houses carved out of the soft, well-drained limestone known as tuffeau, to which the region's châteaux owe much. Gifted producers in these appellations include Daniel Chauveau, Pierre-Jacques Druet, Charles Joguet and Olga and Jean-Marie Raffault.

Touraine is one of France's most confusing wine names. White versions can be made from any or all of four grape varieties (although Sauvignon is the most common and the best examples can rival wines of the Upper Loire). Reds and rosés may be a blend of Gamay (the most common), Cabernet Franc, Cabernet Sauvignon, Cot (Malbec), Pinot Noir, Pinot Meunier, Pinot Gris and two local vine varieties Pineau d'Aunis and Grolleau. An early-bottled Touraine Primeur version rivalling Beaujolais Nouveau is a further confusion. The districts of Amboise, Azay-le-Rideau and Mesland are allowed to append their name to the Touraine appellation but offer no guarantee of superior quality.

Cheverny and **Valençay** are two small Touraine satellites which have managed to avoid being subsumed into the appellation Touraine.

Some favourite producers: Philippe Allet, Yannick Amirault, Bernard Baudry, Pierre-Jacques Druet, Charles Joguet, Henry Marionnet, Olga and Jean-Marie Raffault.

Touraine's arguably most distinctive wines are **Vouvray** and its reflection across the river **Montlouis**. Like the great sweet wines of Anjou, they are made from Chenin Blanc grapes, and vary considerably in quality and even style according to the year's grape sugar level. In great years such as 1947, 1989 and 1997, the combination of noble rot, sky-high sugar levels and the naturally high acidity levels of Chenin grown this far from the equator ensure that the deep green-gold versions labelled *moelleux* or *liquoreux* will last virtually forever. In cool years, however, the grapes may well be better suited to making a crisp base for sparkling wine. And between these two extremes a host of wines labelled *sec* (dry), *sec tendre* (off dry) and *demi-sec* (medium dry) are made. Many a top quality dry Chenin has emerged from the better cellars over the last few years and they can develop for years in bottle, just as the sweet ones can last for decades. Even the demi-sec versions have enough tang to make them delicious partners for many fish dishes, notably those involving a creamy sauce. Quality-conscious producers include Jacky Blot at Domaine de la Taille aux Loups, Domaine Delétang, Foreau of Clos Naudin, Fouquet of Domaine des Aubuisières, Domaine Huet of Le Haut Lieu in Vouvray and Domaine Tailles aux Loups and Olivier Delétang in Montlouis.

Parisians should not be allowed a monopoly on all the best wines of the Loire: the stylish sparkling wines and, in riper vintages, the dry, barrel-fermented Cheninn and the nobly rotten sweeter ones and keenly priced, refreshing Cabernet-based reds..

Muscadet region

The **Muscadet** region at the mouth of the Loire, like Brittany to the immediate north, is quintessentially oceanic. Clouds and sea spray blow in off the Atlantic, untainted by any contact with land for thousands of miles. The relatively light, neutral wine was the creation of the energetic Dutch in the 17th century (they encouraged locals to plant the Muscadet grape, the slightly vapid Melon grape of Burgundy) and, as it happens, the terrain round Nantes looks perfectly suited to windmills and tulips.

Muscadet de Sèvre-et-Maine, named after two small rivers which flow to the south and east of Nantes, is by far the most common form of Muscadet. Because the Melon grape is not exactly flavour-packed, many local winemakers leave the fermented wine on the lees, *sur lie*, for several months in order to leech a bit more character (and often an appetisingly light tingle) into the wine. When Muscadet was popular as France's white answer to Beaujolais, the term *sur lie* was far too generously applied and the regulations were, not before time, tightened in 1993. Some ambitious producers – notably Bossé, Guindon, Landron, Marquis de Goulaine, Master de Donatien, Louis Métaireau, and Sauvion – have been turning their Muscadets into 21st century wines by using oak and dramatically reducing yields, but 95 bottles of Muscadet out of 100 should be drunk as young and casually as possible. **Muscadet Côtes de Grandlieu** is theoretically a more floral style of wine from the west of the region.

Gros Plant is the region's light, tart white varietal for masochists.

Some favourite producers

: Domaine de l'Ecu, Bossé, Gadais, Guindon, Günther-Chéneau, Landron, Marquis de Goulaine, Louis Métaireau, Sauvion.

Travelling upstream from the mouth of the Loire, the very light whites of the **Fiefs-Vendéens** are like Muscadet shadows, while **Coteaux d'Ancenis** and **Vins du Thouarsais** are on the fringes of Anjou-Saumur. **Haut-Poitou** is far from the river itself, well south of the Touraine, and produces a wide range of well-made modern wines almost exclusively from a single co-operative. **Coteaux du Loir** is the confusingly named northern outpost of Touraine, with some very fine dry **Jasnières** being made from Chenin Blanc grapes - most successfully by Joël Gigou and Aubert de Rycke. **Coteaux du Vendômois** makes light wines around the town of Vendôme, while Orléans and Gien give their names to the local **Orléans** and **Coteaux du Giennois** on the most significant bend in the river Loire.

Well inside that bend are Gamay-dominated **Chateauneuf-sur-Loire**, which makes wines from a wide range of grape varieties, with the Loire's hallmark of high acidity and relatively light body.