New crus for Muscadet

5 Sep 2011 by Richard Hemming

Last week Muscadet gave birth to three new crus: Clisson, Le Pallet and Gorges. These crus communaux have been created 'to push Muscadet wines up-market, in an effort to establish a centre of excellence' according to InterLoire, the local professional body.

They describe the newcomers as follows:

CLISSON

This area, known as 'Little Venice' is set on a granite fault in the Armorican Massif. The soil here is a naturally free-draining mix of gravel and pebbles, encouraging the vines to drive their roots right down to the heart of the terroir. Wines produced here require long periods of maturation – at least 24 months – to develop their rich flavours of candied fruit, dried fruit and quince.

GORGES

Gorges straddles both sides of the river Sèvre, and has a variety of soils ranging from gabbros to clay and quartz. Harvests in this area are usually relatively late, well after other areas, so a fine Indian Summer can pay dividends. After at least two years of ageing on their lees, the wines develop good complexity: smooth, with an intense vein of minerality and a distinctive smoky flavour.

LE PALLET

Le Pallet is located on the right bank of the river Sèvre. The main distinguishing element of this terroir is its warm weather, which gives rise to early harvests. Soils here are shallow and stony, on a base of gneiss (metamorphic rock) and gabbros, making it sufficiently porous for the vines to root well and deeply. Le Pallet wines mature for some 17 months to develop their elegant aromatic profile which features floral, fruity flavours.

Furthermore, regulations are imposed across all three crus in pursuit of quality. Yield must not exceed 45 hl/ha, potential alcohol must be between 11 and 12% and vines must be at least six years old. It is not without bureaucratic fudge, however: these wines will be aged on their lees for 18 to 36 months, yet may not cite themselves as 'sur lie'. This is because the law demands that 'sur lie' be 'reserved for wines aged on their lees between 1 March and 30 November of the year following the harvest, that is those which are still on their lees at the time of bottling, which, by law, must take place at that time.'

Across the Loire, the harvest is in full flow, two weeks ahead of the five year average. As in many French regions this year, successful wines will require prudent selection and skilled winemaking. High temperatures and thunderstorms have been plaguing the region of late, creating anxious times for the vignerons.