

The Muscadet of reckoning: a call to action

25 Jan 2013 by Richard Hemming

Extinction is governed by two irreconcilable forces. On the one hand, natural laws of evolution demand that the weakest must die. On the other, human laws of conservation demand intervention to save those most at risk.

What would be on the red list of endangered wines? We might not fret too much over the uglier looking specimens (exhibit A, pictured: [the purple frog](#)), but what about the pretty ones? Not hock and cream sherry, but Muscadet and Beaujolais?

Beaujolais was, until recently, decidedly off trend. The annual 'nouveau' malarkey was anything but. In 2002, the head of the Grand Jury of European Tasters dismissed Beaujolais as '[vin de merde](#)'. In 2006, the region's biggest producer [Duboeuf was fined](#) for fraudulent blending. In 2007, over 100 growers were accused of buying sugar for illegal must enrichment.

But in 2009, the fortunes of Beaujolais changed. The vintage produced wines of excellent quality, and when they came to the market in 2010, the reception was rapturous. Buyers, writers and drinkers all took notice – Jancis wrote of the [year of Beaujolais](#). Beaujolais was rehabilitated and revived, and not a moment too soon – in the UK, after at least 14 years of decline, sales began to show a pulse.

Now, in 2013, Muscadet needs our help. The prospects in this part of the Loire are as bleak as its outlook into the cold, restless Atlantic. Muscadet is an endangered species, and the opportunity to save it lies with us: in our wallets and purses. Every cheap Pinot Grigio or branded Sauvignon Blanc we default to is a vote against wine's great diversity.

Let us sing the praises of the Melon from Burgundy. Let us talk of [Clisson, Gorge and Le Pallet](#). Let 2013 be the year that every dog has its Muscadet.

My tone may be droll (or at least attempting to be so), but the cause is quite serious. Loire courtiers Charles and Philippa Sydney estimate that over the last year, over half of Muscadet's growers have 'gone bust or simply given up' because 'bulk prices have been pushed way below production costs'.

This isn't simply a charity case, though. (Besides, there are many unfortunate regions where growers struggle to make ends meet, for all sorts of complicated reasons.) More importantly, there is one overriding reason why Muscadet deserves our attention: the 2012 vintage is brilliant. It has pin-sharp acidity with great natural balance, delicious typicality of salty, citric flavour and perhaps above all, superb concentration of fruit. It is everything you wish Muscadet would be, especially after the poor 2011 vintage, beset as it was with fungal disease.

The reason for that concentration, sadly for the growers, is calamitously low yields – 'between 13 and 25 hectolitres per hectare, which is less than half what they need', according to the Sydneys. The culprit was the same grim weather conditions that have tainted 2012 as a write-off across Europe, despite the fact that many regions are delighted with the quality.

Prices remain remarkably low in spite of this hardship. At a recent Loire tasting in London, the best 2012 Muscadet I tasted, Ch de Cléray (and it was brilliant), can currently be got for less than £8 at Majestic Wine, who sold three times more than they expected of this particular wine since they listed it, according to their buyer Chris Hardy.

It appeals, then, to anyone in search of value. It appeals to those seeking lower alcohol (with its maximum stipulated strength of 12%). It appeals to the mainstream drinker with its *en vogue* style of high acid and citrus fruit. It even appeals to our better nature.

It is, in short, the most appealing white wine of 2013, and I urge you to buy it.