

# LOIRE

**H**istorically a significant source of French white wine, accounting for approximately 8% of the country's vineyards (approx. 500,000 hectares) in 2006, the Loire has struggled despite consolidation among producers in recent years to see off global competition. France still represents the key market, particularly for its sparkling wines.

The three key white varieties grown in the Loire continue to be the Melon de Bourgogne (Muscadet), Chenin Blanc (Vouvray) and Sauvignon Blanc (Sancerre and Pouilly-Fumé). Muscadet, lying on the western Atlantic coast and planted on granite soils still accounts for approximately 40% of Loire's production, mostly made by *négociants* at modest prices. Chenin Blanc is mostly vinified as sparkling wine although is produced in a plethora of others styles (dry, off-dry, *moelleux*, sweet) under famous names such as Savennieres, Coteaux du Layon and Vouvray. However, its relative anonymity as the source of these fine wines does little to win over consumers. Sauvignon Blanc only became known as such with the rise of New Zealand's eponymous industry during the 1980s. Formerly the grape was known to a previous generation as Sancerre and Pouilly-Fumé, responsible for approximately 15% of Loire production (2006). Since Cloudy Bay convinced millions into both thinking about and drinking this 'Kiwi' grape, the Loire producers have been like rabbits caught in the headlights, unsure whether to try and beat them or choose a different path. One Sauvignon Blanc region of the Loire that has really suffered from the Kiwi onslaught has been the Touraine; once the *de facto* wine of choice for those looking for a simple Sauvignon Blanc. Here the wines have fallen between two stools, failing to match the crowd-pleasing aromatic appeal of the New Zealand examples while lacking the *terroir* and branding of Sancerre or Pouilly-Fumé.

While Muscadet prices and aspirations have remained stubbornly low, there are signs that

Chenin Blanc may at last be showing signs of revival among the smaller artisan estates of Layon, Vouvray and Touraine. Meanwhile the Sauvignon Blancs of Sancerre and Pouilly-Fumé are finding it hard to carve out a living among a new generation of drinkers for whom Sauvignon Blanc is synonymous with the Southern Hemisphere. The authorities have responded by hiring (antipodean) winemaking consultants to bring more consistency and ripeness to their wines. An increasing number are adopting barrel vinification to build further complexity into their wines; a move that should also catch the eye of the wine press.

Global warming has helped deliver a higher level of ripeness – indeed often too much so – but this is being offset by a greater prevalence of disease. This is especially the case among the Cabernet Franc vineyards of the Anjou-Saumur region that account for nearly 25% of Loire's production (2006). Historically drunk locally, the red wines of the Saumur-Champigny, Bougueil and Chinon are finding it hard to attract broad interest on the world stage. They may have the *terroir* but do not have the presence, especially coming from what is a region better known for its whites.

The future of Loire wines surely lies in their ability to deliver outstanding examples of their grape varieties as interpreted through their advantageous *terroir*. There needs to be more producers achieving the level of quality shown by the likes of Francois Cotat (Sancerre), Gaston Huets (Vouvray), Nicolas Joly (Savennieres), Domaine de la Chevalerie (Bougueil) and Didier Dagueneaus (Pouilly-Fumé).

#### Vintage Notes

Vintages over the past decade have again seen a high level of consistency, with nothing less than good and a wonderful series from **2002-2005**. Of the last 10 years **2002**, **2005** and **2010** have been outstanding.

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