

A New Taste for Old World Sauvignon Blanc

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SAUVIGNON BLANC-that razor-sharp, refreshing white wine with its lively aromatics and uplifting acidity-is one of the most popular grape varieties in the world. Ask any wine retailer which white they sell the most of and it is odds on the reply will be Sauvignon. I know of one major U.K. merchant that sells more than 10 million bottles a year; another retailer told me that if he could construct a pipe from New Zealand to Europe that carried only Sauvignon Blanc, he would save a fortune in shipping.

From the cooler spots in South Africa, to the northern tip of New Zealand's South Island, to the slopes of Bordeaux and the Loire Valley, this scintillating wine has been cultivated to much success. But what do we really know about its true character?

Where it is produced in the New World-by which I mean New Zealand, South Africa, California and South America-it has a pugnacious kick. One sniff reveals a jumble of flighty aromas jostling for the attention of our olfactory receptors. Gooseberry, sweet herbs, fennel and freshly sliced green pepper bounce off a base of mouth-puckering, thirst-quenching acidity.

In the Old World-in France's Loire Valley and Bordeaux, where it is often blended with Sémillon-it has a more delicate character. Crisp and racy, the wine retains that appealing acidity, but the aromas are more restrained, with notes of grapefruit and white flowers. I like to think of these wines as diametrically opposed to their New World counterparts, with all the power coming on the palate after the first sip has been swallowed.

In France, they seldom label their wines Sauvignon Blanc. Instead, they expect the consumer to know the handful of villages where it is grown. I suspect that, rather like the Chardonnay lover who doesn't drink Chablis (even though it is made of Chardonnay), the majority of those 10 million consumers who buy well-known international brands of Sauvignon like Oyster Bay and Blossom Hill have no idea that wine labeled with the villages of Sancerre, Pouilly-Fumé and Quincy is also made from Sauvignon Blanc.

But while many are happy drinking the New World expression (and why not? it is often exquisite), those wanting to explore wines with a little more delicacy and complexity should look no further than the vineyards of Sancerre and Pouilly-Fumé.

It has been four years since the region lost one of its most respected winemakers. Didier Dagueneau was just 52 when, in 2008, his microlight plane crashed in the Dordogne. Dagueneau, whose aim was to make the best Sauvignon Blanc in the world, did more for showcasing the potential quality of the Loire's Sauvignon than perhaps any other. A disciple of Burgundy's Henri Jayer, his wines displayed a pinpointed purity and taut freshness.

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"He learned alone and was very meticulous and precise," Charlotte Dagueneau says of her father. "He could have made quantity but he chose quality. He traveled to Burgundy to see what they were doing and when he came back, he said we have the same thing as Burgundy." Ms. Dagueneau now runs the estate with her brother Louis-Benjamin.

All of their wines have their own distinct charm: an attractive purity and minerality. "We are just respecting nature and soils," says Ms. Dagueneau. "We don't use any chemicals. We harvest by hand, take care of the grapes, work slowly and age the wine in oak barrels. It is just common sense. "

Silex is their standout wine, with layers of complexity and flavor simply not found elsewhere. As well as a dry, gunflint taste on the palate, the marriage of a creamy texture with a ferocious attack is sensational. On a first sip, I wrote: clean, purity, energy and zing. The greatest Sauvignon Blanc in the world? Perhaps. I have seldom tasted better.