

WINE News

The wines of the Loire are made for springtime.



MAY 7, 2018 FEATURES

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Loire: No Easy Task

By Keith Mabry

Settling into my role as the Loire Valley wine buyer has been a touch tumultuous. A short but very informative visit to the Loire in 2017 set the tone for my new position with an abundance of gorgeous wines. The 2015 whites and reds were lush, open and delicious, and somewhat plentiful. Also during my visit, many 2016s were presented. For those who have followed the weather patterns in France, 2016 was a tragic vintage due to a late frost. The quality was exceptional, but many producers lost huge amounts of fruit and some didn't even make wines. The profiles of the wines are more classic, with less opulent fruit, and with just not much being available. My visit was in early spring of 2017,

and as I departed the region an early budbreak had just begun for many properties. But again, a late and devastating frost set in. Two back-to-back short vintages are troubling for many producers, especially the smaller ones that are struggling to make ends meet. The frost created low yields across the entire region (and it is quite a large region), with some wineries at record low production levels. Recently, after some extensive tasting of the 2017 whites, however, so far the quality looks great once again—just not much wine. So the trick is to take advantage of what we have as it arrives, because many of your favorite producers will run short this year.

2016 Jacky Preys “Cuvée de Fié Gris” Touraine Blanc Vieilles Vignes (\$16.99)

This rare plot of Fié Gris (Sauvignon Gris by another name) was discovered by winemaker Jacky Preys in the 1980s. Jacky has been responsible for identifying and recultivating this unusual heirloom grape variety. The wine has a nose similar to Sauvignon Blanc, with notes of nectarine and orange peel. A richness on the palate leads to a persistent finish. The vines are between 30 and 50 years old and all the grapes are hand harvested and fermented with native yeasts.



2016 Domaine la Clef du Récit Sancerre (\$19.99)

Winemaker Anthony Girard has earned the keys to the castle (clef is French for key) with this extraordinary and harmonious Sancerre. It was a breakout star for us in 2015, and the new vintage is a stellar followup with its gorgeous grapefruit nose and mineral-laden palate. The wine captures the nerve and essence of the 2016 vintage and resonates beautifully on the palate. Some next-level Sancerre here.



2016 Joël Taluau “Expression” Saint-Nicolas-de-Bourgueil (\$12.99)

Saint-Nicolas-de-Bourgueil is a deceptive terroir with a large hill in the background and a long slope ambling down to the Loire River. It may not seem like much, but layers of clay, sand and gravel rest over the core of what is important—the limestone bedrock beneath. This yields one of our favorite Cabernet Francs year after year with its ripe cherry, brushy sage and olive tapenade flavors.



Crisp, Clean Value from Bedouet of Muscadet

By Elsa Baez

I recently attended the “Spring to Loire” tasting and seminar event in San Francisco and have not only gained even more enthusiasm for these wines, but also a fascination with the Loire Valley region.

The Loire Valley has many different soil types and climates that make for a diverse wine growing region. In one of the event’s seminars, which focused on the wines of Muscadet, Master Sommelier presenter Bob Bath enthusiastically extolled the beauty, cleanness, crispness, and aging abilities of Muscadet wines, and expressed why we should be excited about them. If there was one takeaway from the presentation, it is that like most Loire Valley wines, Muscadet wines over-deliver considering how inexpensive and available they are in the United States.

The first thing to understand is that Muscadet is actually a region or appellation, not a varietal like Chardonnay or Sauvignon Blanc (a common misconception is Muscadet is Muscat). The wines of Muscadet originate from the Pays Nantais portion of the Loire where a grape known as Melon de Bourgogne is unique to the region.

Pays Nantais itself borders the Atlantic Ocean, providing a maritime climate similar to that of Bordeaux and having a striking influence on the character of the grape. The vineyards of Muscadet cover nearly 23,000 acres with a mixture of different soils ranging from gneiss,

mica schist and smaller amounts of granite. All of these factors deliver complex wines that display subtle flavors of fruit and herbs along with expressions of earth.

Bedouet is an organic producer with whom we recently began a new Direct Import relationship. Their story begins with Henri Bedouet, a cooper, sharecropper and winegrower in the early 1900s. Today, his grandson Michel is the winemaker for the family operation.

The **2014 Bedouet “Expression du Pallet Vieilles Vignes” Muscadet Sèvre et Maine Sur Lie (\$16.99)** comes from gneiss and mica schist soils, which contribute to its profile of ripe fruit. A sense of salinity, minerality and a toasty note give it even more depth and complexity. I could easily drink this wine with crab cakes or even pair it with fish plates in rich sauces.

If you’re ready for a new “go-to” white wine for a great price, I highly recommend giving Muscadet wines a try. You will not be disappointed!



Eric Cottat (left, with K&L's Clyde Beffa Jr., right) points the way to incomparable Sancerre value.

Catch Eric Cottat While You Can

By Keith Mabry

My visit last year with Eric Cottat was brief but memorable. He has become one of our most desirable producers in Sancerre with each release selling out shortly after it arrives. Eric works his vineyards sustainably with an unerring eye for detail and minimal intervention in the winemaking. This is our last call on the **2016 Eric Cottat Sancerre (\$18.99)** with its profile of grapefruit, lemon zest, gooseberry and chalky minerality. It is quite pleasurable with its vibrant acidity and crunchy finish.

Those on the hunt for quality Pinot Noir with classic red fruit, dusty spices and juicy acidity should check out the **2016 Eric Cottat Sancerre Rouge (\$19.99)**. All from a two-and-a-half-acre parcel, this 100% Pinot Noir is reminiscent of the zesty Marsannays of Burgundy.





In the cellar at Couly-Dutheil in Chinon.

Chinon for the Cellar, Chinon with Dinner Tonight

By Morgan Laurie

To age or not to age, that is the question! Working in wine retail, we are often asked about what wines to age and how long one should age them. Truth be told, it depends. Chinon, for example, produces both wines that are intended to be drunk young and fresh and wines that are built to age for ten or more years.

In step with the French notion of terroir, Cabernet Franc from Chinon heavily reflects the soil in which the vines are grown. The soil of Chinon can be divided into three main types: alluvial silt terraces composed of gravel and sand that sit along the banks of the Vienne River; Turonian chalk outcrops also along the banks of the Vienne; and flinty Senonian clay and tuffeau limestone on the hillsides. The sand and gravel soils on the banks of the Vienne River produce lighter, elegant wines for early drinking while the richer clay and tuffeau limestone soils of the hillsides produce a fuller-bodied wine with more structure, better for longer periods of aging.

Chinon tends to be an overlooked region but one that rewards those who venture into its territory with affordable, food-friendly and captivating, aromatic wines. Cabernet Franc is prized within France for its versatility. It's thought of as a bistro wine, but don't consider that a bad thing—it's not a knock on Cabernet Franc or a dismissive descriptor insinuating the wine is basic. The grape's ability to fit into any weeknight meal, from rich vegetable-based dishes to burgers to tomato or vinegar-based sauces (think barbecue or pasta), has earned it that moniker. Cabernet Franc is also an ideal summer red, and takes very well to a slight chill. The younger, early-drinking Cab Francs would be right at home in a backyard cookout.

The **2016 Domaine Noiré "Soif de Tendresse" Chinon (\$15.99)** is a certified organic wine from vines aged 25 to 30 years. Stylistically, it is produced for early enjoyment and the palate feels lively and youthful. I tasted this once when it was just opened,



then again several hours later. The first pass was already showing well: aromatic and soft. By the time I tasted this again, it was singing! The nose was so perfumed with tons of violet, sage, wet leaves, red clay and dark, ripe berries. The palate was soft and inviting, true to its name: "Soif de Tendresse," or "thirst for tenderness."

Named for a synonym for Cabernet Franc in Chinon, the **2016 Domaine de Pallus "Messanges Rouge" Chinon (\$15.99)** is another charismatic, budget-friendly Chinon. Biodynamic since 2010, the wine is vinified in concrete to maintain lift and vitality. The small amount of oxygen that reaches the wine while in concrete allows for a very gentle micro-oxygenation similar to being in barrel, helping the wine retain a lifted purity of fruit. The Domaine de Pallus has high-toned, bright red fruits, plums, cherries and strawberry along with a forest floor note of earth and an incredible florality of rose petals and lavender. **90 WS**

The complexity of these two under-\$20 wines is a testament to why Cabernet Franc from Chinon is some of the best value in French wine.

While many wines from Chinon are intended to be drunk young, there are many that are built to age, or already have significant bottle age to them. For consumers looking to cellar their own bottles, the **2014 Charles Joguet "Les Varennes du Grand Clos" Chinon (\$32.99)** is built for the long term. Just beginning to hit its stride, this could cellar for potentially ten years, gaining complexity and an added softness from the extra time maturing in bottle. The palate has more structure than I'm used to with a Chinon, but it's all very well balanced. The nose is elegant and fine-spun with brambly black raspberry and blueberry coulis, crushed rocks, dried savory herbs and dried lavender. Again, I tasted this twice, once when it was first opened and once the next day, which perfectly illustrated why I (and you) should decant your Chinons! They open up marvelously. **94 W&S, 92 WS**



If you tend to be an impatient wine enthusiast (like me), you can pick up entirely affordable Chinon that already has some age on it. One producer to look to for quality bottle-aged Chinon is Couly-Dutheil. I recently tasted through the **Couly-Dutheil 1997 "Clos de l'Olive" Chinon (\$46.99)** and the **Couly-Dutheil 2002 "Baronnie Madeleine" Chinon (\$29.99)**. The Clos de l'Olive was incredible, full of savory, damp cedar, pencil shavings and wet forest floor. The palate still had so much vivacity! If I tasted this blind and you told me it was from 1997, I wouldn't have believed you! The Baronnie Madeleine was full of rusticity with notes of animale and sauvage, desiccated wet leaves and menthol. The palate conforms with this cuvée, mirroring the rustic side of aged Chinon. Whether you're looking to pop the cork and pour tonight, build your cellar or affordably explore aged reds, Chinon has you covered with a little bit of everything.



Rosé Season — It Begins!

By Keith Mabry

Even though 2017 is a little short, as vintages go, for the Loire Valley, we are still gearing up for a very promising rosé season. A few of our new Direct Imports from the Loire are just landing, plus we have a couple of really keen new offerings that are both unique and utterly gulpable. Let *Rosé Season* officially begin!

Domaine les Pins sits in the heart of Bourgueil. It is an area that is lately garnering attention for the quality of their Cabernet Franc-based red wines. There is also a more recent history of really fun rosé production that should not be overlooked. Some of the best and most unique pink wines from the Loire come from Bourgueil. The **2017 Domaine les Pins “Les Rochettes” Bourgueil Rosé (\$12.99)** is produced from the gravelly and sandy soils sitting over the limestone bench that makes Bourgueil special. The nose of strawberry and red currants is fresh and intense and hints of lavender and rosemary remind you of the character of the region. This is a perfect sipper for bruschetta or creamy goat cheese with olive oil and balsamic vinegar, or a salad of greens, strawberries, almonds and Manchego cheese.

When a social media blitz erupted over the previous vintage of Forty Ounce rosé, it became one of our biggest surprise hits of 2017. The **2017 Julien Braud “Forty Ounce” Rosé (1L \$15.99)** is made by Julien Braud in the Sèvre et Maine appellation (home of Muscadet). It is composed of 53% Gamay, 33% Merlot, 10% Cabernet Franc and 4% Pineau d’Aunis and fermented using native yeasts. Julien uses organic and biodynamic practices in all of his winegrowing and makes sure that all the fruit he uses for the “Forty” is farmed using sustainable practices. Don’t let the kitschy package fool you, this is a pretty serious rosé with a vibrant pink hue, and laced with gorgeous flavors of white cherries and



strawberry with a hint of marjoram. The palate is full for a rosé and keeps on going. This is a terrific wine for just hanging out with friends and having a little nosh of roasted root vegetable and grilled meats.

One of my go-to rosés of the season is always the J. Mourat, and it’s not just the adorable little owl on the label that makes it special for me. From the area south of Muscadet known as Fiefs Vendéens, the wine is a blend of Pinot Noir, Cabernet Franc, Negrette and Gamay. The **2017 J. Mourat “Collection” Val de Loire Rosé (\$12.99)** has a freshness of white peach and a raspberry skin texture that is engaging. I love the feel here and its length on the palate, which is full of the aforementioned raspberry fruit, and there is also a light orange peel note that makes this a great food pairing. With its great acidity and texture allowing it cut through spicy foods, it is a delicious wine to serve with lovely Thai curries or chicken larb.



The Sancerre rosé from Domaine des Côtes Blanches is always a treat and always one of my favorite Pinot Noir rosés of the season. Vigneron Nicolas Millet has taken the helm of this family operation, originally established in the 1930s, and began moving the winemaking toward organics in 2008. Nicolas makes wonderful blancs and rouges but the rosé is always a standout in the category. The **2017 Domaine des Côtes Blanches Sancerre Rosé (\$19.99)** shows a lighter color with an elegant nose of white flowers, fresh picked strawberries and a crisp cherry finish. Even more fun, we have a limited number of half bottles (**375ml \$9.99**) and magnums (**1.5L \$39.99**) suitable for all your summertime drinking needs. The Côtes Blanches is the perfect accompaniment to salmon glazed with a mustard tarragon sauce or mussels steamed with garlic, sausage, and of course, a little rosé wine!

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