

sauvignon blanc

OVERVIEW

VARIETAL ORIGIN

Sauvignon Blanc hails from the Bordeaux and Loire regions in France, both on the Atlantic coast. Every vineyard in Bordeaux is in close proximity to a body of water, whether it be one of the three rivers that cut through the territory, or the ocean itself. The Loire is one of the largest growing regions in the country, and is divided into more than 50 appellations. Many diverse wines are made throughout, but the one thing all districts have in common is an extremely cool northern climate. Similar to Champagne, the Loire offers the coolest conditions possible in which to grow and ripen grapes.

More specifically, the best-known wines from Bordeaux are made in the Graves region, and in the Loire, from the Sancerre and Pouilly- Fumé areas. Other notable Sauvignon Blanc producing regions include Chile, Australia, South Africa, the Tre Venezie in Italy, Washington State and New Zealand. The latter has had a profound effect on the shape and direction of the varietal in the New World.

THE DOWN-UNDER FACTOR

New Zealand's first wines were made in the early 1800's. The following 150 years were tumultuous for the industry at best. Overcoming strict laws, vineyard pest infestation, and a major re-planting to more suitable varieties, New Zealand has created its own standard of Sauvignon Blanc. By virtue of its island geography, no vineyard is more than 80 miles from the ocean. The resulting marine influence keeps the climate cool and temperate, allowing for the grapes to ripen slowly; a long growing season very similar to the conditions in the Loire. The finished wines are also similar in that they show the same vibrant acidity. Intrinsic flavors to the New Zealand wines however, are passion fruit, fresh lime, green melon, gooseberry, wild herbs, and tropical fruits.

CALIFORNIA MODERN DAY

Sauvignon Blanc was brought to California in the late 1800s, and planted in the Livermore Valley just east of San Francisco. The vines flourished in the Graves-like gravelly soils and produced good quality fruit, but inconsistent winemaking styles confused the American consumer, and the varietal didn't catch on initially. In the mid-1960s wine legend Robert Mondavi found himself with long-term contracts with Sauvignon Blanc growers and realized the need to find a way to appeal to the consumer. In a brilliant marketing move he decided to switch the name to Fumé Blanc. It was a huge success and revived sales of the varietal for all makers.

Using the Mondavi example, France, and then New Zealand as benchmarks, many California wineries are producing exemplary Sauvignon Blancs and Fumé Blancs. As its popularity grows, more acreage of the varietal is being planted. Over 2400 acres were harvested in Sonoma County alone in 2004. Napa came in it at about 2000 acres, and San Luis Obispo County picked grapes from just over 900 acres.

TANGENT SAUVIGNON BLANC

Owned and farmed by the Niven family, the Paragon Vineyard in the Edna Valley of California provides grapes for this wine. Originally planted in 1973, these are most likely the oldest Sauvignon Blanc vines south of the North Coast. With the Pacific Ocean lying only four miles to the west, its influence creates one of the longest growing seasons in the state. As in the cool climates of both France and New Zealand, the grapes leisurely ripen, creating fruit of structured minerality and good acid backbone.

Winemaker Christian Roguenant doesn't take Sauvignon Blanc making lightly; in fact, he has developed quite a complicated method. Not only does he harvest in three stages, he keeps up to ten or eleven lots separate the entire way through the winemaking process. Additionally, he employs traditional techniques to achieve pure varietal character in his finished wine.

Christian harvests at different levels of ripeness in order to achieve his ideal finished wine. One portion is picked a bit early; the higher acid and lower sugar in the berries bring a crisp citrus and slight herbal character. The middle portion is harvested at balanced ripeness, while the third is picked a little later in the season. The fruit in this last batch provides tropical notes and a round mouthfeel. Clusters are picked from different vineyard blocks at each of the three stages, and fermented separately. About a third of the lots were cold soaked for six hours to extract aromatics. Stainless steel tanks provide the perfect environment, and the fruit is kept at a cool 55 degrees during fermentation, usually lasting six to eight weeks. There is no oak influence or malo-lactic fermentation, as Christian sticks to the age-old methods. There are generally ten or so separate wines made during the winemaking process, and he painstakingly blends them to his liking before bottling.

"a departure from the ordinary, **tangent** explores the limitless possibilities of alternative white wines"
