

MAJOR GRAPE VARIETIES OF THE LOIRE VALLEY

There is no single predominant grape variety in the Loire Valley. Fine wines are made from a large number of varieties, some well known and some particular to the region. This is in part tradition and in part because within such a large area, there are numerous soil types and micro-climates where certain grapes are more successful than others. However, within the variety, all Loire Valley grapes have certain qualities in common. All of them can ripen fully in the relatively short growing season of the Loire Valley. The mild climate also insures relatively high acidity, which gives the wines, no matter how ripe, a refreshing leanness. Thus certain the Cabernet Franc Chenin Blanc and Sauvignon Blanc for example show their best qualities in the Loire Valley and set standards for the rest of the world.

Cabernet Franc, the most important red grape of the Anjou-Saumur and Touraine region, is a close relative of Cabernet Sauvignon. It ripens earlier than its more famous cousin, making it better suited to the cooler climate of the Loire. It probably originated in Bordeaux, where it is mainly used for blending, but it is so well suited to conditions in the Loire Valley that it stands alone in such famous wines as *Chinon*, *Bourgueil* and *Saumur-Champigny*.

Cabernet Franc, also called Breton locally, came to the region no later than the 14th century. It was praised by Rabelais, the great epicurean writer who was born near Chinon, and Cardinal Richelieu selected it for exclusive planting at St. Nicolas de Bourgueil, where it has been grown ever since. It is only in recent years, however, that its particular affinity for the climate of the Loire Valley has been widely recognized and planting has increased markedly as a result. The success of Cabernet Franc in the Loire Valley has sparked interest elsewhere, and winemakers in cooler climates in the New World (notably in New York State) have planted the grape with very good results. However, as with Chenin Blanc and Sauvignon Blanc, international standards for Cabernet Franc are set in the Loire Valley.

Cabernet Franc can make lighter bodied, less tannic wines than many other red grapes and they are generally ready to drink soon after bottling. However, a reputation for refreshing, youthful wines should not obscure the fact that there are full bodied wines made from Cabernet Franc that are capable of aging magnificently over many years. In its youth Cabernet Franc has the aroma of red raspberries and cherries, but it develops more complex notes as it ages. Fine old Cabernet Franc wines can, in the words of one Loire Valley winemaker, be reminiscent of the aromas of a forest after a rainstorm.

Young Cabernet Franc is an ideal red wine for summer. It is sufficiently fruity that it can be refreshing when served slightly chilled, yet it has enough structure to stand up to the flavors of a barbecue. Older, bigger wines are delicious with roasted meats and are probably the ideal accompaniment to the traditional roast leg of lamb with flageolet beans.

Cabernet Sauvignon, despite its international popularity, plays a secondary role in the Loire Valley. It is blended in quite a few red wines of the Loire to add weight, and used alone in some rosés as well.

Chardonnay is the most popular white wine grape in the world, but in the Loire Valley it is used as a blending grape. It adds structure and richness to sparkling wines and can be used in Saumur Blanc and Anjou Blanc, but it never makes up more than 20% of the blend.

Chenin Blanc, also called Pineau de la Loire, may have come to the Loire Valley more than a thousand years ago. It was firmly established by the 15th century, and was also praised by Rabelais. Although widely planted in the United States and in South Africa, it attains its definitive expression only in a one hundred mile stretch of the Loire Valley between Blois and Savennières. Unlike any other grape except the Riesling, Chenin Blanc can be vinified in a range of styles from austere, mineral, and refreshing to rich, honey-sweet, and its versatility surpasses Riesling in that it also makes excellent sparkling wine.

Chenin Blanc buds early and ripens late. This presents an element of risk in the Loire Valley, which is among the northernmost viticultural areas in France, but the grape compensates in many ways. In those years when the autumn is exceptionally warm, when there is no rain and when frost is late, Chenin Blanc is subject to *botrytis cinerea*. Also called “noble rot,” botrytis is the mold responsible for all great sweet wines, from Sauternes in Bordeaux to Germany’s Trockenbeerenauslese to Hungary’s Tokaji. Botrytis causes the grape skins to become permeable, allowing water in the grapes to evaporate, and causing the grapes to shrivel on the vine. The juice of these overripe grapes is highly concentrated and very sweet, but balanced with a refreshing acidity, the marks of a great dessert wine. The vineyards of *Quarts de Chaume*, *Bonnezeaux*, *Coteaux du Layon* and *Vouvray*, for example, can produce long-lived sweet wines that are the equal of any.

Sweet wines can only be produced in those exceptional vineyards where shelter from wind and exposure to the sun create very particular conditions, but in other vineyards Chenin Blanc produces dry wines of the first quality. The wines of *Savennières* and the dry wines of *Vouvray* possess all the rich pungency of their sweeter counterparts. Although some of these wines are occasionally aged in oak, the taste of wood is always restrained, leaving the character of the grape intact. This fruitiness, paired with the natural acidity of Chenin Blanc make these superb table wines.

Finally, Chenin Blanc is the primary grape for many of the *Fines Bulles* (or fine bubbles), the sparkling wines of the Loire Valley. Although other grapes may be added (according to the standards of the individual appellation) Chenin Blanc is almost always dominant in these delightful wines.

Côt is the local name for Malbec, another red grape that makes excellent red wines in other areas, but which is used primarily for blending in the Loire Valley.

Gamay is used primarily to make rosé wines in Anjou and Saumur. It can also be used in the blended red wines of those areas. Touraine Gamay is red wine made entirely from Gamay. It can be made in a light, fruity style for consumption *en primeur* (with no aging at all) or in a fuller style for longer keeping.

Grolleau (or **Groslot**) is a red grape grown only in the Loire Valley. It is highly acidic and is used mainly for blending, especially in sparkling wines and rosé. In rare cases it is used by itself.

Melon de Bourgogne is better known as **Muscadet**, the name of the wine that it produces. This is the dominant grape of the area around Nantes on the coast of Brittany, where the Loire meets the Atlantic Ocean. Muscadet has such a bracing sea tang, and such an affinity for the shellfish of the Breton coast – especially the superlative Belon oysters of the region – that it may come as a surprise that the Melon de Bourgogne is a relatively recent arrival, and its dominance in the region was the result of one terrible winter.

The Melon has a long history but not all in one place. As the name implies, the variety originated in Burgundy but was removed from the vineyards there in the 16th century, as other varieties proved more successful there. However the ability of the vines to withstand frost made it attractive to winemakers in Anjou, where it was also eventually edged out by other varieties. At the same time it caught the attention of Dutch distillers further downstream, who needed a dependable supply of wine to make brandy. The Dutch started planting Melon in vineyards near Nantes, the most convenient port from which to ship the wine to Holland, in the 17th century. At the time the area was planted primarily with red grapes but when the worst winter in recorded history devastated the vineyards in 1709, causing barrels to burst in the cellars and even freezing the coastal waters, the Melon was one of two varieties to survive and it has dominated the region ever since.

Although it was originally a rather neutral wine, Muscadet producers have refined their methods to make wines with distinctive attributes. In particular, the wine can be designated as *Muscadet Sur Lie*, indicating that it has been left on the lees for the winter between fermentation in autumn and bottling in spring. This allows the wine to develop a fuller flavor and a slight carbonation that gives the wine additional freshness. For the most part, these wines are best drunk young, but in exceptional vintages certain *Muscadet Sur Lie* can be kept for several years and, in rare cases, decades.

Melon de Bourgogne, despite its name, achieves its best expression in the Loire. It is rarely planted elsewhere. As Muscadet, however, it produces one of the friendliest, most refreshing wines in the world.

Menu Pineau is a red grape particular to the Loire Valley. Once widely planted, it is now used only for blending.

Pineau d'Aunis, like the Grolleau and the Menu Pineau, this grape is grown only in the Loire Valley and often used in blends in Touraine. It can also be used by itself to make light bodied and aromatic red *Coteaux du Loir*. Traditionally, Pineau d'Aunis was also called Chenin Noir

Pinot Gris is grown in the Centre Loire where, unlike its uses in most other parts of the world, it makes pale rosé wines.

Pinot Noir is the red grape of the Centre Loire, most famously in red Sancerre but also in Menetou-Salon and Châteaumeillant. These tend to be lighter wines that one often associates with this grape.

Romorantin – Unique to the Loire, this little known white grape is used in the refreshing, fragrant white wines made in and around Cheverny. The appellation Cour-Cheverny was created as a designation for wines made entirely from Romorantin.

Sauvignon Blanc may have originated in Bordeaux, but it is in the limestone soil of the Centre Loire, that it shows its best, most characteristic qualities. Although widely planted the world over, and highly successful in such widely different climates as California, New Zealand and Chile, all Sauvignon Blanc aspires to standards set in the Centre Loire. The climate here is too cold for later-ripening grapes (such as the Chenin Blanc) but Sauvignon Blanc buds late and ripens early, making it ideal for a region prone to severe frosts and harsh winds. Sauvignon Blanc is rarely blended with other grapes in the Loire Valley and it is responsible for the distinctive characters of Sancerre, Pouilly Fumé, Reuilly, Menetou-Salon, Quincy and Touraine Blanc.

Sauvignon Blanc is almost always dry, yet there is diversity within the refreshing, fruity and almost tart style that predominates these wines, and there are few more vivid demonstrations of the ways in which different soils can determine the character of wines made from the same grape, than to taste the great wines of the Centre Loire side by side.

Much Sauvignon Blanc is made for early drinking. With their distinctive aroma, which reminds some people of gooseberries and other of grapefruit, and their fresh, lively acidity, these are ideal wines to drink with the famous goat cheeses of the Loire Valley (*Crottin de Chavignol* comes from the same village as some of the best Sancerre), with seafood, or with a summer picnic. Nonetheless, the high acidity of Sauvignon Blanc means that the wines can be kept, and a few producers have experimented with aging exceptionally ripe vintages in oak. These wines are richer and take longer to show their best qualities. With time, however, they develop a remarkably fragrant complexity that makes them seem almost sweet, better paired with aged cheeses, and even with foie gras, rather than with shellfish.