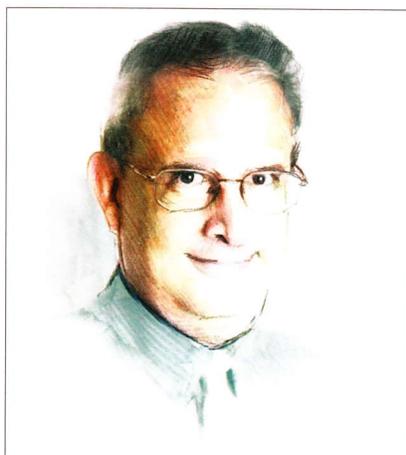


## The tragedy of Chenin

Chenin Blanc remains today the least understood and the most underrated of France's top grape varieties—and the few Chenin enthusiasts that do exist are not enough to change that. For the vast majority of consumers, Chenin is an unknown quantity, and raving about rebellious wines is simply not the answer. My recent visit to the Loire Valley Wine Trade Fair (with its ever-more-numerous spin-off events) only served to confirm my fears.

That said, it wasn't all bad, not by a long chalk. The revival of dry white Saumur is particular cause for celebration. As a young journalist back in the 1980s, I remember watching, appalled, as vineyards on limestone-rich slopes in places like Montsoreau and Turquant were stripped of Chenin vines and replanted with Cabernet Franc, which ripened much less well in its new location. The white wines sold badly, often bought in bulk by customers armed with their own plastic containers—wines clumsily made, not necessarily all that dry, and spoiled by excessive amounts of sulfur dioxide. The sad truth is that these otherwise exceptional vineyards produced very mediocre results. The Champigny wines were even more disappointing, made from overproductive, overloaded Cabernet vines that need limestone soils richer in clay to give really good red wines. (That, of course, is precisely the kind of soil you find at the heart of the AOC, in Parnay and Varrains around the Champigny basin, where Cabernet Franc is in its element.) Hence the outstanding quality of those few well-crafted whites, like Clos Rougeard from the Hill of Brézé across the Loire, which proved such an inspiration for the next generation of winemakers—even if it did take them a while to get the style right. Too many of the wines were overoaked (hoping to equal or even surpass Burgundy wines). And there was too much emphasis on ultra-ripe grapes, usually containing too great a proportion of nobly (and



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sometimes not-so-nobly) rotten grapes. Some wines underwent malolactic fermentation, as recommended by inexperienced enologists in the belief that this would somehow produce wines "closer to nature." Instead, it invariably resulted in heavy, brownish, oxidized wines, with pronounced notes of lactic acid that entirely contradicted the spirit of the chalk in which the vines were grown.

### Saumur chalk and Anjou cheese

We now understand the genetic relationship between the Chenin and the Riesling varieties, along with the importance of malic acid as a flavor enhancer in wine. But it took a really good taster to make that connection back then. Many did, I'm glad to say—people like Jean-Pierre Chevallier, Mathieu Vallée, and Arnauld Lambert, whose wines have restored Saumur to its former glory. These are mineral wines in the real sense of the word, rather like Saumur's answer to Chablis grand cru: dry and intense, with that acidic bite that comes from Chenin grown in chalky soils.

Today's Anjou wines, on the other hand, are a complete disaster. The worst offenders, no matter how stylish, are so horribly unbalanced that their producers actually demote them to vins de table, knowing full well that

they would never pass the taste test required for AOC approval. You name it, these wines dish it up: stale *choucroute*, old cheese rind, rancid butter, moldy dough, and other malodorous flavors, all spawned by the sexual antics of the wild yeasts that end up driving the fermentation. An abusive relationship, you might say—and you would be right.

### Grape and soil perfectly in tune

But it doesn't have to be that way. After many years spent studying the behavior of his wild yeasts, the admirable Jacky Blot in Montlouis has dared to select out particular strains, aiming for a predictable fermentation that brings out the complexity of his grapes and chimes with his principles as a responsible grower. His wonderful Remus bottlings and the sublime Vouvray Clos de Venise should serve as examples to "rebellious" winemakers everywhere. But I was sorry to hear the criticisms leveled against master growers and winemakers such as Florent Baumard, whose ten-vintage Savennières Clos St-Yves and Clos du Papillon vertical tasting left me quite literally speechless. What a superb expression of schist-grown Chenin: grape and soil perfectly in tune, with none of the bitterness you sometimes get with schist, especially in poorly extracted wines that are made from unripe grapes.

The 2006 and 2007 are still available to buy, and they remain as astounding as ever they were. Their extraordinary combination of honey and mineral saltiness reminded me of the greatest Raveneau Chablis, with maybe even greater length and fullness on the palate. Then, of course, there's the unparalleled 2002—sure to make an inspired match for the Loire's finest salmon, if you happen to be in Anjou in wild-salmon season, eating in a restaurant that's choosy about its suppliers.

Sweet wines, meanwhile, are another story—and they will be the subject of a future article! ■