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Flight #2: Albariño/Alvarinho

Aveleda 2013 Minho Alvarinho
Aveleda, Pawtucket, RI

Martín Codax 2012 Rias Baixas Albariño
E&J Gallo, Modesto, CA



Like Champagne, the Atlantic coast of Spain and Portugal is a place where vines often struggle to fully ripen their grapes. Traditionally, the Portuguese have embraced this fact, turning out light, tart alvarinho with palate-whetting levels of malic acidity.

The Spaniards, however, are not as unequivocally enthusiastic about it. In the Val do Salnés, the center of vinegrowing in Galicia, the climate is even cooler than that of the Minho in Portugal, with an average temperature of 55°F and plentiful rain coming in off the Atlantic, just three miles away. At Martín Codax, winemaker Luciano Amoedo regularly puts a portion of the production through malolactic.

The differences are clear, the Aveleda simple, sharp and angular, the Martín Codax broad, satiny and generous. Frank finds the Minho wine fits the style her customers are looking for in alvarinho—“that lightness and freshness.” And Josh Greene, who’s traveled extensively through northern Portugal and into Galicia agrees: “The Aveleda tastes like the grape, clean and simple. The Martín Codax is more stylized,” he says, pointing out that it benefits from a ripe vintage and a softening touch of ML.

Flight #3: Savennières

Domaine du Closel 2011 Savennières
Clos du Papillon

Louis/Dressner Selections, NY

Domaine des Baumard 2011 Savennières

Domaine des Baumard 2011 Savennières

Clos du Papillon

Vintus, Pleasantville, NY



“I prefer Savennières without malo; I like the the sparseness of the structure.”
— Christy Frank

Malolactic used to be anathema with chenin blanc in the Loire Valley; the variety’s searing acidity was part of the definition. Florent Baumard told us that his father, Jean, a professor of enology in Angers, was among the first to experiment with inducing malolactic fermentation in the Loire Valley.

Today, usage varies widely. Big producers use it to make friendlier, more readily drinkable wines. It’s talked about a lot in the natural wine community, where some use it to stabilize their wines, so they can add less sulfur. It’s handy in cooler vintages, Lepeltier points out, when chenin’s high acidity can verge on meanness.

These three Savennières all come from the same general area; two come from the Clos du Papillon and the other comes from the 15-acre Clos Sainte Yves vineyard, between the Clos du Papillon and Roche aux Moines. The soil at Clos Sainte Yves is shale, sand and sandstone as opposed to the more volcanic soils of the Papillon; the other difference is the amount of ML.

“I tend to prefer Savennières with malo,” says Pascaline Lepeltier after tasting all three. “I find it couples nicely with chenin’s phenolics.” For her, it goes along with raising the wine in oak barrels instead of stainless steel tanks, and using the advantages of oxygen to make a more open, developed wine. Her favorite of the three is the Baumard Papillon, a chenin that manages to be both firm and structured yet round and lush—and goes through 100 percent ML.

Frank, on the other hand, prefers the Closel, which hasn’t gone through ML.. “I like the sparseness of the structure,” she says. “It still has texture and weight, but it’s not so heavy.”

This brings up an interesting point. “With ML, I always thought of smell and taste,” says Frank, and we all agree. “But [in this tasting], it’s much more about structure,” Frank says. “The malo wines all have this circular feel; they are juicy, with no angles, like the chubby cheeks of a young child.” ■