

NEW AND ENTIRELY DIFFERENT

by Michael Apstein



“Muscadet loves the ocean,” quipped François Robin, a representative of the Fédération des Vins de Nantes, as we stood together on the beach at La Bernerie-en-Retz, overlooking the Atlantic Ocean. As we were being buffeted by the cold saline-scented winds amid a light drizzle, my usual love for the ocean faded quickly.

Still, there is no question that Muscadet and the ocean are a perfect pairing. A prominent feature on any seafood restaurant’s wine list, these zesty and refreshing wines have always been ideal with steamed or raw clams, oysters on the half shell or just about any other creature from the sea.

The category has just got better with the introduction of the Muscadet crus: wines that convey more complexity and even a touch of Burgundian sensibility. Though the crus differ from one another, they are thrilling and completely different from “classic Muscadet” — a term that growers are adopting to describe traditionally-framed wines to emphasize the difference between the two styles. They have more depth, weight and minerality. They are more substantial yet maintain

balance and an enlivening freshness.

Consumers need not worry that the clean and cutting style of Muscadet they know and love will disappear. When the cru system is fully in place, cru wines will represent only about 10 percent of Muscadet’s acreage and about two percent of its production, according to Pierre-Jean Sauvion, President of Communication for Inter-Loire. Furthermore, talks I have had with producers and prices I have seen lead me to conclude that classic or traditional Muscadet will still be considered “exceptional value” because premium consumers are willing to pay over and above for wines from crus.

The crus have already altered the region’s reputation as a source for light, crisp white wine suited to shellfish and

little else. Don’t get me wrong, Muscadet is still the go-to wine for simple shellfish, but the crus have taken Muscadet to another level.

Muscadet growers have identified villages within the broader region capable of producing distinctive wines. French wine regulators have agreed that these villages (crus) have unique terroir and can produce wines very different to traditional Muscadet. This new AOC (appellation d’origine contrôlée) or AOP (appellation d’origine protégée) — growers decide which term to use — will prominently display the name of the village on the label along with the broader region, Muscadet Sèvre et Maine or, in one case, Muscadet Coteaux de la Loire. In some cases, the Muscadet moniker is even relegated to the

MICHEL BRÉGEON'S 2013 GORGES HAS ALL THE DENSITY AND POWER YOU'D EXPECT FROM THIS CRU.



back label to emphasize the importance of the individual cru. Beaujolais crus use this system, and Burgundy's hierarchy of Grand or Premier Cru uses a similar one. However, unlike the latter, Muscadet crus are (at least officially) equal in prestige.

Having a system that differentiates Muscadet crus from classic Muscadet makes total sense. Muscadet crus bear no resemblance to Muscadet or even Muscadet Sèvre et Maine, one of the best sub-regions. This, in the same way that Beaujolais wines from Moulin-à-Vent bear no resemblance to the wines from Beaujolais or even Beaujolais-Villages.

But no lunch is free — consumers will be burdened with learning more geography and the names of these little known villages. Growers needed twenty minutes

to walk me through the labels during a Muscadet cru tasting last year in the Loire. But rest assured, the cru wines are like a whole new wine category, exciting and eye-opening, and well worth the effort.

Let us take a look at the history of Muscadet wines. Muscadet is a large region at the westernmost point of the Loire, where it empties into the Atlantic. The region only produces white wine from the Melon de Bourgogne grape, brought to the region from Burgundy in the 16th century by monks, according to Sauvion. (Wine producers in Muscadet refer to the grape as “Melon” to avoid any confusion with the Burgundy region.)

Muscadet is split into three major sub-regions: Muscadet de Sèvre et Maine, Muscadet Côtes de Grandlieu, and Mus-

cadet Coteaux de la Loire. Each one has its own appellation and their wines are much more interesting than those simply labeled Muscadet. Producers insist that the soil in Muscadet Sèvre et Maine, a combination of gneiss, granite and schist, without rocks or stones, accounts for the minerally, steely wines for which the sub-region is known.

Côtes de Grandlieu, a much smaller area — 500 acres compared to about 15,000 acres for Sèvre et Maine — is warmer because, like Châteauneuf-du-Pape, during the day the stones in the ground reflect the heat toward the vines and retain it during the night. Moreover, the Loire river and a big lake that lie to either side of Côtes de Grandlieu moderate the temperature. This extra warmth



MARC OLLIVIER'S 2015 CLISSON FROM DOMAINE DE LA PÉPIÈRE COMBINES A DELICATE CREAMINESS THAT CONTRASTS WITH A STIFF SPINE.

results in slightly riper grapes and richer wines that maintain Muscadet's signature minerality and vibrancy.

Growers frequently age Muscadet on lees — dead yeast created by fermentation — in stainless steel or slated-lined tanks for up to nine months. This helps balance the wines' vigorous acidity for which the region is known and create a smoother texture. Wines aged this way are labelled *sur lie*. Muscadet is rarely aged in barrel because the wood mutes the engaging lively character for which the wine is prized.

IT IS BEST TO DRINK MUSCADET WHEN IT IS YOUNG — ITS LIVELY AND FLINTY CHARACTER PAIRS SO WELL WITH LOCAL SEAFOOD (MUSCADET AND OYSTERS ARE A CLASSIC COMBINATION).

However, some growers have kept a little wine on the lees (in often underground tanks) for years before bottling, apparently for friends and family. No producer could explain how this custom originated, but perhaps they borrowed the concept from Champagne, where prolonged lees-aging softens the acidity and is used to make super premium Champagne known as late-dis-

gorged Champagne. These prolonged lees aged Muscadet are stunning and unique, delivering a Burgundian-like richness and minerality framed by firm acidity.

When I first tasted a Muscadet cru in New York in 2012, Nicolas Choblet, owner of Domain du Haut Bourg, exclaimed with a broad smile that acidity provides structure and prolonged lees aging “proves Muscadet can be a great wine”. No argument here. Plus, aging involves little effort: “The work happens in the vineyard; you just watch the wine develop.” Crus are aged on the lees for at least two or three years, depending on the bedrock of the individual cru. The harder the rock, the more lees aging is needed to soften the wine. Paradoxically, they do not carry the *sur lie* designation because their lees aging exceeds nine months — the maximum permitted by Muscadet regulations. Also in an effort to ensure higher quality wine, the yield for the crus is 20 percent lower than for classic Muscadet Sèvre et Maine (45 hl/ha versus 55), according to Robin.

In 2011, authorities granted cru status to three villages: Clisson, Gorges and Le Pallet. According to Sauvion, seven

more are slated to be included with the 2020 vintage (or soon thereafter): Monnières-Saint Fiacre, Château-Thébaud, La Haye-Fouassière, Goulaine, Vallet, Mouzillon Tillères, and Champtoceaux. All of the crus are in Muscadet Sèvre et Maine, except Champtoceaux, which is to the north, in Muscadet Coteaux de la Loire.

The soil and climate between the villages differ, which accounts for the differences in the wines, explains Jérémie Huchet, a top producer in Monnières-Saint Fiacre. Jim Budd, a world expert in Loire wines, agrees, but also believes that the neutrality of the Melon de Bourgogne and the lack of wood aging help explain why the terroir shines in the crus.

According to Huchet, prolonged lees aging is needed to soften the acidity in cru wines, which are more acidic than classic Muscadet. Huchet believes that the acidity gives the wine some spine, while lees aging gives it a creamy body. Robin believes that the cru wines have more in common with Burgundy than with classic Muscadet. They are more suitable for serious meals whereas classic Muscadet is usually paired with casual fare.

The similarity of the wines from a single cru and the diversity of the wines from one cru to another is striking. The differences among the crus shine despite the wines being made by different producers who may be using different winemaking techniques. It is an impressive reminder that terroir is alive and well in Muscadet, not just in Burgundy.

Rightfully, the Muscadet crus are garnering a lot of recent attention. But one taste of Jérôme Bretaudeau's superb 2014 Gaïa (no relation to the famed Piemontese producer, Angelo Gaja, whose daughter is named Gaïa), a straight-up classic Muscadet, reminded me that Muscadet — cru or not — loves the ocean.

Below are some current releases from top producers. Most of them are lees aged and date from 2015 or earlier. These small-production wines may not be easy to find, but any wine from these producers is worth buying.

CLISSON

Granite base rock, in large measure, accounts for the elegant and precise character of the wines from Clisson, one of the first villages to be awarded cru status. Very poor sandy soil forces the vines' roots to go deep. The 2015 Clisson from Domaine de la Pépière (\$30), one of the very top producers in the Muscadet region, combines a delicate creaminess that contrasts with a stiff spine. It is a refined wine that shows marvellously now, but still has energy and tautness for further aging.

Aged 50 months on the lees, Jean-Luc Ollivier's Domaine de la Grenaudière 2014 Clisson (\$20) is still fresh and very lively. Its granitic-tinged edginess and length makes it a sophisticated wine. To emphasize the cru, Clisson is prominently displayed in large type on the label while Muscadet Sèvre et Maine appears in much smaller letters.

GORGES

The primary bedrock here is gabbro (similar to hard basalt), which imparts a muscular power to the wines. Michel Brégeon's 2013 Gorges (\$40) has all the density and power you'd expect from this cru. At five years of age, it is barely ready to drink, reminding us that, contrary to

conventional wisdom, some wines from Muscadet need years to develop.

VALLET

The soil in Vallet is more heterogenous with varying depths of sand and sandy clay soil atop mica schist with spots of gabbro and inclusions of granite. Château de la Ragotière's 2015 Vallet (\$28) has a delicate floral element that accompanies a lovely austerity. An attractive hint of bitterness in the finish adds to its appeal. Long and precise, it cuts like a laser.

Château du Cléray's 2014 Vallet (\$22) has a similar appealing austerity and flowery note that, paradoxically, has an impressive depth. Again, a touch of bitterness in the finish reminds you that this is serious wine.

GOULAINÉ

Goulainé wines are ready sooner and need less time on the lees than other wines in the region. It is the first area to be harvested because the underlying gneiss and mica schist warm the soil and the weather is warmer. The wines often have a distinct salinity (Fleur de Sel de Guérande comes to mind), which is prominent in the Domaine de Guérande's 2015 Goulainé (\$19), adding a captivating brightness and spiciness. You will be surprised by this wine's density if you are used to classic Muscadet.

LA HAYE FOUASSIÈRE

The soil at Muscadet's westernmost cru, La Haye Fouassière, contains quartz. Wine producer Jo Landron, one of the stars of the region, says this imparts a smokiness into the wines. Landron's 2013 Le Fief du Breil (\$33) from La Haye Fouassière is stunning, with a haunting flintiness, power and persistence. His father has been making this wine since 1982.

MONNIÈRES-SAINT FIACRE

The bedrock of gneiss, or decomposed granite, in this cru typically yields a gentler expression of Muscadet, with slightly less firm minerality and a more floral component. True to form, Domaine de la Pépière's 2015 Monnières-Saint Fiacre

(\$26) has a slightly rounder profile without losing any of the energy associated with Muscadet. Comparing this one with their Clisson shows the dramatic differences between those two crus.

MOUZILLON-TILLIÈRES

Stéphane Luneau, a top grower in the region, notes that there are two towns, Mouzillon and Tillières, but only one soil type — decomposed gabbro, locally known as chappe, which imparts muscularity to the wines. As expected from a gabbro-heavy soil, the 2010 Mouzillon-Tillières from Michel Luneau et Fils (\$20), even at eight years of age and after more than four years of lees-aging, is powerful, steel-y and delicious.

CHAMPTOCEAUX

In an effort to promote the cru, growers in this area have adopted a standard type face for all the labels, with Champtoceaux prominently displayed on the front label. With a softer bedrock, the wines undergo less lees aging. The delicacy and floral undertones in Bernard et Benoît Landron's 2016 Champtoceaux, Muscadet Coteaux de la Loire (\$20) are emblematic of the cru and reflect its gneiss soil and Champtoceaux's more northern locale. Penetrating and cutting acidity reminds you this is still Muscadet.

CHÂTEAU-THÉBAUD

The subsoil, which may explain the herbal notes in the wines, is what the locals called diorite — granite without quartz. Growers in this cru believe the subsoil also explains a sharpness to the wines. With its herbal almost anise-like spice, Famille Lieubeau's 2015 Château-Thébaud (\$32) exemplifies the characteristics of this cru. A lovely, sharp and penetrating quality imparts enormous energy.

LE PALLET

A combination of gneiss and gabbro soil lend a fascinating ying-yang complexity to the wines of this cru. The cooperative, Les Vignerons du Pallet, is their major producer. Their 2015 Jubilation (\$26) delivers a beguiling combination of delicate spice and firm minerality, buttressed by vibrant citrus-like acidity. ✦