

THE LOIRE – 450 MILES OF EXCELLENT WINES

by *Jim Budd*



With a few exceptions, Loire wines have long tended to fly under the radar. They have often been under appreciated and their ageing potential frequently underestimated. It is also a misconception to think that the Loire essentially makes white wines: overall 55% of production is white, while 45% is red or rosé.

With vineyards stretching over 450 miles the distances involved makes it a challenge to get to know the Loire well. Furthermore, unlike for instance Bordeaux, Burgundy or Languedoc-Roussillon, there are few lengthy stretches of concentrated vineyards. With the exception of Anjou and the Pays Nantais, pockets of concentrated vines often a considerable distance from the next area are more characteristic.

Historically many Loire wines have been described as light and fruity to be drunk young with Chenin Blanc being an exception, especially the sweet ones. In fact many Loire wines – both red and white – age remarkably well for decades rather than just a few years. Back in 2012 I was lucky enough to taste Bourgueils from Lamé Delisle Boucard back to 1893 – still amazing even if not quite still in its prime!

Equally many Loires can be enjoyed young, especially those designed to be a cuvée printemps.

Over the now nearly 35 years I have been writing about the Loire the overall quality of the wines has undoubtedly improved. This has been due to a number of factors: improvements in viticulture, vinification but perhaps most importantly better educated producers who have been through wine school and had experience in working in vineyards around the world. Despite the challenges the Loire's climate can pose more and more excellent producers are now organic or biodynamic or in the process of conversion.

Probably due to global warming the Loire has been blessed from 2014 to 2021 with a quite unprecedented, unbroken series of good to very good vintages. Unfortunately this has come at a severe cost – a much greater risk of spring frosts. Between 2016 and 2021 only 2018 and 2020 have been essentially frost-free. Fortunately there are now many more frost protection systems

in place than there were seven or eight years ago but frost is still a big problem.

UPPER LOIRE

Travelling from the source of the Loire, which is around a 100 kilometres from the Mediterranean, you come to the four Upper Loire vineyards – Côtes de Forez, Côte Roannaise, Côtes d'Auvergne and Saint-Pourçain. All are now small but well worth exploring as they are in the middle of an exciting renaissance.

Historically these were more important, especially the Puy de Dôme department (Auvergne), which in the latter part of the nineteenth century had the fourth largest area under vines in France.

The first three appellations are on a level with Lyon and the vineyards of the Northern Rhône, while Saint-Pourçain aligns with Maçon. Although Gamay is the dominant grape here there are an interesting range of varieties including those from the northern Rhône like Syrah, Roussanne and Viognier sold as vin de pays or vin de France.

Some recommended producers:

Côte d'Auvergne: Les Chemins d'Arkose, Desprat Saint-Verney – the largest producer in the Auvergne with a big range of wines, Benôit Montel, Annie Sauvat.

Côtes de Forez: Les Vins de la Madone (Gilles Bonnefoy) Verdier & Logel – range of wines including some Riesling.

Côte Roannaise: Domaine des Pothiers (Roman Paire). Domaine Robert Sérol (Stéphane and Carine Sérol).

Saint-Pourçain: Domaine des Berioles (Jean Teissedre) – includes fine Pinot Noir and Tressalier (local grape variety).

CENTRAL VINEYARDS

This is the first substantial and well-known area of vines. Pouilly-sur-Loire marks the halfway point of the Loire's journey to the Atlantic. The appellations of Pouilly-Fumé, Coteaux du Giennois, Sancerre and Menetou-Salon are roughly grouped together, while Quincy and Reuilly are well to the south west

close to the town of Vierzon. Considerably to the south of Bourges is the small Châteaumeillant appellation.

Along with Pinot Noir this is the kingdom of Sauvignon Blanc, which should not be pungently catty but rather with notes of grapefruit and stone fruits. Prior to phylloxera red varieties dominated, especially Pinot Noir that now makes up a little over 20% in Sancerre and a higher percentage in Menetou-Salon. Over the last 25 years the quality of Pinot Noir has improved very significantly not just in Sancerre but also in Menetou-Salon and Reuilly and is now providing competition to Burgundy.

There is no doubt that Sancerre is the Loire's most successful and easiest to sell appellation. Although some critics claim that Sancerre producers sit on their laurels, this is not at all my experience. Instead I am always impressed by the commitment and determination of top producers, such as the Pinards, Gérard Boulay and the Bourgeois family, to continuously improve their wines.

With its rolling hills and steep slopes Sancerre is the most picturesque of the Loire's appellations, especially in October with the autumn colours. Unlike Sancerre, whose eponymous town is a central point, Pouilly-Fumé lacks a focus. The vineyards run north-south and are split in two by the Autoroute 77. Pouilly-sur-Loire is a now sad little place with faded memories of when the Route Bleue (N7) ran through the town taking Parisians holiday-makers to the Mediterranean. The town was a popular stop on their journey.

Some recommended producers:

Sancerre: Berthier, Famille Bourgeois, Gérard Boulay, François Crochet, Vincent Delaforce, Bernard Fleuriet, Alphonse Mellot, Joseph Mellot, Vincent Pinard, Vacheron.

Pouilly-Fumé: Domaine Didier Dagueneau now run by Benjamin and Charlotte Dagueneau (deep pockets essential), Jonathan Pabiot, Masson-Blondelet, Alain Caillourdin, Michel Redde, Serge Dagueneau et filles.

Coteaux du Giennois: Émile Balland, Villargeau.

Menetou-Salon: Philippe Gilbert, Bertrand Minchin, Henry Pellé, Prieurie de Saint-Cérols.

Quincy: Siret-Courtaud, Domaines Tatin.

Reuilly: Denis Jamain (Domaine Reuilly), Claude Lafond.

TOURAINE

Touraine divides conveniently into two distinct parts: east of Tours and the Cabernet Franc appellations west of Tours close to Anjou-Saumur.

Eastern Touraine:

Apart from Vouvray, the majority of vineyards are between the Loire and both sides of the Cher Valley. Although the majority of the production of both Vouvray and Montlouis is sparkling of variable quality, there are world-class examples – dry, demi-sec and sweet – of still Chenin Blanc from these two appellations



The Boulay family during harvest on the steep slopes of the Cul de Beaujeu

with a huge aging potential. In 2009 we celebrated my late father's 90th birthday with a 1919 Le Mont Moelleux from Huet. It was still remarkably youthful.

Away from Vouvray and Montlouis, Sauvignon Blanc dominates in Appellation Touraine. At its best it offers a good value alternative to Pouilly-Fumé and Sancerre. For the reds Côt (known in other parts of the world as Malbec) is the most successful variety here with the potential to age for several decades. Côt/Cabernet Franc is a successful blend, while Gamay can be a delicious wine.

Le Loir

This tributary of La Loire is some 40 kilometres north of Tours and is the Loire's most northerly vineyard. It is home to three small appellations – Coteaux Vendômois, Coteaux du Loir and the best know Jasnières, which produces to age dry to sweet Chenin Blanc depending on the vintage.

Some recommended producers:

Vouvray: Michel Autran, Vincent Carême, Champalou, Philippe Foreau, Bernard Fouquet, Domaine Huet, François Pinon.

Montlouis: Jacky Blot (Domaine de la Taille aux Loups), François Chidaine, Xavier Weisskopf. Both Blot and Chidaine make excellent Vouvray that has to be labelled as Vin de France due to idiotic local politics.

Touraine including village appellations like Touraine

Chenonceaux: Cellier de Beaujardin, Joël Delaunay, Xavier Frissant, Lionel Gosseaume, Jean-François Mériaux, Vincent Ricard, Vincent Roussely, Domaine Sauvète.

Jasnières: Domaines – Bellivière, Roche Bleue.

Western Touraine:

Cabernet Franc dominates here in Bourgueil, Chinon and Saint-Nicolas-de-Bourgueil. Although Chinon tends to be the most mellow of these three red appellations, the most important differences come from the type of soil. Sandy soils giving the lightest wines, those from the clay limestone slopes the most structured and longest lived and, in between, those from gravel soils. Single vineyard wines have become increasingly important.

Some recommended producers:

Chinon: Philippe Alliet, Bernard Baudry, Baudry-Dutour, Couly-Dutheil, Nicolas Grosbois, Jourdain-Picard, Moulin à Tan, Domaine de la Noblaie, Domaine de Pallus.

Bourgueil: Domaine de la Butte (Jacky and Jean-Philippe Blot) Xavier Courant, Domaine de la Chevalerie, Lamé Delisle Boucard, Château de Minière.

Saint-Nicolas-de-Bourgueil: Xavier Amirault, Yannick Amirault, Sébastien David, Domaine Frédéric Mabileau, Taluau et Foltzenlogel.

(Many Bourgueil and Saint-Nicolas-de-Bourgueil have vines in both appellations.)

SAUMUR

This is the centre of the Loire's sparkling wine production with producers like Ackermann, Bouvet-Ladubay, Gratien et Meyer (owned by Henkell Freixenet) and Langlois-Chateau (owned by Bollinger) being the equivalent of Champagne houses. After a slow start from its creation in 1975 Crémant de Loire is now the Loire's leading sparkling appellation.

Aside from sparkling there are some very good reds (Cabernet Franc) and whites (Chenin Blanc). The transformation of the Clos



Part of a tasting back to 1893 (1947-1893) in June 2012



Emptying the hod, 2018 harvest at Domaine Luneau-Papin

Rougeard into a cult wine when under the ownership of Nady and the late Charly Foucault has made Saumur and Saumur-Champigny world famous. Clos Rougeard is now owned by the Bouyges brothers. Fortunately you don't have to pay a fortune to get good quality from other Saumur producers.

Some recommended producers:

Saumur and Saumur-Champigny: Domaine de la Bonnelière, Domaine Filliatreau, Antoine Foucault, Arnaud Lambert, Domaine de Nerleux, Rocheville, Clos Rougeard (deep pockets essential), Domaine de Roches Neuves, Antoine Sanzay, Châteaux de Parnay, Targé, Villeneuve and Yvonne.

Sparkling wines including Crémant de la Loire – not just from Saumur: Ackerman, Bouvet Ladubay, Château de l'Aulée, Langlois-Chateau.

ANJOU

Anjou marks the change from the clay-limestone soils of the Paris Basin to the hard impervious soils of Brittany – schist, granite, slate, etc. This change of rock formation produces red wines with more tannins, which can be tough and bitter if not handled properly, and soft acidity for the whites. Anjou is known for its clement climate – La Douceur Angevin. Spring starts early here – an advantage offset by the danger of Spring frosts! Unusually for the Loire Cabernet Sauvignon ripens properly here on warm, well-exposed sites. Except for dreadful autumns like 2012 it is possible to make sweet wines in almost every vintage, which is not the case in Vouvray and Montlouis. World-class examples include those from Bonnezeaux and the Quarts de Chaume.

Anjou has a wide range of wines in all three colours. Dry Chenin Blanc is increasingly important and impressive as producers in the Coteaux du Layon limit the amount of sweet wine they made due to lack of demand for these wines even from vineyards like the famous Quarts de Chaume. Naturally this includes producers from Savennières. The best reds are Anjou-Villages, especially Anjou-Villages-Brissac.

Some recommended producers:

Domaines Belargus, Bergerie, Bablut, Closel, Domaine FL, Juchepie, aux Moines, Ogereau, Rochelles, Damien Laureau, Château Pierre-Bise.

PAYS NANTAIS

There have always been good Muscadets – it is just that now there are many more of them. My first ever professional visit was to the Pays Nantais in a cold February 1989. I met a number of impressive producers including Louis Métaireau and Jean-Ernest Sauvion and tasted Muscadets back to the mid-1950s.

Well-made Muscadet offers diversity and great value: from simple fresh wines for shellfish to the complex Cru Communaux that have extended lees aging – up to 24 months minimum is required in certain communes like Clisson and Gorges. The best have the potential to age and develop over two or three decades.

Some recommended producers:

Bonnet-Huteau, Gadais, Herbauges, Jérémie Huchet, Jo Landron, Famille Lieubeau, Luneau-Papin, Pepière.

All photos: Jim Budd