

Decanter

Loire dry Chenin Blanc

Chenin is a multifaceted grape, thanks to its spread across this valley, and the differing styles made from its various terroirs. And that's what makes it exciting, says Jim Budd

CHENIN BLANC IS undoubtedly the Loire's most fascinating and diverse grape variety, capable of making a remarkable range of styles from bone-dry through to lusciously sweet as well as still and sparkling.

Recent DNA analysis suggests that Chenin is an offspring of Jura's Savagnin and so related to Sauvignon Blanc and Trousseau. The first historical reference to Chenin comes from the 9th century at Bouchemaine, the small town at the eastern end of Savennières. Much later, in 1496, some Chenin was planted at Château de Chenonceau in eastern Touraine.

Chenin Blanc is largely confined to Anjou-Saumur and Touraine with outposts in Coteaux du Loir, in particular Jasnières, as well as the Fiefs Vendéens close to the Atlantic Coast. There is now a little planted way south in the Upper Loire in the Roannaise and Forez, where leading producers are experimenting with a range of white grapes. These wines will appear as IGP.

As Chenin is a mid- to late-ripening variety, it is not well suited to the Pays Nantais with its increased chance of wet weather in late September and October. Chenin's eastern limit is around Amboise – spring arrives 10 to 14 days later here than it does in Anjou due to the distance from the Atlantic, thus it is hard to get Chenin to ripen properly here. Instead Sauvignon Blanc is largely the chosen white variety in the Loire's eastern part.

Apart from the schist and slate of Anjou, Loire Chenin does best planted on limestone – the bedrock from Saumur eastwards. Chenin from limestone tends to have slightly higher acidity than those from Anjou.

Oak and wine ageing

While there is a tradition in Vouvray and elsewhere in the Loire for fermenting and ageing wines in old wood, increasingly top Loire Chenin Blanc producers use newer wood, usually with a small proportion of new oak. There is a tendency to use 400-, 500- and 600-litre barrels with a medium toast rather than 225- or 228-litre barriques, so as to lessen oak flavour. There are also limited experiments using amphorae and concrete eggs.

Sweet Loire Chenin can be almost immortal, especially in great vintages. Dry Loire Chenin can also age brilliantly, although the opportunities to taste these older wines are considerably less than their sweet counterparts as there is less of a tradition – apart from in Vouvray and Savennières – of ageing dry wines. However, dry Vouvrais that are 40 years old or more are still certainly drinkable and enjoyable.

It is worth considering decanting Loire Chenin Blanc, especially from a recent vintage or if the wine appears closed. Also they should not be served too cold, otherwise their complexity will be masked.

Decanter PANEL TASTING

Highly Recommended



Domaine de Rocheville, La Dame, Saumur 2014 92 JB 95 CK 91 BL 89

£19.50 Dreyfus Ashby

Lemons, pebbles, smoke and gravel perfume. The palate has real texture underpinning notes of creamed yellow plum and a touch of peach. Beneath this there is bright acidity very typical of the vintage, giving it a real sense of life.

Drink 2017-2030 Alc 13%

Recommended (continued) 86-89pts

Wine	Score	JB	CK	BL	Tasting note
Domaine de Rocheville, La Jouvencelle, Saumur 2014	86	87	86	85	Fairly reserved aromas and flavours, mainly of creamy greengages and some dry oak, with a savoury finish.