



Like Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc prospers in many parts of the globe. Here, the scenic Lourensford Vineyards in Cape Town, South Africa.

FRESH LOOK AT BLANC

SENSIBILITIES OF SAUVIGNON BLANC TODAY DESERVE ATTENTION

BY CHRISTY CANTERBURY MW

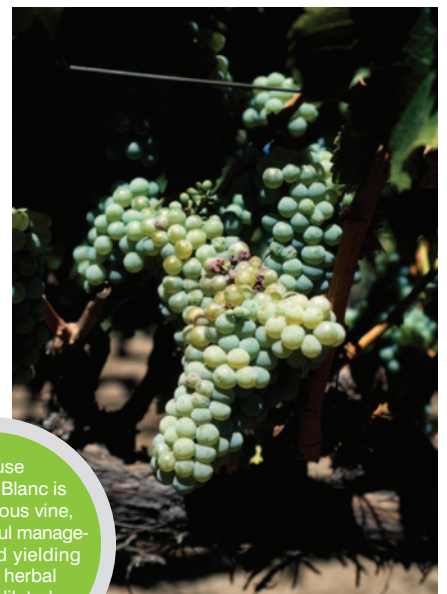
Though an affable grape, Sauvignon Blanc always falls behind Chardonnay in the consumer league and behind Riesling in the eyes of wine industry folk. How could this be? Like those two, Sauvignon Blanc is a noble grape...and not just because it parented Cabernet Sauvignon while cavorting with Cabernet Franc. Its versatility allows it a wide stylistic range—from early-sipping to age-worthy, from varietal to blended, and from sparkling to still to sweet.

No doubt the biggest slice of the Sauvignon Blanc pie is dry (and just-off-dry) table wine. Though outliers can become grandes dames in bottle in due time, most Sauvignon Blancs are for

early drinking. Considering this, are we too restrictive of high praise for drinker-uppers? Surely not—even snotty somms haven't banned it from their wine lists as they do Pinot Grigio. Sauvignon Blanc can't be just a flash in the pan if it is so perennially popular. So in the wise words of the Beatles, "Let it be."

LETTING SAUVIGNON BLANC BE

One reason for the pervasive drink-it-up style is that Sauvignon Blanc is a generous producer—both in canopy (vine leaves) and fruit. As such, farmers must work rigorously in managing green growth in the vineyard in order to achieve proper ripeness.



Because Sauvignon Blanc is a very vigorous vine, it needs careful management to avoid yielding unwanted herbal notes or diluted fruit intensity.

SAUVIGNON BLANC

Otherwise, the resulting wines have herbal high-tones. Furthermore, when too much fruit set is left on the vine, the harvested grapes taste dilute.

Nonetheless, well-managed Sauvignon Blanc can produce tasty wines from young vines even at a high yield. Certain producers prize young vines in New Zealand for their exuberant character (and for their fecundity, too.) In other regions, winemakers blend Sauvignon Blanc with other varieties, mostly commonly Sémillon but also Chardonnay. These varieties can bolster the fruit or mid-palate lacking in less-ripe Sauvignon Blanc. Bordeaux AOC's tradition of allowing 0.6 tons per acre more crop than the Loire arguably stretches the flavor of its Sauvignon Blanc. However, Bordeaux can back-fill with Sémillon, (which covers double the surface area Sauvignon Blanc does in Bordeaux) and Muscadelle.

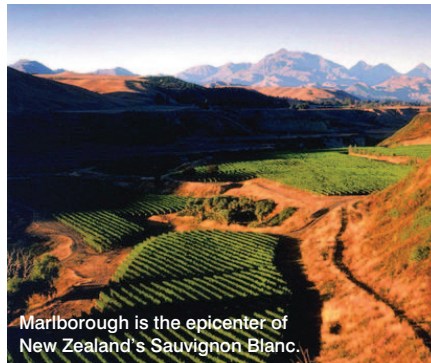
Grown in vineyard blocks all over the world, including more unusual ones like India and Brazil, regional characteristics and styles lay fingerprints on Sauvignon Blanc that are not so easy to transport. Here on the major regions making Sauvignon Blanc today.

TALE OF TWO WORLDS

Most Sauvignon Blancs on the market today are crafted in one of two pronounced styles: overtly fruit-driven or briskly lean and mineral. The latter, Old World style is arguably the most classic, but the former, New World style has brandished astronomical sales numbers over the last 15 years.

» New Zealand

In just a few decades, the formerly hybrid grape- and fortified wine-producing nation of New Zealand established a new classic: Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc. Ripe Sauvignon Blanc struts its stuff with grapefruity pungence and more. As such, its distinctive aromas



Marlborough is the epicenter of New Zealand's Sauvignon Blanc.

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can be polarizing. New Zealand created the “cat’s pee on a gooseberry bush” style, and it stuck. The Kiwis’ exuberant style of Sauvignon Blanc now is welcomed with open arms around the globe, despite its premium price point. Though New Zealand began producing some value-driven wines in the under-\$10 category about a decade ago, I



In the Loire Valley, Sauvignon Blanc wines carry village appellations, such as Sancerre, Pouilly-Fumé, Menetou-Salon and Quincy.

would argue consumers don’t get more value for the lower price. I would argue that Chile or South Africa deliver better value at the sub-\$10 mark—possibly even at \$15 and below.

» Chile & South Africa

Chile and South Africa have gained ground rapidly on New Zealand in the last six or seven years. Both make pristine clean and fruit-driven wines that can resemble New Zealand when the winemaker (or accountants) so desire. In cooler locations, the wines show more minerality than New Zealand. The coolest spots in Chile show their green, herbal touches as jalapeño while South Africa leans toward mint jelly.

For all three countries, the riper the grapes, the broader the palate. In New Zealand in particular, riper and more concentrated styles are more likely to see touches of new oak to enhance their texture and flavor profiles.

SOMM DARLINGS

Sommeliers with ambitious wine lists often stock Sauvignon Blanc that is either high-end and/or from lesser-known regions. Here are some gems sommeliers love to show-off:

Austria

- » FX Pichler (Niederösterreich)
- » Kollwenz (Burgenland)
- » Tement (Südsteiermark)

France

- » Alphonse Mellot (Sancerre)
- » Domaine du Tremblay (Quincy, Loire)
- » Jean-Marc Brocard (Saint Bris, Burgundy)
- » Haut-Brion Blanc (Pessac-Léognan, Bordeaux)

Italy

- » Meroi (Friuli)
- » Gaja Alteni di Brassica (Piedmont)







USA

- » Bevan Cellars (Sonoma, CA)
- » Shared Notes (Sonoma, CA)

SAUVIGNON BLANC — RELIABLE NAMES BY REGION



Helderberg Winery, one of South Africa's oldest, was founded in 1906.

COUNTRY	REGION	UNDER \$25	TOP TIER
CHILE	Aconcagua	Errazuriz	
	Valle Centrale/Colchagua	 Miguel Torres ◀ Santa Digna, Casa Silva	
	Leyda/San Antonio Valley	Cartagena, Viña Leyda	 Casa Marin
FRANCE	Bordeaux	Château Bonnet, Château Lamothe de Haux ▶	 Château Carbonnieux, Château Smith-Haut Lafitte, Pavillon Blanc
	Pouilly-Fumé	Château de Tracy	Baron de La doucette
	Sancerre	◀ Pascal Jolivet	Domaine Vacheron, Henri Bourgeois, Lucien Crochet
NEW ZEALAND	Martinborough	Ata Rangi, Stonecrop	 ◀ Craggy Range
	Marlborough	◀ Greywacke, Nobilo, Oyster Bay, Whitehaven	Mud House, Seresin, Villa Maria Reserve
SOUTH AFRICA	Cape Point/South Africa	Cape Point Vineyards, Cederberg	
	Stellenbosch	De Morgenzon, Thelema ▶	 THELEMA
U.S.A	Napa	St. Supéry, Honig, Grgich Hills	 Robert Mondavi To Kalon, Spring Mountain, Spottswoode
	Sonoma	Dry Creek Vineyard, ◀ Geysler Peak	Merry Edwards, Peter Michael, Rochioli
	Washington	Efeste, L'Ecole No. 41	Woodward Canyon, Avennia

» California Fumé Blanc

With Shakespearean verve, Robert Mondavi created the term Fumé Blanc in the late 1960s to connect his Sauvignon Blanc to the Loire Valley's Pouilly-Fumé. Interestingly, he did not trademark the name, but rather encouraged his Napa and Sonoma neighbors to adopt it as well, essentially to coat-tail on the esteem that at the time was accorded to French AOC Sauvignon Blancs. While the Mondavi wine's richness eclipses the Loire versions, its smokiness does nod to the eastern Loire's flintiness. However, while Loire versions are pure, Napa's often incorporate Sémillon and Muscadelle.

» Loire

In the village-based AOCs of the Loire, wines tend to be lean, mineral and herbal; Their acidities can be tart at times. Appellations like Sancerre and Pouilly-Fumé have the broadest recognition and demand higher price points than those such as Touraine, Menetou-Salon and Quincy. Only truly exceptional wines see new oak influences of vanilla and toasted nuts. Pouilly-Fumé shows a characteristic gunflint note that subtly distinguishes it from Sancerre.

» Bordeaux

In Bordeaux, the Sauvignon Blanc styles are just as complex—if differently—as they are in the Loire. The Bordelais like to blend in Sémillon then age their wines in oak (often new) at the higher end of their offerings. Such wines usually bear the appellations Graves or Pessac-Léognan. Simpler wines, usually crisp from stainless steel-only fermentations, are mostly labeled Bordeaux or Entre-Deux-Mers. In Bordeaux, you definitely get what you pay for. Whatever the provenance of the Sauvignon Blanc, consumers thirst for it. Knowing which wine region best suits each consumer is key to helping this wine on to more tables. ■