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When I first visited muscadet country in the early 2000s, things were looking bleak for producers of the once all-conquering local seafood-friendly dry white. Years of unchecked overproduction and a rather cavalier approach to quality in these Atlantic-buffed vineyards around the mouth of the Loire estuary - not to mention the emergence of a wave of exuberantly fruity new rivals from the new world - had seen sales dwindle alarmingly. Few of the producers I saw were able to puncture the general air of pessimism and doom.

The shining exception on that trip was Guy Bossard, the owner of a small biodynamically farmed domaine called Domaine de l'Écu. Bossard, at the time an energetic 50-year-old, was a bubbling stream of ideas, but his thrilling dry white wines were every bit as eloquent. As resonant, precise and varied as the best white burgundy, and at a fraction of the price, they were a challenge to all my preconceived ideas about muscadet.

Bossard, who died last year, lived long enough to see the local scene and the rest of the world catch up with his vision of muscadet, the best examples of which are now established as the thinking sommelier's chablis. He was also, I soon came to learn, representative of the sort of **thoughtful, free-thinking winemakers** who were in the process of turning the Loire into arguably the most exciting wine region in France, and certainly the most dynamic in this century.

A lot of that energy came - and comes - from the valley's unusually large and influential contingent of natural winemakers. But the Loire is home to creative producers of all philosophical and vinicultural stripes. And between them they're making a greater range of styles than any other wine region in France.

That variety is in part the natural consequence of the geographical spread of the Loire valley's vineyards, which follow the river for 1,000km from the source in the Massif Central to the estuary in Breton-flavoured Nantes. But, with all of these vineyards falling in a band that makes them among France's most northerly, Loire wines always tend to fall in the elegant, fresh bracket.

That gives them a natural affinity with food, and especially at this time of year. A canon of classic Loire matches might begin with one of the region's

increasingly excellent bottle-fermented sparkling wines or a saline dry muscadet with oysters, and finish with a tarte tatin and its liquid equivalent: a sweet chenin blanc from Quarts de Chaume plus a plate of creamy-tangy chavignol goat's cheese with a serpentine, silvery, grassy glass of saucerre.

We might also include salmon or tuna with the strawberry scents and redcurrant pulse of saucerre pinot noir (red or rosé) and an apple-tangy dry chenin blanc from Vouvray, Anjou or Savennières to cut through the sweet, succulent fat of rillettes de Tours. And we should find room, too, for the uniquely crunchy, sappy, summery light reds made from cabernet franc in Chinon, Bourgueil, St Nicolas de Bourgueil or Saumur-Champigny, perhaps with a simple steak, in this Francophile's dream of a spring-into-summer *déjeuner sur l'herbe* on the banks of the Loire.

Six wines from the Loire valley



Loire wines Photograph: PR

The Wine Society's Generation Series Crémant de Loire

France 2020 (£14.50, thewinesociety.com)

Made using the same technique as champagne, but, in this case, using Loire favourite varieties chenin blanc, cabernet franc and grolleau as well as a little chardonnay, this is a brilliant example of the quality on offer from Loire sparkling wine: all tingling red apple and subtle honey.

Domaine de la Noblaie Le Temps de Cérises Chinon

France 2022 (from £12.95, thewinesociety.com, frazierswine.co.uk)

A charmingly evocative name for a charmingly evocative wine from a producer that is a dab hand with cabernet franc reds in the chinon appellation, it offers all the springtime vim and sap, as well as the crunchy raspberry, blackcurrant and, yes, red cherry snap of this most refreshing of red styles.

Château de Plaisance Anjou Blanc

France 2021 (£23.50, leandsandeman.co.uk)

Chenin blanc is such a brilliantly versatile grape variety, capable of producing exhilarating wines at all levels of sweetness. Here it's in crystalline, bone-dry mode, with a tingling fresh steely swish of acidity cutting through the succulent apple and subtle drizzle of honey.

Jérémie Huchet Chateau de la Bretesche Muscadet Sur Lie

France 2022 (£12.91, greatwine.co.uk)

A great example of the affordable quality on offer from modern muscadet (an equivalent quality burgundy would be two or three times the price), this has a wonderfully salty-savoury, subtly yeasty streak as well as deliciously ripe pear and racy citrus.

Waitrose Touraine Sauvignon Blanc

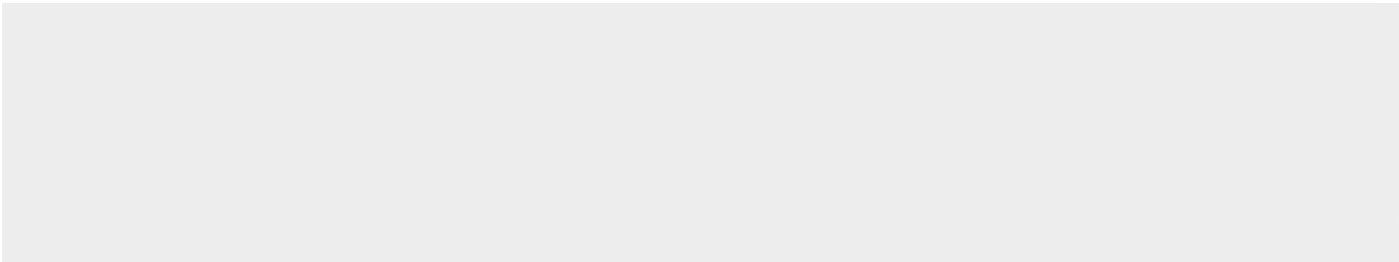
France 2022 (£7.99, Waitrose)

The Loire makes some of the world's very finest sauvignon blanc in appellations such as Sancerre, Pouilly-Fumé and Menetou-Salon. It also makes some of the best value examples of this ever popular variety, notably in Touraine, home of this lipsmacking example.

Clos du Tue Boeuf Vin Rouge

France 2022 (from £20.40, nattyboywines.co.uk; lescaves.co.uk; highburylibrary.co.uk)

Thierry Puzelat is one of the biggest names in natural wines, and his family-run Clos du Tue Boeuf continues to win round sceptics. This is an ebulliently drinkable red, made from the gamay grape in light (12.5% abv) softly juicy style full of perfectly ripe berries and cherries.



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