

Wine Spectator

WineSpectator.com

Great Travel DESTINATIONS

FOR FOOD AND WINE



PLUS

BOSTON'S GRILL 23 HOLIDAY MENU

ANNUAL TASTING REPORTS

Argentina • California Merlot • Loire Valley



28 Loire Valley Chenin Blanc



76 What's new from Argentina



64 Boston benchmark Grill 23



23 Panettone by mail

Grapevine

15 White Wine Going Up Sauvignon Blanc leads uptick in white wine consumption in the U.S. • *Mitch Frank*

18 News Port icon Fladgate expands into table wine; New Jersey law barring wine shipments from out-of-state retailers upheld; remembering Jean Baumard • *Luis Antunes; Collin Dreizen; Kristen Bieler*

21 People Burgundy vigneron Philippe Pascal buys in Beaujolais • *Kristen Bieler*

23 Tastes Panettone's best bakers • *Owen Dugan*

25 Wine Focus: California Merlot Recommended recent releases of this popular red • *Tim Fish*

28 Wine Focus: Loire Valley Dry Chenin Blanc is the region's rising star • *Kristen Bieler*

30 Savvy Shopper Great buys in Malbec and Torrontés from Argentina, Italian reds and Loire Valley whites • *Bruce Sanderson*

Departments

9 This Issue *Marvin R. Shanken*

12 Feedback

32 Aaron Romano VIK Winery's yeast bouquet

33 Kristen Bieler Mastering drought in Roussillon

108 Unfiltered Silver Oak Cabernet makes its country music debut; a Cessna gets a little too close to the Chardonnay • *Dana Nigro; Chris Cardoso*

A Revival in the Loire

For a younger generation of vintners, dry Chenin Blanc is the region's new star

BY KRISTEN BIELER

Vanessa Cherruau knew she could make high quality dry Chenin Blanc in the schist soils of the Loire Valley's Anjou region. But when she debuted her 2019 vintage of Château de Plaisance, a historic estate she acquired on the prized Chaume hill, she was terrified that she would not be able to sell it.

"No one knew where Anjou was even a decade ago, and the region had failed economically," Cherruau says. "It was known for cheap sweet white wines and bad rosé that no one drinks anymore." As in other neighboring Loire appellations dedicated to Chenin Blanc, Anjou fell victim to the post-WWII trap of high yields and overproduction, focusing on low quality sweet wines produced by adding sugar. Sales of the region's truly aristocratic sweet wines, from *premier cru* Chaume and *grand cru* Quarts de Chaume, have also withered.

Therefore, no one has been more surprised than Cherruau to see her wines so eagerly embraced—Château de Plaisance is unable to produce enough to meet demand. "Finally this region is getting recognition for dry Chenin Blanc," she says. "The best are mineral and fresh with real texture and identity. I arrived at the right time, as the doors are very open now. The early pioneers had it so rough."

The dry Chenin Blanc revolution in the Loire, which began quietly a few decades ago, has picked up steam in recent years. It's driven by a band of passionate young vigneron who can afford to buy the inexpensive land in these undervalued, traditionally sweet wine appellations. They are determined to show the world that Chenin Blanc can make complex, ageworthy dry whites. The results are compelling, vibrant wines marked by autumn apple and savory earthiness, with the texture to improve for decades.

The path for Cherruau's generation was paved by trailblazers such as Jacky Blot, whose pioneering domaine, Taille Aux Loups, is now in the hands of his son, Jean-Philippe, since his death earlier this year. In the late 1980s, Blot saw real potential in the limestone soils of the little-known Montlouis Sur Loire appellation and was adamant that sugar disguised the beauty of Chenin. His bone-dry wines, crafted in the Burgundy model of long fermentations in barrel, are less fruity than savory, complex and structured. They remain benchmarks for the region.

Another of Montlouis' stars is François Chidaine. Like Blot, he built a reputation on single-vineyard bottlings and biodynamic farming at the eponymous domaine he founded in 1989. Chidaine has since acquired land in neighboring Vouvray, where he crafts what he describes as more powerful and generous wines that are accessible earlier, though he maintains that the wines from both areas have the same unusually impressive

aging potential. It's the magic of Chenin Blanc in these soils.

In their wake have come younger vigneron such as Damien Delecheneau at La Grange Tiphaine. Inspired by Chidaine, Delecheneau took over his family's Montlouis estate in 2002 when he was just 22 years old. Later joined by his wife, Coralie, Delecheneau is a fanatic for detail, obsessed with obtaining perfect grape maturity—neither overripe and blowsy nor underripe and tart. This is hard to obtain with Chenin, which tends to ripen unevenly. Like others of his generation,

Delecheneau is a risk-taker, switching to biodynamic farming and creating experimental cuvées, including a *pét-nat* rosé. The core range, particularly the Chenins, have reached new heights of precision and elegance.

Outsiders are fueling a lot of the region's dynamism, lured by the inexpensive land, the youthful spirit of innovation and the collective willingness to buck tradition. "We are the second generation inspired by the pioneers without a dime in their pocket, trying to convince people to buy dry Chenin Blanc from Anjou," says Ivan Massonnat, who works in private equity and founded Domaine Belargus in 2018. "In life, timing is everything, and we are able to do a breakthrough."

Massonnat purchased his steep hillside vineyards from Jo Python, the first vintner in Anjou to make a dry white wine from the Quarts de Chaume *grand cru*. He came with an ambitious vision: to craft elite Chenin Blanc upward of \$100 a bottle from single sites, as well as a blend from the Quarts de Chaume hill.

Rigid French bureaucracy maintains that Quarts de Chaume—the only *grand cru* in the Loire—may be used for sweet wines only, so the growing number of dry wines here are declassified as ordinary Anjou blanc. Massonnat is part of a collective of producers who have embraced their own name, Ronceray, to promote dry Chenin in Chaume.

With his bold ambition "to convince the market that a bottle of Anjou is worth \$100," Massonnat is "pushing levers of quality to the max." His efforts are working. Belargus' bottlings of dry Anjou blanc are dense, big-shouldered whites that require age, hence his decision to hold many vintages back years before release. "The market jumped on us, and a lot of the demand is coming from Burgundy lovers," he says. "For the price of a *villages* wine you can drink the equivalent of a *premier cru*. New things are possible here; we are changing the paradigm."

It can't be denied that the warming climate has been good for Loire vintners, Massonnat admits. "We are the first generation here that can choose the maturity that we want. Now almost every vintage is ripe. Even in warm years we still have finesse because of Chenin's acidity, and we get a lot of structure in our wines naturally."



Vanessa Cherruau of Château de Plaisance in Anjou