

Opinion **FT Magazine**

Anjou's buried treasure

When it comes to wine, almost anything is possible in the lower reaches of this former French province

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Andrew Jefford 4 HOURS AGO

Where do the great yet currently unknown wines of the future come from? Pioneers scour virgin wine country outside Europe. Over the past half-century, Pinot from Oregon, Cabernet from Napa, Malbec from Argentina's Mendoza and Sauvignon Blanc (and more Pinot) from [New Zealand](#)'s Marlborough have all proved immensely rewarding for drinkers and growers alike, transforming local economies.

Maybe, though, there are potential fine wines lurking undiscovered in Europe, their vineyards hidden — in this case, not beneath untilled scrub, but beneath the fading tastes of a lost world and beneath thickets of superannuated legislation?

The lower reaches of the former French province of Anjou offer proof. This rolling, garden-like landscape with its gentle climate has in the past been best known for its sweet white wines and its sweetish pink ones.

The Massif des Mauges protects it from the Atlantic; it is dimpled by watercourses such as the Layon and the Aubance. Wine-wise, almost anything is possible here, hence its chaotic patrimony of 27 or so appellations, divided between the limestone-soiled “white Anjou” around Saumur, and the darker-soiled “black Anjou” to the south of Angers. This zone of often schistous soils links the enclave of Savennières to the north of the Loire with the vineyards around the Aubance and the Layon.

Handsome, pale Saumur has ample tourist appeal and a settled identity for sparkling wines and dry wines, both white and red; its relative success means there is little pressure for change. It is in black Anjou, by contrast, where the ground is shifting fast. Few tourists venture here. Sales of its great sweet wines, from Quarts de Chaume, Coteaux du Layon and Bonnezeaux, have languished for years.

You can even buy indifferent Bonnezeaux in plastic “cubitainers” locally: unprofitable in every sense for all. Both Cabernet Franc and Cabernet Sauvignon ripen well, but end up folded into the unambitious, mawkish Cabernet d’Anjou rosé. Yet there are great sites here, particularly along enclaves in the Layon: potentially some of France’s greatest vineyards for dry wines as well as sweet.

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The Anjou Blanc, Anjou Rouge and (for red wines alone) Anjou-Villages appellations are the best places to look for the new, over-achieving dry wines from this region, together with Savennières itself, a long-lauded but sometimes dowager-like dry-wine zone where many formerly drab estates have begun to come good recently. Coteaux du Layon and, astonishingly enough, Quarts de Chaume are turning to dry wines, even though Quarts de Chaume won jealously guarded Grand Cru status for its sweet wines (the only such designation in the whole Loire Valley) as recently as 2011. The grape variety for both is the chameleon-like Chenin Blanc, excellent in either dry or sweet guise. Naturally, any dry white wines produced in the Grand Cru zone have to be declassified to plain Anjou Blanc — but the producers don’t care. Nor, having tasted their efforts, do I. Great things are in store for this zone, regardless of appellation.

The first producer to make dry Anjou white wine from Quarts de Chaume grapes was Jo Pithon, back in 2008. It was the burly Pithon, looking every inch the wild man of the hills, who some years earlier had the courage to purchase and clear the magnificent though long-abandoned Coteau des Treilles hill site nearby. His sons didn't want to take over his work, so, in 2018, [he sold to enthusiast Ivan Massonnat](#); the pair continue to work together, with Pithon and Muscadet's Guy Bossard in advisory roles. The new domain is called Belargus, named after the botanical Latin appellation of the Adonis Blue butterfly that haunts the Coteau des Treilles.

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The affable, wine-obsessed Massonnat (whose day job is with private equity firm Pai Partners) subsequently snapped up the Château de l'Écharderie, which, despite owning 25 per cent of the entire Quarts de Chaume plantings, had been on the market for a decade. Without takers: sweet wine was just too difficult a prospect. Massonnat's vision — to create ambitious dry wine there — made for a more promising business plan; the first wines, from the 2018 vintage, are now in bottle, sold under individual vineyard site names (Les Rouères and Les Quarts) as well as in blended form as “Ronceray”. This name, referring to the abbey that once owned Quarts de Chaume, is one that all producers making dry wine here intend to use on a communal basis, at least until Quarts de Chaume can legally exist in dry guise.

Belargus' dry Anjou Blanc wines from the Quarts de Chaume zone are superb, textured and creamy, with ample mass and refined, orchard fruits: dry white Grands Crus in all but name. They also have an affability and approachability to them as dry Chenin Blanc wines that the sometimes craggy and confronting Savennières seldom attains.

Other young, new-generation producers working to make outstanding dry Anjou elsewhere in Layon include the young viticulturist Pierre Ménard and the dynamic Vanessa Cherruau of Château de Plaisance, whose hugely impressive debut 2019 crop will be bottled a little later in the summer.

Emmanuel Ogereau is another young grower who has reshaped his family's dry wines, giving them a pungency, line and cut few in the region dreamt of (his experience in New Zealand's Central Otago was evidently not wasted); while young David Vigan has breathed life into the Château de Breuil range on behalf of new owner Michel Petitbois.

No one is abandoning the sweet wines, by the way. They remain exquisite and an inspiration to all; indeed, David Vigan says he would like to make nothing else, if only the market would reward them. Some outstanding Layon producers, such as Philippe Delesvaux, continue to make them the chief focus of efforts.

What of the reds? Massonnat seems sceptical about these, save for light reds from the local Grolleau variety, which at present only qualify for IGP status (those rules again), while David Vigan suggests that the Anjou-Villages appellation hasn't yet been a success. I disagree. There are stylistic missteps (too much oak is, as ever, a bad idea), but blends of the two Cabernets here can attain levels of ripeness, purity, roundness, texture and deliciousness I don't often see elsewhere in the Loire, even in more celebrated red-wine appellations.

Look out for the gorgeously perfumed and fleshy Sur La Butte Anjou Rouge from Château de Plaisance when it eventually reaches the market, while Philippe Delesvaux's 2018 Anjou Rouge La Montée de l'Épine, a pure Cabernet Sauvignon, is also savoury, structured and deep — and improbably good value (less than €10 at the domaine). There will, I feel sure, be great reds as well as great dry whites in due course from the dark horse of black Anjou. Back it to the hilt.

Black Anjou: recommended producers

- Patrick Baudouin
- Domaine Belargus
- Domaine de la Bergerie
- Ch du Breuil
- Domaine Philippe Delesvaux
- Pierre Ménard
- Domaine Ogereau
- Ch Pierre Bise
- Ch de Plaisance

And in Savennières:

- Domaine Thibaud Boudignon
- Domaine du Closel — Ch des Vaults
- Domaine FL
- Domaine Damien Laureau
- Domaine aux Moines
- Domaine Eric Morgat

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