

WINES USING THE SAUVIGNON BLANC GRAPE

This white grape is native to France. In France, the grape is used in the Bordeaux and in the Loire, in both locales for both dry and sweet wines. These wines, as with essentially all French wines, are known by the geographic area rather than by the grape name. In the other places in the world where the grape is now grown, wines containing it usually feature the grape name prominently. Thus, we famously have “Sauvignon Blanc” wines from New Zealand, from California and Washington, from Italy, and from Australia. (The grape is rarely grown in Spain, Germany or Austria of the Old World, nor in South America of the New World.) The grape has seen recent serious advances in South Africa.

The Grape: Sauvignon Blanc (often called simply “Sauvignon,” especially in Italy) has high acidity and high aroma. While it does take on different flavor nuances, and aromas in particular, from different soils, the grower will always be seeking to achieve a sharp (not rounded) taste and a crisp feeling in the mouth. Care must be taken in trimming back leaves that might shade the grape bunches, to guard against an off-note of bell pepper or asparagus. The fruit itself is of light green color and of medium size. Sauvignon Blanc is not the white cousin that arose from Cabernet Sauvignon; it is the other way: Cabernet Sauvignon arose later, the result of crossing the white Sauvignon Blanc with the red Cabernet Franc.

Loire, France Sauvignon Blanc is one of three dominate white grapes here, the others being Chenin Blanc and Muscadet. The Loire River valley stretches for several hundred miles across the mid-section of France, emptying into the Atlantic Ocean; it leads first north and then west, each for about 300 miles. Sauvignon Blanc production is concentrated along both legs as the river stops moving north and turns west. (The Loire has no dams or other man-made diversions; it is the last remaining “wild river” of Western Europe and receives legal protection to keep it wild.) The wine names you are likely to see (these are place names) are Sancerre and Pouilly Fumé. These wines are sometimes so aromatic as to shock the senses. The flavor and mouthfeel are dominated by sharpness, and a certain minerality, but with limited fruit character. Also, look for the less well known (and less pricey) wines of Quincy and Reuilly.

Marlborough, New Zealand To Americans, this is the best known home for the grape. While the Loire has been producing wine grapes for centuries, here the time is in decades – only since 1973. New Zealand has two main islands; Marlborough is at the north end of the South Island. The location has just the right *terroir* to create the “electrifying bright fruit flavors” (Tom Stevenson) that characterize its Sauvignon Blanc wines, and that contrast them from those of the Loire. Some of the sub-region names you are likely to meet include: Dog Point, Hawkesbury and Wairau. (Dog Point is also the name of a specific winery.) At least 13,500 acres are devoted to the Sauvignon Blanc grape. Pinot Noir and Chardonnay are also grown with very good results.

Bordeaux, France The white wines of Bordeaux are overwhelmingly made from a combination of Sémillon and Sauvignon Blanc, although there are some pure varietals of each. The grape names usually do not show up on the label. The famous sweet (dessert) wines of the Sauternes and Barsac appellations are the most important white wines of Bordeaux. These areas are specific sites in the larger Graves appellation, which is also home to the specific site of the best dry white wines, Pessac-Léognan. Across the Garonne River from Graves is the Entre-deux-Mers, a red and mostly white wine region of good to very good white wines, but never great ones. Pessac-Léognan is the location of several wineries which make excellent to outstanding red and white wines.

California and Washington, USA Washington used to be the only US state making a significant amount of Sauvignon Blanc other than California, and so it is mentioned. But, its use is now in rapid decline. The best use of the grape is by DeLille Cellars in a Bordeaux blend. The use of Sauvignon Blanc in California is of long standing, at least for the New World. However, it really has never been of very good quality, which remains for the most part true today; much of it looks and tastes of watered-down California Chardonnay. But, alas, not all does. One of the efforts undertaken in California to improve sales was to put the wine in oak and call it “Fume Blanc” due to the smokiness of the oak. These that use “Fume Blanc” on the label are made of the Sauvignon Blanc grape. The oaked/unoaked distinction is no longer followed in the label name used.

The Wines: If it can be found, the Sauvignon Blanc wines of the following US producers are rated excellent: Vineyard 29 (\$100 or more), Lail Vineyards “Georgia” (\$100 or more, but not “Blueprint”), Ojai “Westerly” (\$50), Peter Michael (\$50), Rudd Estate (\$50).

Houston retail is listed first, and then Houston restaurants.

Spec’s Smith St. USA: Altamura Sauvignon Blanc 2006 \$45 (drink very soon); Chateau St. Michelle Sauvignon Blanc “Horse Heaven Hills” 2008 \$13; Dancing Bull Sauvignon Blanc 2009 \$10 (a Loire-style wine); Duckhorn Sauvignon Blanc 2009 \$22; Spottswoode Sauvignon Blanc 2009 \$37

France: Ch. Bonnet Blanc Entre-deux-Mers 2009 \$10; Ch. Carbonnieux Blanc Pessac-Léognan 2005 \$42; Smith Haut Lafite Blanc Pessac-Léognan 2005 \$105; P & N Reverdy Sancerre le Coutes 2008 \$23

New Zealand: Cloudy Bay Sauvignon Blanc 2010 \$20; Dog Point Sauvignon Blanc 2009 \$19

Houston Wine Merchant USA: Merry Edwards Sauvignon Blanc 2009 \$27 for ½ bottle; Crocker and Starr Sauvignon Blanc 2009 \$36

France: Domaine de Chevalier Blanc Pessac-Leognan 2007 \$130; Domaine L. Crochet Sancerre Croix du Roy 2008 \$35

Italy: Russiz Superiore Sauvignon Blanc Colio 2008 \$23

Pappas Bros. Steakhouse: Dog Point Sauvignon Blanc New Zealand 2008 \$49

Reef: Merry Edwards Sauvignon Blanc Calf 2008 \$69; Reverdy “Les Coutes” Sancerre Loire France 2008 \$45; Craggy Range Sauvignon Blanc New Zealand 2009 \$37

Massraff’s: Araujo Sauvignon Blanc “Eisele” Calf. 2009, \$110

VOICE: Cloudy Bay Sauvignon Blanc New Zealand 2008 \$51

Monarch: Cloudy Bay Sauvignon Blanc New Zealand 2008, \$68

Mockingbird Bistro: Merry Edwards Sauvignon Blanc Calf. 2009 \$80

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