

BORDEAUX BLANCS SECS: THE WHITE REVOLUTION

SPECIAL REPORT

Sauvignon Blanc and Sémillon are both indigenous varieties from Bordeaux. What could be more authentic than, than white wines from finest appellations? Apart from the world-famous sweet wines of Sauternes, Barsac and Cadillac, there are a number of dry white wines from other terroirs worth discovering or re-discovering: both fresh, juicy whites and full-bodied, barrel-matured wines with ageing potential.

With the worldwide boom for red wines coming to an end, consumers - and growers - are turning to white wines with renewed interest. In Bordeaux, which offers some of the finest terroirs for Sauvignon Blanc and Sémillon, growers are doubling their efforts to reposition their portfolios of dry white wines.

Every serious wine buff knows Bordeaux. Bordeaux reds, that is, and perhaps some of the noble sweet growths from Sauternes and Barsac; but for Pascal Loridon, marketing director of the Conseil Interprofessionnel du Vin de Bordeaux (CIVB), the picture is not complete without including Bordeaux's fruit-driven, crispy Blancs secs. 'We have one of the best terroirs for Sauvignon Blanc in the world - and we are certainly number one when it comes to Sémillon', he says.

Sémillon comprises 55% of the area of white varieties under vine, followed by Sauvignon Blanc with 34% and Muscadelle with 7%, leaving Colombard and Ugni Blanc to play only minor roles.

Sémillon has its origin in Sauternes, where it has produced sweet wines since the 18th century; but it is also used for dry wines, often in blends with



»» We have the longest lasting tradition of vinifying sauvignon and sémillon. No wonder that Bordeaux has the largest planted area in the world with sauvignon and sémillon. ««

*Alain Vironneau,
Président du CIVB*

Sauvignon Blanc, contributing roundness and a smooth, rich mouthfeel. Sauvignon Blanc is a more demanding variety when it comes to maturation. Its aromatic potential is best illustrated when weather conditions are neither too sunny nor too hot. Recent scientific research conducted at the Bordeaux Faculty of Oenology has improved methods of determining the moment of Sauvignon Blanc's optimal physiological ripeness, thus enabling growers to harvest the grapes at a point at which they will yield both good acidity and a round, flavourful fruitiness.

While white varieties make up 11% of the 123,000 hectares under vine in Bordeaux, in terms of production the relation of reds to whites is 8:1. But it is not size that matters; it is quality and diversity. Denis Dubourdieu, the noted professor of oenology at the Bordeaux Faculty of Oenology, a consultant and the owner of several châteaux, including the Château Clos Floridène in Graves and Château Reynon in the Premières Côtes de Bordeaux, is considered by many as the father of modern Bordeaux whites. 'Although whites have only a small share in total Bordeaux wine production, they offer an amazing variety in styles, aromas and prices,' he says. 'The dry white Bordeaux and



Entre-Deux-Mers should be consumed within three years after harvest. They are fresh, fruit-driven and not too acidic. Wines from Graves and Pessac-Léognan, on the other hand, have a lot more ageing potential – up to 10 years – and are often barrel-aged, offering toasty notes, aromas of citrus fruits and mineral notes. After some years you may even find a hint of truffles.’

According to Dubourdieu, well-balanced wines invariably result from vineyards featuring moderate climate conditions – and the Bordeaux vineyard is one of them. ‘There the vines do not suffer from stress; it is neither too cold nor too hot nor too dry nor too wet,’ he explains. Can Sauvignon Blanc offer the same noblesse, or elegance, on foreign soils as it does in its traditional terroirs, the Loire Valley and Bordeaux? If you believe Denis Dubourdieu, there may be some doubt.

Pessac-Léognan and Graves are two of the most notable appellations in Bordeaux. The soil there is composed of gravel and stones on a sandy soil. The pebbles, which were carried by the Garonne down from the Pyrénées, store the heat. In Pessac-Léognan, close to the city of Bordeaux, the gravel layer can be as thick as three metres. Sheltered from Atlantic winds by pine forests, it is here that Sauvignon Blanc

produces wonderfully rich and powerful wines with an intense, spicy zest. After all, Château Haut-Brion Blanc is made here, the only white wine among the first growths of the Premiers Grands Crus Classés of the 1855 classification. But there are others as well, such as Pape-Clément, Domaine de Chevalier, Malarctic-Lagravière, Smith Haut-Lafitte, Carbonnieux and La Louvière, which all show the excellence of Sauvignon Blanc and Sémillon. In Graves, Sémillon, though blended with Sauvignon Blanc, determines the wine’s profile. In Pessac-Léognan, blends must contain at least 25% of Sauvignon Blanc.

On the right bank of the Garonne, Entre-Deux-Mers is the realm of Sauvignon Blanc. The rolling hills and the clay-limestone soils offer ideal conditions for fresh, aromatic wines. Prompted by the cooperatives, careful clonal selection has been carried over the past few years to ensure fragrant and lively wines. From the neighbouring Graves, Sauvignon Gris has also come into the appellation. ‘This is an old variety which had nearly become extinct, due to its very low yields,’ says Stéphane Defraigne, président of the Syndicat Viticole de l’Entre-Deux-Mers. Sémillon and, occasionally, Muscadelle can be added

to make the wines more powerful and give them more roundness. The small appellation Entre-Deux-Mers-Haut-Benauges in the southern part of the region is named after Château de Benauges, which used to be the seat of a viscount governing the region. This appellation produces wines similar to Entre-Deux-Mers. Another tiny

Key white varieties of the Bordeaux **Sémillon**

Originating from Sauternes, Sémillon is the key variety in sweet Bordeaux wines, thanks to its ability to develop noble rot when mature. It is rounder in flavour and less acidic than Sauvignon Blanc, making it a good blending partner.

Also used for dry wines, its aromas include almond, hazelnut, acacia and honey.

Sauvignon Blanc

Probably originating in Bordeaux or the Loire Valley, this variety prefers deeper soils, such as those of Entre-Deux-Mers, though it also thrives in Graves. It has good ageing potential when grown in sandy soils, and is frequently aged in barrels. Typical aromas include citrus fruits, exotic fruit, blackcurrant blossoms and white flowers.

Muscadelle

Not related to Muscat, this variety offers floral notes and hints of musky orange.

Due to its low acidity, it adds roundness to blends, especially in Entre-Deux-Mers and Premières Côtes de Bordeaux.

