

# WINE News

*A Tour of the Loire, from Fan Favorites to Hidden Gems*



## MARCH 6, 2023 FEATURES

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## Following the Long and Winding Loire River

By Keith Mabry, Loire Valley Buyer



**I recently returned to the Loire Valley for a brief visit.** I had not been since 2019, so it was a welcome site to see several of our favorite producers. My journey started in Sancerre, and, as I moved west, I stopped in Touraine, made my first pilgrimage to Montlouis-sur-Loire, and finished in Saumur. Much fun was had along the way,

new connections were made, and existing relationships strengthened.

The subject at hand was the last few vintages. 2021 was one of the most difficult vintages in recent memory, as almost every grower experienced a devastating frost. Yields were low, but, fortunately, many of the wines are terrific with sinewy frames and vibrant acidity. The wines of 2021

are great for acid freaks, and the best should enjoy a little time in the cellar before reaching their peak. They are in short supply, though, so grab your favorites quickly!

2022 was almost the opposite of 2021. This was a warm vintage where yields recovered and the overall crop was outstanding. It was a dry and hot year. We see a lot of extract in the wines, but, unlike 2019, which was also a hot year, the wines have much more freshness and lower alcohol levels. Entry-level cuvées, many of which are in bottle and beginning to ship, are pure pleasure in a glass. The more serious stuff is still steeping along in the cellar, but, from what I tasted in tank samples, the wines will be generous and rich. Reds, especially, should see a benchmark year.

These pages reflect the short tale of this whirlwind visit and the ground that I covered. Won't you join me on this journey, please?



**2021 Domaine du Vieil Orme Sauvignon Blanc Touraine Blanc \$13.99** One of the best terroirs in Touraine is Chenonceaux, right where Domaine du Vieil Orme is located. Using sustainable practices and experimenting with

biodynamic treatments, Vigneron Laurent Benoist is sussing out some of our best value Sauvignon Blanc from the Loire. Crunchy acidity, lemon peel, lemongrass, and notes of hay give classic form to this ripping white. This is quintessential Sauvignon that could give many Sancerres a run for their money.



**2020 Sylvain Bruneau "Cuvée Reserve" St-Nicolas-de-Bourgueil \$17.99** The wines of Sylvain Bruneau are the newest in our portfolio from the St-Nicolas-de-Bourgueil region. Bruneau is a multi-generational winemaker

who has taken over his family vineyards and converted them to organic farming. He makes lovely Cabernet Franc. The Cuvée Reserve is from 60-year-old vines on clay-limestone. It is perfumed with aromas of rose petals, red cherry, lavender, and anise. It is a scrumptious Cab Franc with a silky and engaging finish.



**2021 Domaine la Clef du Récit (Anthony Girard) Sancerre \$24.99**

The wines of Anthony Girard are spectacular. 2015 was the first vintage we imported, and it was an out-of-the-gate stunner. I visited him and tasted a few back vintages;

they hold up beautifully, gaining depth and complexity. 2021 comes from caillottes and terres blanches soils and is aged mostly in stainless steel. Brimming with gorgeous mineral-driven flavors, it is a mouth-watering Sancerre showing the nuance and complexity I have come to expect from his wines.

# Wines of Central Loire: Sancerre, Pouilly-Fumé, and Menetou-Salon



**It's no secret that Sancerre has taken the world by storm.**

It's one of the most lauded Sauvignon Blanc-producing regions and an exciting place to see the evolution of Pinot Noir in the vineyards. But, did you know that the lesser-known surrounding regions

also produce tremendous Sauvignon Blanc and Pinot Noir? Coteaux, Giennois, and Quincy are emerging as fascinating new places to find great Sauvignon Blanc—and we will concentrate more on those in another report. Today, we zoom in on Pouilly-Fumé, right across the Loire River from Sancerre, and Menetou-Salon, just south of Sancerre. Both produce wines on similar soils with flint (silex) being a major factor in Pouilly-Fumé and Kimmeridgian marl (terres blanches) in Menetou-Salon. These two soils, plus limestone gravel (caillottes) help define each producer's winemaking style and the wines themselves.

## Aurore Dezat

We begin with the wines of Aurore Dezat, whom we count among our favorite direct import producers. With her partner, David Girard, she is making beautiful, transparent wines on all three major soil types. The **2021 Aurore Dezat Sancerre \$21.99** is from a mix of both caillottes and terres blanches soils.

Caillottes brings tension and acidity; terres blanches brings weight and fruit density. The wine reflects the best of the 2021 vintage with a vibrant frame of acidity, marked with flavors of grapefruit, lemon peel, peach pit, and nectarine. It makes it an ideal aperitif, well suited for cheeses and shellfish.



Aurore also makes one of our favorite Pinot Noirs from the region. The **2020 Aurore Dezat Sancerre Rouge \$21.99** is all from the silex (flint) soils across the road from the winery. Silex builds spice in Pinot, giving the wine a more peppery but nuanced flavor. The 2020 vintage is generous with fruit and silky tannins. The warm year provided a nice sensation of fruit-forward, cherry-driven flavors with a cooler spice-box flavors on the finish. It's

hard to believe the quality, especially at these price points. Finally, the **2019 Aurore Dezat "Evidence" Sancerre Rouge \$34.99** is an exceptional Pinot Noir, showing just how complex the wines of the region can be. This comes primarily from a calcareous-clay-heavy parcel, which contributes both finesse and structure to the wine. It has a velvety mouthfeel with complex flavors of mulberry, sweet cherry, mineral, and baking spices. Sancerre Rouge has come a long way, and these wines prove that Sancerre is not just a one-grape region.



## Domaine Cherrier

Brothers Jean-Marie and François Cherrier are the fourth generation to run this estate, comprising 20 hectares in Sancerre and about 10 hectares in nearby Menetou-Salon. Jean-Marie is the quiet type and the domaine's winemaker, making their wines using sustainable and organic practices. François oversees the running of the property.



Both have welcomed their children to work at the estate, establishing the fifth generation to someday take the reins. The **2021 Domaine Cherrier Frères Sancerre \$18.99** is newly arrived and is one of their best to date. The acidity is crisp and inviting, making the wine beautifully refreshing. From a mix of all three soil types, it is a classic Sancerre. Every year this is one of our biggest sellers in the category, but, sadly due to 2021's low yields, we were only able to get

one shipment of this vintage. Possibly even more exciting is the **2021 Domaine Cherrier Frères Menetou-Salon \$16.99**.

This is where you can see the terres blanches terroir shine through. Generous and round, this has a supple and creamy texture. The vintage shows the underlying freshness of the wine adding in the classic citrus tones with a more stone fruit edge. Menetou is always a great alternative to Sancerre and offers tremendous value for any Sauvignon Blanc drinker.



## Domaine Franck Millet

With Betty and Franck Millet of Domaine Franck Millet, we have one of our longest and strongest relationships. Their wines are fan favorites and always sell quickly, especially the **2021 Franck Millet Sancerre Blanc \$19.99** and the tête de cuvée, **2021 Franck Millet "Insolite" Sancerre \$29.99**.

Franck also makes a lovely Pouilly-Fumé and Menetou-Salon. The **2021 Franck Millet Pouilly-Fumé \$17.99** shows some of the flinty, smokier qualities that the silex soil is famous for imparting. There is a electricity that runs through this wine that makes it a stellar example of the best of the region. The **2021 Franck Millet Menetou-Salon \$16.99** has a rounder texture, showing Meyer lemon and nectarine flavors.

It is full of yummy fruit and a real crowd pleaser.

For a fun tasting experience, try these bottlings from the three neighboring appellations side by side to really explore the terroirs through the lense of these exceptionally talented wine producers!





## There's Something About Muscadet

Upon hearing the word Muscadet one might be tempted to think of the aromatic grape variety Muscat, which is often produced as an off-dry or after-dinner wine. The region of Muscadet, which uses the grape Melon de Bourgogne, couldn't be further from the Muscat style. The wines of Muscadet come from the western-most part of the Loire Valley, and they are dry, sometimes racy, and mineral-driven—often more akin to the wines of Chablis. They are the perfect accompaniment to fresh shellfish, and few wines are better suited for pairing with oysters than those from Muscadet. There is a renaissance occurring in the region, where producers are making Cru wines from specific terroirs that are elevating our understanding of Melon de Bourgogne and Muscadet as a whole. Here are few new examples that should get you as excited about the region as I am.

### Bedouet

Bedouet has become one of our favorite producers in the region. Their vines are in the village of Pallet, one of the first areas elevated to Cru status. Most other producers in the area sell their grapes to the local cooperatives, so that makes Bedouet even more special as one of the few domaine wines in the village. The **2021 Bedouet "Clos des Grands Primos" Muscadet Sèvre et Maine Sur Lie \$12.99** is classic out-of-the-gate great drinking. Seeing about six



months of aging on the lees, it has developed lovely apple and peach notes with a stony, mineral-driven finish. Pure, quaffable, delightful.



More serious and quite special is the **2019 Bedouet Muscadet Sèvre-et-Maine Le Pallet \$19.99**. This wine is all from older vines grown on the mica-schist soils that helped elevate the region to international renown. Notes of peach and nectarine emerge from the glass, underlined by the mineral intensity. A touch of tropical fruit adorns the longer finish.

### Domaine des Amoureux

New to our portfolio is Domaine des Amoureux. The **2020 Domaine des Amoureux Muscadet Sèvre et Maine Sur Lie \$11.99** is full of tension and crunchy mineral tones. It is in a more sinewy style and drinks like a great Petit Chablis, but at a fraction of the price.



The **2015 Domaine des Amoureux Muscadet Sèvre et Maine Clisson \$19.99** is impressive. This wine really shows what can happen when you age Melon on its lees for an extended period. It is wonderfully complex with flavors of pineapple, dried mango, and green apples, with a long and detailed finish. This is the kind of wine that keeps you coming back to the glass.

## A Stopover in Saumur

This recent trip through the Loire took me to one of my favorite growing regions for Cabernet Franc and Chenin Blanc: Saumur. The town of Saumur is historic, full of beautiful castles created from limestone quarried from underneath the surrounding region. All that digging has led to catacombs and intersecting tunnels throughout Saumur that extend for miles just under its surface. This limestone is known locally as tuffeau, and it helps define the power and intensity of the wines produced in the region.

Within Saumur there are two sub-appellations. The first is Saumur-Champigny, an appellation that can only produce red wines based on Cabernet Franc from the vineyards closest to the Loire River.

Any Chenin grown is declassified to the basic Saumur appellation. One of our perennial favorites, which recently arrived, is the **2019 Château du Hureau "Tuffe" Saumur-Champigny \$18.99**. The Hureau is full of brambly black cherry fruit with notes of crushed sage, lavender, and leather. It has a beautiful texture, elegant tannins, and a refined finish that calls for a little grilled lamb or duck to go along with it.



The other sub-appellation is a more recent addition to the region called Saumur Puy-Notre-Dame. This area is divided into three parts and sits further south from the river on the plateaus of Saumur. The vineyards are covered in calcareous clay over the limestone and



sit a little higher in altitude than Saumur-Champigny. The topsoil here also tends to be much shallower before you are into the hard bedrock of limestone. A favorite from this region is the **2019 Domaine de l'Enchantoir "Le Pied à L'Étrier" Saumur Puy-Notre-Dame Rouge \$19.99**. The wine is handled with minimal intervention, using native yeast ferments, and aged all in tank. This shows beautiful purity of fruit with blackcurrant aromas, olive tapenade, rosemary, and roses. This has a heartier edge that would play well with braised dishes like pork cheeks, or a veal shank.

# The Wines of Jacky and Jean-Philippe Blot

A visit to Montlouis-Sur-Loire had been on my list forever. I'd been to Vouvray a couple of times but never to this appellation, which sits just across the Loire River due south. Of course a visit to this region means stopping in to see one of its greatest producers—Jacky Blot.

Jacky was introduced to wine by his brother, a pâtissière in Paris. He became obsessed and decided to try his hand at winemaking. In 1988, he purchased his first 8 hectares of Chenin Blanc in Montlouis. At the time, few people were interested in the appellation, and its wines tended to be very lean. Ripening was difficult and harvests often came in around late October and early November. To further complicate things, Jacky also started immediately with organic farming, using native yeasts and some barrel aging. He even shied away from malolactic fermentation, and the tension and longevity achieved in its eschewal became his signature. He bottled many of his cru wines early on as single-vineyard selections, always ahead of the curve.



Eventually, his son Jean-Philippe joined the winery and now runs most of the winemaking and day-to-day operations. We tasted through the range together. All of the wines were incredible, but the following were the standouts.

First, the **2020 Domaine de la Taille Aux Loups “Clos de Mosny” Montlouis-sur-Loire \$34.99**. This is a monopole site, meaning it has only one owner. This walled vineyard is one of his single largest holdings

at about 12 hectares. This hill is composed of a mix of limestone-clay and silex (flint). The lower part of the vineyard is added to the “Remus” cuvée, but it is the top of the hill with the most silex that makes this extraordinary wine. Filled with rich apple and pear fruit, this is a sublime expression of Montlouis. It is vibrant and fruit-driven, yet full of acidity. This vintage should age for some time but has a sexy, creamy mouthfeel right now. For fans of Chenin, it is hard to pass up this wine.

We also tasted the **2020 Domaine de la Taille Aux Loups “Clos du Hohet” Montlouis-sur-Loire \$34.99**. This chalk-heavy site has very

little topsoil. It was the former holding of Stephane Cossais, a cult-like producer who had an untimely death. The vineyards are spectacular and yield some of the most powerful and longest-lived wines in the region. The richness of the Hohet is unbound. This is a broad-shouldered Chenin that has years ahead of it.

The mouthfeel is luscious and fills the palate with flavors of quince, apricot and peach. This is a dynamic wine that will age gracefully for several more years.

In 2002, Jacky saw another opportunity in the vines of Bourgueil. This is a primarily Cabernet Franc–producing area, and he found some beautiful parcels along one of the most desirable hillsides. The **2020 Domaine de la Butte “Le Haut de la Butte” Bourgueil \$29.99** is filled with flavors of plum, redcurrant, cherry, spice, and herbs. It is a seamless Cabernet Franc that is immediately inviting with a long drinking window. And finally the **2020 Domaine de la Butte “Mi-Pente” Bourgueil \$39.99** was one of the biggest standout reds on this journey. The Mi-Pente comes from the center part of the vineyard. Filled with flavors of blackcurrant, crushed herbs, and smoky spices, this is a layered and fulfilling red. I tried a 2015 at dinner with Jean-Philippe, and it was magnificent. I expect the 2020 will hit its full stride in a few more years. What a pleasurable way to finish my trip. Many thanks to Jacky and Jean-Philippe for their hospitality.



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