

BC GUILD OF WINE JUDGES

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CLASS C4 – OTHER DRY WHITE (Sauvignon Blanc)

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AFTER COMPLETING THIS SESSION YOU SHOULD:

1. know the characteristics of Class C4;
2. recognize the characteristic aromas and flavours of Sauvignon Blanc;
3. distinguish between Old World and New World styles and variations; and
4. know the major areas where Sauvignon Blanc is grown and vinified.

BCAWA DEFINITION: Class C4 – Other Dry White

This class contains all other white wines, either varietals or blends, which do not fit the descriptions of Classes C1 (Chardonnay), C5 (White Pinot), or C2 (Aromatic White Vinifera). A white wine to be consumed with food. Varietal vinifera wines in this class must contain 85% or more of vinifera varieties such as Auxerrois, Chasselas, Chenin blanc, Colombard, Grüner Veltliner, Madeleine Angevine, Sauvignon blanc, Semillon, or Trebbiano. The remaining 15% may be any ingredient. Blends in this class must not fit the definitions of C1, C5, or C2. Wines that include interspecific hybrid grapes are acceptable in this class and their ingredient percentages must be specified so their eligibility in the appropriate AWC class can be determined. Aromatic white grape varieties are acceptable in blends provided their impact is subdued. Non-grape dry white table wines belong in either this class or J1 (Country Table).

Technical Characteristics

Alcohol: 9% - 13.5%.

Colour: Pale bronze or bronze-pink to pale straw to light gold. No amber, brown or grey tinges.

Sugar: 0.0% - 1.5%.

Specific Gravity: 0.990 - 0.998.

Acidity: 6.0g/L - 7.5g/L.

pH: 3.0 - 3.7.

HISTORY AND GEOGRAPHY

Sauvignon Blanc probably gets its name from the French words Sauvage (wild) and blanc (white) due to its indigenous heritage in South West France. The primary growing areas in France are the Loire Valley, particularly in the regions of Sancerre and Pouilly-Fume, and in Bordeaux, especially in the Entre-Deux-Mers as well as in Graves and Pessac-Leognan.

In the 1980s New Zealand quickly became one of the world's most famous Sauvignon Blanc producing countries, especially in the Marlborough Region at the north end of the South Island. New Zealand has become so successful with its herbaceous style of Sauvignon Blanc, with tropical fruit smells derived from a long, cool fermentation that winemakers throughout the New

World, and especially in Chile, South Africa, the Languedoc, and in the cooler growing areas of Northern California, and Washington have since emulated.

SAUVIGNON BLANC'S CHARACTERISTIC AROMAS AND FLAVOURS

Sauvignon Blanc's chief attribute is its piercing, refreshing aroma, and tends to be common regardless of location. "Cat's pee on a gooseberry bush" may not sound appealing but often represents Sauvignon Blanc's distinctive smell. The aroma smells remarkably similar wherever it is planted because of the dominant flavour compounds called methoxyprazines. Often elements of things 'green' are generally present: gooseberries, grass, nettles, lime, blackcurrant leaves. The first whiff hits your senses very directly and leads to the immediate recognition of Sauvignon Blanc.

As well, depending on the growing climate, the flavour can range from aggressively grassy to sweetly tropical. In cooler climates, the grape has a tendency to produce wines with noticeable acidity and green flavors of grass, green bell peppers, grapefruit, limes, nettles and some tropical fruits and floral notes. In warmer climates the tropical fruit notes become more dominant but the risk of losing significant aromatics from over-ripeness becomes more dominant. This leads to more grapefruit and tree fruit (peach) aromas.

VARIATIONS IN STYLE

There are two principle style variations which can be considered, the Old World (primarily the Loire and Bordeaux regions of France), and New World, (New Zealand, Chile, South Africa, Washington State and BC). "Comparing a Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc with a Sancerre/Pouilly-Fume will find the New World wine with a much more powerful smell and its fruit and acidity are likely to taste more like separate components than in the more restrained French examples. Fermenting in stainless steel helps to maintain the crisp acidity and distinctive aromas. The French wine is likely to be drier and more minerally, less fruity. Many people prefer the New Zealand style to the French, although a good French example is likely to improve after a year or two in the bottle whereas New Zealand wines can take on a rather tired asparagus note after a couple of years." (Robinson, 2008).

Naturally the terroir has a significant impact on the finished wine. The vineyards of Sancerre and Pouilly-Fume are over chalky limestone and flint. While the soils here vary significantly, due to abrupt fault lines running through the region, many of the soils are highly valued for what growers say is the minerality they contribute to the wines. In addition, about 30% of the vineyards contain silex, a flint- and sand-based soil that combines clay, limestone and silica. Highly desired locally, silex is said to give the best wines their especially vivid minerality and dramatic freshness. In contrast, the soils of the Marlborough region tend to be very fertile. When combined with the abundant rainfall of the area new canopy management techniques were developed to avoid rot. It is Marlborough's combination of the moderating influence of the ocean, long days, cold nights, bright sunshine and, in good years, dry autumns, that lead to high sugars without sacrificing the acidity that delineates New Zealand's wines.

The white wines of the Bordeaux region, especially in Pessac-Leognan and Graves, may be 100% Sauvignon Blanc, or blended with Semillon. These blends may be aged in French oak barrels. The Semillon grape adds more body to the wine while making the wine less acidic. The barrel ageing also contributes higher levels of tannin than non-oaked varieties.

Most wine lovers know that Fumé Blanc refers to Sauvignon Blanc made in the United States, and has likely, but not necessarily, gone through some oak ageing. Sauvignon Blanc arrived in North America in the late 1800s but was generally considered a boring varietal, mainly used for sweet wine to feed the US market. The potential of the grape was not truly recognized until Robert Mondavi decided to produce a quality dry Sauvignon Blanc in the 1960s.

In order to avoid the negative image of the variety name 'Sauvignon Blanc', Mondavi decided to invent another name for his wine; "Fumé-Blanc". To further differentiate his Sauvignon Blanc from those other wine nations, Robert Mondavi also aged this variety in oak barrels. More California producers started ageing their dry Sauvignon Blanc in (old and new) oak barrels, and selling it as 'Fumé Blanc'. Therefore, the name has been more commonly associated with oak-aged Sauvignon Blanc from the US ever since. However, while the name Fumé-Blanc has become commonly associated with California Sauvignon Blanc, not all wineries, such as Dry Creek, age in oak but still label their wine as 'Fumé-Blanc'.

We are now also seeing some Marlborough wines, which historically were always fermented in stainless steel, being blended with percentages that have been fermented in oak. The use of screw caps, rather than corks, has further enabled the retention of the characteristic aromatics.

FOOD PAIRINGS / AGEING POTENTIAL

Sauvignon blanc, when slightly chilled, pairs well with most fish and shellfish, white meat of chicken, and cheese, particularly chèvre. It is also known as one of the few wines that can pair well with sushi.

The wine is usually consumed young, as it does not particularly benefit from aging, as varietal Sauvignon blancs tend to develop vegetal aromas reminiscent of peas and asparagus with extended aging. Dry and sweet white Bordeaux, including oak-aged examples from Pessac-Léognan and Graves, as well as some Loire wines from Pouilly-Fumé and Sancerre are some of the few examples of Sauvignon Blancs with aging potential, but generally still not for much beyond 5 years.

THE FLIGHT

This flight offers a focus only on 100% Sauvignon Blanc. You will find examples from both Old World and New World wineries, including examples of Sauvignon Blanc from both the northern and southern hemispheres, which hopefully will enable relevant comparisons.

List of References

- Robinson, Jancis (2008); How to Taste: a guide to enjoying wine.
- Johnson, Hugh and Robinson, Jancis (2013); World Atlas of Wine.
- MacNeill, Karen (2015); The Wine Bible.
- Zraly, Kevin (2008); Windows on the World; Complete Wine Course;
- <https://www.decanter.com/learn/advice/what-is-fume-blanc-ask-decanter-387348/#rZ7U71GTfR8rwG7h.99>
- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sauvignon_blanc