

BC GUILD OF WINE JUDGES

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CLASS C4 – OTHER DRY WHITE (Sauvignon Blanc and Semillon)

Presented by Angela Holmes (Nanaimo Chapter)

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.

SAUVIGNON BLANC

Sauvignon Blanc is a hugely popular white wine variety that is planted in Bordeaux and the Loire Valley in France, in South America (Chile), South Africa, Australia, California, Canada and New Zealand. It is used to create some of the world's most distinctive aromatic white wines. The grape is a known parent of Cabernet Sauvignon. DNA analysis shows it probably originated in the Loire Valley, likely from Savagnin Blanc, is a sibling of Chenin Blanc and is genetically very close to Semillon.

This grape has a very distinctive aromatic profile which makes it one of the easier grapes to identify in blind tastings. Regardless of where the wine originates, classic aroma descriptors include grassy, herbaceous (green pepper and asparagus), musky, green fruit, lime, nettles, gooseberries, tinned green beans etc.

Wines made from Sauvignon Blanc should show bright high acidity and flavours on the palate typically mirroring the notes found in the aromas. If Sauvignon Blanc is over cropped, it tends to lose the bright acidity and varietal characteristics for which it is known.

Sauvignon Blanc is one of those grapes that tend to show differently depending on where it's grown. The Loire Valley in France is considered to be a cooler continental climate. The 3

regions there that are almost solely planted with Sauvignon Blanc, Pouilly-Fume, Sancerre, and Menetou Salon, have served as the model for New World Sauvignon Blanc wines. The classic herbaceous characteristics are complex and very present but subtle with a notable smoky flinty quality. The best expressions will have a long-sustained finish.

Bordeaux, another cooler climate, began taking Sauvignon Blanc seriously in the 1980's at which point it overtook Ugni Blanc as the second most planted variety after Semillon. Due to the productivity of new clones and its global popularity, Sauvignon Blanc is now close to being the most planted white variety in the region. Plantings are concentrated in the Entre-Deux-Mers (between two Seas, although in this case the 2 rivers), Graves (Left Bank) and around the sweet wine-producing areas (Sauternes). Most Bordeaux wines are blends of Sauvignon Blanc and Semillon. The classic Sauvignon Blanc characteristics are less apparent in a Bordeaux white due to blending with Semillon and to permitted yields. In Loire Valley, the maximum yield is 55hl/ha whereas Bordeaux allows 65hl/ha. It is a classic example of lower-yielding crops showing higher complexity. Bordeaux whites tend to show more savoury nutty notes with a less overt acid and fruit profile than other styles.

New Zealand is considered a moderate maritime climate and has built its wine industry and reputation on a very loud and pungent expression of Sauvignon Blanc. The Marlborough region, at the north end of the South Island, is the most known region for this style and is the home to 88% of these vines. The style is intensely perfumed and more obviously fruity than Loire Valley with more overt asparagus and "cat pee" and gooseberry notes. This style was copied by many other New World regions, Chile, South Africa, North America etc. New Zealand has higher than typical levels of UV radiation compared to similar temperate latitudes which contributes to the overt herbaceous notes in their Sauvignon Blanc.

Warmer climates such as Australia and California tend to show another expression of this grape. The herbaceous notes are always present but the fruit aromas and flavours are more prominent. You will find more green apple, gooseberry aromas and flavours and less piercing acidity.

Sauvignon Blanc is usually best consumed young when the bright acid and primary herbaceous fruity notes are more pronounced. There are examples of oak aged wines out of Bordeaux and the Loire where the wines will develop nicely in the bottle over 10 years or so but that is the exception.

In the 1970's in California, Robert Mondavi was looking to increase the popularity of Sauvignon Blanc so he oak aged it and renamed it Fume Blanc. The intent was to give it some of the glamour of Pouilly-Fume from the Loire Valley. It worked and Fume Blanc became a very successful wine style in the USA albeit questionable in quality.

FOOD PAIRINGS

As a general rule, high acid foods such as salad pairs well with Sauvignon Blanc wines. Seafood and white meats also do well. One classic pairing that can be outstanding is Loire Valley wines and Chèvre (Goat cheese).

SEMILLON

Semillon is a golden-coloured grape originating in Bordeaux. The grape got its name from St Emilion, which is a well-known Bordeaux region. The grape is known for producing large crops and is resistant to most disease pressure. It is primarily used as a blending partner for Sauvignon Blanc and is used for the production of some of the world's best sweet wines, primarily Sauternes and Barsac. The skin of the grape is thin which makes it prone to Botrytis aka Noble Rot.

Classic Semillon shows notes of figs, citrus, and lanolin. These wines when picked early are similar in flavours to Sauvignon Blanc and can show high acidity. When more commonly left to fully ripen, they show low acidity and are full-bodied, rich and can have an oily texture. This makes them a good blending partner for more acidic wines (Sauvignon Blanc), adding body and texture. When the yield is low and the fruit is picked early, the wines can show neutral in youth but evolve into complex spectrums of nut, toast and honey with bottle age and show an affinity to oak. Semillon wines grown in hotter regions tend to be fuller-bodied and softer.

Semillon is the most widely planted white grape in Bordeaux. It is used as a blender with Sauvignon Blanc to make dry whites as well as hugely complex and hugely expensive botrytized sweet wines. Some of the most expensive white wines globally are made with Semillon and Sauvignon Blanc. The grape used to be widely planted in South Africa, accounting for up to 90% of plantings. This number has decreased to 1% so is no longer significant in that region, however it is making a comeback and plantings are increasing. Australia grows a significant amount of Semillon. The Margaret River region produces some outstanding Sauvignon/Semillon blends and the Hunter Valley region produces a well-known long-lived dry Semillon for which it is famous. Chile is also a country that can churn out a magnificent style of rich oak aged Semillon.

In many New World regions, Semillon is often blended with Chardonnay, again adding body and complexity. This grape can be unpopular with consumers new to wine who are unfamiliar with its subtle complexity but is becoming hugely popular with Sommeliers and educated consumers globally.

FOOD PAIRINGS

This depends on what style you are drinking. Younger and lighter styles can be similar to Sauvignon Blanc so food pairings are similar. Seafood, white meat, goat cheese and salads. If you are having a richer style with some age, roast chicken, grilled pork and richer seafood like lobster and salmon are delicious. If you are fortunate enough to be drinking Sauternes, blue cheese is divine.

THE FLIGHT

This flight has two aspects to it. It highlights the difference between the subtle and complex Old World (Bordeaux/Loire Valley) style of Sauvignon Blanc from the racy, fruity New World (New Zealand) style in different quality categories. It also introduces the Semillon grape blended with Sauvignon Blanc in various quality classes as well as a single varietal.

LIST OF REFERENCES

- World Atlas of Wine 7th Edition (2013), Jancis Robinson and Hugh Johnson
- The Oxford Companion to Wine (2015), Jancis Robinson
- Wine and Spirits Education Trust (2012); Wines and Spirits - Understanding Style and Quality
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