

On Wine: Sancerre's sauvignon blancs

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SANCERRE, FRANCE, isn't a particularly big appellation: It encompasses only about 7,000 vineyard acres, less than one-sixth of the acreage in Napa County. But the area produces some of the world's most highly regarded sauvignon blancs.

Vineyards here, at the eastern end of the Loire Valley, date back centuries, although the area was better known for pinot noir until about a hundred years ago. (There's still some pinot, used in both red and rosé wines, but it's a lesser player these days.) Grapes are grown on chalky and flinty hillsides that fan out from the town of Sancerre to include 13 additional villages, all west of the Loire River.

The sauvignon blancs of Sancerre are fresh and elegant, with lots of citrusy flavors, often some grassiness and a wonderful minerality. Most are made in stainless steel or large, neutral oak casks to emphasize fruit rather than wood, although some vintners are starting to experiment with new oak.

Most Sancerres are less dramatic and pungent than the sauvignon blancs from New Zealand, which have become the new paradigm for that grape. But I think that restraint makes Sancerres easier to pair with food. The classic match is tangy goat cheese, produced in abundance in Sancerre (and has its own appellation, Crottin de Chavignol). The wines are also excellent with an array of seafood.

Some Sancerre wines are a blend of grapes from throughout the appellation, but there's a trend toward making and bottling wines from individual parcels separately. The latter type of wine is likely to reflect the soil type on which the grapes were grown. Sancerre's limestone-clay soils, known as terres blanches, yield full-bodied wines; the pebbly-limestone soils called caillottes produce aromatic, elegant wines; and the clay-flint soils or silex tend to produce wines with a flinty, sometimes smoky character.

Prices, unfortunately, have been on the rise in recent years, and the unfavorable exchange rate isn't helping. But you can still find some good wines for \$25 or less. **The 2007 Domaine Cherrier et Fils Sancerre (\$22.50), for example, is grassy and fresh, with lemon-lime flavors and mineral accents,** while the 2007 Lucien Crochet "La Croix du Roy" Sancerre (\$25) is more steely, with citrus and mineral.

The 2008 Pascal Jolivet Sancerre (\$28), made from vineyards representing all three Sancerre soil types, is crisp and grassy, with citrus, mineral and zippy acidity. Jolivet also has a more expensive cuvée, the 2007 Château du Nozay Sancerre (\$34), that's a little fleshier, with fig and pear wrapped around a citrusy core.

For a Sancerre that exhibits more grassy notes, there's the 2007 Patient Cottat "Vieilles Vignes" Sancerre (\$29.50), which is very fresh and citrusy with a nice roundness. The 2008 Pascal et Nicolas Reverdy "Les Coutes" Sancerre (\$28) is also fairly grassy, with pink grapefruit and lemon flavors. **The 2007 Vincent Delaporte Sancerre (\$32) shows citrus and pink grapefruit flavors, some herbal notes and a hint of mineral.**

Some Sancerres I sampled in France and in subsequent tastings are a little richer. For example, the 2007 Gerard Boulay "Clos de Beaujeu" Sancerre (\$30) is racy but weighty, with a strong mineral note.

Although I tend to prefer Sancerre when it's young and fresh, the wines can pick up some interesting flavors with a few years of age. The 2006 Comte Lafond Sancerre (\$34), for example, has fleshy, smoky fig flavors along with its vibrant citrus and persistent acidity.

Sancerre is one of the best-known appellations for sauvignon blanc in the Loire, but other areas produce excellent wines from that grape as well. In two weeks, I'll tell you about sauvignon blancs from Pouilly-Fumé and elsewhere in the Loire Valley.

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