



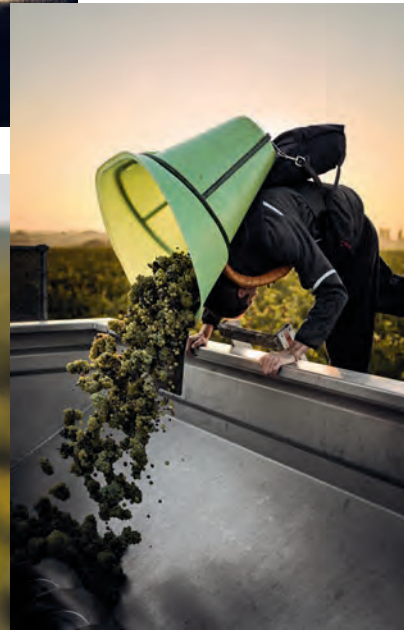
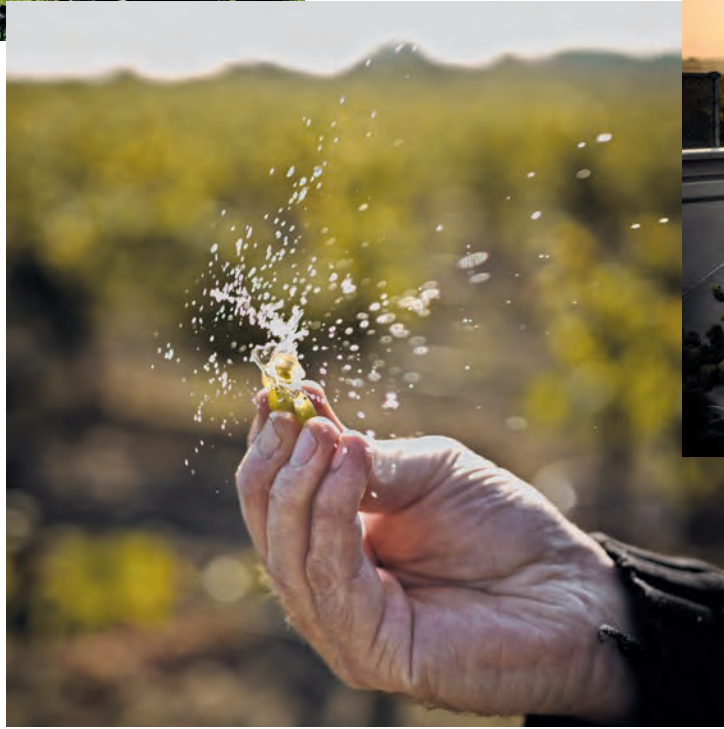
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Long underrated and ignored, a distinctive white wine made in France's Loire Valley is finally getting the attention it deserves.
By Jeffrey T Iverson



Muscadet Awakening



In a land of legendary white wines, muscadet, one of the most historic wines of France's Loire Valley, has never enjoyed much fame. The grape that creates it, called Melon de Bourgogne, flourishes nowhere besides this one coastal region at the mouth of the Loire. Yet after years of being dismissed as little more than a dependable tippie for washing down oysters, today, muscadet's image is changing. A new generation of winemakers has awoken to their region's remarkable

geology, and to the Melon grape's uncanny capacity to distill the character of stone. In so doing, they're opening doors to the world's finest restaurants, and proving that muscadet isn't just quaffable – it's "the quintessence of terroir".

So insists David Biraud, director of Sur Mesure par Thierry Marx in Paris. As a child of France's Atlantic coast, the bottle that kindled the passion of this future Best Sommelier in France was no rare

PHOTOS CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: CHRISTOPHE BORNET, PAUL STEFANAGGI (4); OPPOSITE PAGE FROM LEFT: BIRGIT HERGERT, PAUL STEFANAGGI, © DOMAINE BONNET-HUTEAU, PAUL STEFANAGGI

meursault, but a common muscadet. A perennial fixture on tables at family gatherings, Biraud never forgot the first time his father let him taste this crisp, saline wine. So began a fascination for muscadet, which endured even after Biraud learned of the wine's middling reputation. "When I was training to become a sommelier in the late 1990s, muscadet was rarely granted entry into the best restaurants," he recalls. One exception was La Fontaine aux Perles, a historic restaurant in the Breton city of Rennes. There, Biraud tasted the bottle that "changed my vision of muscadet" – a 1966 Clos des Rosiers.

With its golden hue and aromas of mature chablis, in aged muscadet Biraud immediately recognised that noble provenance suggested in the name "Melon de Bourgogne". As DNA reveals, Melon originated in Burgundy, a sibling of Chardonnay. A 16th-century edict by Philip II, Comte de Bourgogne, would exile Melon from Burgundy (ostensibly for a tendency to create bitter wines when under-ripe). Yet it found a home in the Loire Valley, where Muscadet was first mentioned in 1530 by the Renaissance writer François Rabelais. Perfectly adapted to a cool, oceanic climate, Melon eventually became the sole variety of the Loire's westernmost appellation.



By the 1980s, muscadet was a popular seafood wine in France and abroad, with 2.2 million cases exported in 1989. With large négociant operations controlling production and bottling themselves, vigneron focused more on the size of their harvest than on quality. In 1991, the bubble burst: a spring frost decimated the harvest, leaving négociants unable to satisfy orders, leading to a disastrous decision to bottle 400,000 hectolitres of poorly preserved, unsold wine from previous years. In



PHOTOS FROM TOP: JIMMY DELPIRE, CHRISTOPHE BORNET



one vintage, muscadet's reputation was ruined. Soon, the region's total hectares under vine had plummeted by 40 per cent to around 8,000.

Yet with hindsight, says Nicolas Choblet of *Domaine du Haut Bourg*, 1991 was a blessing. "That crisis forced vigneron to rethink their entire approach," he says, "to not just produce for volume, but also for quality, for richness." After much debate, the profession decided that salvaging its reputation would demand embracing again what makes Muscadet unique: the region's mosaic of terroirs – born of a tumultuous geological history of rising and falling volcanoes, mountains and seas – and its ancestral tradition of ageing on lees, a practice born in the early 1900s when growers realised that wines left in the barrel after fermentation became fuller and more rounded as months passed, the result of the dead yeast cells (lees) undergoing a process called autolysis.

Now, vigneron began exploring the benefits of longer ageing periods. *Domaine du Haut Bourg* led the way, creating a cuvée dubbed "Origine" – a wine aged 10 years on its lees. Tasting the 2003 vintage in 2014, critic Robert Parker was confounded by the mélange of freshness and complexity, declaring it "one of the

most distinctive wines I have ever tasted". (Two years later, *Domaine du Haut Bourg*, an estate that once sold its production to négociants, was being served to socialites at Balthazar brasserie in New York.)

While some innovated in the cellar, others explored the untapped potential in Muscadet's subsoils. Pioneers like *Domaine de l'Écu's* Guy Bossard (and his successor Fred Niger) and Jo Landron of *Domaines Landron* decided the only way to express a terroir was to forgo pesticides and work the soil to encourage deep root growth. In the vineyard, they adopted biodynamic viticulture, while proving in the winery that the Melon grape can yield wines with vastly different personalities depending on a vineyard's geology.

Cuvées like l'Écu's "Orthogneiss" and Landron's "Amphibolite", named after igneous and metamorphic stones in their soils, became rallying calls for a new terroir-minded generation. Among them was Jérôme Bretaudeau of *Domaine de Bellevue*, which grew from two hectares of family vines in 2001 to become a renowned 18ha estate. Through ceaseless innovation – experimenting in the winery with everything from oak barrels to amphorae and cement eggs; planting 11 different grape varieties and introducing draught-horse ploughing in the vineyard – he has created a

Above: Jérôme Bretaudeau of *Domaine de Bellevue*; opposite, from top: award-winning sommelier David Biraud; vintner Jo Landron (left) poses with Fred Niger of *Domaine de l'Écu*

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– Jérôme Breteau

collection of wines with a cult following. His flagship cuvée, Gaïa, a marvel of steely tension and salinity, is served around the world, from California's three-star Manresa to Australia's preeminent pescatarian eatery, Saint Peter. Still, Breteau remains humble. "I don't believe I've revealed even 50 per cent of these terroirs' potential," he says. "That job is going to take more than the lifetime of one vigneron."

Much like how Burgundy's vineyards were organised by centuries of monks, today producers are dividing Muscadet into crus, each associated with specific geological types found in particular communes. Seven of these *crus communaux* were approved in 2011 and 2019; three more are pending. The cru guidelines are strict, requiring low yields, and extended lees ageing. Cru Clisson, a granite terroir, yields rich wines like Domaine Michel Brégeon's La Molette cuvée – a wine importer Emily Spillmann calls "off-the-charts Muscadet". Cru Gorges, a terroir of gabbro (a magmatic rock from the oceanic crust) creates wines of scintillating minerality, like Domaine de la Pépière's mouthwatering Gorges cuvée.

Cru Goulaine, a terroir of gneiss and mica-schist, makes elegant, opulent wines, epitomised by Domaine Pierre Luneau Papin's Excelsior cuvée, whose 2007 vintage reaped 100 points from *Decanter's* Loire expert Jim Budd. Such exceptional, age-worthy wines, says Jean-Jacques Bonnet of Domaine Bonnet-Huteau (another standard-bearer of Cru Goulaine), are muscadet as it's meant to be. "We're returning to the roots of this appellation," he says, "which, at its heart, is one of the great whites of the Loire."

Today, thanks to passionate sommeliers like David Biraud, that sentiment is shared by a growing number of gastronomes, too. For, as director of *Sur Mesure* par Thierry Marx, Biraud offers no less than two-dozen different muscadets, from Landron's Amphibolite to Breteau's Gaïa – wines which the sommelier seamlessly pairs with the "haute couture" cuisine of Thierry Marx. "In the end," says Biraud, "muscadet gets straight to the heart of what oenophiles love in wine – a distinctive signature, a pure expression of a terroir, a place captured in a bottle."



PHOTO PAUL STEFANAGGI