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Cheap but Charming: Dipping Into Muscadet

By LETTIE TEAGUE

What happens when a wine is too cheap? When it's forever associated with the bottom of a wine list—or, in the case of my friend Richard, with a very bad date?

"Muscadet is the wine that you order if you don't like your date," Richard said, just before I poured him a glass. I assured him that the wine he was about to taste—though inexpensive—had nothing in common with his subpar dinner dates of the past. In fact, I informed him, Muscadet may be on the brink of a breakthrough: "There are sommeliers who think Muscadet is the Next Big Thing."



Illustration by Brian Stauffer for The Wall Street Journal

Actually, only one sommelier made this prediction to me: Patrick Capiello, the wine director of Gilt Restaurant in New York. Mr. Capiello features five Muscadets—about four more than most restaurants—on his list, and he argues that Muscadet could be "the next Grüner Veltliner." (Grüner, once little-known to Americans, has been widely popularized by devoted sommeliers over the past decade or so.) In fact, he was so convincing and so passionate on the subject of Muscadet I decided to revisit the wine myself.

There are several obstacles that may keep Muscadet from becoming the Next Big Thing—beginning with its name. Muscadet sounds so much like Muscat or Moscato that many people think it's a dessert wine. "Isn't Muscadet sweet?" my friend Christina asked when we sat down at the Oyster Bar in Grand Central and I ordered a glass. At \$8, it was one of the

three cheapest selections, sharing a price tag with a Chilean Merlot and yes, a Moscato.

Even more confusing is the fact that Muscadet is made from an old Burgundy grape—Melon de Bourgogne—that was expelled from Burgundy hundreds of years ago and somehow ended up in the western Loire, where it's chiefly lauded for unglamorous qualities like high productivity and resistance to frost.

And Muscadet producers have endured a Job-like array of problems in recent years. More than 60% of the Muscadet crop was destroyed by rot in the 2008, and some 60 Muscadet growers went bankrupt in 2010, according to Loire Valley wine broker Charles Sydney, who said the number since then has been even higher. "I'd estimate that more than 100 producers have left—and more will after the next harvest," he said.

At the same time, the Muscadet appellation has gotten smaller: The Institut National des Appellations d'Origine, or INAO, authorized uprooting more than 5,000 acres of Muscadet vineyards in 2009, after determining that the appellation was too large (there was an expansion in the 1970s—the last time Muscadet was a popular wine).

But price may still be Muscadet's thorniest problem. Unlike the wines of Burgundy, Bordeaux or even the Rhône, the cost of a bottle of Muscadet has increased very little, despite several terrific vintages (2005, 2007, 2009) whose wines are still on store shelves. According to New York-based wine importer Victor Schwartz of VOS Selections, a bottle of Muscadet costs only a few dollars more today than it did 10 years ago. In the same period, the price of a bottle of basic red Bourgogne has gone up more than \$40, he said.

Pierre-Jean Sauvion, scion of Château du Cléray-Sauvion and one of Muscadet's biggest private producers, said that he remains optimistic. He mentioned Muscadet's low alcohol content—between 11% and 12%—as a selling point, and cited television cooking shows as a beneficial tool: "Muscadet is such a good food wine," he said. While I agreed that Muscadet is a great partner to seafood, I didn't have the heart to tell him most people I know use it as a cooking wine.

Mr. Sauvion also noted the recent attempt to create a system of Muscadet classification called "cru communal" as a positive development. This new system recognizes certain sites as capable of producing superior wines and mandates more stringent quality standards, including limiting the size of yields. The INAO just approved three crus communaux, Clison, Gorges and Le Pallet, a few weeks ago.

But how much impact can these designations really have when the best Muscadet crus cost just a few dollars more than the "regular" wines? It would be like Domaine de la Romanée-Conti priced a few bucks above basic Bourgogne. The average price of the Muscadets I purchased for my tasting was around \$15, while the most expensive bottle—the 2005 Luneau-Papin Pueri Solis Muscadet—cost just \$5 more.

When I started my tasting, I have to admit I wasn't thinking much about the lost Muscadet vineyards, the penurious growers or their stunted price growth. Like everyone else, I just wanted a good deal. And the subject of price seemed to dominate when I tasted a range of Muscadets with some friends. "I can get a good Muscadet for less than that," said my friend Aimee of the lithe and lively 2010 Domaine de la Pépière Clos des Briords (\$14), which we all enjoyed. Ditto an impressive 2009 Luneau-Papin Muscadet Le L d'Or (\$20) that was rich and generous and paired perfectly with scallops. It was admired all around, but no one seemed willing to pay \$20 for it. "It's only Muscadet," someone remarked, as if that settled the matter.

Some of the wine professionals I spoke with were also skeptical about the prospect of a Muscadet reversal of fortune. Christopher Miller, wine director of Spago Beverly Hills, said the only bottle of Muscadet he'd sold lately (\$32, one of his very cheapest selections) had been to a friend. But what of wines like the Luneau-Papin Le L d'Or or the splendid 2009 Bonnet-Huteau Les Dabinières, which could have well been mistaken for Chablis?

Mr. Miller remained unmoved. "So you get Muscadet at its very pinnacle and it's maybe almost as good as a petite Chablis?" he replied. He currently sells six bottles of Riesling a day. "When I can do the same with Muscadet, I'll be shouting its praises from the rooftop," he said.

I'm betting (or maybe just hoping) that after Mr. Miller tastes Muscadets like Luneau-Papin's Le L d'Or or Pueri Solis, or the Bonnet-Huteau Les Dabinières, he might just get up on that rooftop. It's the sort of publicity that Muscadet producers could use.

Oenophile: Five Muscadets to Try

2010 Domaine la Haute Févrie Muscadet, \$14

The vineyards at Domaine la Haute Févrie are unusual in two respects: They're hand-harvested (uncommon in Muscadet) and the average vine age is fairly old—around 35 years. Vigneron Claude Branger is considered a top producer and this crisp,



almost zingy white with truly mouthwatering acidity is an excellent buy.

F. Martin Ramin for The Wall Street Journal

Domaine la Haute Févrie Muscadet



2009 Domaine de L'Ecu Expression de Granite Muscadet, \$18

Complexity is a word that is rarely invoked when describing Muscadet but it would not be misplaced with this wine; the Expression de Granite is a powerful wine with a bracing acidity and layers of flavors, though its dominant feature is minerality. Indeed, the "Granite" (a specific Muscadet soil type) more than lives up to its name.

F. Martin Ramin for The Wall Street Journal

Domaine de L'Ecu Expression de Granite Muscadet

2009 Luneau-Papin Muscadet Le L d'Or, \$20

This is yet another impressive—even brilliant—Muscadet from another top producer and another top (read: ripe) vintage. Lush



and generous, almost round with beguiling aromas of citrus and white flowers, it's accessible now but may show even better in a few years. (A little-known fact about Muscadets: They're wines that can age.)

F. Martin Ramin for The Wall Street Journal
Luneau-Papin Muscadet Le L d'Or



2010 Domaine de la Pépière Clos des Briords Muscadet, \$17

If there's only one Muscadet offered on a wine list, it's likely to be Domaine de la Pépière's Clos des Briords. This old-vine cuvée from star vigneron Marc Olivier is a bright, clean, dry and citrusy wine with particularly bracing acidity. It's a great aperitif or companion to shellfish.

F. Martin Ramin for The Wall Street Journal
Domaine de la Pépière Clos des Briords Muscadet

2009 Domaine de la Louvetrie Le Fief du Breil, \$18

Mustachioed Muscadet vigneron Jo Landron is widely regarded



as one of the leading producers of the region, turning out consistently characterful wines such as this single-vineyard offering. Marked by notes of citrus and mineral, it's another wine that will likely age well—but is hard not to drink now.

F. Martin Ramin for The Wall Street Journal

Domaine de la Louvetrie Le Fief du Breil

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