

A world beyond oysters

Muscadet has amazing geological diversity, and we're now seeing it expressed in its wines. Why, wonders Chris Kissack, does the British market still harbour such old-fashioned misconceptions?

AS I STOOD looking out over the Marais de Goulaine from my vantage point on the Butte de la Roche, a vine-encrusted hill east of Nantes, Marie Luneau-Chartier handed me a piece of rock. Its appearance was distinctive, the material peppered with little cysts and pits, the surface over-run with ridges, like miniature cuestas on a microscopic moon.

What she had given me was serpentinite, just one small part of the complex igneous and metamorphic geology of north west France. This complexity defies simple description; there is schist and micaschist, particularly beneath the Goulaine vineyards, next to the Butte de la Roche.

There is granite, gneiss, orthogneiss, three commonly encountered forms, as well as more exotically named rocks such as gabbro, amphibolite and the aforementioned serpentinite. This diversity is in stark contrast to the more straightforward picture found in many other regions; Muscadet, I think, must have the most heterogeneous terroir of any appellation.

And yet, when we look to the wines of Muscadet, if anything it is a region known for homogeneity. One appellation (well, four actually, but they all go by the moniker of Muscadet), with 9,000 hectares of vines. One style of wine too, thought of by many as light, anodyne, and uninteresting. And seemingly one price too: rock bottom. No wonder those 9,000 hectares were, just a few years ago,

13,000 hectares; low prices and the catastrophic frost of 2008 tipped many growers into bankruptcy, their vineyards now lying abandoned.

The leading vigneron of Muscadet will tell you, however, that this great complexity of terroir can have a profound



Rock star: Marie Luneau-Chartier

effect on the character of the wines. Vineyard plots on the best soils are highly coveted; the Luneau-Papin family (which includes Marie, by marriage), of the domaine of the same name, had to wait for years before they could secure a parcel on the Butte de la Roche.

THIS LEAVES US with a marked incongruity; complexity on one side, homogeneity on the other. Either the vigneron of Muscadet are fantasists, or British wine drinkers need to appraise Muscadet anew. You can perhaps guess which tack I am going to take.

Aware of the diversity within their vineyard, close to 20 years ago a group of

growers in Gorges – a village in the Muscadet Sèvre et Maine appellation blessed with gabbro rock which the growers believed gave their wines a unique identity – began vinifying and labelling their wines in a manner intended to emphasise this.

It wasn't just the labels that changed though; led by André-Michel Brégeon, the new style of wines featured lower yields (down from the rather generous 55 hl/ha permitted to 45 hl/ha, but often less) and they were left on the lees for much longer than before – we're talking years here, by the way, not just a few extra months.

He initially christened these wines Gorgeois, but as the movement gathered pace, Gorges became the more commonly used term.

FROM THIS SMALL beginning sprang a movement, initially led by the growers; their aim was to define specific higher-quality sites, known as *crus communaux*. Muscadet began to grow a *cru* system.

The movement is now firmly established; it has been a quiet revolution, but there are now many Muscadet *crus*, some signed off by the INAO, some still awaiting ratification.

In July 2011 three *crus*, Gorges, Clisson and Le Pallet, all communes lying on the Sèvre – received the official INAO nod. Each has distinctive terroir, the wines are made from older vines, with lower yields, and they see an extended period of time on the lees before bottling.



Coming out of its shell: modern Muscadet works well with white fish and foie gras

Having tasted many of the wines, I can say that they can be nothing short of stunning. These are not really oyster wines. They have a distinctive new style, richer in terms of flesh, more complex in their floral, desiccated-fruit aromatics, but still cut through with the freshening acidity and minerality that we would hope for.

These wines are to Muscadet what Le Clos and Valmur are to Chablis. The entry-level wines might be fine with simple shellfish, but the upper classes – whether we are talking Clisson or Le Clos – can deal with everything from richer



Clisson very carefully: Bruno Cormerais

fish dishes to roast chicken, guinea fowl, other white meats and hard cheeses. This is Muscadet, but not as you know it.

And what can we expect after Gorges, Clisson and Le Pallet? Well, there are six more Muscadet *crus* in the pipeline; another four are planned for 2014, although this seems to be a rolling target; every time I meet a vigneron waiting for the relevant *cru* to be ratified, I hear the date has been put back another year.

This is, I believe, nothing unusual for French wine bureaucracy. The four in question are Château-Thébaud, Mouzillon-Tillières, Goulaine – as seen from the Butte de la Roche – and Monnières St Fiacre.

Two more, La Haye-Fouassière and Vallet, are even further in the future. Nevertheless some – especially Château-Thébaud – are effectively already in existence; all the stipulations are agreed, and there is a distinctive common label already in use.

DESPITE THEIR GREAT appeal, these wines aren't that easy to grasp. Many of us have such engrained ideas about

Muscadet – quality, price, style and appeal – that dramatically different wines are bound to challenge preconceived biases. On a recent trip to Nantes I watched several UK journalists struggling to get to grips with this very new style of Muscadet; they were expecting briny wines and buckets of oysters, but were served *crus communaux* wines instead, with everything from white fish to foie gras.

Likewise, it will take some time for the British wine trade to grasp the significance of these wines, I think; hopefully this will give insightful retailers an advantage, time to get on board with these wines before news of their new and exciting quality spreads and they become as popular as top-drawer Sancerre or *premier cru* Chablis. Which – with higher quality and lower prices on their side – they have all the potential to do. ■

SOME DOMAINES TO LOOK OUT FOR

Gorges

- André-Michel Brégeon

- Gilles Luneau

Clisson

- Bruno Cormerais

- Domaine de la Pépière

- Laurent Perraud

Monnières St Fiacre

- Château du Coing

- Domaine Ménard-Gaborit

Château-Thébaud

- Domaine de la Pépière

- Domaine Poiron-Dabin

La Haye-Fouassière

- Jo Landron

- Domaine de Bel-Air

Le Pallet

- Les Vignerons de Pallet

Goulaine

- Domaine Luneau-Papin

- Domaine David