

EATING & DRINKING

ON WINE: LETTIE TEAGLE



# Muscadet: The Oyster's Best Friend Comes of Age

CHEAP VERSIONS OF wines that should be expensive are almost always disappointing. Expensive versions of under-rated ones are usually a revelation," wrote British author Patrick Matthies in his terrific 1987 wine book, "The Wild Bunch." "Best value in wine is most likely to come from an \$8 bottle of Muscadet," Mr. Matthies further opined, "than an \$8 bottle of Merlot from the Gores of Oz."

"Great Muscadet" may read like an oxymoron, but quality Muscadet is actually one of the world's best, if most obscure, bargains. Even today, a bottle from a top producer rarely costs more than \$25, and quite a few cost even less.

Low prices are key to Muscadet's history: They're the reason for the wine's boom back in the '60s, and the reason of its more recent lull. A few decades ago, the world was clamoring for the cheap (if rather innocuous) wine. Sales were strong, and the region's vineyards turned out large quantities of perfectly drinkable (if rather soulless) stuff.

This formula worked very well until it did not. Over the years, the world of wine widened, and its bargain-seeking drinkers moved on to yet cheaper alternatives from other parts of the world. By the late 1990s they could find lots of affordable regional wines from Chile, Australia, Greece and Argentina. There were even budget alternatives from other parts of France, such as Gascony or Languedoc.

And there was the matter of some very bad weather. Located in the far western edge of France's Loire Valley, Muscadet vineyards are planted particularly close to the Atlantic, which means they're particularly vulnerable to rain and frost. That vulnerability has compromised more than one recent vintage, most notably in 2006, when the Muscadet harvest was effectively halted.

As a result of both the vicissitudes of the climate and the bad market conditions, quite a few Muscadet growers have gone out of business. According to a Loire Valley Wine Bureau spokesperson, 300 pro-

ducers had pulled out their vines by 2012, and noted Loire Valley wine broker Charles Sydney expects that number to rise. Two years ago, he forecast that one-third of Muscadet's growers would go bankrupt or simply give up by the end of 2013, a prediction that he now considers "optimistic." In a recent email, Mr. Sydney said he believes the number will be closer to 50%.

A further challenge is the wine itself. Produced from the Melon de Bourgogne grape, Muscadet is a dry, rather neutral white wine that hardly inspires a torrent of positive adjectives from oenophiles. At best, it might be called "lively and bright" or "snappy," though a few Muscadets could be described as mineral, stony, penetrating and intense.

The wines that warrant these last four words are the work of a small cadre of growers in the select appellation Muscadet Sèvre et Maine. Their best crus can stand next to the great whites of the Loire—at less than half the price. These small producers focus on quality, not quantity; their wines are almost always hand-harvested, and their vineyards are often quite old.

Most of these wines are fermented with native yeasts and often rest for an extended time

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on their lees—the spent yeast particles that accumulate at the bottom of a wine vat after fermentation—which adds complexity and richness.

Despite these impressive conditions, there are still some tasters who are skeptical about Muscadet. I suspect this has as much to do with the price as it does with the wine's reputation. Why sell a \$30 bottle of Muscadet when you can sell a \$60 bottle of Sauvignon? Kevin McKenna, a partner in



Leola/Bresser Selections, said such attitudes are more typical of what he calls "look-levered" sommeliers than "working" sommeliers. The latter are professionals who taste with an open mind, according to Mr. McKenna, he represents two of the most highly-regarded Muscadet producers, Domaine de la Pépière and Domaine Lucien Papin. "I have a pretty rarefied view of Muscadet," Mr. McKenna said.

David Little, co-owner of Chambers Street Wines in New York, shares that view. Many credit him with bringing serious Muscadet to New Yorkers. If not the world, and he is probably the only retailer in the city who sells more of it than he does Sauvignon. According to Mr. Little, he sold 800 cases of Muscadet in 2012 versus 125 of Sauvignon. While Mr. Little sells lots of Muscadet, he doesn't and wines from many producers—only those he thinks are the best. He is also a proponent of aged Muscadet.

(Another little-known fact: The best Muscadets can age beautifully for decades.) Right now Mr. Little recommends the superb 1998 and 2001 vintages "if you can find them."

Muscadet lovers in Durham, N.C., are in luck: The 1998 Domaine de la Louvernie Le Fleu du Breil Muscadet Sèvre et Maine is on the list at the restaurant Vin Stage for \$87 a bottle. It's one of many Muscadets that Vin Stage wine director and general manager Michael Malin features. Do they sell well? Yes and no, said Mr. Malin. Sometimes people don't know it is a dry wine. "Since we're in the South, sometimes people assume Muscadet is related to the southern grape Muscadine, and that's great," he said.

There are also quite a few older Muscadets on the list at Maison Premiere in Brooklyn, where oysters are the specialty and Muscadet is the marriage wine by the glass. In fact, Muscadet curtails everything else, said Kristof Zuck, the

restaurant's managing partner. "It even curtails cheaper wines," he said. And it is an unwritten rule of Mr. Matthies, he added, "A glass of \$8 Muscadet will always be a better wine than an \$8 glass of something else."

While I didn't taste any Muscadets with oysters (I'm not a fan of the latter), I did include a few older Muscadets in my testing. I sampled mostly wines from the good 2011 vintage and the excellent 2012 vintage, but tried a few that were several years older, too. I bought 15 wines altogether, including bottles from top producers like Lucien Papin, Guy Bossard and Domaine de la Pépière, as well as some more commercial stuff. Prices ranged from \$10 to \$30.

The results weren't particularly surprising: The more commercial wines were one-dimensional and boring. They had lots of acidity but little else. A few of the cheaper ones, like the Château de Chasseuil Muscadet, were pleasant

and lively, but it was the wines from the best producers—Domaine de la Pépière, Lucien Papin, Guy Bossard at Domaine de l'Écu—that stood out. The 2012 Domaine de la Pépière Clos de Briande, a single-vineyard bottling, was particularly impressive, all stony minerality. And the older wines, most notably the 2005 Lucien Papin Sur Le Le L'O'Or, made from the estate's oldest vines, were still vibrant and lively yet profound and rich.

The Sur Le Le L'O'Or is one of 18 Muscadets on the list at Maison Premiere. That's 17 more than one wine director thought that there should be. "This wine director said to me, 'What are you doing with 18? You should have one,'" recalled Mr. Zuck. "It was pretty much the dumbest thing I've ever heard. I'd be think I should only have one oyster too?"

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GENOPHILE: FIVE MUSCADETS MORE THAN WORTH THE PRICE

**2010 Bossard Domaine de l'Écu Expression de Grande Muscadet Sèvre et Maine, \$21**  
Winebroker Guy Bossard produces a number of different Muscadet bottlings on his estate, Domaine de l'Écu. His Expression de Grande wine is a typically mineral example: dry, high in acidity and rather austere. It could be cellared a few years.

**2005 Lucien Papin Sur Le Le L'O'Or Muscadet Sèvre et Maine, \$33**  
The top crus of a top Muscadet estate, this eight-year-old Muscadet is definitely in its prime. Produced from some of the estate's oldest vines and aged on its lees for nearly a year, it's a big, broad-textured and truly beautiful wine.

**2012 Domaine de la Pépière Clos des Brivats Muscadet Sèvre et Maine, \$10**  
There is a lot of a summer cult around the Muscadets of Domaine de la Pépière, especially the Clos des Brivats bottling. It's a single vineyard cuvee of particular intensity—all bright acidity and penetrating mineral character. A wine made for all sorts of plebs.

**2012 Château de Chasseuil Muscadet Sèvre et Maine, \$10**  
The Château de Chasseuil is a straightforward, pleasantly dry wine. It's dry and snappy, unadorned but thoroughly enjoyable. While it may not be the most of the other four wines listed here, it's a lively aperitif at a good price.

**2011 Domaine de la Louvernie Le Fleu du Breil Muscadet Sèvre et Maine, \$20**  
Jo Louvernie is one of the most highly regarded (and distinctly muscadet) producers in Muscadet. He turns out exceptional single-vineyard organic wines. Aged 34 months on its lees, this one is full-bodied with an earthy, saline nose.

HALF FULL

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