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Singing of France's Unsung Chenin Blanc

By JAY MCINERNEY

Back in the late '80s, the French government was planning to run train tracks for the high-speed TGV right through the middle of the historic vineyards of Vouvray, and Gaston Huet, as mayor of the town and its most important vintner, was leading the fight against the plan. When the writers Don and Petie Kladstrup went to interview Mr. Huet about the controversy, they asked him in passing about the greatest wine he'd ever tasted.



Brian Stauffer for The Wall Street Journal

Not surprisingly, he said it was a Chenin Blanc from his native Loire Valley, but he couldn't remember the maker or the vintage. He had tasted it as a prisoner of war in Germany, and the wine, a thimbleful in a mustard jar, was underripe and short on the finish. But it had the characteristic pear, apple and honey flavors of his beloved Loire Chenin, and it was the first wine he'd tasted since his capture some two years before.

A railroad tunnel was excavated under the vineyards of Vouvray in the late '80s and Mr. Huet passed away in 2002, leaving his winery in the capable hands of his son-in-law Noël Pinguet, while the Kladstrups published a very fine book called "Wine and War" that was inspired in part by Mr. Huet's story. What hasn't really changed all that much is the relative obscurity of Loire Chenin Blanc. Sauvignon Blanc, the other white grape of the Loire Valley, gets more recognition, particularly when it's grown in Sancerre and Pouilly-Fumé. But to my mind, Chenin is a much greater and more versatile grape.

Chenin Blanc almost certainly originated in the central Loire Valley, although both California and South Africa have more acreage planted in it. Most of the Golden State's plantings are in the hot Central Valley, and these grapes usually end up blended anonymously into jug wine, while the South African plantings, which were brought to the Cape by French Huguenot refugees in the 17th century, were known for many years as "Steen."

Chenin reaches its greatest heights in the Loire Valley, but in keeping with French practice you won't see the name of the grape on the bottle, but rather the village or region where it's grown. With the exception of Vouvray, none of these are exactly household names; other appellations include Anjou, Bonnezeaux, Chinon, Coteaux du Layon, Jasnières, Montlouis-sur-Loire, Quarts de Chaume, Saumur and Savennières. Got that? Chenin's identity crisis is further exacerbated by the fact that it's vinified in a variety of styles from dry to very sweet, in both still and sparkling forms. For many connoisseurs, the dessert wines of Vouvray, Quarts de Chaume and Bonnezeaux represent the apex of Chenin, although I'm currently most interested in the dry wines, many of them from relatively new domains.

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"Chenin is France's answer to German Riesling," said Daniel Johnnes, the wine director of Daniel Boulud's restaurant group, at a recent gathering of New York sommeliers in my living room as we prepared to taste some 25 Chenins. In some company this statement could clear the room fast, but sommeliers love Riesling, despite the relative skepticism of the American drinking public, and they also tend to love Chenin, for some of the same reasons—it's relatively high-acid, which makes it food-friendly and lively even when it has residual sugar. I've yet to see our congregation, which convenes regularly, as enthusiastic about a group of wines.

The central Loire is a cradle of so-called natural wine making, and of organic and biodynamic viticulture, thanks in part to the towering presence of Nicolas Joly, the messianic proprietor of Coulée de Serrant in Savennières. A 1985 Coulée de Serrant was my epiphany Chenin, and I finally made a pilgrimage to the estate last year. To listen to the erudite and cosmically conscious Monsieur Joly explain the tenets of biodynamics, the system of holistic agriculture based on the teachings of Austrian theosophist Rudolph Steiner, while walking the rolling hills of his vineyard on the north bank of the Loire, it's easy to be convinced that conventional agriculture is pernicious and that biodynamics is the future, if not necessarily to understand it in rational terms. Noël Pinguet, Mr. Huet's son-in-law, was one of the first in the region to be converted.

Domaine Huet is almost certainly the world's most celebrated source of Chenin Blanc; since Gaston's father purchased the domain in 1928, it has produced whites renowned for their freshness and longevity. A 1985 Vouvray Clos du Bourg our group tasted was incredibly fresh and vibrant, quite dry but with the signature flavor of honey, and a 1959 Le Haut-Lieu tasted earlier was definitely my white wine of the year last year. Like many makers of Chenin, Huet makes wines that range from dry to sweet. Harvesting is done by hand, and many passes are made through the vineyards. The ripest grapes, sometimes affected by botrytis, or noble rot, go into the sweetest wines, labeled moelleux (sweet), followed by demi-sec (semisweet) and sec, which denotes the driest wines. (In exceptional years, a super-sweet liqueux called Cuvée Constance is produced.)

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In recent years the central Loire Valley, which has much more affordable vineyard land than Bordeaux or Burgundy, has attracted many ambitious and adventurous young winemakers. Jacky Blot of Domaine de la Taille Aux Loups is among the most exciting of the newer Chenin producers, and we were all

impressed with his 2010 Montlouis Les Caburoches, a vibrant dry Chenin. The mustachioed Mr. Blot began his career as a negotiant in Tours and gradually began acquiring small domains in Montlouis, a not-terribly-fashionable appellation on the South Bank of the Loire, and eventually a few acres in the more illustrious town of Vouvray, across the river. Mr. Blot's obsessive attention to detail in the vineyard and the cellar has helped set a new standard for the appellation, as have the efforts of François Chidaine, a baby-faced Montlouis native who farms biodynamically and, like Mr. Blot, has lately acquired vineyards in Vouvray—specifically the celebrated Clos Baudoin vineyard, which is sort of the equivalent of a boy from the Bronx buying a building on Park Avenue. Honestly, though, the Montlouis wines are at this point as good as the Vouvrais.

Twenty years ago Joly and Huet were among the few names you needed to know for Chenin Blanc, but now the region is teeming with great producers, and the biggest problem facing consumers is where to start, when faced with so many appellations and so many winemaking styles. Most of us drink dry wines most often, so that's a good place to start (although I sometimes think the demi-sec category may show Loire Chenin at its best). Dry wines are made in all the appellations. Savennières is almost inevitably dry, with stony undertones; look for Domaine FL and Domaine Laffourcade. Even the dry Chenins usually display a rich honey character, along with fruit reminiscent of apple or, more often, pear. Lanolin (aka sheep fat) is a signature aromatic characteristic for Loire Chenin; tasters also sometimes cite wet wool.

Chenin often seems to have a rich texture in the mouth; Rabelais compared the Chenins of his native Chinon to taffeta. Silky, yes, but not wimpy. Sommelier Jerusha Frost, of the Lion, pairs an '08 Sébastien Brunet Vouvray Sec with Wagyu beef crudo, while Carla Rzeszewski of the Breslin pours the 2007 Domaine FL Roches-aux-Moines Savennières with April Bloomfield's suckling pig. That's a combination of which I feel certain Rabelais, the author of "Gargantua," would have approved.

Write to Jay at wine@wsj.com.

Oenophile

*Some of the Loire Valley's Standout
Chenin Blancs*



2009 François Chidaine
Montlouis-sur-Loire Clos
Habert Demi-Sec, \$20 |
This floral-scented,
biodynamically produced
wine probably should be
classified as a demi-sec, but
the residual sugar is
perfectly balanced by the
lively acidity. Great value.





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