

Plant d'Anjou, pineau blanc, chenin?

The diversity of grape varieties before the phylloxera outbreak, from the 1500s to the 1860s

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The history of grape varieties remains largely unknown. Historians have above all sought to identify the first mentions of "their" regional grape varieties¹. That is why the explanations of the choice of a particular grape variety have oscillated between two poles. First a vision tinged with Darwinism: nature is well made, the best grape varieties have found their best terroirs naturally. Then a possibilistic vision, claimed by Jean-Robert Pitte, in the wake of Roger Dion: natural constraints do not explain everything (in fact, not much ...), and the very flexible geography of the grape varieties, is primarily a matter of human choice depending on the context².

The inclination of the historian inclines naturally towards the second pole, but it must accept warnings from specialists of the natural sciences. Indeed, not all grape varieties are suitable for all soils and sub-soils. It is also necessary to take into account the exposure, climate, sunshine, changes in temperature over the course of the year, distribution of precipitation. On the other hand, we cannot ignore a multiplicity of human factors.

I would like to propose here several lines of investigation concerning chenin; to present all the characteristics of this history to build. It is at first old, regularly cited since the 16th century. It then has several names: plant d'Anjou, pineau blanc, chenin. It has a particularly significant geographical spread.

Then there is the controversy over its origins: reputed to have originated in the Loire valley, it is nonetheless claimed by the Southwest. We will try to present the main characteristics of the grape varieties of the years 1500-1860.

The difficulty in identifying old grape varieties

Before the 16th century, the mention of grape varieties was rare. The few agronomic treatises of the Middle Ages cite almost no varieties, unlike those of antiquity. For their part, historians have found indications of grape varieties in contracts of sale, leases, descriptions, mémoires. However, it is likely that the majority of known varieties had been identified.

From the 16th century onwards, agronomic texts include increasingly long lists of grape varieties. Admittedly, the vintage of the sixteenth century is quite modest: 22 grape varieties in Estienne and Liébault in the edition of 1583⁴; 37 recorded by Olivier de Serres in 1600⁵. The list shows a strong inflation from the end of the 17th century: 60 grape varieties in the *Compendium of Fine Fruits*, by Merlet in 1690⁶; 62 grape varieties by Plaigne in 1785⁷, which largely plagiarizes Merlet. The period 1800-1860 marks a major break. If Dussieux only cites 39 grape varieties in 1801⁸ and Salmon 37 in 1826⁹, Bosc reaches more than 500 grape varieties in 1823, although there are many duplicates among them¹⁰. Henceforth, the authors seek to classify and explain the distribution of grape varieties. Often absent from lists before the 19th century, the "plant d'Anjou" nevertheless appears in other documents. In addition to Gargantua (book 1, chapter XXV) under the name of "chenin", the "plant d'Anjou" is still quoted in the accounts of Diane of Poitiers from 1547¹¹. In 1765, Drapeau also describes "chenin" as being the dominant plant of Anjou,

¹ Avant le XVIII^{ème} siècle, les sources sont rares et les historiens ont par conséquent consacré peu de place à cette question. On trouve beaucoup d'informations dans l'ouvrage de Robert Chapuis sur le vignoble du Doubs et de Haute-Saône, grâce en particulier à de nombreux règlements interdisant certains cépages, du XVI^{ème} au XVIII^{ème} siècle ; CHAPUIS Robert, *Vignobles du Doubs et de Haute-Saône. De la naissance à la renaissance*, Besançon, Ed. du Belvédère, 2013, p. 41-50,

¹ Before the 18th century, sources are rare and consequently historians devoted little time to this field. Plentiful information may be found in the writings of Robert Chapuis on the vineyards of Doubs and Haute-Saône, due in particular to the numerous regulations forbidding certain varieties from the 16th to the 18th century;

p. 146-157. Voir encore BRUMONT Francis, Madiran et Saint-Mont. Histoire et devenir des vignobles, Biarritz, Atlantica, 1999, p. 76-79.

² PITTE Jean-Robert, *Bordeaux Bourgogne. Les passions rivales*, Paris, Hachette, 2005, p. 146-155.

³ LAVIGNAC Guy, *Cépages du Sud-Ouest. 2000 ans d'histoire*, Ed. du Rouergue / INRA Editions, 2001, p. 158.

⁴ ESTIENNE Charles, LIEBAUT Jean, *L'agriculture, et maison rustique*, Lyon, Du Puys, 1583, p. 326-327.

⁵ SERRES DE Olivier, *Le Théâtre d'agriculture et Mesnage des champs*, Paris, Métayer, 1600, p. 152.

- ⁶ MERLET Jean, L'abrégé des bons fruits, Paris, 1690, de Sercy, p. 141-152.
⁷ PLAIGNE DE le chevalier, L'art de faire, d'améliorer et de conserver les vins, ou le Parfait vigneron, Liège, Desoer, 1785, p. 234-246.
⁸ Cours complet d'agriculture théorique et pratique, Paris, Delalain, volume 10, 1801, p. 173-185.
⁹ SALMON, Art de cultiver la vigne et de faire de bon vin, Paris, Huzard, 1826, p. 1-20.
¹⁰ Nouveau cours complet d'agriculture théorique et pratique, Paris, Deterville, tome 16, 1823, p. 223-436.
¹¹ Comptes des recettes et despences faites en la chastellenie de Chenonceau, par Diane de Poitiers, publié par l'abbé C. Chevalier, Paris, Téchener, 1864, p. 9.

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leaving only a small place for red varieties, while the memoir published by Cavoleau in 1827 cites "pineau blanc" as the principle variety of the region¹². The appellations are therefore incredibly changeable. Consequently, the authors seek to classify and identify the main species, in the wake of the great botanical classifications of the previous century. The need for this classification is originally defended by the Abbot Rozier as early as the 1780s, during a nursery project in Béziers¹³. But it is above all the Count Odart, also from a nursery, located in Esvres south of Tours, who undertook the task of classification. He produced the famous Universal Ampelography in 1843 in which is established a very large number of synonyms, retaining about 150 very original grape varieties. He then put forward the idea of large families, the famous grape variety strains grouped together by "attributes", according to resemblances.

An impossible retrospective geography?

Map 2. The dominant varieties, after Guyot

Ancient vine populations were highly diversified at the departmental level. The great inquiry by Guyot in the 1860s provided the first true national picture, and allowed to calculate an average of grape varieties per department of 12.75, the deviations ranging from one for Ille et Vilaine (muscadet) to forty-eight for the Tarn-et-Garonne. However, other sources suggest an even greater diversity. The works of Guillory on the Anjou identified about fifteen varieties, when Guyot had only four. Similarly, in Châtillon-sur-Marne in the Marne valley, a regional topography of 1830 lists a dozen varieties, whereas Guyot indicates only six thirty years later. The Binson vineyard alone (about 200 ha) had eight varieties¹⁶. Guyot's investigation gives us the opportunity to see the dominant varieties by region, even if one is obliged to be satisfied with the impressions of the author, and not with proportions. It is possible to identify the grape varieties in about thirty départements: the folle blanche is by far the most emblematic grape variety in the western region; pinot noir and meunier are present in Ile-de-France; gamay dominates in central France; côt is well established in the south-west; mediterranean varieties dominate locally in Provence.

Map 2. The dominant grape varieties, according to Guyot. But, a dominant variety does not imply a monopoly. Everywhere, diversity of grape varieties is very large. Chenin, for example, did not have a monopoly in Anjou among the white varieties. Similarly, pinot noir and gamay are equally shared between Côtes de Beaune and Côtes de Nuits, confirmed by the figures provided by Lavalley in 1855: 240 ha for pinot, against 350 for gamay at Nuits, 330 ha of pinot and 400 ha of gamay in Pommard.

High frequency varieties can be identified: gamay (29 départements), chasselas (23), pinot noir (21) meunier (19), côt (19), clairette (18, but the name is very generic), folle blanche (17). Chenin is a rather frequent, with 7 departments. Conversely, 288 varieties are mentioned one department alone.

- ¹² CAVOLEAU Jean-Alexandre, OEnologie française, Paris, Huzard, 1827, p. 192.
¹³ MARTIN Jean-Claude, Les Hommes de Science, la Vigne et le Vin de l'Antiquité au 19^{ème} siècle, Bordeaux, Féret, 2009, p. 120-129.
¹⁴ GUYOT Jules, Etude des vignobles de France, Paris, Imprimerie Impériale, 3 volumes, 1863-1868.
¹⁵ GUILLORY Pierre-Constant, Les vignes rouges et les vins rouges en Maine et Loire, Angers, 1864, 150 p., et Les vins blancs d'Anjou et de Maine et Loire, Angers, 1874, 142 p.
¹⁶ Topographie statistique et historique du canton de Châtillon-sur-Marne », Annuaire ou Almanach du département de la Marne, 1821, p. 68.
¹⁷ LAVALLEY Jean, Histoire et statistique de la vigne et des grands vins de la Côte d'Or, Dijon, Picard, 1855, p. 119 et 141.
¹⁸ Nouveau cours complet..., op. cit., p. 243.

Carte 1. Moyenne des cépages par département, d'après Guyot

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- ¹⁹ GUILLORY Pierre-Constant, Compte rendu de l'exposition des produits viticoles du département de Maine et Loire, 1849-1850, Angers, Cosnier et Lachèse, 1851, p. 24.
²⁰ ESTIENNE Charles, LIEBAUT Jean, op. cit., p. 202.
²¹ SERRES DE Olivier, op. cit., p. 147.
²² BIDEZ Nicolas, op. cit., tome 1, p. 102.

²³ GUILLORY Pierre-Constant, *Les vignes rouges...*, op. cit., p. 36-37. C'est à notre connaissance la première version de cette anecdote.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 35. C'est là encore la première trace de cette histoire.

²⁵ LAVALLE Jean, op. cit., p. 37-40.

²⁶ *Nouveau cours complet...*, op. cit., p. 243.

²⁷ *Cours complet d'agriculture...*, p. 161.

²⁸ ODART Alexandre-Pierre, *Ampélographie universelle*, Paris, Bixio, 1845, p. 8.

²⁹ GUYOT Jules, op. cit., tome 1, p. 528.

Carte 3. Aire d'extension du chenin, d'après Guyot

Multiple variety planting is found right down to the scale of vineyard plots. Certainly all the ancient authors, from Serres to Bosc, agreed on the need to separate grape varieties within the vineyard. But the advantages of pluralism are underlined as Bosc writes, "where one is lacking, the other compensates". Anjou is no exception to this "*co-planting*". If one follows Guillory's table in 1851, in the surroundings of Angers where "through these various white and red grape varieties are more or less accidentally scattered for white grapes: gouais, mêlier, fié blanc, fié jaune, doux blanc, blanc doux, folle blanche"¹⁹. This practice had a great influence in the way of making the wine, actually derived from several grape varieties. Also, ancient writers rarely spoke about varietal wines, preferring wines from blends, which we call today *assemblages* where they are made in controlled and defined proportions. Nevertheless, this practice was increasingly contested by oenologists in the nineteenth century, who more readily promoted wines produced from a small number of varieties in the blends. Guyot, somewhat a radical in this field, was one of the first to defend varietal wines.

The dynamics of grape varieties

Until about 1830, authors considered that the notion of grape varieties was almost closed: *mother nature knows what she is doing and grape varieties are at their right place where they are*. They indicated that experience sufficed to justify the geographical spread of grape varieties, and were distrustful of relocating varieties. Charles Estienne, for example, wrote "the different varieties brought hereafter from foreign countries, such as in Beaune, Rochelle and Bordeaux can do no better than those which already grow there."²⁰. It must be said that none of these authors favored grape variety as the primary quality criterion for wine. Unanimity is very strong where other criteria of quality are concerned. If Olivier de Serres wrote so passionately that "air, land and co-planting are the foundation of the vineyard", he points out a little later that grape variety is more secondary than the other two factors²¹.

In the eighteenth century, Bidet similarly discounted grape variety preferring the "grain of earth" which makes the same grape variety good or not²².

Yet, the vineyard is far from completely immobile. For older periods, sources insist on great owners, like Francis I who would have implanted mediterranean varieties in Ile-de-France, or his secretary Thomas Bohier who reportedly transported chenin to Touraine in the 1520s²³. Other writers also recount the arrival of the "breton" in Anjou in the 17th century, in the luggage of Richelieu. Rare documents, mainly regulations, also point to the popular rise of "bad plants", as they are named in the famous ordinance of Philip le Hardi in 1395²⁵.

In any case, the mobility of grape varieties gathered momentum from 1780-1850, against a background of increasing differentiation of wines, from everyday drinking wines to prestigious wines. On the one hand, "bad plants" continued to spread, causing "the deterioration of once famous wines" for Bosc²⁶, and the most alarming prophecies, such as this reported by Dussieux, "gamet [sic] will kill Burgundy".²⁶ Once again, Guyot's precious table offered an overview of current dynamics: the rise of gamay and secondarily of gouais, including the Loire valley; grenache and picpoule in the south; grolleau in the center; gros meslier, and triumph of folle blanche in the west.

On the other hand, the big landowners were bringing in different varieties. Unlike their predecessors, proponents of stability, the ampelographers of the 1830-1860s considered that the mobility of grape varieties was a condition for improvement in wines. As Odart writes, "trying a few seedlings on a small plot from a distant vineyard, of some

renown, will always leave the imprint of the passage of a man of progress"²⁸. Guyot, dreaming of a rational return to French grape varieties, considers that "all efforts in growing and winemaking must aim for simplification. Therein lies progress."²⁹

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- ³⁰ Raphaël Schirmer a noté les tentatives d'implantation de nouveaux cépages en pays nantais dans la seconde moitié du XIX^{ème} siècle. SCHIRMER Raphaël, Muscadet. Histoire et Géographie du vignoble nantais, Bordeaux, PUB, 2010, p. 114-116.
- ³⁰ PLANCHENAULT Nicolas, "Notice historique et pratique sur la culture de la vigne, spécialement en Anjou", Mémoires de la société académique de Maine-et-Loire, 1866, volume 19, p. 55.
- ³² En 1876, Bouchard constate qu'il n'y a absolument plus aucune trace. BOUCHARD Alfred, Essai sur l'histoire de la culture de la vigne dans le département du Maine et Loire, Angers, 1876, p. 49.
- ³³ GUYOT Jules, op. cit., tome 3, p. 72.
- Sources imprimées
- BIDET Nicolas, Traité sur la culture des vignes, Paris, Savoye, 1759, 2 volumes.
- BOUCHARD Alfred, Essai sur l'histoire de la culture de la vigne dans le département du Maine et Loire, Angers, 1876, 79 p.
- CAVOLEAU Jean-Alexandre, OEnologie française, Paris, Huzard, 1827, 436 p.
- Nouveau cours complet d'agriculture théorique et pratique, Paris, Deterville, tome 16, 1823, 542 p.
- Comptes des recettes et despences faites en la chastellenie de Chenonceau, par Diane de Poitiers, publié par l'abbé C. Chevalier, Paris, Téchener, 1864, 312 p.
- Cours complet d'agriculture théorique et pratique, Paris, Delalain, volume 10, 1800, 500 p.
- ESTIENNE Charles, LIEBAUT Jean, L'agriculture, et maison rustique, Lyon, Du Puys, 1583, 294 f.
- GUILLORY Pierre-Constant, Les vins blancs d'Anjou et de Maine et Loire, Angers, 1874, 142 p.
- , Les vignes rouges et les vins rouges en Maine et Loire, Angers, 1864, 150 p.
- , Compte rendu de l'exposition des produits viticoles du département de Maine et Loire, 1849-1850, Angers, Cosnier et Lachèse, 1851, 177 p.
- GUYOT Jules, Etude des vignobles de France, Paris, Imprimerie Impériale, 3 volumes, 1863-1868.
- LAVALLE Jean, Histoire et statistique de la vigne et des grands vins de la Côte-d'Or, Dijon, Picard, 1855, 244 p.
- MERLET Jean, L'abrégé des bons fruits, Paris, 1690, de Sercy, 171 p.
- ODART Alexandre-Pierre, Ampélographie universelle, Paris, Bixio, 1845, 436 p.
- PLAIGNE DE le chevalier, L'art de faire, d'améliorer et de conserver les vins, ou le Parfait vigneron, Liège, Desoer, 1785, 258 p.
- PLANCHENAULT Nicolas, "Notice historique et pratique sur la culture de la vigne, spécialement en Anjou", Mémoires de la société académique de Maine-et-Loire, 1866, volume 19, p. 41-98.
- SALMON, Art de cultiver la vigne et de faire de bon vin, Paris, Huzard, 1826, 270 p.
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- "Topographie statistique et historique du canton de Châtillon-sur-Marne", Annuaire ou Almanach du département de la Marne, 1821, p. 37-168.
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- BRUMONT Francis, Madiran et Saint-Mont. Histoire et devenir des vignobles, Biarritz, Atlantica, 1999, 359 p.
- CHAPUIS Robert, Vignobles du Doubs et de Haute-Saône. De la naissance à la renaissance, Besançon, Ed. du Belvédère, 2013, 252 p.
- MARTIN Jean-Claude, Les Hommes de Science, la Vigne et le Vin de l'Antiquité au XIX^{ème} siècle, Bordeaux, Féret, 2009, 368 p.
- PITTE Jean-Robert, Bordeaux Bourgogne. Les passions rivales, Paris, Hachette, 2005, 252 p.
- REZEAU Pierre, Dictionnaire des noms de cépages de France, Paris, CNRS, [1998] 2014, 420 p.
- SCHIRMER Raphaël, Muscadet. Histoire et Géographie du vignoble nantais, Bordeaux, PUB, 2010, 533 p.

Anjou is an important area for variety experimentation³⁰. Planchenault reports in 1866 the essays of Theobald of Serrant in the 1780s, who introduced the verdelho of Madeira in the famous Coulée; an idea which has survived the test of time as there are still verdelho vines in Savennières. More complete are the data presented by Guillory in 1851. Excellent connoisseur of the whole Anjou growing region, he describes the multiple trials in progress, either in his own plots in La Roche-aux-Moines, where he set up a nursery in 1841, or among the great landowners of the region. He tries above all black grape varieties, such as pinot, cabernet, pineau gris, but also the liverdun and gamay de Mâlain, a smaller variety of gamay which he recommends. He also tries planting chardonnay. His neighbors try planting pinot noir (in Saint-Sylvain, Bouchemaine, Savennières), petit gamay and,

more marginally, meunier. However, the wines presented during the exhibition of 1850 are of an overwhelming majority made from chenin.

Indeed, chenin is in no way threatened in the heart of Anjou. It is mainly on the margins of the vineyard that readjustments are proposed by Guyot, with petit gamay around Angers, and pinot noir and chardonnay around Saumur and Baugé. He pays tribute to the Anjou grape variety, noting that, "for me, the pineau blanc of the Loire can unify quantity and quality, thanks to a system of adapted size based on the singular experience of Maine-et-Loire, and careful harvesting techniques tested by experience from time immemorial on the best bases."³³ Ultimately, the variety had found its place, its mode of cultivation and made an original and appreciated wine.

Conclusion

The history of grape varieties is a work in progress that is gradually revealing. It reminds us that the history of vineyards is necessarily a global phenomenon, continually questioning the interaction between societies and their environment. Grape varieties have never been static even in ancient times - before the phylloxera and the great cryptogamic diseases - when transplanting varieties was in no way prescribed. From the 1500s to the 1860s, many parameters have evolved: the definition of quality and consumption of wine, wine-making techniques, reduction of the cereal farming constraints which allows the extension of vineyards, and the ever-warming climate. Grape varieties have migrated, others have receded and have no doubt - already - disappeared. The stability of chenin then takes on another dimension. Far from being a sign of immobility or archaism of wine, it demonstrates the existence of a strong and operating ecosystem, based on the development of a grape variety by adapted cultural practices, providing types of wines (white and sweet) that have long been appreciated over the Atlantic and at home. Conversely, the slow development of black grape varieties in Anjou in the 19th century, vineyards torn between the growth of local consumption and the oenological aspirations of large landowners, show how it has been difficult to find a viticultural model.