

**WINES OF THE TIMES**

# For Muscadet, Look Beyond the Obvious

The melon de Bourgogne grape is often described as neutral, as its aromas and flavors are reticent. But it is most expressive in the realm of texture.



By **Eric Asimov**

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It says something of a grape's character that what is most obvious about it is what is missing. Take the grape of Muscadet — melon de Bourgogne — as a prime example.

Compared with some of the most popular white wine grapes, the melon grape lacks the boisterous aromas that characterize sauvignon blanc. It does not offer the versatile complexity of either riesling or chenin blanc, nor the storied history and potential of chardonnay.

Melon de Bourgogne is sometimes referred to condescendingly as a “neutral grape.”

Yet the melon grape's strength lies in its subtlety. It offers numerous qualities to which consumers, conditioned to judge wines by a grocery list of aromas and flavors, may not be attuned.

These qualities — primarily texture, resonance (which is related to texture) and a stony flavor sensation that comes under the general term of minerality — are prerequisites for the greatest white wines in the world. Yet the absence of the more obvious attributes (flamboyant aromas and flavors) often cause Muscadet to be underestimated.

History is partly to blame. As the name melon de Bourgogne suggests, the grape's origin was in eastern France, and it was common in a region once known as Franche-Comté, which included parts of Burgundy and the Jura.

Under the Treaty of Vaucelles, signed in 1556 to end war between France and Spain, Philip II of Spain was given the Franche-Comté region. Philip and his ministers apparently disliked the melon grape so intensely that they issued an edict in 1567 announcing that its cultivation would be “forbidden, banished and not allowed,” according to “Wine Grapes,” an essential reference work by Jancis Robinson, Julia Harding and José Vouillamoz.



The wine panel tasted 20 bottles from the 2017 vintage. Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

The melon found a more welcoming home in the Pays de Nantes, the region around the city of Nantes on the Atlantic mouth of the Loire. From there, the wine developed into modern Muscadet.

The wine has rarely been esteemed. In France, Muscadet has generally been consigned to the role of cheap supermarket white, enjoyable with oysters, perhaps, but rarely made well and with limited potential. In that respect, Muscadet has been analogous to aligoté, an often-despised white wine of Burgundy.

As with aligoté, Muscadet has not gotten its due. In the last two decades, however, dedicated producers have demonstrated, through conscientious farming and meticulous production, the potential of Muscadet and the melon grape.

Though Muscadet is typically thought to be made for drinking young, with little to recommend it beyond a bracing freshness, wines from these producers have shown that it has far more going for it: that it is delicious when young, but can also age and evolve. It's especially enjoyable to consumers who can look beyond the obvious and tune in to its subtleties.

The wine panel has always gone long on Muscadet. Recently, we tasted through 20 bottles from the 2017 vintage and were highly impressed with the character of the vintage and the quality of the wines. For the tasting, Florence Fabricant and I were joined by Marie Vayron-Ponsonnet, a sommelier at Le Bernardin in Midtown Manhattan, and Charles Puglia, wine director at Le Coucou in SoHo.

The 2017 vintage had only recently begun to arrive on shelves when we held our tasting in mid-September. Since we buy all of our wines for our blind tastings at retail venues, this meant that we had access generally to the more straightforward cuvées, but not to the more ambitious bottles to which producers want to devote additional aging.

This did not deter us, as our aim was to taste a cross-section of wines to gain a sense of the vintage and the state of Muscadet, rather than offer a complete description of the entire production.

The '17 vintage, like the 2016, was harmed by early frost. Though it was smaller than usual, the wines in general were excellent.

“These were balanced, persistent, fresh and pleasing,” Charles said. Marie said the rise in general quality was apparent. Still, as Florence said, “Muscadet is a hard sell,” referring to the public perception of Muscadet as a wine without a lot to offer.

Muscadet can feel so good in the mouth, you want to roll it around continuously, and then take another sip after you swallow. Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

This is where a bit of refocusing is necessary. Though Muscadet is so often characterized as neutral, with a narrow bandwidth of flavors and aromas, the rich yet crackling texture can be captivating. It can feel so good in the mouth, you want to roll it around continuously, and then take another sip after you swallow.

The texture and stony flavors resound, echoing back and forth, leaving lasting impressions long after the sip is gone. Aromas and flavors make themselves felt as well: lemon, lime, anise and other herbs, occasionally a chamomile or saline sensation. They are easier to describe than texture and resonance, for which words are difficult.

These qualities come, as best I can tell, from the traditional winemaking practices of Muscadet. Generally, the wines are aged on their lees, the sediment of dead yeast cells and other particles that remain after fermentation is complete. This technique is often used for many white wines, but because Muscadet is usually aged in glass tanks buried in the earth, and occasionally old, neutral barrels, the effect of aging the wine on the lees is felt more directly.

Many Muscadets, including nine of our top 10, carry the notation “sur lie,” meaning the wine was aged on the lees for a period ranging from fermentation until at least the following March but no longer than the following November. But some producers prefer to age their wines on the lees even longer, so don’t use the notation, and some simply choose not to use it even if they do qualify.

Our top wine was the tangy, energetic Domaine de la Chauvinière from Jérémie Huchet, an up-and-coming vigneron. A second Huchet wine, the Clos les Montys, also made our top 10 at No. 7. Like the Chauvinière, it was tightly wound and energetic. Though the Clos les Montys was less expressive now, it may ultimately have longer aging potential.

The vast majority of the bottles in the United States come from the Muscadet Sèvre et Maine appellation. Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Our No. 2 wine was the rich and textured Domaine du Fief aux Dames, while at No. 3 was the fresh, minerally La Pépie from Domaine de la Pépière, one of the best Muscadet producers. La Pépie is an accessible bottle, delicious now, while the more structured Pepière cuvées, like Briords, are at their best with a little more aging.

Next came the savory, stony Domaine de la Bregeonnette from Stéphane Orioux. We called this our best value at \$13, but really, all of these wines are great values. Only two of our top 10 cost \$20, and seven of them were \$15 or under.

Also well worth trying are the structured, deep La Louvetrie from Jo Landron; the lively, balanced Domaine Haute Févrie from Sébastien Branger; the earthy yet delicate Domaine du Haut Bourg; and the subtle, deep Domaine de Bellevue from Jérôme Bretaudeau.

The vast majority of the bottles in the United States come from the Muscadet Sèvre et Maine appellation, but one bottle, the Haut Bourg, came from the rarely seen Muscadet Côtes de Grandlieu area south of Nante and closer to the Atlantic.

Several top Muscadet producers were not in our tasting, like André-Michel Brégeon, Domaine de l'Écu, Pierre Luneau-Papin and Vincent Caillé. They are well worth seeking out.

I realize that I've gotten this far and have not even mentioned how transparent Muscadet can be in expressing differences in terroir. Many of the best producers, like Écu, Landron and Pépière, have long offered multiple cuvées dedicated to the varied and complex geology of the region.

It's great fun to compare and contrast. You can taste the difference between the softer, rounder wines grown on gneiss or amphibolite soils; sense the firmer minerality of a wine from orthogneiss; and feel the greater complexity, at least in my opinion, of the wines from granite and gabbro, a black, particularly hard form of granite.

Try it yourself. At Muscadet prices, it's a party in the making.

## Tasting Notes: The Many Textures of Muscadet

★★★1/2 Jérémie Huchet Domaine de la Chauvinière Muscadet Sèvre et Maine Sur Lie 2017 \$14

Tangy and energetic, with tightly wound acidity, herbal and citrus flavors, and the potential to age. (Fruit of the Vines, Long Island City, N.Y.)

★★★1/2 Domaine du Fief aux Dames Muscadet Sèvre et Maine Sur Lie 2017 \$16

Lively, textured and balanced, with rich, lingering flavors of anise and lime. (Verity Wine Partners, New York)

★★★ Domaine de la Pépière Muscadet Sèvre et Maine Sur Lie La Pépie 2017 \$15

Fresh and textured, with earthy flavors of citrus and minerals. (Louis/Dressner Selections, New York)

## Best Value

★★★ Stéphane Orioux Domaine de la Bregeonnette Muscadet Sèvre et Maine Sur Lie 2017 \$13

Savory and lip-smacking, with aromas and flavors of herbs and stony minerals. (MFW Selections/T. Elenteny, New York)

★★★ Jo Landron Muscadet Sèvre et Maine Sur Lie La Louvetrie 2017 \$15

Structured and deep, with tangy herbal, mineral and citrus flavors. (Martin Scott Wines, New York)

★★1/2 Sébastien Branger Domaine Haute Fèvrerie Muscadet Sèvre et Maine Sur Lie 2017 \$20

Lively and balanced, with lime, herbal and saline flavors. (V.O.S. Selections, New York)

★★1/2 Jérémie Huchet Clos les Montys Muscadet Sèvre et Maine Sur Lie 2017 \$14

Tightly wound and energetic, with zesty flavors of herbs. (Massanois, New York)

★★1/2 Domaine du Haut Bourg Muscadet Côtes de Grandlieu Sur Lie 2017 \$14

Earthy yet delicate, with savory citrus and floral flavors. (Polaner Selections, Mount Kisco, N.Y.)

★★1/2 Jérôme Bretaudeau Domaine de Bellevue Muscadet Sèvre et Maine 2017 \$20

Subtle, textured and deep, with herbal and citrus flavors. (Savio Soares Selections, New York)

★★ Domaine des 3 Versants Muscadet Sèvre et Maine Sur Lie 2017 \$13

A touch muted, with rich texture and smoky flavors of herbs and citrus. (Verity Wine Partners)

### Pairings: **Rice With Mushrooms (Arroz con Campinones)**

Oysters are to Muscadet as Roquefort is to Sauternes: a given. But those who live in Muscadet country around Nantes in Western France insist that their wine is more versatile than a mere raw-bar quaff. Other dishes Muscadet might accompany came to mind when I dined at Huertas, a Spanish restaurant with a Basque accent in the East Village. There we drank crisply refreshing txakoli, a white wine from Northern Spain, with everything we ordered, including mushrooms and chorizo. It set the stage for Muscadet. When the new cookbook from Huertas arrived on my desk, I looked for a suitable recipe to serve with the French white and came up with this paella-like dish of mushrooms and rice. It was an attractive fit, especially with its creamy aioli sauce and tangy finish. Though best served immediately, the rice can be loosely covered with foil to await a reheat. It's substantial enough to anchor a meal, though the owners of Huertas, Jonah Miller and Nate Adler, who wrote the cookbook, consider it a side dish. If you agree, serve it with grilled chicken, fish or sausages. FLORENCE FABRICANT

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COOKING

## Rice With Mushrooms (Arroz con Campinones) Oct. 17, 2018



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