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Loire Longevity

Collectors take note: The top whites from this French region belong in your cellar

BY KRISTEN BIELER

The dry Chenin Blanc quality revolution in the Loire Valley has been underway for years, gaining major steam in the past decade. These days, it's unusual to encounter a serious restaurant wine list without at least a few dry versions from Vouvray, Savennières, Anjou or Montlouis.

As more savvy wine drinkers recognize the complexity and deliciousness of these dry whites, what is somewhat less celebrated is their incredible ageability. These are whites that belong on dinner tables and in wine cellars.

A well-made Chenin Blanc with some age is a rare pleasure. Delivering richness of fruit and texture layered with honeyed minerality and savory earth, they are enlivened by Chenin's powerful acidity. Just like its historically more famous sweet counterparts—Coteaux du Layon, Bonnezeaux and Quarts de Chaume are some of the longest-lived dessert wines in the world—dry Chenin Blanc also possesses an uncanny ability to age.

"When young, Chenin Blanc can be very discreet. They open up with oxygen," says Evelyne de Pontbriand, the sixth generation of her family to helm Domaine du Closel in Savennières. (She is also the president of the appellation.) Pontbriand recommends decanting and then serving them in large glasses. Better yet? Age them for at least two or three years after release—it's only then their true complexity begins to shine, she says. "They reveal much more structure, greater length and a delicious mix of cooked apple, white flowers, grilled almonds and honey. If you wait longer, you get a more waxy, almost oxidative style that is amazing with cheeses and fish or white meat and mushrooms."

Not all Loire Chenin Blanc has this potential, of course. "Chenin grown on schist has nerves, strength and character to age—sometimes unpleasant character in its youth, by the way," says Florent Baumard of Domaine des Baumard in Savennières, which is located in Anjou Noir in the western half of the region. Named for its black schist soils, Anjou Noir has become ground zero for many young vignerons and new heirs to historic properties crafting Chenin Blanc built to last. Austere *terroir* can yield austere wines, and when young they can be assertive or tightly wound, Baumard describes. But the best versions can age for two to three decades or more. "In 2020 I drank the last bottle of our Savennières Clos du Papillon 1973 from my father; the wine was fresh and magnifique." The Baumard family is the largest owner in the renowned Clos du Papillon vineyard, which is named for its butterflylike shape and offers some of the most stunning, concentrated expressions of Chenin Blanc with the structure to go the distance in the cellar. "Chenin soaks up the taste of our *terroir*, especially with dry wines. That's one reason why some of our wines age so well."

Another reason is the changed mindset of the dynamic new generation. Farming organically and moving to longer *élevage* in barrel on fine lees has massively contributed to the wines' complexity and longevity, says Pontbriand. Like her, many producers are naming individual *cuvées* for their parcels to isolate site expression.



Domaine du Closel

Chenin-on-schist fanatic Ivan Massonnat founded Domaine Belargus in the heart of Anjou Noir in 2018 in an ancient vineyard he purchased, and he now farms 59 acres. The high acidity of Chenin Blanc, combined with the ability of the region's schist soils to keep yields low and impart powerful structure, is the magic recipe for ageworthy wines, he says.

Inspired by the Burgundy model of working parcel by parcel, he is trying to build a consensus that Chenin Blanc ages longer than Chardonnay: "If only because of its acidity. Acidity forms the backbone of any wine—the more it has, the longer the wine will hold itself straight up."

"Dry Chenins from Anjou Noir, especially the ones coming from soils with some clay or sand soils, can be enjoyed young, as they display good fruit. But wines coming from hillsides, with thinner topsoils and more complex volcanic rocks, are better to be enjoyed after at least four or five years. Time will polish their tannins." In top vintages with more acidity, such as 2019 and 2021, he believes they will mature gracefully for decades.

The push toward ageworthy whites has been playing out in the Loire's Sancerre region as well. Because Sancerre—the world's most famous Sauvignon Blanc region—is so wildly popular with wine drinkers for its youthful freshness and vibrant fruit, it's overwhelmingly consumed upon release. It wouldn't even occur to most people to cellar Sancerre. But top producers are making a strong case to do just that.

"The Sancerre *terroir* is unique because of its ancient marine soils which contribute to the mineral dimension of the wines," says Arnaud Bourgeois, whose family has been farming in Sancerre for 10 generations. Famille Bourgeois is based in Chavignol, one of Sancerre's 14 villages and home to the renowned slope, the Côtes des Monts Damnés. As producers strive for more "complex wines with stronger identification from the *terroirs*," the wines are "riper, deeper and are becoming more than ever able to age," he describes. Early believers in Sancerre for the cellar, the Bourgeois family began making single-vineyard *cuvées* that are aged many years before release in the 1950s. "With age, Sancerre develops more complex aromas, a silkier texture and increased length on the palate."

Sancerre's soils are some of the most diverse on the planet, and obsession with *terroir* in the region has only increased in recent years. It's now common to see producers list soil types in the cuvée name. According to Bourgeois, the region's limestone soils (*caillottes*) give wines that are aromatically expressive and fruity in their youth, and are easiest to enjoy young. They take on a saline mineral character with age—"similar to licking the inside of an oyster shell." Those from Kimmeridgian marls (*terres blanches*) have more depth and a broader texture. They take on honeyed truffle notes and greater power over time. The region's famed silex, or flint, soils yield supremely elegant and structured wines with the greatest aging potential, though they can be austere in their youth.

"Silex *terroir* offers the most surprising wines, and it marks the most original version of Sauvignon Blanc in our region," says Bourgeois. "They evolve very little," giving the impression they are aging at a glacial pace.

The challenge in crafting ageworthy Sancerre is retaining what makes the wine so beloved in the first place. "We must preserve the essential signature characteristics of brightness and vibrant fruit," says Rodrigo Zamorano, the Chile-born winemaker newly at the helm of Domaine Hubert Brochard in Chavignol (purchased by the Bollinger Group in 2022). New oak barrels could compromise the fresh profile of the wine, so he opts for amphorae, concrete and neutral oak *foudres*.

"Today in Sancerre, there is a greater search for quality and differentiation in wines. I was surprised to find all these possibilities at Sancerre when I arrived, because the Sancerre I met back in 2003 was very different." He employs extended lees aging, which helps build the structure. As they age, the wines "evolve aromatically and taste-wise toward truffle notes and very complex and mineral mouthfeels. The fruity aromas and tastes tend to diminish to give way to brioche and pastry notes, and texturally the wines feel drier."

The prices of top Sancerre have climbed, as have those for some of the most coveted Chenin Blancs. But their price-to-quality proposition



Domaine Hubert Brochard's Rodrigo Zamorano (right)

remains compelling: white wines with legendary ageability for a fraction of the price of more famous whites of similar quality—namely, Burgundy.

"Compared to Montrachet, many Savennières are outstanding values," says Pontbriand. "Burgundy wines have probably peaked in price. During that time, some top Chenin Blancs have considerably improved their quality, and the prices are still very reasonable. But do I think the consumer who spends 200 euros on a bottle of Burgundy is ready to pay that same price in the Loire? Not yet."

Others are more optimistic. Massonnat sees increasing enthusiasm from sommeliers and private collectors. "A collector can safely bet on Loire Chenin to age for at least as long as any of the top Burgundy wines. And from the best producers in the Loire, you may still find true *premiers crus/grands crus* equivalents at the price of Burgundy Village appellation. We are pushing quality to new levels, and I believe the market is ready." □

KRISTEN BIELER'S RECOMMENDED WINES FROM THE LOIRE VALLEY

More than 175 wines were reviewed for this report. A free alphabetical list is available at [WineSpectator.com/LoireAlpha113024](https://www.winespectator.com/LoireAlpha113024). WineSpectator.com members can access complete reviews for all wines tasted using the online Wine Ratings search.

WINE	SCORE	PRICE	WINE	SCORE	PRICE
FOREAU Vouvray Moelleux Domaine du Clos Naudin Réserve 2018	95	\$110	HUBERT BROCHARD Sancerre Château de Fontaine-Audon Terres de Silex 2023	92	\$45
DOMAINE BELARGUS Anjou White Sec Treilles 2020	94	\$200	CHATEAU DE PLAISANCE Anjou White Ronceray 2022	92	\$45
DOMAINE DU CLOSEL Savennières Clos du Papillon 2021	94	\$95	CHATEAU DE PLAISANCE Savennières 2022	92	\$75
DOMAINE HUET Vouvray Demi-Sec Clos du Bourg 2023	94	\$48	DOMAINE HUET Vouvray Sec Le Haut-Lieu 2023	92	\$36
DOMAINE DES BAUMARD Savennières Clos du Papillon 2020	93	\$65	PASCAL JOLIVET Sancerre Les Caillottes 2022	92	\$47
DOMAINE BELARGUS Anjou White Sec Bonnes Blanches 2019	93	\$115	FAMILLE JOLY Coulée de Serrant Moelleux Clos de la Coulée de Serrant 2022	92	\$145
DOMAINE BELARGUS Anjou White Sec Veau 2019	93	\$140	DOMAINE LAPORTE Sancerre Les Garennes Terroir du Jurassique 2023	92	\$48
CHATEAU DE PLAISANCE Anjou White Le Grande Piece 2022	93	\$67	FRANÇOIS PINON Vouvray Sec Bon Pinon 2022	92	\$37
DOMAINE DU CLOSEL Savennières Les Caillardières 2021	93	\$78	FRANÇOIS PINON Vouvray Les Déronnières Sec 2022	92	\$40
DOMAINE HUET Vouvray Sec Clos du Bourg 2023	93	\$45	CLAUDE RIFFAULT Sancerre Monoparcelle 538 2022	92	\$60
DOMAINE HUET Vouvray Sec Le Mont 2023	93	\$45	CLÉMENT & FLORIAN BERTHIER Sancerre Les Chasseignes 2018	91	\$34
GÉRARD FIOU Sancerre Terroir de Silex Le Grand Roc 2022	93	\$44	HUBERT BROCHARD Sancerre Château de Thauvenay Terres Blanches 2023	91	\$45
FOREAU Vouvray Demi-Sec Domaine du Clos Naudin 2017	93	\$50	VINCENT CARÈME Vouvray Sec 2022	91	\$30
AGNÈS & RENÉ MOSSE Vin de France White Le Rouchefer 2022	93	\$52	PASCAL JOLIVET Pouilly-Fumé 2022	91	\$40
HENRI BOURGEOIS Sancerre ES-56 Domaine 2022	92	\$45	DOMAINE LAPORTE Sancerre La Comtesse 2023	91	\$50
HENRI BOURGEOIS Sancerre La Côte des Monts Damnés 2022	92	\$45			
HENRI BOURGEOIS Sancerre d'Antan Terroir de Silex 2022	92	\$60			
HENRI BOURGEOIS Sancerre Jadis 2022	92	\$60			



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