

Is Chenin Blanc the world's most versatile grape?

Chenin Blanc has fallen in and out of favor so many times in recent history that you could be forgiven if you haven't had the chance to try this wonderfully versatile grape.

In the winemaker's hands it may be used to make anything from a very crisp, dry wine to a lusciously sweet dessert wine. With such a wide variety of styles and flavors to choose from, Chenin Blanc may be the only wine you need for your next dinner party.

It is a grape that can take you (and your guests), through every course - from appetizer to dessert.

Your other "blancs" would find that a challenge.

As the name suggests, this white grape is of French origin and has been planted there as far back as the ninth century. The Chenin Blanc grape is now found throughout the world, as it produces a plentiful crop in almost all soil conditions.

This may not be the first variety you would think to ask for when you next shop for wine, but if you try it, you will be glad that you did.

The Grape

The Loire Valley in France is the home of Chenin Blanc and this variety has always been extremely popular there. (No small compliment in a region with some 87 appellations to choose from).

Traditionally, it has been cultivated in the cool valleys to produce mainly sparkling and dessert wines. This range of styles is made possible because the grapes are hand-picked according to their level of ripeness.

The less ripe grapes have more acid and are a perfect base for making sparkling wine. At the end of the season, the over-ripe, and those grapes affected by noble rot are selected for the sweeter wines. The concentrated sugars in these grapes produce many of the famous sweet wines from this region, including Quarts de Chaume and Bonnezeaux.

Strangely enough, South Africa grows more Chenin Blanc than any other country. The grape was introduced to South Africa around 1655 and it is mostly found in the Stellenbosch and Swartland regions.

Initially, the grape was used as the primary ingredient in their numerous, large, brandy production facilities.

After nearly 400 years of practice, South Africa is now producing top quality examples of these wines and there are more Chenin Blanc vines in South Africa than in the rest of the world combined. As a result, they have a number of vineyards which are able to produce excellent wine from their "old bush vines".

These days, even the golfer, Ernie Els, has a vineyard producing wine from Chenin Blanc grapes. What does he call it? "The Big Easy", of course.

Let's not forget about the U.S.A. either. Before the 1980's (and the rise of Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc), there were large pockets of Chenin Blanc grown throughout California - particularly in the Napa Valley. At one time, the United States had more acreage of this varietal than France! Sadly, most of these grapes were pulled to make room for more "fashionable" grape varieties, although there are still isolated pockets across California.

Chenin Blanc can also be found in such diverse areas as the Colombia Valley, Texas High Plain, New York and Minnesota - to name a few.

Since the early 2000's, Chenin Blanc has experienced a resurgence in the USA. This is mainly due to the new generation of winemakers who are looking for something fresh, different, and food-friendly, with which to tempt white wine drinkers.

One of the most remarkable aspects of a quality Chenin Blanc is its ability to age well. This has a lot to do with the grape's naturally high acidity and low pH.

Some fresh and fruity styles are made to drink well immediately.

Others, such as the sweeter Vouvray and Quarts de Chaume, may be cellared for 20 - or more - years.

Certainly, all well-made Chenin Blanc wines have the potential to age and it is with a little age that their complexity and richness will shine.

Flavor And Aroma

Given the variety of wine styles produced from this wonderfully complex grape, the flavors and aromas of Chenin Blanc can differ greatly. The country and region where the grapes are grown also has a huge impact on the aroma and taste.

Even when comparing two very similar Chenin Blanc wines, it is not unusual for them to exhibit quite different flavor profiles, depending on where they are grown and how long they have aged.

The top four styles to look out for are:

Dry as a Bone: This very fresh style will produce a wine that has a clean and mineral aroma. The primary flavors will be of unripe pears, a touch of ginger, and the taste of apples.

Unpuckered Lips Dry: When a little extra of the natural sugar remains, you will get a slightly smoother, dry Chenin Blanc. The pears will be riper, the ginger flavor will be richer, and you may enjoy a little honeycomb.

Sweet & Sticky: Think mandarins, oranges and toasted almonds, blended with peaches and a spoonful of honey.

Lovely Bubbly: Sparkling styles range from dry (Brut) to sweet (Demi-Sec). You'll discover floral notes, together with quince, honey, and nuts.

Acidity: A typical Chenin Blanc is known for its acidity. Generally, this will be in the medium – plus, to high range.

ABV: Usually between 12 – 14.5%

Food Pairing

When it comes to pairing Chenin Blanc with your favorite food, it is often the case that opposites attract.

If your Chenin Blanc is young and on the dry side, then that acidity is going to complement fresh seafood and shellfish. Try a Salt and Pepper Squid, Sushi, or Fish Tacos topped with salsa.

Salads are a great idea too - especially if you add a bit of chicken or smoked salmon.

Don't forget the goat's cheese!

A medium style Chenin Blanc will also pair with the suggestions above, but really shines when paired with baked egg dishes and almost any meal with a creamy sauce. Alternatively, prepare a simple dinner of roasted root vegetables and chicken, or Pork Cutlets with a Pear Chutney.

If you're a fan of spicy Asian food, then choose a slightly sweet Chenin Blanc. This will bring out the best in a Thai Green Curry or some spicy fishcakes.

For dessert, you can't beat a sweet and sticky Chenin Blanc served with a Key Lime, or Lemon Meringue Pie.

Simply the best way to discover all that Chenin Blanc can offer is to grab a bottle from all three regions – France, South Africa, and California - and conduct your own side by side comparison. (Don't forget to invite us!).

Some Suggestions

Ken Forrester 2015 The FMC Chenin Blanc (Stellenbosch)

Chappellet 2016 Signature Chenin Blanc (Napa Valley)

Domaine Vincent Carême 2015 Le Clos (Vouvray)

A Final Word

So that you can sound like an expert, here's a hint on pronunciation.

Chenin Blanc = shen in blahnk