



# Muscadet – worthy for all seasons

**T**hink of a white wine which is made from a single grape variety and expresses its terroir in a generous and very specific style, a wine which can age with style and which can be a perfect partner for complex food. Burgundy, certainly, or riesling from Alsace or the Rheingau, maybe the very best of albarino from Galicia or sauvignon from Sancerre. But muscadet? Surely not?

That's where you're entirely wrong. I'm far from mad to sing muscadet's praises, even in November. Chilly winter evenings are just as good a time as any hot summer day to enjoy a wine which is hugely misunderstood and ridiculously underrated here.

Last month, days after the grapes which will make remarkable 2012 wines had reached the cellars, I tramped the vineyard where vines just two years off their centenary grow proudly, smelled the soil of a flourishing biodynamic plot, handled a kaleidoscope of rock fragments. More importantly, I talked to committed, charismatic vigneron and tasted splendid wines.

The vintages stretched back to 2002 (though don't try to age a basic supermarket muscadet for a decade – it won't be drinkable). And time and again the wines had a depth and complexity which in burgundies would cost twice as much.

Muscadet de Sevre-et-Maine is one of the four muscadet appellations in the arc of land south and east of Nantes,



■ Smell the soil, in Jo Landron's biodynamic vineyard

close to the mouth of the river Loire. The geology is complex: igneous rocks ranging through granite, gneiss and gabbro to mica schist and amphibolite lie beneath the topsoil, quite different from the limestone base of vineyards further east along the Loire. The gentle landscape has plenty of undulations plus the deep-cut valleys of the two rivers which give it its name and micro-climates abound.

Melon de bourgogne, richly reflective of its terroir, is the only grape allowed, and most of the best wines are aged on their lees – the yeasty deposit left after fermentation – for extra flavour; this can last for as much as four years when wines are destined for the new crus communaux. So far only three limited areas, each with different soils, have been granted this top-tier status, but several more will join them soon.

#### Salvation in quality

Vignerons who care for their region and the future of its wines are convinced that the quality route is their salvation. It's a pessimistic scenario otherwise, as Charles Sydney, the very committed middleman responsible for bringing a lot of excellent Loire wine to the UK, makes clear. Huge areas of vineyard – some 40 per cent of

the muscadet total – have been ripped up or abandoned since 2008, and Sydney estimates that half the growers have given up, unable to make ends meet when they receive barely a euro a bottle for simple muscadet. Only “the bigger guys” and those who succeed in selling quality wine at a more sensible price can continue.

“This year is going to be really interesting,” he adds. “Forty per cent less vines minus 50 per cent crop loss equals yield 70 per cent down versus four years ago.”

But the 2012 wines will be special. Though quantity is half the normal expectation due to the vine-unfriendly weather through most of the growing season, the surviving grapes were exceptionally good, disease-free and with high sugar levels matched by a perfect balance of acidity. October's drenching rain came only as the very last tractor-loads reached the cellars – inside, the vigneron was smiling.

Inevitably, prices will rise, though the wines will be worth them. Next week, I'll introduce you to some of the best currently available, but meanwhile here's a bottle which is honest, flavourful, modern muscadet and excellent value: Sainsbury's Taste the Difference, £7.

# Tradition gives way to New York vibe

Former pub is reborn as US-style diner with hot dogs, burgers and whisky chasers

**H**ard to imagine it these days, but Heath Street used to be the coolest and most fashionable part of Hampstead. While the High Street still had plenty of independent shops, they tended to the functional (as shops in a high street ought to, of course). So there was Gaze the haberdashery, Fowler the ironmonger, Finlay's the tobacconist (I know! A proper dark panelled and wonderfully aromatic joy, devoted wholly to smoking: large Delft tobacco jars, racks of pipes and a gas jet that you leaned towards to light your cigar). Foster was our local mini Fortnum & Mason, Stamp the chemist, King the stationer, Sam Cook the greengrocer and Knowles-Brown the jeweller ... not to mention Woolworth's and the shoe shop Freeman, Hardy & Willis. In contrast, Heath Street boasted Chic, a very upmarket purveyor of classic designer clothes and shoes for women. There was another for men called Goulding House – and there was also a boutique (we rather thrilled to the word “boutique”) called Choses ... which sold, well ... things. There too was Drazin, which had flashy televisions the size of a wardrobe. The open air annual art exhibition, Maxwell's – London's first true American diner – and lots of historic and unbuggered up English pubs.

One such was the Horse & Groom – that



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