

Eau de Vie

a wine, spirits, and travel newsletter

Vol. 18 June 2020

LEARN THE VARIETAL: SAUVIGNON BLANC

When people first taste Sauvignon Blanc, the most common reaction is a puckered face, followed by a down turned mouth which quickly leads to an expression of disgust. When I serve this wine in my beginner classes most of the students are not pleased. Comments like, “oh that was so dry”, and “why would anyone drink that,” are usually followed by a small voice from the back saying something like, “mmmmm, hello summer.” Once I hear that then I know I’ve found a kindred spirit and an ally in convincing the rest of the class of the benefits of refreshingly tart Sauvignon Blanc.

Sauvignon Blanc is a pale yellow, sometimes greenish, dry white wine. It can smell like grapefruit, lemons, limes, fresh cut grass, and melon. When served properly chilled it tastes light, tart and refreshing. It is high in acid and low in sugar. Actually I’d call it dry, dry, dry, only because I reserve the term “bone dry” for Fino Sherry. This dryness is the most off-putting initial aspect to the uninitiated.

But this dryness has real purpose. Sauvignon Blanc “grew up” in France’s Loire river valley. Most likely in the upper reaches of the valley around the small communes

of Sancerre and Pouilly-Fumé. These two regions also produce a wide variety of moldy, hairy, scary looking goat cheeses which they call *Crottin*. The exact translation of this is a bit muddled but most people agree that it means goat droppings, or goat dung.

This cheese, also known simply as *Chèvre*, is tangy, a bit dry in the mouth, can have a strong flavor and it spreads easily. It tastes great in salads, on crackers, slices of French bread, or spread on fresh fruit. But the cheese is sticky. It’s sticky in your mouth and coats the tongue. This is where Sauvignon Blanc with its intense acidity comes to the rescue. One sip from the glass and the cheese is scrubbed from the palate.

In summary, I’m encouraging you to eat and drink super dry acidic white wine that most people recoil from and to pair it with hairy, moldy “goat turds” on a cracker. You can see why I need an ally. But the truth is that this wine with its versatility and acidity is perfect to pair with dishes which are high fat or oily and yet are not bold enough for a red wine with its associated tannins. Served cold, Sauvignon Blanc is also refreshing when consumed on a warm summer day.

This isn’t a wine for the beginner - it takes a bit to get used to its tart dry flavor - but once you learn how to consume it, I guarantee that each time you drink it, it will remind you of the warmth and aromas of a perfect summer day.

Many countries make Sauvignon Blanc. In France it is called a Sancerre or a Pouilly-Fumé. Good examples of these will cost \$20 to \$40 and should have a more herbaceous aroma rather than citrus. California Sauvignon Blanc costs \$18 to \$35 and have more fruit based aromas with grapefruit being the signature smell. New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc is famous the world over and is well priced at \$14 to \$25 a bottle. These wines are particularly fruity and tart. Chile produces a Sauvignon Blanc for around \$12 to \$15 a bottle. Be cautious of any of the wines at a lower price point as these can be disappointingly bland and tart.

All Sauvignon Blanc wines are ready to drink the moment they hit the bottle. This wine does not benefit from aging. Chill it well but remember that when a wine is too cold it will taste more tart and crisp. If fully refrigerated, let it warm up a bit before drinking. Pair it with salad, pasta, fish, cheese, fresh fruit, and time spent on the deck this summer.

THE HEIGHT OF THE EMPEROR

Each week, Sara, Lynnea, Doris and I get together and practice our French and this week a comment was made about the height of Napoleon. It is a much repeated myth that Napoleon was short. He was measured at *5 pied et 2 pounces dans le système de mesure français*. This translates into “5 foot 2 inches in the French system of measurement.”

The English, happy to minimize the size of their foe, often repeated that Napoleon was just 5 foot 2. Certainly a short enemy is easier to overcome than a tall enemy. They weren't wrong except they failed to note that a French foot and a French inch were longer than a British foot and British inch. So by the British system of measurement Napoleon was short but he was measured by the French system so... how big was he by the British system? And this is where it gets complicated.

Units of measurement in Europe date back to the Roman era. The Romans used two common units for length, the fathom and the ell. The fathom was the amount of space between a grown man's out stretched arms and an ell was the amount of space from his elbow to his finger tip.

Since this amount was different, depending on the person, the king, or similar leader, would issue an artifact, which was a steel rod or a mark on a column that would dictate the official size of a fathom and an ell.

Eventually the need for a smaller unit of measurement arose and the *pied du roi*, the foot of the king, was developed. The foot was cut down into 12 inches because it is easy to slice a circle in to 12ths and the inch into 16ths because if you fold a length of something in half over and over again to get equal parts, eventually getting 16ths or 32nds and on and on.

By the time Napoleon was being sized up by his enemies there were over 800 different “official” *pied a roi* throughout France. This made it very difficult to trade items honestly as my foot is bigger or smaller than yours and this didn't just stop at length. There were also differing units of measurement for volume, weight, temperature and even time.

The age of enlightenment as well as commerce was being hampered by this lack of standard units of measurement. This trouble was well known and French thinkers started to imagine a new system. Maurice Tallyrand, [whom I wrote about in the February edition of this newsletter](#), was instrumental in introducing a new system of measurement. This new system was called metric.

The designers of the metric system thought that measurements should be in increments of 100 for easy math and the measurements should be based on the size of the earth. After years of computations it was determined that the distance from the north pole to south pole was 20,000,000 meters or 20,000 kilometers. For fans of math read about how to calculate the true distance [here and download the PDF article](#).

In 1795 metric became the law of measurement in France and all the *pied du roi* were abolished. But people didn't take to the change quickly. Feet and inches still persisted and in 1812 Napoleon relented and allowed for a hybrid system. This lasted until 1840 when metric was finally enshrined in all aspects of French life.

This creates a problem in calculating Napoleon's true height because no one knows which *pied du roi* was used. But it is assumed that when converted into British Imperial Units Napoleon was between 5'6" and 5'8". Not tall, but no shorty, and was of average height for his time.

Vive le France!

Vive L'Empereur!

2020 Pairing Club Classes

I'm still hopeful we can host the summer class. I'll let you know in future editions of this newsletter.

Practical Information:

Class starts @ 6:00pm @ 2620 E. Superior Street. Cost is \$20/pp.

Class size is limited to 12.

R.S.V.P. required.

Class includes: Nose Testing, 6 wines, tasting cards, information, and custom wine pairings.

Each class needs 5 volunteer pairing cooks. Email:

david@savvynomad.com to volunteer to bring a food pairing.

July 18th ~ *Été*
Wines for Summer.

August 15th ~
Diner en Blanc Duluth

November 7th ~ *Automne*
Wines for Fall