

VINOT Tasting #53-October 20, 2016

Information on the wines

Chablis Wine

Chablis is an historic wine-producing town in northern-central France. It produces light, dry white wines famed for their minerality and crisp acidity. AOC Chablis wines are produced exclusively from Chardonnay.

Chablis is located in northern Burgundy (Bourgogne), although the town and its vineyards are located a considerable distance (more than 60 miles/100 km) northwest of Burgundy's main wine-producing areas around Nuits-Saint-Georges, Beaune, Chalon-sur-Saone and Macon. They are in fact closer to Sancerre (Loire) and Les Riceys (southern Champagne). Consequently, Chablis has a cooler climate than the rest of Burgundy, which contributes significantly to the style of wine its vineyards produce. The effects of terroir on wine can be seen more clearly in Chablis than almost anywhere else.



Vineyards in Chablis

A key division within Chablis lies between terroirs with Kimmeridgian soils and those with Portlandian soils. Kimmeridgian soil is more highly regarded; it contains greater levels of mineral-rich clay, as well as the essential marine fossils which are responsible for its significant lime content. Kimmeridgian soils are the source of the trademark minerality in Premier Cru and Grand Cru wines from Chablis. By contrast, Portlandian soils are not so rich in clay and fossils, which results in slightly

fruitier wines with a less mineral profile. Petit Chablis wines are most often grown in Portlandian soils.

Chablis wines are made in a style rather different from those produced elsewhere in Burgundy. They are drier and fresher, rather than weightier and richly flavored. Unlike typical Burgundian white wines, which are barrel fermented, Chablis is usually entirely free of any oak influence. Very few Chablis producers use oak barrels in their winemaking and the exceptions are restricted to the higher-quality wines, whose extra complexity and depth mean that the wines are not overpowered by oak flavors.

The vineyards of Chablis are classified into four tiers of quality. Starting from the top, they are: *Chablis Grand Cru*, *Chablis Premier Cru*, *Chablis* and *Petit Chablis*. Wines that conform to the general Chablis appellation laws may claim the classification held by the vineyard where they were grown.

The appellation AOC Chablis is the most prolific and geographically widespread of the four classifications. It was created in 1938 – at the same time as the Chablis Grand Cru appellation – to protect the Chablis name, which was being used around the world to describe wines bearing little resemblance to the real Chablis. Today, all wines carrying the Chablis title are dry whites made exclusively from Chardonnay. They must be produced from vineyards in a specifically designated area surrounding Chablis town and its nearby villages.

Chablis Premier Cru is not a distinct appellation like the other three classifications, but rather a quality sub-division of the standard *AOC Chablis* title. Its geographical coverage is significantly larger than that of Chablis Grand Cru. There are 40 climats (vineyard sites) around Chablis which are deemed worthy of the Premier Cru title, and these are further subdivided into roughly 80 specific vineyards. The wines produced under this title are made according to quality controls that are halfway between those of the Chablis and Grand Cru Chablis appellations.

Chablis Grand Cru wines are produced from just 250 acres (100ha) of vineyards planted on gentle south-west-facing slopes at the eastern edge of the town. There are seven named Grand Cru climats. Running from north to south along the Serein river they are: Preuses, Bougros, Vaudesir, Grenouilles, Valmur, Les Clos and Blanchot. Wines claiming the Grand Cru title are made under stringent regulations; the maximum permitted yield is lower than for standard Chablis, and the minimum potential alcohol one degree higher. Chablis Grand Cru wines respond well to bottle ageing for between 10 and 15 years.

Petit Chablis is the least prestigious of the *Chablis* appellations. It was created in 1944 to cover the less highly rated vineyard sites in the area, generally located on plateaux above the Premier Cru or Grand Cru sites. Because they are more exposed to wind, and are not angled towards the afternoon sun, these sites do not

benefit from the same climatic and geological advantages as the better vineyards, and produce less complex, less refined wines.

Just 8 miles (13km) south-west of Chablis lie two villages with their own wine styles and appellations. These are Irancy (Pinot Noir) and Saint-Bris (Sauvignon Blanc and Sauvignon Gris).

Pinot Noir Wine

Pinot Noir is *the* red wine grape of Burgundy, now adopted (and feverishly studied) in wine regions all over the world. The variety's elusive charm has carried it to all manner of vineyards, from western Germany and northern Italy to Chile, South Africa, Australia and, perhaps most notably, California, Oregon and New Zealand. It is the patriarch of the Pinot family of grape varieties – so called because their bunches are similar in shape to a pine cone (*pinot* in French). Other members of this family include Pinot Gris, Pinot Blanc, Pinot Meunier, Aligote and Pinot Noir's white-wine counterpart, Chardonnay.

Pinot Noir causes more discussion and dispute than any other grape, most of which centers around finding and describing the variety's "true" expression. Examples from Santenay are undeniably different from those made on the other side of the world in Central Otago, and yet they are all unmistakably, unquestionably Pinot Noir. It takes a great deal of care and skill to make Pinot perform, and the results vary wildly from watery, acidic candy water to some of the richest, most intensely perfumed wines on Earth. This elusive perfection has earned the variety obsessive adoration from wine lovers all over the world.



A cluster of Pinot Noir grapes

In Burgundy (Pinot's homeland), the traditional vigneron focuses more on soil and climate than on the qualities of the grape variety itself (this is, after all, the home of terroir). Even very subtle differences in terroir are reflected in Pinot Noir wines made there. There are clear and consistent differences between the wines

of Volnay and Pommard, for example, even though the villages are separated by just one mile.

The effects of terroir aren't limited to Burgundy, of course – every region has its own particular terroir, and these are reflected in its wines, particularly when it comes to terroir-sensitive varieties such as Pinot Noir. Although many winemakers in the New World attempt to emulate the Burgundy style, the newer Pinot regions in Oregon, Washington, California and New Zealand have their own individual expressions and interpretations of the variety.

The essence of Pinot Noir wine is its aroma of strawberry and cherry (fresh red cherries in lighter wines and stewed black cherries in weightier examples), underpinned in the most complex examples by hints of undergrowth (*sous-bois*). Well-built Pinot Noirs, particularly from warmer harvests, also exhibit notes of leather and violets, sometimes approaching the flavor spectrum of Syrah.

The question of oak in Pinot Noir winemaking is frequently raised, as are the length of fermentation and the option of a pre-ferment maceration (cold soak). Cooler temperatures lead to fresher fruit flavors, while longer, warmer fermentations and pigeage result in more extracted wines with greater tannic structure. In order to retain as much Pinot character as possible, many producers have turned to biodynamic viticulture, avoiding the use of commercial fertilizers that may disrupt the variety's sensitive chemical balance.

Although Pinot Noir earns most of its fame from its still, red, varietal wines, the variety is also a vital ingredient in the production of sparkling white wines. For these, it can be used alone (to produce *blanc de noirs*), but is most commonly blended with its cousin Chardonnay, and other members of the Pinot family – most obviously Pinot Meunier in Champagne and Pinot Blanc in Franciacorta. The highly successful Pinot – Chardonnay sparkling wine blend has been adopted by regions all around the world, in Europe, the Americas, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand.