

OF GRASS & greenbacks

SAUVIGNON BLANC IS AN EASY SELL, BUT IT'S TOLERATED RATHER THAN LOVED BY MOST SOMMELIERS. **PETER RICHARDS MW** HEADS OFF TO THE FIRST INTERNATIONAL SAVVY LOVE-IN TO SEE WHAT PRODUCERS ARE DOING TO ADD PASSION TO THEIR PROFIT

Love it or hate it, there's no doubting Sauvignon Blanc's popularity – with the public at least. This historic grape variety – noble parent of Cabernet Sauvignon, let's not forget – tends to polarise opinion like few others. Yet the market tells its own success story.

Sauvignon Blanc has overtaken Chardonnay and Pinot Grigio to become, by a significant margin, the best-selling grape variety in the UK off-trade. According to the latest WSTA figures, Brits now shell out some £637m a year on more than 105 million bottles of the stuff, and at one of the highest average selling prices of any key variety (£6.03 versus the national average of £5.38).

And still it continues to grow. As Liberty Wines' David Gleave MW comments: 'Sauvignon is without doubt one of the darlings of the UK wine scene.'

The picture is more nuanced in the on-trade, where the likes of Chardonnay, Merlot and Pinot Grigio still top the sales charts. Yet Sauvignon takes the other spot among the four big hitters, shifting more than 24m bottles and accounting for sales of around £361m, posting growth similar to that of Pinot Grigio and Pinot Noir.

It's a brave on-trade list that doesn't feature a Sauvignon somewhere – as food and wine consultant Martin Lam comments: 'Right now, you have to have Sauvignon Blanc, much like prosecco. People ask for it by name, and there's nothing wrong with satisfying that demand.'

And so, as is the way of things, cometh Sauvignon's hour, cometh the conference. The spotlight was shone brightly on all aspects of this contentious grape variety at the first ever International Sauvignon Blanc Celebration, which took place in New Zealand's Marlborough region in early February. Topics ranged from thiols to sexist marketing bias, with Sauvignon being compared variously to Kylie Minogue, Labrador puppies and – memorably – Meg Ryan's moment of ecstasy in *When Harry Met Sally*.

The overall tone was perhaps even more upbeat than might have been expected. US commentator Matt Kramer decried the 'naysayers and hand-wringers' for precipitating a varietal 'mid-life crisis', identifying New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc as 'the most reliable dry white wine in the world' and 'one of the world's most successful wine styles'.

Oz Clarke championed it as anti-elitist and, in this context, 'the truly radical grape variety of the last generation'. Neudorf's Judy Finn pointed out how 'Sauvignon Blanc really put New Zealand on the world wine map', while figures released at the conference noticed how New Zealand wine exports topped \$1.5bn in 2015, with Sauvignon Blanc itself accounting for 86% of those shipments.

Analysing opinion from the conference, as well as considered thoughts from some of the UK's prominent on-trade figures, not to mention leading Sauvignon producers around the world, several key themes emerged.

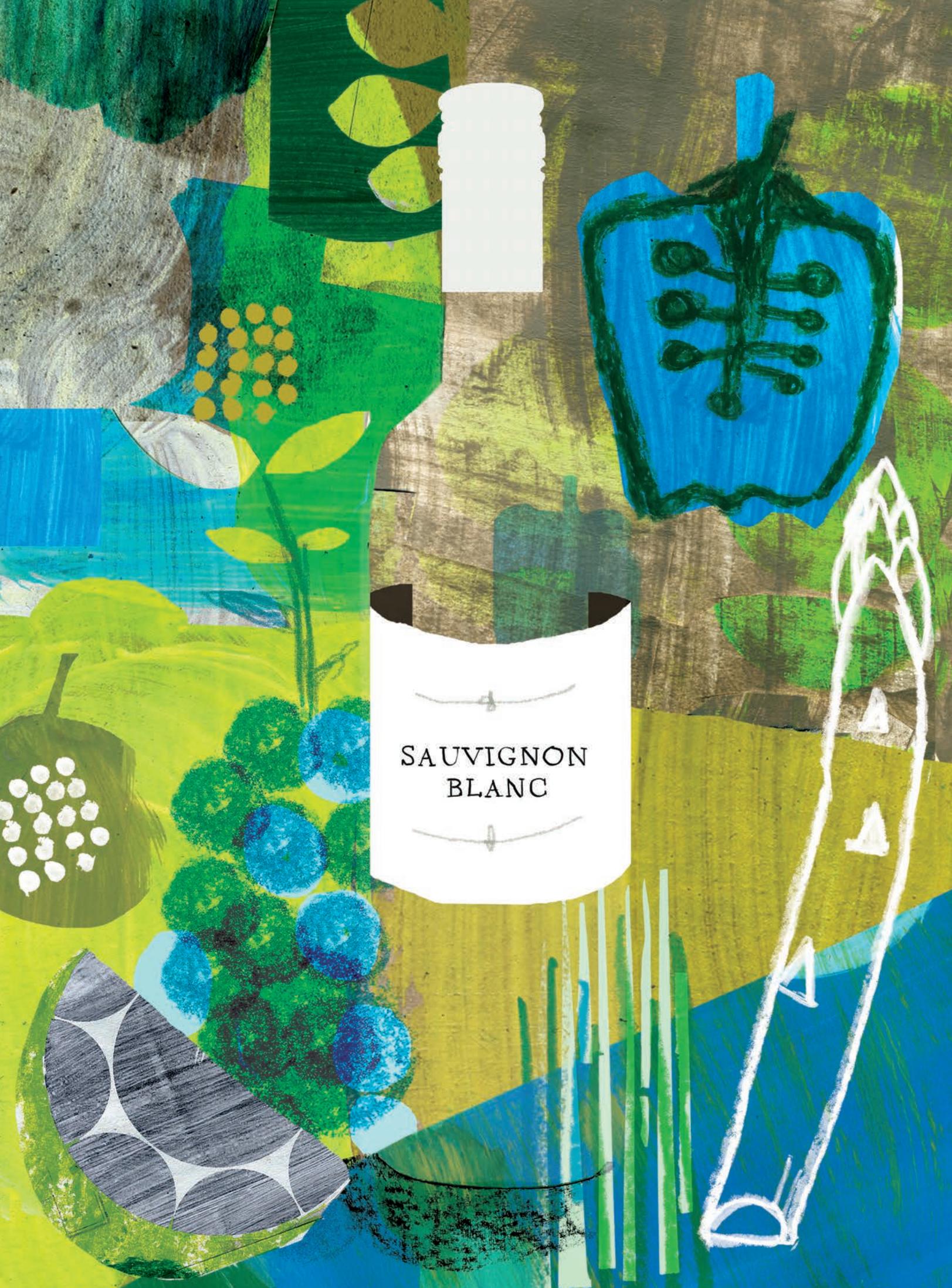
The commercial imperative v the connoisseur's prerogative

'WE NEED TO EMBRACE SAUVIGNON BLANC, NOT PUSH IT AWAY' RONAN SAYBURN MS

There is a general consensus that Sauvignon is increasingly popular and profitable – and this trend doesn't show any sign of slowing. Sauvignon 'sells itself', according to the Tate's Hamish Anderson, 'and isn't going away anytime soon'.

Xavier Rousset MS praises Sauvignon's 'longevity of appeal', adding: 'It's done well for everyone: customers are happy with the value, restaurants are happy with the GP and wineries happy with the sales. It's a win-win situation.'

And yet it's fair to say there is a clear ambivalence in the trade's feelings towards Sauvignon Blanc. In many quarters



SAUVIGNON
BLANC

there is a disdain towards what is perceived as a simplistic grape variety whose enforced ubiquity suppresses diversity on lists and prevents experimentation.

As a result, many sommeliers I talked to – from those in Singapore to Australia, New Zealand, the US and the UK – now report they are actively trying to steer people away from Sauvignon Blanc, or tailoring their lists accordingly.

Anderson points out the difference between the more casual dining of the Tate Modern, where Sauvignon is popular, to the finer dining at Tate Britain, where 'higher-end customers can be sniffy about Sauvignon and tend to choose something else'.

Meanwhile Rousset notes how, despite the commercial imperative, 'as customers' curiosity and knowledge increases, interest grows in other grapes such as Vermentino, Picpoul, Albariño and Grüner Veltliner.'

Sounding a note of caution however is Peter McCombie MW. 'In the trade, we've got a bit sniffy about Sauvignon Blanc and this needs addressing,' he warns. 'The world loves Sauvignon Blanc and perhaps it's been a victim of its own success. It has an immediacy of appeal and has been described as the gin and tonic of wine – but we need to be careful. There are people who love this style. Are we just patronising them? This style is absolutely valid.'

Championing rather than sidelining Sauvignon is what Ronan Sayburn MS counsels: 'I love Sauvignon Blanc and have got a lot of stick for this. But we have to ask ourselves: who are we actually buying wines for? The trade, or the vast majority of the public? We need to embrace Sauvignon Blanc, not push it away.'

Re-educating the trade is a top priority, according to New Zealand winemaker and consultant Matt Thomson: 'Customers aren't getting bored by Sauvignon Blanc, it's the trade and gatekeepers such as some sommeliers that are. But they haven't explored the huge diversity that's out there. Quality and diversity are better than ever.'

Sauvignon's ever-increasing diversity

'SOME PEOPLE WANT SIMPLICITY, OTHERS WANT MORE INTERESTING THINGS. WE NEED TO CATER FOR BOTH' MATT THOMSON

Gone are the days when choice in Sauvignon meant a flinty Loire white, an oaky Bordeaux, or an exuberant Kiwi style. Partly, this is due to the geography and regionality of Sauvignon Blanc growing and finding ever more lucid expressions in the wines (call it terroir if you will).

But it's also down to winemaking and stylistic choices: Sauvignon Blanc now comes in all shapes and sizes, from sparkling to light or low-alcohol styles, to oak-aged versions, wild ferments, sweet wines, blended iterations – even natural Sauvignons lurk in the melee.

This diversity, both at a global and local level, is a welcome development and looks set to continue expanding the variety's repertoire. As consultant, writer and restaurateur Roger Jones from The Harrow at Little Bedwyn comments: 'We still need the simpler style of Sauvignon – and it can be great – to entice



younger drinkers, or as an aperitif or easy-drinking style on a sunny day. But we also need the more complex wines for discerning palates or to have with food as an alternative to Chardonnay or Burgundy.'

Producers who appreciate Sauvignon's potential to cater for different markets include Friuli-based Marco Felluga and Johan Reyneke in Stellenbosch. According to Felluga: 'Today, because consumers are more and more attentive and interested, they appreciate not only the "young" Sauvignon style but also the "age-worthy" Sauvignons, where wines can express minerality.'

For Reyneke, 'people should keep an open mind with Sauvignon. The industry has come a long way and there's an incredible variety and diversity in Sauvignon Blanc out there. Mass-market Sauvignon is uncomplicated and easy to recognise, which appeals to the novice. But the more serious/age-worthy Sauvignons are right up there with some of the best offerings available to the wine drinker. Certain cultivars fall in and out of favour over time. Quality, however, seems to negate these trends and good wines are always sought after.'

Some styles seem more accepted than others, though. The jury seems to still be out on sparkling Sauvignon, despite Kiwi producers hoping its fruit-forward, off-dry style can compete with prosecco. Low-alcohol versions have yet to take off, while natural styles remain niche. Blends, wild ferments, sweets and oaked styles, on the other hand, seem increasingly popular.

But is there a risk of confusing consumers with this ever-growing diversity? For Astrolabe's Simon Waghorn it has more potential benefits than disadvantages: 'One of Marlborough's weaknesses is also its success: it's so recognisable and consistent, but the risk of that is people get bored or think it's simple. We need to demonstrate the depth and breadth of Sauvignon – in the last 10 years there's been a proliferation of styles, from single vineyards to oaky or reductive styles. We need to keep adding the next layer.'

Fellow Marlborough producer Jules Taylor adds: 'Sauvignon is underestimated. Lots of people become complacent with the bog-standard stuff. But it's more versatile than it's often given



credit for.' Thomson concludes: 'Burgundy wasn't built by doing just the simple wines. Some people want simplicity, others want more interesting things. We need to cater for both.'

Terroir takes hold

'SAUVIGNON BLANC IS ONE OF THE GREAT WHITE WINES. THOSE WHO THINK OTHERWISE ARE FOOLS' ALPHONSE MELLOT

There's no doubt the range of identifiably different regional and sub-regional expressions of Sauvignon has expanded significantly in recent years. Think Elgin, Limarí, Uco, Styria, Friuli, Sonoma, San Antonio, Tasmania, Rueda – even sub-regional Marlborough has become part of the Sauvignon lexicon, from the more opulent Wairau Plain to mineral Southern Valleys and tauter Awatere expressions.

This, of course, in addition to the likes of Sancerre, Pouilly-Fumé, Touraine and Graves, traditionally thought of as historic terroirs for Sauvignon. As Sauvignon's popularity continues to soar, and producers search for ever-greater diversity and quality, site-specific expression looks set to grow.

Such adherence to terroir, of course, remains a bastion of Old World wine production. As Nicolas Girard growls: 'We don't make Sauvignon Blanc – we make Sancerre.' Fellow Sancerre producer Alphonse Mellot is just as strident: 'Sauvignon Blanc is one of the great white wines, along with its cousin Riesling. Those who think otherwise are fools. All grapes can be simplistic or varietal when planted by a bad wine grower in a bad terroir. But if ever there were a complex variety, it's Sauvignon. When it's unripe it's vegetal, varietal – horrific. But when it's not over-produced, in the right terroir, it can express its true potential and become incomparable.'

Mellot describes Sauvignon as a 'sponge for terroir', a point with which Bordeaux-based consultant and producer Denis Dubourdieu agrees: 'It's false to believe that Sauvignon is

incapable of expressing terroir: those from the Loire are very different to those from Bordeaux or Friuli.' Jean-Christophe Mau notes how Sauvignon 'like many other grapes, can be relatively simple in its own right, but a favourable climate and terroir can bring out more complex expressions'.

It's not just the Old World playing the terroir game these days; this can exist at a macro level. As Thomson comments: 'Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc has arguably the greatest sense of place of any wine on the planet. In an ocean of industrial wine, we have a beacon for the variety with a sense of place.'

It can also take the form of ever-greater geographic specificity in the wines and on labels, from Lo Abarca to Kekerengu Coast. According to Geneviève Janssens, director of winemaking for Robert Mondavi Winery, Sauvignon is 'a variety which evokes people and terroir. There's a big range of diversity in the world and from each region, Sauvignon Blanc will bring something special and different to the consumer. Our Fumé Blancs are unique, reflecting the terroir of To Kalon and Wappo Hill. The beauty of Sauvignon Blanc is that it cannot be imitated if it does come from one vineyard, one region.'

At the Marlborough Sauvignon conference, Gleave even went as far as to moot the benefits of introducing appellation-style controls to the region to help safeguard quality; this despite a career spent railing against the deficiencies of Italy's arcane wine legislation. He urged those present to 'protect against Sauvignon fatigue, add diversity to the category and look for growth in the on-trade'. Terroir, it seems, will play an increasingly important part in Sauvignon Blanc's future.

The future isn't orange

'WE GREW UP WITH SAUVIGNON AND WE WILL DIE WITH IT. SAUVIGNON IS FOREVER'
JEAN-CHRISTOPHE BOURGEOIS

Sauvignon Blanc clearly has a lot going for it – even if its future isn't just strawberry fields forever. Most agree that, when made well, it can be expressive, complex, food-friendly and age-worthy. Its refreshing, characterful style chimes with the taste of the zeitgeist as consumers seek out vibrant flavours and wines with personality and stories to them. Growing diversity seems to be reinforcing the variety's appeal rather than undermining it.

Risks ahead vary from shifting consumer allegiances to over-stretching the brand, potential abuses of bulk shippers and even the variety's particular susceptibility to the vine disease Esca (as noted by Dubourdieu). Not to mention the ambivalence of the wine trade, some elements of which have grown wary of Sauvignon's popularity and perceived simplicity.

However Sauvignon's trajectory pans out, for the meantime, it looks set to stay. As Janssens says: 'The new generation likes fragrant varieties and it's pretty exciting to see how the world endorses Sauvignon Blanc: it has a bright future.' Loire and Marlborough producer Bourgeois is just as tenacious: 'We grew up with Sauvignon and we will die with it. Sauvignon is forever.'

Keep an eye out for the T-shirt, which is coming to a conference near you soon. ↗