

Ageing Sauvignon Blanc

Surely not? There are those who wouldn't even put Sauvignon in their glass, let alone their cellar. But, says Peter Richards MW, winemakers the world over are now producing wines with the structure to improve over many years

HERE'S A QUESTION for you. Be honest. When you reach for that special bottle of white wine you've been carefully ageing, how often is it a Sauvignon Blanc? I'd hazard a guess that the likes of Chardonnay and Riesling spring more readily to mind (and to hand) in this context. Nothing strange in that – from top sites and producers, these varieties have a proven track record of ageing and developing well. Indeed, sometimes they positively need bottle ageing in order to soften and blossom into their full potential. The implicit assumption is that the world's finest whites either need or should be able to mature in bottle.

By and large, I tend to agree with most of this. What I take issue with – increasingly vehemently, it has to be said – is the notion that Sauvignon Blanc is a grape variety that doesn't have the capacity and potential to do all these things, or indeed that it is not already making wines that we wine lovers can and should be stashing away and eagerly returning to later on. The more I taste, discover and talk about this intriguing grape variety, the more I'm convinced that we wine drinkers still have much to learn about Sauvignon Blanc and its true potential for diversity, quality and ageability. In short, we're at risk of missing out on something good. And no real wine lover would ever want to do that.

Changing face

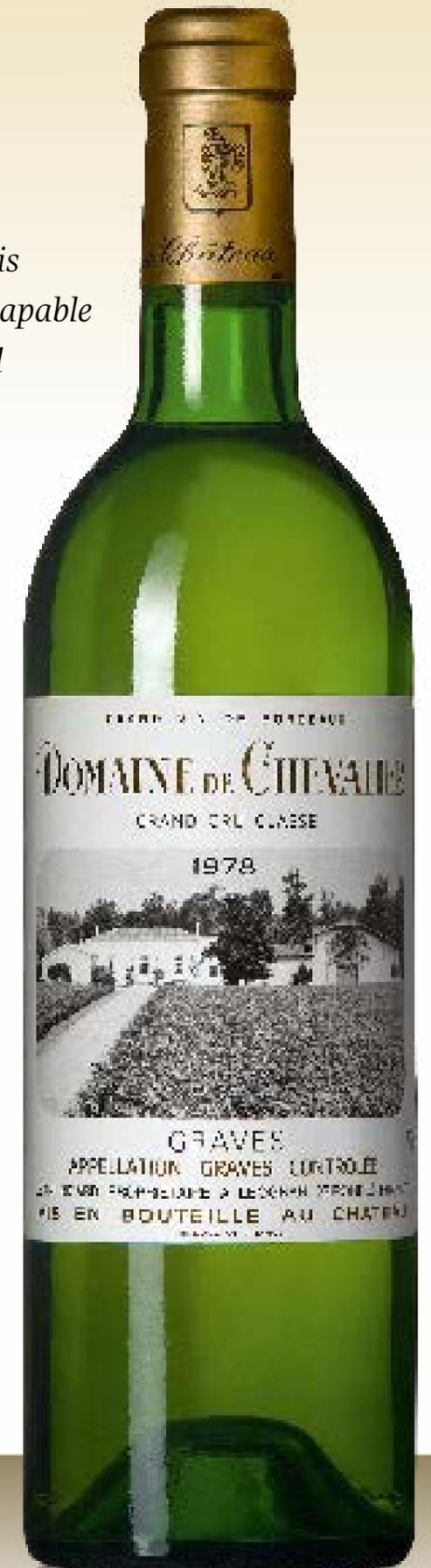
It's fair to say that Sauvignon Blanc is not short of detractors. Some wine lovers view it as irredeemably obvious and limited. Sommeliers resent its popularity for stifling diversity on their wine lists. One Master of Wine has 'hater of Sauvignon Blanc' on her Twitter profile summary. Specific varietal criticism can result on occasions when I recommend a Sauvignon Blanc, for example on BBC1's *Saturday Kitchen*, when such feedback is rare regarding other varieties. There is also a widespread body of opinion that holds Sauvignon in its purest form does not make a wine for ageing. Sauvignon Blanc, it seems, is an easy target.

Such varietal prejudice, while in some ways understandable, is premature. Because, strange as it may seem for such an historic grape variety (parent of Cabernet Sauvignon, close relation to Chenin Blanc and Pinot), we are only just starting to appreciate the real potential of Sauvignon Blanc.

The global figures tell the first part of an intriguing story. According to Kym Anderson's rigorously researched *Which Winegrape Varieties are Grown Where?*, Sauvignon Blanc is one of the fastest growing varieties in the world by plantings. In 1990, it was the 25th most planted variety worldwide, with 44,677ha (hectares) of vineyard. By 2010, it had shot up to 8th spot, having more than doubled its surface area to 110,138 ha – its most popular homes being France, New Zealand, Chile, South Africa and, oddly, Moldova. What this means is not just that Sauvignon is in demand – but that more than half of its global vineyard is relatively young.

What's more, the first commercial release of Sauvignon Blanc from New Zealand was the 1979 vintage, and it wasn't until the 1980s and 1990s that this novel take on the grape really took off. The advent of Kiwi Sauvignon changed the face of the wine world, suddenly giving the grape a totally new stylistic paradigm compared to its previous heartlands of Pouilly-Fumé in the Loire or Pessac-Léognan in Bordeaux. But the intervening few decades are the mere blink of an eye in wine terms, >

'Sauvignon is evolving, and is increasingly capable of meaningful evolution in the bottle'



Left: Robert Mondavi's Reserve Fumé Blanc can mature well for 15 to 20 years. Right: the 1978 vintage of Domaine de Chevalerie Blanc



‘Sauvignons from Pouilly and Sancerre take on an inimitable truffley bouquet after a couple of years in bottle’ Denis Dubourdieu

and it has taken time for producers to learn from each other, as well as their own vines, and refine the craft of Sauvignon in the new global context. In short, Sauvignon is evolving before our eyes – and, as a direct result of this progress in the vineyards, is increasingly capable of meaningful evolution in the bottle.

Hidden potential

One man who is more of an authority than most is Denis Dubourdieu, Decanter’s current Man of the Year. The respected winemaker and professor of oenology at the University of Bordeaux runs a research lab and has taken a keen interest in the science of Sauvignon, helping other producers with his insights and producing many a fine version himself (his Doisy-Daëne Sec being regularly one of my favourite dry Sauvignons from Bordeaux). Dubourdieu is a firm believer in Sauvignon’s capacity not only to express terroir, but also to age in bottle.

‘Of course, there’s Sauvignon Blanc and there’s Sauvignon Blanc,’ he chuckles. ‘I adore Sauvignons from Pouilly and Sancerre, which take on an inimitable truffley bouquet after a couple of years in bottle. It’s a variety that can make ageworthy wines, depending on the terroir and vintage, when it is grown in the right climate, low in pH and rich in aroma precursors. In fact, the ageing capacity of some Sauvignons is astonishing. Some of my oldest Clos Floridène [Bordeaux] whites from 1993 or 1996 are still alive, with remarkable bouquets. Most of these wines are drunk too young.’

Having been lucky enough to relish the Domaine de Chevalier Blanc, Graves 1978 and the 1992, I appreciate Dubourdieu’s point. But it’s true that many Sauvignons are made to be sold and drunk young, which also has the benefit for producers of generating swift returns and keeping bank managers happy. And certain styles just don’t reward ageing, especially those with residual sugar or an overtly green character (the result can be an unholy concoction of sweaty sweetcorn). But producers in all parts of the world are now starting to see the long-term benefits of crafting genuinely ageworthy Sauvignon.



Above: New Zealand’s Cloudy Bay now has sufficiently old vines and the experience necessary to produce ‘great alternative and ageworthy styles of Sauvignon’

‘I love Sauvignon Blanc – I could wear it as perfume!’ enthuses Marlborough producer Jules Taylor. ‘But I also think that aged Sauvignon is beautiful. We’ve shot ourselves in the foot promoting it as something that’s just suitable for drinking early. It does come down to how you like to drink your Sauvignon, but we should focus on how well the variety can work when it’s oaked, wild-fermented or showing sub-regional expressions – as well as how it ages.’

Richness and finesse

I found palpable proof of Taylor’s assertions when tasting hundreds of Kiwi Sauvignons, some comfortably more than a decade old, at The International Sauvignon Blanc Celebration (the first of its kind) in Marlborough, February 2016. The likes of Cloudy Bay, Dog Point, Huia, Jackson Estate, Spy Valley and Wither Hills all showed straight Sauvignons that had evolved beautifully, with vivid lime-pith purity and wonderful texture and energy. These were wines that still had Sauvignon’s aromatic expression, albeit evolved, but were more about the palate texture, weight and harmony.

‘Ageability should be a fundamental quality of fine wine,’ asserts Cloudy Bay viticulturist Jim White. ‘If we want our Sauvignon to be considered one of the great wines of the world, ageability needs to be part of its DNA. For that, you need grapes to be ripe but not too ripe, with good but not green acidity and lowish yields giving density and substance. We now have the vine age and experience to make great alternative and ageworthy styles of Sauvignon.’ Tellingly, White adds that the



Above: Robert Mondavi’s To Kalon vineyard, home to the I-Block of 60-year-old Sauvignon vines

Sauvignons have aged much more consistently under screwcap closures, which Cloudy Bay implemented from 2002 and 2003, than under corks – another evolutionary detail that has arguably helped to usher in the new era of Sauvignon Blanc.

For those in the know, the upper Loire in France is a fine source of good, ageworthy Sauvignons. The likes of Didier Dagueneau, François Cotat, Henri Bourgeois, Masson-Blondelet, Vacheron and Vincent Pinard all make wines that develop textural richness and finesse as they age, as recent tastings back to the early 1980s have proven. For Sancerre producer Alphonse Mellot: ‘Sauvignon is the greatest white grape, along with its cousin Riesling; those who think otherwise are fools. For a great Sauvignon to be made, though, it needs a man who has understood Sauvignon, his terroir and vineyard.’ When it is made well, Mellot asserts, Sancerre can age ‘15 years at least’, and sometimes much more, going on to develop ‘delightful hints of truffles and petrol – both savoury and mouthwatering’.

Fresh appraisal

In California, head winemaker at Robert Mondavi, Geneviève Janssens is also a fan of ageing Sauvignon. ‘Our Sauvignon ages very well – we still enjoy 15- to 20-year-old Fumé

Photographs: Chris Leschinsky(2)



‘The key is the terroir, the age of the vineyard and the style’

Geneviève Janssens (left)

Blanc Reserve and I Block Fumé Blanc. The key is the terroir, the age of the vineyard and the style – our To Kalon vineyard gives wines with low pH and high acidity, which are the keys for the wine to age well.’

In South Africa’s Stellenbosch region, ageing Sauvignon is a matter of personal taste for Johan Reyneke: ‘Mass-market Sauvignon appeals to the novice,’ he says. ‘As the palate and ability to enjoy more complex wine develops, the more serious or ageworthy Sauvignons are right up there with some of the best offerings available to the wine drinker.’

Reyneke’s point echoes that of Dubourdieu: with Sauvignon, it’s a matter of horses for courses. Not every producer will want – or be able – to make ageworthy Sauvignon, and >

not every wine drinker will want to drink aged Sauvignon. The use of oak and techniques such as wild yeast fermentation, extended lees contact and blending with other varieties – typically Semillon, as in Bordeaux or Western Australia – are some of the tools most commonly used by winemakers to give Sauvignon Blanc more complexity and ageing potential. Yet they will all make different styles, and each iteration won't appeal to everyone, however sensitively done.

The important point is that, while not all Sauvignons can or should age, an increasing number of them, from all corners of the

winemaking globe, can and will – and in an ever-growing variety of styles. This, if you like, is Sauvignon's second coming – after the initial Kiwi revolution turned the world of Sauvignon on its head, we're now starting to see the experience, fine-tuning and long-term vision that are necessary to make nuanced, ageworthy Sauvignon Blanc, among producers from Sancerre to San Antonio and beyond.

So, early adopters and real wine lovers take note. If you want to be ahead of the curve, choose your producers with care and start making room for fine ageworthy Sauvignon in your cellar. I certainly am. **D**

Peter Richards MW is the Decanter World Wine Awards Regional Chair for Chile

For our panel tasting of 83 Sancerre 2015s, turn to page 89

10 Sauvignon Blancs that will go the distance



Dog Point, Section 94, Marlborough, New Zealand 2013 96

£19-£25 **Cambridge Wine, Hennings, James Nicholson, Laithwaite's, The Wine Society, Vin Cognito, Woodwinters**
Stunning intensity. Smoky, citrus-infused, spicy and compelling. It's a full-on oaked style but is also very harmonious and savoury. Tremendous stuff. **Drink** 2016-2022 **Alc** 14%

Reyneke Reserve White, Stellenbosch, South Africa 2012 95

£24 (2013) **Connolly's, Harvey Nichols, James Nicholson, The Guildford Wine Co, SA Wines Online**
A beautiful single-block, barrel-aged Sauvignon from this inspired biodynamic producer. This is nutty, citric, mineral-infused and super-gastronomic. **Drink** 2016-2023 **Alc** 13.9%



Aquitania, Sol de Sol Sauvignon Blanc, Traiguén, Malleco Valley, Chile 2014 94

£19.95 **Winety**
Elegance from the cool, cloudy south of Chile's wine territory. Tense acidity and discreet oaking mean this Sauvignon will develop in depth and nuance over time. **Drink** 2016-2021 **Alc** 13.5%

Château Brown, Blanc, Pessac-Léognan, Bordeaux, France 2013 94

£25 **Fine & Rare**
There's more Semillon than usual in this



Didier Dagueneau, Silex, Pouilly-Fumé, Loire, France 2012 93

£63-£75 **Clos & Cru, Crump Richmond & Shaw, Harrods, In Vino Veritas, Jeroboams, Justerini & Brooks, Roberson**
Hardly textbook Sauvignon, with its peachy, floral, stoney tones, but this taut, profoundly mineral white

ages superbly: the 2002 was dynamic, energising and hugely complex tasted in late 2015. **Drink** 2018-2027 **Alc** 13%

Henri Bourgeois, Les Côte des Monts Damnés, Sancerre, Loire, France 2014 93

POA **Les Caves de Pyrène**
Both subtle and vivacious. Stony, chalky, perfect marriage of variety and site (a steep slope in Chavignol). Needs time to develop more savoury complexity (the 1988 was on fine form recently). **Drink** 2016-2024 **Alc** 13%

Cloudy Bay, Sauvignon Blanc, Marlborough, New Zealand 2015 92

£21.95-£24 **Cambridge Wine Merchants, Connollys, Drinkmonger, Harrods, Jeroboams, Majestic, Millésima, Roberson, Woodwinters**
The 2015 vintage of this famous, LVMH-owned name is spot-on, showing its classic earthy, peapod and green plum flavours. The beautifully evolved 2005



Domaine de Chevalier, Blanc, Pessac-Léognan, Bordeaux, France 2012 92

£59-£65 **Corkr, Crump Richmond & Shaw, Georges Barbier, Millésima, R&B, Woodwinters**
It's gone up a bit in price of late, but this property has a track record for eminently ageworthy Sauvignon-dominant blends. Engaging if youthful flavours of ripe lemon and buttered toast. **Drink** 2017-2022 **Alc** 14%



Bay of Fires, Sauvignon Blanc, Tasmania, Australia 2014 91

£12.21 **Accolade Wines**
Has a wonderfully tight, focused style with complex, grassy, lemony flavours. Succulent, with a touch of sweetness, but it's well balanced by the vivid acidity. **Drink** 2016-2020 **Alc** 12.5%

Ravine Vineyard, Sauvignon Blanc, Niagara Peninsula, Ontario, Canada 2014 91

N/A UK www.ravinevineyard.com
Elegantly oak-aged, this is a refreshing wine. Well worth seeking out if you're in the mood for something different. **Drink** 2016-2020 **Alc** 12.5%

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