Melon de Bourgogne - A Marketing Conundrum

In much of France and Great Britain, restaurant wine lists prominently feature the wine known as Melon de Bourgogne. This grape variety hails from the western end of the Loire Valley, in the Pay de la Loire region, although its roots trace to Burgundy (Bourgogne). Melon de Bourgogne is known as Muscadet (moose-ka-day), no relation whatsoever with Muscat, Muscatel, Muscadine, Moscato or the myriad of similar sounding grapes, or more simply as “Melon”.

So with over five million cases of wine produced from the Loire region, why is Muscadet such an unknown quantity in the United States? Well many would suggest the difficulty in marketing a wine that includes melon in its name, and sounds so familiar to so many other wines. In an article in the Wall Street Journal in 2009, Elemental Cellars winemaker Steven Westby says, “We call it our 'Lucy and Ricky wine' because there's so much 'splaining to do' with the name”.

So where is Melon de Bourgogne popular? Travel to France.

France – The far western regions of the Loire Valley, rich with the influence of the cool Atlantic Ocean, are home to virtually all of France’s vineyards of Melon de Bourgogne. The Muscadet Appellation, established in 1937, is the overarching AOC, and it is further subdivided into three sub-appellations: Muscadet-Sèvre et Maine, Muscadet-Coteaux de la Loire, and the most recent AOC, Muscadet-Côtes de Grandlieu. The Muscadet- Sèvre et Maine AOC, named for the two rivers that dissect the region, accounts for nearly three quarters of the Melon produced in France and is the largest AOC by volume of any in the Loire Valley. The Grandlieu sub-appellation is the southernmost sub-region and benefits from a unique microclimate generated by the nearby 25 square mile, shallow, lac du Grandlieu.

Producers to look for: Finding Melon de Bourgogne in the United States can be challenging. The wine is given limited marketing and shelf space and this, coupled with the large number of relatively small French producers, makes the wine’s availability vary widely. Most of the better quality Melons come from Sèvre et Maine, so check for that designation on the label. Some of the better known producers include: Domaine de la Pépière, Château de la Chesnaie, Lieubeau Vignerons, Andre-Michel Bregeon, and Michel Delhommeau.

United States – Melon de Bourgogne was brought to the United States in 1939 by Georges de Latour of Beaulieu Vineyards. The grape took to its California environs, however marketing proved a challenge and over the years Melon de Bourgogne has become a virtual unknown in the United States. There are currently only a handful of wineries that produce wines that include the Melon de Bourgogne grape. Historically Panther Creek’s Melon from the Stewart Vineyard near Dundee, Oregon was a perennial favorite but sadly production ceased with the 2006 vintage. Eugene Wine Cellars produces the Recess White Blend from the
Willamette Valley that includes Pinot Gris, Pinot Blanc, and Melon.

In 2004 Perennial Vineyards in the Puget Sound AVA planted the first Melon de Bourgogne in Washington State. In 2008 the experiment proved successful, and the Vineyards' annual production sells out quickly. But with only 20 cases produced, don’t look for this wine outside the immediate area.

**Melon de Bourgogne Style**

Widely known as the wine to have with seafood, Melon de Bourgogne has a range of styles that incorporate fruit, minerality and quiet earth aromas. The grape struggles to have concentrated flavors by its genetic makeup; however the cool climates of the western Loire allow what could otherwise be a somewhat minimalist wine to develop rich fruit flavor and ample acidity. To maximize the aroma profile many Muscadet wines are aged sur lie or on the lees (yeast remaining following fermentation) for an extended period following fermentation. This sur lie aging can increase the body of the wine resulting in a much fuller mouth feel. Fruit aromas can include tree fruit (apple, pear, peach) and occasionally elements of tropical fruits (lemons and limes). Alcohol is usually less than 12%, allowing the wine to stay in balance. Muscadet is produced to be drunk young, while the flavor profiles remain strong.

The best way to enjoy a Melon de Bourgogne is on the deck or at a picnic during the summer. Pair with virtually any seafood, and you will not be disappointed.

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