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Appel on Wine: Great Muscadet, from mineral-rich Loire Valley, worth a search

By JOE APPEL

Muscadet is a dry, mineral-housed, unoaked white wine from one of the best-known regions in France. It is recognized mostly for being complementary with oysters and simple fish preparations, and it is produced in relatively large quantities. At this point there shouldn't be that much about it to contemplate.

But there is. Just as you're throwing back a glass and gazing at the ocean, the wine smacks you upside and forces deeper investigation. If it's the right Muscadet. There's quite a bit of wrong: haphazardly planted, machine-harvested (often when underripe), and carelessly fermented Muscadet is rampant in France, and prevalent here as well in the "inoffensive" section of seafood restaurant wine lists.

Muscadet is not Moscato. Although this wine from the Western end of the Loire Valley got its name for a supposed musky taste, no one ever really discerns it. The sole grape used to make Muscadet is Melon de Bourgogne, which doesn't taste melon-y. (So French.)

The best subappellation of Muscadet is "Sevre et Maine". The terrain is sweeping, with low-lying hills, five or 10 miles from the Atlantic. There is more mineral differentiation in Muscadet, a region formed by dramatic volcanic activity moving south from Great Britain eons ago that left myriad distinct soils, than anywhere else in France, including Burgundy.

So keep your antennae up. Great Muscadet is available, and great Muscadet approaches the realm of great wine. Great Muscadet is the strangest normal white wine I know, expressing tremendously complex flavors and aromas, many of which stay outside the sphere of linguistically renderable. And great Muscadet costs less than \$20 a bottle.

I don't know anyone better with whom to discuss such matters than Paul Chartrand, the pioneering wine importer based in Rockland. Chartrand developed a portfolio of French wines made exclusively from certified-organically grown grapes, back when that was a somewhat ridiculous prospect (1985). His offerings have since expanded to wines from other countries, but France is still what he knows and does best.

His exceptional palate makes him a fascinating man to taste with, and he has always placed emphasis on organic growing as an essential component of overall wine quality -- restraint in use of chemicals transferring directly to fineness of wine and sustainability of winegrowing and winemaking.

This is what brings us to the Muscadets of Guy Bossard and Domaine de l'Ecu. Bossard was the second producer Chartrand chose to represent, back in the 1980s. He has become one of the more revered winemakers in the Loire if not all of France, for the intricate beauty of his wines and his uncompromising commitment to the biodynamic principles that frame farming holistically. (The domaine's website presents an uncommonly succinct and informative overview of biodynamics.)

"Guy was really the first of a new generation to claim Muscadet as a great white wine," Chartrand told me. "It's a high-acid, cold-climate place. Melon is a delicate grape with a lot of green notes, so if it's not nurtured to full ripeness, it falls short."

Bossard, 62, and the younger winemaking partner, Fred Niger Van Herck, has chosen to sustain the fifth-generation winery when he can no longer spend every day in the vineyards as he still currently does. The two are fanatics about full ripeness. In Muscadet where autumn usually brings copious rains that threaten mildew and rot, getting grapes to full ripeness is a high-risk

endeavor.

Indeed, Niger and Bossard seem to be brave fanatics (of the best sort) about close to everything. Bossard has resisted the many entreaties to expand his vineyard area past the current 50 or so acres, because he and Niger want to be able to be nurture every vine and participate actively in the harvest. Grapes are hand-sorted and fed into the crusher gingerly. Whereas most Muscadet producers add cultured yeasts to impart fruity flavors that will offset the high acidity, Bossard and Niger only use native yeasts and still get great, true fruit flavors! And a grape as delicate as Melon will transmit the effects of sulfur all too transparently, so they add a bare minimum.

The wines, never fined or filtered, ferment on their lees (spent yeast cells) for eight to 10 months (and more than a year in the stunning Expression series, single-vineyard wines from average-40-year-old vines), well past the six that are required by law. (Lees contact, a technique first introduced in Muscadet, develops more texture and unusual flavor compounds in any wine.)

Such fine, structured Muscadets made this carefully are capable of significant aging, akin in Chartrand's estimation to Chablis. Especially with the Expression wines, I'm going to squirrel away a few bottles of the great 2011 vintage, just coming available now, for five years at least.

"Over time," Chartrand said, "the acidity softens, the nose gets less fruity, there's a bit more thickening on the palate." This transformation will happen gradually, and it's hard to think of an easier case of wine to buy than a mix of Domaine de L'Ecu Muscadets (distributed in Maine by Pine State) to cherish now, and follow through time.

I like the Cuvee Classique (\$16), though it's more conventional in profile (crisp, briny) and so an ideal introduction. So, yes, oysters. But a distinct nuttiness and floral bouquet set it apart.

Better for oysters is the traditional-method sparkling wine, now called Bossard-Thuad Brut but which will soon change to "La Divina" (\$19). Chardonnay, Cabernet and Pinot Noir are added to the Melon, along with the native Folle Blanche. As you'd expect, it's not a creamy wine: the mousse is prickly-foam rather than silken. The flavors are predominantly smoke, hay, dry toast. It's a crazy price for a vibrant wine that compares favorably to much NV Champagne.

The real action for me is in the Expression series, of which two are available in Maine: the Gneiss (\$18) and Granite (\$19). Though they are both supple and flow in a manner that seems unique to minimally treated wines, the former is the softer of the two, with light touches of vanilla and wax woven through the lemon notes. The Granite is heartier. The citrus flavors are orange rather than yellow, and spices come in ginger, cumin and coriander.

They are both truly like Chablis, though with less bone density, more ethereal. You think you've grasped it, then it slips away. What is that? Brown sugar? Underripe pineapple? Seeds? Hard to know. The fruit is just so complex, almost crunchy and juicy simultaneously, but difficult to place terms and analogues on. This is what great Muscadet teaches -- nothing in the end belongs to anything else. That there are no cognates.

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