

Semillon (*Se-mee-yohn*)

Most mispronounced wine by Britons, saying it as its spelt opposed to the French way of '*Seh-Mee-Yhon*'. (Telegraph Media Group Ltd 2012)

Introduction

One of the wine world's unsung heroes. Like Riesling which tends to be much more appreciated by wine insiders than by the average wine drinker. This gold-skinned grape produces France's most famous and revered sweet wines (notable Sauternes) and some of the greatest dry white wines of Australia (specifically those of the Hunter Valley) but few Semillons between these two extremes attract much attention. The Dry Wine requires a unique set of conditions in which to make quality wine.

Grape production.

Fairly low maintenance grape to cultivate with the ability to thrive in a wide variety of soils. The thin skins of the grape make it vulnerable to the botrytis cinerea (or grey or noble rot) and sunburn. It also ripens early. Care must be taken to manage the canopy for maximum fruit protection in the warmer growing regions. The medium-sized berries take on a golden, yellow hue at maturity (contributing a deep golden colour to wine which is even deeper if the grapes have been botrytised). The grape buds later but ripens earlier than its most common blending partner (i.e. Sauvignon Blanc). It is not difficult to grow with bright green leaves earning it the title of 'green grape'.

Young Semillon lacks complexity but with a bit of age Semillon can take on the rich, full flavours of candied fruit, caramelised nuts and ongoing honey nuances. It ages well.

Countries of production

Semillon has called **France** (30,000 acres) (chiefly south west France - Bordeaux – Graves (dry) and Sauternes) home for centuries and it has been grown in **South Africa** (was 90% now 1% of plantings) and **Chile** (though both of these countries have largely stepped away from Semillon production now) and Australia with considerable success. The USA – **California** (3,000 acres), **Argentina** and **New Zealand** are now also growing Semillon. In Chile, South Africa and Argentina it is usually used as a blend though.

In **Australia** (17,000 acres) it is made in both sweet and dry styles – as a single variety and oaked and unoaked and blended with Sauvignon Blanc and Chardonnay (known as Hunter Riesling). Most notably the **Hunter Valley** (New South Wales, 32/33 degrees south with a relatively wet climate and local mesoclimate and cooled by regular afternoon cloudy cover and gentle breezes which inland from the coast providing respite from the baking Australian sun) is the best known and famous for its distinctive dry Semillon made there since 1870's. These wines are renown for their ability to improve with age (best >15 years).

Bordeaux

Semillon is one of Bordeaux's big wine grapes which is especially vulnerable to Botrytis Cinerea or Noble Rot (see below) which concentrates the sugars of the late harvest and is responsible for many of the world's most famous dessert wines, for example Sauternes or Barsac. Sauternes are made with Semillon, Sauvignon (20%) and some Muscadelle and the Semillon grape makes up 80% of the blend in the most expensive and famous dessert wine in the world Chateau d'Yquem

Botrytis cinerea – a fungal disease which is spread by damp, humid weather. If it attacks young immature grapes it can soften and split the skins, allowing the bacteria to get inside the berries and ruin them. If it attacks ripe and healthy white grapes and the weather is hot enough to slow down the growth of the mould, then *noble rot* results. This rot removes the moisture from the grapes but retains acids and sugars. The result is very sweet grapes which despite their appearance can produce some of the world's sweetest and longest living white wines in the world.

The Wine

1. Appearance

Older wines have rich golden colours

2. Nose

The grape does not dominate the nose. Reported honeyed apricots, quince, and candied peach and creamy vanilla tones.

Older wines - rich aromas, such as hazelnuts, fig, lemon, saffron, nectarine, grass, asparagus.

3. Taste

Young wines - short finish and often bland.

Older wines (peak at 10 years) longer finish that lingers for minutes. Dry.

Wines start out with a fresh grassy citrus taste and evolve into golden wines with nutty, honeyed tones and luscious mouth feel.

4. Aromatics

Aromatic profile which ranges from subtle fruit to floral and some spice to a bit of earthy and herbal aromas.

5. Blending qualities

Lower level of acidity, almost oily textures, subtle aromatics and rounder profile makes it the perfect complement to the leaner lines, zesty profiles and fresh acidity of Sauvignon Blanc. The grape's ability to pick up and spotlight impressionable oak influences is another draw for blending this grape.

While Semillon is the major contributing grape in Bordeaux's sweet wines, it is also frequently blended with Sauvignon Blanc to create a dry, white wine simply known

as Bordeaux Blanc. Also dry, oaked wines rich wines of Graves and Pessac-Leognan (approx 70% Semillon) regions of France.

In Australia, Semillon is popular with Australian wine drinkers and it is an important ingredient in the popular 'Sem-Sav' wines of Western Australia which are now popular throughout the country. Also 'Sem-Chard'.

6. Suggested suitable accompanying foods

In Europe - Pear and Roquefort tarts (sweet), mussels (dry)

In Asia - grilled squid skewers (satay sotong) (dry)

In Americas – Parmesan gratinated scallops (dry)

In Australia/Oceania – Seared yellowtail kingfish with hollandaise sauce (dry), candied orange cheesecake (sweet)

Well known Vineyards/names

Australian

Tyrrell's Semillon Hunter valley or Single vineyard Stevens reserve or HVD Single or Vat1 Vineyard, Hunter Valley

McWilliam's Mount Pleasant Elizabeth or Single Vineyard Semillon, Hunters Valley
Brokenwood Semillon

Margan Semillon, Hunters Valley

Barossa Valley – Peter Lehmann

South African

Franschhoek Valley

References

Forrest T (2004) The Complete Wine Course Carlton books

Victoria Moore (6.10.2012) The Bounty of Hunter Weekend Telegraph

Janice Robinson (2006) www.janicerobinson.com 31.10.2012

Uncork – A short history of Semillon www.uncork.biz 31.10.2012

Semillon Wine www.wine-searcher.com 31.10.2012

Hunter Valley Wine www.wine-searcher.com/regions-hunter+valley 31.10.2012

Semillon Wine Grape Varietal www.wine.about.com 31.10.2012

R.Ham

2012-11-11