

SAUVIGNON BLANC

Marlborough or Loire?

This is the decision that lovers of Sauvignon Blanc usually ponder as they browse the wine aisles. Stephen Brook looks at the two differing styles of this popular grape - and considers how ripeness of fruit holds the key

IN 1990 OR so I was asked to write a book about Sauvignon Blanc and Semillon. This was based on my fondness for Sauternes, rather than any particular fascination with those two varieties. I spent much time visiting the Sauvignon heartlands, especially Sancerre and Pouilly – so much so that I wearied of Sauvignon over the long term.

At the same time, Marlborough was attracting attention for the searing, exotic and individual expressions of Sauvignon being coaxed from its young vineyards. I wasn't immune to its charms: I even served Cloudy Bay at my wedding lunch. But then I began to weary of New Zealand Sauvignon too: strongly vegetal aromas and flavours dominated many wines, and what should have been a pizzicato background in the wine's orchestration became instead a mighty roar on the kettledrums. I just didn't fancy knocking back a glass of liquidised asparagus, which is what so many wines resembled.

This autobiographical excursion will soon end, but comes to its climax in 2012 at New Zealand's major wine competition to which, for the second time, I was invited as an international judge. One morning I had to assess 60 Marlborough Sauvignons – a masochistic exercise given their high acidity. I gave low marks to some wines that, to quote a popular Australian descriptor, reeked of 'Sydney taxi driver's armpit'. But when comparing scores with my fellow judges, most of whom were winemakers, I was taken to task. I was wrong, they explained, to

penalise Sauvignons with strong vegetal aromas, as they were simply exhibiting Marlborough typicality.

I replied that in France such aromas indicated unripe fruit. Vintages such as 1984 in Sancerre, which I'd tasted in quantity, had just that nasty aromatic cocktail of asparagus and sweat. How could I reward unripe wines? Author of a book on Sauvignon or not, I was taken aside and instructed on thiols, pyrazines and other aromatic compounds commonly encountered in Sauvignon Blanc.

A year later I returned to the Loire, and was delighted with what I found. Since the 1980s the vines had aged, yields had been severely reduced (high yields inhibit ripening and thus exacerbate vegetal aromas) and recent vintages had been clement, resulting in ripe, succulent wines with only a trace of herbaceousness. Yields in the '80s had often been around 100hl/ha; in 2011 the maximum authorised yield was 63hl/ha.

Bertrand Daulny of SICAVAC, a group that advises Loire growers and supervises viticultural research, confirms that the more extreme Marlborough styles would not be considered acceptable in the Loire, and would probably fail the 'Label' – the tasting that authorises the use of the AC name on a bottle. Producer Daniel Crochet insists: 'Vegetal is the exact opposite of what I am aiming for.'

It became clear that there are two opposed schools of thought on Sauvignon. No self-respecting Loire grower would deliberately aim for vegetal characters; on the other hand many New Zealand



Photograph: Mick Rock/Cosphas

'No Loire grower aims for vegetal characters; on the other hand, many New Zealand growers do precisely that'

growers do precisely that. The most obvious explanation for the Marlborough style is that consumers like it; consequently, wine companies produce it. As with Beaujolais Nouveau, you create a stereotype, encourage a trend and then sit back while everyone follows it. It's not for me to say that consumers are duty bound to prefer the French style. If wine drinkers seek out vegetal wines and consume them with pleasure, that is their right. (I say that, but, to be honest, don't entirely believe it.)

A foot in both camps

The Bourgeois family in Sancerre is unique in that it owns vineyards in Marlborough too. Jean-Christophe Bourgeois told me: 'I was an international judge at a competition in South Africa in 1997 and there was a clear divide. The southern hemisphere judges rewarded herbaceous wines, while the northern judges preferred fruity, fresher ones. The divide seems less marked today.' Lionel Bourgeois, who makes the wines at both estates, agrees that New Zealand wines are becoming more European. And a few producers such as Seresin have always adopted a more French style of Sauvignon.

Lionel Bourgeois points to the huge differences in approach to farming Sauvignon Blanc. 'New Zealand growers irrigate a lot, so the vines are more vigorous and less stressed. Also yields are far higher. Our neighbours in Marlborough crop at two or three times our levels. Vine density is much lower than in France, so there is less competition between vines and less reduction in vigour. We only irrigate young vines as we want the roots to descend to find minerals and water. New Zealand growers analyse for sugar and acidity and then decide when to harvest. Here in Sancerre we taste the grapes constantly and don't analyse them until they're pressed. We do that in Marlborough too. ➤

Another difference is that estates in Sancerre are fairly small, while there are some huge properties in Marlborough. We can follow our vines very closely

here, but there they simply can't monitor their vineyards so intensively. They also can't pick as speedily. The Sancerre harvest takes two weeks on average; in Marlborough it can take four.'

Simon Chotard, the son of Daniel Chotard, has worked in Marlborough and couldn't help noting the differences. 'Alcohols of 14% are easy in Marlborough, despite the high yields, but that doesn't mean the grapes are fully ripe.'

Varietal character vs terroir

'We're lucky in the Loire that people from all over the world know our wines and seek them out. Most estates have a following of private clients. In New Zealand they fashion wines to meet consumer demand, as so much is exported. We're producing Sancerre rather than Sauvignon, but in Marlborough there's a strong emphasis on varietal character – or what people think of as varietal character. New Zealand winemakers favour yeasts that will give very aromatic wines, whereas in Sancerre growers tend to use indigenous or neutral yeasts. For us the aromas are important, but not as important as the wine's palate and structure. In New Zealand there is more emphasis on fruitiness and aroma.'

'We're very focused on the different terroirs here – chalk, flint, clay – as they do give recognisably different wines. In Marlborough soils count for less, as it's a new region and its terroir is not well understood. The densities are different too: our new vineyards are planted at 9,000 vines per hectare. In Marlborough it's far lower.'

Craggy Range's Steve Smith MW, of one of New Zealand's leading viticulturists, confirms yields can be very high, estimating that most estates aim for 75-85 hl/ha, while some might crop as high as 110hl/ha. 'In Marlborough we have young soils and plenty of humidity from the ocean, so the vines tend to be very vigorous. It's plant nirvana, and very difficult to stop that growth. The areas closest to the coast are more fertile, and you're almost certain to get very herbaceous tones. There can also be a lack of exposure to light as the canopies tend to be exuberant and there is little leaf removal here. That too can result in a herbaceous character.'

He is not convinced that wineries are simply pandering to a taste they have created. 'I'm not sure it's true that there's a strong consumer demand for this style. What happens is that many senior judges in New Zealand are Marlborough winemakers who reward the vegetal styles. Those wines win gold medals and trophies and are then sought out by supermarkets and other large buyers. It's a vicious circle and one I tried to break when I was chairman of the Air New Zealand competition by reducing the number of Marlborough judges.'

Those were the judges who had insisted to me that pronounced thiols and pyrazines were intrinsic to Marlborough Sauvignon, especially from cool sub-regions like Wairau and Awatere. It's true that

certain aromatic compounds are characteristic of Sauvignon Blanc: pyrazines, which give the vegetal and herbaceous aromas and flavours; and thiols, that give flavours such as passion fruit as well as less attractive sweaty aromas. Wine scientist Dr Jamie Goode notes that thiols tend to be far higher in Marlborough than in other spots where Sauvignon is grown, though he believes that almost ubiquitous machine-harvesting rather than site or climate may account for those levels. Winemaker Michiel Eradus notes machine-picking keeps the ➤

juice in contact with the skins, which increases pyrazine levels. The choice of certain cultivated yeasts might also contribute to the exaggerated herbals and exotic character of Marlborough wines.

Thiols and pyrazines

Not that Sancerre growers despise thiols. As Jean-Christophe Bourgeois says: 'Thiols can give optimal

aromas, and there is a 10-day window in Sancerre when those aromas are present. In Marlborough, where it's generally hotter, the window is only two to three days, and then the thiols are replaced by pyrazines. So it's much harder in New Zealand to preserve thiols. In Sancerre we get pyrazine aromas when the potential alcohol is 11% to 11.5%, but in New Zealand they get them at 13% to 13.5%. It's very sunny there so they get high sugars but less phenolic ripeness. That means they may need to wait for full ripeness which results in high alcohols.'

Some Marlborough growers are fully aware that pyrazine levels can be too high. Brian Bicknell of Mahi notes that most pyrazines lie on the skins. 'That's why we only use the free-run juice so as to minimise them.' Patrick Materman, winemaker for Pernod-Ricard who oversees the production of 30 different Sauvignons, confirms Dr Goode's view that machine-picking increases the volatile thiols.

The typical Marlborough combination of high acidity and green characters is often dealt with by stopping the fermentation and leaving residual sugar, or by adding grape juice or grape concentrate. Such methods are generally used only by large commercial wineries, but they are the ones with the greatest presence on export markets. This explains why certain wines exhibit both raucous acidity and a strange sweetness on the finish. Even in the very ripe, healthy 2013 vintage, most Marlborough Sauvignons have three to five grams

per litre of residual sugar, essentially to round out the wine and make it accessible very young, which is when these wines tend to be consumed.

Materman believes there are fewer vegetal, sweaty wines produced today than in the 1980s and '90s. 'That's because back then growers kept a

shaded canopy over the grapes, with limited direct exposure to sunlight, and picked too early as they were worried about botrytis. Today the grapes are riper and often picked later.' I think that is true and that there is less divergence between France and New Zealand than in the past. Nor would one want a wine world in which styles became standardised.

As the following recommendations make clear, Marlborough Sauvignon, in the right place and the right hands, can still be a magnificent wine. **D**

Stephen Brook has been a Decanter contributing editor for 18 years and is the author of more than 30 books



Above: since the 1980s, Sauvignon Blanc yields in the Loire have fallen from around 100hl/ha to a legal maximum of 63hl/ha. High yields inhibit ripening and exacerbate vegetal aromas



Photograph: Kevin Judd/Cephas

Above: some of the fruit for Greywacke's 2013 Sauvignon Blanc comes from the clay-loam slopes of Marlborough's Yarrum Vineyard

Taste the difference: Stephen Brook's top 22 wines to try

Pouilly-Fumé



Didier Dagueneau, Silex 2011 18.5 (95)
£61.60-£68 Genesis, Justerini & Brooks
Spicy, stylish nose. Rich and full-bodied, taut and firm, with great concentration, minerality, and length. **Drink** 2014-2020 **Alcohol** 12.5%

Château de Tracy 2012 18 (93)
£18-£21 Adnams, Hallgarten Druiitt, Jeroboams, Laytons, Lea & Sandeman, Majestic, Tanners, The Merchant Vintners
Ripe apricot nose. Rich and suave, spicy and lively, concentrated, some lees influence yet vigorous, bright and fresh. **Drink** 2014-2018 **Alc** 13%



Chatelain, Chailloux Silex 2010 17 (90)
£14.50 (2011) Montrachet
Delicate green pea nose. Creamy and full-bodied, with good weight of fruit and concentration. Some slight mineral austerity on the long finish. **Drink** 2014-2016 **Alc** 13.5%

Masson-Blondelet, Angelots 2012 17 (90)
£15.25 Stone, Vine, & Sun
Floral, smoky, citrus nose.

Full-bodied and compact, citrus and minerals. Spicy and quite long. **Drink** 2014-2016 **Alc** 13%

Sancerre



Alphonse Mellot, Génération XIX 2012 18 (93)
£32-£33.34 Laithwaite's, Millésima
Good attack, with old-vine concentration, a creamy texture, and long, very mineral finish. **Drink** 2014-2018 **Alc** 13%

Gérard Boulay, Clos de Beaujeu 2010 18 (93)
£28.50 Huntsworth
Firm grassy nose. Plump and full-bodied, concentrated and firm, showing restraint and good depth of fruit. Long, nutty finish. **Drink** 2014-2018 **Alc** 13%

Vincent Pinard, Harmonie 2010 18 (93)
£24.40 Justerini & Brooks
Very oaky nose. Dense, concentrated and still rather austere, this has grip and extract but needs time. Long. **Drink** 2014-2018 **Alc** 13.5%

Vacheron, Romains 2011 18 (93)
£33.50 H2Vin
Very ripe apricot nose, some citrus too. Full-bodied, creamy, and concentrated, this also has fine acidity and flinty precision.

Spicy and powerful, textured and long. **Drink** 2014-2018 **Alc** 13%



Bourgeois, Monts Damnés 2010 17.5 (91)
£18.95 Winedirect
Mouthwatering citric nose, very stylish and quite exotic too. Juicy and full-bodied, with fine acidity and delicious fruit. Fresh and lean, with, excellent balance and length. **Drink** 2014-2016 **Alc** 13.5%

Fouassier, Clos Paradis 2010 17.5 (91)
£15.98 (2010) Exel
Lively, grassy nose. Fresh but with old-vine concentration, taut and balanced. Long, grapefruity finish. **Drink** 2014-2017 **Alc** 13%

François Crochet, Exils 2011 17.5 (91)
£22.75 (2012) Corking Wines
Lightly smoky nose. Rich, broad, and full with spicy, tangy citrus fruit. This has drive and energy, good length, and a mineral finish. **Drink** 2014-2016 **Alc** 13%

Lucien Crochet, Cul de Beaujeu 2010 17.5 (91)
£23.40 Justerini & Brooks
Muted citrus and apple nose, with some oak. Firm, rich, oaky, spicy and taut, precise and delicious with fruit sweetness on the finish. **Drink** 2014-2018 **Alc** 13.5%

Daniel Chotard 2012 17 (90)
£16.50 Berry Bros & Rudd
Floral, appley nose. Mid-bodied, juicy and ripe, yet has finesse and balance, and a long tangy finish. **Drink** 2014-2017 **Alc** 13.5%

Menetou-Salon



Pellé, Morogues 2012 16.5 (88)
£14.95 H2Vin
Ripe grassy nose with gooseberry. Lively and concentrated, with good acidity that tails off a bit on the finish. Fine precision and typicity. **Drink** 2014-2016 **Alc** 13%

New Zealand

Dog Point Section 94, Marlborough 2010 18.5 (95)
£18.25-£25 Carruthers & Kent, Harvey Nichols, Hennings, Jeroboams, New Zealand House of Wine, Swig
Discreet ripe citrus nose. Flavours of very ripe grapefruit, intense and crystalline, its racy fruit a



very pure expression of Sauvignon. Very long. **Drink** 2014-2016 **Alc** 14%
Cloudy Bay, Te Koko, Marlborough 2011 18 (93)
£28-£33 Adnams, Harvey Nichols, Hedonism, Jeroboams

Ripe green apple nose, with discreet oak. Rich and suave, full-bodied and dense but has fine citric acidity. Elegant and long. **Drink** 2014-2018 **Alc** 13.5%



Clos Henri Marlborough 2011
17.5 (91)
£17.99 (2012) **AG Wines**
Delicate nose of green peas and passion fruit. Full bodied and weighty but balanced by fine acidity. Long lifted finish. **Drink** 2014-2016 **Alc** 14%



Craggy Range, Te Muna, Martinborough 2012
17.5 (91)
£13-£16.75 **Ann et Vin, Bon Coeur, Hailsham Cellars, Majestic**
Ripe, lemony nose, some tropical fruit. Good attack, juicy and vigorous; exotic with a tangy sweet 'n' sour tone. Fresh, balanced and long. **Drink** 2014-2016 **Alc** 13%

Greywacke, Marlborough 2013
17.5 (91)
£16.99 **widely available via UK agent Liberty Wines**
Aromas of cut grass and green peas, typical Marlborough but not vegetal. Fresh and crisp, with

precision and bite, and racy acidity. Poised, stylish, and bright, just lacks a little weight. **Drink** 2014-2016 **Alc** 13.5%



St Clair, Pioneer Block 18 Snap Block, Marlborough 2013
17.5 (91)
£16.99 (2012) **New Zealand House of Wine**
Firm gooseberry nose. Concentrated and full, this is a more powerful, compact style. Solid and long. **Drink** 2014-2016 **Alc** 13%



Mahi, Boundary Farm, Marlborough 2011 17 (90)
£17.95 **Carruthers & Kent, Roberson**
Muted grassy nose. Concentrated and solid – a ripe rather than herbaceous style, with good acidity on the finish. **Drink** 2014-2015 **Alc** 13.5%

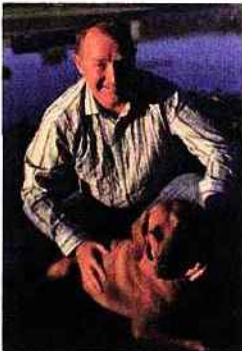
Brancott, Letter Series B, Marlborough 2013 16.5 (88)
£13.95 (2012) **Edgmond**
Delicate, herbaceous nose, but not vegetal. Crisp attack, but with good weight of fruit, Quite long, grapefruity finish. **Drink** 2014-2016 **Alc** 14%

For UK stockist details, see p94



‘We can follow our vines very closely in Sancerre, but in New Zealand they simply can’t monitor their larger vineyards as intensively’

Lionel Bourgeois (pictured above) makes wine in both Sancerre and Marlborough



Above: Steve Smith MW of Craggy Range doesn't agree that Marlborough Sauvignon producers are pandering to a taste they have created