

Chenin Blanc Makes an Audacious U.S. Return

Photo



Paumanok Vineyards, on Long Island, which has produced two versions of chenin blanc. Credit Gordon M. Grant for The New York Times

After 20 years in which the repertoire of American winemakers seemed to have dwindled to a half-dozen grapes, endlessly repeated, the last decade has been one of intrepid exploration. Myriad grapes once deemed unworthy or too esoteric have been rediscovered and revived by winemakers seeking to make fresh, lively wines that are simply delicious to drink nightly, rather than ponderous wines aiming for trophies.

Chenin blanc, the white grape of the central Loire Valley, is one of those grapes achieving new life in the United States. Once widely planted in California, it had largely disappeared from fine wine regions by 2000. In the last few years, though, at least a dozen California producers have started making chenin blancs, joining a handful who never stopped, along with producers in Oregon and New York.

Because of its great acidity, chenin blanc is a grape able to make wines bone dry or unctuously sweet yet fresh, with an entire spectrum in between. It has the ability to transparently display its place of origin, to age for decades and to tantalize not just with complex aromas and flavors but with a seemingly paradoxical texture that can be thick yet delicate, rich yet light.

Photo



Credit Gordon M. Grant for The New York Times

It used to be a staple in Napa Valley. Until 1996, Charles Krug, for one, used to make more than 100,000 cases a year of inexpensive, slightly sweet chenin blanc. Most of those Napa grapes were pulled in favor of sauvignon blanc and cabernet sauvignon, which offer a far better economic return. Americans still buy inexpensive sweet white wine, though, if it's called chardonnay.

When John Skupny, the proprietor of Lang & Reed Wine Company with his wife, Tracey, arrived in Napa in the early 1980s, chenin blanc was an important commodity. "In 1980 there were about 2,000 acres of chenin blanc in Napa Valley and 1,600 of chardonnay," he said. "Now, there's around 7,000 of chardonnay and 20 of chenin blanc." Many of those Napa acres belong to Chappellet, which seemingly alone in Napa has continued to make the wine.

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In the 1980s, Charles Massoud of Paumanok Vineyards on the North Fork of Long Island knew little of chenin blanc beyond the cheap jug wines of California, which he thought were flabby and uninteresting. When he bought a vineyard adjacent to his own containing three acres of chenin blanc in 1989, he planned to rip it out. But he didn't get around to it before the next growing season and ended up making a little wine, which he liked.

"What we found is that the Loire varieties are really at home here," he said. Now Paumanok has nine acres of chenin blanc, and Mr. Massoud's son Kareem, the winemaker, makes two versions. The main cuvée, which sells for about \$25, is made quickly to preserve its liveliness. It's fresh and exuberant with a savory maritime edge to it, but fairly simple. More interesting is a tiny lot of experimental minimalist chenin blanc, which received six months of aging in stainless steel barrels before it was released. The 2014 had a noticeably richer texture and livelier acidity, with flavors of honey, lemon and straw.

As of yet, nobody else is making chenin blanc on Long Island. But in California, the movement is accelerating.

When he's not at his day job as director of winemaking for Turley Wine Cellars, Tegan Passalacqua has made chenin blanc a centerpiece of his own label, [Sandlands](#), which seeks out classic California grapes from old vineyards. He makes an excellent, beautifully textured chenin blanc from old vines in Amador County, and has some old chenin blanc in his own Kirschenmann Vineyard in Lodi.

“Twenty producers have called me this year asking if I have any or know of any chenin in California for sale,” he said. “The problem is, many old vineyards do have some chenin planted but not enough for multiple producers.”

Photo



From left, Kareem Massoud, the winemaker for Paumanok; his brother Salim; his parents, Ursula and Charles; and his brother Nabeel. Credit Gordon M. Grant for The New York Times

One that does is Jurassic Park Vineyard in the Santa Ynez Valley of Santa Barbara County, where about 13 acres of chenin blanc were planted in 1982 on sandstone slopes in an area now adjacent to oil derricks and an industrial park. A half-dozen or so small producers buy chenin blanc from Jurassic Park, including Leo Steen, Habit, Birichino, Lo-Fi and Field Recordings. Of the few I've been able to find, I particularly like [Lo-Fi's](#)

2014, tangy and textured with lemon, honey and waxy lanolin flavors.

Not one of the new wave of chenin blanc producers has been making it as long as Leo Hansen, whose first release on his Leo Steen label was in 2006. Mr. Hansen, whose middle name is Steen (which happens to be the South African term for chenin blanc), was a sommelier from Denmark looking to get into winemaking in California. His reasons for focusing on chenin blanc were practical as well as aesthetic: He needed inexpensive grapes that could be produced and sold quickly, and he wanted a grape that would make a wine of generous acidity.

He found an eight-acre chenin blanc vineyard in Sonoma County whose grapes had been going to Korbel to make sparkling wine. The Saini family, which owns the vineyard, ripped out six acres and replaced them with chardonnay; the remainder it sells to Mr. Hansen, who makes an excellent version, dry with floral, citrus and honey flavors, which sells for about \$20.

The biggest obstacle to wider production of chenin blanc in California is a limited supply of grapes. About 6,000 acres are planted in the state, according to the California Grape Acreage Report, but the majority are in the Central Valley and are used for bulk wines. Still, producers are finding small blocks and looking forward to new plantings, though the economics of growing chenin blanc remain an obstacle.

“When talking to growers about planting some chenin vines, the common quote was, ‘I pulled that out 10 years ago, and I’m not going to plant it again!’ ” said [Chris Brockway of Broc Cellars](#) in Berkeley. Mr. Brockway found a vineyard in Solano County that had been abandoned for a decade before being purchased and resuscitated. He made a 2014 chenin blanc that is savory and herbal, with a lavender tang and the characteristically thick chenin texture. Sadly, he no longer has access to the grapes, but he expects to have new sources in the future.

Other producers are finding a way. Mr. Skupny of Lang & Reed has two small sources for chenin blanc, one in Mendocino and another in Napa, and he is committed to making small lots of each. Division, an Oregon producer, gets some chenin blanc from Washington State. It makes a delicate wine with a touch of sweetness, what the French

would call *sec tendre*.

Pascaline Lepeltier, the wine director at Rouge Tomate in New York and one of chenin blanc's foremost advocates, is impressed that Americans are taking the wine seriously. She said that making complex, age-worthy chenin blanc is a commitment that can take years. The right grapes must be planted in the right places, and the vines require enough age to make wines with the ability to age and evolve. She has her own chenin blanc project: a plan to plant a few vines in the Finger Lakes of New York in partnership with Bloomer Creek Vineyard.

"It's very different from the Loire," she said, "and very exciting."

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