

Muscadet's crus communaux

We're all familiar with the traditional Loire classic of Muscadet sur lie. But the real excitement in Muscadet today is to be found in its 'crus communaux' wines, which take the established practice of ageing a wine on its lees to new levels. A superior style of Muscadet has emerged from the top sites of this historic region

STORY BEVERLEY BLANNING MW

At the western edge of France, the vineyards of Muscadet cloak a verdant landscape of wandering cattle, low farm buildings and gentle slopes that descend to the cool and shady Loire tributaries of the Sèvre Nantaise and the Maine. This is one of the oldest

appellations in France, and it feels as if little has changed here in decades, if not centuries. But a gradual revolution has been taking place.

Growers with an eye to quality have quietly been working to obtain cru recognition for their top cuvées. These are wines grown in specific sites

and aged for years in cool, underground vats. The journey to achieving cru status has been long – and isn't over yet – but it is proving to be worth the wait. Muscadet, a wine historically known more for its ubiquity than its quality, has been reimagined as a modern classic. The cru wines are vibrant and food-friendly, low in alcohol, subtly complex and capable of effortless ageing. Fashioned from traditional winemaking techniques – and a lot of patience – this is the new Muscadet, and it's bang up to date.

Muscadet is the largest appellation in the Loire valley and, for the most part, it's always been a straightforward one: there is a single grape variety and a single style of wine, often aged over the winter on lees ('sur lie') before its release (see *muscadet.fr*). The light, dry, citrusy white reflects the irregular, cool weather of the vineyards' location close to France's northwest Atlantic coast. A popular match for local seafood, due to its fresh, saline drinkability and inexpensive price tag, it is the product of a grape that is the unique signature of the region: Melon B (see *box, p51*).

The Melon grape has never been fashionable or popular elsewhere, but its relatively neutral

'Fashioned from traditional winemaking techniques, this is the new Muscadet, and it's bang up to date'

character has its benefits. As François Robin of the Fédération des Vins de Nantes explains: 'Because Melon is not aromatically expressive, it has a greater tendency to transmit terroir.'

Naturally, terroir expression has been a key element in defining the newest addition to the Muscadet appellation. Permitted yields are lower for the cru wines, and they must age on their lees for an extended period typically ranging from 18 months to two or three years. Robin says the crus have brought a renewed sense of pride to Muscadet producers: 'Finally, we have confidence that we can make great wines with our own grape variety.'

LONGER ON LEES

The cru initiative came from a handful of growers in the village of Gorges in the late 1990s. They

Picking Melon B grapes at Domaine Luneau-Papin's La Butte de la Roche vineyard, near Nantes, Loire



decided to experiment by leaving their finished wines on lees for longer than the traditional sur lie period: years instead of months (see box, below). Soon, growers in the neighbouring villages of Clisson and Le Pallet were experimenting in the same way. They discovered that the three different terrains produced superior and distinct styles of wine and set about obtaining official recognition for this new style of Muscadet.

Undaunted by the glacial pace of French wine legislation, the growers persisted and finally achieved cru recognition for each in 2011.

Meanwhile, momentum was building among other groups of growers. In 2019, a further four crus were recognised, namely Goulaine, Monnières-St Fiacre, Château-Thébaud and Mouzillon-Tillières. Soon, La Haye-Fouassière, Vallet and Champtoceaux will join the group to bring the total up to 10.

For readers looking to find these wines, it is useful to note that there is no mention of 'sur lie' on the labels, which regular buyers of Muscadet might find confusing, since these are wines that are clearly defined by the influence of long lees ageing. This is where you need to forget everything you thought you already knew about Muscadet, and instead marvel at the French administrative genius in coming up with new rules that make no sense when applied. The mention of sur lie as part of the appellation on



Above from left: the Lieubeau family – Vincent, Chantal, François, Marie and Pierre

a Muscadet label can only be used for wines that have aged on their lees for between five and 14 months (ie, the traditional Muscadet sur lie category, which remains unchanged).

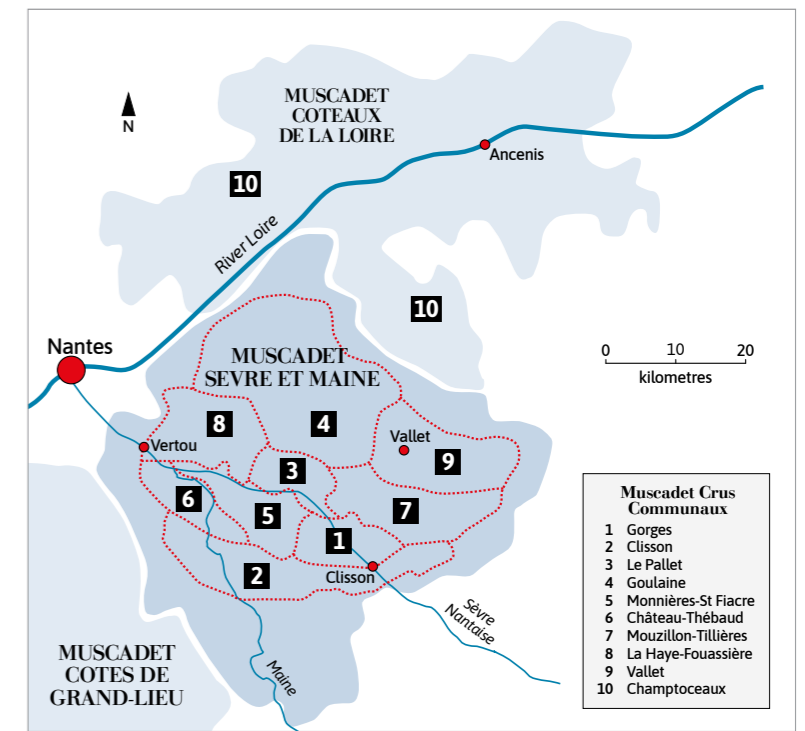
Any wine that has spent longer than 14 months ageing on lees (meaning any cru wine) is actually

prohibited from using the term sur lie. Crazy, but true – or, as one local winemaker succinctly put it: 'C'est très français.'

SOIL DIVERSITY

The Muscadet terrain is complex. Soils derive from an ancient bedrock formed by the breakdown of the enormous Hercynian mountain range that existed some 350 million years ago. Now known as the Massif Armoricaïn, it's home to the oldest soils in the Loire valley, and Muscadet winemakers are proud of the rocks that lie beneath their vines: granite, gabbro, amphibolite, serpentinite, orthogneiss... These are not your run-of-the-mill vineyard soils: some are so rare they are found in almost no other vineyards. Part of the lengthy process of defining the crus has been mapping these differences.

The Lieubeau family makes a range of cru wines from Clisson, Château-Thébaud and Goulaine. Brothers François and Vincent explain how the different terroirs affect the wines. Clisson comprises granite bedrock with sand on top – a free-draining, warm soil that typically gives wines with slightly higher alcohol than the other crus. Winemaker Vincent describes Clisson as 'the most approachable cru – fruity, sunny, spicy and bold'. In comparison, Château-Thébaud vineyards are more varied in terms of soil composition, but all are on slopes and have thin topsoil. This means the vines are subject to more water stress. Vincent says these wines are 'thinner, clearer, smoky, fresher and more mineral'. Their third cru, Goulaine, is easy, rich and citrusy, and a little less acid-driven



than the other two. Goulaine grapes come from a mild microclimate on a sandy hill surrounded by marshland. All of these wines are aged on lees for two to three years, and are a far cry from the everyday Muscadet to be gulped down with a plate of oysters.

Wines from the Gorges cru are known for being long-lived, austere and perhaps the most extreme of the crus in style, with razor-sharp acidity and precision. Asked how he would describe Gorges wines, Fred Lailier clenches his fist: 'They should be like gunflint.' Lailier, winemaker and owner of Domaine Brégeon, explains that the wines are born from a subsoil of gabbro, a dense, dark and impenetrable igneous rock. The topsoil, rich in clay, retains water easily, making this a much cooler growing environment for vines than next-door Clisson's warm, sandy granite. The grapes ripen later and have less of the easygoing fruitiness that typifies Clisson wines.

Lailier's approach to winemaking is strict. He aims for minimal intervention and tries to avoid excessive alcohol in his wines, shaking his head as he pours a 2018: '12.5% – it's too much.' Here, 12% is the norm. Lailier's wines show concentration and balance, shining fruit and laser-bright, saline acid.

VARYING TECHNIQUES

Because historically Muscadet has only been left on its lees over the winter following harvest, there is ongoing speculation over what constitutes an ideal ageing period for the crus. 'It's new for us all,' says Robin, 'and we are still learning.' But a few top producers have a longer history of making

Lees ageing: the key to quality in Muscadet

Lees are composed principally of dead yeast cells that sink to the bottom of the fermentation vessel once they have done their work in converting grape sugars to alcohol during winemaking.

Lees ageing is a valued winemaking technique, notably used in the context of barrel-fermented white Burgundy and Champagne. Leaving new wine in contact with its lees enhances richness of aroma and, especially, texture, which is often described as more rounded, mouthfilling, or mealy. When this ageing extends for several years, the lees begin to break down, leading to the yeasty complexity we associate most readily with Champagne.

During the ageing period, lees may be stirred into suspension periodically, a process known as batonnage. This can accentuate and accelerate the effects of the lees and use of the technique depends very much on the style a winemaker is seeking to achieve.

Wines with prolonged lees ageing have been shown to have higher levels of amino acids, something that has been linked with generating higher scores from critics. It is also suggested that the savoury, umami characters that come from lees ageing improve a wine's suitability for drinking with a wide range of foods.

Lees ageing is one of the keys to quality in AP Muscadet, but knowing how long a wine has been on lees is not always apparent from the label. Here is what you need to know:

Muscadet The basic AP appellation – no requirement for lees ageing. These wines may contain a small percentage of Chardonnay (all other Muscadet APs are 100% Melon B).

Muscadet Sèvre et Maine Accounting for about two-thirds of Muscadet wine produced, the vineyards are situated between the Sèvre Nantaise and Maine tributaries. No requirement for lees ageing.

Muscadet Sèvre et Maine + sur lie The wine must have aged on lees for between five and 14 months (but no longer).

Muscadet Sèvre et Maine + the name of one of the crus Each cru has its own minimum ageing requirements, meaning these wines can spend anything from 18 months to several years resting on their lees before bottling. Confusingly, use of the term 'sur lie' is actually prohibited for wines aged longer than 14 months on lees.

The crus communaux Clisson, Gorges, Le Pallet, Goulaine, Monnières-St Fiacre, Château-Thébaud and Mouzillon-Tillières have all been approved and are usually seen on the front label. Three other crus are in-waiting: La Haye-Fouassière, Vallet and Champtoceaux. Regardless of their current unofficial status, these names are also often seen on the label, because these wines have been produced already for a number of years as part of the ongoing process of achieving the cru recognition.

wines in this style. At Luneau-Papin, for example, Marie Luneau explains that the ageing period for high-end cuvée Excelsior (in Goulaine) was reduced from 36 months to 24 in 2012.

Another who has been experimenting for longer than most is Muscadet veteran Jo Landron, in La Haye-Fouassière. He has been identifying and vinifying individual parcels for years, leaving the wines on lees for long periods. His top cuvée, Le Fief du Breil, is a fine example of the potential and longevity of these wines. The grapes grow in what is now the cru of La Haye-Fouassière. He currently favours increasing the length of lees ageing for his more recent vintages, explaining: 'Lees have a physical action, softening bitter flavours, giving a rounder texture and revealing citrusy notes.' But he adds that some crus are better suited to long lees ageing than others, depending on the soil type.

It is likely his Fief du Breil will be labelled as a cru in future, although one gets the impression that for Landron it is all rather academic. As he points out: 'The individual lieu-dit sites were recognised long before anyone thought of having



Vincent Caillé

a cru system. I've been making wines like this for 30 years.'

Then there is the thorny question of what to do while the wine is ageing on its lees. While some winemakers (such as the Lieubeaus, see p49) stir the lees regularly, others prefer to leave well alone. Lailler reveals he never touches his wines during the lengthy maturation process, dismissing batonnage as 'useless and violent'. This might be an extreme view, but certainly there are other winemakers, such as Jérémie Huchet, who are unconvinced that batonnage works for their terroir and style: 'It erases the terroir,' he says.

At Domaine Le Fay d'Homme, biodynamic winegrower Vincent Caillé takes a more measured approach, born perhaps of his 35 years' experience. He varies the length of ageing and the amount of lees stirring according to the wine. He notes: 'Batonnage accelerates the ageing process because it brings oxygen to the wine.'

After tasting a selection of site-specific, lees-aged Muscadet wines from vintages dating back to 2001, there is no question in my mind that, despite their apparent delicacy, these are

PHOTOGRAPH BY MICK ROCK/CEPHAS MAP MAGGIE NELSON

The grape you really, really want. . .

There aren't many places in the world that can claim a grape variety that is truly its own, but Muscadet is one of them. The grape may have originally been brought from Burgundy, hence the historic name Melon de Bourgogne, but as readily as it was rejected by the Burgundians it was embraced by growers in the cooler vineyards around Nantes thanks to its valued resistance to winter chill. There are tiny pockets of the grape grown in cool locations

in the US and Canada today, but otherwise Melon means Muscadet and Muscadet means Melon.

As an aside, the Burgundians are not happy with the use of the word 'Bourgogne' anywhere outside Burgundy, so even though Melon de Bourgogne is the historical and commonly used name of the grape, the official name is Melon B. Yes, it's the Spice Girl grape. And in case you were wondering, the B stands for Blanc (definitely not Bourgogne).

wines with excellent potential to age. They retain their youthful freshness for far longer than one might imagine, gaining in complexity and interest for decades (if you can resist drinking them). Even better, many of the wines currently available to buy are already several years old, coming straight from the cool cellars of Muscadet.

The new Muscadet: Blanning's 10 crus communaux wines to try

① **Domaine de la Pépière, Château-Thébaud 2012** 95

£25.80 Kitchen & Vine

Everything about Domaine de la Pépière is so unprepossessing it comes as a bit of a shock that the wines are quite so glorious. This aged bottling is from a low-yielding vintage that concentrated the sugar and acidity in the wine – both are intense but balanced, and the wine has enough weight and texture to carry it off. Textured, long finish. Still fresh and quite fabulous. Organic. **Drink** 2022-2032 **Alc** 12%

② **Domaine Luneau-Papin, Excelsior 2014** 95

£29.99 (2015) Museum Wines

The flagship wine of this quality-focused domaine, from vines at the top of the slopes of the Butte de la Roche hill at the heart of the Goulaine cru. Marie Luneau describes the 2014 vintage as 'always elegant', and at seven years of age, the wine is really hitting its stride. A smoky, mineral nose precedes a tight, focused palate with savoury, juicy acidity and a rich, saline finish. Enormous concentration and length, amazing intensity. Now certified biodynamic, at this time the domaine was in conversion to organic viticulture. **Drink** 2022-2037 **Alc** 12%

③ **Les Bêtes Curieuses, Château-Thébaud 2014** 95

£17.50 Tanners

Les Bêtes Curieuses is a joint venture between talented winemakers Jérémie Huchet and Jérémie Mourat, the latter a winemaker in the coastal appellation of Fiefs-Vendéens. The pale colour of this wine gives little clue that it is already seven years old. A slightly creamy, buttery nose belies the vertical nature of the palate, which has linear acidity with layers of flavour slicing through. Silky textured, with a bit of grip and slight smokiness. Powerful, with a long, long, mineral finish. Delicious. **Drink** 2022-2042 **Alc** 12.5%

④ **Domaine Brégeon, Les Vigneaux Gorges 2015** 94

£28.50 The House Supply Co

Fred Lailler crafts his wines with an obsessive attention to quality: low-yielding, organic grapes from 65-year-old vines are handpicked and pressed within two hours to obtain the highest-quality juice. Fermentation is natural and additive-free. This is an extraordinarily focused wine, with pure, mineral concentration, tangy salinity and mouthwatering acidity. From the cool 2015 vintage, it has spent 53 months on lees

before bottling. Lailler recommends opening the wine at least 24 hours before drinking. **Drink** 2022-2037 **Alc** 12%

⑤ **Domaine Le Fay d'Homme, Monnières-St Fiacre 2018** 94

£27 Handford

From vines of 70 years' age minimum grown on gneiss soil, this has an expressive and inviting nose of apricots, pears and white flowers. The palate has gorgeous fruit

sweetness with a puckering acid drop balance that softens on the finish. Overall there is a light, almost aerial quality to this wine. Beautiful, light and delicate, this is a wine of great poise and finesse. Biodynamic. **Drink** 2022-2040 **Alc** 12%

⑥ **Jo Landron, Le Fief du Breil 2017** 94

£29.49 Buon Vino, Christopher Keiller, Les Caves de Pyrene, The Natural Wine Co

Jo Landron is still undecided whether 36 months is too long to leave his wines on lees, but based on this, the results are

fabulous. From the luminous golden hue to the long and powerful mineral finish, this is a gripping wine. Showing the characteristic smokiness of the site in La Haye-Fouassière, it has a firm backbone of fruity acidity and enormous concentration of flavour, but nothing is heavy or overdone. Savoury, saline and masterfully balanced. Biodynamic. **Drink** 2022-2032 **Alc** 12.5%

Domaine de la Pépière, Clisson 2014 93

£27.50 Kitchen & Vine

Rich and delicious. The expressive nose is leesy and mineral, the palate cream pie with fresh citrus, kiwi and touches of gooseberry. Despite this riot of flavour, nothing is overdone, and the wine gains in fullness in the mouth, leading to a peaches-and-cream finale. Easy to love. **Drink** 2022-2032 **Alc** 12%

Gadai Père & Fils, Plantation 1947 Monnières-St Fiacre 2016 93

£21.95 Champagnes & Chateaux

As the name suggests, this prime hectare of land in the Monnières-St Fiacre cru was planted in 1947 by Louis Gadai, founder of this family domain now in its fifth generation. The wine has aged for two years on lees. The inviting nose shows fabulous aromas including smoke and lemon; the palate is

juicy, long and ripe, with a vein of sweet citrusy acidity. Open and stylish, drinking beautifully now. **Drink** 2022-2032 **Alc** 12%

Domaine Le Fay d'Homme, Gorges 2018 90

£27 Handford

2018 was a warm and sunny year in Muscadet, and the effect of the vintage is reflected in this Gorges cru from Vincent Caillé. 25 months on lees and some lees stirring have amplified the richness of the vintage and accelerated the approachability of this most austere of the Muscadet crus. From vines at least 55 years of age, this is creamy and soft, with an easy balance and firm, supporting mineral backbone. Biodynamic. **Drink** 2022-2035 **Alc** 12%

Chéreau Carré, L'Orée du Château la Turmelière Château-Thébaud 2016 89

£13.95 The Wine Society

From one of the largest producers in the region, with 130ha devoted to growing Muscadet, this new cru wine is savoury, smoky and powerful, ready to drink now but with sufficient structure to keep. With nearly four years of ageing on lees before release, it shows lovely richness of flavour combined with tension and minerality. Firm, highly drinkable and terrific value. **Drink** 2022-2030 **Alc** 12.5% **D**

