

# A World Of Sauvignon Blanc

NO LONGER DELIMITED TO THE LOIRE VALLEY, FRANCE OR MARLBOROUGH, NEW ZEALAND, ALMOST THE ENTIRE WINE-WORLD IS NOW PRODUCING SAUVIGNON BLANC AND THE WHOLE WORLD IS WILLINGLY DRINKING IT. CURTIS MARSH COMES OUT OF THE CLOSET IN DEFENCE OF THIS GREATLY MALIGNED VARIETY.



O: TU

Since early Roman times, the wider popularity of grape varieties has been largely determined by its ability to travel or adapt to new environments and, above all, fashion. Achieving global mass-consumer appeal for any grape variety in this day and age has long been a very tight clique, namely Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon. This is largely due to the chameleon-like nature of these varieties, readily acclimatising to almost any habitat but also highly manipulative in the winery, if not formulaic, with oak and barrel ferment characters an overriding ingredient in achieving an almost universally accepted flavour profile and body or mouth-feel.

Sauvignon Blanc, on the other hand, has more in common with Riesling in the winery, and the less intervention in the winemaking process the better. That is not to say, throw it in the tank and leave it alone – precision temperature-controlled fermentation in stainless steel tanks is required with meticulous attention to detail (this includes minimal contact with skins to avoid any phenolic flavours, in contrast with Riesling where it can be desirable) and cleanliness are the key to preserving the vivacious, zingy freshness and naturally expressive perfume and fruit of Sauvignon Blanc. Yes, I can hear the Sauvignon Blanc buffs (perish the thought!) bleating, “What about barrel-ferment characters?” – the alluring nuances of extended lees contact (dead yeast cells) or batonage (stirring of the lees)? However, we must draw a line here between Bordeaux Blanc or Semillon Sauvignon Blanc blends (or the reverse and variations of), as opposed to Sauvignon Blanc on its own.

Whilst these winemaking techniques offer intriguing nuances/complexities for wines destined to age, sometimes ten years or more, for example Château La Louviere from Pessac-Léognan, benchmark Graves ([www.andrelurton.com](http://www.andrelurton.com)), I personally believe there is no place for oak (with an emphasis on new oak) with 100 percent Sauvignon Blanc wines. I would suggest those who are driving this fad are bored winemakers (make Chardonnay if you want it to taste like Chardonnay) and ambitious marketers trying to increase Sauvignon Blanc's status to the realms of Chardonnay (vis-a-vis white Burgundy) and employing the completely passé if not convoluted manoeuvre of 'reserve' wines which are invariably, over-priced.

I realise I am being a little blinkered, if not dictatorial in stylistic opinion and admittedly there will always be exceptions to the rule. For example, Gembrook Hill's Sauvignon Blanc ([www.gembrookhill.com.au](http://www.gembrookhill.com.au)), located in the highest altitudes of the Yarra Valley hills, in Australia's southern state of Victoria and arguably the best in the country, has a secret weapon. I say secret, because the labelling laws of Australia do not oblige Gembrook Hill to state the three to five percent (depending on the vintage) of Semillon included in the wine. The Semillon component is also barrel-fermented and due to its cool provenance, has cobalt, lemon-edged acidity that is a very useful blending component, along with a small portion of barrel-fermented Sauvignon Blanc however, must be viewed in

the context of a seasoning – a winemaker's pinch of pepper and salt in an otherwise predominantly Sauvignon Blanc ingredient. One should also not preclude those winemakers (mainly European) advocating or experimenting with relatively inert large oak barrels for extended ferments or maturation, much in the same vein as the aromatic varieties Riesling or Pinot Gris can benefit from the minute oxidation of these vessels, also lending a subtle viscous texture to the wine.

## Vine Management

In the vineyard, Sauvignon Blanc is generally a vigorous vine and requires much work in keeping the canopy and foliage under control. Contributing to its commercial viability and success, Sauvignon Blanc is a relatively generous cropper yet retains good flavours and balance at relatively higher yields than many other white varieties. That said, the window of ripening for Sauvignon Blanc is frustratingly small and requires vigilant scrutiny at vintage with a precariously fine line between picking either under-ripe or over-ripe. The key issue with ripeness is to achieve a level that avoids the unappealing cooked asparagus, green capsicum or overt-herbaceous characters of unripe Sauvignon Blanc. At the same time, not pushing the envelope too far, as over-ripeness can result in a tropical fruit-bomb that I liken to the syrupy juice in canned mixed fruit salad, sacrificing vital natural acidity with the wine displaying a flabbiness and leaving your mouth gluey and struggling to get through the first glass. On the subject of sweetness, residual sugars (RS) in Sauvignon Blanc can generally be linked with their commerciality (a notable exception being the idiosyncratic Didier Dagueneau in Pouilly-Fumé) with the industrial-sized New World producers obviously targeting a more gullible, brand-influenced palate, with five or six grammes per litre (RS g/l) not uncommon in the US and Marlborough, New Zealand. The more serious New World producers and most of the Old World tend to be much drier in style, somewhere around two or three (RS g/l) however there is also more importance placed on naturally high acidity with cooler-climate styles and wines from the Loire Valley and Austria often nudging a bracing seven grammes tartaric acidity (g/l T/A).

So, do all Sauvignon Blancs have a uniformity or sameness, no matter where they are from? Clearly not, and I would go even further to say that unadulterated Sauvignon Blanc (sans wood) can express its terroir, or more specifically, its geological footprint through distinctive minerality as much as any Riesling. Moreover, Sauvignon Blanc articulates its climatic influences loud and clear, generally favouring plenty of sunshine yet high-altitude cool evenings or coastal breezes. By all accounts, Sauvignon Blanc is still the world's most popular white grape variety and has been for more than a decade, dismissing any notion it is a passing trend. So why is it shunned by wine writers, the wine cognoscenti and even the terroir fanatics when it clearly performs admirably, has varietal integrity and can distinctly show a 'sense of place'? Sure, the ubiquitous adoration for Sauvignon Blanc does not have a long history and some would say it is largely based on the back of one wine – the people's front Sauvignon Blanc, Cloudy Bay. And yet this variety aptly represents the demands of contemporary lifestyle and the modern-day palate with its unashamedly and explicitly fruity, zesty crowd-pleasing style. Incidentally, apart from the Muscat family, Sauvignon Blanc is the only grape variety that actually tastes like a grape in the finished wine.



It has also polarised the term 'cult wine', having nothing to do with exclusivity or intellect; to the contrary, its magnetism was based on being the consummate social lubricant acceptable and approachable in price and style to all. Surely this is a good thing, unless you're a complete and utter wine snob. I have never encountered any wine geeks, or writers for that matter, waffling on about Sauvignon Blanc clones, but that could be about to change with the first ever World Sauvignon Blanc Congress being held (26 to 29 August, 2008) in the city of Graz, Styria (Steiermark), Austria's Sauvignon Blanc epicentre. And before you dismiss this event as fanciful, visit their website, [www.worldsauvignon.com](http://www.worldsauvignon.com), and observe the internationally diverse and high profile presenters. Furthermore, for those scoffing at the notion that Austria produces Sauvignon Blanc of merit, two years ago I took part in a blind tasting of 50 Sauvignon Blanc's from around the world. Held in Vienna coinciding with VieVinum, Austria's international crowd-pulling wine show, fine and rare wine merchant Jan-Erik Paulson had assembled a tasting jury comprising 53 wine journalists from 27 countries, assuring the results would attract widespread attention. Indeed, it was like a United Nations gathering of the wine writing fraternity. Equally impressive was the international line-up of wines including benchmark producers Cloudy Bay (New Zealand), Saint Clair (New Zealand), Vergelegen (South Africa), De Bortoli (Australia), Chateau Margaux (France), Baron de 'L', (France) Henri Bourgeois (France), Didier Dagueneau (France). The outcome was demonstrative, with the panel's highest averaged score going to Burgenland vintner Andi Kollwentz and out of the highest scoring ten current vintage wines, five came from Austria. For the record, my own preferences or three highest scoring wines all came from Austria, with Weingut Nigl from Krems my clear winner. "A stunning wine, Sancerre I think?" my notes read, "Nicely perfumed, ripe pears, fresh figs, grapefruit, citrusy palate, racy, powerful with bite of lemon acidity and incredible length" ([www.weingutnigl.at](http://www.weingutnigl.at)). Incidentally, the 2007 Nigl was also the top wine in our panel tasting of Sauvignon Blancs for this issue, indicating the quality and style of this wine is irrefutable. For more on Austrian wines, visit [www.winesfromaustria.com](http://www.winesfromaustria.com).

## Sauvignon Blanc Across The Globe

Many anomalies or malining of Sauvignon Blanc's image exists throughout the world wine stage though, particularly in Asia where white wines already start with a handicap and Sauvignon Blanc producing regions do not have the luxury 'X' factor with even white Bordeaux excommunicated from the shrine of celebrated French Châteaux. Take for example Chile, and the general impression in Asia that most Chilean wines are cheap bait for consumers on overpriced restaurant wine lists. Yet in London, arguably the most mature and sophisticated wine marketplace in world, wine drinkers are taking a bath in Chilean Sauvignon Blanc. The fact is, the quality of Chilean Sauvignon Blanc has been improving for some time now with exciting new coastal regions and valleys enjoying the cooling influence of the Pacific Ocean against the dramatic backdrop and heat tempering effect of the Andes Mountains. Beyond the dependable ground of Casablanca Valley, the Elqui Valley, 520km to the north of Santiago, Chile's northernmost wine estate; the excellent Vina Falernia produces the Sauvignon Blanc bargain of the world ([www.falernia.com](http://www.falernia.com)). Also, the San Antonio Valley, only a decade young with a handful of boutique wineries is already producing some of Chile's most exceptional Sauvignon Blanc, evidence Amayna winery ([www.vgs.cl](http://www.vgs.cl)), capturing the attention and praise of wine writers and consumers worldwide.

Then there's South Africa which, for reasons unexplainable, is still not on wine aficionados' radars yet clearly positioned to be the next 'big thing', perhaps unseating Spain. Just recently, Jancis Robinson MW broached the topic in her column in the *Financial Times* in March 2008 with much praise for South African wine and in particular white wines, highlighting she had scored five Sauvignon Blanc 17 points, "an impressive total". There is a lot of South African wine floating about Asia however, much of it is cheap and not so cheerful thanks to erroneous wine importers. However, look out for dynamic producers like Boekenhoutskloof, Cape Point Vineyards, Mulderbosch or Vergelegen as fine examples of New World Sauvignon Blanc.

I can understand why Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc pushes all the right buttons in the mass-market, effortlessly churning out a crowd-pleasing style with succulent stone-fruit and tropical melange with zingy acidities balancing out commercially palatable residual sugars. And with New Zealand's enviable long, dry radiant autumns and super-cool night temperatures of the southern extremities, they do not get bad vintages in Marlborough. For those who feel there is an element of predictability in Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc, yes it is consistently first-rate, the perfect example of a grape variety finding Utopia and far from becoming passé; move over Cloudy Bay, here comes O:TU (abbreviation for Otuwhero, pronounced 'oar-two-fare-raw' in the Maori language). This is Marlborough's newest player yet already trailblazing around the globe ([www.otuwine.com](http://www.otuwine.com)). It hails from the relatively new sub-region of Awatere Valley, which has imparted new impetus on an established regional style adding a distinctive minerality, augmented by pronounced, refreshing natural acidity and a discernible elegance (Sancerre meets Cloudy Bay). The climate here is marginally warmer and notably drier than the Marlborough's main Wairau Valley, coupled with the mountain-oceanic airflow tempering the hot sunny days with a longer, cooler growing season finishing about three weeks later than the rest of the region.

Speaking of cool-climate images, across the Tasman Sea, Australia has the dilemma of the whole world identifying it with sunshine, sandy beaches and relaxed lifestyle (the Antipodean Mediterranean), notwithstanding heatwaves and droughts. Yet in actuality, there exists truly cool-climates, in viticultural terms, in the southern extremities of the country with Sauvignon Blanc performing admirably in many parts in the State of Victoria — namely Yarra Valley, King Valley, Pyrenees, Strathbogie Ranges, and in the Western Australia regions of Margaret River, Pemberton, Manjimup and Great Southern. The island of Tasmania has more in common with the climate of New Zealand and equally diverse terroirs, however, Sauvignon Blanc has not assimilated as well as one would expect with the Alsace and Burgundy varieties performing much better and is seen as Australia's stronghold of Sparkling wine in quality terms. Other Australian regions rely on elevation, altitude tantamount to





cool- climate viticulture and the vineyards of the Adelaide Hills and Mount Lofty Ranges, arguably the stronghold of Australian Sauvignon Blanc, rising 400 to 600 meters above sea level. The ripening season is long here, with radiant autumn days bringing the grapes to ideal ripeness, tempered by ultra-cool evenings, almost snap-freezing in the flavours and maintaining the pivotal naturally high acidities, the benchmark being the iconic Shaw and Smith from the Adelaide Hills ([www.shawandsmith.com](http://www.shawandsmith.com)) and the equal of any Marlborough wine for computation. The reality though, with Australian Sauvignon Blanc, and the equally refreshing and palatable Semillon Sauvignon Blanc blend more associated with Western Australia, is that it is almost entirely drunk onshore with hardly enough wine to keep up with local demand, little lone export. I suspect the US has a similar problem to Australia, which has a myriad of Sauvignon Blanc producers and diverse regional styles, but they don't really care much for the international market because they too are drinking it all there.

There is no question in my mind that Sauvignon Blanc reaches its pinnacle in the Loire Valley communes of Sancerre and Pouilly-Fumé and you will not find a more transparent style of the terroir with its expressive chalky and flinty-minerally characters and an ethereal leanness, coiled poise and unmatched intensity of exhilarating acidity and concentration of citrus flavours. Both the Henri Bourgeois ([www.bourgeois-sancerre.com](http://www.bourgeois-sancerre.com)) and Alphonse Mellot ([www.mellot.com](http://www.mellot.com)) wines in our tasting are evidence of this. However, consumers should also look towards the lesser-known Loire Valley Appellations of Quincy, Menetou-Salon, or Touraine (Sauvignon Touraine) for there are countless excellent wines at very reasonable prices. Likewise the Appellation of Saint Bris, or Sauvignon Saint Bris as it is known, is of equal merit with plenty of value wines to be had.

As a final word... Yes, I have bagged Sauvignon Blanc in the past, my excuse probably the same as other wine nuts, not wanting to appear unknowledgeable or uncool, but perhaps as I get older and less image-conscious or opinionated (yet, remaining recalcitrant), I am beginning appreciate wine that suits my mood, even before considering the food. The fact is, in the Asian climate and with its varied styles of cuisine, Sauvignon Blanc is becoming entrenched in my mind-set. CM

New Zealander Curtis Marsh is known to many as 'The Wandering Palate' who believes that a meal without wine could only be breakfast! To read more of Marsh's wine and travel articles, click on to [www.thewanderingpalate.com](http://www.thewanderingpalate.com), where he shares a selection of his many journalistic exploits.



**2007 Otuwhero Estates, O:TU** Excellent Price-Quality Rapport  
**Awatere Valley, Marlborough, New Zealand** [www.otuwine.com](http://www.otuwine.com)

Vineyard Direct

"Lively fragrance of grapes, kiwi fruit, guava, with a background of zesty lemon-lime and ginger amongst flinty minerals. Tangy palate entry bristling with a charge of lemon then fleshing out with mouth-watering juiciness, building to sweeter guava and ripe pear checked by edgy acidity. Elegant, crisp and racy frame, tantalisingly vivacious." Curtis Marsh



**2006 Domaine Alphonse-Mellot La Moussière Blanc**  
**Sancerre, Loire Valley, France** [www.mellot.com](http://www.mellot.com)

Taste Fine Wine Merchant

S\$61.00 (Retail)

"This had a nose of sweet perfume and custard apple, with some powerful citrus notes lurking behind; also spicy with apricot conserve. It had an awesome palate entry – concentrated with an explosion of lime and grapefruit – and richness in the mid-palate. It had some barrel ferment characters and was very impressive. There was great length on the finish and is made in a style that will age." Curtis Marsh



**2007 Amayna Sauvignon Blanc**  
**Leyda Valley, Santiago, Chile** [www.amayna.cl](http://www.amayna.cl)

Vineyard Direct

"The colour was a light gold. I found this wine interesting on the bouquet, with quite a bit more complexity than the others; probably due to the fact that it had more than just primary fruit characters. It had good varietal fruit in the mid-palate but I marked the wine down because I thought the finish was a little bit coarse and clumpy." Ian Cochran



**2007 Viña Falernia Sauvignon Blanc Reserva**  
**Elqui Valley, Santiago, Chile** [www.falernia.com](http://www.falernia.com)

Vineyard Direct

"On the nose, there were lovely hints of mineral and chalk, some oakiness with a bit of rose petals. I didn't like the watery mid-palate but overall it had a nice balance. I thought this was classic New World Sauvignon Blanc and I liked it for being what one would expect of this style of wine." Nicola Lee



**2007 Fairview Sauvignon Blanc**  
**Paarl, Coastal Region, South Africa** [www.fairview.co.za](http://www.fairview.co.za)

The Wine Company

S\$30.00

"A lemongrass-style. In one short phrase, I'd probably call it a watered-down Cloudy Bay. New World Sauvignon Blancs seem to be either on the Cloudy Bay side or the other side. That's Life." Lee How Sheng



**2005 Angelo Gaja Alteni De Brassica**  
**Langhe, Piedmonte, Italy**

Cellarmaster Wines Singapore

S\$89.00 (approx)

"This was quite a good wine. The nose was a bit closed at first but it opened up with floral notes and a flinty, mineral background. Seems to have a bit more Semillon than Sauvignon Blanc characteristics." Lee How Sheng



**2006 Gembrook Hill Vineyard, Yarra Valley Sauvignon Blanc**  
**Yarra Valley, Victoria, Australia** [www.gembrookhill.com.au](http://www.gembrookhill.com.au)

Vineyard Direct

"A pale gold in colour, with a musky nose and exotic bouquet that was very big and full. On the palate it was full-flavoured and of a richer style." Ian Cochran



Best Value Wine Of The Tasting  
Excellent Price-Quality Rapport

### 2007 Shaw & Smith Sauvignon Blanc

Adelaide Hills, South Australia [www.shawandsmith.com](http://www.shawandsmith.com)

Culina Pte Ltd S\$37.00

"The colour was youthful, pale and light. The nose showed a little bit of sweet pears and sweet citrus fruits but the freshness was still there. On the palate it was fresh and round with very good fruit flavours; a very pleasurable wine." Lim Hwee Peng



Best Wine Of The Tasting

### 2007 Weingut Nigl Sauvignon Blanc

Krems, Austria [www.weingutnigl.at](http://www.weingutnigl.at)

Vineyard Direct

"Excellent presence on the nose with sweet perfume, pronounced grapefruit, squeezed rocks and lots of flinty notes. It had a mouth-watering palate entry that was tangy, vibrant and concentrated with excellent persistence. It had wonderful length; and was chalky and minerally with an endlessly dry and tangy finish. It was racy; a textbook Sancerre-style Sauvignon Blanc and my best wine of the tasting." Curtis Marsh



### 2006 Henri Bourgeois Pouilly-Fumé

Pouilly-Fumé, Loire Valley, France [www.bourgeois-sancerre.com](http://www.bourgeois-sancerre.com)

Vineyard Direct

"I liked this wine. It had a green, grassy nose, and was obviously a cold weather sort of Sauvignon Blanc. On the palate there were lime and peppery notes, and umami in the late palate with zesty minerals. The fruits were elegant, complex and interesting. The alcohol was fairly high, but not burning." Dr Lee Hui Ling



### 2006 Château La Louvière Blanc

Pessac-Léognan, Bordeaux, France [www.andrelurton.com](http://www.andrelurton.com)

Vineyard Direct

"On the nose you get a greenish, acidic overlay on top of the buttery, oaky, vanilla notes. On the palate, it had very clean acids and a good mineral background. Quite a complex wine, I would say." Lee How Sheng



### 2006 Weingut Lackner-Tinnacher Sauvignon Blanc

Styria, Austria [www.tinnacher.at](http://www.tinnacher.at)

Vineyard Direct

"I liked the wine's very clean, sweet nose. It was more floral than sweet for me and even the palate the floral notes followed through with rose, ice cream soda and umami. There was a good acid balance. I found it complex and elegant; and a cold weather climate wine." Dr Lee Hui Ling



### 2006 Riposte Sauvignon Blanc

Adelaide Hills, South Australia

Angel's Share S\$35.00

"On the nose, this reminded me of an Alsace Pinot Gris. The difference was on the palate; this Sauvignon Blanc showed more guava and distinctiveness. Also, the acidity came though well." Lim Hwee Peng



### 2005 Te Mata Cape Crest Sauvignon Blanc

Hawkes Bay, New Zealand [www.temata.co.nz](http://www.temata.co.nz)

Culina Pte Ltd S\$59.00

"I found the wine had a nice austere nose. There was a lovely entry, good balance and good complexity. Overall, it was a very stylish and well-made wine." Nicola Lee



## Tasting & Rating Guide

- ★★★★★ **Extraordinary** (96 to 100 points)  
A benchmark wine of its region, variety and style; sublime in complexity and structure; a must-have wine.
- ★★★★ **Outstanding** (90 to 95 points)  
An outstanding wine of admirable quality; true to regional and varietal style; highly recommended.
- ★★★ **Very Good** (85 to 89 points)  
Correct in regional and varietal characters; recommend trying.
- ★★ **Good** (79 to 84 points)  
A pleasurable but straightforward wine.
- ★ **Average** (74 to 78 points)  
A simple wine with no faults, but no real appeal.
- Additional Categories**
- Panel's best wine of the tasting
  - Best value wine of the tasting
  - Excellent price-quality rapport
- Vision: 10 points • Nose: 25 points •  
Palate: 35 points • Structure & Complexity: 30 points • Total: 100 points

## OUR PANELISTS

Dr N K Yong	(Wine Consultant, World Gourmet Summit)
Curtis Marsh	(Contributing Wine Editor, CW Asia)
Dr Lee Hui Ling	(Member of Commanderie de Bordeaux, Confrerie de Tastevin, IWFS Tanglin Branch)
Ian Cochran	(Member of Commanderie de Bordeaux, Confrerie de Tastevin, IWFS Tanglin Branch)
Lee How Sheng	(Member of Commanderie de Bordeaux, Confrerie de Tastevin, IWFS Tanglin Branch)
Lim Hwee Peng	(Wine Educator & Writer)
Nicola Lee	(Member of Commanderie de Bordeaux, Confrerie de Tastevin, IWFS Tanglin Branch)

CW Asia tastings are arranged in varietal, regional or stylistic themes and are conducted blind using the 100 point scoring system, judged in accordance to style and regional context. The panel scores are then calibrated to our star ratings placing a wine in a category or range of points with the view this is both ethical and provides a clear indication of the wines quality accordingly to our panels assessment. We also place a great deal of importance on price/quality rapport, acknowledging this is subjective however, wanting to highlight if a wine is over-delivering at its price point. A discussion and unveiling of each wine follows as ultimately our goal is to encourage and train sommeliers and wine or hospitality industry professionals. In this regard we invite promising talent and enthusiasts to participate, as it is our hope that the exposure to the wines and discussion will lead them to achieve greater heights. This tasting was held at Angel's Share.

## Distributor List

Angel's Share  
Tel: (65) 6479 1033

Cellarmaster Wines Singapore  
Tel: (65) 6270 8135

Culina Pte Ltd  
Tel: (65) 6474 3931

Taste Fine Wine Merchant  
Tel: (65) 6299 6300

The Wine Company  
Tel: (65) 6479 9341

Vineyard direct samples were airfreighted specifically for this tasting. Asian trade and consumer enquiries are welcome via the web addresses listed. Special thanks to the Austrian Wine Marketing Board.