

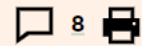
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## The Sancerre success story

How the tiny, friendly French region became a global sensation



Jancis Robinson 15 HOURS AGO



Unlike most wine producers, who are seeking customers for their wines, the 285 vigneronns of Sancerre have been much more likely to be seeking enough wine to meet demand.

Sancerre, roughly halfway along the Loire, is in the enviable position of easily finding a place on wine lists all over the world and exports almost 70 per cent of its wine. It has a wonderfully pronounceable and memorable name, unlike Pouilly-Fumé, the similar Sauvignon Blanc grown across the river on the flatter, sandier land around Pouilly-sur-Loire.

Sancerre also benefits from being seen as the classical inspiration for the upstart New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc, which is enjoying such popularity that the US imported more wine from tiny New Zealand last year than from either Australia or Spain. Today, almost 40 per cent of all Sancerre exports go to the US.

So ubiquitous is Sancerre in the world of wine that it can be seen to be “boring”, as a leading wine-minded London restaurateur put it to me.

But real energy is evident in the villages slotted into the folds of Sancerre's rolling hillsides. This month I spent a couple of nights in the hilltop town of Sancerre for the first time in a shameful number of decades. I'd forgotten how small the town and wine region are. For comparison, a single New Zealand producer, Delegat's of Oyster Bay fame, owns more vineyard than Sancerre's total 3,000ha. Virtually every available hectare within the French appellation is already planted with either Sauvignon Blanc or the grape responsible for the region's pink and red wines, fashionable Pinot Noir.

Luc Prieur of Domaine Paul Prieur told me that one hectare of planted Sancerre vineyard was probably worth about €250,000 "but there's nothing available for sale. We don't have the mentality to want to sell to become rich."

This little region of family farmers has a single co-op and a handful of growers who also buy in grapes from their neighbours, but there is no destabilising foreign or big company ownership, just a handful of acquisitions by outfits based downriver in Anjou-Touraine. I was assured by Arnaud Bourgeois, one of Sancerre's most energetic grower-merchants, who has even established Clos Henri winery in New Zealand, that this is a particularly friendly region — unlike Burgundy, he added, where he, like so many Sancerre growers, did his formal wine studies. During the Fête de St-Vincent in January, they all taste each others' wines and, according to Bourgeois, "If someone has a health problem, their neighbour won't hesitate to prune their vines for them."

Sancerre may have enjoyed commercial success but doesn't seem complacent. Sicavac, the technical arm of the generic wine growers association, has played a key role in its evolution. When agronomist François Dal arrived to lead it in 2002, he was asked to develop plant material more varied and interesting than the clones of Sauvignon Blanc on which growers then depended, so he set about painstakingly collecting and propagating more than 200 cuttings from pre-clonal-era vines to achieve what is known by growers as "massal selection" vines, which can yield much more interesting wine than any clone.

He has since performed the same feat for the Pinot Noir vines that constitute about 18 per cent of Sancerre's total, an even more valuable job as there were relatively few clones of this important variety. Next year will see the first harvest.

Dal was brought up on a farm in northern France and originally wanted to work in forestry. In Rennes, Brittany, he discovered the wines of Bordeaux and decided that vines, which yield something every year rather than every century or so, might be more interesting. He was offered a job in Champagne but decided that would be a bit boring (that word again) so applied for the Sicavac job instead. "I'm very happy here," he told me, "because it's a family. The people are cool."

Sauvignon Blanc is unfortunately particularly prone to vine trunk diseases such as esca. All over the region, mature vineyards are dotted with young vines guarded by the tubes that protect them from rabbits and the like because so many vines have succumbed and have had to be replaced. Soon after he arrived, Dal developed his own pruning technique to minimise esca's ravages and has since managed to control them.

The Sicavac team is responsible not just for Sancerre where they are based but for all of the vineyards that make up what is known as Centre-Loire, so also Pouilly-Fumé, Menetou-Salon, Quincy, Reuilly and Coteaux du Giennois (all Sauvignon-dominant); the newish Gamay-led appellation Châteaumeillant; plus two new little appellations-in-waiting Coteaux de Tannay and Côtes de la Charité (both are in the less prestigious category of IGPs — Indication géographique protégée).

Sicavac has been hugely helpful in Centre-Loire's decision to do away with agrochemicals. The aim, as in Bordeaux, is to have all vineyards anointed with one of the 20-odd official certifications of eco-virtue by 2030. By the end of last year they had got to 65 per cent, of which about two-fifths are certified either organic or biodynamic, or in conversion towards that goal. The impetus is not just saving the planet, but the fact that many of the pesticides and fungicides once used are being banned.

Of most interest to wine lovers, however, is the progress of the wines from dependable to exciting. There are now far more single-vineyard wines, typically demonstrating the differences between Sancerre's three most important soil types: the white clay-limestone terres blanches; pebbly caillottes; and silex, or flint. Most self-respecting growers are now aiming to make serious white wines that will age, even though Sauvignon Blanc is generally associated with early-drinking wines. But then, as Luc Prieur pointed out to me, "Terroir is more important than grape here. We could even switch to another grape. I'd love to plant Chenin Blanc, for instance."

He is in the vanguard of the red wine revolution in Sancerre, the proud owner of an unusually extensive five-hectare massal selection 60-year-old Pinot Noir vineyard. Sancerre Rouge used to be a pale, skinny thing found mainly in Paris wine bars but thanks to warmer summers (in which August harvests are becoming more common), the best examples can rival much more expensive red burgundy and they are already sought-after on export markets. The fact that so many vigneronns are trained in Burgundy has seen them come back home determined to make their own fine reds from the Pinot Noir grape.

Sancerre and Pouilly-Fumé are so established that they carry a price premium, but there are some excellent growers in Menetou-Salon, Quincy and Reuilly who can offer very similar wines, albeit from slightly different soils, at very attractive prices.

## Some superior Centre-Loire wines

I would like to have recommended many more but they seem easier to find in the US than the UK

### WHITES

- **Dom Philippe Rimbault 2022 Coteaux du Giennois (13.5%)**  
£15.95 Whitebridge
- **Dom Pellé, Morogues 2022 Menetou-Salon (13%)**  
£16 Wine Society, £18.79 Vinatis and many others
- **Dom des Patureaux Organic 2022 Pouilly-Fumé (13.5%)**  
£19.99 Majestic (sold elsewhere under the name Domaine Tabordet)
- **Dom Serge Laloue, Cuvée Silex 2022 Sancerre (13%)**  
£24 The Wine Society
- **Dom Pellé, Les Blanchais 2020 Menetou-Salon (13%)**  
£24 Terra Wines
- **Dom Paul Prieur, Pieuchaud Silex 2022 Sancerre (13%)**  
£35 Huntsworth Wine
- **Dom Paul Prieur, Les Monts Damnés 2022 Sancerre (13%)**  
£38.50 Huntsworth Wine, £41 The Good Wine Shop, £42.49 The Wine Library

REDS

- **Dom Pellé, Le Carroir 2021 Menetou-Salon (13%)**  
£24.29 All About Wine (sold in cases of 6 or more), £32.95 Mill Hill Wines
- **Dom Lucien Crochet, Cuvée Prestige 2016 Sancerre (13.5%)**  
£460 for six magnums Millésima UK

*Tasting notes, scores and suggested drink dates on Purple Pages of [JancisRobinson.com](https://www.jancisrobinson.com). International stockists on [Wine-searcher.com](https://www.wine-searcher.com)*