



LE JARDIN

by Michael Pinkus

The Loire Valley, known as the Jardin de la France because of its abundance of vineyards, orchards and fields of fruits and vegetables, is one of those wine regions that doesn't immediately come to mind.

As much as I'd like to tell you it's one of the most popular regions in France, I can't ... but I would bet you drank a wine from one of its mainstay grapes at least once this summer — and I'll bet you another guinea or two that it's from the place that made it even more famous: New Zealand. By now I'm sure you've figured it out, the main grape in this region is Sauvignon Blanc; but that's not the only thing they grow. In fact, the big three are all white (not surprising considering its northern situation). Along with Sauvignon Blanc, you'll find Chenin Blanc and Melon de Bourgogne also flourishing in these soils as well as some minor red production using Cabernet Franc, Gamay and Pinot Noir.

The appellations are almost household names too — or at least, are very familiar to wine lovers. Running east to west, they are Muscadet, Anjou, Saumur, Chinon, Vouvray, Touraine, Sancerre and Pouilly-Fumé just to name a small handful ... 87 appellations in all.

A couple of things you may not know are that the Loire is second (in France) only to Champagne for sparkling wine production. Here they call it Crémant de Loire. The history of winemaking in this region dates back to the first century — that's a mighty long time to be fermenting grapes continuously.

The Crémant designation is given to any sparkling made in the Loire that is made in the traditional method no matter the appellation — while the label of Vin de Pays du Jardin de la France refers to any varietal vinified outside its designated AOC regions' regulations (e.g. Chardonnay is grown and may be used, but is not a recognized variety of the appellation).

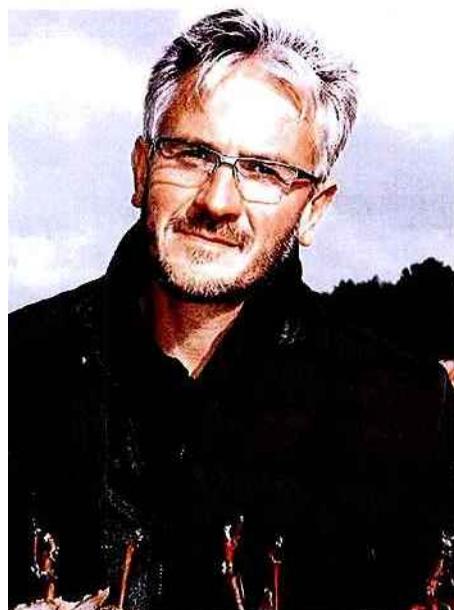
The region itself can be divided into three main parts: the Upper Valley, where Sancerre and Pouilly-Fumé exist, is Sauvignon Blanc dominated; the Middle Valley, where Chinon and Vouvray are located, have both Chenin Blanc and Cabernet Franc being pressed; and the Lower Loire is made famous by the Muscadet appellation, where Melon de Bourgogne is king.

The Valley has in excess of 185,000 acres of planted vineyards, and because it is in a marginal climate zone for grape growing, has similarities to many northern regions of Canada, such as the struggle to achieve minimum sugar levels. It is able to do this because the Loire River acts in much the same manner as the Great Lakes, providing protection to the regions' vineyards and keeping the temperature a few degrees warmer than in the surrounding areas. Areas both north and south of the Loire can't sustain vineyards.

But enough about what makes the region able to grow the building blocks of delicious wines. Let's look at the finished product — from the red and whites to those with bubbles.



01 Thibault Roger, the wine-maker at Jean-Max Roger;
02 The soil in and around the Loire Valley is varied — from chalk to marl and gravel;
03 Thierry Delaunay from Domaine Joël Delaunay in AOC Touraine



DOMAINE BELLEVUE TOURAINE SAUVIGNON BLANC 2012 (\$13.95)

This wine sits in the anti-New Zealand camp of Sauvignon Blanc with sweet grass, grapefruit pulp and some peach nuances to round it all out, but every thing here is subtle.

CLOS LES MONTYS VIEILLES VIGNES MUSCADET SEVRE & MAINE SUR LIE 2013 (\$14.95)

Hay and quince with a touch of mineral backing it all up, pretty smooth across the tongue with a nice lime zest on the finish. Perfect accompaniment for mussels.

PASCAL JOLIVET SANCERRE 2013 (\$29.95)

Sweet grass and grapefruit dominate this Sancerre with lovely hints of floral that keep swinging in for added depth.

JEAN-MAX ROGER CUVÉE LES CHANTE-ALOUETTES POUILLY-FUMÉ 2013 (\$28.95)

Nice complexity with mineral taking charge of the herbal and lemon pith; this wine just keeps on giving especially on the long finish; not sure if I'd want to pair it with anything except a sunny afternoon – it's just that good.

ROGER CHAMPAULT LES PIERRIS SANCERRE ROUGE 2013 (\$23.95)

Gentle yet inviting on the nose with smoky-raspberry notes. Palate shows beetroot, cranberry and peppery goodness all the way to the finish; comes off as very Pinot-esque.

CLOS LE VIGNEAU VOUVRAY 2012 (\$19.95)

Pleasant sweet/dry ratio of pear and green apple that combine to make this one of those wines you just wanna keep sipping on.

DOMAINE DU PETIT MÉTRIS LES TÊTUÈRES COTEAUX DE LAYON-CHAUME 2009 (\$38.95)

There is a pretty floral note reminiscent of orange blossoms along with apricot and some mango; but what makes this really enjoyable is the sweetness to acid balance.

DOMAINE DE VAUGONDY DRY VOUVRAY 2012 (\$16.95)

Here you have a wine that has so much in the way of apple qualities you'll look at the label to make sure it's really a wine, and not something from your kid's juice-box, you've been poured.

HENRI BOURGEOIS PETIT BOURGEOIS SAUVIGNON BLANC 2012 (\$15)

Herbal zesty-ness with a real grassy backbone, the mineral undertones elevate both and comes across more lemon pith and seed than pulp.

CHÂTEAU MONCONTOUR TÊTE DE CUVÉE BRUT VOUVRAY (\$17.95)

There's a certain amount of praline nuttiness in this bubbly that gives it a fun, toasty sweetness along with apple, orange zest and well-balanced acidity.

DOMAINE CHAUVEAU POUILLY-FUMÉ 2013 (\$23.95)

Gooseberry, grapefruit and herbal notes take charge on the nose; the herbal backs off the palate helping to round out the pleasant mouthfeel and long finish.

JOËL DELAUNAY SAUVIGNON BLANC TOURAINE 2013 (\$14.95)

Definite signs of grass in here, but this one leans more heavily on the tropical side of Sauvignon Blanc from the get-go. There's also a citrus mid-palate and a pithy finish; these swings make it a wine hard to find boring. *