

MUSCADET GETS ON THE TRAIN

Rebecca Gibb MW visits Muscadet, a region undergoing a revival after years of problematic vintages and low prices. But can they seize the moment?

Monnières Saint-Fiacre

Never heard of Clisson, Le Pallet, or Gorges? Nor have most wine lovers. Little known outside of Muscadet, this trio of appellations might yet be the rocket fuel that it needs. For a region that has had no hierarchy, the foundation of a quality pyramid has emerged, and it could prove the locomotive to put the area back on the lips of fine wine drinkers.

There are already rumblings that Muscadet is now firmly in the middle of a revival. There's certainly increased interest in the quality of wines coming out of the area, which sits southwest of the buoyant city of Nantes, around 50 km from the shores of the Atlantic. This year, British wine critic Jancis Robinson MW has waxed lyrical about a €3.00 (\$3.50) Muscadet "that would put to shame white Burgundies at ten times the price" while UK-based consumer magazine *Decanter* ran its first major article and panel tasting since the 1990s with impressive results. In 2016, exports increased to levels not seen since 2008. It seems there's something exciting happening around Nantes (other than Airbus production).

Hard times

It's been a while since Muscadet quickened pulses. In the 1980s, it was a regular feature on wine lists and supermarket shelves, but it was thought of as little more than a crisp, dry white wine that offered value for money. However, following a severe frost in 1991, which played a large hand in cutting production to about one-third of the average crop, hard times loomed. "We made virtually nothing and it was complicated to supply the market with the reduction in production and then the New World came on board," said Jean-Luc Ollivier of Ollivier Père et Fils. The influx of accessible whites (and reds) from

Australia, Chile, and New Zealand, and a hike in prices on the back of the supply shortage, caused a decline in sales, and Muscadet producers found themselves with stock piling up. It marked the start of a challenging two decades for the region; today, the prices producers achieve per bottle are the lowest in the Loire: €2.40 versus €7.32 in Sancerre and €4.24 in Vouvray.

Muscadet, it seems, needs a facelift, and locals have been plotting its enhancement for some time. Thierry Martin, the president of the crus communaux and a vigneron in the village of Gorges, explains that over the course of the first decade of this century, producers explored the concept of linking terroir with distinctive wine styles. "In the early 2000s, six vignerons in Gorges got together to launch the idea of crus communaux," he says. With the blessing of the body that gives the stamp of approval to new wine appellations – the Institut national de l'origine et de la qualité (INAO) – the first three crus communaux of Clisson, Le Pallet, and Gorges were approved in 2011. Four more crus are expected to be approved this year and will likely be able to backdate the designation to wines from the 2016 vintage, and another two have their applications on the go. It is hoped they will get the green light in the coming three to four years.

The quality hike

The rules for crus communaux are more stringent than the appellations of Muscadet or Muscadet Sèvre-et-Maine. Yields are lower – for example, 45 hL per ha maximum against 55 hL for Muscadet Sèvre-et-Maine and 65 hL per ha for generic Muscadet – and wines must undergo extensive ageing on lees: at least 17 months for Le Pallet and 24 months

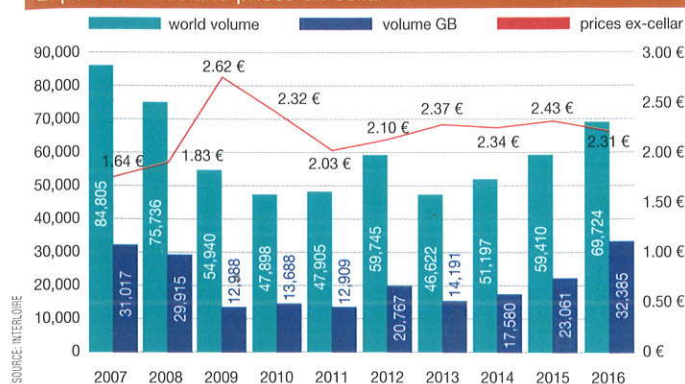
for Clisson and Gorges. "It's the equivalent of Pauillac to Bordeaux, Meursault to Burgundy," says François Robin, head of communication for the Federation of Nantes Wines. The crus currently represent between 1% and 2% of the total production in the Muscadet area so are insignificant in terms of quantity. The largest slice of Muscadet production is bottled under the Muscadet Sèvre-et-Maine appellation, which accounts for around two-thirds of annual production.

This quality pyramid is a new reason to start talking about Muscadet – it is a new story to tell. However, local producers realise it is not a quick-fix solution. "The problem today is that people know Muscadet but not in a good way," admits Martin. "Even wine producers have a tendency to disassociate the crus with Muscadet. Today, you hear regularly that Muscadet is not a 'grand vin' and it is difficult to place our wines among the greats."

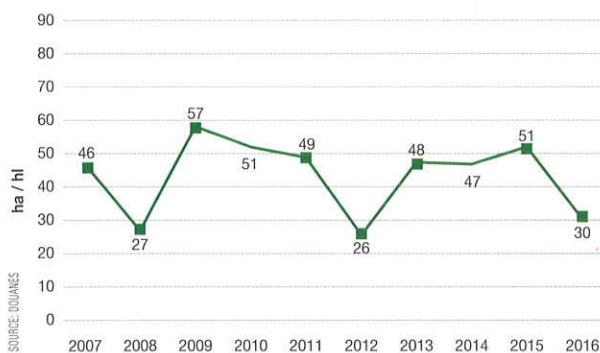
One of the teething problems for the crus communaux lies in its promotional budget. With just three villages currently contributing to the marketing pot, there isn't much to go around, although crus communaux members must pay €5.00 per hectolitre toward the communications budget, whereas non crus communaux Muscadet producers pay just €1.45 per hectolitre, according to Martin. With around 100 producers currently making around 5,000 hL to 8,000 hL of crus communaux wines in total, it's difficult to afford billboards on the London underground.

The uncertainty over the budgets for marketing also lie in the region's climate: it suffered severe frosts in 2016, 2012, and 2008, reducing the whole Muscadet production to 244,042 hL in 2016, 249,630 hL in 2012, and 308,625 hL in 2008. The 10-year average between 2007 and 2016 stood at 425,481 hL, whereas in the 10 years between 1998 and

Export volumes and prices ex-cellar



Average yield



2007, the average production was 679,620 hL. The smaller production volumes are also a reflection of the diminution of the vineyard area, which has shrunk from more than 13,000 ha at its peak to 11,600 ha in 2007 and 8,194 ha today. The lower levels of production mean far less money paid into the region's marketing budget. "At the moment, people are discovering the new wines through tasting rather than us doing a large promotional campaign," says Thierry.

One of those people who have discovered the upper echelons of Muscadet recently is Simon Jones, a wine buyer for Tanners Wines, a small chain of independent wine merchants with branches in England and Wales. While Muscadet has long been a 'stalwart' in hotels and restaurants who have been attracted by its low prices, explains Jones, he has seen quality gradually improve. The creation of the crus has been timely. Small harvests across Burgundy from Chablis to the Côte d'Or and Mâcon have created a shortage of quality dry, crisp whites from France, forcing buyers to look elsewhere for wines that can realistically be offered as an alternative to white Burgundy. "A factor

has been the supply problems in Chablis. At a tasting we wrote things like 'Chablis-like' for some of the crus," he says. "The crus are nearly three times the price of other Muscadets, but if you are struggling to find Chablis, we can offer this to our customers [as an alternative]."

Growing awareness

It's not just UK buyers that have cottoned on to the quality coming out of Muscadet. Both the Swedish and Norwegian monopolies recently issued tenders for aged Muscadet. Sweden's Systembolaget has put out a call for 5,000 bottles of Muscadet cru for delivery in June 2018, while earlier this year, Norway's Vinmonopolet was on the hunt for 5,000 bottles of Muscadet aged on lees for 30 months from four of the villages that will likely become crus communaux this year. Chris Hardy, who has recently taken on the Charles Sydney negociant business selling Loire wines to the UK, Sweden, US, and Australia, says, "If the Swedish monopoly is taking aged Muscadet seriously, it's certainly coming to the fore. It's selling itself at the

moment and gaining momentum; it has even caught producers by surprise."

However, he rightly states there is a lack of awareness of the crus. "No one knows any of the names; there's no coherent market plan to ensure the public are aware of what's going on. They are missing a trick there," he says. The names are still foreign to all but the most interested members of the trade and can seem a little convoluted to the initiated: Muscadet Sèvre-et-Maine Gorges or the soon-to-be Muscadet Sèvre-et-Maine Mouzillon-Tillières hardly roll off the tongue. An international trade education campaign would be a good start to spread the word and gain recognition.

However, with limited resources and limited supply, it appears that a local-first approach will be the path it follows. Pierre-Jean Sauvion, a savvy young winemaker at Maison Sauvion who speaks English fluently having spent time working in the Margaret River, believes it's a little by little approach, starting with the Nantes area: "It's important to be the king in your area" first, which is still a battle to be won based on the average wine list in the restaurants in Nantes. "When you are travelling, you always have a cru in your suitcase. It makes a little bit of noise so everybody says 'hmm, something is happening in Muscadet', so that's why journalists like you are here - we need people to talk about it, to make a bit of noise."

Clearly something is happening in Muscadet thanks to improved quality. And with a new story to tell, and a gaping hole left by supply issues in Burgundy, there's reason to revisit this much-maligned region. It is an opportune moment to rediscover Muscadet, but it wouldn't harm the area to seize the day rather than wait in hope. Otherwise, the locomotive might fail to pull out of the station. ■



Saint-Fiacre-sur-Maine, near Nantes, is surrounded by Muscadet vineyards.