

## STIRLING WINES: Anything But Chardonnay - Part II

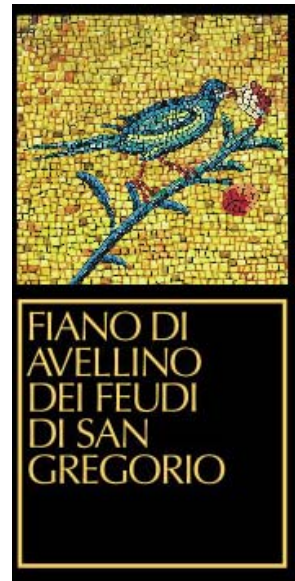
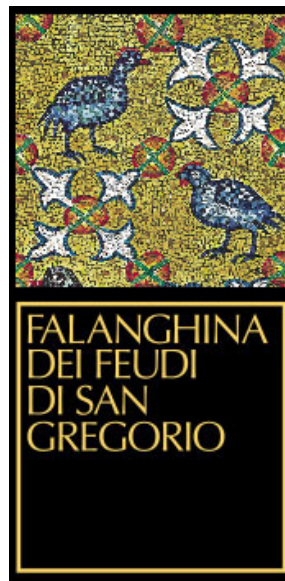
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At the end of last year, in Anything But Chardonnay – Part I, we laid out the merits and demerits of Chardonnay from blowsy ‘Dolly Parton’ wines to the sublime expression of top-of-range white Burgundy. However, if you are still resolutely anti-chardonnay, or just keen to explore other varietals, here are a few thoughts.

The obvious place to start is the usual suspects of Sauvignon Blanc, Riesling and Pinot Gris/Grigio. But if you’ll forgive me, I’ll leave those noble grapes for another day and a more detailed discussion. Instead, I want to explore some of the less well known corners of the wine shelf – nothing too obscure – just a little off the beaten track.

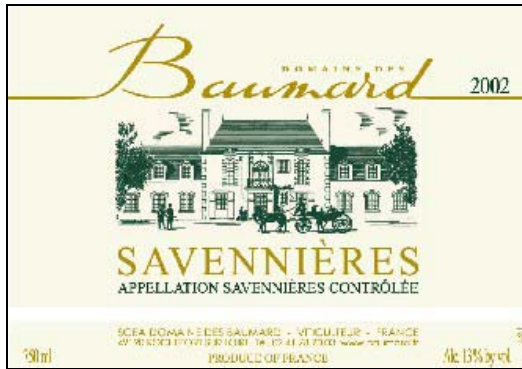
I used to believe that the white wines of Italy were universally bland. This prejudice was shaped by early exposure to Orvieto and Frascati, which had been made in vast industrial quantities. However, I am now an evangelical believer in the ‘New Italy’. In particular, there are some great white wines coming from **Campania**, near Naples. Now normally, hot weather and white wine don’t mix. But these wines are produced 400m-600m up in the Appenines. This means that there is loads of sunshine during the day to ripen the grapes but relatively cool nights to preserve the acidity. The grape varieties have an amazing history and are said to date back to when the Greeks first settled in Southern Italy in the first Millennium BC. Indeed one of the prominent varieties is even called **Greco di Tufo**. One of the other notable varieties is called **Falanghina** and is reputed to be the base of the most famous wine in ancient Rome, Falernian. The third member of today’s quality trio is **Fiano di Avellino**. All three make wonderful characterful wine, full of zesty flavours and excellent with Italian food. Try a Greco di Tufo with anti-pasti or a Falanghina with grilled fish. The two best-known producers in the region are Mastroberardino (who rescued many of these varieties from obscurity and near-extinction) and Feudi di San Gregorio, whose wines have very funky labels (see below).



**Chenin Blanc** has been described by Jancis Robinson as “probably the world’s most versatile grape variety, capable of producing some of the finest, longest-living sweet whites although more usually harnessed to the yoke of basic New World table wine production”. In between these two extremes, there are an increasing number of reasonably-priced high-quality dry wines, in particular from the Loire valley in France and South Africa.

There are two broad appellations for dry Chenin in the Loire – Anjou and Saumur. Vouvray produces very high quality wines but sometimes the same producer produces a dry wine and sometimes off-dry or even sweet. My personal favourite is a small appellation called **Savennières**. This is on the north bank of the Loire with south-facing slopes that produce bone-dry but full flavoured wines, often with a slight tinge of honey and nuts, always with plenty of zing. The most famous producer is Coulée de Serrant, with prices to match. However, Domaine Baumard (see label) is also excellent and fairly widely available. Also try the wines of Eric Morgat or Jo Pithon. In general, I would say that well made Chenin is typically too powerful for seafood but goes very well with roast chicken, or a mild curry.

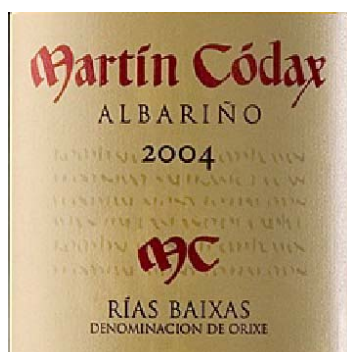
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Although Chenin originated in the Loire, it has found a home-from-home in South Africa, where it is the most widely planted variety, also known as Steen. Although often used for plonk or distilled into Cape brandy, in the right hands Chenin can produce magnificent wines, often barrel-fermented but not overtly oaky. Try wines from Mulderbosch (particularly their top cru Steen op Hout), Flagstone or Spice Route.



**Albariño** is the Spanish name of the distinctive, aromatic, peachy, high-quality vine grown in Galicia, also known as Alvarinho in the north of Portugal. The grapes' thick skins help them withstand the particularly damp climate, and can result in white wines high in alcohol, acidity, and flavour. Young Albariño smells of a mixture of ripe citrus, with a hint of peach. With age Albariño takes on nutty aromas often described as scents of almonds. It is most common in Spain in the Rías Baixas zone of Galicia, in the Northwest corner of Spain and goes particularly well with seafood. Try wines from Martin Codax, Pazo de Señoráns or Pazo de Barrantes.



**Grüner Veltliner** is the most commonly planted vine variety in Austria, particularly in lower Austria and around Vienna; these wine are perfectly serviceable if unexciting. However, in the Wachau (on the upper reaches of the Austrian Danube) and Kamptal, Grüner Veltliner can produce wines that combine both perfume and substance, similar to Alsace wines in style. The wine is typically dry, spicy, with hints of white pepper and with time in bottle can start to taste positively Burgundian. The top wines in the Wachau, made with the ripest grapes, are called Smaragd (emerald) after the small lizards that bask in the sunshine on these slopes.



The biggest winery in the Wachau is Freie Weingärtner Wachau (FWW) which makes very solid wines. But for a bit of excitement go for one of the wines from a top private producer such as F.X.Pichler or Nikolaihof (Wachau), Bründlmayer or Loimer (Kamptal). Although most top Smaragd Veltliners are in the £15-£20 range, one can pay up to £40 for the top crus.



**Viognier's** most famous manifestation is as Condrieu from the Northern end of the Rhône valley. Here I have to quote Oz Clarke's florid description: "serious, swooning wine, with texture as soft and thick as apricot juice, perfume as optimistic and uplifting as mayblossom, and a savoury sour creamy richness like a dollop of crème fraîche straight from the ladle of the smiling farmer's wife – in other words, a wine which just oozes sex and sensuality". As you can guess from this description, Condrieu is a wine that you either love or hate – there is no middle ground. Personally, I love it as an

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apéritif. However, because the vineyard area is very limited and the wine has gained a small but very loyal following, prices have risen strongly. My favourite example is Les Chaillots from Yves Cuilleron at approx £40/bottle.



However, the wine has not always enjoyed its current renown. A French agricultural census of 1968 recorded just 14 ha/35. There was an increase in demand for Viognier cuttings from the mid 1980s and by 1997 more than 100 ha/250 acres of Viognier qualified for the Condrieu appellation. The vine has also taken root in California, mainly in Napa and Mendocino. However, my favourite non-French Viognier comes from an Australian vineyard, Yalumba, which first planted the variety in 1979. Their standard blend is called Y but they also do a top cru called Virgilius which is every bit as good as top Condrieu for half the price at £20.



This neatly leads me to the South of France, in particular the area of **Roussillon**, sandwiched between Perpignan and the Spanish border. This area is best known for its gutsy reds and wonderful fortified red wines from Banyuls and Maury, which are the perfect vinous accompaniment to chocolate. However, in recent years, the area has also started to produce top-class whites, in particular the area around the town of Agly.

In a similar way to Campania, the first reason they can produce great whites in a very hot region is altitude. These are the highest vineyards in the Roussillon, between 450 and 600m above sea level. Secondly, the soil is decomposed granite with limestone washed down off the mountains, very similar to that of the hill of Hermitage.

Gérard Gauby began to blaze this particular trail in the late 1980s but it has taken time to put this full-bodied but wonderfully tense, mineral style on the international map. Gauby makes two notable whites. The first is labelled as a simple Vin de Pays des Côtes Catalanes from Domaine Gauby. It is made from a blend of very traditional grapes: his 2004 Vieilles Vignes was 50% Maccabeu, 45% Grenache blanc, and a splash of Carignan blanc & Malvoisie. Low yields give this wine superb minerality and balance.



He also produces wines at Le Soula, a joint venture between Gauby, local grower Eric Laguerre and British importer Richards Walford. The 2002 was a blend of Grenache gris and blanc, Marsanne, Roussanne, Sauvignon and Chenin blanc in similar proportions, fermented in oak. The yield was just 10 hl/ha, less than a quarter of that one would expect in a top-class white Burgundy. To quote Jancis Robinson "marvellously rich and concentrated, full of fresh fruit flavours, quite unique and super long on the palate, drink now and for at least the next ten years". One small note on nomenclature - up to 2002, the wine used to be labelled as VdP des Côteaux Fenouillèdes but is now officially VdP des Côtes Catalanes.

Other good wines from the region include: Matassa Blanc (made by South African Tom and Nathalie Lubbe of The Observatory in South Africa and Kiwi Sam Harrop MW) and Dom Olivier Pithon (brother of Jo Pithon whom I cited as one of the leading growers in the Loire).

Enjoy!