

Summer's wine

Crisp and zesty sauvignon blanc is imbued with fruits, herbs Beat the heat with crisp and zesty sauvignon blanc

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By Bill St. John, Special to Tribune Newspapers
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Sauvignon blanc does one thing overwhelmingly well: It stands out in a crowd. Even the least initiated of wine tasters could not mistake a sauvignon blanc out of the bottle.

It does that pretty much wherever it grows as a vine. Its classic rendition arrives from cool climates such as the Loire Valley in France, coastal South Africa or either island of New Zealand. From these places, it is possessed of a notably acidic edge and the memorably piercing aroma of one or more of these: grapefruit rind, lime zest, fresh-cut green bell or jalapeno pepper, passion fruit, green apple, and the herbal notes of verbena or bay laurel.

Riper sauvignon blanc shows up in warmer grape-growing regions (many sections of California, for example). From these spots, its acidity is somewhat diminished, while it sports aromas and flavors of white peach, ripe melon, even apricot, and notes of tangerine or herbs such as thyme. In California, the grape's sometimes moniker is fume blanc (not the name of a grape proper), although this is diminishing.

These characteristics can bloom into something aggressive, depending on how the vine is cared for. Vineyard work needs to curb sauvignon's adolescent nature (its name comes from the French "sauvage," wild). Cutting back on water and leaf canopy achieves control by keeping vine growth in check, else the wine turns out strongly herbaceous, even rank.

Most producers ferment and age their sauvignon blancs in stainless steel to accentuate the wine's crisp, zesty, bracing qualities, though a few barrel-ferment or wood-age the wine. When the latter, as in Graves in Bordeaux, sauvignon blanc is often further tamed by the blending in of semillon as a buffering wine.

Sauvignon blanc's other role in Bordeaux is to add its zing and acidity to blends of ultraripe and unctuous semillon in the sweet winemaking areas of Sauternes, Barsac and such outlying districts as Loupiac or Monbazillac.

Cutting-edge sauvignon blanc is subject to all manner of new fermentation and aging regimens, from using egg-shaped "amphorae" fermenters to significant lashings with new wood in the aging cellar.

At table, sauvignon blanc, with its acidity and freshness, is an obvious choice for seafood, from simple to elaborate preparations. It matches well with rich, even creamy and fatty, dishes because of its cleansing, bracing acidity.

Of all food and sauvignon pairings, perhaps the perfect one is a Loire Valley sauvignon blanc such as Sancerre with fresh or aged goat cheese. The high acidity in both the cheese and the wine stand as foils and make for pure deliciousness.

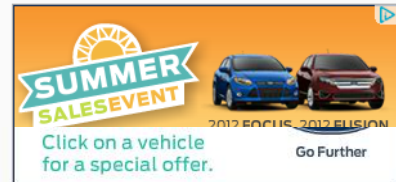
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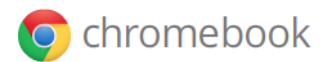


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Sauvignon blanc is a quintessential summer wine, and I've tasted many dozens already this year.

Here are some favorites, all recommended and listed by ascending price. All are 100 percent sauvignon blanc.

2011 Bogle California: This winery does not fail at this price; lemongrass-edged soft texture and smooth feel on the tongue. \$9

2010 Line 39 Lake County (Calif.): Great value for straightforward citrus character, snappy finish. \$10

2011 Quintay Casablanca, Chile: Super-zesty and fresh; lime, grapefruit, minerals; great value. \$10

2011 Mulderbosch Western Cape, South Africa: An old favorite and a great price; big on the citrus and green fig, blessed with minerals and a juicy texture. \$15-\$17

2011 Palliser Estate Martinborough, New Zealand: Notable for its delicious combination of "green" (bell pepper, lime) and "yellow" (passion fruit, peach) and its creamy, rich texture. \$15-\$17

2010 Kingston Family "Cariblanco" Casablanca Chile: Juicy, many-layered in both texture and flavor; long aftertaste. \$17

2011 Raymond Napa Valley: Warms up the lime and grapefruit by wrapping it in melon and lemon curd. \$18

2011 Frog's Leap Rutherford Napa, California: A squeeze of lemon juice atop a warm stone; minerally, snap-to finish. \$20

2011 Matanzas Creek Sonoma County: A classic Californian offering; vibrant with citrus and verbena notes; super tangy finish. \$20

2011 Nobile "Icon" Marlborough, New Zealand: Combine full-on citrus aromas and flavors with the scent of a pinched tomato leaf and this is it; supercrisp and fresh, but also richly textured. \$22

2010 Greywacke "Wild Sauvignon" Marlborough, New Zealand: Barrel-fermented using wild yeasts; a wallop of lemon curd, brioche, with a sapid, saline finish; opulent and many-layered; not for the faint. \$30

If your wine store does not carry these wines, ask for one similar in style and price.

Bill St. John has been writing and teaching about wine for more than 30 years.

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