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High Pair

The Loire Valley bounces back from a string of trying harvests with the ripe 2015 and racy 2016 vintages

By James Molesworth

Excerpted from the Nov. 15, 2017, issue

Fans of Loire Valley wines can lick their chops in anticipation. Following a choppy run of vintages from 2011 through 2014, the tide has turned dramatically. Both 2015 and 2016 produced excellent crops, giving this large and diverse region a rare back-to-back pair of outstanding vintages. The result is a plethora of great wines for consumers to choose from, with the two vintages providing a marked contrast in style.

Since my last report on the Loire Valley ("[Relief in the Loire](#)," Oct. 15, 2016), I have reviewed 355 Loire Valley wines. Of these, 181 earned outstanding ratings of 90 points or higher on [Wine Spectator's 100-point scale](#), easily the best performance for the region since the heralded 2010 vintage. Fourteen wines earned classic ratings of 95 points or better.

Leading the way in this report is the Domaine Huët Vouvray Moelleux Clos du Bourg 2016 (97, \$50), a **late-harvest** Chenin Blanc from one of the region's most acclaimed producers and the first bottling of the wine since the 2009 vintage. It's a beautiful display of pear, green fig, yellow apple and quince notes that are creamy and sweet, seamless and refined, backed by a light echo of white ginger at the very end.

"Beautiful conditions prior to and during harvest allowed us to make multiple passes through the vineyards [in 2016], thereby granting us the ability to produce our entire range of still wines from Sec to Cuvée Constance," says Jean-Bernard Berthomé, winemaker at Huët. Eight bottlings from the domaine earned classic ratings in this report, all from the 2016 vintage.

Other top wines include two more late-harvest Vouvrais. The Champalou Vouvray Les Tries 2015 (96, \$66/500ml) and Vouvray La Moelleuse 2015 (95, \$45/500ml) show the richness and depth of the vintage. The Les Tries bottling uses fully **botrytized** grapes exclusively and has only been made in five vintages since the domaine's inception in 1983. La Moelleuse uses both botrytized and shriveled grapes.

In addition, a trio of late-release Sauvignon Blancs from Didier Dagueneau, including the Sancerre Le Mont Damné Chavignol 2014 (96, \$135), help set the bar.

With the 2015 and 2016 vintages dominating the releases now on U.S. retail shelves, consumers have plenty to choose from, albeit in slightly different styles. 2015 was a warm and dry vintage that produced frankly ripe wines. The 2015s are generally forward and plump, with slightly lower-than-average acidity.

In 2016 a severe spring frost reduced the crop by as much as 50 percent in some areas. A rainy spring followed, but by July the weather had turned dry, without excessive heat. This allowed for slow and steady ripening while the major varieties retained their acidity. Consequently, the wines are generally in the racy, crisp style the region is known for.

"Both 2015 and 2016 were great in quality, despite the fact we lost a lot of grapes," says Florent Baumard of Domaine des Baumard in Savennières. "Soft, round and generous wines in 2015, which reminds me of 2005. Sharper and lighter, it seems, in 2016. Too early to say, but I personally like it very much at this stage."

The Domaine des Baumard Savennières 2015 (94, \$30) has a creamy feel, with alluring pear, quince and green almond flavors, showing the slightly more forward personality of the vintage.

To navigate the Loire, it's easiest to start at the eastern end, where Sauvignon Blanc leads the way in the well-known appellations of Sancerre and Pouilly-Fumé. There are 75 Sancerre whites in this report (rosé and red are made as well) covering a range of vintages. This appellation produces the crispest, raciest versions of Sauvignon Blanc, known for their distinctive flinty profiles. The Pascal Jolivet Sancerre Clos du Roy 2015 (92, \$43) is among the top late-release 2015s.

"2015 is already looking like a great vintage. It's powerful, with lots of concentration," says Pascal Jolivet. "The 2016 vintage is a very good vintage with great potential, but the wines are little bit restrained due to [the] high level of acidity. [They] will open beautifully and slowly in the next two to three years."

Pouilly-Fumé is an alluring contrast to neighboring Sancerre. The wines have a slightly creamier feel and notes of paraffin or smoke as they age. The Jean-Claude Dagueneau Pouilly-Fumé Domaine des Berthiers Cuvée d'Eve 2015 (93, \$33) is an excellent example.

Moving to the middle Loire, around the towns of Anjou and Tours, Chenin Blanc takes the lead for whites, while Cabernet Franc produces arguably the region's best reds. The character of the two vintages holds here as well.

"[The] 2015 wines show the character of a sunny vintage but with an acidity that is still present," says Vincent Carême. "In 2016 we made a very straight wine, with balance and backbone. And the yield was low, so we got good concentration."

The Vincent Carême Vouvray Sec 2015 (92, \$25) shows baked meringue and lemon curd notes, yet keeps a steely edge for balance. Top Vouvrays in this report also include wines from François Pinon, Domaine Bourillon-Dorléans and Vigneau-Chevreau.

The reds of Chinon and Bourgueil enjoyed the extra warmth of 2015, producing wines of depth and substance that should appeal to a wide range of wine lovers.

"The profile of 2015 is very accessible young, though the clay-limestone terroirs will also have a very good potential to age," says Rodolphe Raffault of Jean-Maurice Raffault in Chinon.

The vigneron's limestone-based Chinon Clos de l'Hospice 2015 (93, \$40) leads the way here, showing a beautiful beam of cassis and plum fruit inlaid with a seamless chalky spine and backed by alluring bergamot, violet and white pepper notes.

As the valley continues west, with the Loire emptying into the Atlantic, the Muscadet appellation takes center stage. These light-bodied wines are generally meant for immediate drinking; they match well with shellfish and are among the region's best values. The Domaine de l'Aujardière Muscadet-Côtes de Grandlieu Sur Lie La Noë 2015 (89, \$19) and Domaine du Haut Bourg Muscadet-Côtes de Grandlieu Sur Lie Pavillon 2016 (88, \$18) are prime examples, with the former showing the rounder profile of the vintage and the latter a brisk rapier of lemon zest and verbena.

With its geographic breadth (the valley runs from just west of Paris to the Atlantic), covering dozens of appellations and myriad grape varieties, the Loire provides fertile ground for those who want to go off the beaten path. Adding to the allure is the region's reputation for value: 92 wines in this report (one-quarter of all wines tasted) earned at least very good ratings of 85 points or higher while costing \$20 or less per bottle.

It would seem American consumers are catching on to the Loire's value and quality. The U.S. is the leading market for Loire exports, taking in nearly 3.46 million cases in 2016, an increase from 3.16 million the previous year, according to InterLoire, the winery-funded marketing body for the region.

With the bounty of the 2015 and 2016 vintages on offer, now's the time to join the Loire party.

James Molesworth is Wine Spectator's lead taster on the wines of the Loire Valley.

For more top Loire Valley wines from the 2015 and 2016 vintages, including [top values](#), WineSpectator.com members can [read the full tasting report](#) in the Nov. 15, 2017, issue.

