

# Muscadet with extended lees ageing

A move to recognise communes with specific soil types, aligned with wines that stay on their lees for a minimum of 17 months, has revived this Loire region, says Jim Budd

IN NEARLY 30 years of writing about wine, I've seen Muscadet go from huge popularity and success to crisis and popular scorn by consumers and now a gradual rehabilitation. Although the crus communaux represent a tiny proportion of total production, they are a very important factor in changing the image of Muscadet.

In 1989, Muscadet exported 2.2 million cases – 40% of production. The severe April 1991 frost and consequent price rises coupled with the arrival of wines from outside Europe, in particular Australia, ended its success. At the height of the boom, the area planted with Melon de Bourgogne (the grape used to make Muscadet) rose to about 13,000 hectares. This has now declined by nearly 40% to 8,075ha, which remains a very large area; Sancerre, for instance, is 2,900ha.

Producers' difficulties have since been exacerbated by a series of serious frosts – notably in 2008, 2012 and 2016 – allied with small crops from 2012 onwards.

Following the overdue tightening up of the sur lie regulations in 1994, there were long discussions over the next quality step up. Eventually it was agreed that long lees ageing associated with particular communes with specific geological type was the way forward. This was recognition of the growing practice by producers over the past 10 to 15 years to give a small proportion of their production extended ageing on lees. Muscadet is usually fermented and aged in large, shallow underground vats, though stainless steel vats are also used. Oak barrels are occasionally used but remain atypical.

The first three crus communaux – Clisson (granite), Gorges (gabbro) and Le Pallet (mix of granite, gneiss and gabbro) were approved in February 2011. Yields are limited to 45hl/ha. Wines from Le Pallet have to be lees aged for a minimum of 17 months, while the minimum for Clisson and Gorges is 24 months. Due to a quirk in the sur lie legislation these wines cannot be labelled sur lie as they are bottled after 30 November in the year following the vintage – the last date for bottling sur lie. Le Pallet cru wines tend to be fruity and forward; Clisson rich, full and flattering; and Gorges tighter and more restrained in character.

Four more cru communaux are due to be recognised: Château-Thébaud, Goulaine, Monnières-St-Fiacre and Mouzillon-Tillières – all in the Sèvre-et-Maine. Hopefully final approval will be given this summer. There are a further three crus in the pipeline – La Haie-Fouassière and Vallet (Sèvre-et-Maine), and Champtoceaux in Muscadet Coteaux du Loire. It is expected to be at least another two years before approval is given. In time there may be two – north and south – in the Côtes de Grandlieu.

*Jim Budd is the DWWA Regional Chair for Loire who writes the award-winning [jimsloire.blogspot.co.uk](http://jimsloire.blogspot.co.uk)*



Map: Maggie Nelson

## Muscadet: know your vintages

**2016** Small but fine crop. Severe April frost, widespread summer mildew, heat and drought. Fine autumn with just enough rain.

**2015** Rich wines of good potential, but not yet bottled.

**2014** Wet, cold summer, harvest saved by warm and dry September. Balanced, ageworthy wines. Most should be kept at least another year in bottle.

**2013** Very cold spring led to a late-

flowering vintage giving austere wines.

**2012** Small crop from April frost. But very good wines starting to show well with very good potential to age.

**2011** Early vintage starting with a warm dry, spring. Wet from mid-June with serious problems from rot.

**2010** Less rich than 2009 but ageing fast.

**2009** Ripe, rich grapes. Full-bodied wines with ageability.

## Muscadet: the facts

**Area under vine (2016)**  
Sèvre-et-Maine 6,400ha,  
Grandlieu 230ha,  
Coteaux de la Loire 145ha  
**Crus communaux** 70ha

from three recognised crus; close to 200ha when other crus recognised

### Producers

500, plus two co-ops at Ancenis and Le Pallet

### Annual production

Between 400,000hl and 450,000hl, though much less in frost years

### Exports

15% to 20% of production ➤

# The results

With 65% of wines scoring 90 points or more, including a perfect score from one of our experts, this tasting confirmed that Muscadet is back. Christelle Guibert reports

THE FACT THAT *Decanter’s* last Muscadet panel tasting was back in the 1990s says much of the region’s fall from fashion. But this long period in the wilderness may be about to change following this successful panel tasting.

With 63 of the 113 wines rated Highly Recommended, eight Outstanding and three Exceptional – including the first-ever 100-point wine from *Decanter’s* Loire expert Jim Budd – the wines exceeded all expectations and the judges praised the tasting as their most exciting to date.

‘It highlighted just how amazing the quality can be, not just in terms of winemaking, but terroir expression and differences between the crus,’ said Ben Llewelyn. Chris Kissack said these results proved that Muscadet’s perception as ‘a simple wine you just knock back with oysters’ was outdated and should be put to rest. ‘You can still have your easy-drinking lunchtime wines, like your Petit Chablis or AC Chablis, but you can also step up to your 1er cru vineyards and have your grand cru vineyards for something even better.’

While the crus communaux may account for only 2% of Muscadet’s production, the panel was convinced they will raise the profile of the region and make consumers aware of the importance of terroir. Melon de Bourgogne may be a neutral grape variety, but it expresses its terroir well and the panel felt the relationship between the soil, grape and lees was the distinctive mark of the wines.

Gorges on gabbro soil and Château-Thébaud on granite seem to be our judges’ favourite crus, showing great minerality but needing time to develop. Monnières-St-Fiacre (gneiss) gave a much more elegant style with floral characters, while Clisson (granite) showed a clear identity with its energy, broader and more powerful style. Kissack was pleasantly surprised by the freshness and minerality of the Mouzzillon-Tillières wines (gabbro).

In terms of vintages, 2014 and 2012 showed best, Kissack describing both as having ‘energy, acidity and fruit intensity’. Llewelyn was impressed by the older wines.

***‘Extended lees ageing gives this extra dimension, texture and energy which is unique’*** Ben Llewelyn

‘It’s very exciting to taste something from 2003 or 2006 which has been sitting on its lees for a long, extended period – this is Muscadet’s real calling card. Extended lees ageing gives the wine this extra dimension, texture and energy which is unique.’

Perversely, the 113 wines tasted here cannot be labelled ‘sur lie’ despite having spent a minimum of 17 months on their dead yeast particles. According to appellation rules, this is too long. To qualify as ‘sur lie’, wines have to spend one winter on their lees and then be bottled between 1 March and 31 December.

These older, extended lees-aged wines demonstrate Muscadet’s ageing potential, said Budd. ‘Many will happily last to 2030, if not longer.’ He also advised aerating the wines before serving, and not to chill them excessively: ‘You want them at cellar temperature – the temperature you’d serve fine white Burgundy.’ Grilled fish, seafood with white sauce, chicken or guinea fowl are more suitable accompaniments than oysters.

‘These are exciting, versatile wines, especially for the UK market where people appreciate fresher, more mineral, lower-alcohol wines, said Llewelyn. ‘Muscadet has everything: complexity, terroir characteristics and ageability – now it’s just a question of getting people to buy the wines again.’

The panel said behind their obvious enthusiasm over the quality of these wines, the frustration is that very few are available in the UK. However, Llewelyn said this is slowly being rectified by savvy importers. ‘And when the trade, press and consumers taste these wines, they will understand our excitement!’

The scores	
113 wines tasted	
Exceptional	3
Outstanding	8
Highly Recommended	63
Recommended	25
Commended	6
Fair	4
Poor	1
Faulty	3

**Entry criteria: producers and UK agents were invited to submit wines with 17 months’ minimum lees ageing from the crus and proposed crus of Le Pallet, Clisson, Gorges, Château-Thébaud, Goulaine, Le Have Fouassière, Monnières St-Fiacre, Mouzillon-Tillières, Vallet and Champtoceaux**

# Outstanding 95–97pts



**Pierre-Luc Bouchaud, Pont Caffino, Muscadet Sèvre-et-Maine Château-Thébaud 2014** 96 JB 96 CK 95 BL 96

N/A UK [plbouchaud.free.fr/siteplb/accueil.htm](http://plbouchaud.free.fr/siteplb/accueil.htm)

The grapes for Pont Caffino come from a 1ha parcel on this 20ha domaine where the vines, on the site of an old quarry, are between 70 and 80 years old. Although the 2014 was machine harvested, Bouchaud now harvests this parcel by hand. He uses underground vats with very limited lees stirring – just two or three times immediately after the end of fermentation.

**JB** Attractive citrus aromas lead to a lean, tense palate which unravels and opens out in the glass, hinting at development still to come from further bottle age.

**CK** Golden pear skin and a subtle struck-match aroma, while on the palate this feels alive, energetic, delicately poised, fresh and cool, yet substantial with plenty of concentration and length. Serious.

**BL** Fresh, aromatic nose with notes of orange blossom and bergamot – a very pretty wine with a cherry-like acidity and a fresh, sappy finish.

**Drink** 2018-2027 **Alc** 12%



**Pierre-Luc Bouchaud, Pont Caffino, Muscadet Sèvre-et-Maine Château-Thébaud 2009** 92 JB 93 CK 93 BL 90

N/A UK [plbouchaud.free.fr/siteplb/accueil.htm](http://plbouchaud.free.fr/siteplb/accueil.htm)

Expressive bready aromas pave the way for a vibrant, precise, mineral palate drawing out the finish. Elegant. **Drink** 2017-2029 **Alc** 12.5%

# Expert summary: Jim Budd

There were no real conclusions to be drawn between crus, vintages, time on lees or established and lesser-known producers – it was just a great line-up of quality wines



*Jim Budd is the DWWA Regional Chair for Loire, and writes the awarded Jimsloire.blogspot.com*

THE RESOUNDING SUCCESS of many Muscadets in this tasting does not come as a surprise, although the full depth of quality perhaps does.

It is encouraging that there are a number of lesser-known producers in our top 11 wines, as well as well-known names like Bernard Chéreau, Haut-Bourg and Luneau-Papin. There was also a range of vintages from 2003 to 2014 with three from 2009 and four from 2012. A number of the 2014s are still quite closed having just been recently bottled. It is clear that these cru wines benefit from further bottle age – this is underlined by the Luneau-Papin’s top-scoring 2007 Excelsior, which was bottled in November 2010.

Six different terroirs featured among our Exceptional and Outstanding wines: Goulaine (3), Château-Thebaud (3), Clisson (2), La Haye-Fouassière (1), Bouaye (1) and Mouzillon-Tillières (1). All, with the exception of Bouaye (Côte de Grandlieu), are in the Sèvre-et-Maine. Interestingly, of the three currently officially recognised crus, only Clisson featured among these top scorers.

Time on lees for our top 11 ranged from 28 months to 144 months. This suggests that there isn’t any optimum

duration, except that for most, at least 24 months is required to gain extra complexity. Optimum time on lees depends on the vintage and how the wine matures.

Although these long lees aged wines represent a very small proportion of Muscadet produced, they should play a very important role in changing wine drinkers’ perceptions. The results show that these wines can be exceptional – special-occasion bottles at very affordable prices and best served with fish such as turbot and sole as well as lobster. Many will also age exceptionally well. To benefit from their full complexity, these wines should not be served too cold; many may well also benefit from being decanted.

Regrettably a number of these wines are currently unavailable in the UK. Hopefully this tasting will persuade merchants to look again at the Pays Nantais. **D**

***‘These wines should play a very important role in changing wine drinkers’ perceptions’***

# The judges

**Jim Budd**

*Budd is the DWWA Regional Chair for Loire and has written for Decanter since 1989. He writes the awarded Jimsloire.blogspot.com, is one of the members of the blog Les5duvin.wordpress.com and was editor of the Circle of Wine Writers’ newsletter from 1991-2015.*



**Chris Kissack**

*Kissack is author of TheWinedoctor.com, which he has published since 2000. He has focused on the Loire for many years, and has made regular trips since 1993, visiting domaines and vineyards, and meeting the winemakers and reporting on their wines throughout the year.*



**Ben Llewelyn**

*Llewelyn has worked in the UK wine trade since 1997, starting at Oddbins, and then at Enotria. He moved his family to France in 2007 and in 2008 set up the wholesale wine agency and importer Carte Blanche, which leans towards producers who make wine as naturally as possible.*

