

Chenin Blanc



By Peter Dry, Emeritus Fellow,
The Australian Wine Research Institute

BACKGROUND

Chenin Blanc (shennin blonk) is an old variety that has been known in the Loire since at least the 15th century — some sources claim as early as the 9th century. DNA analysis has shown that Sauvignon Blanc and Chenin Blanc are likely siblings (offspring of Savagnin Blanc and an unknown parent). Synonyms include Agudelo, Agudillo (Spain), Anjou, Blanc d'Aunis, Gros Pineau, Ronchalain (France) and Steen (South Africa). The global area was 35,164ha in 2010, down 23% since 2000, with most of the decrease outside of France. South Africa has the largest area (53% of global), followed by France (28%) and USA (9%).

In South Africa, it is grown in every region and used for many wine types. High quality table wines from old bush vines are well regarded. In France, Chenin Blanc is mainly grown in the central Loire Valley where it produces a wide range of styles. It is the base of many sparkling wines; for example, Cremant de Loire and others from Saumur and Vouvray. It is also used for late-picked sweet wines. Chenin is rare in the rest of France except in the south in Limoux (Languedoc) where it is a required component (20 to 40%) of the blend for Cremant de Limoux (with Chardonnay, Mauzac Blanc and Pinot Noir).

California had 2923ha in 2010 (more than halved since 2000), mainly in the central valley counties of Fresno, Madera and Kern. Higher quality wines are produced from lower yielding vineyards in northern California. South

America has limited plantings except in Argentina where it is mainly grown in Mendoza and usually blended with other varieties such as Chardonnay.

In Australia there were 520ha in 2012 (mainly Riverland, Swan Districts and Margaret River) and at least 140 wine producers. Until the 1970s, all Chenin Blanc in Western Australia and the Barossa Valley was incorrectly known as Semillon and Albillo/ Sherry, respectively.

VITICULTURE

Budburst is early and maturity is mid-season. Vigour is high with semi-erect growth habit. Bunches are medium, well-filled to compact with small berries. Yield is high. Spur pruning is used in Australia. It is susceptible to oidium (powdery mildew) but more tolerant of downy mildew. Bunches are very susceptible to bunch rot. There are at least 12 clones available in Australia, approximately half of which are local selections.

WINE

Chenin Blanc is a very versatile variety used for many wine styles from sparkling to fortified. Its high natural acidity is said to confer good ageing potential. Very often it is used as a workhorse variety, producing relatively neutral wines for blended commercial styles. However, at its best, as a dry table wine, it can be crisp and flavoursome when young and complex with age. Descriptors include herbal, floral, green apple, melon and tropical fruit; and with age, almond, marzipan and honey.

For further information on this and other emerging varieties, contact Marcel Essling at the AWRI (marcel.essling@awri.com.au or 08 8313 6600) to arrange the presentation of the Alternative Varieties Research to Practice program in your region.