

Calling All ABC (Anything But Chardonnay) Wine Enthusiasts

By Jim Bryant

Many wine lovers have reacted to the Chardonnay overload of recent years by moving to the “ABC” (anything but Chardonnay) school of choosing wine. And great alternatives to Chardonnay do abound.

The popularity of Sauvignon Blanc has surged over the past decade. While produced in many countries, it’s most famous and distinctive if it comes from France or New Zealand. The two countries’ styles are quite different, but neither is aged in oak. In general, the greatest Sauvignon Blanc comes from a region near the French town of Sancerre (by which the wine is known) along the Loire River. Sancerre wines vary by producer but often are medium-bodied, crisp, and dry. They have slightly herbal, grassy, mineral, and gooseberry aromas and are quite acidic.

Sancerre is quite different from Chardonnay and is a far better accompaniment to most foods. Great combinations include white fish, especially halibut, and goat cheese. A similar wine comes from the other side of the Loire. This wine, Pouilly Fumé, is usually slightly heavier and fuller than Sancerre.

Sauvignon Blanc from New Zealand is very different in style from Sancerre. In most cases, New Zealand’s offerings are also dry but have aromas of citrus and tropical fruits. Some producers’ wines have these attributes almost to a fault; sometimes experiencing this wine can be like drinking the fruits.

While almost all Sauvignon Blancs are value wines, those from New Zealand average \$10–\$16 except for Cloudy Bay, which is approximately double in price. Sancerre ranges from \$15–\$25 except for those of Pascal and François Cotat, which are the ultimate expression of this grape and will age gracefully. The Pascal and Cotat wines average \$45 for Monts Damnés and Culs de Beaujeu and \$55 for Grand Coté. Didier Dagenau produces two Pouilly Fumés—Pur Sang and Silex—that cost approximately \$55



PHOTO: THOMAS BALSAMO

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and \$75 but are benchmarks of this grape.

The other important difference between French and New Zealand wines deals with closures. Almost all of the former comes in corked bottles, while most of the latter are in bottles with screw caps. There is no quality difference, but the screw cap eliminates spoilage due to wine being “corked.”

Another alternative to Chardonnay is wine made from the Riesling grape, which most often come from Germany, France, or Australia. German wine labels in general are difficult to decipher, and many people remember starting their wine journey by drinking inferior German wines (such as Blue Nun) with high residual sugar. As a result, one of the world’s greatest grapes, Riesling, suffers in popularity due to the fact that much of the best comes from Germany. Wonderful German producers include J. J. Prum, Egon Müller, Schloss Johannisberg, and Schloss Vollrads.

Rieslings come in varying degrees of dryness and sweetness, and the best examples age for decades due the grape’s high acidity. Great Rieslings (generally drier and less complicated) come from Alsace-Lorraine in France and the Clare Valley in Australia. Riesling can be enjoyed with many foods, although pork seems ideally suited. Other worthy wines from Alsace-Lorraine include Pinot Blanc and Gewürztraminer.

Another interesting white wine is Albarrino from Spain, Portugal, and Australia. It is medium- to full-bodied and is great with seafood. Grüner Veltliner from Austria ages well, is smooth and of medium weight, and is full of minerality with a faint aroma of white pepper; it goes well with veal and seafood and makes a nice aperitif. Arneis from the Italian region of Piemonte has a faint smell of almonds. It goes nicely with light fish. Santé. 