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Get to know the elegant, versatile wines of Sancerre and Pouilly-Fume

By Michael Austin
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The picturesque vineyards of Sancerre, in France's Loire Valley. (Julian Elliott/Getty Images)

About two hours south of Paris, on the eastern end of the Loire Valley, two of the world's most renowned sauvignon blanc appellations sit just a handful of miles apart.

Sancerre and Pouilly-Fume are separated by the Loire River, which flows north between them before making its big, left-hand turn toward the Atlantic Ocean near the southern reaches of Brittany. The wines bearing the Sancerre and Pouilly-Fume names are often as dry as an elementary school chalkboard, with racy acidity and everything from tangy citrus and stone fruits to herbal notes, wet-gravel minerality and a subtle smokiness.

Served properly chilled, these wines can elevate just about any drinking experience. You call on these wines not when it is time for easy sippers on the beach or in the park, though they are delightful on their own, as aperitifs. Instead, call on these wines when you are settling in for a serious dining session. They are versatile with food due to their generous amounts of acidity, minerality and tanginess, pairing with everything from raw oysters and goat cheese (the legendary local version of it is known as Crottin de Chavignol) to shellfish and smoked salmon, and even roasted chicken and pork.

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You can probably handle the pronunciation of Sancerre without any help, but if you want to say Pouilly-Fume correctly, say “poo-YEE foo-MAY.” The various limestone and clay soils that dominate the two appellations contain fossilized seashells in spots — the chalky Kimmeridgian soil that the Chablis region is famous for — and flint in others, all of it contributing to the distinct character of these wines.

That flinty clay soil contributes to Pouilly-Fume wines’ reputation for offering gunflint or smoky notes. The French word “fume” translates to “smoke,” and some will claim that the word’s usage in Pouilly-Fume is a reference to that smoky character. But it’s far more likely that the inspiration for the “-Fume” in Pouilly-Fume is actually the grayish-white film that sometimes appears on the sauvignon blanc grapes in the vineyards on that (east) side of the river.

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These are old appellations, established in 1936 (Sancerre) and 1937 (Pouilly-Fume), and their wines have been beloved locally, and on the restaurant and sidewalk-cafe tables of Paris, for decades. Despite Pouilly-Fume’s reputation for offering distinct smoky notes, in many cases Sancerre and Pouilly-Fume wines are so similar that most people cannot tell them apart. For seasoned local experts, identifying these two similar styles is not a problem, but for the rest of us, the lines between them can delightfully blur. One is as bright, fresh, complex, perfumed and piercing as the next.

Speaking of wines being confused for one another, don’t mix up your Pouilly-Fume with your Pouilly-Fuisse, the white wine appellation in the Burgundy region of France. Different place, different grape, different wine.

If you’re wondering where “Fume Blanc” fits into all of this, well, those wines are related but a world apart from the sauvignon blancs of the Loire Valley. Fume blanc is the name coined by Robert Mondavi for his wood-kissed California sauvignon blancs. Other New World sauvignon blanc producers have adopted the Fume Blanc name and wine style, and many of those are fine versions of sauvignon blanc. But they are related to Pouilly-Fume only in that they share a grape variety and a portion of their names. To further complicate things, sauvignon blanc grapes and the local wines made from them are sometimes referred to as “Blanc Fume” or “Blanc Fume de Pouilly” in the Loire Valley.

It can be a little confusing. There is, however, no confusion around the idea that Sancerre and Pouilly-Fume are two of the world’s leading examples of this varietal wine style.

Don’t save many spots in your cellar for these wines — just cool them down, and drink them as soon as you take possession of them. For the most part, they are not known for their aging ability (though some certainly can be aged) and usually are best drunk as young and fresh as possible, within a few years of bottling.

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Below are notes from a recent tasting of Sancerre and Pouilly-Fume wines. They are listed in ascending order according to price.

2017 Langlois-Chateau Sancerre. Wet stones, apricot and peach are countered by a whiff of smoke, tangy citrus and a nuttiness on the finish. \$27

■ **2016 Fournier Pere & Fils Les Deux Cailloux Pouilly-Fume.**

Minerality, smoke and floral notes lead to lemon-lime and ripe pear in this soft, mouth-filling wine. \$30

2017 Domaine Hubert Brochard Tradition Sancerre. Fresh lime, chalk, pear and anise come together in this bright wine with zingy acidity and 13 percent alcohol. \$31

2016 La Poussie Sancerre. Minerality and earthy notes commingle with stone fruits and a kiss of honey in this one, which is soft and silky. \$38

2017 Domaine de Ladoucette Pouilly-Fume. Ginger, spice, chalk, ripe stone fruits, pear and tangy citrus make up this lip-smacking wine. \$45