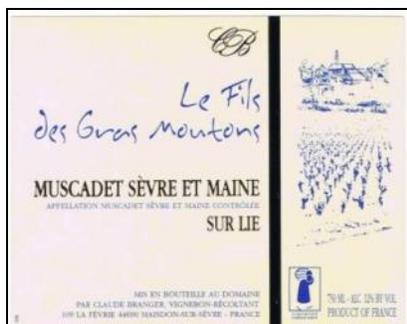


Claude Branger

Muscadet Sèvre et Maine



Claude Branger is a tall, soft-spoken gentleman with silver hair. He dresses neatly and modestly, and there is about him, as there is about his wines, a clear sense of refinement. His grandfather developed the wine domaine of Haute Févrie during the First World War. Today his wife Thérèse manages the home office in Maison-sur-Sèvre (as well as an eye-popping vegetable garden), while his son Sébastien works beside him. They farm 65 acres in two parishes in the heart of the Muscadet Sèvre et Maine appellation. .

Among the small cadre of committed growers—and it remains a small cadre—the father and son team of Claude and Sébastien rank among the top. Claude was an early member of Terra Vitis, an organization that sets guide-

lines for sustainable farming and monitors its members' practices to ensure compliance. Subsequently, Sébastien embarked the domaine on the road to full-fledged organic farming. Certification came in 2016.

Sébastien has also introduced two new wines: a méthode traditionnelle sparkling wine made entirely from Melon, and two new crus. The *crus communaux* are the most exciting thing to come down the Muscadet pike in recent time, and are meant to be the apex of the pyramid in Muscadet (the base being made up of generic Muscadet, and the middle being made up of the three sub-appellations of Sèvre et Maine, Côteaux de la Loire, and Côtes de Grandlieu). The INAO recognized the following crus in 2011: Le Pallet (grabbo terroir), Clisson (granite), and Gorges (clay and quartz). Four more are to follow in 2014: Goulaine (schist); Mouzillon-Tillières (grabbo); Château Thébaud (granite); and Monnières-Saint Fiacre (gneiss). Down the road two more are aspiring for status: La Haye Fouassière and Vallet. An homogeneous soil base combined with the inherent quality of a given site are the main criteria, coupled with lower maximum yields—45 hectoliters per hectare for a cru compared to 55 hl/ha for the sub-appellations—and a minimum ageing period on the lees (usually 24 months, but this varies).

The Brangers have vines in the delimited zones of Château Thébaud and Monnières-Saint Fiacre, and have already bottled their first rendition of the Monnières-Saint Fiacre. The Thébaud will follow, and soon you will be able to have two exceptional Muscadets made identically by the same domaine, distinguished strictly by terroir.

This domaine prunes its vines for low yields, harvests by hand (a rarity in this land of machine harvesting), and lets its wine rest on the lees until bottling, which is done without fining and with a light filtration—the classic *sur lie* technique. It's this technique that gives good Muscadet wine its freshness and lift. Contrary to popular opinion, Melon is not, if allowed to ripen properly, naturally high in acid; it's the lees contact and the resulting CO₂ gas that give the wine its crisp spice and zest (acid Muscadet is usually the product of under ripe, high-yielding machine-harvested grapes).

Dutch traders introduced the Melon grape to the region from Burgundy in the 1600s. They wanted grapes for distilling, and the city of Nantes was within ready reach of their boats. An extreme winter in 1709 wiped out the red varieties then locally grown and thereafter Melon came to rule the roost. Today, there are four appellations in the region: the base appellation of Muscadet followed by the three sub-appellations. The Muscadet Sèvre et Maine appellation is the most varied and by far the largest (this AC produces more wine than any other in the Loire Valley). A generation ago, most of its wine was forgettable except that from a few dedicated growers such as Claude Branger. Nowadays, a revolution in quality is taking place. There are wines of revelation made here, wines that are soft yet shockingly vigorous, imbued with scents of bread, lemon freshness, and sea salt minerality—a palette of aromas that in the better renditions follows through with flavor intensity and length. This is wine of the north Atlantic coast, the product of Brittany's great shelf of granite. Melon de Bourgogne is a white cousin to Gamay, and like Gamay it can be easy, it can be delicious, and it can surprise. For those of you who like white wine that favors detailed verticality, good Muscadets are some of the best white wine values in the world.