

# SACAVIN



# COURIER

## COMMANDERIE DE GRANDE BRETAGNE DE LA CONFRERIE DES CHEVALIERS DU SACAVIN D'ANJOU

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The pleasurable task of editing *The Courier*, gives me the opportunity to review the months since the last was despatched. We spoke then of our intention to look carefully at our aims and how the Commanderie can grow in size a little with active and interested members whilst we remember to pay attention to the constitution, particularly where the culture and wines of Anjou and the Loire valley are concerned. We have talked about how this might be done. There will be no radical change, but like the Loire we will make slow and purposeful changes. So it is appropriate that Robert Wills' kindly account of his journey, by pen along that river and her banks. He will introduce his piece . . . .



### *The Loire Valley – a journey of peaceful water and formidable wines*

Some time ago, I was fortunate to obtain a number of back copies of the *Courier*. To my delight, they contained an amusing, erudite set of articles beautifully written by Marie-Therese Baird, on the history of the early Plantagenets, the royal Angevin house that ruled England from 1154 to 1485. Further articles, written by George Wilks, covered such diverse subjects as "Food down the Ages", "Wine Orders of France" and "Table Manners down the Ages".

So with some trepidation I have decided to put pen to paper, in the hope that readers may find some similar enjoyment in articles on the wines of the Loire. I hope to take a written journey up the Loire valley from Nantes to the hills of Lyonnais and Forez near its source. I will look at the wines, with perhaps a few facts and legends to help us on our way. My observations may differ from those who know the region personally and I am sure the experts will find reason to dispute my thoughts on the wine. If that encourages Chevaliers to write in, so much the better. I will start with a few incontrovertible facts.

France's longest river, the Loire flows for about 1000km through ten of the thirty-three provinces of France. Rising in a farmyard, 1375m up the mountainside of Mont Gerbier de Jonc, (the Stack of Rushes), in the Massif Central.

Astonishingly it's source is only some 50km from the Rhone. The river flows first northward and just when one would think it would join the Seine to Paris, it curves round to head east towards the Atlantic coast and the port of Nantes.

Fed by some 100 tributaries, the Loire was for centuries a placid, majestic, but untamed

river, suffering mysterious changes to its course as it meandered slowly towards the sea. It is the least navigable of all France's major rivers and its flow is relatively small throughout much of the year. It wanders about over a wide bed. In many reaches, the depth drops to no more than .25m. Up to the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the river, in spite of its whims, sandbanks, whirlpools, floods and tolls were much used as a means of communication. Navigation was organised by a guild of mariners based at Orleans and as well as merchandise, there was a great flow of travellers, who preferred the river to the road. The journey from Orleans to Nantes took six days and from ten to

twenty for the return journey, depending upon season and winds.

In 1832 the first steamboat service was started, cutting journey times down to two days, and by 1843 more reliable boats were carrying some 100,000 passengers a year. However, the coming of the railways began an inevitable decline in traffic and the last shipping company closed down in 1862.

All navigation has long ceased on the upper and middle sections of the river, except at two places where the water has been held back by weirs, at Roanne and Decize. From Bouchemarine, south-east of Angers to Nantes a channel 100 to 150 m wide is marked by buoys, but even so at low water, it is wise to contact the river authorities before attempting a passage. Because of these problems the French constructed the Canal Lateral à Loire, which opened in 1838. It runs parallel with the river for some 200km from Digoin to Briare and is an important link in the chain of the inland waterways of the country.

Naturally, the vineyards used the river as an outlet for selling their wines and many villages along its banks are still called "ports", Port-St Maur, Port-Lin and Port-Boulet.

For centuries the Loire formed a natural barrier between southerners who spoke the "langue d'Oc" and those who lived north of the river who spoke the "langue d'oïl" which ultimately became the "langue française". The history of the middle ages in France is writ large on its banks. To the south, were fought the battles that won, and later lost half of France to the English. In the Loire's environs, from Louis XI on, the kings and nobles of France built some of the most magnificent châteaux the world has ever seen. In the course of the 100 year war, (1337-1453), the centre of French culture moved with the court from Paris to Touraine. New universities were founded in Orleans and Angers that attracted scholars from far afield, including Erasmus and Calvin.

Much of French literature found inspiration in or near this mighty river. Alexander Dumas wrote 35 of his 250 novels at Montsoreau, Victor Hugo lived in the Sarthe before his exile to Jersey. Balzac was a native of Tours and of course our patron, François Rabelais, physician, humanist, poet and novelist. He was a master vintner of Chinon.

The Loire region, along with the other major wine growing areas of France, produces a large volume of wines classified either as "Vin de Table" or "Vin de Pays". So before we begin our look at the more famous wines of the Loire, let us examine the status of these "country wines" more closely.

Vin de table wines are for every day drinking, but must conform to certain EEC quality guidelines

concerning the grape varieties that may be used. They must attain a minimum alcoholic strength of 8.5 to 9.0 degrees and have a certain acidity. The label must state that the wine is indeed vin de table and show its alcoholic strength. The wine in the bottle can legally be a blend of wines from one or more regions and indeed the label may even state "Blend of wines from different countries of the European Community", as it is not yet necessary to give either the origin or composition of the wine.

The négociant in preparing a table wine, seeks to maintain a consistent standard to suit the food of the area and also tries to ensure it is of a recognisably strong character. In this category French consumers look for honest straightforward wines that are pleasant to drink at a modest price. On the other hand vin de pays wines have to meet more detailed and tighter production requirements. To obtain this classification a wine must conform to four main conditions. It must be produced in the clearly defined area from which it gets its name as stated on the label and it may only originate from one of three categories of origin.

First:

*Vins de pays régionaux* wines can come from several departments as long as they conform to an accepted style. There are three such regions of origin.

- Vins de Pays d'Oc applies to the whole of the Languedoc-Roussillon

- Vins de Pays du Jardin de la France, to the whole of the Loire valley

- Vins de Pays du Comté Tolosan, to the area in the south-west corner of France.

Second:

*Vins de Pays Départementaux*. These must state the name of the department where they were produced. The numbers of such departments vary from year to year, but it is normally around 30-35

The wines must have a natural minimum strength of between 9-10 degrees, conform to set requirements in terms of grape varieties used and meet the approval of an officially recognised panel of local experts who regularly reject some 10% of wines presented to them for this classification. Thirdly:

*Vins de Pays de Zone*. Named after the zone of production, these wines may also state the name of the individual commune for example Vin de Pays de Retz to the south of the Loire. There are about 100 of such zones, three of which are in the Loire. Wines in this category have to meet even more exacting standards, as laid down by local growers committees and as formally specified by decree. The volume of vins de pays produced fluctuates from year to year and if a producer cannot sell his wines as vins de pays, he

can always sell them as vins de table. Vins de pays wines go well with food and the white, rosé and light red wines are best if drunk chilled. Without doubt, the quality of these wines is improving all the time and personal favourites can be very good value for money. The majority are produced from local grape varieties, but the names of noble grapes are beginning to appear under these labels and there is now an almost unlimited range of genuine "country wines". Recently, in a French supermarket I spotted a Chardonnay under the Vins de Pays du Jardin de la France label. The popular choice in the UK at present seems to be wines from the Vin de Pays d'Oc.

So in the knowledge that vin de table and vin de pays wines form a large percentage of the volume of wines produced, let us start our journey up the Loire with a look at the valleys of the Sèvre-et-Maine, two attractive little rivers that wander to the south of the Loire, a half-hour's drive from Nantes.

Stumpy vines, hardly more than 75cm high, dominate the scene and with the benefit of a year long mild climate and sub-soils with varying percentages of clay, sand, quartz and decomposed rock, the vineyards here produce the dry white wine, known the world over as Muscadet, an AOC wine.

The Romans had vineyards here 2000 years ago and by the 11<sup>th</sup> century the Loire wine districts were already renowned, although this maritime area was chiefly known for its thin red wine. Dutch traders used their influence to persuade growers to change to more exportable white wines and by the early years of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Gros Plant covered two-thirds of the region. A variety from Burgundy known as Melon de Bourgogne, was also being planted here in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and by the 1630's it had been officially renamed as Muscadet. But it was the terrible winter of 1709 when the sea froze along the coast, that set the scene for Muscadet. Growers found that the Melon had survived the harsh winter better than any of the other varieties and so sought a supply to restock their vineyards. Although native, the Melon had been banned from being grown in Burgundy during the 16<sup>th</sup> century and growers were forced by decree, to replant their vineyards with more "noble" grape varieties. Legend has it that the then Duke of Brittany, desperate to restore his vineyards destroyed that winter and hearing that the Burgundians were tearing it out of their vineyards, had hundreds of rootstocks of the unfortunate Melon brought down the Loire and planted around Nantes.

Within 5 years the vigneron prospered when they found that the vine was planted in soil with a climate it evidently liked. Being small, it was easy

to prune and pick, the vine was hardy and the grapes ripened early, usually by the third week of September. Soon, Muscadet had eclipsed the Gros-Plant. The climate in the Pays Nantais area is affected by the presence of the Gulf Stream some 120km away. Fig trees, magnolias and palms grow next to ancient oaks. The month of September heralds the start of the rainy season. The vigneron quickly found that vines grown to gain maximum benefit from the sun, ensured an early harvest, a factor all the more important as the Melon produces its bunches of tightly packed grapes, concealed beneath small round leaves.

There is Muscadet and there is Muscadet, even though all bear the AOC label. There are four separate classifications, Muscadet de Sèvre-et-Maine, Muscadet des Coteaux de la Loire, Muscadet Cotes de Grand Lieu and plain Muscadet. A traditional Pays Nantais technique is to bottle the wine directly off its lees deposited during fermentation. The method produces a wine with barely discernible bubbles of dissolved carbon dioxide gas. Such wines are said to have a more creamy, yeasty taste and yet seem to "bite" the tongue. To use "sur lie" on the label, the wine must have spent one winter in vat or barrel and still be on its lees, the sediment of mainly dead yeast cells left over from vinification prior to bottling. And that is the problem; some wines are not genuinely bottled on the lees. Pumping and moving the wine around before bottling, knocks most of the bubbles out, which can happen when a grower's wine is carted off to a merchant's cellar for bottling.

Only bottling at the producer's cellar can really preserve the sur lie freshness. Again if the lees comes from a tainted or damaged grape harvest, the wine can be flaccid and dull. Whisper it not but some wineries have been known to put a minute amount of carbon dioxide into their wines! These problems were very noticeable twenty or thirty years ago when allied with a sharp rise in prices, the reputation of Muscadet suffered.

The 1979 Loire harvest produced a glut of Chablis at knockdown prices. Muscadet vigneron were forced to lower their prices and the area began to suffer economically. So much so that there were riots, négociants properties were attacked and police vans patrolled the vineyards.

In 1984, the harvest was only two thirds of the usual size of sales that year and growers forced prices up some 30-40%. Since then, with the growing competition of dry white wines from further up the Loire, from New Zealand and elsewhere, the vigneron, négociants and authorities have had to work hard to improve quality in order to maintain their markets, particularly as 40% of the

wine produced is exported abroad, mainly to the UK and the USA.

Some merchants, such as Sauvion have portable bottling lines and bottle sur lie properly at the growers cellar. Guy Bossard makes an excellent organic sur lie. Look out for the single estate wines from Chereau-Carré and Chateau de la Cassemicherie. The message however, is that it is still wise to buy wines labelled "mis en bouteille sur lie a la propriété chateau or domaine".

Largely unknown out of its area, Muscadet gained recognition in Paris and fashionable French seaside resorts in the 1930's. It was a cheap dry, finely balanced, moderately strong white wine, (11 degrees minimum). Pale golden in colour, smoothly structured, having a low acidic level and with an aroma of ripe grapes. It is the only wine in France to have a set maximum alcohol level, (12.3%)

It's fame quickly grew and has stayed, as the ideal accompaniment to fish and shellfish. All Muscadet is normally drunk young, but surprisingly, it can keep for two to four years. In vintage years, depending upon its origin and the quality of production wines have been claimed to keep for five to twenty years and yet still retain a fresh flavour.

Wine sold as Muscadet AOC is produced in small quantities in the departments of Maine-et-Loire and the Vendée. A simple, light and rather neutral wine, it can in some years be flabby and ordinary. The best is considered to be made by Phillipe Dumortier at the Chateau de la Preuille, Saint-Hilaire de Loulay.

Muscadet des Coteaux de la Loire from north of the Loire, produces wines in even smaller quantities but the area can give better wine in very hot years with more lasting properties.

Muscadet Côtes de Grand Lieu, only granted AOC status in 1994, is a sub-region that stretches west from Nantes to the sea. Nearly all are bottled sur lie and the clay soil imposes its own character on the wines from this area. The vigneron here are aware that they need to develop and maintain a "style" to compete with the other AOCs and they are experimenting with the use of new and used oak barrel fermentation, trying to get a more Burgundy feel to the wine. The best wines are considered to be from Luc Choblet's Domaine des Herbauges at Bouaye.

The heart of the region however is the Sevre-et-Maine, producing the best balanced, the most scented and soonest ready wines. Here there are many hundreds of small vineyards, from two to ten hectares set in a landscape of valleys, old water mills, splendid chateaux, little hamlets, windmills and ruined castles.

Ideally, Muscadet should have a lemony acidity and good ones may taste slightly peppery, nutty or salty. As we have seen, domaine bottled wines are considered the best. Look out especially for wines from the villages of St-Fiacre and Vallet Chevaliers. We remember with particular pleasure, our visit in 1987 to the vineyard at the Chateau de la Gallissonniere in the village of Le Pallet. Incidentally the chateau is named after a French admiral of that name who built the house in 1737 and who was killed in a naval battle with the English under Lord Byng.

Unless one is prepared to pay in the order of £10 or so, vintages are of little consequence in buying Muscadet, although depending on weather conditions, some years are better than others.

I have greatly enjoyed domaine wines from 1992 and 1995, 1996 and 1997. Indeed as I write I am sipping a sur lie 1997 Chateau La Touche!



There we will leave our intrepid traveller, pen in one hand and his crisp La Touche in the other. The ink flows as does the wine. In the next Courier we will enjoy his look at the three VDQS in Muscadet country before he arrives .... at Anjou.



Our AGM and supper was a relaxed and sociable affair. The business was dealt with, under The Grand Commandeur's brisk direction. A light hearted tasting was enjoyed as an alternative to the more usual vin d'honneur. Some 55 Chevaliers and their guests then enjoyed a dinner, another tour de force from the Bleeding Heart's chef. The wines, as ever complemented the food, eleven in all! Our Délégué Générale, had dug deep to the bottoms of many bins. Some old friends were tried still drinking well and one a little senile; they conjured many memories of the Loire and previous events. If you have not yet discovered the supper and AGM, try to join us. It is a delightful contrast to the more formal Chapitre.

The tasting preceded the supper. The bistro atmosphere supplied a very suitable ambience. Our Grand Commandeur Derek Sheen supported by Trésorier Robert wills commented on the four wines –

**Quincy, Les Creves-Coeurs, Louis Viltange 1997;** The Quincy was the second AOC viticultural area in France. It's light dry soils allows the Sauvignon to ripen earlier than in Sancerre. With the right vigneron this may be a wine that could help this neglected AOC and regain it's respected name.

**Sauvignon de Touraine, Domaine des Chezelles, Earl Alain Marcadet 1998;** Named after the principle city this region embraces the two départements Indre-et-Loire and Loir-et-Cher. Touraine is archetypal Loire. Sauvignon Blanc is not a grape to all tastes, considered by some to be sharp tart, flinty, dry and stony, but well made it is floral, clean, sprightly and herbaceous.

**St Nicholas de Bourgueil, Le Vigneau, Donatien Bahaud 1997;** Granted AOC status in 1937 these vineyards lie in a very picturesque region of the Loire with an unbroken panorama of wines covering plateaux and hillsides. It's mild climate is ideal as the 10<sup>th</sup> century Benedictines discovered. St Nicholas' wines are considered to be lighter than Bourgueil. Compared with Chinon some say Bourgueil wines are more rustic. Donatino Bahaud is perhaps better known for his Sevre-et-Maine sur lie wines.

**Touraine Mesland, Clos de la Briderie, J and F Girault 1997.** One of Touraine's oldest wine growing areas in and around the village of Mesland. They blend Malbec, Gamay and Cabernet Franc. Girault is one of the premier producers. Their efforts produce concentrated colour and depth. It has all the characters of a first class wine.



### *The 1999 Annual General Meeting – a brief report*

The AGM produced some discussion, in particular about venues for Chapitres. The Committee have been busy in the City, understanding the venues available, their suitability and their costs. This has enabled us to book for this year's Chapitre at The Ironmongers Hall. It has a long history. The first hall was purchased in 1457. Their Court books go back to 1555 as do the list of Freemen. They survived the Great Fire, endured a bomb in the first world war, and avoided most of the blitz in the last war. Like most of the liveries, they have rebuilt several times. The present Hall is in Shaftesbury Place on the edge of the Barbican. It is in the Tudor style, with many treasures, and wonderful craftsmanship. For the rest – try to be there!

Our straw poll about midweek versus weekend, seemed to say that if the venue is worth it, weekdays are not a problem. We were keen to consider Vintners at some time but they let only Monday to Thursday. It was suggested that we go to the Vintners Hall, and there was plenty of interest in that idea. So we will go there in 2000. Our millenium event. We have booked there on a Thursday in November 2000. There will be more details at the appropriate time. We are back in the City and we intend to make these events successful.

We asked for views about a Chapitre outside London with a residential night away. There seemed to be some support for that too but given the plans set out above it is unlikely to happen for a while.

The meeting voted for the Management Committee to stand for a further year. We had no nominations for a Chef de Cuisine, or a further committee member. We have not been able so far to identify candidates for either of those posts. We reminded the members present that the Management committee has reduced in size because members have resigned, usually because they feel they have been there long enough, and their feeling that some new blood would be stimulating.

Raymond Harris, Ecuyer stood down on this occasion. The Grand Commandeur spoke warmly of Raymond's contribution. He was inducted in 1980, promoted to Officier in 1989 and Commandeur in 1998. He has enriched our discussions, always taking a sensible view and wise advice. He was too, a man for detail, he always found the Chancellor's mistakes! I will miss him. We need some new members. Please digest the note over the page.

The Loire trip is well supported. We have firm bookings for thirty rooms, but rooms can be found. If you want talk about the possibility call Audrey Thompson on 01923 778054.

Finally we talked about our initiative to make sure that we have aims that suit our constitution and that we pursue those aims. This is now a standing agenda item. We have strengthened our friendship in Angers. We are looking at the possibility of our "own label" wine, (perhaps a little unlikely). If a Chevalier has any

experience in this subject please call Robert Wills on 01483 562314. We are contemplating a web site and a link with "Food and wine from France", an organisation with whom we have worked in the past. If you have any contacts that might be useful, please let us know.



**T**he present Management Committee wants new faces and ideas, broader viewpoints and fresh approaches. If we are to grow and offer varied activities we must find more Chevaliers who will become involved. Whilst we try to know you all, there are many we do not know well but we would like you all to consider helping the Commanderie improve and prosper. The work is not arduous and need not take up much time. We meet about four times during the year, currently in Central London and dates are known well in advance. We meet at 11 am. We try to finish by 1 pm.

Only a few of us spend appreciable time beyond meetings. Some members may help with a particular project from time to time if they wish. It has been our habit (if it is practical), to bring new members onto the committee for a while as Halberdiers, and if after a while they want to help with or take on, one of the more strenuous jobs they may do so. Not everybody wants to take that step, and that is absolutely reasonable. We would like to hear from any Chevalier who is interested to know more. If some first approaches engender interest we will welcome a few guests to sit in at our next meeting in June to see how we operate.

Please consider taking a step towards becoming an Officier, however tentative that step might be. Your interest will be treated as just that. There need not be a final point of no return. It is likely that in the future, new members joining the committee as Halberdier, will serve for a tenure of two years in that office, and then move to another post or stand down.

Please write to me or call by 'phone, in confidence if you wish. The address and 'phone numbers are over the page. Please think it over. This is an important matter. I look forward to hearing from you.

pfb

We were saddened to hear of Bobby Baskcomb's death last August. He was one of the "Anglais aerien" who flew to Angers and helped to establish the British Commanderie. He wrote a little while ago mentioning some of the adventures they enjoyed.  
He was inducted in 1953 in France.

#### From the Chancellor



#### Some dates for your diaries

Management Committee meetings - Thursday June 17 1999; Thursday 9 September 1999;  
Thursday 4 November 1999; Thursday 3 February 2000; Thursday 6 April 2000

Loire visit - Thursday 23 September to Monday 27 September  
Chapitre 1999 Ironmongers' Hall - Saturday November 20 1999  
AGM and supper (provisional) - Saturday 25 March 2000

#### Subscriptions

Should you have overlooked paying your subscription please send your cheque to Robert Wills. Annual subscriptions cover the calendar year, so those not paid by now are well in arrears! It would save money and time for us and you if you take out a bankers order. Robert will be happy to send the appropriate form to you. Robert's number is 01483 562314

A postscript from Commandeur John Braun, having seen Cyril Saper's piece in Courier 34. As yet we do not know whether Cyril will manage to get to the UK this year. I am holding seven or eight names and I am happy to have yours on the list to contact you if he is able to come. John writes . . . . .

It was good to have news of Cyril and to know that we may have the chance of a gossip with him in due course when he is fitter and no doubt when the weather is warmer. He and some other Chevaliers will no doubt recall those heady days when we first went to Angers and a procession was winding its way through the town. Cyril became involved in the festivities to the great amusement of Glyn Hardwicke, who had not yet inherited the mantle of Chancellor from me. When relating the story of these capers particularly when the wine had flowed, Glyn would always say that Cyril had led the route, "dancing naked in the streets". Cyril never minded this flight of Welsh fancy. The fictional episode became a part of the folklore of the disrobing ceremonies, which on one occasion turned into a scene when Glyn and John Addey had a difference of opinion. Anyway, naked or not, we shall all look forward to greeting Cyril.

John Braun



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