

FROM THE CELLAR

# The New White Wine Paradigm

Super Sauvignons are creating waves of excitement in wine country.

BY KAREN MACNEIL

At least once a year, someone asks me about new trends in the US wine industry. I always have to explain that vineyards are long-term endeavors. Wine is the quintessential *un-trend*.

But there are paradigm shifts, and one of them is happening right now. It's the emergence of a whole new class of California Sauvignon Blancs—wines that are bright, minerally, and complex, often with a ravishing raciness and richness. I call them “super Sauvignons.”

If you thought you didn't like Sauvignon Blanc, it's time to rethink your position. These are not the thin, weedy Sauvignon Blancs of old. (And of course, they're not \$20, either.) These are polished, sophisticated, expensive white wines. And the time to drink them is now, in the spring, because their fresh, citrusy, botanical flavors are absolutely perfect with springtime foods.

Why these Sauvignons are happening is a case study in the evolution of American wine culture. Maybe we are finally over our national infatuation with Chardonnays that are overoaked, overwrought, and overmade. Maybe the speed of contemporary culture has infused us all with a passion for things vital and alive? (And what is Sauvignon Blanc if not energetic?) Or maybe, as sommelier friends of mine point out, wine drinkers increasingly want to “start the night right” with a glass of something pure, cool, and refreshing. (And you can't drink Champagne every night, can you?)

In the Napa Valley alone, there are currently more than 25 Sauvignon Blancs that cost more than \$50 a bottle. Sauvignon Blancs such as Illumination, Accendo, Lail Vineyards “Georgia,” Araujo, Matanzas Creek “Journey,” Rudd, and Spottswoode are at the forefront of this new style of Sauvignon Blanc that's the most exciting thing happening right now with white wine in the US.

These wines taste different because they are made differently, starting from the ground up. First, they are planted in better vineyard sites—in some cases, in sites that historically would have been reserved for Cabernet Sauvignon. Second, the vines are cared for and trained with great precision. Sauvignon Blanc is what is known as a highly vigorous variety. Left to its own devices, it grows

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like a weed, producing so many leaves and shoots that energy is diverted away from ripening grape clusters—and the wine tastes thin and green as a result. The new Sauvignon Blancs come from vines that are carefully manicured at great expense. In fact, all other things being equal, it costs more to grow a top Sauvignon Blanc vine than it does a Chardonnay vine.

The wines are also made in a more sophisticated manner. Many old-style Sauvignons were quickly made in large stainless-steel tanks and then released on the market in under a year. The “super Sauvignons” are generally made in multiple individual lots that might be fermented and/or aged in four or more types of vessels before being back blended—any combination of concrete eggs, used oak barrels, small stainless-steel drums, and new oak barrels. The wines also undergo a lot of “lees stirring”—a process that adds rich texture to the wines.

And furthering that complexity, many super Sauvignons incorporate small amounts of other varieties—notably Sauvignon Gris and Semillon—or other clonal selections, like an especially aromatic version of Sauvignon Blanc called Sauvignon Musqué.

In the end, I believe that all great wines are precise. Their flavors are not muddled or diffused. Their flavors are exact and vivid—like the sound of a church bell in the mountains. For me, no domestic white wines are more precise or more inspiring than the new super Sauvignons. 🍷

*Karen MacNeil is the author of The Wine Bible and editor of WineSpeed.*

PHOTOGRAPH BY KING LAWRENCE

## THE NEW SUPER SAUVIGNONS

**ILLUMINATION** Sauvignon Blanc 2016 (Napa Valley, California) \$50  
Minerally, citrusy, bright, lovely.

**RUDD** Sauvignon Blanc 2015 (Mt. Veeder, Napa Valley, California) \$80  
Limey, minerally, long, supple.

**ACCENDO** Sauvignon Blanc 2015 (Napa Valley, California) \$55  
Rich, spicy, exquisite.

**MATANZAS CREEK** “Journey” Sauvignon Blanc 2015 (Sonoma County, California) \$50  
Racy, tangy and stony.

**LAIL VINEYARDS** “Georgia” Sauvignon Blanc 2015 (Napa Valley, California) \$125  
Languorous, rich, reminiscent of top white Bordeaux.

## FROM THE BARREL

To taste a wine, a winemaker siphons the wine out of a barrel using a glass rod called a wine thief. Most winemakers check their wines multiple times a week to make sure they are evolving well.