

When a close friend of mine first heard of the inaugural Jura Wine Tasting in Toronto, last April, his twitter was ablaze with “Jura - I am all over the obscure regions!”

Jura-ssic Wine

Eighty kilometers to the east of Burgundy, and eighty kilometers to the west of Switzerland, is the eighty kilometer wide wine region known as the Jura. This secluded mountainous land is probably best known, to most people, for its non vinous exploits. It is the birthplace of Louis Pasteur, and home to a trio of renowned cow cheeses: Comté, Morbier and Blue de Gex.

Wine wise, the Jura has the distinction of being home to France’s very first co-op, established in 1906, the first AOC area in 1936 (Arbois), and of course, the address of Vin Jaune- France’s answer to dry Sherry. Also, the global wine community owes a debt of gratitude to a Jurassian botanist, Alexis Millardet. He was the creator of the famous ‘bouillis bordelaise’, used to combat vineyard rot, and, even more importantly, he and his partner were the first to suggest grafting as means to combat phylloxera.

Having grown up and started my wine studies in Montreal, Vin Jaune and other dry wines from this area, were always plentiful, and continue to be so. Even after moving to Niagara in the mid 90s, these wines were available at the LCBO. Sadly, due to the decision of the monopoly to shift purchasing towards a more streamlined and homogenously fruit driven product, these wines fell out of favour. A true pity! The Jura offers a selection of grapes and wine styles, which are found nowhere else, making for both interesting drinking, as well as innovative food marriages.

The Jura itself only became French in 1678. Before this time it was under Spanish influence- European power plays of that time period did indeed produce some interesting results! And because the Spaniards created Sherry, there is a certain belief that the genesis of oxidized wines in the Jura stemmed from their rule. But there is no firm evidence to validate this hypothesis.

Prior to the arrival of phylloxera and WW1, there were close to 20 000 hectares of vineyards. Today, there are only 2000, planted on a mixture of limestone on the slopes, clay on the flatlands and smatterings of marl throughout, giving rise to four geographic appellations, two style appellations and five varietals.

The Grapes

Chardonnay

Because of its proximity to Burgundy, it comes as no surprise that Chardonnay is the most planted grape in the Jura. The best renditions are from a combination of hillside slopes and limestone soils, à la modèle de la Bourgogne. Both non oaked and oaked versions exist. In regards to the later, when applied, it is done so judiciously, so as to protect the integrity of the fruit.

Savagnin (Naturé)

The Jura's singular white grape, and number two in terms of acreage, is Savagnin, which is also known as Traminer (but not Gewurz). It may be the only grape authorized in the production of Vin Jaune, but it is not solely restricted to said specialty. Late ripening, low yielding and high in acid, it has the capacity to produce interesting dry wines, as well as vibrant dessert wines.

Also, there are a few distinctions to be made with both white varieties, namely non oxidized and oxidized versions, labeled ouillé, which refers to the fact that all barrels topped up the eye (oeil) of the barrel (and, subsequently, are not oxidized), and non-ouillé (oxidized) respectively.

Historically, a high percentage of white wines from the Jura were oxidized, but sometime in the 90s, a transition to a modern style of winemaking occurred. Today, both styles co-exist. In the case of Savagnin, many producers will actually label their wine Naturé, the ancient name of Savagnin, when producing the oxidized version. There is also a wine christened Tradition, which is a blend of oxidized Savagnin and Chardonnay.

Pinot Noir

Without a doubt, this is the finest red varietal grown in the Jura. The best are reminiscent of top Côte de Beaune, and once again, it is the limestone which is the key to its success.

Poulsard (Ploussard)

In times gone by, the Jura's most planted red was consumed as a table grape, this due to its pale colour and minimal tannins. Even after a week of hard macerations, it is a Rosé at best. It is also susceptible to a plethora of viticultural issues. More structured versions come to life when blended with Pinot Noir or Trousseau. Classic aromas are of red fruits and flowers.

Trousseau

Known as Bastardo in Portugal, this late ripening varietal finds success being planted on the warmest gravel soils and with full sun exposure. Good colour, medium tannins, high alcohol and combination of red and black fruits are its call signs.

Specialties

The Jura produces two idiosyncratic wines, Vin Jaune and Vin de Paille, which do not have their own Appellation Contrôlée (AOC). Rather, they must be labeled in conjunction with an AOC.

Vin Jaune

The secret to making Vin Jaune is late harvested Savagnin planted on blue and red marls. By law, the minimum alcohol content at harvest is 11.5%, but in practice, most producers easily surpass this. The juice is then fermented in older barrels to dryness, but never fortified like Sherry. Aging then transpires

in low humidity cellars, wherein the barrels are never topped up, allowing for evaporation, and subsequently, the development of the famed voile (yeast film), partially protecting the wine from oxidation.

After six years and three months of aging, the wine's alcohol has risen to 15%, and has developed the characteristic deep yellow colour and attributes of yeast, nuts, dried fruits and curry. It is then bottled in the squat 620ml bottle known as the clavelin; this format alludes to the remaining volume of 1L of wine, after seventy five months of aging and evaporation.

Of course, such a singular wine deserves an equally singular celebration, which comes in the form of the La Percée du Vin Jaune. The event, which has become France's largest wine festival, welcomes close to 60 000 people during the first week-end of every February, when the yeast is broken and the wine from 6 autumns previous is withdrawn from cask.

Vin de Paille

Grapes for this wine are picked early so as to retain good acidity and avoid any rot which may occur with late autumn rains. The whole clusters are then dried on straw (paille) mats or racks, in well ventilated rooms for a minimum of 6 weeks, until they desiccate. It is at this point they are pressed. One hundred kilos of grapes will produce a miniscule fifteen liters of wine, which will then be fermented until 15% to 18% alcohol is achieved. The resulting sweet wine will then spend three years in barrel, producing a stickie spectrum of jammy fruits, prunes, honey, caramel and orange marmalade. These wines can only be fashioned within Côtes de Jura, l'Étoile and Arbois AOCs.

The Appellations

Crémant de Jura AOC

The 'style' AOC may be produced anywhere in the Jura region and denotes a sparkling wine made in the traditional method. Both white and rose versions are produced and all five grapes are authorized for use. For the white version, the law mandates a minimum usage of 50% Chardonnay, and for rosé, Pinot Noir and Trousseau must comprise at least 50% of the assemblage.

Macvin de Jura AOC

Macvin is a Mistelle/Vin de Liqueur, or if you will, fortified grape juice. Like Crémant, Macvin is a 'style' AOC, which may be concocted anywhere within Jurassian boundries, and all grapes are permitted.

Two parts of fresh sweet grape juice are blended with one part Marc de Jura, a pomace (think grappa) based spirit, which has already been aged, in barrel, for 18 months. Once blended, the two are set aside to marry for twelve months before bottling. The final product will be sweet, with an alcohol content somewhere between 16 and 22%.

Arbois AOC

Jura's most important region in terms of production is Arbois. Within the 850 hectares, many soils exist, allowing for all styles and colours of wine to be produced. Within this area, is the tiny town of Pupillin. The Hollywood sign proudly announces itself as the world capital of Poulsard, with 70% of all plantings being of this fickle varietal.

Côte de Jura AOC

The second largest appellation follows the ground rules set about for Arbois; all grapes, colours and styles are in play.

L'Étoile AOC

L'Étoile is the smallest region with a slim 60 hectares cultivated. This appellation derives its name from two sources- the star shaped fossils which permeate the soils and the village itself, which is surrounded by 5 mountains, roughly forming the five points of a star. Chardonnay is the king, followed by the queen, Savagnin. Poulsard is authorized solely for Vin de Paille.

Château-Chalon AOC

The appellation of CC is a village perched on small mountain, surrounded by sloped vineyards. It is also considered the cru of Vin Jaune. Why cru? The combination of slopes with blue marl and stones helps to expedite ripening and give an extra dimension to the low yielding Savagnin grapes. Producers are also fanatical. In a great year, a meager 2000 hectolitres is produced, while in lesser ones, there is not a drop.

Classic Jura Food and Other Possibilities

So what to pair with these wines? Locally, the classic dish with Vin Jaune is, ironically enough, Coq au Vin Jaune; a decadent combination of free range bresse chicken, cream, Vin Jaune and morel mushrooms. The version I savoured, while in the Jura, also had pinch of curry added, to further bridge the pairing. Otherwise, Comté cheese for its nuttiness.

For Chardonnay and Savagnin, fondue and fresh water fish work extremely well because of the acidities. As for the reds, and their natural propensity to delicacy, charcuterie, smoked sausage and duck are regional combinations.

Then again, do not restrict yourself. Open your mind and your palate, as there is much versatility and diversity to submit to just one style of cuisine. These wines are made for food!