

TOM STEVENSON

## Catch-22

At the first ever International Sparkling Wine Symposium at Denbies Wine Estate on March 18, 2009, Tim Atkin MW asked, “Are there any grape varieties that are not widely used for sparkling-wine production that are or might be potentially as good as Chardonnay and Pinot Noir?”

In *Christie’s World Encyclopedia of Champagne & Sparkling Wine*, I describe the sparkling-wine application of more than 150 grape varieties. From Tim’s mention of Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, it is evident that he was thinking essentially about dry, bottle-fermented sparkling wines of premium quality and above. I suspect he was wondering what other grapes might benefit from yeast aging.

When the second fermentation is complete, dead yeast cells undergo an enzymatic breakdown called autolysis. The aromas created during this process are rather delicate, which is why it is often said that neutral grape varieties best suit classic bottle-fermentation techniques. Although it is true that dominant aromas easily overwhelm the subtle effects of autolysis, relatively neutral should not be interpreted as bland. The effects of autolysis need something to work on, and a classic sparkling-wine grape will also need a flavor profile that is sympathetic to the mellow, creamy, biscuity, and toasty bottle aromas that develop after disgorgement. This is why Chardonnay and Pinot Noir are ideal for the job.

Three grapes that are not are Cava’s Parellada, Macabéo, and Xarel-lo, since they gain nothing from time on yeast or, indeed, post-disgorgement aging. I prefer unpretentious tank-fermented Prosecco to bottle-fermented Cava. Prosecco is another grape that has nothing to gain from either time on yeast or post-disgorgement aging, but at least its producers are aware of this and, consequently, use minimal yeast contact in order to preserve as many of Prosecco’s primary aromas as possible.

I put Chenin Blanc (thus Saumur, Vouvray, et al) in a similar category to Cava and Prosecco, though I have had



some delicious exceptions. Mauzac works well for the sweet Blanquette *méthode ancestrale* in Limoux but has been found wanting for modern, brut-style sparkling wines. The truth is that hardly any French sparkling wine made outside the famous region itself has impressed me—not even when made from Champagne varieties. This is primarily due to the fact that they have not come from vineyards specifically designated for sparkling wine. If they had, then Burgundy would surely be the second most famous sparkling-wine region in the world, and we would not be searching around the rest of the wine world for top-class alternatives to Champagne.

### Sparkling Muscadet or Beaujolais?

Considering how a good Muscadet ages in bottle, it is obvious that Melon de Bourgogne should be a prime candidate for sparkling-wine production. I prefer to drink a top Muscadet when it is young and fresh and its minerality is at its most vibrant. If you keep them for three or four years, they age like an inferior Chardonnay, but what does a white Coteaux Champenois age like? Exactly. So why has no one tried to make sparkling Muscadet? The nearest I have come across is Guy Bossard’s Ludwig Hahn, but that is a blend of predominantly Gros Plant, with more Chardonnay than Melon de Bourgogne, and even some Cabernet Sauvignon.



Every Pinot variant is suitable for high-class sparkling wine, and Champagne has historically grown them all—even Gamay (which, like Chardonnay, is a natural cross between Pinot and Gouais Blanc). In 1980, there were still 20ha (50 acres) of Gamay, mostly in the Aube, where it was once prolific: Drappier 1959 contains 50 percent Gamay. Gamay’s ban from the world’s greatest sparkling-wine region should not discourage others from dabbling with the effervescent potential of this grape. John Worontschak, one of the founding fathers of the International Sparkling Wine Symposium, once produced a pure Gamay sparkler of surprising finesse. He was consulting at Valley Vineyards (now Stanlake Park), where, in 1992, they harvested some Gamay for the first time. It was too thin for a rosé, let alone a red, and its high acidity encouraged John to try a sparkling style. It was such a success that it is a pity no one bothered to look longer and harder at Gamay clones that might be suitable for the UK’s breezy climate.

### The old reliables

Chardonnay and Pinot Noir not only work, they are also probably the best varieties for the job. After all, they have achieved their status through a selection process that took centuries, involving thousands of producers and literally billions of bottles of sparkling wine. So what incentive is there for serious sparkling-wine producers to mess around with any other grapes, particularly in countries where there are no native varieties? Very little. They are under pressure from consumers, too: If they want to achieve the best price, they must consider that most customers willing to pay top dollar have sufficient knowledge to expect sparkling wines of a certain quality to be made from Chardonnay or Pinot Noir, and insufficient experience to see the possibilities beyond. There is thus a marketing imperative, and it is a varietal catch-22 that very few are brave or foolish enough to escape from. ■