

The rise, and rise, of Sauvignon blanc in the global marketplace

The international juggernaut, the go-to wine, the fastest-growing wine style... There is no shortage of descriptors to illustrate Sauvignon blanc's meteoric rise in sales and popularity over the past few years. But what is fuelling its progress and can it keep up the momentum? **Sharon Nagel** takes a closer look at some of the world's leading wine markets to chart its success and see what lies ahead.

How New Zealand is driving the US market

2020, admittedly, was not your average year when it came to wine sales. Many imbibers switched inevitably from on-premise to off, some reduced their overall consumption of wine whilst others increased it. But analysts concur that in any crisis, existing trends only become more entrenched and both data and industry comments substantiate the fact that the vogue for Sauvignon last year was anything but a flash-in-the-pan. In the vanguard of this movement is the USA, where Sauvignon blanc was gaining significant traction before the pandemic hit and has continued to witness growth since.

“Sauvignon blanc has been absolutely booming over the past couple of years in the US” confirms Jonas De Maere, wine program manager with Ahold Delhaize USA. *“It accounts for about 15% of our white wine sales today and is the third best-selling varietal after Chardonnay (35% of sales) and Pinot Grigio (25% share of sales). While Pinot Grigio and Chardonnay are flat, Sauvignon blanc has been growing at about 17 % for the last three years”*. Aside from intrinsic issues such as palate appeal, one of the main drivers of Sauvignon's success in the American market has been efforts by New Zealand to ramp up its presence in the world's pre-eminent wine market.



Household Kiwi brands such as Oyster Bay, Cloudy Bay and Kim Crawford have made significant inroads in a country that until recently was largely dominated by domestic wines. *“While only a couple of years ago most Sauvignon blanc sales were domestic Californian wine, today the share of New Zealand is as big, both accounting for a 44% share and together making up 88% of total Sauvignon blanc sales,”* stresses De Maere.

More adventurous consumers move from home-grown to more exotic provenances

This, in turn, has prompted a shift in styles: *“With New Zealand growing faster, we are seeing more crisp and fruity styles working very well. Domestic producers are trying to imitate that fresher style as well”*. The transition mirrors the trend in rosé wines, where American consumers have tended to swap the heavier, sweeter White Zinfandel for drier, lighter French-inspired rosés. But one of Sauvignon's biggest selling points is its ability to embrace myriad styles, offering a wine for every occasion, type of food and wallet. In fact, the success of New Zealand Sauvignon has spawned a raft of new-generation offerings from a number of producer countries eager to cash in on the varietal's popularity, thereby broadening its scope and creating a virtuous circle.



This is not just true of the US market: Walter Stassi, director of the beverage department at Italian supermarket chain PAM, has witnessed the same trend in Italy. *“The Sauvignon market in Italy is doing very well. To date, sales are up by 13%. Sauvignon is becoming much better known by consumers who appreciate its ease of drinking, its rich flavours and ability to pair with both meat and fish, giving it a wide range of action”*. As in any producer country, Italian consumers tend to favour home-grown wines, such as those from the northern regions of Alto Adige and Friuli. But,

echoing American consumers’ new-found propensity to opt for New Zealand pours, they are also looking beyond Italian Sauvignon towards countries such as Austria.

The need to stay relevant and reinvent profiles

Nearer to New Zealand, Australian consumers have also shown a penchant for Sauvignon and the varietal is billed by specialist drinks retailer Dan Murphy as *“Australia’s most popular dry white wine”*. According to Wine Australia, Sauvignon currently accounts for 1 in every 8 bottles of wine purchased in the Australian domestic off-trade retail market, having *“overshadowed other white wines on the domestic market for many years”*. The Australian market also illustrates how wine styles must move on to remain relevant.

“New Zealand SB was huge here some years ago and is still very popular with many consumers. However Aussie styles have certainly been making inroads, with many winemakers looking to move from the simple fruity styles of the past to more savoury, complex styles. We are starting to push the envelope a bit in terms of skin contact, natural ferment, oak ageing etc”,

explains Dave Mavor, national wine buyer for Wine Selectors, a direct-to-consumer, subscription-based business that over the past forty years has built up a broad membership base.

Sauvignon blanc remains a staple of the company’s curated cases, either mixed, straight or custom-picked. Beyond the country’s own-grown Sauvignon, Mavor also notes that *“there is a lot of interest in European wines in general... Sancerre would be the most highly regarded and is likely to be seen on many restaurant wine lists. It is certainly the style of SB that you would find most Australian winemakers drinking!”* Although the softer, fruitier styles are still likely to be the go-to wines for the average consumer, Mavor says that *“more herbaceous styles from the West, with intense passion fruit and gooseberry flavours are definitely on the rise”*.



From uncomplicated, flavoursome and refreshing to complex, savoury styles

The fact that Sauvignon’s flavour spectrum is so broad-ranging is undeniably one of its greatest assets, underpinning its global success. It is one of the reasons why, in a survey of 4,500 wine lovers across the United Kingdom by wine subscription service Wine List last November, Sauvignon blanc was declared the nation’s favourite type of supermarket-bought wine.

“Whether it’s from New Zealand, South Africa or elsewhere, the UK loves this white wine... reviewers rave

about its fresh flavours and crisp citrus notes”, summed up Wine List, whilst the highly revered Sunday Times Wine Club referred to Sauvignon blanc as “probably the UK’s favourite wine”.

It is a testament to the skills of viticulturists and winemakers the world over that the varietal has achieved this status. They have undeniably succeeded in fusing site-expressiveness with varietal characters, creating an infinite stylistic spectrum that not only resonates with hugely diverse flavour preferences but also spans numerous price points and runs the gamut in terms of food pairing possibilities, irrespective of the season. *“I have no doubt that the variety will remain very popular here as an uncomplicated, flavoursome and refreshing drink whose flavours are recognised easily by most consumers”,* predicts Australia’s Dave Mavor. *“Along with a general trend to drink less but drink better, I suspect many will graduate to the more complex and savoury styles, with or without oak influence”.* His opinion is echoed by Jonas De Maere at Ahold Delhaize USA: *“I think we will see growth over the next few years, Sauvignon blanc still has some room to grow. The consumer seems to be shifting away from the overly sweet and oaked wines. I wonder whether there will be opportunities for the classic styles of Sauvignon blanc such as Sancerre and Pouilly Fumé based on the success of the varietal. It’s early to tell, but I do hope so!”*



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A modern language graduate with a BA Hons in French, Sharon Nagel nurtured her innate passion for wine by spending 25 years writing for the French wine trade journal 'La Journée Vinicole'. Travelling to many producer countries world wide, she gained a greater understanding of the social and environmental role played by wine as well as the myriad expressions of the vine stemming from origin.