

Domaine Claude Branger, Muscadet Sèvre et Maine

2006 Muscadet Sèvre et Maine "Terroir Les Gras Moutons Sur Lie"

"Lovers of Muscadet will not want to miss this old vines bottling, and those who don't think this genre exciting need to merely stick their nose in a glass to have their misconceptions corrected! It will be sharply tweaked by aromas of oyster shell, sea water, kelp, quince, pineapple, and lime. Your mouth will be set aquiver by the mineral and citrus intensity of this wine, whose sheer, palpable density of extract is remarkable, not to mention for a wine of only 12% alcohol. 'Palate-staining' is almost too weak a word for the finish. Treat yourself to a bottle from time to time over the next 2-3 years."

91 points-David Schildknecht, The Wine Advocate #178 (August, 2008)



Claude Branger is a tall, soft-spoken gentleman with silver hair. He dresses neatly and modestly, and there is about him, as there is about his wines, a clear sense of refinement. His grandfather developed the wine domaine of Haute Fèvrerie during the First World War. Today his wife Thérèse manages the office while his son Sébastien works beside him. They farm 61 acres in two parishes in the heart of the Muscadet Sèvre et Maine appellation. The small river of La Sèvre is just to the north, cutting deep into land; further south and east is the sister river of La Petite Maine.

Dutch traders introduced the Melon grape to the region from Burgundy in the 1600s. They wanted grapes for distilling, and the city of Nantes was within ready reach of their boats. An extreme winter in 1709 wiped out the red varieties then locally grown and thereafter Melon came to rule the region. Today, there are four appellations in Muscadet, and Muscadet Sèvre et Maine AC is the best and by far the largest (this AC produces more wine than any other in the Loire Valley). Most of its wine is, unfortunately, forgettable. The fact is there are wines of revelation made here, wines that are soft yet shockingly vigorous, imbued with scents of bread, lemon freshness, and sea salt minerality—a palette of aromas that in the better renditions follows through in the mouth with intensity and length. Melon de Bourgogne is a white cousin to Gamay, and like Gamay it can be easy, it can be delicious, and it can surprise. The best Muscadets are some of the world's best white wine values.

Among the small cadre of committed growers—and it is a small cadre—Claude Branger ranks among the top. His domaine of La Haute Fèvrerie is in Madison, and he is a member of *Terra Vitis*, an organization that sets guidelines for sustainable farming and monitors its members' practices to ensure quality control. Claude prunes for low yields, harvests by hand (a rarity in this land of machine harvesting), and lets his wine rest on its lees until bottling, which is done without fining and with a light filtration—the classic *sur lie* technique. It's this technique that gives good Muscadet its freshness and lift. Contrary to popular opinion, Muscadet is not, if allowed to ripen properly, naturally high in acid; it's the lees contact and the resulting CO₂ gas that give the wine its crisp spice and zest.

The Wines:

- *Le Fils des Gras Moutons*: is the domaine's base wine, and it's one of the truly great buys out there. The wine comes from 26 acres of vines in Branger's earlier maturing plots (while named *the son* of the wine below, this does not come from the same vineyard—but it is made in the same spirit). The soil runs from 10 to 16 inches deep and the granite bedrock is metamorphic gneiss full of mica and quartz. These vines average 35 years of age and their yield averages 50 hectoliters per hectare (the legal maximum permitted in the AC, and thus the norm, is 55 hl/ha). The wine rests on its lees for six to seven months before bottling, and a productive year will see 5,800 cases made.
- *Terroir Les Gras Moutons*: is the top wine, made now from 18 acres of vines (before 2009, their parcel totaled 10 acres) growing in a celebrated vineyard named the Fat Sheep, one that occupies the high and gently sloping ground. This is in the adjacent commune of Saint Fiacre, which is the smallest of the 23 communes in the Sèvre et Maine AC and one with some of the best grape growing land. The rocky granite soil here is thin, between 6-14 inches deep, in a seam of amphibolite, greenish metamorphic rock. The vines were planted between 1930 and 1986, and average more than 50 years old. The meager soil and the old vines give naturally low yields, averaging 45 hl/ha. The wine rests on its lees in underground tanks for twelve to fourteen months, and it is quite powerful by Muscadet standards. Ripe, round, and intensely mineral, this wine can age beautifully, developing aromas that are a cross between Riesling and Pinot Blanc. A productive year sees 3,625 cases made. that are a cross between Riesling and Pinot Blanc. Roughly 1,000 cases are made each year.