

# Decanter®

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## In defence of Sauvignon Blanc

A recent retrospective tasting of Sauvignon Blancs from Sonoma County's Dry Creek Vineyard coincided with an interesting post from British writer Richard Hemming on Jancis Robinson MW's website. In it, he labelled Sauvignon Blanc "rubbish", the Loire Valley's Sauvignons "overpriced mouthwash", and New Zealand's versions the "vinous equivalent of swilling your mouth with Toilet Duck".

Though his tongue may have been planted somewhat loosely in his cheek, Hemming's distaste for Sauvignon Blanc is as strong as the pleasure I get from a good bottle of it. While most people have wines in which they find little redeeming value (for me it's sparkling Shiraz), most are able to make exceptions to their "I hate it" rules. But Hemming is adamant against Sauvignon Blanc, and he's not the only one. In 2006, *Slate* magazine's wine writer Mike Steinberger said: "Simply put, the grape is a dud, producing chirpy little wines devoid of complexity and depth." I guess he hadn't tasted Toilet Duck.

Call me an idiot, but I enjoy drinking Sauvignons from producers such as François Cotat and Didier Dagueneau in the Loire Valley, Château Haut-Brion in Pessac-Léognan, Spottswoode and Hartwell in Napa Valley, Merry Edwards and Rochioli in Russian River Valley, Cadaretta, a new brand, from Washington State, Montes in Chile's Leyda Valley, and Saint Claire in Marlborough. They may not be as "noble" as some, yet they offer refreshment value and, yes, complexity and depth. As with other varieties, there are winners and losers in the Sauvignon Blanc field; finding the former and avoiding the latter is just all part of the game.

The vertical tasting of Dry Creek Vineyard's (DCV) Sauvignon Blancs was a rare opportunity to try aged California white wine other than Chardonnay. Older Sauvignon Blanc has only a tiny following in the US, with most accepting the theory that it is best drunk young and fresh. Yet the Sauvignon Blancs from the Dry Creek Vineyard have a remarkable knack for evolving beautifully, for as long as 30 years (and counting.)

From day one, DCV followed the lead of Robert Mondavi and labelled its Sauvignon Blancs as Fumé Blanc. The word "fumé" (smoky) resonated with consumers unfamiliar with – or scared by – Sauvignon, so Fumé Blanc represented a higher-quality, oak-influenced wine than the domestic Sauvignon plonk then on the market. The Wallaces have since been tempted to change the label to Sauvignon Blanc, but trade and consumers convinced them it would be a mistake. For 36 years,

with Mondavi, they've owned the category.

Of the 19 DCV wines tasted, starting with the 1973, most were incredibly alive and holding their fruit, with the oldest example showing savoury notes of jalapeño pepper, coriander, rosemary, Asian spices and wet stone. The 1973 Fumé Blanc was a bit tart and lean, yet still quite drinkable. The 1977 stole the show with its spectacular complexity, with fresh lemons, baked apple, pear, ginger, green olive and capsicum notes. The 1998, from a cool, overlooked vintage, was surprisingly rich and mouthfilling, plumped up by crisp acidity. The single-vineyard DCV3 Fumé 1999 was downright delicious – slightly austere and flinty on the nose, with generous

citrus and gooseberry flavours, an intriguing note of chamomile and great structure – not bad for a decade-old "dud".

As we worked through the younger wines, I tried to project what each would become in 10 years' time, factoring in vintage conditions and the track record playing out in each glass.

Simpleton wines don't stimulate such thought.

We took the wines to an alfresco lunch and drank them with bruschetta with green olive tapenade and goat cheese, ceviche of scallops with lime, spring onion and jícama, and crispy fish tacos. The conditions were ideal for the wines: they quenched our thirst in the heat, and their crisp, herbal elements mirrored those in the dishes.

Of course, most American Sauvignon Blancs don't age as well as Dry Creek Vineyard's, and there are too many dreary efforts with too much residual sugar, washed-out flavours, and sharpness from over-acidification. Yet, when Sauvignon Blanc is made from ideally ripe grapes grown in warm locations which cool down at night, and handled carefully in the cellar, they can be invigorating – and I don't mean Listerine-like invigorating.

While I'll likely continue to turn down sparkling Shiraz from social settings, I hope to run across one in my tastings that changes my mind. I wish those who savage Sauvignon would give it a similar chance, and not broad-brush paint the category as being a dullard. That's just, well, rubbish.

**"The Sauvignon Blancs from the Dry Creek Vineyard have a remarkable knack for evolving beautifully"**

*Dry Creek*  
VINEYARD

