

[back to story page](#)
Journal

Printed from ABQjournal.com, a service of the Albuquerque

URL: <http://www.abqjournal.com/food/553722food04-11-07.htm>

Wednesday, April 11, 2007

Choosing Best Grape for Food

By **Jim Hammond**

For the Journal

WINE COUNTRY: Few grapes go as well with food as the Sauvignon Blanc grape in its many variations, from the flinty Sancerre of France to the fruit-forward New Zealand wines. Although the Sauvignon Blanc grape may not overpopulate Chardonnay on wine lists, it is becoming recognized by many as a better choice with most foods.

Insiders in the wine industry sometimes describe the characteristic "cat pee" nose of the Sauvignon Blanc grape. Now, I've never seen this written on the back of a wine label, and don't expect to see it. It was, however, on my mind when I did my last tasting of the grape from various regions. I have to admit, the scent was familiar. Did I mention I have three cats?

It isn't that I want to put you off this wine. To the contrary, I find it marries with food better than the ubiquitous Chardonnay.

However, descriptions of the taste components of this grape are very broad, depending on where the grape is grown and how it is vinified. Grown in cooler regions, the grape is lighter in style, with good acidity, making it an excellent accompaniment to food. In warmer regions, the fruit is often thinner and winemakers often add the Semillon grape and oak.

Food friendly

Let's briefly digress to what we actually taste in wines and why acidity improves a wine's food-friendly profile. Most of what we "taste" in wine is through the sense of smell, detected by the olfactory epithelium.

The epi-what? It's a tiny hingelike apparatus behind the nose with 15 million receptors (give or take) to catalog the myriad tastes we obtain from food and wine.

Our first hint of what the wine will taste like comes from inhaling the aroma in the glass. The second route to these receptors is the interior nasal passages in the back of the mouth, and the addition of heat and the swirling of wine in the mouth allows these receptors to do their job better. That is one of reasons a wine sommelier shudders when a diner tosses down a good glass of wine. Wine, after all, is meant to be savored.

The four tastes the tongue picks up are acidity, sweetness, saltiness and bitterness. Sugar and acid are the elements we detect in wine. However, it is the quantity, not the quality, of sugar and acid our tongues decode for us. A mouthwatering acidity, which creates saliva to break down food and wine in

the mouth, will release complex flavors. Low acidity makes the wine taste flat, while wines with higher acidity provide refreshment.

Sugar content is another element that enhances the flavors of foods. Medium sweetness in a wine works with both salty and sweet dishes, and many Sauvignon Blanc wines, particularly ones that are un-oaked, offer an explosion of fruit that goes with lighter dishes such as chicken, seafood and salads.

Roots of flavor

Choosing a Sauvignon Blanc is complicated by the fact there are so many varieties. The Sauvignon Blanc grape originated in France but is now planted worldwide. France's Loire Valley produces the popular Sancerre and Pouilly-Fumé. The legendary Robert Mondavi worked with the grape in California in the 1960s, but sales were low until he coined the term Fumé Blanc by combining the names Pouilly-Fumé and Sauvignon Blanc, and wine sales took off.

(Speaking of combinations, a recent DNA analysis identified Sauvignon Blanc and Cabernet Franc as the parents of the Cabernet Sauvignon grape. I'll bet you didn't hear about that on "CSI.")

While some winemakers may add oak to give their Fumé Blanc a smoky flavor, Sauvignon Blanc and Fumé Blanc are almost interchangeable; it is your preference that matters. Sancerre and Pouilly-Fumé are more expensive than other Sauvignon Blanc wines, but their distinctive flavors are highly prized. There are several regional California wines from lightly oaked medium-body wines to heavier styles that may add the Semillon grape for richness. In France, the Semillon grape is joined with the Sauvignon Blanc to produce the Sauterne and Barsacs dessert wines.

New Zealand's Marlborough region produces what are arguably the best Sauvignon Blanc wines for the money. Starting at about \$10 a bottle, these un-oaked wines are fruit-forward and medium-bodied with good acidity and go well with almost any lighter fare.

Many tasters claim the New Zealand wines are the best Sauvignon Blanc wines— ever. I tasted them alongside French and California varieties and was highly impressed. So were my guests as we all raised our glasses and said— you guessed it— "Salut!"

Wine talk

Is imbibing one of the 7 Deadly Zins? Find out why Journal wine columnist Jim Hammond loves the red zinfandels ... and the sauvignon blanc ... and the Spanish rioja ... Join him in a live Internet chat on www.abqjournal.com at 11 a.m. April 18. Log in to speakup.abqjournal.com.

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[Back to story page](#)