

sauvignon blanc secures its spot in marketplace

By Laura Holmes Haddad

Ten years ago the white wine choices started and ended with Chardonnay. Today, however, Sauvignon Blanc has established itself on both wine lists and retail shelves around the country. New World regions such as New Zealand and California have helped put Sauvignon Blanc on the map, and in the glasses of many wine consumers.

According to Grocers' Review data, Sauvignon Blanc is the biggest premium still wine variety, with a 29 percent share of the grocery store market and +31 percent growth in 2004. Sauvignon Blanc was one of two varietals driving wine market growth in 2004, and AC Nielsen data shows that 1.2 million cases of Sauvignon Blanc were sold in 2004.

There are three main styles of Sauvignon Blanc. New Zealand tends to produce a crisp, grassy, herbaceous style with hints of gooseberry; the lean Sauvignon Blancs from France's Loire Valley (Sancerre and Pouilly-Fumé) are known for their mineral and citrus flavor profiles; and a heavier, more fruit-based style is typical of California and the Graves region of Bordeaux, where the wine may also be blended with Semillon and/or aged in oak. (Some California vintners label their Sauvignon Blanc "Fumé Blanc," a term first used by Robert Mondavi in the 1970's and usually means aged in oak.) South Africa and Chile are two new players in the Sauvignon Blanc scene. Both countries have increased their plantings and are producing wines with an emphasis on tropical fruit flavors. As Kathleen Hall, director of marketing for **Matanzas Creek Winery** in Sonoma County, California, notes, "There really is an incredibly eclectic portfolio of styles out there. Hopefully sommeliers and retailers are educating consumers about the different styles. It's really just a matter of personal preference."

And the change in attitude towards Sauvignon Blanc from a little-known varietal to a wine securing a section on wine lists stems from the winemakers themselves. In a nutshell, it's being taken more seriously. "From a sales perspective Sauvignon Blanc is being treated as a higher-end varietal, from the vineyard to the tank. It's no longer a whim," says Hall. There's no doubt that the arrival of New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc in the 1990's has changed the sales landscape. New Zealand winemaker Kate Galloway of **Alpha Domus Hawke's Bay** sees the rise in sales directly correlated to marketing efforts. "A lot of the popularity is being driven by the marketing side of things in the Marlborough region," she says.



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Steady Growth

Paul Young, director of sales and marketing at **Kenwood Winery** in Sonoma County, California, which produces about 140,000 cases of Sauvignon Blanc each year, has watched sales take off. “The demand has been steadily rising for the past couple of years,” he says. “Prior to that when the wine industry was in a slump, there was still growth but [in the] single digits. But it [Sauvignon Blanc] held its own when some of the other SKU’s were off, which was a good sign,” says Young.

Growth is strong on the import side as well. “We’ve seen a very dramatic rise in sales for Sauvignon Blanc,” says Ben Dollard, president of **Pacific Wine Partners**, a division of Constellation Brands U.S. “The category overall is up 8.1 percent over the past 52 weeks. There is no doubt that buyers and consumers alike are more open to Sauvignon Blanc than they were five years ago. With imported Sauvignon Blanc there is a significant acceptance, and the growth trends we’re seeing are just amazing,” says Dollard.

Off-premise Sauvignon Blanc sales have held steady. Chad Yonker, a sales associate at **Vino 100** in Kansas City, Missouri, hasn’t seen significant changes in Sauvignon Blanc sales. “Sauvignon Blanc sales have been pretty steady. One region that has maintained its sales is New Zealand,” he says. Yonker finds many of his customers are well aware of the varietal. “A lot of people are already educated, due in part to the popularity of New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc for the past few years,” says Yonker. Most of Yonker’s sales are between \$15 and \$20. “Twenty dollars is the upper limit for what most people will pay for a Sauvignon Blanc,” he notes. The store carries seven to eight Sauvignon Blanc selections out of an inventory of about 160 wines.

“To a degree Sauvignon Blanc is seasonal,” says Douglas M. Fauth, general manager of **Tribeca Wine Merchants** in New York City. “We do very well with the **Joel Gott Sauvignon Blanc** at that price point [\$11.99],” he says. Fauth looks for new producers in the U.S. as well as the Loire Valley for his Sauvignon Blanc selections.

Food Friendly

Regardless of where it is grown, Sauvignon Blanc has a naturally high acidity level, making it a very food-friendly wine and a favorite among chefs. General manager John Ross of one sixtyblue in Chicago sees the versatility of Sauvignon Blanc as the key to sales in his restaurant. “I don’t think it’s a Chardonnay world anymore. People understand the versatility of Sauvignon Blanc,” says Ross. “The acidity level and the characteristics of the varietal work very well with the certain fruits or herbs that chefs are cooking with. We did a very urban-fused dish with herbs that paired perfectly with Sauvignon Blanc,” he says. For Ross it’s not sales but the price point that sets Sauvignon Blanc apart from other whites such as Chardonnay. “You have to list it at a price point that’s more attainable than a Chardonnay. I think you’d be hard pressed to put Sauvignon Blanc on a list for over \$60,” says Ross. Ross’ wine list offers Sauvignon Blanc in the \$40-60 range and in the spring and summer offers 30-35 choices and about 26 in the fall and winter seasons. “Because it’s so cold in the Midwest we see a trend of white wine in summer and red wine in winter,” he notes.

If the current growth rates are any indication, there’s little doubt that the finesse of Sauvignon Blanc will continue. With more consumers choosing Sauvignon Blanc, no restaurant or retail shop can afford not to increase their inventory of this versatile varietal.



Boschendal 2005 Sauvignon Blanc South Africa

Edna Valley Vineyard 2004 Sauvignon Blanc

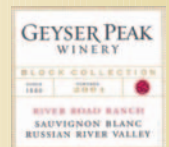
San Luis Obispo County, California



Fetzer Vineyards 2004 California Sauvignon Blanc

Geyser Peak 2004 Russian River

Valley River Road Ranch



Kim Crawford 2005 Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc New Zealand

Kumala 2005 Western Cape Sauvignon Blanc South Africa

Lake Chalice 2005 Sauvignon Blanc Marlborough, New Zealand

Monkey Bay 2005 Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc New Zealand

Nobilo Regional Collection 2005 Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc New Zealand

Veramonte 2005 Sauvignon Blanc Casablanca Valley, Chile

