

**DE LADoucETTE TELLS THE
COMPELLING STORY OF SAUVIGNON
BLANC IN THE LOIRE VALLEY**

Page TURNER

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Against the rather bleak backdrop of declining wine sales in the U.S., the continued success of Sauvignon Blanc is a bright spot: According to a March report by WineBusiness Monthly, it was the only variety among the top ten sold at retail to see growth in 2023. Among the grape's greatest ambassadors—along with New Zealand, of course—has been the Loire Valley appellation of Sancerre, nearly 40% of whose exports are now U.S.-bound, per a recent article by Jancis Robinson in the *Financial Times*. So it might stand to reason that Americans would also be clamoring for Pouilly-Fumé; located just 10 kilometers away from Sancerre, it too produces Sauvignon Blanc in a similarly cool continental climate on similar soils consisting, albeit in differing proportions, of clay, flint, and limestone.

That they aren't may simply be due to the fact that Pouilly-Fumé is smaller and therefore yields less volume than Sancerre does today, with about 1,300 hectares under vine compared to the latter's 3,000, or the fact that—in the words of eminent French



Château du Nozet in Pouilly-sur-Loire is the home of de Ladoucette.

producer Baron Patrick de Ladoucette, who works in both appellations—“Sancerre is easier to pronounce.” But with the price of Sancerre rising precipitously, Pouilly-Fumé’s moment in the sun may lie just ahead. After all, at a time when it’s said that consumers want to know the stories behind their beverages of choice, Pouilly-Fumé’s got a great, easy-to-grasp hook insofar as the latter half of its name points to the smoky notes often found in its wines, arguably courtesy of the aforementioned flint soils.

It’s also got a storybook setting in the form of Château du Nozet in Pouilly-sur-Loire, which just so happens to be the historic property of de Ladoucette. While the awe-inspiring castle at its center—all turrets and spires thrusting skyward amid landscaped gardens—was rebuilt in the mid-19th century, the estate itself has been in his family’s hands since 1787. And although the Baron didn’t assume control until 1972, he is understandably proud of the fact that, after World War II, “the first one who introduced Pouilly-Fumé in the U.S. was de Ladoucette,” which today tends some 100 hectares of vines to account for nearly 10% of the entire appellation (in addition to sourcing fruit from growers with which it has relationships spanning generations). If Pouilly-Fumé were to make a state-side comeback following its brief heyday in the 1970s and 1980s, then, there would surely be no producer better suited to ushering it in than de Ladoucette—especially considering that its wines are (speaking of stories) textbook examples of the appellation.

Certainly the winemaking process is designed to preserve the purity of fruit that is the hallmark of de Ladoucette, as logistics manager Eugenie



Baron Patrick de Ladoucette.



De Ladoucette oversees 100 hectares of vines on a 170-meter plateau composed of clay, flint, and limestone.



Baron Patrick de Ladoucette calls the glass-lined tanks installed at many of his estates “formidable for aging.”

Noireau and finance director Christophe Blévin showed us on our visit in May, joined by two representatives of importer Maisons Marques & Domaines USA, Inc.: senior communications manager Cyprien Roy and vice president, sales, Frédéric Bernabeu. Upon the arrival of each parcel of fruit at the gravity-fed facility, which was constructed in 1989 on three levels to replace the use of the old cellar built in 1805, the *jus de benne*, or free-run juice naturally obtained while the grapes are in transit, goes directly into its own vat; the grapes are then gently carried by conveyor belt to custom-built pneumatic presses that yield both the first-press juice (*jus de fleur* or *jus de goutte*) and the second-press juice (*jus de presse*), each of which goes into a separate vat as well. In other words, said Roy, “They have three different juices from the same parcel, and they do that for each parcel, so that when it’s time to blend, they’re able to have the widest array of components—and that’s Ladoucette’s level of precision.”

After undergoing *débourbage*, or settling, in the glass-lined vats, the must is pumped over to thermo-regulated stainless-steel tanks—at 60 years old, they



were the first to be installed in the Loire Valley—for vinification without malolactic fermentation by winemaker Alexandre Bailly, formerly of Domaine Romanée-Conti. There the wine rests three to six months on the lees before it’s blended and transferred into more glass-tiled tanks—where, “because there is no temperature variation . . . you have no other vat where the wines could mature so

gently,” according to the Baron—to age anywhere from 18 to 40 months, depending on the expression and the vintage.

As for the results, Noireau called the classic de Ladoucette Pouilly-Fumé, which we tasted from the mostly dry, warm 2022 vintage, “the most typical Pouilly-Fumé that we can produce. It will be the most mineral, a little bit acidic in the mouth.” Of course, that limpid acidity didn’t approach the pungency found in New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc, integrating beautifully into the nicely rounded structure of the wine, in which white florals and a wisp of smoke wreathed aromas and flavors of gooseberry and melon along with touches of fern and mint before a lightly tropical finish.

In special years, some of that standard Pouilly-Fumé wine is reserved for extra maturation in both tank and bottle to become de Ladoucette Grand Millésime Pouilly-Fumé. The 2018 vintage showed the exceptional warmth of the growing season with notes of passion fruit and mango as well as cantaloupe and even a hint of petrol; salinity edged the silky, slightly creamy midpalate, while flint flashed on the finish.



And then there's the top cuvée, Baron de L. Debuting in 1973, "it was a creation of Monsieur de Ladoucette himself, because he wanted to have a premium wine just to explain that Pouilly-Fumé has the capacity to produce a Burgundy[-style] Grand Cru," said Blévin; to that end, added Noireau, "We make it only in the best years from the best part of the vineyard . . . with the best juice, the jus de fleur, and also we age more time on the lees." As he sipped the 2012 vintage, Bernabeu mused, "When I sell Baron de L, I try to explain that for me, it's the definition of Sauvignon Blanc. They're not trying to make it too exotic, too big, too fruity; they're trying to be as precise as possible. That's the purity that you can find [in the wine]." A whiff of petrol didn't dampen its enduring freshness: Grapefruit and honeydew intertwined with flint, musky florals, and menthol on nose and palate, at once focused and expansive. In short, it went to show that, as the Baron put it, while "there are many Pouilly-Fumés that after three or four years go *whoosh*"—with that he made a downhill motion—"in the structure of our wines . . . we have something exceptional."

But given that "it is very important for Monsieur de Ladoucette to have the most important Sauvignon Blancs in the world," in Blévin's words, all of this is not to discount his equally exceptional Sancerre, of which he makes two brands: Comte Lafond and La Poussie. The latter, which we tasted at de Ladoucette's Paris headquarters complete with a private shop, reception rooms, cellars, and offices,

is made from 100% estate fruit grown in an amphitheater-shaped vineyard with a whopping 62% slope, which "is not possible to work by tractor—just by hand," Blévin noted. The 2022 vintage sprang to life with scents of grapefruit, lime, and white peach accented by honey and flint; in the mouth, a pure, racy stream of salted citrus was flecked toward the mineral finish with chervil and hay.

The Baron also produces Sauvignon Blanc in Touraine under the Les Deux Tours label. But his decades-long winemaking endeavors don't begin and end with that grape—far from it. He produces Chablis and other Bourgogne wines at the house of Régnard (as you'll see in our December 2024/January 2025 cover story). He makes Vouvray (Marc Brédif). And Chinon (also Marc Brédif). And Champagne (Comtesse Lafond). And Provençal rosé (Vallombrosa).

And the Swiss rosé called Oeil-de-Perdrix (Mont le Vieux). And still more, all on display at the Paris facility to provide what Blévin calls a complete "picture of all vineyards of the group . . . for export customers and others who have no time to go to Chablis, to Brédif, to Château du Nozet."

Of course, if you were to have the opportunity to visit the latter, you too would be enchanted by not only its grandeur but the perspective on Pouilly-Fumé it offers as a microcosm of the appellation. You'd understand why, as Bernabeu put it, "If you go anywhere in Paris or Italy, you go to the best restaurants, you're going to see de Ladoucette on every list." And you'd be convinced that the estate is primed to lead the parade for Pouilly-Fumé in the U.S., too. The next chapter of Americans' romance with Sauvignon Blanc has yet to be written. *sj*

