

FOOD & DRINK / WINE

The White to Watch: Sémillon Comes into Its Own

Sémillon, a longtime supporting player, is coming out of the shadows to take lead roles.

BY SARA L. SCHNEIDER ON JUNE 16, 2018



Photo: Courtesy Rudd



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Sometimes the newest great thing is hiding in plain sight. And that's exactly the case with a white wine variety that has been around forever but has very little recognition to show for it: Sémillon. In France, Sémillon is a crucial blender with Sauvignon Blanc in [white Bordeaux](#) (and the lead player in legendary sweet [Sauternes](#)). In fact, the grape is one of the most important whites in the country, just behind Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc. Its lack of recognition might be chalked up to the fact that the French drink wine by place instead of variety; it's a white Bordeaux, not a Sauvignon Blanc/Sémillon blend.



In the States, the wine simply hasn't gotten a lot of love on a grand scale. Sure, a few winemakers have channeled the Bordeaux model and splashed some Sémillon into their "SB," but until recently, few have splashed in enough to call the bottle Sauvignon Blanc, so not many people knew it was there. (Apologies to the stalwart band of producers who have been making 100 percent Sémillon and blends in the shadows. Your time has come.)

Now, more producers are giving Sémillon the lead role in their white Bordeaux blends (and giving the wine a fanciful name because they can't call it by either variety). And joining the aforementioned stalwart band are a few more 100 percenters.

Look for Sémillon to be starring now in both California and Washington, where Nina Buty, founder and president of Walla Walla Valley's [Buty Winery](#) produces an exciting blend of Sémillon, Sauvignon Blanc, and Muscadelle (a lesser player in the whites of Bordeaux). Buty explains what Sémillon brings to the table, in her view: "I love its texture and concentration. Sémillon tends to be a richer, more unctuous grape, with fig and lanolin."

About that last descriptor, it's a thing! (A good thing, if you think of that character in terms of mouthfeel as opposed to spa product.) Buty says they choose to dominate their Bordeaux-style blend with the variety because of the depth—"the foundational bass notes"—it offers. "Besides," she adds, "Sémillon is often the underdog, and I love a great underdog!"

Happily, Sémillon's growing presence is creating a whole new category for white wine lovers to explore. Those already in the know call it SBS. Here are a few special bottles on our radar at the moment.



Volker Eisele and L'Ecole Walla Walla Valley wines

Photo: Courtesy Volker Eisele/L'Ecole

Buty 2016 62% Sémillon, 25% Sauvignon & 13% Muscadelle Columbia Valley

Pear, white blossom, and grapefruit aromas lead to honeyed citrus and dried apricot flavors with balancing savory herbs and minerality. (\$25)

L'Ecole No. 41 2016 Luminesce Walla Walla Valley

An exquisite deal from [L'Ecole](#), this blend of 56 percent Sémillon and 44 percent Sauvignon Blanc leads off with a whiff of jasmine and lime. Rich tropical fruit flavors and tart peach are carried by bright citrus in beautiful balance. (\$21, though L'Ecole also makes a terrific 100 percent Sémillon—a screaming deal at \$15)

Rudd 2014 Susan's Blanc Mt. Veeder Estate Napa Valley

Made only in the best years for Sémillon in [Rudd's](#) high-elevation Mt. Veeder vineyard, this blend of Sémillon, Sauvignon Blanc, and Sauvignon Gris is fermented entirely in concrete and kept on its lees, resulting in fascinating textures. Bright tropical fruit, pear, and fig have underpinnings of limestone minerality. This one will age well. (\$150, three-pack in wood for \$450)

Volker Eisele Family Estate 2015 Gemini Napa Valley

Sémillon gets 78 percent of the territory in this one from [Volker Eisele](#), with Sauvignon Blanc at the remaining 22 percent. Orange-leaning citrus, pear, and fig—balanced by green tea notes and racy minerality—are wrapped in distinctive textures. (\$28)

🍷 SEMILLON, SAUVIGNON BLANC

