

Australian Semillon

Once one of the most widely planted grape varieties on the globe, Semillon has fallen on hard times in the past 50 or so years. Few countries have given Semillon a chance to shine as a major grape variety. Of course we can find the Semillon grape in the Bordeaux region of France where it is one of the three stellar grape varieties that make up the classic Bordeaux white blends along with Sauvignon Blanc and Muscadelle. It is in this region of the globe also that Sauterne wines are King and the Semillon grape is the major contributor of these sweet and luscious wines. But recently Semillon has found a niche in the Australian homeland and in the hearts of Aussie wine producers.

Let's take a closer look at this unheralded grape. Semillon, or as the Australian like to pronounce it "SEM-ill-on" instead of the more traditional French pronunciation of "se-mee-OHN", is characterized by its golden color with pinkish hue (in warmer climates) and thin skin. This thin skin and the fact that it grows in tight bunches makes the Semillon grape susceptible to fungus and rot. We will see later that this is a major factor in producing the Sauterne style of wine. Also the Semillon juice is heavy in texture with an oily finish and has a low acidity. The grape variety is relatively easy to cultivate, gives higher than average yields and ripens quite early. These factors allow some flexibility to the producers that have taken up the production of Semillon on a larger scale. As mentioned earlier the Semillon grape is prone to rot or mold in the later part of the growing season, the producers in the Bordeaux region noticed that a certain strain of rot the "noble" strain *Botrytis cinerea*, did not cause destruction in the ripening stage but rather concentrated the sweetness by drying out the grape.

It was mentioned earlier that the Semillon grape is one of only three approved white wine grapes in the Bordeaux region. While Sauvignon Blanc brings crisp citrus and acidity notes to the blends, and Muscadelle contributes a youthful fruitiness, Semillon rounds out the blend by adding a little sweetness and tones down the acidity of the Sauvignon Blanc. It has always played an important part in the wine industry in this region and by doing so has gotten some attention by other producers around the world. We can find the Semillon in South America, most notably in Chile, South Africa and North America. But it is in Australia where the Semillon grape has prospered and has found a land where it produces exceptional wines. As in Bordeaux, the Semillon grape is blended but not with Sauvignon Blanc and Muscadelle but rather with Chardonnay or Sauvignon Blanc. Also there are examples of Semillon being sold as a single variety, either aged in stainless steel vats, where the end result is a crisp refreshing white wine, or in oak barrels where the Semillon grape takes honey notes, orange marmalade and nutty undertones. In both cases, the wine renders itself to aging potential. From the five major growing regions of Australia; New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia, Western Australia and Tasmania, it is in the New South Wales region where Semillon has developed to its star status. The Lower Hunter Valley district and Riverina district produce the major part of blends or single

grape wine developed with Semillon. As with Sauterne, a botyritised version of Semillon is being utilized in sweet wines.

There are some great Australian Semillon and Sauvignon Blanc blends at NB Liquor including Wolf Blass Red Label series 750 ml \$13.79 and Yellow Tail 750 ml \$13.79 are blends of Semillon and Sauvignon Blanc.

Semillon blends with the Chardonnay grape include Banrock Station 1.5L \$19.99, Hardys Stamp Series 250ml \$4.99, and Lindemans Cawarra series 750 ml \$10.99.

In the boxed wines category, we offer a Semillon, Chardonnay and Chenin blend in the Stanley's 2 L \$20.99.

There are two great Sauterne style wines as well; first is a true Sauterne, Chateau Raymond-Lafont 375 ml \$61.79, golden in color with a nice balance of sweetness and acidity it has notes of caramel and dried fruit. The second option comes from California; Beringer Nightingale Semillon Sauvignon 375 ml \$36.99. This is a new addition to the wine portfolio; nice honey notes with a hint of nuttiness it is regarded as one of the best products coming out of the Golden State.

So while looking for new types of wine to sample do try the Semillon grape either in blends or alone and I am sure you will not be disappointed.

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