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ON WINE

5 Fantastic Sancerres You Can Actually Afford

Since the last time our wine columnist looked at this Loire Valley white, its star has only continued to rise—along with its price. Here, a guide to the best values available now.



BOTTLED AND SOLD Time to take another look at Sancerre. Is it worth the prices it's currently going for?



By [Lettie Teague](#)

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WHAT WINE is recession-proof, fad-proof and seemingly immune to any bad press it gets?

Sancerre, the white wine made from Sauvignon Blanc in the Loire Valley of France, has also been called overexposed, overproduced and overpriced. When restaurateurs price wines higher because they are sure to sell, it's often called "the Sancerre tax."

Sancerre certainly has become more expensive. Caroline Styne, co-owner and wine director of the Lucques Group of restaurants and wine bars in Los Angeles, told me she's had to price a bottle of Sancerre over \$90 for the first time. When I spoke to wine director Victoria Taylor at Boulud Sud in New York last month, Sancerre by the glass was at \$22; she now offers another Sancerre at \$27 a glass. Sancerre accounts for 20% of all by-the-glass sales. By the bottle, the five Sancerres on her list run between \$80 and \$250. "They all sell well," Ms. Taylor said.

Joe Salamone, wine director at Crush Wine & Spirits in New York, noted that prices for wines from sought-after producers such as François Cotat have increased as much as 40% wholesale. Crush does not sell the 2021 François Les Monts Damnés Sancerre, but it goes for around \$115 elsewhere.

Other factors besides high demand are driving up the price. According to the Sancerre producers I contacted, they're paying more for bottles, cardboard, labels and shipping than they did pre-Covid. And there has been some fairly terrible weather. Of course, these challenges face producers of other wines, too.

As it has been 10 years since my last column on Sancerre and the wine has only continued to rise in both popularity and price, I thought it was time for another tasting. But would I be able to find good wines under \$40 a bottle?

Geographically, Sancerre is a charming if rather touristy hilltop town as well as an appellation within the central Loire Valley covering over 7,000 acres and various terroirs. The locations generally considered best for Sancerre are around the hamlets of Bué and Chavignol, where the soils of the steep vineyards are clay and limestone, aka "terres blanches." The most famous and formidably named Chavignol vineyard is Les Monts Damnés ("The Damned Mountains"), hilltop home to wines of an appropriately formidable character.

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At the same time, there are too many Sancerre producers turning out plonk from vineyards treated with chemical pesticides. A few of these simple, characterless and aggressively herbaceous wines showed up in my tasting. The bottlings I loved were produced on family-owned estates, in many cases biodynamically and/or organically.

The vibrant, thrillingly mineral 2021 Claude Riffault Les Chasseignes Sancerre (\$38) shows the depth and complexity Sancerre can achieve in the right hands. Stéphane Riffault, now 43, of Domaine Claude Riffault took over the family domaine from his father, Claude, in 2008. His certified-organic and biodynamic domaine hand-harvests fruit from a wide variety of vineyards representing Sancerre's various terroirs. (There are three main types: the clay-and-limestone terres blanches, the limestone-and-gravel caillottes and the flinty silex.)

I was particularly heartened to find a number of very good wines from the difficult 2021 vintage. Due to storms and severe frost, many Sancerre producers lost more than half their production,

but some still managed to make excellent wines. Most of the 14 wines I purchased were from 2021; I also bought one 2020 wine and a few bottles from the 2022 vintage, though most 2022s have yet to show up in stores.

The 2022 vintage was a beneficent one. “It was good for the morale of the wine growers after a year like 2021,” said Sancerre producer Mickaël Picard. His 2022 Jean-Paul Picard & Fils Le Chemin de Marloup Sancerre (\$22) was one of my favorites, an agreeably bright, well-balanced wine. Mr. Picard’s hand-harvested grapes come from a wide variety of plots, 40 in total. “It is a real headache throughout the year but also a great opportunity to express each terroir,” he wrote in an email. Mr. Picard also noted that while some Sancerre producers may turn out indifferent examples, there are “a multitude of small, passionate and exciting family estates” making quality wines.

Decidedly of the latter type, Firmin Dezat, an 18th-generation Sancerre vigneron, produces terroir-focused wines from all three types of Sancerre soils. The 2022 Firmin Dezat Sancerre (\$27) is crisp and classically styled with a clean mineral finish.

Two other terrific wines came from Gérard Boulay and Alphonse Mellot, estates long synonymous with first-rate Sancerre. The intensely mineral 2021 Gérard Boulay Chavignol Sancerre (\$30) is a blend of grapes sourced around Chavignol. Boulay’s flagship Sancerre, Les Monts Damnés, is actually a blend of Monts Damnés and Comtesse, said winemaker Thibaut Boulay. The latter parcel, home to Boulay’s oldest vines, is ordinarily bottled on its own, but with an 80% loss of fruit in 2021, its grapes were blended with those of Les Monts Damnés. The basic Chavignol is so impressive it even won over my husband, not a fan of Sauvignon Blanc. “It’s so good it doesn’t taste like a Sancerre!” he declared.

Just as impressive, the 2021 Alphonse Mellot La Moussiere (\$30) had a crisp mineral note and a long saline finish. It is another blend of two great cuvées, Edmond and Generation XIX, normally bottled separately but combined due to a loss of fruit. The result is “a wine for the ages!” wrote Adrian Chalk, who imports Alphonse Mellot’s wines, in an email. It’s certainly a great deal.

The 2020 Domaine Vacheron Le Paradis Sancerre (\$75) was the only wine from the 2020 vintage that I purchased. Tasting 2020 Sancerres last year, I found many of them a bit too high in alcohol. (The 2020 vintage was quite warm.) But Vacheron is a legendary name, and I was curious to see if its 14.5% wine wore its alcohol well. Alas, while it was impressively concentrated and lush, the alcohol wore me down.

Fortunately, I tasted some Sancerres I truly loved, and I bought more of them for my own cellar. Talking to producers gave me a greater appreciation of the work it took to make the wines—and I’m sure the prices will only go up.

OENOFILÉ / The Best Values in Sancerre Now



1. 2021 Gérard Boulay Chavignol Sancerre, \$30. One of the top producers in Sancerre has turned out a terrific wine—beautifully balanced with a dazzling flinty edge—from one of its top terroirs in a highly challenging (frost, hail) vintage.

2. 2022 Jean-Paul Picard & Fils Le Chemin de Marloup Sancerre, \$22. The 2022 vintage was a great deal less challenging than the previous year, noted winemaker Mickaël Picard. He made this crisp Sancerre with citrus notes from a variety of hand-harvested vineyards.

3. 2022 Firmin Dezat Sancerre, \$27. This attractively crisp wine marked by notes of citrus and a fresh acidity is the second vintage since the famed Domaine André Dezat et Fils was split between 18th-generation wine grower Firmin Dezat and his cousin.

4. 2021 Claude Riffault Les Chasseignes Sancerre, \$38. In 2008 Stéphane Riffault took over the domaine and instituted hand harvesting, strict sorting of fruit and other rigors resulting in first-rate wines like this: beautifully textured, mouth-wateringly mineral.

5. 2021 Alphonse Mellot La Moussière, \$30. One of the most respected of all the names in Sancerre, Alphonse Mellot produced this gorgeous wine of great balance and length on the palate from two prestige cuvées, Edmond and Generation XIX.