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Why you should pour a Muscadet tonight

Edward Deitch makes the case for this light and delicious wine

By Edward Deitch
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 TODAY
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One of the most enjoyable food and wine pairings I've experienced recently took place the other night at one of New York's hottest new restaurants and featured one of the world's most affordable and under-rated white wines.

The wine is called Muscadet, and it is decidedly un-chic, so much so that many restaurants don't bother putting it on their wine lists. But Muscadet, produced in France's Brittany in the westernmost part of the Loire Valley not far from the Atlantic Ocean, is both highly versatile when it comes to food and easily found. Most wine stores are likely to have at least one example of it, usually at \$10 to \$15, sometimes a bit less, sometimes a bit more.



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A few things you should know about Muscadet. It's the name of the wine, not the grape. The grape is the melon de Bourgogne, which, as the name suggests, came originally from Burgundy, although it isn't found there anymore (it's a cousin of chardonnay, which, of course, has long ruled in Burgundy among white varieties).

There are three Muscadet appellations, meaning that they are made in three areas within the western Loire region, and the most common is Muscadet Sèvre-et-Maine, which refers to two rivers in the area.

Unlike chardonnay, most Muscadet is made without oak. It's usually fermented and aged in stainless steel, although age, when it comes to Muscadet, is a relative term. The wine is typically released in the spring following harvest, so most of the 2007s are about to come out, just in time for spring and summer.

I mention spring and summer because Muscadets are perfect for warm-weather drinking and are most often enjoyed young and fresh, although, as I was reminded the other night, they can have considerable complexity. Part of that comes from the fact that they are usually bottled "sur lie," an expression you'll see on the label, which means the wine is kept in contact with some of the tiny lees, or solid grape remnants, a traditional technique that adds flavor and texture (but don't worry, you won't see the lees).

Muscadets are, essentially, light wines, which, for me, is their strength. With modest alcohol levels of 12 percent or so, they are great food wines. They complement but don't overwhelm. This was amply demonstrated in a tasting of eight Muscadets for wine and food writers at the restaurant Bar Blanc in Greenwich Village. A fellow guest at my table summed up the wines succinctly when he observed, "They're not in your face."

Being produced close to the Atlantic, Muscadet is a quintessential fish wine. What kind of fish? Well, just about any, as we found in the variety and artistry of the presentations at Bar Blanc. As we stood around sipping and talking we sampled spoonfuls of "ravioli of salmon with avocado, tomato and basil gelée," followed by a briny breaded and

fried "sardine beignet." Two non-fish offerings were rich little balls of "mushroom schnitzel with Tartar sauce" and "chicken sausage with crispy sage."

I was struck by how a sip of Muscadet was able to cut through the richness of some of these dishes and didn't clash with any of them. All the wines were crisp and refreshing with various fruit notes that included pear and subtle red berry flavors as well as touches of honeysuckle, lemon, orange and vanilla. Some people detect a slightly salty quality in Muscadet, although I would define it more as minerals, which were nicely present in the examples we drank. A couple of the wines had a somewhat richer, creamier taste. All of these qualities made them pair well with the mix of dishes that followed when we all sat down.

There was the pie-like wedge of "live scallop carpaccio," the thinly sliced scallops sandwiched between slices of white mushroom; a "stew of Burgundy snails, razor clams, mussels and baby leeks" and,

finally, a "confit of wild striped bass, porcini mushrooms, and oysters" enveloped in a rich beurre blanc sauce. The bass was served with the real wine treat of the evening, a 1995 Muscadet Sèvre-et-Main from Luneau-Papin, a luscious and memorable wine, light golden in color, that reminded a few of us of a fine, aged Burgundy, but at \$25 instead of \$100. That, in essence, is Muscadet.

The following wines were my favorites:

- Domaine de la Quilla, Muscadet Sèvre-et-Maine Sur Lie 2006, \$11. Imported by Robert Kacher Selections, Washington, D.C.
- Guy Bossard Muscadet Sèvre-et-Maine Sur Lie "Expression de Granit" 2005, \$18. Imported by Organic Vintages, Somers, New York.
- Domaine de la Pépière Muscadet Sèvre-et-Maine Sur Lie 2006, \$13. Imported by Louis/ Dressner Selections, New York.
- Luneau-Papin Muscadet Sèvre-et-Maine Sur Lie "Le L d'Or" 1995, \$25. Imported by Louis/Dressner Selections, New York.

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Edward Deitch is the recipient of the 2007 James Beard Foundation

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