

# good living

A wine to challenge  
sauvignon blanc

Willie the wonky  
chocolate maker

The chefs behind  
five-star hotel dining

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wine good living

## A savvy sidestep

From one Australian winery comes the tale of the little semillon that could.



HUON HOOKE

If the taste of Marlborough sauvignon blanc is so popular, why is traditional Australian semillon so unpopular?

It is a question that has plagued semillon producers and lovers, especially from the Hunter Valley, for the past decade or so as New Zealand sauvignon blanc has blithely taken over the world. "Savvy", as the Kiwis call it, accounts for 70 per cent of the New Zealand grape crop and Marlborough, thanks to sauvignon, now produces more than half of all that nation's wine.

The world has fallen in love with the wine, none more so than Australians. Our biggest-selling wine is a Marlborough sauvignon.

But Australian semillon is also a light, fresh, fruit-driven style of dry white, which has a lightly herbal fruit character, not a hell of a lot different to sauvignon, really. So why is it in the doldrums?

Hunter wine producer McGuigan estimates sauvignon is selling 3.4 million cases a year in this country, while semillon is doing about a one-hundredth of that – 40,000 cases. In dollar terms, sauvignon is worth

\$438 million compared with semillon's \$5.6 million. The picture is healthier if you include blends of sauvignon blanc and semillon (just under a million cases, worth \$104 million).

While semillon sales fall, semillon sauvignon blends grow at a healthy rate but not as fast as sauvignon, which powers along at 18 per cent a year.

It's enough to scare the daylight out of Australian winemakers.

They've had no choice but to look in helpless horror as their market is progressively eaten away by Kiwi producers.

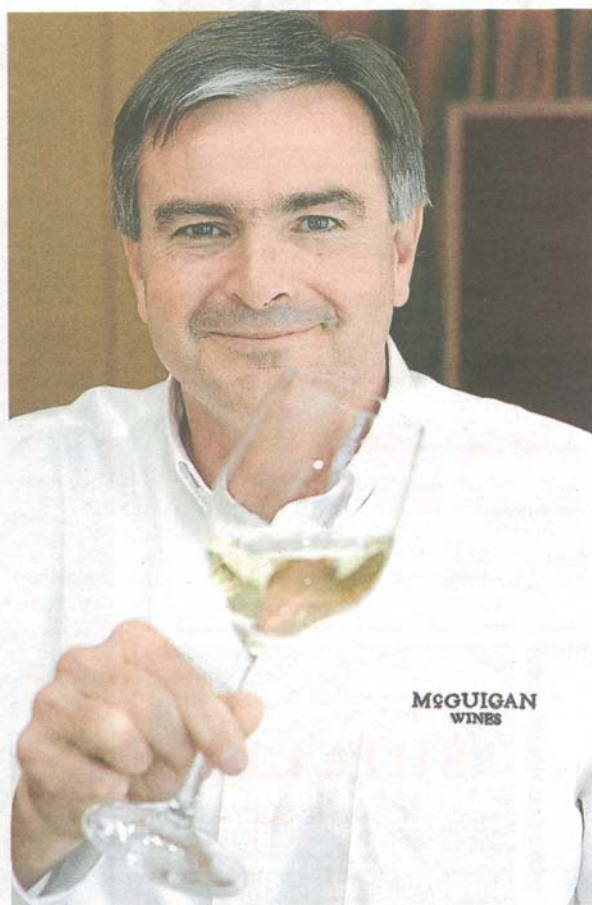
Now, an Australian winery has decided to do something about it; McGuigan has launched a wine labelled The Semillon Blanc.

The packaging is clever and the target buyer is influenced by this. It looks good and has a simple message on its label. The name is The Semillon Blanc 2011 (\$12.99) with the words "Refreshing, crisp and aromatic".

Some buyers will probably assume it's a semillon sauvignon blanc blend but that's not the intention, according to chief winemaker Neil McGuigan. "It could happen but it's not a concern," he says.

The smartest thing is the wine: it's 100 per cent semillon but McGuigan decided the Hunter Valley, traditionally a semillon producer, could not make the wine he had in mind.

It's not a traditional Tyrrell's semillon style of



Blanc check... winemaker Neil McGuigan with The Semillon Blanc.

10 per cent alcohol, a pH of 2.9 and a Chablis profile. "That would be too lean; too light."

Instead, the grapes are mainly from the Murray Valley (the Riverland and Sunraysia) with a little Barossa Valley. It's 11.5 per cent alcohol, which is still very light wine, but the pH is higher – 3.35 – which means the wine is softer and tastes less acidic. There is a smidgin of sweetness, between four and five grams per litre but most people won't notice it. The overall effect is lightness with softness and a clean finish. Unlike traditional Hunter semillon it probably won't age well but that's not the objective. As McGuigan jokes: "From



the day we bottled it, we have 364 days left to sell it."

He could have achieved a similar result by blending in a little chardonnay, perhaps, but I suspect it's a point of pride to a Hunter man that the wine is all semillon... and when some tasters commented its aroma reminded them of sauvignon blanc, he retorted: "There's not a berry of sauvignon blanc in it".

The wine is already doing exceptionally well in Britain. "This wine has single-handedly lifted McGuigan's semillon sales in the UK by 52 per cent," he says.

A 2010 vintage was test-marketed through Tesco supermarkets at \$10.50 (£6.99), and quickly became McGuigan's second best selling wine after shiraz. Tesco competitor

Sainsbury's was unhappy it didn't have it, McGuigan says, and influential British wine buyer Dan Jago reportedly described it as the most exciting new white wine from Australia in 10 years.

The 2011 is quite fragrant, in a citrus, passionfruit, gooseberry sort of way, with a hint of semillon varietal straw. It's delicate and

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finely textured but also soft and round, with gentle acidity and immediate drinkability.

The launch of The Semillon Blanc follows a dream run for McGuigan and its sister label, Tempus Two. The week before, Tempus Two Copper Zenith Semillon 2003 was named international best semillon at the International Wine Challenge in Britain, and the 2011 of the same wine won a gold medal at the Cairns Wine Show. The '03 was also NSW wine of the year in 2010.

Aussie winemakers scan the sauvignon blanc sales figures the way an outback cocky scans a drought-parched horizon for a cloud. Right now, they're just a little excited: after several years of growing at 25 per cent a year, sauvignon sales are faltering. Woo-hoo! But hang on a sec: they're still growing at 18 per cent a year. Don't spike the keg just yet.

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McGUIGAN  
WINES