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Virtual Wine Tasting – 17th July 2020

Chablis to Savour

2018 Côte de Léchet Chablis Premier Cru Sébastien Dampt

background notes
and
suggestions for food pairing

with thanks to

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A bit of background

The town of Chablis lies in an island of vines amid the rather northern-feeling forests and pastures of the Yonne near Auxerre. The rock beneath these modest hills is limestone and in the heart of Chablis, clayey limestone (marl) of a special sort – Kimmeridgian. Like all Burgundy wine, Chablis is produced in three different qualities:

- **The Grand Crus** [vineyards] of Chablis rise above the town in an impressive sweep, sloping south into the sun. Their wines are stately and deep, and gain greatly from bottle age.
- **Premier Cru** Chablis is in far greater supply and is more variable, though the best are truly impressive and can be excellent value.
- **Everyday** Chablis is labelled, simply, 'Chablis'. It can be an excellent drink at one to three years old.

Owing to its latitude (Chablis is a fair way north), vintages can vary markedly in ripeness.

Chablis is made from Chardonnay grapes which, when grown in a cool climate like Chablis, produce steely, stony, appley wine with good acidity. Chardonnay is of French descent; there is even a village called Chardonnay, buried in the countryside of southern Burgundy. Doubtless to the chagrin of the locals, its wine is only entitled to the lowly label Mâcon-Villages – but from starrier Burgundian vineyards come Chardonnays that are, at their finest, the greatest white wines in the world and are truly versatile food wines.



Côte de Léchet



Côte de Léchet is a 120-acre Premier Cru vineyard on the western side of the Serein river in Chablis. While most of Chablis' top Premier Cru vineyards lie on the eastern side of the river, where the slopes are angled towards the setting sun, Côte de Léchet's south easterly aspect gives it an efficient exposure to the less intense morning sun. This helps ripening in Chablis' cool continental climate, while ensuring that the acidity that typifies Chablis wines flourishes. As a result of this aspect, Côte de Léchet Premier Cru wines tend to be leaner and sharper than the slightly rounder wines that come from the vineyards on the eastern side of the Serein.

The soils in the Côte de Léchet vineyard are made up of Chablis' famous Kimmeridgian clay, covered by a layer of calcareous brown topsoil. These porous, low-fertility soils drain freely and are often thought to contribute intense minerality to the wines. The high limestone content in the soil comes from ancient marine animals, and many fossils have been found on the Côte de Léchet vineyard site.

The first mentions of this historical vineyard site date back as far as the 15th Century. Today, the Côte de Léchet Premier Cru vineyard makes some of Chablis' most sought-after Premier Cru wines, along with Vaillons, Fourchaume and Mont de Milieu. Unlike many of these, it is a stand-alone vineyard, divided only into the non-official Côte de Léchet and Le Chateau lieux-dits.

Sébastien Damp, 37, is a rising star of Chablis. He is married and has a baby daughter. He is part of a dynasty that has been making wine in the region for over 150 years. Having studied in Beaune and gained experience around France, he returned to work for the family domaine in 2005 alongside father Daniel and brother Vincent. In 2007 he took 17 acres of family land and created an estate in his own name based in Milly to west of Chablis.



In 2017 Sébastien planted Phacelia amongst his parcel of Premier Cru vines, where some of the very old vines had had to be removed. So as not to leave the soil exposed for several years he decided to seed with this very useful plant. Phacelia is not only very attractive to bees and other insects but when ploughed in, acts as a green manure that fertilises the soil and, as it develops an extensive root system, helps fight vine Black Knot disease as the roots may keep away the microscopic earth worms which transmit the disease.

2018 Côte de Léchet Chablis Premier Cru Sébastien Dampit

Quite simply, Sébastien Dampit's 2018 Côte de Léchet is a lovely classic Chablis with a nose of crushed oyster shell and lemon fruit. Serve chilled, but not too cold – 10-11°C – note this is slightly less chilled than you might normally serve white wine, but the better the Chablis, the less chilled you serve it in order to bring out the flavours.

The palate is tangy, with a surprising structure and grip, while remaining fine and elegant. The old vines suffer from Black Knot, giving lots of very small grapes which results in plenty of concentration and phenolic grip.

Lemony and saline, this is textbook Chablis with a punch, 13% alcohol by volume.

Some Food Pairing Notes

The Chardonnay grape produces truly versatile food wines and this is particularly true of the light, cool-climate Chablis. Broadly, think fish, poultry, cheeses and salads – but there is an added layer of complexity – read on.

Chablis can be grouped into five categories each having some unusual favourite food pairings:

Inexpensive, young Petit Chablis and Chablis and very young Premier Cru Chablis

These lighter wines make a wonderful aperitif, or pair well with fresh seafood dishes including sashimi. If you prefer your food cooked, then you might prefer *spaghetti alla vongole*, fish and chips, *goujons* or other deep-fried fish, or prawns with garlic butter. Meat eaters will find Chablis can complement *charcuterie*, and it is traditionally served with *lapin à la moutarde* or the jellied terrine *jambon persillé*, *andouillette* (a local Chablis sausage made with tripe and served with chips) or snails with garlic butter. Perhaps better to stick with the fish?

2-3 year old Premier Cru Chablis (i.e. unoaked, still lively and fresh-tasting but more intense)

Serve these with asparagus or smooth vegetable-based soups. Excellent with *moules marinière*, where mussels bring out the wine's salinity, a nod to the ancient oyster shells found in the region's soil. Will accompany fish dishes in many variants, from simple grilled fish with butter and parsley, or poached fish with a creamy sauce, through the British summer staple of cold poached salmon with mayonnaise to fish pies and stews. Another local dish is *oeufs en meurette* Chablis-style, a white wine variant on the classic red wine sauce that those who were on the WCoMC Wine Club Loire trip will recall. Also consider a seafood or spring vegetable risotto, and also match with hard cheeses, goats cheese and local Burgundian varieties such as *Epoisses* or *Chaource*.

Chablis or Premier Cru Chablis made in a richer style (e.g. *Vieilles Vignes Chablis*, Chablis with more pronounced oak character, more mature Chablis or wines from a warmer vintage such as 2003 or 2005)

These richer, oakier wines suit equivalently richer dishes such as Dover sole, turbot and halibut, seared scallops or baked crab. Your salmon could now be en croute or with a butter based sauce, your ham becomes *Jambon à la Chablisienne* (ham in a Chablis-based sauce with tomato and cream). More substantial meat dishes that the wine will stand up to include roast chicken or guinea fowl and simply grilled veal or pork chops, especially with mushrooms, which have a particular affinity with the wine.

Grand Cru Chablis and the best Premier Cru Chablis

Continuing on the theme of increasing richness and complexity, add more luxurious or intensely flavoured ingredients. Consider grilled or steamed lobster, *poulet de Bresse* with *morels*, or even very rare fillet steak. Although often matched with champagne or a sweeter wine such as Sauternes, *foie gras* is an often underrated match with Chablis, the acidity making a more refreshing start to a meal than a sweet wine. Developing the theme of fungi, truffles come into their own here; Chablis is a show-stopping pairing with the Italian-inspired dish of fettuccine with winter truffles, (toss the fettuccine in a simple sauce of cream and parmesan, finishing the dish with fresh winter truffle shavings). The intensity and weight of the Chablis Grand Cru will stand up to the sauce whilst the acidity lifts all of that richness, and the wine's earthy mushroom-accented complexity will marry well with the truffles.

Very old Chablis (i.e. Chablis that has acquired a deep golden colour and rich, honeyed notes)

Such a rarity may be best savoured on its own but it can also be matched with very simply prepared dishes with pronounced umami flavours, such as roast chicken with a crispy skin, ceps and *Vieux Comté* or old *Gouda* cheese.

To summarise: with just a few high-quality ingredients and the right wine pairing, a simple dish can be transformed into a spectacular one. There will inevitably be some cross-over between the five categories and we won't all have access to the 'right' Chablis at the 'right time', but broadly almost all will go with simple fish or chicken in a white wine sauce but with an inexpensive wine you might add a touch of curry to the sauce whereas with a Grand Cru Chablis wine you might be more inclined to serve a *poulet de Bresse* and *morels*.

Gougères

But, you may ask, what about the *gougères* that we said, in our emails prior to the tasting, were the traditional accompaniment to Chablis? They, and indeed any cheesy snacks, go exceptionally well.

Gougères are traditionally served as an accompaniment to tastings in many cellars including Sébastien's. During our recipe experimentation, we have also enjoyed these with red wine including one from the wine club's Loire trip that went very well.

Gougères are essentially savoury profiteroles, based on a choux pastry with added cheese. They are not difficult to make and are very moreish so we encourage all 'tasters' to have a go. Apart from the cheese and seasonings, they are made from butter, eggs and flour. Recipes vary quite widely in the amounts of flour and cheese that are added to broadly similar amounts of butter and eggs, which give noticeably different results. I provide here three variants so you can choose which to try:



Sébastien's Table

The Classic Burgundian	The Bibendum	The High Clandon Vineyard
55g butter	50g butter	50g butter
125ml water with ¼ tsp salt	125ml water with ¼ tsp salt	150ml water
2 large eggs	2 large eggs	2 large eggs
65g plain flour	100g plain flour	70g plain flour with ½ tsp English mustard powder, a pinch of powdered cayenne and 6 twists of a grinder of salt and pepper
110g Comte cheese, grated	70g mature cheddar cheese and 25g parmesan, both grated	60g cheddar cheese, grated
<p>The method is the same for all.</p> <p>Preheat the oven to the temperature indicated below and prepare two baking sheets by lining with non-stick baking parchment. The <i>gougères</i> need a lot of space when cooking.</p> <p>Put the butter, water and salt in a pan and bring to the boil. Remove from the heat.</p> <p>Add in all the flour and beat well until the dough forms a dryish ball and comes away from the sides of the pan.</p> <p>Beat in the eggs one by one until the mixture is smooth again.</p> <p>Stir in the cheese.</p> <p>Use spoons (or a disposable piping bag) to place mounds of dough about 3 cms across on the baking sheets, spaced their own width apart. You are aiming for about 20 puffs.</p> <p>Cook as below until risen and golden brown – the times are approximate.</p>		
205°C 15-20 minutes	210°C 15-20 minutes	220°C 10 minutes, then 200°C 10 minutes

So, experiment and see which you prefer. The traditional recipe gives a rich, slightly heavier result with lovely cheesy egg flavour. The Bibendum is lighter, uses possibly easier to source cheese and is equally delicious but different. We've not tried the High Clandon recipe – we would probably omit the additional seasonings and we suspect there is too little cheese – but it comes highly recommended ...

The end result needs to be eaten fresh and warm, but the cooked *gougères* can successfully be kept in your fridge and reheated, or frozen then thawed and reheated. Apparently the dough can also be frozen then thawed and cooked, but we've not tried that out ...

Wine Tasting – the BLICK guide

And there is just space to remind you of the aficionados' method for describing the five qualities that separate the pleasantly *ordinaire* from the *prestigieuse*:

Balance – Length – Intensity – Complexity – Keepability