

Blanc de Noir

Why would one make a still white wine from black grapes?

Summary Wine Akademiker Thesis

Still white wine made from black grapes is a niche product which is relatively new. In Switzerland it started in the late 1980s and in Germany, the early 1990s. Currently, there are examples of Blanc de Noir still wines found all over the world, and it seems increasingly popular. In the last years, I have tasted some very interesting still Blanc de Noirs which in my opinion are especially good wines to be paired with food.

For this thesis I've researched and identified more than 30 Blanc de Noir still wines. These are wines made from various grapes and produced in various regions. With this study material and information from the winemakers who produce them I hope to answer the question, why would a winemaker choose to produce a still white wine from black grapes.

For the production of a good Blanc de Noir, there are multiple decisions to be made during the winemaking process. For a still Blanc de Noir it is important to select a harvest date when acidity and sugar levels are optimal. Following harvest, it is important to press gently to limit the transfer of skin colour to the wine. Furthermore, decisions need to be made with regard to selecting the right yeast, leaving the wine on the lees, oak ageing and possible other adjustments.

Still Blanc de Noirs are produced all over the world from a variety of grapes. The climates where the wines are produced vary between cold and warm. The grapes used for producing Blanc de Noir can have both a thick and a thin skin, but all have a good acidity level. The ripening of grapes matches the climate of where the wines are produced.

The wines tasted during the course of this thesis gave a good representative overview of the features of Blanc de Noir. Most Blanc de Noirs tasted have a golden colour. However there are also wines with Blanc de Noir on the label which more resembles the colour of a rosé. In my opinion these wines should not be called Blanc de Noir. The nose gives various aromas, including red fruit aromas, which is unusual for white wine. On the palate the wines show more than average body. A variety of aromas is found, including red fruit aromas and most wines have a good level of acidity. Another feature of the wines tasted is the good level of flavour intensity, which also contributes to the quality of the wine. Overall the wines are of good quality which also reflect the prices of the wines tasted (between €10 and €40). The ageing potential is estimated to be about two to three years for most wines.

For wine food pairing, a still Blanc de Noir gives many options. The reason for this is the acidity levels, the intensity of the wine and also the body. Food pairing suggestions vary from French, Spanish to Asian cuisine.

The key drivers to produce a Blanc de Noir can be summarised as follows:

- To expand the range of wines produced. A larger number of wines in a portfolio gives the customer a greater choice. Which can result in larger orders and higher revenue.
- To create something new, a niche. To create something new or a niche has a marketing advantage. This is especially viable for wines produced from other grapes than Pinot Noir.
- To use vines which are not suitable to produce a good red wine. If the vines are too young for instance, the vineyard can contribute to the winemakers revenue by producing a Blanc de Noir until the vines are old enough to produce a good red wine, this is a temporary solution. When vines are grown in a climate where grapes cannot fully ripen, climate change can be a threat.

The economical factor is important to consider. A winemaker needs to decide what kind of wine to make from black grapes. With making a Blanc de Noir the yield can be limited, but since it is a niche, the price of the wine can make it viable for a winemaker to make a still Blanc de Noir. Also the quality level of the wine which results in the bottle price can make it economically viable to make Blanc de Noir.

It might be assumed that the best grapes used for making a Blanc de Noir are thin skinned grapes, because then the discarded element of the grape is minimised when making the wine. From the research and the tasting however, it was concluded that good Blanc de Noirs are in fact made from both thin and thick skinned varieties. The most important feature found for making a Blanc de Noir is the acidity level.

The features of Blanc de Noir are special. Many of the wines are not typical white wines because of the body and aroma characteristics. It is also not possible to classify the wines as red, this is because of the acidity level, the aroma characteristics and of course the colour of the wine. A third option would be to compare Blanc de Noir to rosé, but also there, the comparison goes wrong. In my opinion the quality of Blanc de Noir is in general better than most rosés. This is mainly related to the intensity and the body of the wines. With the colour of the wine, it is best to classify it as a subcategory within white wine, which is especially good for combining with food.

In my opinion, still wine of Blanc de Noir is a very nice addition to the different styles of wine available however it is likely to stay a niche product.

Since Blanc de Noir is especially good to combine with food, restaurants should be a target market. Here a skilled sommelier is able to match these wines with the food served and tell and sell the story of Blanc de Noir to its guests. Having Blanc de Noirs on the wine list in a top restaurant is good exposure for the winemaker and can be used for marketing purposes.

Because of the winemaking techniques necessary to make a Blanc de Noir, I would like to classify these wines as real 'winemaker' wines. But I hope that many of the wines tasted are still going to be produced in the future.