July was hot even in Italy. I tasted some of the greatest Barolo's and Brunello's ever made. Had memorable Chianti and Barbaresco as well. It seemed perfectly normal to drink red wine in 90 degree weather and the food fit perfectly with these high acid red wines.

However, once back in Tennessee my thoughts turned to great summer whites and my focus has been turned to Chenin Blanc. Chardonnay seems too heavy. Riesling and Muscat seems too sweet but Chenin Blanc seems to fit the bill.

Chenin Blanc really can be found three ways: fermented dry, sweet or sparkling. Fermented dry can be the tartest white grape around and although every wine maker has his own style. It will usually display green apples, apricots and nutty honey. Great ones have an oily texture.

The wine has its European origins more than 800 years ago in the Loire Valley. The most widely known dry Chenin Blanc is Savenneieres. These wines are intense, have high acidity and will even develop complexity if aged. Andrea Immer tells of a blind tasting of Chenin Blanc where wine experts guessed the age of one of the wines. They had tasted blind to be 15 years old and when the wine was revealed it had been made in 1953. These wines will hold up. And Chenin Blanc from the Loive Valley usually has low alcohol and is made with no oak. So take that you big over oaked new world wines!

So I want to mention that Australia, the USA and South Africa all make Chenin Blanc wines. But comparing those three country's wines would not be fair. There are great American, South Africa and Australian Chenin Blanc but overall the quality of these wines from the Loive Valley is far superior. In fact, in South Africa Chenin Blanc was and still is many times referred to as Steen. Would you rather drink Steen or Chenin Blanc? By the way, the '04 and '05 vintages were both killer from the Loive Valley ('05 better than '04).

So if you're like me and want to drink some of this chilled in the heat here's what you should know. The Sparkling Chenin Blanc will all say sparkling on the label or they'll have a pressure sensitive cap. They'll usually say Saumur, Vouvray, Montlouis or Savennieres. The sparklers from Savennieres usually are drier almost steely and will age. These wines pair well with soft white cheeses and mild seafood. Because of its high acidity it cuts sharp flavors and its carbonation helps enhance your appetite. Start with this wine.

If you want to try dry Chenin Blanc look for wines from Savennieres – always dry or Vouvray which will say "sec" if it's dry. Because of its high acidity, apple and honey flavors this is excellent with fish or pasta in a white wine or cream sauce. Dry Chenin Blanc is also good with most soft and medium hard white cheeses.

If you like the idea of a sweet wine then try Chenin Blanc from the Loive Valley region called Coteaux du Layon. They are always sweet! They are made with Boytritus Grapes. Wine from Vovray can also be sweet if the label says "demi-sec" it's off dry with a touch of sweetness and if it says "moelleux" (moy-yuh) it's really sweet. Try these sweet wines by themselves for dessert or with fresh fruit. These would never go with chocolate. (Remember the wine must be sweeter than the dessert.)

In an effort to remain somewhat neutral (not!) here's some info on other county's Chenin Blanc. In South America it's called Pinot Blanco. It's a warmer climate so more fruit, less acidity and usually less aging potential.

In South Africa, Chenin Blanc is the county's most widely planted grape. Chenin Blanc was introduced there in the 1650's. These wines usually display grapefruit, pear, honey and sometimes white flowers. They sometimes have less acidity and more alcohol.

American and Australian Chenin Blancs tend not to distinguish themselves from the above, but there are great wine-makers from both countries making inexpensive, good Chenin Blanc. Pick a winemaker that makes another wine you like if you're feeling patriotic (American) or want to go on a "walk about" (Australian).

Stay cool, drive safe and take a chance, Columbus did!