March 2013

World’s most admired

wine

brands

Barometer

of change

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methodology p4

from the top

The countdown of

the world's 50 most

admired brands p7

best regions

The world's most

admired brands by

country p25Most Admired Wine Brands

The time

for wine

Welcome to this year’s Drinks International Most

Admired Wine Brands supplement.

This is the third time we have asked our panel of

leading wine professionals to cast their votes. The results are, as

always, fascinating.

It’s an interesting time to be involved in wine. There’s something

of a power shift taking place. Asian markets are experiencing

dynamic growth, the US is opening up to wine more than at any

time in its history, and upwardly mobile consumers in markets like

Brazil and Russia are also getting a taste for wine like never before.

In Europe, meanwhile, wine is finding growth harder to come

by – not just in producing countries, where consumption has been

slowly tailing off for some time, but in the UK, which has grown

accustomed to sales increases but may now have reached its peak.

So brand owners are redrawing their maps and setting their sights on

markets that were previously off their radars. As we’ve seen with China,

the brands that have done most to open doors are prestige marques

such as Lafite, or international brands like Jacob’s Creek, which have

the scale, resources and consumer profile to make progress.

Reputation counts for an awful lot in the wine world, now more

than ever. Our survey is the perfect indicator of which brands lead

the way on the global stage – as well as which brands are on the

march, and which ones may have more work to do.

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march 2013 i Drinks International i 3Most Admired Wine Brands

Barometer

of change

Now in its third year, the

Drinks International Most

Admired Wine Brands

has become a reliable

barometer of the way the

industry regards its leading players.

As any wine professional knows,

sales success is not the only indicator of

a healthy brand.

And achieving mega volumes does

not necessarily mean that a wine can be

regarded as great.

Winning the admiration of your

peers, and wine professionals across

the world, is not something that can be

achieved merely by installing 1-million

litre tanks at your winery, shifting

10 million cases a year, or buying the

sponsorship of a major sporting event.

So how can it be done? In many

ways, it’s an intangible thing. We can’t

always put our finger on exactly why

we admire something. But we gave our

judging panel a few pointers.

When casting their votes, we asked

judges to use the following criteria:

l wines should be of consistent or

improving quality

l they should reflect their region or

country of origin

l they should respond to the needs and

tastes of their target audience

l they should be well marketed and

packaged

l they should have strong appeal to a

wide demographic.

The judging panel, as usual, included

Masters of Wine, consultants,

winemakers, wine writers, retailers,

educators, buyers and analysts.

This year we recruited extra judges

from emerging markets in Asia, to give

the panel more of a balanced look, and

to reflect the explosive growth that

wine is experiencing in the region.

In particular we’ve approached

wine educators – the people who are

doing more than most to spread wine

knowledge in markets such as China –

to take part in the poll.

Judges can vote for up to six wine

brands. Again we emphasised that this

was not necessarily a competition to

reward the best-selling wines in the

market, or those with the most critical

acclaim.

To help them on their way, we

supplied a list of more than 80 well-

known brands and producers, but as

usual we also encouraged the option of

free choices – names not included on

our list.

The results are fascinating.

While some brands have been

a model of consistency, and have

performed equally well in all three

Most Admired surveys, a few tend to

yo-yo around the top 50 and some dip

in and out.

Where there was a tie for places, a

small jury of voters was assembled to

decide the final positions.

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As always, our judges cast their votes in a secret ballot and we allowed them to

remain anonymous if they chose. Those who gave permission for their names

to be published are listed below. As always, judges were not allowed to vote for

brands with which they have a professional association.

Sárka Dusková (Czech Republic), educator and researcher

Godfrey Spence (UK), educator

Dan Jago (UK), group wine director at Tesco

Su Birch (South Africa), chief executive of Wines of South Africa

Cees van Casteren mw (Netherlands), educator, consultant and writer

Joan Torrents (Spain), director of buying at Enotria

Christian Neethling (South Africa), sales and marketing manager at Raats

Family Wines

Gavin Quinney (UK), owner, Château Bauduc

João Victorino (Portugal), educator

Michael Cox (UK), Europe director at Wines of Chile

Charles Metcalfe (UK), educator, consultant and writer

Stephen Rannekleiv (US), executive director and analyst at Rabobank

Simon Doyle (UK), commercial director at Concha y Toro UK

Xavier Rousset (France), sommelier and restaurateur

Per Karlsson (Sweden), educator and writer

Steffen Schindler (Germany), marketing director at the German Wine Institute

Miguel Chan (South Africa), group sommelier at Tsogo Sun

Peter Scudamore-Smith mw (Australia), tour organiser and blogger

Neil Barker (UK), former UK & Ireland commercial director of Foster’s Group

Wendy Narby (UK), educator, writer and tour organiser

Richard Bampfield mw (UK), educator and consultant

Michael Hill Smith mw (Australia), wine producer

Tuomas Meriluoto mw (Finland), importer, educator and blogger

Jose Manuel Ortega Fournier (Spain), director, O Fournier

Juel Mahoney (UK), writer

Peter McCombie (New Zealand), consultant and writer

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march 2013 i Drinks International i 5#1Most Admired Wine Brands

Concha

y Toro

Estimated global shipments: 20m cases

Country of origin: Chile and Argentina

Owner: Concha y Toro

For the third time in

succession, Concha y Toro

tops the Most Admired

Wine Brands poll. It’s a

staggering achievement,

displaying the sort of consistency that

devotees of the brand have come to

expect from the winemakers behind

Chile’s most famous export.

Casillero del Diablo is the brand that

is most associated with the Concha y

Toro name. Preliminary figures from

the company show that global volumes

of the brand rose by an impressive 8%

in 2012, reaching a figure of around 3.4

million cases. It accounts for just under

half of all exports by Concha y Toro.

The UK market remains the most

important market for Casillero del

Diablo and, despite all the challenges

facing exporters to that country –

rising duty rates, squeezed margins

and reduced consumer spending

power – the brand hit new heights last

year. It’s now a 1m-case wine in the

UK market, where it remains one of

the few major international brands to

garner favourable reviews from critics.

Matthew Jukes, who writes for the

UK’s Daily Mail, described Casillero del

Diablo Cabernet Sauvignon 2010 as the

“finest value Cabernet on the planet”.

The brand has benefited from

marketing investment from Concha y

Toro, involving brand-building work in

more than 50 markets, both in media

and at point of sale. The partnership

with Manchester United continues to

pay dividends.

For Concha y Toro as a whole, the

most dynamic region in 2012 was Asia,

where it achieved volume growth of

21%. China, unsurprisingly, is leading

the way, with volumes up by 56%.

It’s followed by Japan (+20%), Korea

(+26%), Hong Kong (+14%) and

Singapore (+30%).

This has not happened by accident.

In 2010 a commercial division was

created for the region, followed by

the opening of the regional office

in Singapore. The company is now

in the process of opening an office

in Shanghai with the objective of

strengthening its position in China.

Almost two thirds of Concha y Toro

volumes worldwide are distributed by

its own network, meaning the sales and

marketing are also closely controlled

by the Chilean head office. It’s a system

widely envied by rival brand owners

without such resources, who are forced

to rely on partnerships and agency

agreements with other businesses, not

always with the results they would

prefer. In addition to its recent activity

in Asia, the company has also opened

wholly-owned commercial offices in

Canada and South Africa in the past

year.

Concha y Toro’s more upmarket

offering has also been performing well.

Global sales of the super-premium wine

Marques de Casa Concha grew 10% in

2012, according to company figures.

In this year’s Most Admired poll,

we separated Cono Sur’s votes from

those of Concha y Toro as a whole,

following feedback from those who

felt that they deserved to be treated as

different entities. So Cono Sur enters

the top 50 in its own right, for the first

time … yet still Concha y Toro amassed

enough votes to top the table. It’s yet

more proof, if it were needed, that this

genuinely is the world’s most admired

wine brand.

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march 2013 i Drinks International i 7#2Most Admired Wine Brands

Torres

Estimated global shipments: 4-5m cases

Country of origin: Spain

Owner: Torres SA

on the back or think

We don’t pat ourselves

we are the best;

we simply believe

in doing things a

little better every day.” That’s one of

the most telling statements in a long

list of company values published by

Torres. Brand owners of this scale are

often accused of taking short cuts and

accepting compromise in their quest to

retain their dominance. Torres, on the

other hand, is never associated with

such complacency.

Torres wines can now be found in

more than 150 countries, with exports

accounting for 72% of the company’s

business. In 2011, turnover rose

almost 5% to €215m, with 95% of

the company’s profits reinvested into

the business “to ensure growth and

viability in the long term”.

Outside of its native Spain, Mexico,

the UK, the Netherlands, Germany and

Finland are Torres’ most important

territories, though the list also includes

developing markets such as Russia

and China, where more growth seems

assured.

Bodegas Torres can trace its history

to 1870. The company now owns

2,272 hectares of vineyards, 1,800 of

which are in Spain, 440 in Chile, and

32 in California. It employs more than

1,300 people worldwide.

In Spain, Bodegas Torres has a range

of vineyards in various Denominations

of Origin: Penedès, Conca de Barberà,

Priorat, Jumilla and Costers del Segre;

as well as wineries in Penedès, Priorat,

Ribera del Duero, Rioja and Rueda.

Outside Spain, its most acclaimed

vineyards are Mas La Plana, Grans

Muralles, Reserva Real, Perpetual,

Fransola, Milmanda, Manso de Velasco

(Chile), the Don Miguel and Doña

Margarita Vineyards (California), and

the Jean Leon winery which is managed

by Mireia Torres-Maczassek, who

combines this role with running the

Priorat winery.

The company’s most mainstream

brands, Viña Sol and Sangre de Toro,

are acclaimed by critics for their

consistent quality. Other familiar

brands include De Casta, Coronas,

Atrium and Viña Esmerelda, while at

the premium end Torres takes pride

in Coronas Mas la Plana, made with

Cabernet Sauvignon from a 29ha plot

in Penedès.

Since 1991 the company has been

led by Miguel A Torres, a fourth-

generation family member whose

pioneering work has helped shape

the modern Spanish wine industry.

A committed environmentalist, he is

an opponent of intensive viticulture

and prefers biological treatments to

chemicals.

Along with vice-presidents Juan M

Torres and Marimar Torres, Torres is

now overseeing the “steady transition”

to the fifth generation, represented

by Arnau Torres-Rosselló, Mireia

Torres-Maczassek, Cristina Torres and

Miguel Torres-Maczassek, who recently

became the company’s general manager.

Don’t expect the succession to lead

to a change of direction, however. The

new generation are unlikely to rest on

their family laurels, but they will be

charged with continuing a legacy which

demands innovation, trust, loyalty,

teamwork and honesty – and the

characteristic humility that has made

Torres such an iconic name for decades.

most admired wine Brands SUPPLEMENT i drinksint.com

march 2013 i Drinks International i 9Most Admired Wine Brands #3

PenfoldsEstimated global shipments: 2.6m cases

Country of origin: Australia

Owner: Treasury Wine Estates

towards super-premium

Penfolds has been veering

status for some time –

indeed Grange has been

regarded as Australia’s icon

wine almost since it first appeared in

the 1950s.

Recently, however, the project has

gained real momentum as Penfolds has

conquered Asian markets and played

on its luxury credentials. Two launches

from 2012 illustrate the strategy

perfectly.

First, Penfolds released its highly

sought-after Block 42 Kalimna

Cabernet Sauvignon 2004 in a hand-

blown glass ampoule housed in a hand-

tooled wooden cabinet, with an asking

price of AU$168,000.

As commentators pointed out at the

time, that’s roughly what you would

expect to pay for 10 or more cases of

Château Lafite 2009.

As part of the deal, winemaker Peter

Gago will fly to any destination in the

world to open the 12 ampoules that

were released.

“The ampoule will be ceremoniously

removed from its glass casing and

opened using a specially designed,

tungsten-tipped, sterling silver scribe-

snap,” the sales prospectus said.

“The winemaker will then prepare

the wine using a beautifully crafted

sterling silver tastevin.”

The wine itself is worth a fraction of

the price tag of the ampoule, but that’s

not the point.

Penfolds is sending a clear message

to the world that its name is about

more than fermented grape juice,

even if it’s very good fermented grape

juice.

It’s aligned itself with a luxury

lifestyle, and the kind of aspirational

values that appeal to the world’s super-

rich.

The theme continued with the

launch of Penfolds Collection, a

complete vertical dating from the first

experimental vintage in 1951 up until

the most recent, in 2007.

Priced at £1.2m, the package also

includes 13 magnum cases which

include both the ultra-rare 2004 Bin

60A and the 2008 Bin 620 Coonawarra

Cabernet/Shiraz.

The purchaser will also be sent a case

of Penfolds icon and luxury wines for

the next 10 years.

The price tag also includes £50,000

in vouchers to spend on acquiring other

older Penfolds wines, two business-

class tickets to Adelaide, a VIP tour

and tasting at Penfolds’ Magill Estate,

two nights’ accommodation and dinner

at the Magill Estate restaurant.

This shift in strategy has, in reality,

ruffled a few feathers among Penfolds’

traditional customer base, which has

been critical of recent price rises.

But Treasury Wine Estates is pleased

with the progress it’s making. In its

most recent figures, net sales revenue

for Penfolds was up nearly 11% a

case, driven by “luxury innovation”

and “increased allocation to Asia and

emerging markets”.

It’s all a world away from the brand’s

beginnings in 1844, when a young

English doctor, Dr Christopher Rawson

Penfold, imported vine cuttings from

the south of France and planted them

near his cottage at Magill, on the

outskirts of Adelaide.

The business continued to progress

and really hit its stride when

winemaker Max Schubert developed

Grange (initially without the blessing of

his employers) in the 1950s.

Now under the stewardship of

Treasury, Penfolds has not just

innovated with its luxury strategy – it

has also set about correcting its over-

reliance on red wines.

Its Yattarna project, set in train

in the 1990s, has led to two white

wines joining the Bin range – Bin 311

Chardonnay and Bin 51 Riesling –

while a Semillon/Sauvignon Blanc has

become part of the Koonunga Hill

range.

Penfolds continues to act as

Treasury’s flagship wine, but the

ambassadorial role it carries out for

Australia in general – and arguably

the entire wine category – ensures

that it continues to be held in high

regard by its peers, rivals and

customers.

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Michel Chapoutier

Estimated global shipments: 420,000 cases

Country of origin: France

Owner: Chapoutier

Once again Chapoutier is the most admired French wine brand in the vote. The

Rhône winemaker and négociant has been in the same family ownership since

1808, producing Hermitage, Côte Rôtie, Chateauneuf du Pape, Saint-Joseph,

Crozes Hermitage and Luberon to international acclaim. It also operates in

Australia, though hints of an English operation have not come to fruition, at

least not yet.

The company’s own vineyards and the single vineyards it selects are

cultivated either organically or biodynamically to respect the terroir. But Michel

Chapoutier remains scathing about the ‘natural wine’ movement.

“It’s rubbish,” he declares. “It’s like making vinegar, bad vinegar. How can

anyone allow toxic yeasts to develop so that these inhabit the wine? It is

extraordinary that people defend products with defects on the grounds that in

the past growers were making wines with defects, so that is good, or natural.

Those old wines had defects because people lacked the tools and means not

to make fault-free wines.”

Chapoutier remains as passionate as ever about his winemaking philosophy

and his legacy. “Twenty years from now, I don’t see it being different from

today. M Chapoutier will be making wine. There is one thing I want to defend:

making rare, terroir wines. It’s a culture that must be defended.”

#5 Cloudy

Bay

Estimated global shipments:

150,000 cases

Country of origin: New Zealand

Owner: LVMH

It’s now almost 30 years since David

Hohnen (founder of Cape Mentelle

in Margaret River) created this iconic

brand on the northern tip of New

Zealand’s South Island. Its Sauvignon

Blanc put the Marlborough region

firmly on the international wine map

and created a fruity, pungent style

that many have imitated, but few have

bettered.

The company now owns 250ha of

vines across four vineyards, containing

Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon,

Merlot and Pinot Noir, as well as the

trademark Sauvignon. It also buys

grapes from elsewhere in Marlborough

to help it meet demand.

Cloudy Bay has been part of the

LVMH group since 2003 and is now

sold in 30 markets, with Australia, the

UK, the US and Japan among the most

important export destinations.

#6 Ridge

Estimated global shipments: 75,000

cases

Country of origin: US

Owner: Otsuka Pharmaceutical Co

Ridge is the US’s most admired wine

brand, a triumph its owners will

doubtless ascribe to their commitment

to ‘pre-industrial’ winemaking

techniques.

The company bases its philosophy

on 19th-century principles, a world

away from the chemical reliance and

mass-production found in parts of

#4

California, and indeed across the

world.

This involves natural pest and

disease management techniques, native

yeasts in the winery, and an absence

of commercial enzymes. More than

anything else, Ridge wants its wines

to have a genuine sense of place, and

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bases grape-growing in each vineyard

on long experience with each site.

Ridge produces wines from two

northern Californian wineries: Monte

Bello Ridge in Santa Clara County

(home of the signature Monte Bello

Cabernet Sauvignon), and Dry Creek

Valley in Sonoma County. Since 1969

its production has been supervised by

winemaker Paul Draper (pictured).

#7 Brancott

Estate

Estimated global shipments: 1.2m

cases

Country of origin: New Zealand

Owner: Pernod Ricard

Brancott Estate was created in the

mid-1970s, when Marlborough was

better known for its sheep farms than

its vineyards. Since then, the brand

has become New Zealand’s biggest-

selling wine export, and

helped pioneer a style of

Sauvignon Blanc which

is rightly acknowledged

as a world classic.

According to the

current owner, Pernod

Ricard, sales of the

company’s New

Zealand portfolio

(which includes

Stoneleigh as well

as Brancott Estate)

continue to build

on the momentum

generated by

“significant

advertising

and promotion

investment”,

growing global

sales by 2% in

the most recent

financial year.

It adds: “The

Americas stood

out for Brancott Estate, with the

portfolio posting notable sales in the

region led by the US (+18%) and in

Canada (+35%). Brancott Estate also

continued to expand its portfolio

footprint and capitalise on strong

consumer demand for New Zealand

wine, with sales in the Netherlands

(+89%), Sweden (8%), China (+22%)

and Japan (+67%) showing a strong

opportunity for continued expansion,

and demonstrating the future potential

for Marlborough wine.”

#04-11

Duboeuf

Estimated global shipments: 2.5m cases

Country of origin: France

Owner: Duboeuf family

Known as ‘the king of Beaujolais’ (or sometimes the pope), Georges Duboeuf

grew up on the family vineyard in Mâçon and by the age of 18 was delivering

Beaujolais by bicycle to local restaurant clients. Not long after that, Duboeuf

established a syndicate of 45 growers to fuel his growing enterprise.

This in turn gave way to Les Vins Georges Duboeuf, a négociant business

started in 1964. Inevitably, no discussion of Duboeuf (the man and the

business) is possible without reference to Beaujolais Nouveau, a marketing

stunt which arguably put the region on the map internationally and continues

to capture the imagination of wine lovers in many countries.

those who feel such young wines have achieved success at the detriment of

on its crus and a range of Domaine wines, made from single estates. These days, Nouveau is regarded as something of a poisoned chalice by

more complex and aged alternatives. Duboeuf itself is putting more emphasis

#8 Guigal

Estimated global shipments:

500,000 cases

Country of origin: France

Owner: Guigal family

Guigal is celebrated for a wide range

of red, white and rosé wine from the

northern and southern appellations of

the Rhône valley. Established in 1946

by Étienne Guigal, it has been managed

by his son Marcel since 1961.

Around half of the company’s

vineyard holdings are in Côte-Rôtie,

where it makes the famous Brune et

Blonde as well as the so-called La La

wines: La Mouline, La Landonne and

La Turque.

Rapturous endorsement by Robert

Parker has certainly helped Guigal’s

cause (as well as that of Côte-Rôtie

generally) but the real secret of the

company’s success is its attention to

detail and minimal intervention – both

in the vineyard and in the cellar.

#10 Domaine

de la

Romanée-

Conti

Estimated global shipments: 5,250

cases

Country of origin: France

Owner: De Villaine and Roch

families

The first vintage of DRC was produced

in 1232. Contemporary reviews are in

short supply but, in more recent times,

critics around the world have poured

out fulsome praise for a wine that may

not just be the best in Burgundy but, in

some people’s eyes, the world.

DRC’s 25 grand cru vineyards

include Romanée-Conti, La Tâche,

Richebourg, Romanée-St-Vivant,

Grands Échezeaux, Échezeaux and

Le Montrachet. They form a cluster

around the village of Vosne-Romanée,

on well-drained slopes around 240m

above sea level.

Vines have an average age of around

45 years and are farmed organically.

Winemaker Bernard Noblet, who

followed his father André into the

business, works with tiny yields,

producing wines of sublime finesse and

complexity.

#9

#11 Château

Mouton-

Rothschild

Estimated global shipments:

30,000 cases

Country of origin: France

Owner: Rothschild

Mouton was, infamously,

excluded from the 1855 classification

of first growths – an omission

that caused anger and resentment

until the authorities got around to

correcting this sorry state of affairs

in 1973, after decades of lobbying

on the part of Baron Philippe de

Rothschild.

Even without such status, Mouton

always behaved like a first growth, and

indeed sold its wines for higher prices

than many which had been recognised

as Bordeaux’s finest.

Owned by the Rothschilds since

1853, it is credited as the first to

introduce estate bottling, and has a

tradition of engaging leading artists

to design its labels. Picasso took the

commission for the historic 1973

vintage.

The 75ha Pauillac vineyard is

dominated by Cabernet Sauvignon,

with a little Cabernet Franc, Merlot

and Petit Verdot also present.

Today Mouton is owned by Baroness

Philippine de Rothschild and run by

estate director Hervé Berlaud, who

specialises in exotic and exuberant

wines with a loyal following among

collectors worldwide.

A second wine, Le Petit Mouton, first

appeared in 1993.

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Kendall-

Jackson

Estimated global shipments: 4m cases

Country of origin: US

Owner: Jackson Family Wine

Estates

Jess Jackson, who died aged 81 in 2011,

would be proud to see that the business

he created continues to be held in such

high regard. Founded in 1974 on a former

peach and walnut estate, the vineyard

originally supplied grapes for other

wineries before Jackson created his own

brand in 1982.

“We simply wanted to create

extraordinary wine from California’s best

vineyards,” he explained.

The Sonoma-based business is

associated with the full gamut of

Californian varieties, at a range of price

points. A recent addition is K-J Avant,

described as “a new benchmark of

California Chardonnay”, and made with

minimal oak contact.

Winemaker Randy Ullom, who oversees

the entire Kendall-Jackson portfolio,

was appointed by Jess Jackson in 1992.

“I look at all of the vineyards we own,”

he says, “and all of the individual lots of

wines that we make, and the thousands

of barrels we have sitting in our cellar

and sometimes I think, you gotta be

kidding me!

“After I’ve sufficiently recovered from

my daily panic attack, I take off my coat,

dig in my heels and take it one barrel at

a time.”

#13

#15 Wolf

Blass

Estimated global shipments: 4m

cases

Country of origin: Australia

Owner: Treasury Wine Estates

Wolf Blass recently reported a sales

increase of more than 20% in the

Chinese market and is expecting to see

Asia loom ever larger in its priorities

in the near future. Indeed, Treasury

Wine Estates compares economic and

demographic trends in China to those

that existed in the UK in the 1980s,

before Australian wineries pounced on

the opportunity and made Britain their

top export destination.

More than 70% of Wolf Blass wine

is exported, to around 50 countries.

The brand has come a long way since

1969, when Wolfgang Blass bought a

1ha plot in South Australia, launching

Black Label four years later, and

winning the Jimmy Watson Trophy at

the Melbourne Wine Show in 1974.

#12 Vega

Sicilia

Estimated global shipments: Not

known

Country of origin: Spain

Owner: Álvarez family

Ribera del Duero’s recognition as a

world-class wine region has come

comparatively late, but its most

acclaimed producer, Vega Sicilia, can

trace its history as far back as 1864.

It was then that Don Eloy Lecanda y

Chaves decided to plant the Cabernet

Sauvignon and Merlot grapes that are

still so crucial to the winery to this day.

Technical director Xavier Ausás, who

began working as an oenologist at Vega

Sicilia in 1992, oversees a winemaking

style that has an intensity of flavour

and aroma that has captivated wine

drinkers everywhere and helped spark

a tidal wave of investment in the region

from rivals who would like to emulate

some of Vega Sicilia’s success.

The flagship wine is Único, made

with Tempranillo as well as Cabernet

and Merlot.

14 i Drinks International i march 2013 #14 McGuigan

Estimated global shipments: Not

known

Country of origin: Australia

Owner: Australian Vintage

Tracing its roots to 1880, when Owen

McGuigan settled in the Hunter Valley,

McGuigan has remained family-owned

throughout its history and is now one

of the giants of the Australian wine

industry. It’s also one of the most

awarded wineries in the world, by its

#16 Félix

Solís

Estimated global shipments: 16m

cases

Country of origin: Spain

Owner: Félix Solís SA

Félix Solís’s Viña Albali brand – named

after a star in the constellation of

Aquarius – sells around 1.8m cases

a year and is available in Crianza,

Reserva and Gran Reserva styles.

In 1952, Félix Solís Fernández –

who came from a long tradition of

winemaking – settled in Valdepeñas. He

purchased Casa del Huerto del Cura

and began his winemaking enterprise.

Today the estate is known as Viña

Albali and serves as the headquarters of

Félix Solís SA.

Seventy per cent of the wine sold

outside Spain under the DO Valdepeñas

label bears the Félix Solís name. In

addition to Viña Albali, the portfolio

includes Albali Arium, Los Molinos,

Diego de Almagro, Soldepeñas,

Peñasol, Consigna, Orquestra and

several more brands.

#12-20

#20

Château Margaux

Estimated global shipments: 30,000 cases

Country of origin: France

Owner: Corinne Mentzelopoulos

Taking its name from the commune of Margaux, the estate has been associated

with wine since the 16th century. It was reportedly the first claret to be sold at

Christie’s (in 1771) and was one of four estates singled out for particular praise

by Thomas Jefferson when he visited Bordeaux in 1787. A bottle of Château

Margaux 1787 holds the record as the most expensive bottle of wine ever

broken, being insured for $225,000.

Around 150,000 bottles of the grand vin are produced each year, compared

to 200,000 bottles of the second wine, Pavillon Rouge. The white version of

Pavillon, which sells around 35,000 bottles a year, must be labelled as generic

Bordeaux as the Margaux authorities do not recognise Sauvignon Blanc.

own calculations.

Now run by brothers Brian and

Neil McGuigan, the business exports

to more than 20 countries and makes

wine in the Barossa as well as the

Hunter.

The company is best known for

Black Label, the flagship brand, but its

portfolio also includes the Bin Series,

Estate, Cellar Select and Signature.

Recent innovation has included

Semillon Blanc, a light and zesty

expression of the variety.

calculates that 2.5 million glasses of its

wines are consumed around the world

every day of the year.

Yellowtail can now be found in

more than 50 countries, and is rapidly

making progress in Asian markets. But

its story will always be linked with its

remarkable success in the US, where

its growth rates were unparalleled in

that market’s history, and where it

remains the number one imported red

wine.

The company remains family-owned

and true to its roots and original

philosophy, producing easy-drinking

wines that are aimed firmly at

consumers, rather than the critics.

#17

Yellowtail

Estimated global shipments: 12m

cases

Country of origin: Australia

Owner: Casella family

Yellowtail is such an epoch-making

wine brand that it’s sometimes easy

to forget it was launched as recently

as 2001, from a small site in Griffith,

New South Wales. The company now

#18 Cono

Sur

Estimated global shipments: 4.5m

cases

Country of origin: Chile

Owner: Concha y Toro

“No family trees, no dusty bottles, just

quality wine” – so goes the marketing

slogan, appropriately enough for a

wine business established in 1993. Its

name may sound like a play on words,

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but it literally means ‘southern cone’

– a reference to the shape of South

America on the map.

The business has become one of

the largest producers of Pinot Noir in

South America, and indeed the world.

Its wines are sold in 70 countries

worldwide, taking advantage of the

enviable distribution network created

by parent company Concha y Toro.

Under the stewardship of general

manager Adolfo Hurtado, the company

has built a reputation not just for good

value wines of consistent quality, but

a dedication to sustainable agriculture

and a benevolent approach to workers

and their families.

Recent launches have included

Sparkling Rosé Brut and Cosecha

Noble Late Riesling.

#19 Château

Lafite

Estimated global shipments: 45,000

cases

Country of origin: France

Owner: Rothschild

Imitation is supposedly the sincerest

form of flattery but Lafite would prefer

to be ignored by the counterfeiters who

continue to create problems for the

marque in China. Lafite is one of the

most desirable luxury goods among

the Chinese business and upper classes,

thanks partly to the efforts made by

its owners to cultivate sales in that

country, but also because Chinese

speakers find it a relatively easy name

to pronounce.

Classified as a first growth since

1855, Lafite’s Pauillac estate has been

planted with vines since the 17th

century and spent time under Dutch

and English ownership before being

bought by the Rothschilds in 1868. Its

first wine is dominated by Cabernet

Sauvignon while the second wine,

Carruades de Lafite, contains a higher

percentage of Merlot in the blend.

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#24 Marqués de Riscal

Estimated global shipments: 1m cases

Country of origin: Spain

Owner: Vinos de los Herederos del Marqués de Riscal

Marqués de Riscal is one of the oldest wineries in La Rioja, founded in Elciego

(Álava) in 1858 by Guillermo Hurtado de Amézaga.

Sixty per cent of its production – described by the company as “original,

fresh, elegant and easy to drink wine” – is exported, to nearly 100 countries.

Always keen to innovate, the business now operates from City of Wine, Frank

Gehry’s acclaimed construction which opened in 2006.

In Rioja, the company owns 500ha of vineyards, planted with Tempranillo,

Graciano, Cabernet Sauvignon and Mazuelo. It also has control of a further

985ha of vineyard.

The company was the first to introduce Bordeaux winemaking techniques to

the region and was also a pioneer of the modern winemaking scene in Rueda.

#21 Cheval

Blanc

Estimated global shipments: 8,500

cases

Country of origin: France

Owner: Bernard Arnault and Baron

Frère

Cheval Blanc was first conceived as an

estate in 1832 and took on its current

configuration in 1871. Export success

arrived at the end of the 19th century,

when the estate was spared by the

disastrous phylloxera plague, and the

wine found a loyal following across

Europe.

In 1955 it became (along with

Ausone) one of only two Pomerol

properties given premier grand cru

class status. The 1947 vintage has

become legendary, regarded by some as

the best wine ever made.

Pierre Lurton has headed the

winemaking at Cheval Blanc for two

decades, reporting to Arnault and Frère

since they took on the ownership in

1998.

Cabernet Franc accounts for 58% of

the vines planted, with the remaining

42% being Merlot.

#22 JP

Chenet

Estimated global shipments: 8m

cases

Country of origin: France

16 i Drinks International i march 2013 Owner: Les Grands Chais de

France

JP Chenet is now the best-selling

French wine brand in the world,

and exported to 160 countries. Its

distinctive bottle shape has helped on

the marketing front (it was designed

by Joseph Helfrich and christened

Josephine). But the brand was among

the first in France to recognise that

consumers were more familiar with

grape varieties than regions, and so JP

Chenet made its name with wines such

as Pays d’Oc Cabernet Sauvignon.

The wines are sourced from a

network of cooperatives, with the best-

sellers either offered as single varieties

or as blends of two grapes (Colombard/

Chardonnay or Grenache/Cinsault, for

example) and labelled either as IGP

Pay’s Doc or simply Vin de France.

#23

Château Ste

Michelle

Estimated global shipments: 2.5m

cases

Country of origin: US

Owner: UST

Washington State’s oldest winery

was built on the 1912 estate owned

by Seattle lumber baron Frederick

Stimson. The winery’s roots date back

to the Repeal of Prohibition, when the

Pommerelle Wine Company and the

National Wine Company were created.

All of Château Ste Michelle’s

vineyards are located on the sunny

and dry east side of the Cascade

Mountains. Winemaker Bob Bertheau

(below) makes the white wines in

Woodinville, near Seattle, and the

reds at Canoe Ridge Estate winery in

eastern Washington.

The company describes its recent

performance as “very solid”,

adding: “We continued to grow our

distribution globally, in addition to

our solid US business, which is strong

nationwide.”

#24

the launch of Cool Harvest, which has

a lower alcohol content than regular

wines; and also 1837 The Solway, a

premium blend of Cabernet Sauvignon

and Merlot developed exclusively for

the Chinese market.

China is a major focus for the brand.

Recent figures quoted by Pernod

Ricard describe a 32% increase in net

sales, driven by a dedicated marketing

and portfolio strategy which last

year saw the brand’s advertising and

promotional activity expand from five

to 24 cities.

Other emerging markets for the

brand include India (net sales growth

of 34%), Thailand (+32%), Russia

(+16%) and Poland (+20%).

#25 Jacob’s

Creek

Estimated global shipments: 7m

cases

Country of origin: Australia

Owner: Pernod Ricard

Johann Gramp first planted his

vineyard in 1847, starting a chain of

events that led, ultimately, to one of the

world’s most successful wine brands.

Jacob’s Creek is one of a small number

of mega-selling wines that continues

to earn plaudits from critics as well as

consumers.

The range was extended last year with

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#21-30

#26 Campo

Viejo

Estimated global shipments: 1.7m

cases

Country of origin: Spain

Owner: Pernod Ricard

Arguably Rioja’s most recognised

brand, Campo Viejo has long been

ahead of the curve in the region’s

modern thinking, launching less

oak-driven wines back in the 1990s

and in at the start of the trend for

architecturally iconic wineries as long

ago as 2001.

Little over half a century after

being founded by the merger of two

winemakers’ businesses, Campo Viejo’s

multinational ownership has thrown it

into the world of sponsorships and on-

pack offers, but it remains true to its

original principles of making accessible,

consumer-friendly wines with a true

expression of the Tempranillo grape.

image to move forward.

Recent history has seen the winery

relaunch its Delicato Family Vineyards

range as Domino, with retro-chic

packaging and a modern, easy-drinking

style.

The core philosophy remains true

to founder Gasparé Indelicato’s vision

of making affordable wines with big

character that punch above their price

point.

Nielsen recently rated it as the

fastest-growing of the top 15 producers

in the US.

#28 Leyda

Estimated global shipments: not

known

Country of origin: Chile

Owner: San Pedro Group

It’s little over a decade since the family-

owned vineyard harvested its first grapes

in the cool-climate Chilean valley from

which Viña Leyda borrows its name.

An area that had previously been the

setting for wheat and barley crops now

has thriving vineyards of Pinot Noir,

Sauvignon Blanc and Chardonnay,

with Merlot, Syrah, Riesling and

others coming through, and leading

commentators have remarked on

its potential to match more famous

regions such as Marlborough and

McLaren Vale in the future.

Fittingly, as the pioneer of the

appellation, Viña Leyda’s quality and

diversity have made it the region’s most

celebrated producer, with exports to

27 countries accounting for 90% of its

sales.

#30 Petrus

Estimated global shipments: 3,000

cases

Country of origin: France

Owner: JP Moueix

Boss Christian Moueix thinks the

relative modesty of the house that sits

on the top Pomerol estate makes it

barely worthy of the epithet ‘chateau’,

but there’s considerably less doubt

about the standing of the Petrus wines

on world markets.

With production limited to 11ha of

almost exclusively Merlot, its scarcity

is reflected in some of the silliest of

Bordeaux’s silly prices.

A case of 1982 fetched the top side

of US$83,000 at a Christie’s Hong

Kong sale in March 2011, while a box

of 1961 went for $144,000 later the

same year.

Fact, film fans: Moueix declined the

involvement of Petrus in the wine-nerd

movie Sideways because he found the

script “unexciting”.

#29 Louis Latour

Estimated global shipments: 700,000 cases

Country of origin: France

Owner: The Latour family

The Louis Latour name has global resonance in the modern wine world but

you’d be hard-pushed to find another producer more steeped in tradition.

The Burgundy producer is into its third century under family ownership and

claims to have the world’s oldest functioning winery and the first ever to be

built for the purpose. It uses a gravity-fed winemaking process of lifts and

railways, resisting modern innovations such as pumps.

Latour has the largest grand cru property in the Cote d’Or, part of an overall

holding of 51ha dedicated to Chardonnay and Pinot Noir.

#27 Delicato

Estimated global shipments: 8.4m

Country of origin: US

Owner: The Indelicato family

The Napa-based producer may be

closing in on its 90th anniversary in

2014, and under the stewardship of

the third generation of the family from

which it takes its name, but it has never

been shy of changing wine style and

#29

most admired wine Brands SUPPLEMENT i drinksint.com

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#31 Robert

Mondavi

Estimated global shipments: 10m

cases

Country of origin: US

Owner: Constellation Brands

When Robert Mondavi built the winery

which still bears his name, it was the

Napa Valley’s first major new-build

project since the end of Prohibition

more than 30 years earlier.

His Cabernet Sauvignon became

a signature wine and laid out the

blueprint for modern winemaking in

California. A true pioneer, Mondavi

was ahead of his time in promoting

wine education, greener approaches

to production and New/Old World

collaboration in the form of Opus One

with Baron Philippe de Rothschild.

The family’s $1.4 billion sale to

Constellation in 2004 took some of

the gloss off the Mondavi legend but

its reputation still outshines most

Californian rivals.

Santa Rita

Estimated global shipments: Not known

Country of origin: Chile

Owner: Claro Group

Legend has it that the independence leader Bernardo O’Higgins and 120 of his

patriots took residence in the Santa Rita cellars in the fight against the Spanish

in 1814.

Under the ownership of the Claro Group since 1980, the company has

enjoyed a more peaceful existence, with the main battle fought on world

wine markets, in 75 of which Santa Rita is now sold with regional offices

representing the firm in London, Miami and Shanghai. Sub-brands such as 120,

Reserva, Medalla Real, Triple C and Casa Real, have made the Santa Rita name

one of South America’s most reliable and innovative winemakers.

#32 Antinori

Estimated global shipments: 2.2m

cases

Country of origin: Italy

Owner: The Antinori family

Tuscany’s finest has built its on a

fine balance between tradition and

modernity, desirability and accessibility,

and focus and diversity.

With six centuries and 26 generations

of winemaking heritage it finally threw

open its doors for public tours and

tastings in 2012 with the inauguration

of its new Chianti Classico Cellars

facility.

Four decades earlier it had blown

the lid off the region’s winemaking

conventions, creating the style that

world become known as Super-Tuscan,

of which its Tignanello is still regarded

as the ultimate example today.

And, while its remained ahead of

the game at home, it’s continued to

spread its influence with winemaking

interests round the world – a 20ha

experimental project in Romania

the latest to benefit from a touch of

Antinori magic.

#33

#34 Faustino

Estimated global shipments: 1m

cases

Country of origin: Spain

Owner: Gruppo Faustino

Under the direction of Julio Faustino

Martinez, one of the most famous

names in Rioja has spread its wings to

explore lesser-known Spanish regions

with the potential to produce top-

quality wines.

It’s already proved itself happy to

tinker with convention in its own

region, blending Tempranillo and

Mazuela for its V Reserva wine and

adding Chardonnay to the blend

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for one of its flagship whites. More

than 150 years after it was founded,

Faustino’s mix of tradition and

innovation keeps it firmly on the world

wine map – and that of international

cycling. The main bodega has been the

start point for a stage in the last two

Tours of Spain.

#35 KWV

Estimated global shipments:

500,000 cases

Country of origin: South Africa

Owner: Niveus/HCI

South Africa’s largest wine producer’s

recent past has been so closely linked

to the country’s own political tides that

it’s sometimes been easy to overlook

the multiple successes that wines such

as its Classic Collection, the Mentors

and Cathedral Cellar achieve in

domestic wine competitions. A virtual

monopoly producer in the days of

Apartheid, it has reinvented itself in

21st-century South Africa.

The HCI black empowerment

investment company secured a

controlling stake in KWV at the end of

2012 and this year has already seen the

release of African Passion in the US, a

brand aimed at raising funds for social

justice projects in its home continent.

#31-40

#36 Fetzer

Estimated global shipments: 3m

cases

Country of origin: US

Owner: Concha y Toro

Sustainability, natural and

environmentally-friendly have become

buzzwords throughout the industry, but

California’s Fetzer has been living the

green dream for close on three decades

now.

That said, the days when Fetzer

might have been cast in boutique terms

are long gone, with the company now

into its second spell as the subsidiary of

a global drinks major, having swapped

Brown-Forman for a place in Chile’s

biggest wine empire in 2011 for a far-

from-niche US$238 million.

Labelling has already been freshened

up and CyT has promised brand

investment and a move to a more

Haut-Brion

Estimated global shipments: 13,000

cases

Country of origin: France

Owner: Domaine Clarence Dillon

No leading Bordeaux producer resonates

with Americans quite like Haut-Brion.

The main property was one of the four

original first growth classifications in

1855, though it had already won a ringing

endorsement from Thomas Jefferson

when he stayed there 68 years before.

Francophile American financier

Clarence Dillon went one better when

he bought Haut-Brion in 1935 and it

remains in his family today, with his great

grandson Prince Robert of Luxembourg

the current custodian. Another famous

American – in wine circles at any rate

– Robert Parker has more bottles of

La Mission-Haut Brion in his private

collection than any other wine.

La Mission is one of five properties

in the Haut-Brion empire. The most

recently acquired, Château Terte

Chateau Quintus in 2012. #39

Daugay, was given the new name

premium position. We could yet see

Fetzer turn consumers’ enduring

affection for the brand back into the

hip wine credentials it enjoyed in the

1980s and 1990s.

particularly in the UK, which continues

to be its main market, though it is now

making inroads into other European

nations.

#38 Blossom

Hill

Estimated global shipments: N/A

Country of origin: US

Owner: Diageo

Ever since Blossom Hill first came on

the scene 20 years ago, it’s been largely

reviled by wine writers who see its

no-nonsense accessibility as an affront

to their well-honed senses. But its

philosophy from the start was to make

wines for consumers, not the critics.

The Californian brand’s leading

markets are the UK, Ireland and

Scandinavia, and the quest to satisfy

every mass market consumer need has

seen brand extensions from Italy, South

Africa and Chile, premium Limited

Release and Winemaker’s Selection

wines and, most recently, a plunge into

the fashionable 5.5% abv segment with

Blossom Hill Vie.

#40 Ausone

Estimated global shipments: 2,000

cases

Country of origin: France

Owner: The Vauthier family

A sprinkling of fairy dust from

consultant winemaker Michel Rolland

has helped bring the St Emilion

property’s luscious fruit-driven wines

back to peak form in the past decade

and a half.

The estate – named after the Roman

poet-viticulturist Decimis Magnus

Ausonius, who is said to have had

a villa on the site – had fallen into

decline until the arrival of winemaker

Pascal Delbeck in 1976, after which

Ausone began a steady climb which

saw its reputation, and prices, restored

to a par with its illustrious neighbours.

The vineyard area amounts to a mere

7ha with a 50-50 split of Merlot and

Cabernet Franc.

#37 First

Cape

Estimated global shipments: Not

known

Country of origin: South Africa

Owner: Brand Phoenix

What started out just over a decade ago

as a venture between three UK wine

trade executives and a group of five

South African wineries has now grown

into a global affair with more than 200

South African suppliers supplemented

by others in Australia, Italy, eastern

Europe and South America.

First Cape has fragmented into a

number of sub-brands, all retaining the

core philosophy of giving mainstream

consumers what they want – honest,

affordable wine.

The brand has been at the forefront

of the lower-alcohol wine movement,

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Kumala

Estimated global shipments: 1.1m cases

Country of origin: South Africa

Owner: Accolade Winess

A brand that originated in the marketing department of a Telford-based

wine distributor, with the finer points sketched out over a meal at an Italian

restaurant, became the major UK market success for South Africa in the post-

Apartheid era.

A couple of quick changes in ownership allowed rival brands to chip away at

a market position that once gave it 50% of the South African wine market in

the UK, but a more settled period under Constellation and, later, Accolade has

steered it to calmer waters.

The brand may not be the ubiquitous presence on supermarket shelves it

once was but is still a force to be reckoned with.

#42 Le Pin

Estimated global shipments: 600

cases

Country of origin: France

Owner: The Thienpont family

With a measly 2.7ha under vine, and

a low-yielding gravel-clay soil, the

scarcity of Le Pin wines means that

even in the crazy world of Bordeaux

trading, few wines are as coveted.

Named after a solitary pine tree

that stands near the Pomerol winery,

the property was bought in 1979 by

Belgian Jacques Thienpont of the

neighbouring Vieux Château Certan.

A tiny farmhouse basement winery

that he inherited gave way to a new,

gravity-fed facility in 2011, designed by

Belgian architect Paul Robbrecht.

The vineyard is exclusively Merlot

with vines averaging not far short of 40

years in age.

#43 Marqués

de Cáceres

Estimated global shipments: 28m

cases

Country of origin: Spain

Owner: Forner family

When Enrique Forner returned to

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Spain in 1968 to set up a winery in

Rioja a slow revolution in the region’s

winemaking began.

The Forner family had taken exile

in France in the 1930s after Franco’s

victory in the Spanish Civil War, and

Enrique took back its experience

running Bordeaux chateaux to found

Marqués de Cáceres in Rioja Alta.

His new approach to Rioja

winemaking involved working closely

with growers and using younger oak

for shorter ageing periods to produce

a fresher, less oak-driven style. It’s one

that is commonplace today, but being

ahead of the game helped Forner and

Caceres forge markets in 120 countries,

accounting for a 10th of all the region’s

a pair of sparkling wines attempting

to reach out to a new generation. It

may never again scale the 3m-plus case

heights of the late 1980s, when it was

sold in 120 countries, but its presence

here suggests Mateus has a future – not

just a past – in an era when fresh, light

wines and rosé are on-trend.

#41

exports. Enrique died in 2011 but his

vision lives on under daughter Cristina.

#44 Mateus

Estimated global shipments: 2.2m

cases

Country of origin: Portugal

Owner: Sogrape

It’s to the credit of the gradual

reinvention process behind Mateus

in recent decades that it’s now almost

possible to get through a sentence when

talking about it without mentioning

table lamps. Almost.

What was once an iconic pink wine

brand is now a pan-category with

Tempranillo and Shiraz varieties and

#45 Black

Tower

Estimated global shipments: 1m

cases

Country of origin: Germany

Owner: Reh Kendermann

Though global trends may have shifted

away from Black Tower’s favour, the

world’s biggest selling wine has moved

with the times to maintain its place as

one of the most recognisable names –

and bottles – on the world stage.

The packaging has been dragged

into the 21st century by an overhaul, a

move which has successfully kept it on

supermarket shelves and dinner tables

in more than 50 countries around the

world.

The introduction of the 5.5% abv

B from Black Tower is further proof

that this is one German wine that won’t

allow itself to fall victim to changing

fashion.

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#41-50

#46 Oyster

Bay

Estimated global shipments: 1.8m

cases

Country of origin: New Zealand

Owner: Delegat’s Wine Estates

Delegat’s was one of the first to capture

the distinctive Marlborough style of

Sauvignon Blanc and encapsulated it in

Osyter Bay, a brand whose image has

been mimicked by a host of pretenders

since it started winning awards more

than 20 years ago.

The brand is now also picking up

gongs for its Hawke’s Bay wines, while

moves into Chardonnay, Merlot, Pinot

Noir and sparkling wine all helped it

avoid being typecast, as competition

for NZ Sauvignon intensified.

The brand’s principal export markets

include Australia and the UK and it has

achieved top 10 status in the US for

imported wines over the $10 mark.

#47

Undurraga

Estimated global shipments: 1.5m

cases

Country of origin: Chile

Owner: Grupos Viños del Pacifico

Undurraga was one of the pioneering

wine producers in Chile and remains

one of its most prestigious. Francisco

Undurraga personally brought over

Cabernet Sauvignon, Sauvignon Blanc,

Merlot, Pinot Noir, Riesling and

Gewürztraminer vines from France and

Germany in 1885 – and less than 20

years later the first wines were being

exported to the US.

Fast-forward over a century, and

2012 saw Undurraga named Winery of

the Year by Wines of Chile, principally

in recognition of its work to develop

the country’s fizz footprint through its

Sparkling People marketing campaign.

#49

Barefoot

Estimated global shipments: 10m

cases

Country of origin: US

Owner: E&J Gallo

Gallo has publicly declared it wants

Barefoot to become the biggest wine in

the world in the next few years but, lest

anyone think that it’s here purely for its

promotional skills, it’s worth nothing

that Barefoot Moscato took three

trophies and a clutch of other gongs in

the blindly-judged What Wine What

Food tasting in 2012.

The judging line-up included British

wine writers and MWs. It was a ringing

endorsement for the wine quality of

Barefoot, which has had little trouble

convincing consumers about its

down-to-earth image – the footprint

of former owner Bonnie Harvey still

appears on the label – and good-times

marketing.

#50 Changyu

Estimated global shipments: 9m

tonnes

Country of origin: China

Owner: State/public

China’s biggest producer – and one

of the top 10 in the world – is the

first from the country to make an

impression in the annual Most Admired

chart, though it’s hardly a new kid on

the block.

The company celebrated its 120th

anniversary last year by announcing

plans to build a wine tourism centre

twice the size of Monaco in its home

city of Yantai in Shandong Province.

Changyu’s wines have been sold in

28 countries over the past decade, and

it further developed its export sales last

year when its Jiebaina wine went on

sale in upmarket British supermarket

chain Waitrose.

The producer’s international

ambitions are also evident from

teaming up with Castel of France

to build a winery in China and

establishing its own production unit in

New Zealand.

Wyndham Estate

Estimated global shipments: 1m cases

Country of origin: Australia

Owner: Pernod Ricard

Exiled Brit farmer George Wyndham was too modest to give the wine estate

he founded in 1828 his own name, so for 140 years the Hunter Valley Shiraz

specialist went under the name Dalwood.

When it was bought by Brian McGuigan from Penfolds in 1970 he renamed

it Wyndham Estate in its founder’s honour, and built it into a 2m-case brand

before selling to Pernod Ricard in 1990. It’s not seen by Pernod Ricard as one

of the global power brands within in its wine portfolio but the French giant

has recognised its place in Aussie wine heritage by releasing an upmarket

Founder’s Reserve label.

#48

most admired wine Brands SUPPLEMENT i drinksint.com

march 2013 i Drinks International i 23Most Admired Wine Brands regionals

Top North American Wine Brands

1 Ridge Vineyards

2 Kendall Jackson

3 Château Ste Michelle

4 Delicato

5 Robert Mondavi

6 Fetzer

7 Blossom Hill

8 Barefoot

North

America

North American brands

Once again there are eight

in our top 50 countdown.

This time, Ridge pips

last year’s highest ranked

brand, Kendall-Jackson, to the top spot in

the table of US wines.

Château Ste Michelle holds on to

the third place finish it achieved last

time, and Mondavi is steady at number

five (this year we’re including all the

company’s brands in its vote, including

Woodbridge). But Delicato is a new entry

at number four, pushing Fetzer into sixth

place.

Blossom Hill, absent altogether from

last year’s chart, makes a return this time.

But there is a notable absentee: Gallo did

not pick up any votes this time around

and has to be content with a sixth-place

finish in the North American chart for its

Barefoot sub-brand.

Above: Fetzer

Left: Delicato

Below left to right: Kendall-

Jackson, Robert Mondavi,

Barefoot

most admired wine Brands SUPPLEMENT i drinksint.com

march 2013 i Drinks International i 25Most Admired Wine Brands

Above: Santa Rita

South

Left: Leyda

America

Top South

American

Wine Brands

1 Concha y Toro

2 Cono Sur

3 Leyda

4 Santa Rita

5 Undurraga

South America in the Most

There is a trend emerging for

Admired Wine Brands survey.

In the first poll, three brands

made the top 50. Last year,

there were four. In 2013, five South

Americans make the list – all of them

from Chile.

Part of the explanation comes from

our decision to count Concha y Toro and

Cono Sur as separate entities, something

which has happened as a result of

feedback from judges, even though the two

wines belong to the same parent company.

But Cono Sur is not the only newcomer

to the South American chart. Leyda, which

was absent last time, achieves a creditable

fourth place, while Undurraga – itself a

newcomer last year – continues to earn the

faith of the judging panel.

26 i Drinks International i march 2013 drinksint.com i most admired wine Brands SUPPLEMENTMost Admired Wine Brands

Top

Bordeaux

Wine Brands

1 Mouton Rothschild

2 Lafite

3 Margaux

4 Cheval Blanc

5 Petrus

6 Haute-Brion

7 Ausone

8 Le Pin

Right: The cellars

at Haute-Brion

Above: Cheval

Blanc, Petrus, Le

Pin

Below right:

Château Margaux

Bordeaux

Like last year, Bordeaux again

has eight representatives in the

top 50, compared to 10 in the

survey’s first year.

There’s a new name at the

top of the Bordeaux league table, with

Mouton Rothschild jumping six places

at the expense of last year’s number one,

Margaux – which settles for third place

this time.

Lafite improves on last year’s third-place

finish, and there’s a return for Ausone,

which dipped out altogether in 2012. But

Château d’Yquem has failed to make the

cut.

Once again there’s no berth for Latour,

which was the second highest ranked

Bordeaux wine in the first Most Admired

survey.

Perhaps tellingly, no Bordeaux company

managed to do better than the top scoring

wine from Burgundy, Domaine de la

Romanée-Conti.

28 i Drinks International i march 2013 European

In the overall top 50, there are 24 European

wines. This year’s vote again puts Torres at the

top of the pile, with Chapoutier and Guigal

each moving up a place to claim second and

third spots respectively.

Duboeuf and Vega Sicilia again make the top 10,

but elsewhere there are some interesting movements.

Antinori drops out of the top 10 altogether, despite

securing second place last time. Mouton Rothschild is

a new entry in the top 10, and it’s also hello to Félix

Solís, which gives Spain its third representative in the

European big league.

But the rest of the places all go to French brands.

For France to claim seven of the top 10 spots in

the European chart, compared to six last time, is a

ringing endorsement – and a sure sign that, despite

increased global competition, France’s reputation as

the home of quality wine is still intact.

Left: Dubeouf vineyards

Top: Guigal

Below: Torres’s Rioja winery

Top European

Wine Brands

1 Torres

2 Chapoutier

3 Guigal

4 Duboeuf

5 Domaine de la Romanée-Conti

6 Mouton Rothschild

7 Vega Sicilia

8 Félix Solís

9 Lafite

10 Margaux

drinksint.com i most admired wine Brands SUPPLEMENT

march 2013 i Drinks International i 29Most Admired Wine Brands

Australia &

New Zealand

Australia regains its

dominance of the regional

league table, having been

eclipsed six to four by New

Zealand last time around.

This year, only nine brands from the

region make the top 50, so a top 10 is

not possible. Australia claims six of those

positions.

Again, Penfolds tops the poll, but

Cloudy Bay has motored ahead of last

year’s second placed wine, Jacob’s Creek,

which slips five places.

Brancott Estate holds on to third place,

and Oyster Bay also makes the cut.

Fellow New Zealanders Babich, Wither

Hills and Villa Maria all miss out this time

around.

Among the Australians, the newcomers

to this year’s top 10 are Yellowtail, Wolf

Blass and Wyndham Estate.

Top

Australian

and New

Zealand

Wine Brands

1 Penfolds

2 Cloudy Bay

3 Brancott Estate

4 McGuigan

5 Wolf Blass

6 Yellowtail

7 Jacob’s Creek

8 Oyster Bay

9 Wyndham Estate

Above: Wyndham

Estate

Left: Cloudy

Bay Red Shed

vineyards

30 i Drinks International i march 2013 drinksint.com i most admired wine Brands SUPPLEMENT

STATE OF THE WORLD VINE AND WINE SECTOR IN 2024 — 1

State of the

World Vine

and Wine Sector

in 2024

APRIL 2025STATE OF THE WORLD VINE AND WINE SECTOR IN 2024 — 2

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Abbreviations

ha: hectares

kha: thousands of hectares

mha: millions of hectares

l: litres

khl: thousands of hectolitres

mhl: millions of hectolitres

m: million

bn: billion

EUR: euros

Avg.: average

Prov.: provisional

Prel.: preliminary

APRIL 2025STATE OF THE WORLD VINE AND WINE SECTOR IN 2024 — 5

The year 2024 in a nutshell

In 2024, the global vine and wine sector faced another challenging year,

marked by adverse climatic conditions that resulted in historically low

production levels. At the same time, social and economic factors have led

to declining consumption in key markets. Despite these pressures, higher

average prices helped support overall market performance in value terms,

mitigating some of the impact of reduced volumes.

Key Highlights

• Vineyard Surface Area: The global vineyard surface area

continued its decline in 2024, contracting by 0.6% to 7.1 million

hectares. This marks the fourth consecutive year of decline,

driven by vineyard removals across major vine‑growing

regions in both hemispheres, affecting all grapes for wine and

non-wine uses.

• Wine production: For the second consecutive year, extreme

climatic conditions and consequent disease pressure severely

impacted vineyards worldwide, leading to a historically low

global wine production. As in 2023, these circumstances were

further exacerbated by economic and market pressures. In

2024, the total output fell to 225.8 million hectolitres - the

lowest in over 60 years - down 4.8% compared to the previous

year.

• Wine Consumption: In 2024, global wine consumption is

estimated at 214.2 million hectolitres, down 3.3% from 2023’s

already low level. Declining demand across major markets,

coupled with high average prices - driven by low production

volumes and the lingering effects of past inflation - made

for a challenging year. However, some key markets showed

resilience despite these difficulties.

• International trade in wine: In 2024, the international trade

in wine was impacted by low production volumes and high

average export prices. While total export volume remained

relatively low at 99.8 million hectolitres - matching 2023 but

5% below the five-year average - this was offset by strong

export value, reaching 35.9 billion euros. The average export

price held steady at 3.60 euros per litre, maintaining the

record high set in 2023.

APRIL 2025STATE OF THE WORLD VINE AND WINE SECTOR IN 2024 — 6

1 l Vineyard surface area

1.1 • World vineyard

In 2024, the world’s vineyard surface area1 stands at

7.1 million hectares, marking a slight decrease of 0.6%

compared to 2023. As shown in Figure 1, this is the

fourth consecutive year of shrinking vineyard surfaces

globally. The trend is attributed to a reduction in

vineyard surface across major vine-growing countries

in both hemispheres, with only a few exceptions. The

trend has been noted for all grape types, with wine

grapes being affected the most.

Figure 1 • Evolution of world vineyard surface area

mha

7.9

7.8

7.7

7.6

7.5

7.4

7.3

7.2

7.1

7.0

2000 2001 2002 2003 2004 2005 2006 2007 2008 2009 2010 2011 2012 2013 2014 2015 2016 2017 2018 2019 2020 2021 2022 2023

Prov.

2024

Prel.

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1

The vineyard surface area refers to the planted area with vines for all purposes (wine grape, table grape, and grape to be dried), including young vines

that are not yet productive.

APRIL 2025STATE OF THE WORLD VINE AND WINE SECTOR IN 2024 — 7

1.2 • Major vine-growing countries

The European Union’s (EU) vineyard landscape

witnessed an overall decrease of 0.8% in 2024, totalling

3.2 mha. The modest expansions reported in Italy,

Romania, and Greece did not offset the vineyard

removals observed in other EU countries.

At the country level, Spain, the largest vineyard in the

world, accounts for 930 kha in 2024 and has decreased

by 1.5% (equivalent to 14.5 kha) compared to 2023.

Similarly, France, with the second largest area under

vines, saw a decrease of 0.7%, setting at 783 kha. Italy,

on the contrary, continued its positive trend, reaching

728 kha. Among the top seven largest vineyards in the

world, Italy is the only one recording positive growth.

Expansions were also recorded in Romania (187 kha,

+0.1%/2023) and Greece (93 kha, +0.4%/2023). In all the

other main vine-growing countries of the EU, declines

in area under vines are recorded: -5.1% in Portugal

(173 kha), -0.4% in Germany (103 kha), -7.3% in Bulgaria

(60 kha), and -1.0% in Hungary (60 kha).

Outside the EU, Moldova maintained its position as the

largest vineyard in Eastern Europe with 115 kha, while

Russia reported a 2.2% surface area increase, reaching

108 kha.

In Asia, after a period of significant expansion from

2000 to 2015 (from 300 kha to 770 kha), the vineyard

in China2, third in the world by size, has stabilised

in recent years and is estimated at 753 kha in 2024

(-0.4%/2023). Türkiye hosts the fifth largest vineyard

in the world in 2024, with an estimated vineyard surface

area of 402 kha primarily dedicated to table and dried

grape production. Türkiye recorded a negative trend in

the last ten years, losing 20% of its vineyard surface.

India’s vineyard area has been significantly expanding

in recent years, with an average annual growth rate

of 4.5% since 2019. In 2024, the total area under vines

is estimated to reach 185 kha. Other large vineyards

in Asia, mainly specialised in the production of table

grapes and grapes to be dried, are in Iran (122 kha),

Uzbekistan (121 kha) and Afghanistan (100 kha).

In North America, the USA, the sixth largest vineyard in

the world, is estimated at 385 kha (-0.7%/2023). This is

the eleventh year in a row that the area under vines has

declined since its peak at 453 kha in 2013.

In South America, Argentina’s vineyard area decreased

by 2.4% in 2024, reaching 200 kha. Similarly, Chile saw

a significant drop of 3.2%, totalling 166 kha. Brazil,

on the contrary, expanded its vineyard for the fourth

consecutive year, reaching 83 kha (+1.6%/2023).

The largest vineyard in Africa is in South Africa. Its

surface area, estimated at 120 kha, diminished by 1.5%

in 2024, marking the tenth consecutive year of decline.

This is attributed in part to the severe droughts that took

place between 2015 and 2017. Other major vineyards in

Africa are in Egypt (89 kha) and Algeria (69 kha).

Australia’s vineyard is estimated at 159 kha, consistent

with the average observed over the last five years.

2

For statistical purposes, the data for China do not include those for the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (Hong Kong SAR), Macao Special

Administrative Region (Macao SAR) and Taiwan Province of China.

APRIL 2025STATE OF THE WORLD VINE AND WINE SECTOR IN 2024 — 8

Table 1 • Vineyard surface area of major vine-growing countries3

kha 2019 2020 2021 2022 2023

Prov.

2024

Prel

24/23

% var.

2024

% world

Spain 966 961 963 955 945 930 -1.5% 13.1%

France 794 799 795 796 788 783 -0.7% 11.0%

China 781 766 754 758 756 753 -0.4% 10.6%

Italy 714 719 722 718 723 728 0.8% 10.3%

Türkiye 436 431 419 413 406 402 -1.0% 5.7%

USA 407 402 393 391 388 385 -0.7% 5.4%

Argentina 215 215 211 207 205 200 -2.4% 2.8%

Romania 191 190 189 188 187 187 0.1% 2.6%

India 151 161 167 175 182 185 1.8% 2.6%

Portugal 195 195 194 193 182 173 -5.1% 2.4%

Chile 210 207 182 182 172 166 -3.2% 2.3%

Australia 159 159 159 159 159 159 0.0% 2.2%

Iran 167 155 136 119 122 122 0.0% 1.7%

Uzbekistan 112 114 118 122 121 121 0.0% 1.7%

South Africa 129 128 126 124 122 120 -1.5% 1.7%

Moldova 143 140 138 122 115 115 0.0% 1.6%

Russia 96 97 99 101 105 108 2.2% 1.5%

Germany 103 103 103 103 104 103 -0.4% 1.5%

Afghanistan 96 100 100 100 100 100 0.0% 1.4%

Greece 109 112 96 93 92 93 0.4% 1.3%

Egypt 78 85 83 84 89 89 0.0% 1.3%

Brazil 81 80 81 81 81 83 1.6% 1.2%

Algeria 74 75 68 69 69 69 0.0% 1.0%

Bulgaria 67 66 65 65 65 60 -7.3% 0.9%

Hungary 65 63 63 61 61 60 -1.0% 0.8%

Other countries 837 834 824 814 802 800 -0.2% 11.3%

World total 7377 7356 7248 7195 7142 7096 -0.6% 100%

Figure in Italics: OIV estimate

Sources: OIV, FAO. National Statistical Offices

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3

Countries with a vineyard surface area equal to or above 50 kha in 2024.

APRIL 2025STATE OF THE WORLD VINE AND WINE SECTOR IN 2024 — 9

2 I Wine production

2.1 • World wine production

In 2024, global wine production4, excluding juices

and musts, is estimated at 225.8 mhl, marking a 4.8%

decrease compared to the already historically low

output of 2023. This marks the second consecutive year

of strong decline, resulting in the lowest production

level recorded since 1961 (219 mhl), when spring frost hit

major vineyards in Southern Europe, notably in France.

As with 2023, extreme or atypical meteorological

events are the key influence on global production, with

early frosts, heavy rainfall, and prolonged drought

dramatically impacting vineyard productivity. These

factors severely impacted harvest volumes across major

wine-producing regions in both the Northern and

Southern Hemispheres. Additionally, in some regions,

this low output reflects market adjustments driven by

declining consumption volumes.

2.2 • Major wine-producing countries

in the Northern Hemisphere

Vinified production in the European Union in 2024 is

estimated at 138.3 mhl, which marks a decrease of

3.5% compared to 2023. This represents the lowest

production volume recorded since the beginning of the

century, behind even 2017 (141.5 mhl). The 2024 data

highlight the significant impact of climate change on

the EU wine regions, with vineyards facing a wide range

of climatic disruptions. While some areas experienced

severe drought and hydric stress, others were affected

by unprecedented heavy rainfall and destructive storms.

These extreme weather conditions have led to increased

disease pressure, vineyard damage, and challenging

grape cultivation conditions. These impacts were spread

unevenly and some regions benefited from relatively

favourable weather conditions, yielding average harvest

volumes.

Italy, the largest wine-producing nation globally, is one

of the few countries that recorded an average production

level in 2024, with 44.1 mhl, representing a notable 15%

increase from the historically low production level of

2023. However, the 2024 volume is still 6% below the

five-year average. Adverse weather conditions affected

the majority of Italian wine regions, most particularly in

the North, where a significant part of the vineyard was

impacted by hailstorms.

France, second in the world ranking, produced in 2024 a

volume of 36.1 mhl, marking a significant drop of 11.1 mhl

(-23.5%) from 2023 and 17.9% below its five-year average.

This represents the lowest output since 1957 (32.5 mhl).

The decline in French wine production for 2024 is again

attributable to adverse weather conditions across the

country from flowering to harvest, impacting all wine

regions, with issues like continuous rain, fungal disease

outbreaks (notably downy mildew), poor flowering,

droughts and hailstorms reducing yields.

Spain maintains its position as the third largest wine

producer globally, with a 2024 production volume

of 31.0 mhl. This figure represents an increase of

2.6 mhl (+9.3%) compared to 2023, though it remains

11.1% below the five-year average. This rise, driven by

relatively positive harvests in Castilla-La Mancha and

Extremadura, is a partial recovery from the severe

droughts of 2023, but ongoing water stress continues to

challenge grape growers.

Figure 2 • Evolution of world wine production (juices and musts excluded)

mhl

310

300

290

280

270

260

250

240

230

220

2000 2001 2002 2003 2004 2005 2006 2007 2008 2009 2010 2011 2012 2013 2014 2015 2016 2017 2018 2019 2020 2021 2022 2023

Prov.

2024

Prel.

©OIV

4

Production volume resulting from wine grapes harvested in the first semester of 2024 in the Southern Hemisphere and in the second semester of 2024 in

the Northern Hemisphere.

APRIL 2025Among the other major EU countries, Germany

(7.8 mhl, -9.8%/2023), Portugal (6.9 mhl, -8.2%/2023),

Romania (3.7 mhl, -19.8%/2023), and Austria (2.2 mhl,

-8.8%/2023) recorded not only a decrease compared

to 2023, but also a smaller-than-average production

volumes attributed to various climatic challenges such

as drought, late spring frosts and heavy summer rains.

Conversely, Hungary (2.7 mhl, +10.0%/2023) and Greece

(1.4 mhl, +1.4%/2023) recorded production volumes

exceeding those of 2023.

Concerning neighbouring countries outside the EU,

Russia (5.4 mhl, +19.3/2023) reported a 2024 production

level that is 17.5% larger than its last five-year average,

recording the largest volume since 2015. Moldova’s

vinified production is well below average at 1.1 mhl

(-39.7%/2023), the third-lowest volume recorded since

2000.

Wine production in Georgia is estimated at 2.4 mhl,

marking a 26.6% increase from 2023 and 19.7% above its

five-year average, representing the highest production

level since the start of the century. This growth is

attributed to favourable weather conditions across all

key wine regions.

In Asia, China is the largest wine producer, with a 2024

volume estimated at 2.6 mhl, marking a reduction of

17.0% compared to the previous year.

In the USA, the world’s fourth-largest wine producer,

2024 wine production is estimated at 21.1 mhl, marking

a 17.2% decline from 2023 and 15.5% below the five-year

average. Extreme heat and inventory pressures led to

one of the lowest production levels in the past 15 years.

Notably, California’s grape harvest has been the smallest

since 2004.

APRIL 2025

STATE OF THE WORLD VINE AND WINE SECTOR IN 2024 — 10

2.3 • Major wine-producing countries

in the Southern Hemisphere

The Southern Hemisphere registered a historically low

output for the second consecutive year. Attributed to

extreme climatic events across major wine-producing

regions, the 2024 vinified production dropped to

45.8 mhl, marking a 3.6% decrease from 2023 and a

13.8% drop from the five-year average. This represents

the lowest production level in the last twenty years.

Lower volumes were recorded only at the beginning of

the century when the Southern Hemisphere vineyard

was about 15% smaller in size.

The majority of South American countries have

registered comparatively low production volumes in

2024. Argentina has produced 10.9 mhl, reflecting

a significant recovery from a challenging 2023

(+23.3%/2023), though still 3.9% below the five-year

average. This volume positions Argentina as the leading

producer in the Southern Hemisphere for 2024. Chile,

with a production of 9.3 mhl, recorded a significant

15.6% decrease from 2023 and stands 21.4% below the

five-year average. This is the lowest output since 2010

for Chile and is attributed to a late harvest due to an

unusually cool spring and to drought conditions in the

main wine regions. Brazil’s 2024 wine production is

estimated at 2.1 mhl, marking a substantial 41.0% drop

from 2023 and 25.2% below the five-year average, driven

by excessive spring rainfall and downy mildew pressure.

South Africa’s 2024 wine production volume is 8.8 mhl,

marking a 5.1% decline from 2023 and 12.6% below the

five-year average. This is the lowest output since 2005.

The harvest faced multiple challenges, including frost,

heavy winter rainfall, high winds, floods, and elevated

fungal disease pressure.

In Oceania, Australia’s wine production is equal to

10.2 mhl in 2024, representing a 5.3% increase from the

historically low volume of 2023 but remaining 16% below

the five-year average. The country continues to face

challenges from adverse climatic conditions, notably

excessive rainfall, as well as inventory pressures. New

Zealand’s production, at 2.8 mhl, shows a notable

21.2% decline from 2023 and 13.1% below the five-year

average. The low output is primarily attributable to

Marlborough’s reduced harvest resulting from frost

damage during the critical flowering period.STATE OF THE WORLD VINE AND WINE SECTOR IN 2024 — 11

Table 2 • Wine production (juices and musts excluded) in major countries5

mhl 2019 2020 2021 2022 2023

Prov.

2024

Prel

24/23

% Var.

2024 /

avg. 19-23

% Var.

2024

% world

Italy 47.5 49.1 50.2 49.8 38.3 44.1 15.1% -6.2% 19.5%

France 42.2 46.7 37.6 46.0 47.2 36.1 -23.5% -17.9% 16.0%

Spain 33.7 40.9 35.5 36.0 28.4 31.0 9.3% -11.1% 13.7%

USA 26.8 23.9 25.3 23.5 25.5 21.1 -17.2% -15.5% 9.4%

Argentina 13.0 10.8 12.5 11.5 8.8 10.9 23.3% -3.9% 4.8%

Australia 12.0 10.9 14.8 13.1 9.6 10.2 5.3% -16.0% 4.5%

Chile 11.9 10.3 13.4 12.4 11.0 9.3 -15.6% -21.4% 4.1%

South Africa 9.7 10.4 10.8 10.3 9.3 8.8 -5.1% -12.6% 3.9%

Germany 8.2 8.4 8.4 8.9 8.6 7.8 -9.8% -9.0% 3.4%

Portugal 6.5 6.4 7.4 6.8 7.5 6.9 -8.2% -0.2% 3.1%

Russia 4.6 4.4 4.3 5.0 4.5 5.4 19.3% 17.5% 2.4%

Romania 3.8 3.8 4.5 3.8 4.6 3.7 -19.8% -10.0% 1.6%

New Zealand 3.0 3.3 2.7 3.8 3.6 2.8 -21.2% -13.1% 1.3%

Hungary 2.4 2.6 2.6 2.5 2.4 2.7 10.0% 7.0% 1.2%

China 7.8 6.6 5.9 4.7 3.2 2.6 -17.0% -53.4% 1.2%

Georgia 2.1 2.1 1.9 1.9 1.9 2.4 26.6% 19.7% 1.0%

Austria 2.5 2.4 2.5 2.5 2.4 2.2 -8.8% -11.8% 1.0%

Brazil 2.2 2.3 2.9 3.2 3.6 2.1 -41.0% -25.2% 0.9%

Greece 2.4 2.2 2.4 2.1 1.4 1.4 1.4% -33.8% 0.6%

Moldova 1.5 0.9 1.4 1.4 1.8 1.1 -39.7% -23.3% 0.5%

Other countries 15.2 14.5 13.7 14.3 13.7 13.4 -2.4% -6.3% 5.9%

World Total 259.0 263.0 260.7 263.7 237.2 225.8 -4.8% -12.0% 100.0%

Figure in italic: estimate OIV

Sources: OIV, EC DG AGRI, FAO, National Statistical Offices, Specialised Press

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Countries with a wine production equal to or above 1 mhl in 2024.

APRIL 2025STATE OF THE WORLD VINE AND WINE SECTOR IN 2024 — 12

3 I Wine consumption

3.1 • World wine consumption

World wine consumption in 2024 is estimated at

214.2 mhl, marking a decrease of 3.3% compared to

2023. If this estimate is confirmed6, it would signify the

lowest volume recorded since 1961 (213.6 mhl).

The decline in global wine consumption has followed a

relatively steady trajectory since 2018. A combination of

several factors contributes to this trend. Notably, the

decrease in China’s consumption, averaging a loss of

2 mhl annually since 2018, has played a central role in

driving down global consumption figures.

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 exacerbated

this downward trend, with lockdown measures

negatively impacting major wine markets worldwide. In

2021, the end of pandemic-related restrictions, coupled

with the reopening of the hospitality sector (HoReCa)

and the resurgence of social gatherings and festivities,

led to a rebound in consumption across many countries,

as shown in Figure 3.

However, in 2022, geopolitical tensions, particularly the

conflict in Ukraine, and subsequent energy crises, along

with disruptions in the global supply chain, resulted

in heightened wine production and distribution costs.

This, in turn, led to significant price increases for

wine consumers, dampening overall demand. Against

the backdrop of a complex economic landscape

characterised by global inflationary pressures and

reduced consumer purchasing power, the major wine

markets experienced notable declines also in 2023.

Figure 3 • Evolution of world wine consumption

mhl

255

250

245

240

235

230

225

220

215

210

The year 2024 continued the negative trend in wine

consumption seen in 2023. Declining demand across

major markets, coupled with high average prices - driven

by low production volumes and the lingering effects of

past inflation - made for a challenging year. Fifteen out

of the top twenty markets in the world experienced a

reduction in consumption compared to 2023. However,

some key markets showed resilience despite these

difficulties.

Beyond the short-term economic and geopolitical

disruptions outlined above, it is important to consider

the structural, long-term factors also contributing to

the observed decline in wine consumption. Notably, a

progressive decrease in consumption has emerged in

several mature markets, shaped by evolving lifestyle

preferences, shifting social habits, and generational

changes in consumer behaviour. This gradual

transformation is now intersecting with a particularly

challenging economic environment. The interplay

between these structural trends and recent economic

and trade pressures provides a more comprehensive

framework for understanding the recent decline in

global wine consumption levels.

2000 2001 2002 2003 2004 2005 2006 2007 2008 2009 2010 2011 2012 2013 2014 2015 2016 2017 2018 2019 2020 2021 2022 2023

Prov.

2024

Prel.

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6

It usually takes about three years to have consolidated data for official statistics

APRIL 2025STATE OF THE WORLD VINE AND WINE SECTOR IN 2024 — 13

3.2 • Major wine-consuming countries7

In 2024, the EU represented a wine market of 103.6 mhl,

accounting for 48% of the world’s consumption. This

figure reflects a significant decrease of 2.8% compared

to the previous year and a decline of 5.2% compared to

the five-year average. This decline is attributed to an

overall reduction in wine consumption observed in some

of the major traditional wine-consuming countries.

Within the EU, France, Italy, and Germany are by far

the largest wine markets. France maintains its position

as the largest European consuming country in 2024,

with an estimated consumption of 23.0 mhl, marking

a 3.6% decrease from 2023 and 4.9% below the five-

year average. Italy, the second-largest market in the

EU and third globally, saw a consumption level of 22.3

mhl in 2024, a volume in line with 2023 (+0.1%) and 3.6%

below the five-year average. Germany, the third-largest

EU market, has an estimated consumption volume of

17.8 mhl in 2024, which represents a significant decline

of 3.0% over 2023.

Spain is one of the few large EU markets that saw (for

the second consecutive year) a modest increase in

consumption, reporting a 2024 total volume of 9.9 mhl

(+1.2%/2023). Similarly, Portugal (5.6 mhl) reported

a 0.5% increase over 2023 and stands 4.7% above the

average observed in the past five years. Portugal is also

the only large EU market that consumed more wine

(+10%/2023) in 2024 than in the pre-pandemic period

(2015-2019).

All the other major markets within the EU saw

declining wine consumption in 2024. It is the case of

the Netherlands, at 3.2 mhl, which recorded one of

the largest declines (in relative terms) in consumption

among major EU markets with a -8.1 % over 2023. This

estimated consumption volume is 12% below its last

five-year average. Romania, at 3.0 mhl, despite an 11%

decline in wine consumption compared to 2023, remains

4% above the five-year average. Austria (2.2 mhl,

-2.6%/2023) has shown a very stable consumption trend

since 2015, ranging between 2.2 and 2.4mhl. After three

years of below-average consumption, Hungary (2.2 mhl,

+7.5%/2023) seems to be back to the consumption levels

recorded in 2019 and 2020.

Outside the EU, the UK, ranked fifth globally, saw a 1.0%

decrease in wine consumption in 2024, estimated at

12.6 mhl. Conversely, Russia’s wine consumption rose

by 2.4%, reaching 8.1 mhl, almost 5% above the five-year

average. In 2024, Switzerland recorded the lowest wine

consumption volume since 1965, estimated at 2.2 mhl,

reflecting a 5.0% decrease from 2023.

In the USA, the largest wine market globally,

consumption decreased by 5.8% in 2024 and fell to

33.3 mhl. Similarly, Canada, with 4.6 mhl, witnessed a

significant decline of 6.4% compared to 2023, marking

its fourth consecutive year of decreasing consumption.

Among Asian markets, China’s wine consumption

plummeted by 19.3% in 2024, totalling 5.5 mhl,

reflecting an overall decline in internal demand that

started in 2018. Japan, the second-largest wine market

in Asia, recorded a decrease of 4.4% from 2023, reaching

3.1 mhl. This volume is the lowest since 2011.

In South America, Argentina’s consumption decreased

by 1.2% in 2024, reaching 7.7 mhl, the lowest level

since 1942. Brazil, the region’s second-largest market,

is estimated to have a consumption volume of

3.1 mhl, reflecting a 4.3% decline compared to 2023.

Although this volume remains significantly below the

five‑year average (-11.4%), it is 1% above the country’s

pre‑pandemic consumption levels.

South Africa is the largest and most dynamic wine

market in Africa in 2024. With an estimated consumption

of 4.3 mhl (-2.8%/2023), the country recorded in 2024

the third-highest volume in its history, following the

peaks of 2022 and 2023.

In Oceania, Australia’s wine market, ranked eleventh

globally, remained relatively stable at 5.3 mhl

(-2.7%/2023), showing a very stable trend over the past

fifteen years with consumption fluctuating around

5.5 mhl.

7

The estimates of national wine consumption levels presented in this chapter warrant careful interpretation. This is due to the inherent limitations of

the “apparent consumption” methodology. Apparent consumption is defined as production plus imports minus exports, with adjustments for changes in

inventories. This method is particularly limited in countries where comprehensive data on stock variations are not available. As a result, it may not fully

account for destocking and stock management processes of importers and distributors, as well as losses or industrial uses of wine.

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Table 3 • Wine consumption in major countries8

mhl 2019 2020 2021 2022 2023

Prov.

2024

Prel.

24/23

% Var.

2024

USA 35.6 34.1 34.3 35.5 35.4 33.3 -5.8% 15.6%

France 24.7 23.2 24.6 24.4 23.8 23.0 -3.6% 10.7%

Italy 22.6 24.2 24.2 22.4 22.3 22.3 0.1% 10.4%

Germany 19.5 19.8 19.9 19.4 18.4 17.8 -3.0% 8.3%

UK 12.6 13.7 13.9 13.1 12.8 12.6 -1.0% 5.9%

Spain 10.2 9.2 10.3 9.6 9.8 9.9 1.2% 4.6%

Russia 8.1 7.9 8.0 8.7 7.9 8.1 2.4% 3.8%

Argentina 8.5 9.4 8.4 8.3 7.8 7.7 -1.2% 3.6%

Portugal 5.4 4.4 5.3 5.7 5.5 5.6 0.5% 2.6%

China 15.0 12.4 10.5 9.1 6.8 5.5 -19.3% 2.6%

Australia 5.8 6.0 5.6 5.4 5.5 5.3 -2.7% 2.5%

Canada 5.2 5.3 5.3 5.1 4.9 4.6 -6.4% 2.1%

South Africa 3.7 3.0 3.9 4.5 4.4 4.3 -2.8% 2.0%

Netherlands 3.5 3.7 3.7 3.6 3.5 3.2 -8.1% 1.5%

Brazil 3.6 4.1 4.1 3.6 3.5 3.1 -10.1% 1.5%

Japan 3.5 3.5 3.1 3.2 3.2 3.1 -4.4% 1.4%

Romania 2.2 2.6 3.7 2.5 3.4 3.0 -11.4% 1.4%

Switzerland 2.6 2.5 2.6 2.4 2.4 2.2 -5.0% 1.0%

Austria 2.3 2.3 2.4 2.4 2.3 2.2 -2.6% 1.0%

Hungary 2.1 2.0 1.7 1.7 1.9 2.0 7.5% 0.9%

Other countries 39.5 38.2 38.9 38.6 36.3 35.3 -2.6% 16.5%

World total 236 231 234 229 222 214 -3.3% 100.0%

Figure in italics: OIV estimates

Sources: OIV, FAO, National Statistical Offices, Specialised Press

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Countries with wine consumption equal to or above 2 mhl in 2024.

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4 I International

trade in wine

4.1 • World trade volume and value

Low production volumes in 2023 and 2024, high average

export prices and weakened international demand

significantly impacted the international trade in wine in

2024. Global wine export volume remained at its lowest

level since 2010, totalling 99.8 mhl - a modest decrease

of 0.1% compared to 2023. Some major exporters

showed signs of recovery from the significant decline

in 2023, including Chile (+1.0 mhl), Australia (+0.4 mhl),

Portugal (+0.3 mhl), and the USA (+0.3 mhl). Meanwhile,

some other countries showed a downward trend in

2024, such as Spain (-0.9 mhl), Canada (-0.2 mhl) and

Germany (-0.2 mhl).

Figure 4 • Evolution of international trade in wine by volume

In 2024, global wine export value is estimated at

35.9 billion EUR, which represents only a slight decline

of 0.3% compared to the high level recorded in 2023.

Similarly, the average export price held steady at

3.60 EUR/l, showing a marginal 0.3% decrease from

2023. However, it is important to note that while the

annual variation from 2023 is low, the overall price level

in 2024 remains relatively high. This outcome results

from a combination of several factors. On one hand,

the trend of premiumisation started a few decades ago,

has become increasingly pronounced in recent years.

On the other hand, the convergence of low production

volumes and persistent global inflationary pressures

over the past few years has significantly contributed to

the elevated price levels observed in comparison to the

pre-pandemic period, as illustrated in Figure 6.

mhl

120

110

100

90

80

70

60

50

2000 2001 2002 2003 2004 2005 2006 2007 2008 2009 2010 2011 2012 2013 2014 2015 2016 2017 2018 2019 2020 2021 2022 2023

Prov.

2024

Prel.

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Figure 5 • Evolution of international trade in wine by value

bn EUR

40

35

30

25

20

15

10

2000 2001 2002 2003 2004 2005 2006 2007 2008 2009 2010 2011 2012 2013 2014 2015 2016 2017 2018 2019 2020 2021 2022 2023

Prov.

2024

Prel.

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Figure 6 • Evolution of the average price of world wine exports

EUR/l

3.8

3.5

3.2

2.9

2.6

2.3

2.0

1.7

2000 2001 2002 2003 2004 2005 2006 2007 2008 2009 2010 2011 2012 2013 2014 2015 2016 2017 2018 2019 2020 2021 2022 2023

Prov.

2024

Prel.

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4.2 • World trade by product type

Bottled wine (< 2 litres) represents 50.8% of trade

volumes globally in 2024 and 67.0% of the value. This

category has decreased by 1.8% in volume and remained

stable in value (+0.1%/2023). The average export price

observed in 2024 is 4.7 EUR/l, marking a 1.9% increase

over 2023.

Sparkling wine witnessed a drop of 3.7% in terms of

trade value, while the volume slightly decreased by

0.3% compared to 2023. The average export price fell

to 7.9 EUR/l, down 3.4% from the previous year. This

category maintained its share in 2024, representing

10.9% of total exported volume and 23.8% of export

value.

Bag-in-Box® (BiB) refers to wines in containers holding

more than 2 litres but less than 10 litres. In 2024, BiB

represents a share of 3.6% in volume and 1.9% in value

of the total world exports. Experiencing a 5.0% decline

in volume and 4.8% drop in value compared to 2023, the

category maintained its average export price relatively

stable at 1.9 EUR/l, in line with 2023 (+0.2%).

Bulk wine (> 10 litres) exports, the second largest

category in volume, saw a 3.3% increase in volume and

a 9.8% rise in export value compared to 2023. Despite

representing 34.7% of total world wine volume exports,

bulk wine comprised 7.4% of the total value of wine

exports in 2024. Notably, the category recorded an

average export price of 0.8 EUR/l, reflecting a 6.3%

increase compared to 2023.

Table 4 • Breakdown of international trade in wine by product type

Volume (mhl) Value (bn EUR) Type Vertical Structure in 2024 Var. 24/23

2023 2024 2023 2024 volume value volume value

50.8% 10.9% 3.6% 34.7% 67.0% 23.8% 1.9% 7.4% -1.8% -0.3% -5.0% 3.3% 99.8 99.8 36.0 35.9

variation of -0.1% variation of -0.3% Bottled (< 2 l) Sparkling BiB Bulk (> 10 l) 0.1%

-3.7%

-4.8%

9.8%

Sources: OIV, GTA ©OIV

APRIL 20254.3 • Major wine exporters

In 2024, the top three exporters - Italy, Spain, and

France - exported 54.6 mhl of wine, accounting for

54.7% of global wine exports by volume and 63.4% by

value.

Italy, the world’s largest wine exporter by volume,

reversed the downward trend started in 2021, by

growing 3.2% to 21.7 mhl, and rising 5.6% in value

to reach 8.1 bn EUR. This marks the third-highest

export volume in the country’s history. This positive

performance was driven primarily by sparkling wine -

notably Prosecco - which increased 12% by volume and

9% by value. Bottled wine also performed well in 2024,

with +4.1% in volume and +4.8% in value.

Spain kept its second place among the largest wine

exporters by volume in 2024. Compared to 2023, the

total exported volume decreased by almost 1 mhl to

20.0 mhl – the lowest level in a decade. Despite this

drop in volume, export value rose by 1.4% to 3.0 bn EUR.

The 6.9% decline in bulk wine (55% of Spanish export

volume) was the main factor contributing to the overall

volume reduction in 2024. Bag-in-box was the only

category growing both in volume and value.

Despite ranking third in export volume, France once

again recorded the highest export value among

exporting countries. In 2024, France exported 12.8 mhl

(+0.7%/2023), generating 11.7 bn EUR in export

revenue (-2.4%/2023). While bottled wine performed

very similarly to 2023, the sparkling wine category

experienced the most significant decline, with a 2.4%

decrease in volume and a 6.5% decrease in value,

indicating a 4.2% drop in price.

Chile, the world’s fourth-largest wine exporter,

experienced a strong recovery in 2024, with export

volumes rising to 7.8 mhl (+14.4%/2023) and export value

reaching 1.5 bn EUR (+6.1%/2023). After a challenging

2023, Chilean wine experienced a significant increase in

export volumes across all categories, although at lower

prices—except for Bag-in-Box (BiB) wines, which saw

substantial price gains.

Following a difficult 2023, which saw the lowest export

volumes in two decades, Australia’s wine exports

rebounded in 2024, rising by 6.9% in volume to 6.5 mhl

and surging in value by 30.6% to 1.6 bn EUR. Apart from

BiB, all categories experienced growth in both volume

and value. Notably, the bottled wine category saw an

exceptional 40.8% increase in value, accounting for 77%

of Australia’s total wine export revenue.

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In 2024, South Africa’s wine export volume grew by

3.4% to 3.6 mhl, while export value saw a larger annual

increase of 5%, reaching 0.6 bn EUR. The relatively weak

performance of bottled wine, which declined by 5.2% in

volume compared to 2023 and accounts for 68% of total

export value, was more than offset by strong growth

across all other categories. However, it is important to

note that South Africa’s export volume remains 1 mhl

below the average recorded over the past 15 to 20 years.

Portugal saw an increase in export volume of 8.7% to

3.5 mhl, and a raise in value by 4.5% to 1.0 bn EUR. This

is the result of very good performances in all product

categories, with the only exception of BiB which lost 5%

in both volume and value terms compared to 2023.

Germany, the seventh-largest global exporter, saw

for the second consecutive year a decline in its wine

exports in volume (3.1 mhl, -4.7%/2023). Similarly, the

export value, totalling 1.0 bn EUR, decreased by 4.3%

compared to the previous year. The only category that

saw a positive performance in terms of value is sparkling

wine (+3.9%), with all other categories losing between

4.5% and 25.0% over 2023.

New Zealand’s 2024 wine export volume (2.7 mhl)

and value (1.1 bn EUR) decreased by 0.9% and 6.1%,

respectively. Bottled wine continued to hold the

majority share by value at 68%, despite declines of 15.3%

in volume and 13.3% by value.

The USA reported a 15.5% increase in export volume to

2.4 mhl, along with a 1.7% rise in value to 1.2 bn EUR.

Despite these positive aggregate results, bottled,

sparkling, and BiB underperformed compared to 2023

in both volume and value terms. The only category that

witnessed a positive performance was bulk wine, which

represents 48% in export volume and 14% in value.

In Argentina, 2024 wine export volume increased by

5.3% to 2.1 mhl, 75% of which is constituted of bottled

wine. The overall export value in 2023 rose to 0.6 bn EUR

(+4.4%/2023).

Canada’s wine exports recorded a significant decrease

in volume with 2.0 mhl (-9.4%/2023) and in value with

75 m EUR (-13.0%/2023). Notably, 99% of its exports are

re-exports on bulk wine from other countries, almost

all of which is destined for the USA.STATE OF THE WORLD VINE AND WINE SECTOR IN 2024 — 18

Table 5 • Major wine exporters9

Volume (mhl) Value (m EUR)

Vertical Structure

in 2024

Variation

2024/2023

Type

2023 2024 2023 2024 volume value volume value

Italy 21.1 21.7 7 673 8 105

Spain France 12.7 Chile 6.8 7.8 Australia 6.1 South Africa 3.5 3.6 Portugal Germany New Zealand USA Argentina Canada bottle (< 2 l) 56% 65% 4.1% 4.8%

sparkling 26% 29% 12.0% 8.9%

BiB 2% 1% -5.2% -10.6%

variation of 3.2% variation of 5.6% bulk (>10 l) 17% 4% -10.1% 3.1%

bottle (< 2 l) 33% 62% -1.4% 1.3%

20.9 20.0 2 942 2 983

sparkling 8% 18% -9.1% 1.1%

BiB 4% 3% 5.8% 3.7%

variation of -4.5% variation of 1.4% bulk (>10 l) 55% 18% -6.9% 1.7%

bottle (< 2 l) 70% 60% -0.3% 0.1%

12.8 11 954 11 671

sparkling 16% 37% -2.4% -6.5%

BiB 4% 1% 13.0% 6.1%

variation of 0.7% variation of -2.4% bulk (>10 l) 10% 2% 8.4% -1.1%

bottle (< 2 l) 55% 82% 10.6% 6.7%

1 411 1 497

sparkling 1% 1% 18.4% 15.6%

BiB 2% 2% 7.9% 16.2%

variation of 14.4% variation of 6.1% bulk (>10 l) 43% 15% 19.9% 1.3%

bottle (< 2 l) 34% 77% 17.9% 40.8%

6.5 1 243 1 623

sparkling 2% 3% 7.8% 2.0%

BiB 3% 1% -32.0% -32.0%

variation of 6.9% variation of 30.6% bulk (>10 l) 61% 18% 3.9% 8.3%

bottle (< 2 l) 37% 68% -5.2% 2.9%

571 600

sparkling 2% 5% 5.0% 23.4%

BiB 6% 5% 3.6% 0.9%

variation of 3.4% variation of 5.0% bulk (>10 l) 56% 22% 9.9% 9.2%

bottle (< 2 l) 73% 90% 5.3% 4.1%

924 965

sparkling 1% 1% 61.4% 24.5%

BiB 9% 4% -4.9% -5.1%

variation of 8.7% variation of 4.5% bulk (>10 l) 17% 5% 33.6% 17.9%

bottle (< 2 l) 75% 78% -2.0% -4.5%

1 071 1 024

sparkling 10% 15% -5.0% 3.9%

BiB 12% 8% -15.8% -14.4%

variation of -4.7% variation of -4.3% bulk (>10 l) 3% 1% -16.3% -25.0%

bottle (< 2 l) 49% 68% -15.3% -13.3%

1 196 1 122

sparkling 0% 1% -30.8% -21.5%

BiB 0% 0% -87.5% -87.6%

variation of -0.9% variation of -6.1% bulk (>10 l) 51% 31% 21.6% 18.3%

bottle (< 2 l) 47% 80% -2.6% -1.8%

1 138 1 157

sparkling 2% 3% -49.6% -32.9%

BiB 3% 2% -19.8% -25.7%

variation of 15.5% variation of 1.7% bulk (>10 l) 48% 14% 55.3% 63.4%

bottle (< 2 l) 75% 91% 2.6% 3.3%

603 630

sparkling 1% 2% 32.1% 34.9%

BiB 0% 0% -18.2% -5.7%

variation of 5.3% variation of 4.4% bulk (>10 l) 24% 7% 15.0% 15.8%

bottle (< 2 l) 1% 25% -20.5% -24.7%

86 75

sparkling 0% 2% 24.6% 9.4%

BiB 0% 1% -30.1% -31.4%

variation of -9.4% variation of -13.0% bulk (>10 l) 99% 72% -9.3% -8.5%

3.2 3.5 3.3 3.1 2.7 2.7 2.1 2.4 2.0 2.1 2.3 2.0 Sources: OIV, GTA

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Countries with wine exports equal to or above 2 mhl in 2024

APRIL 20254.4 • Major wine importers

In 2024, Germany, the UK, and the USA maintained their

positions as the top import markets globally, collectively

representing 38.3% of the world’s total imported wine

volume and 37.2% in terms of value.

Germany remained the world’s largest wine importer

by volume in 2024, bringing in 12.7 mhl - a 6.9% drop

from 2023 and the lowest level in the past twenty years.

Declines were observed in all categories by volume,

significantly in sparkling wine (-17.2%/2023). Germany

ranks third in overall import value at 2.5 bn EUR, a

decrease of 8.8% over 2023. This shrinkage is primarily

due to the drop in the import value of bottled wine

(-10.5%/2023), which comprises 61% of the total value.

The UK, the second largest import market, has ended

the negative trend started in 2020, reaching 12.6 mhl

(+2.4%/2023). Bulk wine, accounting for 37% of the total

volume, is the main driver of this recovery, with a 7.2%

increase in volume. The import value remained stable at

4.6 bn EUR, with a slight 0.7% decrease.

After a significant drop in 2023, the USA was in third

place in wine import volume with 12.3 mhl (+0.1/2023)

and held the first place in wine import value with

6.3 bn EUR (+1.6%/2023). Bottled wine is the main

imported category, representing 56% and 71% by volume

and value, respectively. Bulk wine imports in 2024

(accounting for 37% of total imported volume) shrunk

significantly, by 13.3% in volume and 12.4% in value.

France and the Netherlands, the largest importers

by volume within the EU after Germany, showed

downward trends in 2024. France reached its lowest

volume since 2016, with 5.4 mhl (-9.7%/2023), mainly

due to the decline in bulk wine (-11.9%/2023), with an

associated drop in value to 0.9 bn EUR (-8.4%/2023). The

Netherlands reported an imported volume below 4 mhl

for the first time since 2016, with 3.9 mhl (-10.7%/2023)

worth 1.5 bn EUR (-2.2%/2023).

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Canada, the seventh importer by volume globally,

reported overall imports of 3.8 mhl (+0.7%/2023), worth

1.9 bn EUR (+4.2%/2023). Bottled wine is the main

imported category and accounts for 65% by volume and

84% by value, respectively

In 2024, Italy imported 2.9 mhl of wine, marking a

substantial increase of 65.6% compared to 2023. The

corresponding value is 0.5 bn EUR, representing a

10.4% rise over the previous year. Bulk wine comprises

a significant share (86%) of the total imported volume,

increasing 74.2% by volume and 84.0% by value

compared to 2023.

Wine import volume in China, has ended a six-year

downturn, reaching 2.8 mhl (+13.7%/2023), worth

1.5 bn EUR (+37.6%/2023). Bottled wine accounted for

90% of the import value and increased by 43.8% from

2023.

Belgium’s wine import in 2024, at 2.8 mhl worth

1.2 bn EUR, reported a decline in both volume (-6.7%)

and value (-0.2%), with reductions recorded in all wine

categories except for sparkling wine import value

(+7.4%).

In 2024, Japan imported 2.4 mhl (+2.9%/2023), while the

value dropped by 7.7% to 1.5 bn EUR. Sparkling wine,

accounting for 39% of the total value, remained stable

in volume but dropped by 12.6% in value.

Portugal saw a sharp 28.0% drop in wine import volume

in 2024, falling to 2.1 mhl. Bulk wine, making up 64%

of the total volume, declined by 37.4% compared to

2023. The overall import value also fell to 152 m EUR

(-20.2%/2023).STATE OF THE WORLD VINE AND WINE SECTOR IN 2024 — 20

Variation

2024/2023

2023 2024 2023 2024 volume value volume value

Germany 13.7 12.7 2 699 UK 12.3 USA 12.3 12.3 France 6.0 5.4 Netherlands 4.4 3.9 Table 6 • Major wine importers10

Volume (mhl) Value (m EUR) Type Vertical Structure

in 2024

bottle (< 2 l) 37% 61% -5.8% -10.5%

2 460

sparkling 4% 18% -17.2% -12.2%

BiB 2% 2% -6.1% -8.1%

variation of -6.9% variation of -8.8% bulk (>10 l) 56% 19% -6.7% 0.5%

bottle (< 2 l) 48% 59% -0.7% -3.6%

12.6 4 664 4 632

sparkling 13% 26% 2.3% -1.1%

BiB 2% 1% -6.9% 4.8%

variation of 2.4% variation of -0.7% bulk (>10 l) 37% 14% 7.2% 15.2%

bottle (< 2 l) 56% 71% 5.4% 2.7%

6 179 6 278

sparkling 15% 25% 11.1% 1.2%

BiB 1% 0% 2.4% -6.7%

variation of 0.1% variation of 1.6% bulk (>10 l) 28% 4% -13.3% -12.4%

bottle (< 2 l) 17% 53% -7.0% -14.8%

961 880

sparkling 8% 18% 5.2% -2.2%

BiB 4% 3% 27.2% 18.9%

variation of -9.7% variation of -8.4% bulk (>10 l) 71% 26% -11.9% -0.1%

bottle (< 2 l) 87% 82% -11.2% -3.7%

1 509 1 475

sparkling 6% 14% 6.7% 7.6%

BiB 5% 3% -9.6% 7.7%

variation of -10.7% variation of -2.2% bulk (>10 l) 2% 1% -34.3% -22.6%

bottle (< 2 l) - - - -

- - -

sparkling - - - -

BiB - - - -

variation of - variation of - bulk (>10 l) - - - -

bottle (< 2 l) 65% 84% 2.1% 4.6%

1 845 1 923

sparkling 6% 11% 2.7% 0.7%

BiB 3% 1% 11.1% 7.3%

variation of 0.7% variation of 4.2% bulk (>10 l) 26% 3% -4.0% 4.9%

bottle (< 2 l) 9% 24% 29.4% 12.5%

497 549

sparkling 5% 57% -5.4% -3.4%

BiB 0% 0% -17.3% 40.0%

variation of 65.6% variation of 10.4% bulk (>10 l) 86% 19% 74.2% 84.0%

bottle (< 2 l) 59% 90% 8.8% 43.8%

1 072 1 475

sparkling 2% 4% 13.1% -14.4%

BiB 1% 1% -13.5% 4.7%

variation of 13.7% variation of 37.6% bulk (>10 l) 38% 5% 22.9% 12.2%

bottle (< 2 l) 57% 62% -6.8% -3.3%

1 158 1 156

sparkling 20% 30% -4.9% 7.4%

BiB 7% 2% -8.8% -9.4%

variation of -6.7% variation of -0.2% bulk (>10 l) 17% 5% -7.4% 2.8%

bottle (< 2 l) 62% 57% 1.5% -4.8%

1 644 1 517

sparkling 17% 39% -0.1% -12.6%

BiB 7% 2% 16.3% 8.3%

variation of 2.9% variation of -7.7% bulk (>10 l) 14% 2% 7.4% 5.3%

bottle (< 2 l) 30% 38% 6.7% -3.3%

191 152

sparkling 3% 21% 2.2% -10.9%

BiB 3% 2% -5.2% 8.4%

variation of -28.0% variation of -20.2% bulk (>10 l) 64% 39% -37.4% -35.8%

Russia\* 4.0 Canada 3.8 3.8 Italy 1.8 2.9 China 2.5 2.8 Belgium 3.0 2.8 Japan 2.3 2.4 Portugal 2.9 2.1 Sources: OIV, GTA

\* 2024 data on Russia not available

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10 Countries with wine imports equal to or above 2 mhl in 2024

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Thanks! Follow us.

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International Organisation of Vine and Wine

Intergovernmental Organisation

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M A R C H 2 0 1 4

T H E

WORLD'S

M O S T A D M I R E D

W I N E

BRANDS

D r i n k s

INTERNATIONAL

Most Admired Wine Brands

Ringing the

changes

Change is the word that best describes this year’s Most

Admired Wine Brands supplement. The definition of

admired may have remained the same, but change is

evident in almost every other way – from the logo to the academy

list, Most Admired has gone from strength to strength.

With four times the respondents as in previous years and many of

them willing to discuss the reasons behind their admiration, big sales

haven’t necessarily converted to big love from the academy.

And what about the top 50? You guessed it – it’s all change. Most

Admired has crowned a new champion, there are no non-movers in

the chart and nine brands appear for the first time. Both Old World

and New World wines make the cut.

For the first time in its history, Most Admired has also spoken

extensively to the winning wine brands and asked them what it

means to them to receive the admiration of our panel.

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MARCH 2014 I DRINKS INTERNATIONAL I 3

Most Admired Wine Brands

Wind of

change

The 2014 Most Admired Wine

Brands survey is a very different

animal to previous years. Holly

Motion explains why

This year Drinks

International’s World’s

Most Admired

Wine Brands report

has undergone a

metamorphosis. The voting is more

robust, the number of academy members

has quadrupled, the survey has expanded

and the results are telling. There are some

surprise newcomers – and some even

more surprising absentees.

Much has changed and the top 20

looks considerably different. New

names have joined the top 50 and,

inevitably, some have dropped out.

The voting academy – comprising

masters of wine, sommeliers, educators

and journalists – all rose to the

occasion in contributing to the poll.

To help the academy members with

their choice of three, we provided a

list of previous winners and other

well-known brands, purely as an

aide-mémoire. If they wished to choose

three brands not on the list, based on

their knowledge and experience, those

names would be included.

With more voters than in previous

years, academy members were also

offered the opportunity to discuss their

reasons for voting. For the first time,

some of these comments accompany

the winners.

The 2014 supplement also includes

interviews with the winning brands’

winemakers and ambassadors revealing

their thoughts as to how they have

achieved the accolade of topping this

year’s poll.

Some have launched campaigns,

made well-documented changes that

have strengthened their brand identity,

while others are simply lifelong

‘personal favourites’, a mainstay of

regional taste, highly regarded or

cannot be replaced.

Last year’s winner, Concha y Toro,

has been knocked off the top spot by

Torres, which garnered more than 15%

of the total votes cast. Despite losing

the top spot, Concha y Toro’s global

brand, Casillero del Diablo, secured the

second spot with its eco-friendly sister

Chilean brand, Cono Sur, taking the

16th slot, two up on last year’s poll.

In previous years the parent company

stood as an entry, collecting votes for

both its Casillero del Diablo and Cono

Sur brands. This changed following

judges’ feedback. Rounding up the top

three, Château Latour, absent in the

2013 poll, takes bronze.

There are some noticeable absences

in the overall list. For example,

Brancott Estate has dropped out of the

top 50 after finishing seventh last year.

Five of the 1855 Classification

Premier Crus secure places in the

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top 40: Château Lafite Rothschild,

Château Haut-Brion, Château Mouton

Rothschild, Château Latour and

Château Margaux.

Age and wisdom are not necessarily

the key to success though – Australia’s

Yellow Tail, at number 33, has yet to

celebrate its 20th birthday.

The criteria remained the same as in

previous years, with the academy asked

to vote based on the following:

the wine should be of consistent or

improving quality

it should reflect its region or country

of origin

it should respond to the needs and

tastes of its target audience

it should be well marketed and

packaged

it should have strong appeal to a

wide demographic

Academy members may have voted

merely on the criteria above or gone a

little further, as academy member and

wine importer India’s Sanjay Memon, did.

He said:“My choices are based on

what most people might desire to

have on their lists, even if they don’t

actually.”

Where there was a tie for places, a

small jury of voters was assembled to

decide final positions.

It should be emphasised that this did

not affect any of the top 10 brands.

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Most Admired Wine Brands

How we did it

This year, Drinks International has collated data from more than 200 wine

professionals who took part in the 2014 survey. Many of them also offered

some rationale as to why they voted for the three brands either suggested by

us or volunteered by them.

After the votes were counted, the winning brands were contacted and a

number of winemakers, brand ambassadors and brand owners agreed to be

interviewed. DI’s World’s Most Admired Wine Brands 2014 is more robust than

ever. For the first time, the voting has been analysed in more depth and in

different ways. As well as Regional charts, there is a complete list of the top 50

including their movement within the poll.

About the academy of voters

More than 200 wine professionals are in our academy of voters and cast their

votes in the secret ballot. They were given the option to remain anonymous

if they chose. The following people are among the high-profile academy

members. As always, judges were not allowed to vote for, or nominate, brands

with which they are professionally associated.

Cristina Alcalá, journalist/sommelier, Madrid

Andrew Caillard, auctioneer

Liz Donnelly, buying manager, Alliance Wine Co

Christian G.E. Schiller, blogger, Germany/US

Konstantinos Lazarakis MW

Jaroslav Pergl, writer, Barlife magazine

Paul Tudor MW

Hamish Anderson, sommelier, UK

Tony Aspler, consultant/journalist, Canada

Richard Bampfield MW, consultant/educator, UK

Gerard Basset, sommelier/hotelier, UK/France

Su Birch, consultant, South Africa

Philippe Boucheron, Journalist, UK

Miguel Chan, sommelier/blogger, SA

Sergi Cortes, journalist, Barcelona

Neil Courtier, wine educator & writer, Grape Sense

Erica Donoho, analyst, US

Simon Doyle, supplier, UK

Ramon Francàs Martorell, journalist/blogger

Louise Gordon, head sommelier, The Rib Room Bar & Restaurant

Brett Jones, consultant/educator

Evelyn Jones, senior buyer, The Vintry

Darrel Joseph, wine journalist, central & eastern Europe

Per Karlsson, journalist, Sweden

David Longfield, freelance journalist

Peter Marks MW, educator, US

Toni Massanés, director of Alicia foundation

Ashika Mathews, buyer, UK

Tuomas Meriluoto, importer/agent, Finland

Wendy Narby, educator

Anders Öhman, educator, Sweden

Marcel Orford-Williams, buyer, The Wine Society

Nicolas Papavero, marketer, France

Will Parker, freelance wine tutor, WineSwines

Peter Scudamore-Smith MW, consultant, Australia

Godfrey Spence, educator, UK

Cees van Casteren MW, journalist, Holland

Gary Westby, retailer, US

Ronn Wiegand MW MS, journalist, US

David Williams, journalist, UK

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#1Most Admired Wine Brands

Torres

COUNTRY OF

ORIGIN: Spain

OWNER: Torres SA

on the Most Admired

After narrowly missing out

crown for three years,

Torres finally takes the

top spot. And what

might be the secret to this long-awaited

success? Family, a loyal team and

consumers says Torres Group CEO

Miguel Torres Maczassek – but not

necessarily all consumers.

“For us the Torres brand is a

statement of quality. We do not change

our wines because of short-term trends

– we focus on a long-term relationship

with our consumers based on quality

and consistency,” Torres says. “Every

wine we produce is an individual wine.

Our main goal is to produce elegant

wines but also to reflect the region

and ultimately the characteristics of a

particular vineyard itself.”

The Torres family has been

producing wine in Spain since 1870.

This year, the brand also beats 14 rival

European brands to claim the title of

Most Admired European Brand.

Among the first Spanish wineries

to introduce stainless steel tanks

and French oak barrels back in the

1980s, Torres is admired by many for

transforming the vinification processes.

“We give as much importance to

innovation as we do to tradition,”

Torres says, and the company annually

experiments and incorporates new

techniques. As well as its own

vineyards, Torres has long-term

relationships with more than 600

suppliers and their families.

“From those who work in the

vineyards to the sales force, all make an

effort to meet the expectations of our

wine lovers,” Torres says.

This is something one academy

member reaffirmed, saying: “To me,

Torres is making a real attempt to move

consumers out of the entrylevel sector.”

In the past year the Torres & Earth

project has committed to reduce CO2

emissions by 30% per bottle by 2020.

As part of this commitment, solar and

photovoltaic panels have been installed

in the company’s Priorat winery and

the Torres salesforce can now be seen

whizzing around in hybrid cars.

“We have also been adapting our

viticulture to the new conditions and

buying more land in higher altitudes,”

Torres added.

And where does tradition come in?

A fifth-generation family member,

Torres appreciates the importance of

honouring the past.

He says his father has been crucial

during the past few decades in guiding

the winery towards higher levels of

quality, as well as promoting its single-

vineyard (Finca) wines.

“My family remains very involved

in the business, from new wines to the

final blends of each wine and even to

the names and labels of the wine. This is

important because it keeps our focus on

the consumers and the quality at all levels

rather than becoming just corporate.”

This is something with which

academy member David Longfield

agrees. He says: “Torres displays its

traditional heart on its sleeve, in both

its presentation and the character of its

core wines, yet at the same time dares

to pioneer exciting new wine styles.”

Originally exported to Cuba, Torres

wines are now enjoyed in more then

160 countries worldwide.

While its main markets remain in

Europe, “we have good growth in

Asia, Russia and South America,” says

Torres. “Today more and more we

see a split between the on and the off-

trade, and fewer brands can be found

in both channels.”

Tradition to Torres also means

maintaining quality, even if this doesn’t

make the brand available to everyone.

“One of the key points in Torres is that

we are a vertically integrated winery.

We incentivise quality with higher

prices for the grapes and promote

viticultural techniques that respect the

environment.”

So, is it tradition that has secured the

Most Admired crown? “I believe that

today there are more and more wines

that live and die quickly,” says Torres.

“Many do not have a clear message of

their origin or a focus on quality.”

The consumer is integral to this, he

adds. “Being close to our consumers is

very important.

“Torres is a safe bet for consumers.

I believe they know that inside each

bottle, whether it is a classic Sangre de

Toro or a single vineyard like Mas la

Plana, there is a wine that has a soul

and cares for quality; the wine will be

worth every cent.”

Consumers can now find original

Torres wines from Peñedes, Conca de

Barbera and Catalunya, but also wines

from Rioja, Ribera del Duero, Rueda,

Rias Baixas and Priorato – the last two

led by Torres’s sister, Mireia. Torres

also operates in Chile and California.

Torres concludes: “The world of

wine can be very complicated and

intimidating, but with Torres wines the

consumer can better understand and

enjoy Spanish wines.”

MOST ADMIRED WINE BRANDS SUPPLEMENT I DRINKSINT.COM

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#2Most Admired Wine Brands

Casillero

del Diablo

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN:

Chile

OWNER:

Concha y Toro

This year Casillero del

Diablo appears in the chart

for the first time. While in

previous years brand owner

Concha y Toro has received

the top honour, following feedback

from the academy Casillero del Diablo

now stands in its own right to take

second place in the World’s Most

Admired Wine Brands and top South

American brand.

A key part of Concha y Toro’s

portfolio, Casillero del Diablo is

available in more than 135 countries

worldwide.

The legend of Casillero del Diablo

began more than a century ago, when

founder Don Melchor de Concha y

Toro reserved an exclusive batch of

the best wines the company produced

for himself. He spread a rumour that

the devil lived in his cellar to keep

prying eyes and pilfering hands from

his private reserve – hence the name

Casillero del Diablo (Devil’s Cellar).

Sebastián Aguirre, marketing

manager for Casillero del Diablo, says:

“The brand appeals to a wide range

of consumers, in terms of age and

nationality. The story behind the brand

and wine appeals to young consumers,

because of its communication style,

and it also appeals to more mature

consumers through its traditional

packaging and its history.”

Today, each bottle is said to be

guarded by the devil – it is fitting,

then, that Casillero del Diablo became

official wine partner to Manchester

‘Red Devils’ United in 2010.

Marcelo Papa, winemaker at Concha

y Toro, insists there is more to the wine

than just clever marketing. “We have

focused on quality and consistency to

attract a broad range of consumers

from all over the world.

“The story and presentation

have been designed to appeal to all

consumers who are looking for a great

wine at a reasonable price.”

The competitive pricing and wide

distribution means Casillero del Diablo

has visibility throughout the world,

Papa says.

The company has invested heavily

in the brand and quotes figures which

suggest this is paying off, with sale

volumes of 3.8 million cases and 12.2

% volume growth rate in 2012.

The brand has gained market share

in the UK, Brazil, Mexico, Chile and

the US, as well as smaller markets such

as Belgium, Holland, Costa Rica and

Uruguay.

Papa puts this down to the value

consumers perceive in the brand. “It

provides them with quality consistency,

the right image and is at the right

price.”

One academy member echoed this

sentiment, saying: “Its consistency and

reliable quality created a stepping stone

and bar for further experimentation,

which can only be good for the

industry.”

Deaconu Lorena, oenologist and

academy member, said he voted for the

brand for its “good expressiveness of

the variety and terroir, well-structured

and balanced wines, constant quality

and good value for money”.

When asked his thoughts on the

Most Admired Regional accolade, Papa

said: “Each Casillero del Diablo variety

reflects Chile as a country, more than a

specific region. There are several blends

that aim for the best expression of each

grape, regardless of the region.”

Papa expressed his concern about the

development of more appropriate areas

for each grape variety.

Ten or 15 years ago Casillero del

Diablo Sauvignon Blanc was made

from grapes from the Central Valley of

Chile, but now it comes from vineyards

near the coast.

“We pay attention to the changes

in terms of the trends. Years ago

Casillero del Diablo Chardonnay used

to have a significant percentage of

fermentation in barrels and today we

have lowered the amount of wood in

the mix, looking for a more mineral

and juicy wine.”

The complete range comprises

12 wines. The main focus is on the

grapes for which Chile is best known

and which represent 80% of sales

– Cabernet Sauvignon, Carmenère,

Merlot, Sauvignon Blanc and

Chardonnay. The other, less traditional,

varieties are Shiraz, Pinot Noir, Pinot

Grigio, Malbec, Viognier and Shiraz

Rosé. There is a Sparkling Brut from

Chardonnay grapes and a Late Harvest

from Sauvignon Blanc.

Casillero del Diablo also offers a

Reserva Privada, a higher-priced wine

for special occasions.

It may be the first time Casillero del

Diablo appears in this chart, but Papa

firmly believes it won’t be the last.

“Casillero del Diablo will continue to

appeal to a broad range of consumers

in terms of age and nationality, so we

focus on quality and making sure our

consumers enjoy every bottle.”

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Most Admired Wine Brands #3

Château

Latour

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN: France

OWNER: Bernard Magrez

in the World’s Most

Having only appeared

Admired Wines list once,

in 10th place, it is fair

to say Château Latour

wasn’t predicted to take third place or

top the Most Admired Bordeaux wines

this year.

A single event might explain its sudden

resurgence in the chart with such high

ranking. That is, the decision to disregard

the en primeur system and only sell its

wine when it is ready to drink, rather

than while it is still in the barrel.

Many admire this decision and think

it bold; others bemoan it. Wine traders

who previously purchased the wine

before it had been bottled and sold it

unproven at high prices will, starting

with the 2012 vintage, have to buy

Château Latour in the bottle.

Academy member Pierre Chapeau

says: “Château Latour must be

commended for the strong move to

redefine the relationship of Châteaux

owners with the Bordeaux negociants.”

Many speculate this is a move to

prevent wine traders, or negociants,

from buying top wines before they have

been bottled. Château Latour insists

the move was not a calculated one and

that it has a tradition of working with

negoicants which it is keen to continue.

Latour is widely documented as

saying the en primeur system worked

far better when people travelled less

and were able to cellar wines for long

periods of time in perfect storage

conditions.

That is something Latour will

be able to do far better now it has

commissioned the construction of more

underground cellars, scheduled to be

finished by mid 2014.

It is rumoured President Frédéric

Engerer plans to store wine at the

château for seven to eight years on

average for the second wine and 10 to

15 years for the first.

The question is, will Château

Latour now be a wine sold for actual

drinking, rather than mainly long-term

investment?

Academy member Gary Westby, of

K&L Wine Merchants, said: “Latour

shook the Bordeaux world by moving

away from en primeur sales and deciding

to hold wines until they are ready to

drink. With first growths costing so

much, the cost of ageing should be born

by the house, and now it is.”

But what of Château Latour’s past?

Latour is the highest-ranking brand

in our chart to appear in the 1855

classification.

Its vineyards are some of the oldest

in the Médoc. Established in the 1670s,

the densely planted estate contains

more than 750,000 vines, some of

which pre-date the existing château.

Just 300m from the Gironde river, the

47ha that surround the château are

worked on by 66 people. Many have

worked at the château for generations.

The first wine, Le Grand Vin, is made

solely from old vines. Latour’s second

wine was first labelled in 1966 and

takes its name from the plot in Enclos,

Les Forts de Latour. While the grape

variety proportions vary each year,

one thing that is consistent is there is

always a higher proportion of Merlot

(25%-30%) in Le Forts compared to

the Grand Vin.

Launched in 1973, the third wine Le

Pauillac de Château Latour, is produced

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from young vines of l’Enclos. The

cuvées that are deemed unfit to go in to

the Grand Vin are used to produce the

wine that has been produced every year

since 1990.

Each individually silk paper hand-

wrapped bottle will on average set you

back around 300 times more than a

bottle of basic Bordeaux.

From January 2013, every bottle

of Château Latour is fitted with a

special seal. An alphanumeric code

will grace the seal in an attempt to

prevent counterfeiting and strengthen

authentication.

Rolled out on the 2007 and 2008

Pauillac and Forts de Latour vintages,

the system enables Château Latour

to authenticate the origin and access

technical and sales data.

It will be interesting to see if Château

Latour’s decision to break with

tradition results in a breakdown of the

en primeur system and a streamlining

of how these top Bordeaux wines get

to market.

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Most Admired Wine Brands

Tignanello

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN: Italy

OWNER: Antinori

War, plague and the changing tastes of consumers have proved no match for

the Antinori family. Twenty-six Antinori generations have directly managed the

estate since 1385.

The first Italian wine to top the list of the Wine Spectator magazine’s World’s

100 finest Wines, Antinori was a continuous wine supplier to the Royal House

of Italy for the first 40 years of the 20th century.

Having returned to the position held in the first Most Admired list, one of the

biggest wine companies in Italy is on top once again. Academy member Carla

Trimani said: “Tignanello is a real picture of wine in Italy: not only tradition.”

#5 Penfolds

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN: Australia

OWNER: Treasury Wine Estate

Rounding off the top five, Penfolds

may have fallen two places in the chart,

but it’s riding high in the trophy stakes.

Awarded top honours at the Australian

2013 Dan Murphy’s National Wine

Show, Penfolds took home two trophies

and a Top Gold accolade.

“Penfolds has repositioned itself

effectively over several years as a

quality, region-defining range of

styles,” said David Longfield, Freelance

wine, spirits and packaging journalist.

In January, a 50 Year Old Rare Tawny

was announced in recognition of the 170-

year winemaking tradition at Penfolds.

Three generations of winemakers

have watched over the wine, which has

a minimum average blended age of 50

years. Individually numbered 1-330,

the limited bottles were hand blown

and designed by master glass craftsman

Nick Mount.

#6 Château

d’Yquem

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN: France

OWNER: LVMH

With the grapes harvested by hand, only

one glass of wine is produced per vine.

Aged for three years in oak barrels,

unsurprisingly on average just 65,000

bottles are produced every year and, in

Margaux

#4#7 Château

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN: France

OWNER: Corinne Mentzelopoulos

Last year a few balthazars (12 litres)

of 2009 vintage Châteaux Margaux

were packaged in an oak cask on rising

metal feet, symbolising the barrels in

the event Château d’Yquem deems the

wine unworthy, the vintage will not be

distributed. This happened nine times

in the 20th century.

A 135-year vertical containing every

vintage from 1860 to 2003 sold for

$1.5 million at London auction in

2006, one of the highest prices paid

for a lot of wine – yet, this is only the

second time Château d’Yquem has

appeared in the Most Admired list.

which the wine was aged. The casks

were labelled with the purchaser’s name

etched in gold. If you fancy your name

emblazoned on a bottle, to give you

an idea of how much it will set you

back, the first was sold for $195,000

in Dubai.

Only 12,500 cases of Château

Margaux are produced every vintage and

the Château’s white wine, Pavillon Blanc

du Chateau Margaux, is widely regarded

as one of the finest in the Médoc.

Journalist and academy member

Ramon Francàs i Martorell divulged

his admiration for Chateaux

Margaux “for its authenticity, for its

heroic agriculture, for its varieties

of autochthonous grape and for its

planetary dimension”.

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#04-11

Cloudy Bay

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN: New Zealand

OWNER: LVMH

Exported to more than 30 markets, Cloudy Bay’s principal markets are Australia, UK, US,

Europe and Japan.

“Cloudy Bay is the other side of wine: taste, estate, and packaging,” said Carla Trimani

of Trimani.

With the release of Sauvignon Blanc 2013, Cloudy Bay has retained a position in the top

10 for a third time in this survey’s history. Academy member Andrew Rowe commented:

“Cloudy bay has displayed consistent quality over the years.”

Cloudy Bay’s main grape varieties are Sauvignon Blanc, Chardonnay, and Pinot Noir.

Anthony Borges of The Wine Centre said: “Cloudy Bay was a marketing triumph – seen

as the best brand in New Zealand, qualitatively speaking, for years. Now a Moët Hennessy

brand, once again Cloudy Bay is punching high. Still best known for its Marlborough

Sauvignon, for me the Chardonnay is best.

“Cloudy bay has displayed consistent quality over the years.”

#8

#10 Vega

Sicilia

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN: Spain

OWNER: Alvarez family

In 1915, Vega Sicilia and Valbuena

were not distributed for commercial

purposes but were given instead to the

upper-class bourgeoisie and aristocracy.

As the owners of the winery offered

the wine as a gift to their good friends,

the legend was established that no

amount of money could guarantee a

bottle of Vega Sicilia or Valbuena – that

luxury could only be secured through

friendship.

Academy member Raquel Pardo

Zamora said: “My choice is one of my

country’s best known and appreciated

wines and wineries, and I think it

has quality, is a good ambassador for

Spanish wines and is well respected as

quality producers.”

#9 Guigal

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN: France

OWNER: Guigal family

Three Guigal generations have worked

on the 2,400-year-old land to produce

the wine that is now available in more

than 100 countries.

Having taken over management

when his father was struck with sudden

blindness in 1961, Marcel Guigal runs

the estate-owned vineyards in Condrieu

and the Côte-Rôtie.

Guigal has slipped only one place

in the chart and continues to strive

for excellence, as evidenced by its

installation of a new bottling line in

2013 to improve the quality in labelling

and traceability of its wines.

Academy member Jean-Pierre

Chambas said: “Guigal has been and

is the most consistent wine producer in

the world, year in, year out, in all the

appellations that he offers. In the thirty

years that I have been distributing, I

have never had a disappointing wine.”

Winemaker Philippe Gugial said:

“We have always been focused on a

quality axis upon which we aim to

show the best of the Rhône. We wish

our wines to transcend all levels of the

hierarchy, from simple Côtes de Rhône

widely available, right up to the single

vineyard Côte-Rôtie and treasured

wines in Hermitage, Condrieu and

Saint-Joseph produced in confidential

quantities and hunted by collectors and

aficionados the world over.”

MOST ADMIRED WINE BRANDS SUPPLEMENT I DRINKSINT.COM

#11 Ridge

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN: US

OWNER: Otsuka Pharmaceutical Co

Celebrating its 50th birthday in 2012,

Ridge Vineyards did not always

look likely to appear in this list. Its

chequered history has included closure

during Prohibition and being reopened

with repeal only be closed again by

management in the early 1940s. It was

only after the Ridge partners set their

differences aside in 1962 that a superb

vintage followed and secured the next

50 years of quality winemaking.

Marcel Orford-Williams, buyer

for the Wine Society, said the winery

provided “individuality, no compromise

on quality and respect for tradition”.

Academy member Gerry O’Donnell

agreed: “Ridge does a good job giving

the customer a fine wine at relatively

affordable prices. Crucially, it also

provides easy to understand information

on each vintage on the label.”

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Most Admired Wine Brands

Louis

Latour

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN: France

OWNER: Latour Family

The Latour family have been

viticulturalists since the 17th century

and have run the estate for seven

generations.

Shipping wine to more than 60

countries worldwide, the first French

purpose-built winery was built in

1832 and is one of the oldest still

functioning today.

Academy member Andrew Rowe

said: “Louis Latour is consistently

good. Great reputation, great wines.”

The Burgundy vineyard won IWC

gold in 2013.

#13 Château

Haut-Brion

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN: France

OWNER: Domaine Clarence Dillon

The first estate to lend its name to a

wine, thereby creating the notion of

a brand, the president of Domaine

Clarence Dillon claims Château Haut-

Brion could be seen as the “oldest and

first luxury brand in the world”.

It is fitting, then, that the brand

should once again grace the Most

Admired report.

Château Haut-Brion – the only

property from outside the Médoc to

be included in the 1855 classification

– has been owned by some influential

families since Jean de Pontac acquired

the estate in 1533 and Tony Aspler, The

Wine Guy, said Château Haut-Brion

displays “quality across the portfolio

on three continents.”

#14

Michel Chapoutier

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN: France

OWNER: Chapoutier

Michel Chapoutier bottles are not just renowned for the liquid within them.

Since 1996 labels have been marked in Braille after Chapoutier heard his friend,

the singer Gilbert Montagné, on television describing his difficulty in picking out

wine by himself as a blind person. This innovation was recognised by the Royal

Institute for the Blind a year later.

For the first time in three years, Michel Chapoutier is replaced as the Most

Admired French wine, but still retains a place in the top 10 French brands.

Producing 550,000 bottles a year of traditional-style wines, Michel Chapoutier

has been awarded a perfect 100-point score by Robert Parker for the past three

years, showing that one of our academy members was not alone in remarking

“it’s a personal favourite”.

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#15 Yalumba

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN: Australia

OWNER: Robert Hill Smith

Yalumba has a background of more

than 160 years of family winemaking.

In 1985 vigneron and proprietor

Robert Hill-Smith became one of

the youngest managing directors in

Australian wine industry history.

Yalumba is no stranger to a challenge

and faced Mother Nature head on

in 2007, a year of bushfire, frost and

drought. But the brand was rewarded

with a Winestate magazine Winemaker of

the Year and Winery of the Year nod. It is

appearing in this chart for the first time.

Hill-Smith said: “Elegance and

personality drive our mantra. We focus on

sustainable environmental practice, value,

quality and trust. We respect tradition

but innovate around it and play to our

regional strengths and winemaking beliefs

of quality and provenance.”

DRINKSINT.COM I MOST ADMIRED WINE BRANDS SUPPLEMENT

#12-20

#18

Marqués de Riscal

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN: Spain

OWNER: Vinos de los Herederos del Marques de Riscal

Marqués de Riscal is one of the oldest Rioja wineries, having been founded in 1858 by Guillermo Hurtado de Amézaga,

with its first wine bottled in 1862. The first non-French wine to win the Diploma of Honour at the Bordeaux Exhibition in

1895, old vintages of Marqués de Riscal to this day have to be decapitated with hot tongs, as wire netting was used to

make it impossible to extract the cork without breaking to prevent fakes.

This oldest firm in the Rioja appellation was awarded Wine Enthusiast’s Best European Winery 2013, proving that with

age comes experience.

#16 Cono

Sur

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN: Chile

OWNER: Concha y Toro

Cono Sur – the name refers to the

shape of South America on the map,

‘southern cone’ – was founded in 1993

and exported more than 30,000 cases

of wine during its first year.

Cono Sur led the sales charts of

Chilean wines in the British market

eight years after its creation.

Parent company Concha y Toro

may not have the top spot this year

following a change in judging, but it

can take solace in the fact that Cono

Sur has jumped two places and stays

firmly in the top 20.

Following Most Admired 2012,

feedback from the judges recommended

Cono Sur deserved to be a brand in its

own right and compete against Concha

y Toro’s Casillero del Diablo, rather

than be paired with it. This decision

has done it no harm as it continues to

appear in the chart and is the second

Most Admired South American brand.

Winner of the most awards at the

11th Annual Wines of Chile Awards,

Cono Sur is a leader with its pioneering

environmental policies and was the

first South American winery to win a

double ISO certification.

#17 Robert

Mondavi

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN: US

OWNER: Constellation Brands

Not yet half a century

in age, Robert

Mondavi Winery

formed with a single

aim: to recreate

Sauvignon Blanc.

This was achieved in

1968, with Mondavi’s

signature Fumé

Blanc that is, to

this day, one

of the winery’s

most popular

wines.

A joint

venture with

another Most

Admired titan

Baron Philippe

de Rothschild,

saw the launch

of Opus One in

1980.

Our academy

member said:

“The wine

quality of Robert

Mondavi has

never been better.”

MOST ADMIRED WINE BRANDS SUPPLEMENT I DRINKSINT.COM

#19 Château

Petrus

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN: France

OWNER: JP Moueix

Château Petrus is a

wine that has never

officially been classified

and it was a relative

unknown 50 years ago.

But, with fewer than

4,000 cases produced

in most vintages, a

bottle of 1961 sold

for $144,000 at

Christie’s wine

auction.

Petrus has secured

a place in the Most

Admired top 20 for

the second time and

it’s not hard to see

why – it tops many

people’s admired

and wish lists.

Produced almost

entirely using

Merlot grapes, its

exclusivity is in part

responsible for its

steep price tag and

notoriety as the

most expensive wine

in the world.

#20 Jacob’s

Creek

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN: Australia

OWNER: Pernod Ricard

Jacob’s Creek has just unveiled a new

icon to strengthen brand identity by

tapping into its Australian heritage.

Previously unchanged since it was

launched in 1976, the label now shows

more uniformity and Jacob’s Creek

has undergone what senior winemaker

Nick Bruer terms a “subtle evolution”.

The 12-month project has resulted

in an icon that asks the consumer to

identify the subtle vine leaves, creek and

wine glass that are all present, if hidden –

a nod to the legacy of the Gramp family

which is reiterated by the addition of the

Gramp & Sons’ signature.

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Most Admired Wine Brands

#21 Château

Mouton Rothschild

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN: France

OWNER: Rothschild

Tired of serving the same old thing to your guests?

Wish you could wow them with something different?

That is how Baron Nathaniel de Rothschild felt and, as

a consequence, purchased Château Brane Mounton

at auction in 1853. A quick name change and Château

Mouton Rothschild was born.

Rather than produce a bottle with a label that bears its

name, in 1924 Nathaniel’s great grandson, Baron Philippe

de Rothschild, enlisted the aid of graphic designer Jean

Carlu to help create an original label.

Innovative and streets ahead of its time, this was not

repeated for another 20 years, when it became the brand’s

hallmark.

Since 1945 some of the greatest names in the world of

art and beyond have taken a turn at designing the label

artwork. Andy Warhol, Salvador Dali and even Prince

Charles have all risen to the challenge.

#22

Inniskillin

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN: Canada

OWNER: Constellation Wines

When co-founders Donald Ziraldo and

Karl Kaiser left Inniskillin in 2006,

you could be forgiven for predicting a

transitional period, but Jackson-Triggs

winemaker Bruce Nicholson’s arrival

in 2007 has helped the brand to go

from strength to strength. In 2009

Nicholson’s move was rewarded with

the top Premio Speciale Gran Award

at Vinitaly.

Innovation Inspired by Tradition

is the Canadian winery’s mantra and

its Icewine, first produced in 1984

from Vidal grapes frozen naturally

on the vine, continues to thaw judges

at both national and international

competition.

The company exports 16,400 cases of

Icewine a year.

“Consistent attention to terroir,

innovation and authenticity – along

with continuous accolades – keep

Inniskillin a trusted and sought-after

quality brand,” said Nicholson.

“The winery at Niagara is a Mecca

for wine lovers from around the world

(250,000 visitors annually).

“The exclusive Icewine Bar features

current and older vintages along with

the Riedel Icewine glass, which was

inspired by Innskillin in collaboration

with Riedel,” the winemaker added.

16 I DRINKS INTERNATIONAL I MARCH 2014 #23

McGuigan

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN: Australia

OWNER: Australian Vintage

At the age of 100, Percival ‘Perc’ Alfred

McGuigan passed away last year. A

pioneer winemaker for 50 years, Perc

set up Wyndham Estate and inspired

his sons to create McGuigan Wines.

Today, McGuigan

sells 2.4 million cases

worldwide and is the

only winery in the

world to have won

World’s Best Winemaker

three times.

Having joined forces

with celebrity chef

John Torode in

2013, McGuigan

is continuing to

strengthen its

brand presence and

utilise technology

to pair the

Masterchef judge’s

recipes with the

Australian wine.

Academy member

Andrew Roe said:

“McGuigan is

a volume seller

and for what the

customer wants,

it’s better than you

think.”

#24 Abadal

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN: Spain

OWNER: Roqueta Origen

Having been named David Seijas’

Unbeatable Wine in January of

this year, Abadal is looking well placed

for 2014.

Making an appearance for the first

time in the Most Admired list, Abadal

was founded in 1983 by Valenti

Roqueta in Santa Maria d’Horta

d’Avinyó near la Masia Roqueta.

The winery has a long tradition with

more than nine centuries of history

and it looks like Abadal is going

to continue this long tradition and

produce award-winning wine.

#25 Royal

Tokaji

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN: Hungary

OWNER: The Royal Tokaji Wine Co

Tokaji was the tipple of choice for

some of the most illustrious and

influential people in history.

From Beethoven to Heinrich Heine

to Voltaire and Goethe; Emperor Franz

Josef sent Queen Victoria a bottle of

Tokaji Aszu wine for every month she

had lived each birthday. On her 81st

and last birthday in 1900, this is said to

have totalled 972 bottles.

The Royal Tokaji Wine Company

was co-founded in Hungary in 1990 by

noted author and wine historian Hugh

Johnson and since then has exported

to more than 30 countries and received

more than 100 international awards.

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#26 Wolf

Blass

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN: Australia

OWNER: Treasury Wine

Estates

‘Australia’s first consultant

winemaker’ and self-

proclaimed “Golden Boy”

of the Australian wine

industry, Wolf Blass

has three ‘International

Winemaker of the Year’

IWSC awards to support

such claims.

Winner of the Jimmy

Watson Trophy from the

Melbourne Wine Show for

an unprecedented fourth

time in 1999, Wolf Blass

has won a further 3,000

awards at national and international

wine shows. Exported to more than 50

countries worldwide, the “Golden Boy”

appears to truly have the Midas touch.

#27 Château

Musar

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN: Lebanon

OWNER: Hocar family

At almost 85 years old, Château Musar

has once again returned to our report.

Steeped in tradition and history,

Château Musar narrowly misses out on

a place in the top 25. With 6,000 years

of winemaking tradition it is only right

that a Lebanese wine should appear in

the top 30.

Son of founder Gaston Hochar, Serge

was the first ever recipient of Decanter’s

Man of the Year in 1984 for his

dedication to producing quality wine

throughout Lebanon’s Civil War. An

18th century castle, Château Musar is

far from archaic in its outlook, forging

on and broadening distribution to the

likes of Vietnam and Romania in 2013.

#21-30

Les Domaines Paul Mas

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN: France

OWNER: Jean-Claude Mas

Working with 30 different grape varieties, owner and winemaker Jean-Claude

Mas has continued to strengthen the family portfolio he inherited from his

father, Paul Mas.

The Mas family has been cultivating grapes since 1892 when Jean-Claude’s

grandfather purchased the first family vineyards.

The ever-expanding Les Domaines Paul Mas celebrated the acquisition of its

eighth wine estate last year. Now available in 45 countries over five continents,

Paul Mas wines have received more than 300 medals in the past five years and

can add top 30 in Most Admired 2014 to this impressive resumé.

#28 Oyster

Bay

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN: New Zealand

OWNER: Delegat’s Wine Estates

When the first vintage produced

by a winery wins a gold for Best

Sauvignon Blanc of the Competition

at the International Wine & Spirit

Competition, it would be fair to

assume that something is going

right.

That was in 1991, and since then the

New Zealand family-owned company

has routinely been regarded as an

Admired Wine.

Jumping 20 places since last

year, the brand continues to receive

commendations, its Pinot Noir 2012

winning gold in Texas as recently as

2013.

MOST ADMIRED WINE BRANDS SUPPLEMENT I DRINKSINT.COM

#30

#29 Cheval

Blanc

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN: France

OWNER: Bernard Amault/Baron Frere

Château Cheval Blanc

shares a border with

the estate that produces

the most expensive wine

in the world and holds

the 19th spot on our

chart, Château Petrus.

But Cheval Blanc

possesses something

its neighbour does

not – the supreme

distinction, rank of

Premier Grand Cru

Classé A, awarded

in 1954.

In 2010, a 1947

Cheval Blanc

Imperial broke

records, selling for

$304,375 in auction

at Christie’s.

It is said to have

taken two years to

convince the owner

to part with the

record-breaking

bottle.

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Most Admired Wine Brands

#35

#31

Trapiche

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN: Argentina

OWNER: Bemberg family

Argentina’s largest exported premium

wine brand, Trapiche exports some 2.7

million cases to more than 80 countries

worldwide.

With more than 130 years in the

market and 1,000ha of its own

vineyards, this is Trapiche’s first

appearance in the Most Admired

report.

Founded in 1912 and located in

the foothills of the Andes Mountains,

Trapiche is the only Argentinian brand

in this year’s list.

Gustavo Arroyat, winemaker, said:

“I believe there is no one reason that

explains a recognition like this – it’s

kind of intangible.

“Our conscious focus is trying to

understand different consumers and

offer something tailored in all aspects:

the style of wines, the labels, the history

and the price point each consumer is

looking for.

“We like to offer a different journey

in each of our wines.”

Viña Leyda

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN: Chile

OWNER: San Pedro Group

Founded in 1998, Viña Leyda calls a small sub-region of the San Antonio Valley

wine region in Chile its home. Its location makes it one of the coolest growing

sites in Chile. Just eight miles from the Pacific Ocean, traditionally Leyda Valley

has been an area of basic crops such as wheat and barley.

The train station that graces the label of Leyda is an historic passage point

on the line from Santiago to the coast. Once the last stop before travellers

from Santiago reached the Pacific Ocean, the station burnt down following an

accidental fire in 1983.

A landmark and a saying, “la ida” – going/one-way ticket, has gone down in

the rankings this year, but still managed to scoop third Most Admired Chilean

brand. Viña Leyda exports some 100,000 cases a year.

“When Viña Leyda first planted vines in 1998 Leyda Valley was dry farming

land. People probably thought we were crazy planting there. This innovation

and passionate spirit has guided us from the beginning and is what keeps us

investigating about soils and grape varieties because Leyda still has much more

to surprise the world with,” said winemaker Viviana Navarrete.

#32 KWV

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN: South Africa

OWNER: KWV Holdings

Many have commented on the

mirroring of wine and political and

social change. It is only right then that

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a single year. A year later, the winery

installed the fastest bottling line in the

world, capable of processing 36,000

bottles per hour.

Two years later Yellow Tail hit the

UK with its Hello campaign and it

would appear that consumers are not

yet ready to wave goodbye. Celebrating

its 10th year in 2011, Yellow Tail sold

more than one million cases in its first

year. Nine times the predicted amount,

this success makes Yellow Tail the most

successful wine brand launch in history.

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN: France

OWNER: Rothschild

Referred to as ‘the king’s wine’, Lafite

started in the late 17th century when

Jacques de Segur planted and cultivated

the vineyards. Lafite boasts an

impressive 100ha, making it one of the

largest vineyard areas in the Médoc.

Lafite can also stake a claim as the

‘politician’s wine’ as both Robert

Walpole (widely regarded as Britain’s

first prime minister 1721-1742) and

US president (1801-1809) Thomas

Jefferson are said to have gone to great

measures to get their hands on Lafite.

Walpole reportedly purchased a

barrel of Lafite every three months and

Jefferson, having drunk Lafite during

his stay in Bordeaux in 1787, is said to

have remained a steadfast customer of

the Bordeaux wine following this trip.

it should be observed that KWV was

formed in 1918, the year of Nelson

Mandela’s birth.

South Africa celebrated 300 years

of winemaking heritage in 1955 and

KWV has long since been recognised as

an important part of this achievement.

In 1997 these efforts were recognised

when it won the President’s Award for

export achievement.

#33 Yellow

Tail

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN: Australia

OWNER: Casella Wines

Created exclusively for the US

market in 2001, the brand named

after Australia’s Yellow-Footed Rock

Wallaby has sprung far higher and

farther than its native land.

In 2005 Yellow Tail became the first

variety wine to sell one million cases in

DRINKSINT.COM I MOST ADMIRED WINE BRANDS SUPPLEMENT

#31-40

#36 Kendall

Jackson

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN: US

OWNER: Jackson Family Wine

From humble beginnings as a pear and

walnut orchard in rural

Lakeport, California, to

winner of the Wine &

Spirits magazine Winery

of the Year for a 10th

time.

Kendall Jackson

sold its grapes to

wineries until 1980

when the potentially

catastrophic

cancellation of a

large order turned

into a cause for

celebration as the

first bottle of Kendall

Jackson wine was

produced.

The winery was

started as an attempt

at relaxation for

practising barristers

Jess Jackson and his wife, Barbara.

#37 Mateus

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN: Portugal

OWNER: Sogrape

Inspired by the Portuguese Army’s

World War I flasks, the distinctive

bottle dates back to 1942 when

Fernando Van Zeller Guedes created

the flagon-shaped vessel.

With estimated sales over 1 billion

worldwide, the medium-sweet frizzante

wine was the height of fashion

from 1950-1980 and, after a dip

in popularity in the 1990s, Mateus

appears to have returned to favour over

the past 10 years.

Sogrape chief executive and Mateus

founder’s grandson,

Salvador Guedes, was

quick to monopolise on

the popularity of rosé

in the new millennium

and the makeover and

marketing campaign

proved to be

successful.

Mateus

continues

to rise up

the Most

Admired

chart.

#38 Château

Ste Michelle

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN: US

OWNER: UST

The oldest winery in

Washington State, Château

Ste Michelle was named

Winery of the Year 2013 for

the 19th time by Wine

& Spirits magazine.

One of the founding

fathers of the modern

California wine industry

and one of the most

influential figures

since the repeal of

the Prohibition,

Andre Tchelistcheff

was famed for

counselling others

in the wine world.

Fredrick Stimson was

one of Tchelistcheff’s

MOST ADMIRED WINE BRANDS SUPPLEMENT I DRINKSINT.COM

#40

Zonin

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN: Italy

OWNER: Zonin family

Zonin is 200 years old with seven

generations of family behind it.

This year it makes its first appearance

in this list, securing a place in the

top 40.

The Zonin family has been

linked to the world of wine since

1821, an achievement that was

recognised in 2013 when its

president, Gianni Zonin, was awarded

the Wine Enthusiast Lifetime

Achievement Award.

Zonin chief international

officer Massimo Tuzzi said: “The

definition of our success is in our

mission: to produce the highest

quality Italian wine available to all

wine lovers.

“Tailoring custom-made

business plans for each country,

with the belief each market

is different and unique, we aim

to achieve a leadership role in

the different international

markets by providing wine solutions

directly ‘from the vineyard to

the glass’ and by ensuring the

highest quality experience for all

wine enthusiasts in all customer

segments.”

counsels and following this guidance,

Ste. Michelle Vintners, a new line

of premium vinifera wines, was

introduced in 1967.

With two separate wineries, one

for the red and another for the

white, Château Ste Michelle is led by

winemaker Bob Bertheau.

The seemingly unbeatable winery of

the year retains its place in the chart

and is the third in the Most Admired

US brands.

#39 Campo

Viejo

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN: Spain

OWNER: Pernod Ricard

One of Rioja’s major brands, Campo

Viejo is also one of Pernod Ricard’s

key strategic wine brands, along with

its Jacob’s Creek from Australia and

Brancott Estate, formerly Montana,

from New Zealand.

The winemaking team has worked

to make Campo Viejo a modern, fruit

forward style Rioja.

Despite being often on offer in

multiple retailers, the brand

has managed to maintain its

premium positioning and

is currently experiencing a

stronger presence in the US

and emerging markets such

as Russia and Mexico.

Anne Tremsal,

global marketing

& communications

director for Pernod

Ricard Winemakers

said: “Campo Viejo’s

dedication to Rioja

winemaking has

allowed this brand to

create modern twists

on traditional methods

to deliver progressive

styles of Rioja that

satisfy today’s palates.”

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Most Admired Wine Brands

#41 Château

Le Pin

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN: France

OWNER: Thienpont family

Small it may be, but

Château Le Pin, or simply

Le Pin, can boast that it

produces one of the most

valuable wines in the

world.

Named after the

solitary pine tree that

grows near the winery,

the 2.7ha Thienpoint

family-owned property

releases 500-700 cases

per vintage.

The estate was a

mere 1.5ha when

first bought but the

Thienpoint family

acquired adjoining

plots in the heart of the

Pomerol appellation.

Brand ambassador

Jan Thienpoint is the fourth-

generation Thienpoint family member

to manage the estate.

#42 Marqués

de Cáceres

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN: Spain

OWNER: Cristina Forner

From the birth of the Marqués de

Cáceres in 1970, Enrique Forner relied

on his family’s five generations of

devotion to the wine trade to guide a

brand that today exports more than

50% of its production and is present in

more than 120 countries.

A member of the Leading Brands

of Spain Forum, designed to promote

and defend Spanish brands, Marqués

de Cáceres says it is committed to

producing an authentic wine “to enjoy

and share”.

The launch of Excellens Rosé 2013

marks Marqués de Cáceres’ limited-

production wines ‘Excellens’, Rosé

2013 has qualified for the Best Wine of

Spain national finals.

#43

Undurraga

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN: Chile

OWNER: Grupos Vinos

del Pacifico

One of the pioneers in

Chilean winemaking,

Don Francisco Undurraga

brought plants over from

France and Germany

and developed the first

vineyards in the Santa

Ana Estate under

the guidance of

renowned French

viticulturist M

Pressac.

In 1903, Viña

Undurraga was

the first Chilean

winery to export to

the US and seven

years later its Rhin

de Undurraga

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Hardys

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN: Australia

OWNER: Accolade Wines

Australia’s number one wine brand has been through some turbulent times

with ownership moving around within the Foster’s Group before finally being

spun out to Accolade Wines.

The many tiers, expressions and discounting have done little to enhance

the positioning of the brand. There have also been questions about the

quality of the liquid – understandable considering the uncertain background

– and possible lack of forward investment in quality. Then there is the deep

discounting, which has afflicted all the major Australian producers and brands

at the hands of the multiple retailers.

Now in the capable hands of Paul Schaafsma at Accolade, who cut his teeth

on Australian Vintage and McGuigan Wines, Hardys is being repositioned and

new classy advertising is promoting its history, heritage and quality.

#44

won its first international prize in the

Centenario Argentina International

Fair.

European awards followed 20 years

later when Pinot de Undurraga was

awarded the Gold Medal at the Expo

Sevilla.

Wine & Spirits magazine’s Winery of

the Year 2012 and Producer of the Year

2013, Undurraga continues to rise in

the Most Admired list.

#45 Banrock

Station

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN: Australia

OWNER: Accolade WInes

Another newcomer to Most Admired,

Banrock Station will celebrate its 20th

anniversary next year.

The brand boasts 239ha of vineyards

on which 17 grape varieties are grown,

including Tinta Mole and Tinta Cao.

Banrock Station offers good green

credentials – for every wine sold, it

donates to environmental projects

worldwide.

#46 Barefoot

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN:US

OWNER: E&J Gallo

E&J Gallo, the world’s largest

wine producer, does not enjoy the

greatest reputation for its

mainstream, entry-level

wine brands such as Gallo

Family Vineyard, Hearty

Burgundy (only in the US)

and Turning Leaf.

Yet it has won

countless medals for

its premium estate

wines, such as Frei

Ranch and the

MacMurray Estate.

Barefoot represents

the new generation

of wine brands which

are more about image

and what the wine

represents rather than

concentrating on what

is in the bottle.

Known as a

‘hippy brand’ due to

its unconventional roots, Barefoot

has done well among younger wine

drinkers who, according to one

academy member, “just want to

consume an affordable, easy-to-

understand, easy-to-drink wine and are

frankly not interested in the baggage

that can come with wine”.

#48

Berberana

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN: Spain

OWNER: United Wineries

As one of the oldest wineries in Rioja,

Berberana credits its success to four

attributes: heritage; value for money;

Tempranillo; Spain and innovation.

Berberana’s One Cork, One Point

scheme was launched in 2009 to

encourage brand loyalty.

It allowed customers to convert their

purchase into points which would

ultimately result in luxury breaks and

experiences.

Winning more than 116 awards

in the past six years, most recently

Berberana took home two gold and

two silver medals from the Bacchanalia

Wine Awards.

While Berberana may be ‘Spain’s

best-selling brand worldwide’, it will

have to settle for a place outside the

top five Most Admired Spanish brands

this year.

DRINKSINT.COM I MOST ADMIRED WINE BRANDS SUPPLEMENT

MOST ADMIRED WINE BRANDS SUPPLEMENT I DRINKSINT.COM

#41-50

from grapes grown and vinified by

partner producers in Le Pays d’Oc and

Gascogne.

The revolutionary design meant that

a special bottling chain had to built,

but this was to be rewarded when

JP Chenet was awarded a Packaging

Oscar and Verre Avenir award in 1991

for design and packaging innovation.

Following the launch of flavoured

wine ‘Fashion’ 2009, JP Chenet has

been on somewhat of a gold rush,

with the Chardonnay and Syrah/

Malbec offerings both picking up

gold at Selection Mondiales des Vins

Canada 2013.

#47

#50 Barton

& Guestier

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN: France

OWNER: Castel Frères

A newcomer to our chart,

Barton & Guestier has

more than three centuries

of experience in the wine

business and is present on

five continents in 130

countries.

The ‘first French

brand name’ and one

of the oldest wine

merchants established

in Bordeaux, Barton

& Guestier today

works in partnership

with around 250

winegrowers in

France.

Thomas Barton

founded the wine

shipping company in 1725 at the

age of 30, after emigrating to

Bordeaux from his native Ireland.

Barton’s grandson, Hugh,

made the savvy decision to team

up with friend and ship owner

Daniel Guestier in the early 18th

century.

While this partnership was

not confirmed in writing until

1802, Guestier almost single-

handedly ran the company

while Barton faced, and

narrowly escaped, the

guillotine for “dealings with

the enemy” in 1791.

Diageo sold Barton &

Guestier to France’s largest

wine company Castel Frères

in 2010 for an undisclosed

sum.

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Santa Rita

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN: Chile

OWNER: Grupo Claro

Founded in 1880, Santa Rita is one of the largest Chilean wine producers,

marketing its product in more than 75 countries and exporting 1.4 million cases

in 2013. The end of the 1980s and early 90s marked a time of great expansion

for the company and today it has more than 3,000ha of vineyards and the

brand is marketed in some 75 countries.

In 2013, Santa Rita was named one of Decanter magazine’s Wine Legends, the

first Chilean wine in history to gain the distinction. The 1989 vintage of Casa Real

takes pride of place among such brands as Château Petrus, Châteaux Margaux and

Vega Sicilla – all nominees in DI’s Most Admired 2014.

Andres Alavados, export commercial director, said: “A wide selection of

wines, labels and flexibility for both the on and off-trade sees the brand

appealing to a wide consumer audience.

“Santa Rita also enjoys a strong following in the domestic market, taking a

lead with the legendary Casa Real to the Medalla Real and 120 ranges ensures

the wines of Santa Rita access all areas of the premium market place. Santa

Rita also prides itself on being at the forefront of sustainability in Chile.”

#49 JP

Chenet

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN: France

OWNER: Les Grands Chais de

France

The ‘best-selling French wine in

the world’ has fallen from 22nd

place, and dips out of the top

10 all together this year.

The distinctive, slanted

neck and generously bodied

bottle was designed in 1984

by Joseph Helfrich and

named Joséphine.

In Helfrich’s own words,

JP Chenet was introduced

as a “brand for the masses”

and is exclusively made

regionalsMost Admired Wine Brands

Top North American

Wine Brands

1 Ridge Vineyards

2 Robert Mondavi

3 Inniskillin

4 Kendall-Jackson

5 Château Ste Michelle

North

America

Above: Inniskillin

Below left to right: Ridge,

Robert Mondavi, Inniskillin,

Kendall-Jackson, Château Ste

Michelle, Barefoot

brands in our top 50 has

The number of North American

fallen for the first time, from

eight last year to six this year.

Ridge retains the top spot, but

last year’s chart brands Delicato, Blossom

Hill and Fetzer fail to make the cut.

The only Canadian brand in the top 50,

Inniskillin, bumps Kendall-Jackson and

Château Ste Michelle out of the top three

in the fight to take third Most Admired

North American brand.

Gallo is once again only present in the

sub-brand form of Barefoot, which placed

sixth on the list – up from last year’s eight.

With five winners in the top 40 and

two in the top 20, North America is

proving why its 300 years in winemaking

are making it a formidable force in the

World’s Most Admired Wine Brands.

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Most Admired Wine Brands

Top South American

Wine Brands

1 Casillero del Diablo

2 Cono Sur

3 Trapiche

4 Leyda

5 Undurraga

Above: Trapiche

Below from left: Casillero del Diablo

Cono Sur

Trapiche

Undurraga

South

America

number of South American

For the fourth year in a row the

brands in the top 50 has

increased.

Proving admiration does

not always equate to volume sales,

Chile – which is the world’s ninth largest

producer of wine – has four brands in

the list compared to fifth-largest producer

Argentina’s one in Trapiche.

Once again, Concha y Toro performs

well with its Casillero del Diablo brand

taking the top spot, independent of its

parent company’s name.

Leyda, a newcomer last year, holds on to

its place in the top five.

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Most Admired Wine Brands

European

More than half of the World’s

Most Admired Wine Brands are

European, so being named top was

no mean feat.

Torres took the overall crown

so of course it tops the European chart as well – as

it has done every year since this supplement was

launched.

Newcomer Château Latour replaces Rothschild as

the top Bordeaux brand and takes second place here,

while Tignanello comes back strong to take third.

Duboeuf, Félix Solis and Domaine de la Romanée-

Conti fall out of the top 50 altogether this year. The

top 10 Most Admired European Brands all secure

places in the top 20.

The make up of the European presence is distinctly

different from previous years as Bordeaux has been

incorporated into this ranking for the first time. In

all, seven Spanish brands, 11 Bordeaux, four French

(outside Bordeaux), two Italian, one Hungarian and

one Portuguese brand make up the 26 European Most

Admired Brands.

Eight of the Bordeaux brands are in the European

top 20 – one more than in the past two years and one

less than the first Most Admired. Perhaps next year

Bordeaux will boast the 10 entries it has been unable

to match since 2011.

A number of academy members voted solely for

Bordeaux wines.

Commenting on his company’s win, general

manager Miguel Torres Maczassek said: “During the

past decade we have started to produce wines in more

appellations of origin in Spain.

“We spend a lot of time and effort trying to be close

to our consumers. Our winemakers, managers and all

family members are travelling constantly to meet new

customers and communicate about Torres.

“We are very present in the online channels and

have a great number of loyal consumers who ask for

our wines wherever they go.”

Top European

Wine Brands

1 Torres

2 Château Latour

3 Tignanello

4 Château d’Yquem

5 Château Margaux

6 Guigal

7 Vega Sicilia

8 Louis Latour

9 Château Haut-Brion

10 Michel Chapoutier

11 Marques de Riscal

12 Petrus

13 Mouton Rothschild

14 Abadal

15 Royal Tokaji

16 Cheval Blanc

17 Paul Mas

18 Lafite

19 Mateus

20 Campo Viejo

Top: Torres, Château Margaux,

Abadal

Left: Bountiful Bordeaux’s

top wines include Haut-Brion,

Margaux, Petrus and Mouton

Rothschild

Right: Vega Sicilia, Marqués de

Riscal and Cheval Blanc

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Most Admired Wine Brands

Australia &

New Zealand

winners are wines

One-fifth of this year’s

produced in Australia and

New Zealand.

Penfolds and Cloudy Bay

hold on to their top slots again this year

while Yalumba and Hardys both make the

cut for the first time.

Neither Brancott Estate nor Wyndham

Estate are present in this year’s top 50,

despite placing well in previous years

(third and ninth respectively in this

regional section).

Cloudy Bay and Oyster Bay are the only

two New Zealand brands to make it into

the chart.

Australia retains the dominance it

achieved last year with eight brands.

With one more entry than last year and

with different brands making their debut

from the two countries, Australia and

New Zealand are showing their breadth in

production and quality in the estimation

of our panel.

Top

Australian

and New

Zealand

Wine Brands

1 Penfolds

2 Cloudy Bay

3 Yalumba

4 Jacob’s Creek

5 McGuigan

6 Wolf Blass

7 Oyster Bay

8 Yellowtail

9 Hardys

10 Banrock Station

Cloudy Bay vineyards

MOST ADMIRED WINE BRANDS SUPPLEMENT I DRINKSINT.COM

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Most Admired Wine Brands

50THE TOP

1

World’s Most Admired Wine Brand

2

Full list of placings

from this year’s poll

Top South America Wine Brand

1 Torres up 1

2 Casillero del Diablo down 1

3 Château Latour re-entry

4 Tignanello up 28

5 Penfolds down 2

6 Château d'Yquem re-entry

7 Château Margaux up 13

8 Cloudy Bay down 3

9 Guigal down 1

10 Vega Sicilia re-entry

11 Ridge down 5

12 Louis Latour up 17

13 Château Haut-Brion up 26

14 Michel Chapoutier down 10

15 Yalumba new entry

16 Cono Sur up 2

17 Robert Mondavi up 14

18 Marques de Riscal up 6

19 Petrus up 11

20 Jacob's Creek up 5

3

Top re-entry

4

Highest climber

5

Top Australia and New Zealand WIne

Brand

11

Top North American Wine Brand

34 I DRINKS INTERNATIONAL I MARCH 2014 21 Mouton Rothschild down 12

22 Inniskillin re-entry

23 McGuigan down 9

24 Abadal new entry

25 Royal Tokaji new entry

26 Wolf Blass down 11

27 Château Musar re-entry

28 Oyster Bay up 18

29 Cheval Blanc down 8

30 Paul Mas new entry

31 Trapiche new entry

32 KWV up 3

33 Yellow Tail down 16

34 Lafite down 15

35 Leyda down 7

36 Kendall-Jackson down 23

37 Mateus up 7

38 Château Ste Michelle down 15

39 Campo Viejo down 13

40 Zonin new entry

41 Le Pin up 1

42 Marques de Caceres up 1

43 Undurraga up 4

44 Hardys new entry

45 Banrock Station new entry

46 Barefoot up 3

47 Santa Rita down 14

48 Berberana re-entry

49 JP Chenet down 27

50 Barton & Guestier new entry

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Hospitality Group

CEO, Union Square

- D A N N Y MEYER,

subject."

I ' v e e v e r s e e n o n t h e

a n d entertaining book

" T h e m o s t informative

U p d a t e d

R e v i s e d a n d

Completely

EDITION

2 N D

B U B I L E

W I N E

K A R E N M A C N E I LW I N N E R O F E V E R Y M A J O R W I N E A W A R D

O V E R H A L F A M I L L I O N C O P I E S S O L D

KAREN MACNEIL

THE WINE BIBLE

REVISED SECOND EDITION

WORKMAN PUBLISHING | NEW YORK

To Emma,

who has taught me the meaning of love

And to Harvey,

who has taught me the meaning of friendship

And to the lesson of red tulips …

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MARRYING WELL: WINE AND FOOD

THE TEN QUESTIONS ALL WINE DRINKERS ASK

FRANCE

BORDEAUX

CHAMPAGNE

BURGUNDY

BEAUJOLAIS

THE RHÔNE

THE LOIRE

ALSACE

LANGUEDOC-ROUSSILLON

PROVENCE

ARMAGNAC AND COGNAC

ITALY

PIEDMONT

THE VENETO

FRIULI-VENEZIA GIULIA

TUSCANY

OTHER IMPORTANT WINE REGIONS

Trentino-Alto Adige

Lombardy

Liguria

Emilia-Romagna

Umbria

Abruzzi

The Southern Peninsula

Sicily and Sardinia

SLOVENIA

SPAIN

RIOJA

RIBERA DEL DUERO

JEREZ

PENEDÈS

RÍAS BAIXAS

PRIORA T

OTHER IMPORTANT WINE REGIONS

The Basque Region

Bierzo

Calatayud and Campo de Borja

Castilla-La Mancha

Jumilla

Rueda

Toro

PORTUGAL

PORT

MADEIRA

PORTUGUESE TABLE WINES

GERMANY

THE MOSEL

THE RHEINGAU

THE PFALZ

OTHER IMPORTANT WINE REGIONS

Ahr

Baden

Franken

Mittelrhein

Nahe

Rheinhessen

AUSTRIA

LOWER AUSTRIA

BURGENLAND

STYRIA

VIENNA

SWITZERLAND

HUNGARY

REPUBLIC OF GEORGIA

GREECE

THE UNITED STATES

CALIFORNIA

Napa V alley

Sonoma County

Mendocino

The Sierra Foothills

The North Central Coast

Livermore V alley

Paso Robles and York Mountain

The South Central Coast

W ASHINGTON STA TE

OREGON

NEW YORK STA TE

TEXAS

VIRGINIA

OTHER IMPORTANT WINE REGIONS

Arizona

Missouri

New Mexico

Pennsylvania

Idaho

Michigan

Colorado

New Jersey

MEXICO

CANADA

AUSTRALIA

NEW ZEALAND

CHILE

ARGENTINA

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INTRODUCTION

WHY WINE MATTERS

During the ten years it took to write the first edition of The Wine Bible and the four years it

took to write this second edition, I have often asked myself why wine matters. What is it

about wine that I hold so deeply? What is this endless attachment?

I have always known what it is not. It’s not about scoring or competitive analysis,

though like any wine pro, I’m game for the next blind tasting. And it’s not about the need

to retell what I have learned, though I can lie awake for hours thinking about how to

capture a wine in words.

Perhaps it is this: I love wine because it is one of the last true things. In a world

digitized to distraction, a world where you can’t get out of your pajamas without your cell

phone, wine remains utterly primary. Unrushed. The silent music of nature. For eight

thousand years, vines clutching the earth have thrust themselves upward toward the sun

and given us juicy berries, and ultimately wine. In every sip taken in the present, we drink

in the past—the moment in time when those berries were picked; a moment gone but

recaptured—and so vivid that our bond with nature is welded deep.

Wine matters because of this ineluctable connection. Wine and food cradle us in our

own communal humanity. Anthropologically, they are the pleasures that carried life

forward and sustained us through the sometimes dark days of our own evolution.

Drinking wine then—as small as that action can seem—is both grounding and

transformative. It reminds us of other things that matter, too: love, friendship, generosity.

The Wine Bible has taken me a long time to write—in some ways I’ve spent the better

part of my last twenty years on it. It has taken this long not because it takes a long time to

accumulate the facts, but because it takes a long time to feel a place—culturally,

historically, aesthetically.

And so, on my mission to understand the wine regions of the world, I’ve danced the

tango (awkwardly) with Argentinian men to try to understand malbec; drunk amarone

while eating horsemeat (a tradition) in the V eneto; sipped wine from hairy goatskin bags

in northern Greece (much as the ancients would have); and been strapped into a

contraption that lowers pickers down into perilously steep German vineyards (an

experience that momentarily convinces you your life is over).

I’ve shared wine and cigars with bullfighters in Rioja; ridden through the vineyards of

Texas on horseback; eaten octopus and drunk assyrtiko with Greek fishermen in Santorini

(considered by some to be the lost Atlantis); and picked tiny oyster shells from among the

fossilized sea creatures that make up the moonscape soils of Chablis.

I’ve waltzed among wine barrels with winemakers in Vienna; stomped grapes with

Portuguese picking crews until my legs were purple, and worked for weeks with a

Mexican harvest crew in California, one of the hardest and most rewarding experiences

I’ve ever had.

These encounters brought wine so vividly into my life that I ultimately moved to Napa

V alley on the sheer belief that living near vines would touch my heart in ways imaginable

and not.

And so it has.

—Karen MacNeil

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Every author writing about wine has to make decisions about what to include, what to

exclude (a harder choice), and how to present information that can be technical, complex,

or just plain messy in scope. Here are my decisions and the thinking behind them.

• WHERE TO BEGIN Acquiring knowledge about wine doesn’t usually occur in a linear

fashion and neither, I suspect, does reading about wine. So The Wine Bible is written in a

way that allows you to begin anywhere. Y ou can, of course, start with the section I call

Mastering Wine, but if you want to read about Spain first, by all means, go ahead. Some

readers may read this work cover to cover, but you can also dip into it over time as your

fascination with a given topic, country, or type of wine takes hold.

• THE COUNTRIES AND THEIR MOST IMPORTANT WINES This second edition of The Wine

Bible covers every major wine region in the world and most of the minor ones. That said,

regrettably, because of lack of space, I was not able to include Israel, Turkey, Bulgaria,

Romania, or Croatia.

For every major wine region that’s included, you’ll find a Most Important Wines box.

The wines listed are divided into Leading Wines and Wines of Note. My hope is that the

Most Important Wines boxes will give you a quick idea of the wines that most deserve

your attention. For example, if you’re going to Tuscany, which wines should you be sure

not to miss? Those are designated as Leading Wines. And which wines are absolutely

worth trying even though they aren’t as important as a Leading Wine? Those are the

Wines of Note.

• ABOUT THE WINES TO KNOW For every major country and every significant region within

it, there’s also a section called The Wines to Know. The Wines to Know are highly

personal choices that I recommend you try because I think they’ll tell you, within a few

sips, the story of that place in a way that words barely can. (Just as an aside, looking for

the wines that tell the story of a place is slightly different from looking only for “great”

wines that might score high in a critic’s notebook.) To arrive at the Wines to Know for this

edition of The Wine Bible, I tasted close to ten thousand wines. Still, finalizing the specific

wines to be included was often difficult, and I know I’ve left out some deserving wines.

Most of the Wines to Know are available either from a wine retailer, directly from the

winery or via the Internet. Alas, because of high demand, a few wines may prove difficult

to locate through standard retail channels. I’ve included them anyway because you may

very well encounter them on a restaurant wine list or find them while traveling in wine

country.

• ABOUT VINTAGES The Wine Bible does not include information on specific vintages. Not

because vintages of a given wine aren’t different—of course they are—but my hope was

to present wines that are worth your knowing about in any vintage.

I also hope that the whole concept of vintages is something that you’ll take in stride

because most vintages aren’t nearly as cut and dry, black or white, good or bad as they are

often made out to be. In this spirit, I hope you’ll find How Much Do Vintages Matter?

(page 124) evocative and worthy of consideration.

• ABOUT COST I also haven’t given prices in this book. That sort of information often

changes so rapidly that only newsletters, newspapers, magazines, and the Internet can

attempt to be accurate. But I have sometimes indicated that a wine is a steal, or moderately

priced, or super-expensive, and so on.

• ABOUT FOOD What would a wine book be without food—wine’s ineluctable companion?

I’ve included dozens of boxes and sections on the traditional foods of a given wine region.

Want to know the history of croissants? (Hint: The story doesn’t begin in France.) Or why

Sherry’s soulmate is tapas? Or why you need to eat chinchilla while drinking malbec in

Argentina? It’s all here. Y ou’ll also find lots and lots of information on wine and food

marriages including a section in the Mastering Wine chapter outlining strategies for

pairing wine and food (page 115).

• ABOUT THE MAPS AND PHOTOS The maps created for this second edition are not overly

complex or overly simple. They include, I believe, what every wine lover needs to know

—that is, how wine regions relate to one another in terms of their locations. Each region

has a slightly different color shading, allowing you to easily tell them apart. (Note that the

color of the shading does not indicate the color of the wine in that region).

Dozens of individuals helped me by sharing their photos—some were professional

photographers; others, wine pros on a wine country excursion. I thank them all for

allowing us to use their works. Their names are listed in the acknowledgments or in the

photo credits.

• ABOUT THE SEVEN GLOSSARIES In addition to a comprehensive general glossary of wine

terms in English, there are seven other glossaries for wine terms in other languages—a

glossary each for terms in French, Italian, Spanish, German and Austrian, Portuguese,

Hungarian, and Greek. So a word like cosecha (“vintage,

” in Spanish) appears not in the

main glossary, but in the Spanish one.

• ABOUT GRAPE GENETICS This edition of The Wine Bible includes fascinating information

on the genetic parentage of all the leading grapes. In all cases, my information comes from

Dr. José V ouillamoz and the writers Jancis Robinson MW and Julia Harding MW.

• ABOUT STATISTICS There are several companies and organizations that track worldwide

wine statistics, but they often have widely differing formats and provide information that

is often not comprehensive. To maintain consistency throughout this book, my figures for

wine production and vineyard acreage come from the OIV , Organisation Internationale de

la Vigne et du Vin, and for consumption, from the Wine Institute. Both are highly

respected organizations.

• ABOUT NAMES, SPELLING, AND PUNCTUATION As seemingly prosaic as this topic is, it can

galvanize you as you attempt to write a book of this scope. Grape varieties are called

different things or spelled different ways in different countries. Throughout, I’ve tried to

be as clear as possible, always tipping you off about synonyms and local spellings. As for

punctuation, you’ll find that I’ve capitalized all wines that are named after places (this is

standard), and put all grape varieties (and wines named after grape varieties) in lowercase.

Thus in Piedmont, Italy, two of the leading wines are Barolo and barbera; the first capped

because it takes its name from a place, the second appearing in lowercase because it’s

named after the grape. The only exception to this practice is grapes named after people,

such as Müller-Thurgau and Palomino, both of which are capitalized.

• AND FINALLY, LEARNING MORE ABOUT WINE Some topics may be a bit boring to study. Not

wine. It’s quite possibly the most engaging, fun, and fascinating subject a learner could

ever want. I hope The Wine Bible plays a role in your process of understanding wine and

that you’ll also give wine courses and certification a try. WSET (Wine and Spirits

Education Trust), the Master Sommelier program, and the Society of Wine Educators are

all top-notch organizations that will help your study of wine develop and evolve. In

addition, there are countless wine courses and wine schools in cities large and small

around the world. Happy tasting.

Wine has a way of pulling you into it—of making you want to taste and experience more.

MASTERING WINE

WHAT MAKES GREAT WINE GREAT?

Most wine books begin with what wine is, how it’s made, where it comes from. And we’ll

definitely get into each of those.

But I wanted to lead off the first section of The Wine Bible with the bottom line, the big

question, and the final paradox: What makes great wine great? Intentionally or not, many

of us spend our entire “wine lives” tasting in pursuit of the answer (or answers), and it’s a

delicious journey to be sure. But it seems to me that this, the most intriguing of important

wine questions, also deserves some thoughts put down on paper. So to begin, in this

chapter I’ll share mine. From there, we’ll get down to the specifics, and I’ll take you

through all the essentials: what wine is; the building blocks that make it taste the way it

does; the stunning role that place plays in a wine’s flavor; how wine is made; the

professional method of tasting in a way that magnifies a wine’s flavor; the vast world of

grape varieties and how to get to know them; pairing wine with food; plus all the practical

particulars, from how to feel more comfortable in a wine shop to how to choose the best

wineglasses to how to know when a wine is ready to drink.

A final thought: When I was first learning about wine, I remember thinking that wine

wouldn’t be so hard to understand if I could just find someone to explain it well. Above

all, I wanted to understand the concepts in this chapter—the concepts that give each of us

the grounding we need to think about wine more meaningfully and know it better. I hope I

can be that good explainer for you. For it’s by understanding this chapter—wine in all of

its magnificent, paradoxical, and elemental details—that we enhance our awe and

enjoyment of what is, after all, the world’s most captivating beverage.

Among wine’ s central mysteries: How is it that mere grapes can become a beverage of profound depth and complexity?

How is it that this simple fruit can tell the story of a place?

THE NINE ATTRIBUTES OF GREATNESS

No one needs a wine book to tell them what they like to drink. Subjectivity in wine is

pretty easy. But a wine is not great merely because we like it. Liking a wine is simply

liking a wine—it tells you something about what you take pleasure in.

I would argue that to really know wine—and to consider its potential greatness—

requires that we move beyond what we know we like. It requires that we attempt a larger

understanding of the aesthetics behind wines that have garnered respect, wines that have

consistently been singled out for their merit, wines that have, again and again over time,

been cherished for their integrity and beauty. I’ll call this our best attempt at wine

objectivity. And by attempting to objectively understand wine, we begin to inch toward

the underlying principles that make great wine great.

Like literature, then, wine encourages two assessments: one subjective, the other,

objective. Y ou may not like reading Shakespeare, but agree nonetheless that Shakespeare

was a great writer. Y ou may have loved that carafe of wine in the Parisian café… and yet

know that it was not, in the end, a great wine.

What does it take to have as objective an opinion as possible about a wine?

Discernment, an open mind, and usually some experience in repeatedly tasting the wine so

you have a feel for how it classically presents itself. Experience with the wine is, I think,

especially critical. My own best example of this is Sherry. The first time I tasted Sherry I

envisioned writing an article called “Death by Sherry.

” I could not imagine why anyone

would drink the stuff.

Today, I consider Sherry one of the greatest wines in the world, and it has become one

of my favorites. By tasting it over and over again with “the willing suspension of

disbelief” (to borrow a literary concept), I came to a closer understanding of it. One day

while tasting it, the light switched flipped. In that moment, I “got” Sherry. Many, many

wines require this sort of pursuit. (As do foods. Who can say they had a good idea of how

to evaluate sushi the first time they tasted it?)

So, open-minded tasting experience is key. Assembling all that experience is also the

fun part. After years of doing that, here are the nine attributes that I believe matter most in

determining whether a wine is great: distinctiveness, balance, precision, complexity,

beyond fruitness, length, choreography, connectedness, and the ability to evoke an

emotional response.

DISTINCTIVENESS

In the simplest sense, consider: If you buy a Granny Smith apple, you want it to taste like

one. If it tastes simply generic—like any old apple—you’d probably be disappointed. In

fact, the more Granny Smithish the Granny Smith apple is, the more it can be appreciated

and savored for what it is. Great wines are great because they are distinctive; not because

they exhibit sameness. This is true first of all for wines based on single grape varieties.

Each variety of grape presents itself in an individual way (see Getting to Know the

Grapes, page 53). Wines that fully and precisely express those individual grapes are said

to have “varietal character.

” A good thing. (As a quick aside and perhaps needless to say,

not all varietal characteristics have mass appeal. Some wine drinkers, for example, think

the edgy,

“wild girl,

” tangy green herb character of some sauvignon blancs is hard to love.

And indeed it can be. But think about cheese. Just because some people cannot bear

intensely flavored cheese, is blue cheese awful? Should every cheese be remade in the

image of American singles? I hope not.)

Then there are wines that are blends, including many of the most remarkable types of

wine in the world: Champagne, Bordeaux, Rioja, Chianti, Châteauneuf-du-Pape—and

many others. A blend does not, cannot, demonstrate varietal character. But it should

demonstrate distinctiveness. Tasting a great Châteauneuf-du-Pape should tell you above

all that this is a Châteauneuf-du-Pape and cannot be anything else. (And, of course, we’ll

address what great Châteauneuf-du-Pape tastes like in the Rhône V alley section of the

French chapter.)

Finally, great wines are distinctive not only in their aromas and flavors, but also

distinctive in their textures. Great wine does not lie amorphously on the palate. It has a

feel that is exciting. That feel can be as soft as cashmere, as minerally as mountain water,

as brisk and crisp as fresh lime juice, or as downy as falling snow (which is the texture of

many great Champagnes). The nature of the texture doesn’t matter. What’s important with

great wine is that it have a discernible and distinctive texture.

In the end, distinctiveness is perhaps the highest attribute of great wine. It’s the sense

that this wine could not be just anything; it is something.

BALANCE

One of the most commonly used words to describe a great wine is balance, along with its

cousin, integration. The two words mean slightly different things. Balance is the

characteristic a wine possesses when all of its major components (acid, alcohol, fruit, and

tannin) are in equilibrium (see What Makes Wine, Wine?, page 9). Because no single

component sticks out more than any of the others, a balanced wine has a kind of

harmonious tension of opposites. I often think of a Thai soup when I think of balance.

Sweetness, heat, acidity, spice—they’re all there in perfect contrapuntal tension with one

another, and as a result the soup tastes harmonious.

“Great wine is about nuance, surprise, subtlety, expression, qualities that keep

you coming back for another taste. Rejecting a wine because it is not big

enough is like rejecting a book because it is not long enough, or a piece of

music because it is not loud enough.

”

— KERMIT LYNCH,

Adventures on the Wine Route

Integration takes this concept one step further. When a wine is integrated, its

components and flavors have coalesced in a way that seems almost magical. Instead of

various components and flavors that are all separate and discernible, an integrated wine

possesses a unique and stunning character that comes from the synthesis of the

independent parts. A wine that is balanced when young has the potential to become

integrated when it’s older.

Balance or integration is essential in great wine. That said, they are difficult

characteristics to describe. Wine that is not balanced or integrated is far easier to talk

about. It presents itself like a broken star on the palate, with a few points sticking out.

When oakiness is out of balance, for example, it’s easy to taste because, from a sensory

perspective, it sticks out like a sore thumb. It’s worth noting that great wines usually leave

wine critics literally speechless.

PRECISION

Great wines do not have flavors that are muddled or blurry. Great wines have flavors—

whatever those flavors are—that are precise, well defined, and expressive. Imagine an old-

style radio where you can dial in the frequency. If you don’t adjust the dial perfectly, you

can still hear the music, but its integrity is lost in static. When you get the frequency just

right, the music takes on a special beauty because it is precise.

Interestingly, sensory scientists often analogize flavor to sound. Is flavor X a whisper

or a shout?, they will ask in an experiment. Using this as a metaphor, I would offer that a

great wine has a flavor that is the precision equivalent of a church bell in the mountains.

Given two well-made wines from two above-average vineyards in the same good year,

it is not clear why one wine might be more precise in flavor than the other. There are many

ways in which winemaking could be at fault (overhandling a wine, for example, can

discombobulate it; too much oak could blur its flavors). But it is also well known that

certain vineyards, mostly year in and year out—for reasons immensely complex to fathom

—simply produce precise wines.

COMPLEXITY

Wines fall along a spectrum from simple to complex. Simple wines are monochromatic in

flavor and monodimensional in appeal. They may be delightful, but in a sense they have

only one thing to say.

By comparison, complex wines have multifaceted aromas and flavors—and here’s the

most important part: Those layers of aroma and flavor reveal themselves sequentially over

time. Tasting a complex wine is a head trip. Just when you think you’ve grasped the

flavors, the kaleidoscope turns and new flavors emerge, revealing different facets of the

wine. A complex wine is therefore not knowable in one sip. A complex wine almost pulls

you into it, compelling you to take sip after sip in order to understand it (or at least follow

what’s going on!). I like to think that, as humans, we are somehow hardwired to like

complexity; that the not-knowing-what-is-coming-next quality of a thing is inherently

gravitational.

“There’s volumes to be said for a wine that takes you three glasses to decide

whether you find it compelling or repellent.

”

— EV AN AND BRIAN MITCHELL

The Psychology of Wine

LITTLE RED RIDING HOOD

“One day her mother said to her,

‘Come, Little Red Riding Hood, here is a piece of cake and a bottle of

wine. T ake them to your grandmother, she is ill and weak, and they will do her good.

’”

—

“ROTKÄPPCHEN”

(Little Red Riding Hood, or Little Red-Cap) printed in Kinder und Hausmärchen, a collection of German

fairy tales first published in 1812 by the Brothers Grimm

In 1989 and 1990, two California school districts, in Culver City and Empire, respectively, banned this

version of the tale over concern about the mention of alcohol in the story.

It’s important to note that complex wines don’t have to be powerful, full-bodied wines.

As Jurgen Wagner, the winemaker of Capçanes winery in Spain, once said to me,

“If

someone tells me a wine is fragile, I consider it a good thing. Fragility is complex. I love

introverted wines because, like introverted people, they know they are good; they don’t

have to show off.

”

BEYOND FRUITNESS

The description “fruity” has become such a positive in the past two decades that what I’m

about to suggest may seem surprising, even sacrilegious. But the fact remains: The great

wines of the world are not merely fruity. Fruitiness alone often comes off in a juvenile,

sophomoric way—like wearing an all-pink dress. Great wines go beyond fruit and are

woven through with complicated aromas and flavors—things like tar, bitter espresso,

roasted meats, blood, worn leather, exotic spices, minerals, rocks, wet bark, and dead

leaves, to name a few. These beyond-fruit characteristics give wine an even broader and

deeper sensory impact and make it more intellectually stimulating.

LENGTH

The persistence of a wine on your palate, even after you’ve swallowed, is called its length

or finish. The better the wine, the longer the length. By contrast, the flavor of a common

wine disappears almost as soon as you swallow it. (This can be a blessing.)

In Sensual Geography: Tasting Wine Like a Professional (page 101), I talk about the

method professionals use to get a good sense of the length. But here I simply want to state

the importance of long persistence on the palate as a hallmark of great wines.

As an aside, no one knows why certain wines possess a long finish. Is it a vineyard

characteristic? Something about certain vintages? A quality associated with physiological

states like ripeness? There is no definitive thinking on this.

CHOREOGRAPHY

Since writing the first edition of The Wine Bible (2001), I have thought a lot about this

aspect of great wine. Y et, what I’m about to describe has no agreed-upon language.

Indeed, it’s virtually never addressed in wine books. It’s an added facet that great wine

appears to possess—a kind of fifth dimension. To me, that extra dimension might be

thought of as the choreographic character of a wine—the way its flavors appear to move

physically and spatially. Does the wine appear to “grow” or blossom in the mouth? Does

the wine almost attack the palate with explosive flavors, then crescendo and fade out in a

slow ooze? Does the wine move with broad, sweeping brushstrokes? Or is it precise and

pointillistic, like the tiny dots in certain Impressionist paintings? As my friend the

importer Terry Theise would say, does it feel like Swedish massage or shiatsu?

One thing would appear true: The finest wines are multidimensional on the palate.

There are wavelengths of flavor, force, volume, and velocity. In my experience, when the

fifth dimension of a wine is spellbinding, you’re in the midst of a great wine.

CONNECTEDNESS

Connectedness is perhaps the most elusive of these concepts and the most difficult quality

to ascertain. It is the sense you get from the wine’s aroma and flavor that it is the

embodiment of a particular place. Connectedness is the bond between a wine and the land

it was born in.

Connectedness, like cultural identity, makes a thing different from other things and

therefore worthy of appreciation. It was, for example, innately satisfying when, not so

long ago, Frenchmen still wore berets, when you could find only olive oil (not butter) in

the south of Italy, when Spanish children were given wine-dipped bread sprinkled with

sugar as a snack. Each of these things, small as they were, revealed the links between

people and their cultures and homes. Wine without connectedness to the ground from

which it came may be of good quality but, like a chain hotel in Rome, there is a limit to

how deep one’s aesthetic appreciation of it can be.

Connectedness, though hard to describe, is easy to find. Try a Côte-Rôtie (syrah) from

the northern Rhône, with its almost savage peppery, gamey flavors, or a shimmeringly tart

riesling from the Mosel region of Germany. Neither of these wines could come from

anywhere other than the place it did.

ABILITY TO EVOKE AN EMOTIONAL RESPONSE

This is the final hallmark of greatness and, in many ways, it’s the combined result of

everything I’ve talked about so far. Great wines incite emotion. They stop you in your

tracks. Send chills down your spine. Make you write things like “oh my God” as a tasting

note.

Great wines appeal not only to the intellect; they have the rare power to make us feel.

Throughout its history, wine has always been a communal beverage. Drinking it implies sharing, generosity, and

friendship. There’ s a reason wine is rarely sold in single-serving bottles!

Wine is, of course, more than the sum of its parts. But today all wineries have laboratories to analyze a wine’ s

components.

WHAT MAKES WINE, WINE? THE BUILDING BLOCKS

For all of wine’s complexity, it is born of something utterly simple: a grape. A grape berry

is, by weight, 75 percent pulp, 20 percent skin, and 5 percent seeds (there are usually two

to four of them). Pulp is the soft, juicy center of the grape, and is what will become the

wine. Mostly water and, after that, sugar, the pulp of a ripe grape contains minuscule

amounts of acids, minerals, and pectin compounds, plus a trace of vitamins. It’s the sugar

in the pulp that is crucial to vinification, since it’s the sugar that will be converted to

alcohol. As for the skins, they get to play the sexy part. They’re largely responsible for the

wine’s aroma and flavor, as well as its color and tannin, the compound that makes some

wines feel slightly dry and taste bitter (more on this soon). But a bunch of grapes has a

way to go before it can be called wine. And once it’s transformed, there will be several

components to consider: alcohol, acid, tannin, fruitiness, and dryness and sweetness.

These are the structural building blocks of any wine. Let’s look at each of them.

HANG TIME

Let’s say a grape variety normally takes 120 days to ripen. In an especially hot year, it

may ripen after only 100 days; in a cooler year, after 130 days. Which situation would a

viticulturist prefer? All other things being equal, viticulturists want a long growing

season. Long ripening (a long hang time) allows components in the grape other than

sugar—tannin, for example—to reach greater physiological maturity. Fully developed

grapes, of course, hold more promise for a wine with fully developed flavors.

Historically, perfectly ripe grapes that took a long time getting ripe often produced

superior wines with more complex aromas and flavors. (For complexity, I always

imagine the deep flavor of freshly squeezed orange juice from ripe oranges versus the

shallow flavor of powdered mixes.) There’s one important distinction here. Long hang

time in the pursuit of ripeness (a good thing) is not the same as overripeness (a bad

thing). When a wine has all the charm of prune juice crossed with flat cola, it isn’t pretty.

ALCOHOL

Alcohol is a critical constituent in wine, not because of the genial mood it can evoke

(although that’s surely part of its charm), but rather because of the complex role it plays in

the wine’s structure, and the profound effect it can have on aroma and flavor. Alcohol

occurs in wine as a result of yeasts. During fermentation, a yeast cell takes one sugar

molecule in the grape pulp and turns it into two ethanol (alcohol) molecules. In the

process, two carbon dioxide molecules and some heat are thrown off. (Tiny amounts of a

few byproducts are also created. One of the most important of these is glycerol, which

gives wine a sweetness and may contribute a slightly viscous, mouth-coating texture.) The

more sugar the grapes contain (that is, the riper they are), the higher the alcohol content of

the final wine will be.

How does alcohol manifest itself in the wine? First and most important, alcohol

determines the body of the wine. Quite simply: The more alcohol, the fuller the body.

Thus, high alcohol wines feel weighty on the palate. They are the sensory equivalent of

heavy cream, not skim milk. By comparison, very low-alcohol wines are so light in body

they almost seem weightless (dry German rieslings are a good example).

Alcohol can also influence aroma and flavor. In a wine with very high alcohol, the

aromas of the wine may be masked by the more dominant smell of the alcohol. What we

call alcohol’s aroma is actually more of a nasal burn. Put your nose directly over a bottle

of rubbing alcohol and you’ll probably instinctively and quickly want to turn away. When

a wine has so much alcohol that all you get when you smell it is the burn, the wine is said

to be “hot.

”

As for taste, alcohol can impact wine in two ways that are negative. First, high alcohol

can mask the flavors of the wine, rendering them virtually meaningless because you can’t

taste them anyway. Second, a wine that’s very high in alcohol is a wine that has come

from very ripe grapes. If the grapes are so ripe they border on raisins, the wine can have a

dull,

“overcooked” fruit character. In the worst cases, very high-alcohol wines can come

with flavors that are so mind-numbing and lifeless, one might as well mix grape jam with

vodka and call it a day.

Y ou notice I keep qualifying the alcohol as being “very” high. There is no agreement

on what defines this. Moreover, it’s true that the impression of alcohol may be mitigated

by a significant level of other components—tannin, acidity, and fruit. All of this said, my

sense is that many wine professionals (including me) would argue that once a table wine

exceeds 15 percent alcohol by volume, the chances of it being elegant, being reflective of

its place, and being distinctive, diminish considerably.

Today, ripe grapes the world over are generally picked quickly and put into small, squat boxes so that the weight of the

grapes on top won’ t crush or bruise the fruit underneath.

ACID

As a grape ripens, its acid content decreases from around 3 percent usually to less than 1

percent, and its sugar content increases from 4 percent usually to more than 24 percent.

The challenge is to harvest precisely when an optimal balance between the two is struck,

for acidity is critical to the final balance, flavor, and feel of the wine.

Acidity gives wine liveliness, snappiness, freshness, and, to a certain extent, makes it

thirst quenching. Acidity also “frames” the fruit, and gives the wine a sense of precision

and clarity.

Without a sufficient amount of acidity, a dry wine seems languid, dull, flabby,

amorphous, and flat. A sweet wine that doesn’t have enough acidity will, in addition, taste

overly saccharin and candied. In the end, having just the right amount of acidity is as

pivotal in wine as it is in lemonade (actually more so).

Another concern: Wines that lack acidity do not age well and may be susceptible to

spoilage. The vast majority of California and Australian chardonnays, for example, are not

candidates for long keeping precisely because of their fairly low acidity. In fact, in warm

wine regions where grapes quickly lose their natural acidity, winemakers commonly

“adjust” the acid by adding 2 to 3 grams of tartaric acid per liter (.2 percent to .3 percent)

to the fermenting wine. (Tartaric acid is one of the natural acids in grapes). Small as it is,

this bit of natural acid can help a wine taste more focused.

But there’s more to acidity than just the amount. While we have no good language to

describe acidity in depth, many pros agree that what’s important about acidity is not just

the quantity but the quality of it. For example, German winemakers (acid experts if ever

there were any), distinguish between harsh acidity (the sensory equivalent of shattering

glass), round acidity (harmonious crispness), and candied acidity (the sweet, crystalline

taste of powdered sour candies or drinks like Crystal Light).

One type of acidity, volatile acidity (often called V .A.), is not an inherent part of the

grape, but instead is acetic acid formed by bacteria during or after fermentation. A tiny

amount of volatile acidity is neither harmful nor perceptible. If, however, the bacteria are

exposed to air and allowed to multiply, the resulting volatile acidity will make the wine

smell vinegary and taste somewhat dank and sour. A wine with very noticeable volatile

acidity is considered flawed.

NICE LEGS…

The rivulets of wine that roll down the inside of the glass after a wine has been swirled

are called legs in the United States, Canada, and Britain. The Spanish call them tears;

the Germans, church windows. Some wine drinkers look for great legs, falsely believing

that nicely shaped legs (and who knows what that means?) portend great flavor. In fact,

legs are a complex phenomenon related to the rate at which liquids evaporate and the

difference in surface tension between the wine’s water and alcohol contents. Legs have

nothing to do with greatness.

With wine, as with women, there is very little meaningful information one can deduce

by looking at the legs.

TANNIN

Tannin is among the most intellectually intriguing components in wine. The amount of

tannin, its physiological maturity, and the extent to which it is counterbalanced by other

building blocks can all contribute to (or detract from) a wine’s greatness, structure, and

ageability.

Plants build tannins for protection, preservation, and defense. (Since Neolithic times,

plant tannins have been used to prevent the spoilage of animal skins—when “tanning”

hides into leather, for example). Tannin belongs to a class of complex compounds called

phenols and comes primarily from the grapes’ skins and seeds (stems, too, have tannin, but

stems usually are not used in winemaking). Because red wines are fermented with their

skins, and whites are not, tannin is a consideration primarily with red wines.

To begin with, different varieties of grapes are predisposed to having different amounts

of tannin. Cabernet sauvignon, for example, generally has a lot of tannin; pinot noir has

comparatively little.

What does tannin do for a wine? It provides two things: structure and ageability.

Structure—which, in wine, is difficult to describe—is the sense that the wine has an

underlying “architecture.

” The French sometimes refer to structure as the skeleton or

backbone of the wine. With a well-defined structure, a wine takes on a certain

formidableness and beauty. Structured wines feel impressive on the palate. Tannin is also,

as just noted, a natural preservative. All other things being equal, wines with significant

amounts of tannin live longer than wines without. Look at any collector’s cellar and

you’re likely to see wines like cabernet sauvignon and Bordeaux—wines that have a lot of

tannin and therefore have a good chance of living well into the future.

From a sensory standpoint, tannin has both a taste and a feel. The taste of tannin is

bitterness—good bitterness, like espresso or dark chocolate. The feel of tannin is

astringency or dryness. When tannin in the grapes is physiologically mature or “ripe,

” the

feeling of dryness in the final wine is slight, and the taster simply senses that the wine has

a commanding structure. If, on the other hand, the tannin in the grapes is completely

unripe, the dryness in the wine can be so gripping and harsh it feels like your palate has

been shrink-wrapped. If you’ve ever bitten into an unripe persimmon, you know the

severely drying, puckery feeling of immature tannin.

THE TANNIN TABLE

Below is my view of how various major red grape varieties compare in the amount of tannin they generally

display. Climate, place, and factors such as vine yield, vine age, and winemaking can shift these

relationships a bit. But in general, I think, this is a good guide.

So, what causes tannin to be ripe or unripe? In a word: sun. As grapes become ripe, in

general, the sugar in them builds, the acidity drops, and slowly the tannin matures.

Imagine the ideal situation: Sugar would build just enough to provide ripe (but not

overripe) fruit flavors in the final wine; the acidity would drop but not disappear

(remember, some acidity is essential); and the tannin would evolve from something harsh-

feeling to mellow. Alas, it’s difficult to get this timing down perfectly. Say, for example,

bad weather forces a vintner to pick his grapes before the tannin has had a chance to

mature fully. The wine he makes in this case will certainly be drinkable—even, perhaps,

enjoyable. But it will definitely have a rough grip to it. The vinous equivalent of Clint

Eastwood with a five-o’clock shadow.

THE CLINT EASTWOOD FIVE-O’CLOCK-SHADOW EFFECT

Why does tannin sometimes come across with such grip? Why is it sometimes so drying? Short of an

organic chemistry course, here’s what’s happening. T annin molecules in wine are hugely attracted to the

protein in saliva (of which there is a copious amount). In effect, it’s not that tannin itself is drying. It’s that

saliva, bound up by tannin molecules, can no longer lubricate the palate, and as result, your mouth

tissues rub against one another, causing your palate to feel dry. At this point, the story gets complex, and

chemists aren’t sure what happens to tannins to cause some of them to glide over the palate (causing

you to perhaps describe the wine as “silky”). Do tannin molecules get longer and slip more easily across

the palate? Until recently, scientists thought so. But new research describes tannin as complex structures

that form, re-form, and combine with all manner of other molecules, sometimes with soft, tactile results.

In the end, no one is sure why some wines come across as Clint Eastwood with a five o’clock shadow.

Critical as ripe tannin is to the final texture of the wine, you’d think there would be a

hightech way to test grapes to see if the tannin is ripe. There isn’t. The only device that

exists is the oldest tool of all: one’s senses. Watch a winemaker as harvest approaches, and

if that winemaker makes red wine, it’s a sure bet he walks the vineyards constantly, tasting

hundreds of grape berries and squeezing them open to look at the seeds. The seeds turn a

nutty brown as the tannin ripens. But most important, he’s tasting for that moment when

the feel of the grape skins changes, when the tannin switches from unripe to ripe.

For any good taster, then, there are two dimensions to consider when thinking about

tannin in a wine. First, how much tannin does one perceive? Second, what is the quality,

or ripeness, of that tannin?

Finally, the perception of tannin can be changed by food. In other words, to some

extent tannin can be “solved” by a lamb chop. For more thoughts on this, see Marrying

Well: Wine and Food, page 115.

FRUITINESS

As the word suggests, fruitiness is simply the propensity of a wine to display ripe, fruitlike

aromas and flavors. Fruitiness is most marked in young wines and is rarely found in

mature ones. Some varieties—gewürztraminer and gamay, for example—are

characteristically very fruity. Gewürztraminer, a white wine made notably in the Alsace

region of France, has effusive lychee aromas and flavors; drinking gamay (the red grape of

Beaujolais) is like diving into a pool of black cherries. Fruitiness is often confused with

sweetness, but the two are distinctly different.

HOW SWEET IT IS (OR ISN’T)

Amazingly, there is no international, or even national, consensus on the meaning of terms like dry, off-dry,

medium dry, medium sweet, semisweet, and so on. In 2002, the European Union did legislate the

definition of some of these terms. But the definitions depend on the wines’ acidity levels. So, for example,

a “dry” European wine cannot have any more than .4 percent residual sugar, unless that wine has

“suitable acidity,

” in which case it can have up to .9 percent residual sugar and still be considered dry.

From a taste perception standpoint, this does make sense; but it also makes it next to impossible to

grasp where one term ends and another begins. In the United States and much of the New World,

producers decide for themselves what terms to use and what those terms mean. The only simple

guideline in the U.S. (and it’s not law) is suggested by the Sweet and Fortified Wine Association. Here

are their definitions:

DRY: Less than .5 percent residual sugar

OFF-DRY: .5 percent to 1.9 percent residual sugar

SEMISWEET : 2 percent to 6 percent residual sugar

SWEET : More than 6 percent residual sugar

Note that if these definitions were legally adopted in the United States, most chardonnays would

probably need to be labeled “off-dry.

”

DRYNESS AND SWEETNESS

Dryness is a funny word to apply to wine, which, after all, is wet. But in the world of

wine, dry means that the wine has no more natural grape sugar that could be converted

into alcohol during fermentation. (Don’t confuse the term dry here with the idea of a wine

displaying a drying or astringent sensation as a result of tannin.) If a wine has any natural

grape sugar left—that is, if some of the sugar was not converted to alcohol during

fermentation—then the wine is said to have residual sugar. Importantly, a little bit of

residual sugar does not necessarily make the wine as sweet as dessert wine. In fact, most

of us would not be able to detect a small amount of residual sugar in wine. A lot of so-

called “dry” California chardonnays, for example, actually have a little residual sugar to

make them taste mellow. Ironically, of course, many people swear they like only dry wines

(even while happily drinking one of those chardonnays). In fact, the presence of sweetness

in beverages appears to be uniquely a wine problem. After all, no one says,

“I don’t want

any sweetness in my Coke.

” (Colas, by the way, clock in at about 11 percent residual

sugar; most wines that you’d have with dinner would be 0 to perhaps 2 percent residual

sugar.)

In the “quiet” winter months after the harvest, wineries are busy analyzing and repeatedly tasting the different lots of

wine that they’ve fermented. Preliminary blends—often many dozens of them—will be painstakingly made.

Colas, by the way, clock in at about 11 percent residual sugar; most wines that

you’d have with dinner would be 0 to perhaps 2 percent residual sugar.

In order to be considered a sweet wine (not a dinner wine), a wine has to have quite a

lot of residual sugar. According to European Union legislation, for example, a wine

labeled sweet must have at least 4.5 percent residual sugar. Most of Europe’s great sweet

wines, however, have considerably more than that. Port, for example, generally has

approximately 8 percent residual sugar; Sauternes, 10 to 15 percent; German

trockenbeerenauslesen (TBAs), as much as 30 percent; and some of Spain’s fabled,

opulent Pedro Ximénezes have over 40 percent residual sugar.

There are also several notable styles of wine where a tiny bit of sweetness is critical to

balance the poignancy of the wine’s acidity. This is true, for example, with Champagne,

some German rieslings, and some French V ouvrays (chenin blanc). With these wines, a

little sweetness is used to counterbalance the wines’ soaringly high acidity. By way of an

analogy, think about a really bitter espresso. A quarter teaspoon of sugar in the espresso

would not make the espresso sweet. But it would mollify the edges of the bitterness.

Sweetness, then, can either be a goal, as in dessert wines, or it can be a counterpoint,

something used in small amounts to create overall balance and harmony.

Whether their farming approach is high-tech or traditional (as with Alta Vista’ s malbec vineyard in Mendoza, Argentina,

above), all vintners work within the demands of a vineyard’ s microclimate and soils. Here, the canopy of leaves helps

shade the grapes from too much heat and potential sunburn.

WHERE IT ALL BEGINS

In the drama of wine, the land itself is a character—rough and brutal sometimes, but also

tender and, ultimately, fragile. The wine that comes from it in any given year will never

exist again. How is it that the land gives us this continual gift? It is an unanswerable

question, for in a literal sense, great wine is not made, but rather revealed and released

from the land. I often think of the story of Michelangelo’s Pietà, depicting the Madonna

holding her crucified son in her arms. When asked how he could sculpt such divine

beauty, Michelangelo is said to have replied that he did not make it; he freed it from the

block of stone.

Great wines don’t come from just anywhere. The Earth has her own vinous erogenous

zones—a few places of harmonic convergence, where every facet of the vineyard and

every nuance of the grape fit together like chromosomes on a DNA helix. In these rare

places, grapes and ground are transformed into thrilling wine. Indeed, it is grapes’ ability

to reflect the character of the place where they were grown that separates wine from beer

and spirits. Wheat and potatoes do not give “voice” to their environments. But grapes do.

Vit, the Latin root of the word viticulture, is also the source of vita—life itself.

The last three decades of the twentieth century were a time when sweeping

advancements in winemaking commanded much of the wine world’s attention. And

rightfully so. With new technologies and scientifically trained winemakers, entire

countries—Portugal, Spain, Argentina—were lifted out of what might be called “peasant

winemaking.

” Others, such as New Zealand, sprang, already sophisticated, onto the scene.

But if technology has sometimes seemed more sexy than dirt, it is only because in the

history of wine, dirt has been a comfortable constant, while technologies are fascinatingly

new.

TERROIR

The French word terroir has no single-word equivalent in English. Historically, terroir

has been defined as the sum of every environmental force affecting a given vineyard

site. Soil, slope, orientation to the sun, and elevation are all part of a vineyard’s terroir,

as is every nuance of climate, including rainfall, wind velocity, frequency of fog,

cumulative hours of sunshine, average high and low temperatures, and so forth. The

late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have been a time of profound discussion

about the importance of terroir versus winemaking. Is a wine great because of natural

forces that have come together in near Platonic perfection? Or must all great wines be

“realized” by the skilled hand of a winemaker? Can human intervention itself—from the

way the grapes are farmed to the way the wine is aged—be considered part of terroir?

Indeed, does terroir even exist? “It’s the question of our time—the enological equivalent

of ‘Is God dead?’” says Randall Grahm, proprietor and winemaker of Bonny Doon

Vineyard in California.

As the twenty-first century emerged, however, the picture in the foreground was

already changing. The ancient idea that “wine is made in the vineyard” began once again

to take prominence. In the New World especially, it seemed as if wineries were going back

to the future. For the first time in modern memory, the person who grew the grapes was

given as much credit for the wine as the person who made it.

“What single cloudless day, what soft late rainfall decides that a vintage shall

be great among the others? Human care can do almost nothing towards it. It is

all celestial wizardry, the orbits of planets, sunspots.…

”

—COLETTE,

Prisons et Paradis

In this chapter, we’ll consider wine from the perspective of viticulture, the science of

grape growing. Although a vineyard may appear passive and pastoral to the casual

observer, to the viticulturist it is a powerful, animate ecosphere full of complexities.

Independently and synergistically, such factors as climate, soil, grape variety and clone,

rootstock, spacing, and many others push and pull wine in different directions. Like the

colors in a kaleidoscope, these elements are swirled together in thousands of intricate,

unique patterns, profoundly influencing the aroma, flavor, body, and finish of a wine. It’s

these nuances of individuality that viticulture celebrates. In the end, fine wines are

compelling not because they are the same, but because they are different.

CLIMATE

Nature influences wine quality conspicuously and dauntlessly through climate. For

starters, climate determines whether grapes can exist at all. Grapevines thrive in temperate

regions where long, warm, frost-free periods allow them to develop. Specifically, vines

begin to grow when the ambient temperature reaches about 50°F (the precise temperature

varies from one grape variety to another). Below 50°F (10°C), the vines remain dormant.

When the average daily temperature reaches 63°F to 68°F (17°C to 20°C), vines will bud

and then flower. Flowering is critical, for only those flowers that become pollinated and

“set” on the cluster become individual grape berries. As crucial as it is, set is an extremely

fragile phenomenon. Even under favorable climatic conditions, up to 85 percent of a

vine’s flowers never set at all and are destined to die as “shatter.

” As the temperature

moves into the mid-80s, (28°C to 30°C) vines hit their growth stride and flourish.

Flowering, as it is known, is that fragile time in spring when grape clusters pollinate themselves. Every fertilized flower

will become a grape.

If you narrow your field of vision, you find “climates” within climates, created by such

factors as the proximity of oceans and bays; the presence of hills and mountains; the slope,

orientation, and altitude of the vineyard; plus wind, cloudiness, and precipitation.

In fact, while we use the general term climate to describe most situations, viticulturists

distinguish between macroclimate, mesoclimate, and microclimate. Macroclimate (often

just called climate) is the weather patterns of a general area over a long period of time,

usually the average of thirty years or more. Mesoclimate, the climate of a small area, is

caused by local variations in topography and vegetation, as well as by human actions.

Mesoclimates are found over lakes and in big cities. Vineyards often have unique

mesoclimates. Far smaller in scale is a microclimate, or the climate in which a vine exists.

A microclimate is defined as that area around a vine that extends 6 feet (2 meters) above

the ground and about 3 feet (1 meter) into the soil, below the ground.

Climates can be counterintuitive. Take, as an example, the Napa V alley—a small wine

region and yet one that has multiple distinct temperature zones. Calistoga—the warmest

part of the Napa V alley—is, surprisingly, the farthest north. Carneros—as much as 30°F

(17°C) cooler than Calistoga—is nonetheless the farthest south. Another even more

dramatic reversal of the expected: Several of the wine regions in Santa Barbara County,

nearly 300 miles (483 kilometers) to the south of Napa, are some of the coolest in

California. In both of these cases, proximity to the ocean matters more than latitude when

it comes to climate. Santa Barbara’s wine regions, for example, are east-west-running

valleys that form virtual wind tunnels for bracing breezes and fog drawn in off the Pacific

Ocean.

A YEAR AS A GRAPE

During the course of a single year, grapes and vines go through several important stages. The life cycle begins in

the spring, around April 1 in the northern hemisphere (the dates are six months later in the southern hemisphere),

when new shoots—small, green, feathery branches—emerge from dormant buds on the vine. This is called bud

break. As May arrives, the shoots lengthen and tiny flowers appear which “set,

” that is, pollinate themselves

(helpfully, cultivated grapevines are hermaphroditic). The pollinated flowers grow into tiny berries that stay green

and hard until midsummer. In July, the berries begin to soften, swell, and change color (called veraison). The skins

of white varieties will turn shades of yellow, gray, and light pink; red varieties will turn purple and some will appear

almost blue-black. Come fall—usually September through October—the grapes will be harvested. Finally, in

November and December, the vine loses its leaves and goes into dormancy until the following spring when the

cycle will begin anew.

Ironically, bodies of water can have a cooling effect or a warming effect, or both, at

different times. Water tempers and stabilizes the climate. A marine breeze can cool down a

hot vineyard, but it can also warm a vineyard where temperatures are dropping and frost

threatens.

One of the most intriguing aspects of any wine region’s climate is the impact hillsides

and mountains can have and how that subsequently affects the ripeness of the grapes. A

mountain’s creased face contains crevices, caverns, and canyons that become nichelike

mesoclimates on their own. Mountains can block cold winds, acting as shields behind

which grapes can mature. They can also impede ripeness, acting as huge slides that cause

frost and cold air to pool in vineyards on the valley floor. If high enough, mountains also

force clouds to give up their moisture as frequent rain on one side, while the other side

basks in the sun. A perfect example of this is found in Washington State, where the

Cascade mountain range causes the western part of the state near Seattle to be extremely

overcast and rainy, while in the eastern part, grapes—with the help of irrigation—thrive in

sunny, near desert conditions. Mountains also offer the possibility of different vineyard

altitudes. A vineyard at 2,500 feet (762 meters) will generally (but not always) be cooler

overall than one at 500 feet (152 meters) on the same mountain. Not surprisingly, the

wines will usually be strikingly different.

The old zinfandel vines of the Napa V alley have never grown on trellises. Their stark, twisted trunks are especially

striking in spring when all around them grow stems of vivid yellow wild mustard.

For every winery in the world, the most important decision of the year is when to pick. Once the decision is made, crews

work relentlessly and quickly to harvest the grapes at optimal ripeness.

In general, in very cool regions like northern Germany, the most prized vineyards are

always on mountainsides, since slopes angled precisely southward act like huge solar

panels catching every ray of the sun. (In the southern hemisphere, cold-climate vineyards

face north.) Sometimes even the name of a vineyard reveals this importance. On the cool

alpine foothills of Piedmont, Italy, famous vineyards often contain the words bricco or

sorì, as in the Bricco Asili vineyard of the producer Ceretto or the Sorì Tildìn vineyard of

Angelo Gaja. A bricco is the sun-catching crest of a hill; sorì in Piedmontese dialect

means a south-facing slope where the sun melts the snow first.

Alas, sun can be a double-edged sword. In some wine regions, too little sun is not the

problem—too much is. Intense sun can cause grapes to lose considerable acidity through

respiration, leading to flat, flabby wine, or cause hyperactive leaf growth, which shades

the grapes and may lead to vegetal and other off flavors in the wine. As heat becomes

excessive, unprotected grapes begin to scorch and their leaves wither and burn. At about

104°F (40°C), sustained heat becomes intolerable for most grapevines, and the grapes start

to shrivel into raisins. Thus, wine producers in hot, sunny climates often face hurdles that

are the complete opposite of those faced by wine producers in cooler climates.

But no matter where they are located, viticulturists are trying to find balance in the

vineyard, in much the same way that a wine-maker aims for balance in a wine. When this

is achieved, the vines reach a healthy medium between what viticulturists call vigor

(growth of leaves and shoots), and fruitfulness (number of grape clusters and size of

grapes).

Finally, the biggest current concern regarding the impact of climate on viticulture is the

issue of climate change. It is fair to say that winemakers nearly the world over name

climate change as a major—if not the major—worry facing wine regions today. The

effects of climate change on viticulture can already be felt in many parts of the world,

including Spain, where new plantings are focused on high-heat-tolerant varieties, and

Germany, where a decade of warm temperatures has led winemakers to experiment with

warm-loving red varieties as well as cold-tolerant varieties such as riesling. What climate

change ultimately means for wine regions around the world is not fully known, but some

of those regions are taking an active approach to the issue. The Napa V alley vintners, for

example, employ climate scientists from the Scripps Institute to conduct research and

collect data on the effect of climate change on viticulture within the valley.

THE BANE OF RAIN AND THE HELL OF HAIL

Rain, especially just before or during harvest, is dreaded throughout the wine world.

Why? Absorbed quickly through the roots, rainwater can bloat the grapes, diluting their

flavors. Severe rain can actually tear open grapes or even break off the bunches,

destroying the crop. If the rain is followed by warm temperatures, high humidity, and no

wind, rot or mildew can easily take hold. Finally, trying to pick grapes when the vineyard

is a foot deep in mud is no picnic. Hail is even worse. Defined as large, irregular clumps

of icy frozen water (sometimes as large as golf balls), hail can occur as part of a

thunderstorm and wreak devastating damage. A hail storm in 2013 that swept through

Bordeaux, Burgundy, and Champagne (in each region it lasted no longer than ten

minutes) turned hundreds of acres of vineyard into wasteland. The damage in

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million euros.

STRESS

One of the few monodimensional rules is one of wine’s wonderful curiosities. In making

fine wine, what is ideal is not a perfect environment but, rather, something less than

consummate. A perfectly sunny, hot climate augmented by moisture and fertile soils with

ample nutrients may be good for many plants (as jungles testify), but is usually too much

for grapevines. All of the world’s great vineyards are in places that are in some way

marginal. Assuming that the stress (from lack of sun, water, and/or nutrients) is not so

severe that the vines shut down, go into shock, or die, an endurable amount of adversity

forces grapevines to struggle, adapt, and put their energy into their reproductive system to

ensure survival. The essential element of a vine’s reproductive system is, of course, its

grapes. When healthy vines are forced to concentrate their sugars in a limited number of

grape clusters, the result is grapes and wine of greater character and concentration.

TEMPERATURE SWINGS

Many winegrowers believe that good stress can come in the form of wide temperature

fluctuations, either from spring to fall or from day to night or both. Temperature swings

can help create balance.

The difference between average daytime and average nighttime temperatures is called

diurnal temperature fluctuation. For example, wine regions that are extremely hot during

the day, like Ribera del Duero, on the north-central plains of Spain, benefit from nights

that can be as much as 40°F (22°C) cooler, effectively shutting down the ripening process

and helping grapes to preserve essential acidity. By delaying ripening, cool nights also

extend the span of time from bud break to harvest, leading to better total physiological

maturity.

As for seasonal change, grapevines don’t like ambiguity. Vines need definitive

temperature cues so that bud break and grape development and maturation proceed

steadily and uniformly, ensuring (all other things being equal) a good harvest. V ery warm

winters can awaken vines. With nutrients being pumped into their shoots, vines soon

become confused and begin to bud in the wrong season. Uneven or untimely budding can

wreak havoc on a vineyard, creating a patchwork quilt of mixed-up vines, all maturing at

different rates and times. A definitively cold winter, followed by its opposite, a

definitively warm spring and summer, is the optimal viticultural scenario.

ROCK GROUP

Grapevines are impacted not only by the soils they grow in, but also by the type of rock that may be

present. The basic rock forms are:

SEDIMENTARY ROCK: It includes arenaceous (e.g., sandstone), argillaceous (e.g., clay), calcareous

(e.g., limestone), carbonaceous (e.g., peat, lignite, or coal), and siliceous (e.g., quartz).

IGNEOUS ROCK: Formed from molten or partially molten material, most igneous rocks are crystalline.

METAMORPHIC: Sedimentary or igneous rock that has been transformed by heat or pressure.

Examples of metamorphic rock include marble and slate.

W ATER AND FROST

Like sunlight, the water that vines receive must be part of an overall balanced

environment. There is no optimal amount. How much water vines need (and when they

need it) depends on a number of factors, including the age and size of the vines, the length

of the growing season, the temperatures during the growing season, wind, humidity, the

drainage and water-holding capacity of the soil, and the spacing of the vines, to name a

few.

Vines are not arbitrary in the way they grow; they search for water. Well-drained soils

encourage the roots to burrow deeper into the earth, where they find a more stable

environment of moisture and nutrients. Vines with fully developed root systems can

handle drought or other climatic difficulties better.

In the world’s generally dry wine regions—including parts of California, Washington

State, Australia, Chile, Spain, and Portugal—lack of rainfall can be exacerbated by long,

droughtlike summers. In the New World, these wine growing regions generally allow

irrigation, although increasing limitations on water resources are destined to make

viticulture more difficult in these places.

In most of Europe, irrigation is forbidden (under severe vintage circumstances,

restrictions are sometimes temporarily lifted). In Europe, natural rainfall and moisture is

often sufficient to grow healthy vines. Prohibiting irrigation is seen as a way of ensuring

quality, since vines given excess water can produce swollen grapes with diluted flavors.

This “dilution effect” is also, of course, one of the reasons winemakers fear too much rain.

Not surprisingly, timing is everything. In the spring, right before flowering, vines need

some water to jump-start growth. Without water at this critical moment, the flowers will

not set properly—and therefore will not create grape berries. Water is also critical during

veraison, that time in summer when the grapes begin to change color. A lack of water then

can lead to excessively small grapes that never achieve maturity.

One form of water—frost—is unconditionally a threat to grapes and grapevines. Spring

frosts may kill buds and shoots and thus destroy the potential for a crop. Early fall frosts

can destroy entire swaths of vineyards, or ravage foliage enough that ripening is impeded,

resulting in weakly flavored wines. Even in winter, when the vine is dormant, an excessive

cold snap can be ruinous. Below 25°F (-4°C), the vine’s trunk may split, leaving it open to

infection. After prolonged below-freezing temperatures, the entire vine and root system

can die.

In the mountainous Priorat region of northeastern Spain, old, low-yielding carignan vines are almost entirely covered by

snow in winter . With their deep roots and sturdy trunks, old vines are generally able to withstand extremely cold

temperatures.

The methods used to counter frost are often desperate and generally expensive, but

vintners have no choice; the financial repercussions of losing an entire year’s crop are too

severe. Giant windmill-like frost protectors are fixtures in many cold areas. These help stir

up the warm air hovering above the vineyard and mix it with the colder air that has settled

like a thick blanket under the vines. A more expensive takeoff on the windmill idea is to

hire helicopters to fly low over the vineyards, zigzagging back and forth until the threat of

frost has passed. And finally, there’s a solution that seems crazy, but works: spraying the

vines with water, using overhead sprinklers. The water coats the leaves, shoots, and buds,

forming a thin glove of ice that insulates the vines from windchill and traps the plant’s

natural heat. That incremental amount of insulation, coupled with the tiny amount of heat

thrown off when water turns to ice, is enough to keep the leaves, shoots, and buds from

freezing unless it gets significantly colder.

WIND

On the Aegean Islands of Greece—one of the most windswept wine regions of the world

—not even the mostly-impervious-to-everything olive tree can grow. Vines survive only

because they are trained in a circular manner so close to the ground that they look like

large doughnuts, with the grapes crouching even lower in the center hole. Each vine is

called a stefáni (crown); it will grow that way for twenty years, after which time the trunk

becomes strong enough to withstand the whipping wind, and the vine can be trained

somewhat more upright.

Most wine regions are not subject to such gales, but wind still torments grapevines in

many parts of the world. Although a gentle breeze is almost always good (it cools the

grapes and promotes air circulation as a guard against rot), a slashing wind is another

story. Right after flowering, a severe wind can prevent flowers from setting properly,

scattering them in the air so that they never fertilize and become grapes. Bludgeoning

wind can break off tender parts of the vines, damage the canes, bruise the leaves, and even

rip away the fruit. Lastly, a harsh wind may cause the vine to close its stomata,

microscopic holes in the undersides of the leaves that are responsible for evaporation.

With the stomata closed, the vine ceases to draw water through its root tips. Eventually, all

growth comes to a halt.

The Soils to Know

Exactly how a wine’s flavors are influenced by the type of soil the grapes are grown in remains one of wine’s

central mysteries. Y et, for the past millennium, winemakers everywhere have considered soil a critical factor in the

character of any given wine. Soil not only retains heat (or not), reflects sunlight (or not), and holds nutrients for the

vines, soil also importantly influences water drainage. A good soil must retain enough water to steadily supply the

vine, but not so much water that the roots become saturated. Below you’ll find basic descriptions of some of the

main types of soil that vines are known to live in (and often thrive in).

ALLUVIAL SOIL Fertile soil that has been transported down a slope, usually by a river or stream. At the

bottom of the slope, alluvial soil usually forms a fan that contains gravel, sand, and silt. Alluvial soils are

found, for example, in the Napa Valley, especially near the area of western Oakville at the foot of the

Mayacamas Mountains.

BASALT Cooled lava from volcanic rock that is high in calcium, iron, and magnesium. Very evident in the

Willamette Valley of Oregon, to name one place.

CALCAREOUS SOIL Alkaline soil with high levels of calcium and magnesium carbonate. Often

calcareous soils are “cool,

” which means they retain water and delay ripening, thereby leading to more

acidic wines.

CHALK Very porous, soft limestone soil that vine roots can easily penetrate. A classic soil in

Champagne, France, among other places.

CLAY Sedimentary rock–based soil that has good water retention ability but poor drainage. The soil is

often very “cool” and high in acidity. The Right Bank of Bordeaux is dominated by clay-based soils.

FLINT Siliceous stone (sedimentary rocks that contain silica from silica-secreting organisms such as

diatoms and some types of sea sponges) that reflects sun and heat well. The Pouilly-Fumé wines of the

Loire Valley are generally produced from flint-based soils.

GALESTRO Schist-based soil found in the Tuscany region of Italy.

GNEISS A coarse-grained form of granite.

GRANITE A hard, mineral-rich soil that is composed of 40 percent to 60 percent quartz. The soil warms

quickly and retains heat well. Thus, granite soils are ideal with acidic grapes like gamay. Granite is found

in Beaujolais, as well as in the Cornas region of the northern Rhône Valley.

GRAVEL Soil that is loose and pebbly and has good drainage and poor fertility. Vines planted in this type

of soil must penetrate deeply to find nutrients in the subsoil. The Graves and Sauternes regions of

Bordeaux consist predominantly of gravel-based soil.

GREYWACKE Sedimentary soil formed by rivers depositing quartz, mudstone, and feldspar. It is found in

vineyards of Germany, New Zealand, and South Africa.

HARDPAN A dense layer of clay or other material that is impermeable to water. In some areas of

Bordeaux, a sandy, iron-rich layer is located deep enough below the surface to act as the bottom of a

water table for the vines.

LIMESTONE A wide range of sedimentary-based soils consisting of calcium carbonates, many of which

are formed from the skeletal fragments of marine organisms. Limestone is consistently alkaline and is

generally planted with grapes of high acidity levels. This is a main soil type in Burgundy, Champagne,

and several parts of the Loire Valley. Because limestone is a remnant of some ancient seabeds, certain

islands (including the Florida Keys) are made from limestone.

LLICORELLA A soil type found in the Priorat appellation of Spain. The soil is a mix of slate and quartz

that is very porous and drains well.

LOAM Warm, soft, fertile soil composed of roughly equal amounts of silt, sand, and clay. It is typically too

fertile for high-quality wines.

LOESS very fine, silt-based soil composed of wind-borne sediment that is typically angular and

decalcified. The soil has good water retention and warming properties. Loess is a common soil type in

top Austrian and Washington State vineyards.

MARL Calcareous clay–based soil that is “cool” and thus delays ripening, resulting in wines with

prominent acidity. Marl is typically deep and lacking in stone fragments; it is the main soil type in the

Piedmont wine region of Italy.

QUARTZ A common material found in sand-and silt-based soils. The high soil pH of quartz can reduce

the acidity of the resulting wines. But quartz also stores heat, so it can increase ripening of the grapes.

Quartz is very notable in the vineyards of the lower Nahe in Germany, where the wines have stone-fruit

and wet stone flavors.

SAND Warm, airy soil that is composed of tiny particles of weathered rocks. One of the few soils that the

insect phylloxera does not thrive in (see page 30). The soil drains well but does not have good water

retention. Sand is a main component in the soils of California’s south central coast near Santa Barbara.

Sandstone is a sedimentary soil composed of sand particles that has been pressure-bound by various

iron-based minerals.

SCHIST Laminated, crystalline rock–based soil that retains heat well and is rich in magnesium and

potassium, but is poor in organic nutrients and nitrogen. The upper slopes of Alsace’s Andlau region are

planted on schist-based soils.

SHALE Fine-grain sedimentary-based soil that can turn into slate when under geologic pressure. The

soil is moderately fertile and retains heat well. New York State’s Finger Lakes region boasts shale-rich

soil, brought by glacial deposits hundreds of thousands of years ago.

SILEX A flint- and sand-based soil type, found primarily in the Loire Valley, that is formed from a mixture

of clay, limestone, and silica.

SILT Soil type consisting of fine-grain deposits that offer good water retention but poor drainage. It is

more fertile than sand.

SLATE The most common soil type of the Mosel region of Germany. Slate is a metamorphic, platelike

rock formed when shale, clay, or silt-stone is subjected to pressure deep within the earth. The soil retains

heat well and warms up relatively quickly.

TERRA ROSSA A sedimentary soil, known as “red earth,

” that is formed after carbonates have been

leached out of limestone. The breakdown leaves behind iron deposits that oxidize and turn the soil a

rustic red color. This soil type is found in some areas along the Mediterranean and in Coonawarra,

Australia.

TUFA A highly friable calcareous soil created from exploding volcanic rock flung into the air. Common in

the Loire Valley of France.

VOLCANIC Soil that is derived from one of two volcanic activities. 1) Vent-based volcanic soil is formed

from rock material or molten globules that have been ejected at high velocity into the air and then have

cooled before settling to the earth (such as tufa). 2) Lava-based volcanic soil is the product of molten

lava flows from a volcano. Ninety percent of lava-based soil is basalt.

For a more extensive list of soils in which grapevines grow, I recommend T om Stevenson’s excellent New

Sotheby’s Wine Encyclopedia.

WHERE WERE THE WORLD’S FIRST WINE GRAPES

GROWN?

Turkey may not have as much cachet as Bordeaux, but Anatolia, in southern Turkey, is in effect the

world’s first wine appellation, according to research conducted by Swiss grape geneticist Dr. José

Vouillamoz, of the University of Neuchâtel in Switzerland, and Dr. Patrick McGovern, scientific director of

the Biomolecular Archaeology Laboratory at the University of Pennsylvania Museum in Philadelphia. The

teams’ research, published in 2012, indicates that people in Anatolia—part of the historic Fertile Crescent

—grew and harvested grapevines to make wine as long ago as 8000 B.C., and possibly before.

Vouillamoz and McGovern unearthed the origin of domesticated wine grapes by comparing the DNA

sequences of cultivated grapevines with the DNA sequences of wild grapevines all over the world. The

greatest similarities between the two were found in wild grapevines growing in Anatolia, although areas

of Iran, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan also tell tales of early domestication and wine drinking. Clay

jars used to store and age wine have been found in all of these areas, some dating to 5400 B.C.

Wild grapevines were abundant in Anatolia around the same time that Stone Age farmers settled into

villages and domesticated wild grains. Vouillamoz and McGovern hypothesize that the Anatolians

collected the berries from the vines they found growing freely along the ground and high up into trees.

When it was discovered that the fermented juice of these wild grapes was delicious (not to mention

euphorically mind-altering), the farmers appear to have begun planting wild grapevines alongside their

grains. T en thousand years later, the wines you sip are made from distant descendants of these early

vines.

One of the fascinating facts revealed by the research is that many popular grape varieties, all from the

grape species Vitis vinifera, are more closely related than previously thought. For example, dense,

peppery syrah is the unexpected great-grandchild of subtle, delicate pinot noir. Pinot (responsible for

pinot noir, pinot blanc, and pinot gris grapes) is closely related to the French grape savagnin, but so far

no one can tell which grape descended from the other. And although it makes only a neutral-tasting

quaffing wine, gouais blanc, the surprising Casanova of wine grapes, is the parent of more than eighty

other grape varieties, including chardonnay, riesling, and gamay.

SOIL

The ground has always been seductive—the smell of it, the feel of it, the sight of it, and

certainly the possession of it. The history of civilization is in large part a running

commentary on man’s relationship to the land. Soil’s allure is very evident in the world of

wine. There is something strangely beautiful about the white chalk of Champagne, the

legacy of ancient seabeds and sea fossils; or the jet-black, pitted stones of Santorini in

Greece, the relics of a massive volcanic explosion; or the cool, blue-gray slate shards of

the Mosel in Germany, remnants of the path of glaciers. Remarkably, vines grow

contentedly in all of these.

Soil is undeniably seductive. For thousands of years, it has also been the intellectual assumption behind a wine’ s

character—that is, the notion that a given wine tastes the way it does because of the soil it was born in.

Soil is defined as the naturally occurring loose particles that cover the Earth’s surface.

Soil is composed of tiny bits of broken rock, the pore spaces of air between them, water,

minerals, and organic matter. There are five main factors in the creation of soil: parent

material, climate, topography, biota, and time.

Scientists classify soil into six categories. The broadest category are soil orders, and

there are twelve in the world (interestingly, in the small Napa V alley, six of the world’s

twelve soil orders can be found). From orders, soils are more and more finely categorized.

Ultimately, the most specific classification is called a soil series. In the U.S., for one

example, there are some seventeen thousand soil series, each marked by a unique set of

characteristics based on the arrangement of the soil’s layers, its color, texture, structure,

consistency, and chemical and mineralogical properties.

As far as grapevines are concerned, one of the important factors of any soil is the size

of the soil’s particles. Larger particles such as sand (relatively loose, large grains of

weathered rock) can be important for good drainage. But smaller particles such as silt and

clay are also important, for these may help hold just enough water to support the vine’s

growth. Other particles, such as rocks and organic matter, also help create the delicate

balance of water drainage versus water retention. In addition, rocks and organic matter

aerate the soil and contribute minerals and nutrients.

Most viticulturalists today believe that the most important soil characteristic is its

capacity to drain water. Nothing could seem less exciting, yet good drainage is critical in

viticulture, ensuring that vines push their roots deep into the ground (sometimes 20 feet/6

meters or more) to find a stable source of water and nutrients.

The geologic formation of the land is another important element in drainage. Limestone

and schist have large vertical planes sliced by fissures—perfect for vine roots tunneling in

search of water. Conversely, dense subsoil or some sort of impenetrable horizontal

formation may cause the roots to remain closer to the surface, where they can soak up

water in heavy rains, or more easily suffer from drought.

In the remarkable vineyards of Châteauneuf-du-Pape, the “soil” is composed of large round rocks deposited over

millennia by the receding Rhône River . Barely a speck of dirt can be seen.

One of the most important—if curious—aspects of soil is its color and ability to reflect

sunlight or absorb heat. In the cool, northern region of Champagne, vines are trained low

so that the ripening grapes can take advantage of the warm sun bouncing off the white,

chalky ground. (At one time the thrifty Champenois used to accentuate this phenomenon

by scattering bits of white plastic garbage bags in the vineyards which, despite the PR

drawbacks, did reflect the sun.) In equally cool Germany, dark gray and blue slate rocks

help hold the sun’s heat, even after the sunlight is beginning to retreat.

The big question, of course, concerns flavor. Taste two pinot noirs from the same small

Burgundian domaine, for example, and it would seem almost self-evident that soil

profoundly affects flavor. The two wines were made from the same variety, by the same

person, using the same process and the same minimal equipment. The wines have been

aged and stored identically, and yet they taste remarkably different. How else can one

account for so intriguing a phenomenon except through the mysteries of soil?

Y et, while soil is undoubtedly the soul of wine, there is no absolute correlation between

certain soil types and specific wine flavors. (At least not that we yet know of.) A vineyard

with, say, granite soils, does not have a predictive flavor effect because of those soils.

Moreover, while it’s tempting to think of the soil as a kind of underground spice shop in

which a vine can literally root around for flavors, that’s not how a vine works. The roots of

grapevines can suck up only molecules, ions, and some available forms of minerals. These

compounds are then metabolized for vine and grape growth. How soils “work” is, in the

end, one of wine’s greatest unanswered questions. I can’t resist the pun of saying: We’ve

only just begun to scratch the surface.

MATCHING GRAPES TO GROUND

However omnipotent climate and soil may seem, they cannot be considered apart from the

variety of grape being grown. A climate too warm for successful pinot noir is one that can

be perfect for syrah. V arieties respond differently to heat, hours of sun, water, wind, and

every other facet of climate and soil. Great wine can result only when the grape variety is

tuned in, like the signal on a radio dial, to the “channel” of its terroir. To continue the

metaphor, when a grape variety is less perfectly suited to its environment, you can still

hear the music, but it doesn’t have the same sound quality. This is why a vineyard that

produces extraordinary riesling should not be pulled up and replanted with merlot simply

because merlot has become popular. Clearly, it can be pulled up and replanted, and some

vintners do chase trends. However, mediocre merlot is not better than excellent riesling,

even though it might very well make the vintner more money.

In general, certain grape varieties (cabernet sauvignon, zinfandel, sauvignon blanc)

prefer relatively warm temperatures; others (pinot noir, riesling), cool ones. And some

grapes can dance to almost any beat. Chardonnay is mind-boggling in its flexibility. It is as

happy in the warm regions of Australia as it is in nippy Chablis, France. Miraculously, it

can produce good wine in either climate, although admittedly, the style of the chardonnay

will be different. Great chardonnay, however, still appears to be the province of selected

sites within cooler environments.

There is an old rule of thumb in Bordeaux that vines need one hundred critical days for

proper ripening. In fact, different grape varieties may take as few as ninety days or nearly

twice that to ripen. The time required dictates where certain varieties can successfully be

planted. Clearly, it would make no sense to plant a variety that needs 150 days to ripen in

a place with a growing season 120 days long.

If grape varieties are sensitive to their sites, does that mean that every site is ideal for

only one grape variety? It depends on the site and its size. Many of the world’s top

winegrowing sites—for example, the Burgundy vineyard called Romanée-Conti (pinot

noir) or the Mosel vineyard Bernkasteler Doctor (riesling)—are each planted with a single

variety that appears to supremely express the uniqueness of that small swath of ground.

The wines from these sites become something more than just great tasting. They become

legendary—masterpieces of Nature.

IT’S A DOG’S LIFE NO, REALLY

In most places, a dog is a dog. But in a California vineyard, you might as well spell dog backward. In a

vineyard, a dog realizes her higher calling. A good vineyard dog is, first and foremost, in charge of overall

public relations. She (or he) greets—and loudly announces—all visitors. She then attends all wine

tastings, pre-sampling the baguettes for freshness and occasionally resting her head in the lap of the

taster so as to inspire creative descriptions of the wines being tasted. A vineyard dog is, of course,

faithfully dusty from stalking mice, moles, wild turkeys, rabbits, and deer in the vineyard. She knows

exactly when the vineyard crew stops for lunch, so as to help in the consumption of burritos con pollo

and tacos al pastor. Above all, a good vineyard dog knows (this is true) when the grapes are ripe and will

nibble a cluster right off the vine when the time is right.

On the other hand, many sites the world over provide excellent environments for two or

more grape varieties that are fairly similar in their needs. For example, in both Bordeaux

and northern California, cabernet sauvignon and merlot are often planted in adjoining

vineyard blocks. If a site can support two or more similar varieties well, then planting

those there can have advantages both in the vineyard and in the cellar. In the vineyard,

multiple varieties can be an asset because grapes ripen at different rates. If the earlier-

ripening grape is already picked when a devastating storm hits, the grower loses only a

percentage of the crop. Many Old World vineyards, including the vineyards of Bordeaux,

are planted with several varieties precisely as an economic hedge against bad weather.

And in the cellar, the winemaker has more colors on the palette with which to paint.

PHYLLOXERA: THE BUG OF THE CENTURY

In the latter part of the nineteenth century, phylloxera—a tiny, yellow, aphid-like bug one-thirtieth of an

inch long and one-sixtieth of an inch wide—spread throughout Europe, destroying vineyards in its path.

From Europe, phylloxera (phi-LOX-er-ah) moved around the world, killing vineyards in South Africa,

Australia, New Zealand, and California. So swift and sure was the annihilation that many vintners

believed the world’s vineyards were doomed, and that wine would cease to exist. Originally named

Phylloxera vastatrix (the “dry leaf devastator”) and now specifically identified as the insect Daktulosphaira

vitifoliae, phylloxera feeds on a vine’s roots, ultimately sucking life out of the vine. Although native to

America, the bug remained harmless and unknown for centuries. The reason? Indigenous American

vines belong to several species that are tolerant of the insect. Native European vines, however, belong to

the species vinifera (vin-IF-er-ah), which is susceptible to the pest.

In the 1860s, when native American vines were sent to southern France for experimentation,

phylloxera, unbeknownst to anyone, hitched a ride on the roots. Within two decades, the “phylloxera

plague” had destroyed vineyards throughout Europe. If phylloxera was deadly, it was also eerie. T oo

minuscule to be seen, the insect wrought havoc totally undetected. European growers watched in

maddening frustration as their vines yellowed, shriveled, and then slowly perished. If the grapes

managed to ripen at all, the wine made from them was often weak and watery. Eventually the vine would

simply collapse.

Countless remedies were tried. French vineyards were doused with chemicals, flooded with water, and

irrigated with white wine. By 1873, the French government even offered a prize—30,000 francs (about

$10,000 today)—to anyone who could come up with a solution. Nothing worked.

While phylloxera was waging war in Europe, the young California wine industry was unknowingly

setting itself up to become phylloxera’s next victim. California’s first vintners busily began planting

vineyards with European vines, which were considered superior to native American ones. Once

phylloxera struck, some 17,000 acres (6,880 hectares) of California vineyard were ruined before the only

known remedy was discovered. By grafting European vines onto the roots of American varieties, the

aphidlike creature can be rendered powerless.

As the twentieth century approached, vineyards around the world were painstakingly uprooted, vine by

vine, and replanted on American rootstocks. T oday, most wines worldwide come from vines growing from

American roots.

Growers and winemakers undoubtedly thought they’d seen the last of phylloxera. But when a second

wave of the pest spontaneously erupted in the Napa Valley in 1983, the wine industry knew it was up

against an extremely formidable foe. Known as biotype B, the new phylloxera began moving at lightning

speed through vineyards planted with a specific type of rootstock called AxR1. Throughout the California

wine boom of the 1960s and 1970s, AxR1 had been the rootstock of choice. By 1980, nearly two-thirds

of Napa and Sonoma vineyards were planted with it.

The fatal flaw was genetic: AxR1, a hybrid, had one American species parent and one vinifera parent.

California plant biologists knew this, but in early experimental trials, AxR1 had performed well against

phylloxera—so well that California scientists felt safe in recommending it. (Interestingly, European

scientists remained skeptical about AxR1 and suggested that European growers use other American

rootstocks instead.) By 1995, biotype B had spread throughout much of California and into Washington

State and Oregon. As of 1997 (the final year statistics were collected), replanting costs in California

alone were estimated at about $10,000 (in 1997 dollars) an acre as tens of thousands of acres of Napa

and Sonoma vineyards were pulled up and replanted with different rootstocks.

It takes at least three years before new vines can be commercially harvested. For every California

winery with vineyards planted on AxR1, the staggering financial burden of replanting was exacerbated by

the loss of income from vineyards that were not fully productive for several years.

There is a small silver lining to the story, however. The replanting that has taken place has been done

with the benefit of several decades’ worth of knowledge. As a result, vineyards have been replanted with

varieties, clones, and rootstocks better suited to each site. Have even better California wines resulted?

Most winemakers and viticulturists say yes.

CLONES

When most of us think about wines, we think about various grape varieties. Chardonnay

tastes different from sauvignon blanc, pinot noir tastes different from merlot, and so forth.

Moreover, we think about a grape variety as a single thing. But grape varieties are not

quite that simple.

Grapevines, it turns out, are not genetically stable; they spontaneously mutate over

time. Each grape variety, therefore, is actually a collection of numerous subtypes called

clones. A clone is a genetic variation that has been singled out and reproduced. All clones

are identical to their mother vine, because cultivated grapevines are reproduced by

cuttings (not from seed.)

To explain clones in a very simplistic but helpful way, let’s say it’s the beginning of

time. Adam has a vineyard and Eve has a vineyard (seems right given that this is The Wine

Bible). Adam and Eve each grow pinot noir. Their son Abel grows up and decides he, too,

wants to plant a vineyard. Abel tastes his mother’s pinot noir and his father’s pinot noir

and decides his mother’s is better. He scrutinizes both vineyards. In his mother’s vineyard,

every now and then, he sees a vine that somehow looks better, more healthy, the grapes

smaller and more uniformly shaped. To plant his vineyard, Abel takes a cutting from one

of these special vines in his mother’s vineyard. He grows all of his vines from this cutting.

Today, we’d say that Abel planted “Eve’s Clone” of pinot noir.

Different clones of a variety make wines that smell and taste different, which is why

winemakers are so focused on them. One clone of pinot noir may have a strong strawberry

jam character; another clone may be suggestive of mushrooms. Some clones have more

intensity of flavor in general, while others can be fairly neutral tasting. All of this is

important for wine producers, for a wine’s ultimate flavor and character will be affected

by the clone or clones the producer chooses to plant.

Virtually everywhere in the world, the scion (the upper part of the vine) is grafted onto a disease-resistant rootstock.

Grafting is a time-consuming, delicate process that requires considerable skill.

There’s a catch, however, and it’s an important (and frustrating) one. No clone is ever

superior in all sites. In other words, the fact that clone X produces great wine from a given

piece of ground does not mean clone X will necessarily produce the best wine in a

vineyard a half mile away. Clone and site are inextricably and inevitably bound together in

a complex dance. And the results are not always predictable.

How many clones of any given variety are there? It depends on two factors: How old

the variety is and how genetically erratic it is. Pinot noir, for example, is an ancient vine

probably two or more millennia old. It has had a lot of time to mutate compared to, say,

cabernet sauvignon, which is only several hundred years old. Moreover, pinot noir is

highly unstable genetically, which is not so true for cabernet sauvignon. Thus, there are

hundreds of clones of pinot noir, but only a dozen or so well-known clones of cabernet

sauvignon.

All of this said, clonal research is relatively new. The discovery of clones dates back

just to the 1920s, and practically speaking, it has been only in the past couple of decades

that producers have been able to request the specific clone or clones they want when they

purchase cuttings from a nursery. Most vineyards worldwide remain as they always have

been, a mixture of clones. Often, this is a good thing. After all, by blending several clones

of a given variety, a winemaker may have a better chance of producing a wine with nuance

and complexity.

ROOTSTOCKS

One of the simple but rather amazing facts about grapevines is that most of those growing

in the world today are not growing from their own roots. Instead, most grapevines are

grafted onto one of a handful of different rootstocks that are tolerant of specific pests or

soil conditions. This might not seem particularly compelling news, but if it were not for

rootstocks, the main species of grapes used for wine would have become extinct in most

parts of the world about a century ago.

The rootstock is simply the root system beneath the soil. And that rootstock has nothing

to do with the variety of grapes produced. The grapes come from the variety grafted onto

the rootstock (called the scion). V arieties as different as chardonnay, sangiovese, and

riesling can all be grafted onto the same type of rootstock. It’s also possible to change the

variety growing on a rootstock. If a grower who has planted sauvignon blanc on a

rootstock later decides he would do better with chardonnay, he can usually scalp off the

sauvignon blanc and graft chardonnay onto that same rootstock instead.

It might seem as though the roots are merely a channel through which water and

nutrients flow. In actuality, rootstocks play a far more complex and important role. They

have the power to affect a vine’s vigor, fruitfulness, and resistance to drought and disease.

Let’s backtrack a moment. Until the mid-1800s, most vines grew on their own original

roots. However, when phylloxera, a root-eating aphidlike insect, began to ravage

vineyards around the world, rootstocks took on new importance. The minuscule yellow

bug is native to North America. Native American vines, which belong to several dozen

different species, are tolerant of the pest. Unfortunately, European vines, all of which

belong to the single species vinifera, are not. In the mid-1800s, when American vines were

first brought to France for experimental purposes, phylloxera rode along, clinging to the

roots.

Between 1860 and 1890, the American pest laid siege to Europe’s vineyards. Ironically,

the roots of American grapevines proved to be their saviors. French botanist Jules-Émile

Planchon and American entomologist Charles V alentine Riley were two of the key figures

whose detective work over two decades and subsequent lobbying led to the planting of

American rootstocks in France, so that the last living French vines could be grafted onto

them and thereby saved. Later, Texas vine expert T. V . Munson helped by introducing

American rootstocks that were especially well suited to French soils. Eventually, most

vineyards worldwide were pulled out and the vines replanted on American rootstocks.

Today, most rootstocks can be traced back to three major native American grape

species: Vitis riparia, Vitis rupestris (also known as St. George), and Vitis berlandieri.

Many of the root-stocks used throughout the world are crosses, or hybrids, of these that

were bred to tolerate certain vine pests or soil conditions. They have exciting names like

3309, 110R, and SO4.

How does rootstock affect vine growth? Rootstocks can be high vigor or low vigor, can

have shallow or deep roots, can be drought resistant or tolerate wetter conditions, and can

be more or less tolerant of certain soil pests or other soil conditions. Selecting the best

root-stock for a given location can therefore be one of the most critical decisions the

grower must make. Of all the subjects currently being aggressively researched, rootstock

is considered by many viticulturists to be one of the next big keys to understanding why a

given wine tastes the way it does.

THE SEX LIFE OF WINE GRAPES

Each spring, there’s a lot of sex in the vineyards. Strictly between the vines, of course.

Cultivated vines are hermaphroditic (the reproductive organs of both sexes are

simultaneously present). Thus, come spring, grapevines pollinate themselves. But only

if the moment is right. Grapevines, as it turns out, are rather particular. T oo much wind?

Forget it. A little chill in the air? The grapevines get a headache. Rain? May as well take

a cold shower. Only when it’s calm, peaceful, and perfectly warm, will grapevines

procreate. The tender process is called flowering, and indeed, if all goes well, tiny white

flowers will result. With time, these tiny white flowers will become clusters of grapes.

But if circumstances go awry and no flowers appear, there will be no grapes. (Sorry,

buddy.) With wild grapevines (as opposed to cultivated ones), the situation is different.

Wild vines are usually either female or male, although a small percentage are naturally

hermaphroditic. As a result, wild female plants can produce fruit only if there is a wild

male nearby that can provide pollen. (Male plants, alas, are barren and fruitless.)

Botanists suspect that the first peoples to have cultivated grapevines—perhaps as

long ago as 7000 to 5000 B.C.

—would have initially selected only female plants, since

these would have been the fruitful ones. Ultimately, however, the females, without any

males whatsoever, would have been unproductive too. Thus, over time, the vines

chosen for cultivation (and propagation) would have been the vines that naturally

possessed both female and male sex organs. It’s good to be a hermaphrodite.

FARMING FOR FLA VOR: PRUNING, TRELLISING,

SPACING, PICKING, YIELD

Americans traveling in Europe for the first time often drive past vineyards having no idea

what they are. Unlike something immediately recognizable no matter where you are—say,

a rose bush—vines can come in a dizzying array of shapes and sizes. Vineyards in

Burgundy, France; Sonoma, California; and the province of Galicia, in Spain, look about

as similar as Abraham Lincoln, Winston Churchill, and Julia Roberts (not necessarily in

that order).

BIODYNAMIC VITICULTURE

While biodynamic methods have been used by farmers for centuries, the term

biodynamics came into use in the 1920s and was based on the teachings of the

Austrian philosopher Rudolf Steiner and his student Maria Thun. Sometimes described

as a “spiritual science,

” biodynamic farming involves managing a farm holistically as a

regenerative living organism. Vines are fertilized using compost created on the farm,

and soils are regenerated naturally through the waste droppings of farm and ranch

animals. Harmful pests are controlled by encouraging a population of beneficial pests

that feed on them, creating a “living balance.

” Biodynamic practioners envision plants

as existing in a “middle kingdom” influenced from below by the forces of the earth and

governed from above by solar and astral forces. Thus, vineyard practices such as

pruning are done according to the movement of the moon through the twelve houses of

the zodiac. The goal of biodynamics is to align all of the forces of Nature, creating a

natural harmony.

The size and shape of the vine is the result primarily of the grape variety and the

climate, but the way vines are pruned, trellised, and spaced is also critical. Pruning is the

exhausting process of cutting back the vines while they are dormant during the winter.

Although nothing might seem more boring, viticulturists consider pruning to be both an

art and a science, and experienced pruners often adopt a zenlike contentment after

spending several cold and rather solitary weeks in a starkly barren vineyard during the

winter. What the pruner decides to leave becomes the basis for the next year’s crop. If

pruned too severely, the vines’ fruitfulness and strength may be compromised. Conversely,

if pruned too little, the vines will push out too many shoots and leaves and produce too

much fruit and become unbalanced. The overabundance of fruit will mean the crop will

have a hard time ripening, and this in turn could lead to fewer shoots and stunted growth

in subsequent seasons.

In many parts of the world, especially where there are old vineyards, vines still grow

out of the ground like short, stubby bushes. In most modern vineyards, however, the vines

are trellised up on wires. The rationale behind trellising is simple. By lifting the vines up

and spreading the canopy along wires, the leaves get the sun they need for photosynthesis,

but at the same time, the grapes hang freely in the air where, less shaded, they get enough

sunlight for ripeness, and good air circulation to mitigate against rot.

SUSTAINABLE AND ORGANIC: A FARM FOR THE FUTURE

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, the movement toward eco-friendly grape-growing

accelerated worldwide.

“Green viticulture,

” as it’s known, generally falls under one of three concepts:

sustainable, organic, or biodynamic (see box on the facing page).

SUSTAINABLE VITICULTURE Voluntarily practiced by conscientious winegrowers worldwide,

sustainable viticulture has no single definition or legal requirements. Vintners decide for themselves

which farming practices to implement, and which to avoid, in order to create an integrated farming

system capable of sustaining itself indefinitely.

ORGANIC VITICULTURE Organically grown grapes are those grown without the use of artificial

fertilizers, engineered plant materials, or synthetic chemicals, including pesticides, fungicides, herbicides,

or soil fumigants. In many countries, vineyards and farms that have met organic standards for a given

period of time may subsequently be certified as having done so.

“Organic wine” is different. In the United

States, for example, USDA regulations stipulate that organic wine must be made from organic grapes

and, in addition, sulfites cannot be added to the wine. (Sulfites, natural antimicrobial agents, help prevent

spoilage and act as a preservative.) Winemakers who grow grapes organically but use small amounts of

sulfites cannot use the term organic wine, but can say their wine has been made with organically grown

grapes.

The spacing of vines, like trellising, has become something of a mini science that must

take into consideration the site. In the past, vines were spaced with only one factor in

mind: economics. In Europe, this often meant only as much space between the vines or

rows as necessary to admit a man with a basket on his back, or a horse-drawn plow. By the

1960s in California, spacing at larger intervals, usually 8 feet (2 meters) between vines and

12 feet (4 meters) between rows, neatly accommodated all sorts of machines and tractors,

including those pulling gondolas into which the harvested grapes would be dumped.

But spacing has implications far beyond such simple economic issues as size or type of

tractor and equipment. The closer vines are spaced, the more their roots may have to

compete for the same soil, nutrients, and water. If the vines are too vigorous, this

competition may be beneficial, acting to slow down the vines’ growth, limit the number of

grape clusters produced, and bring the vines into a better balance. The better balanced the

vineyard, of course, the better the grapes and, all things being equal, the better the wine.

In California, the vines in many new and replanted vineyards are now placed much

closer together. Twenty years ago, an acre of California vineyard typically contained four

hundred to six hundred or so vines. With closer planting, the range is now from six

hundred to nearly three thousand vines per acre (and sometimes even more). Importantly

however, the overall yield of grapes is about the same because in closely spaced

vineyards, the vines are kept quite small. The goal, in other words, is not to increase yield

(more on this in a moment) but rather to increase competition between vines and hence

quality.

The romantic vision of grapes lovingly picked by hand is, in many cases, just that—a

romantic vision. Mechanical harvesting is being used with increasing frequency

throughout the world. It has both drawbacks and advantages over handpicking. First, a

machine can never be as selective or careful as a person. Mechanical harvesters can break

and damage the skins of grapes, as well as the vines themselves if the plants are young.

Second, even though modern mechanical harvesters are calibrated to distinguish between

ripe and unripe grapes, some unripe grapes and material other than grapes (MOG) still get

picked.

On the other hand, mechanical harvesters have some very real assets. They can operate

twenty-four hours a day, ensuring that large vineyards can be picked swiftly once the

grapes reach ripeness. A mechanical harvester can pick up to 300 tons of grapes in an

eight-hour day, compared to the 2 tons picked by the average California harvest worker

(admittedly still a breathtaking amount for one person in just one day). Speed is critical if

bad weather is about to break. And with machines, large tracts of vineyard can be

harvested at night, a real advantage in very warm climates, since cool nighttime

temperatures help preserve the fruit’s freshness. (Handpickers with appropriate lights can

also work at night, but on a smaller scale.) Finally, apart from the initial outlay of capital

to purchase a mechanical harvester (in 2012, they cost about half a million U.S. dollars

each), mechanical harvesting is usually less expensive than handpicking, and is critical in

wine regions with limited availability of labor, such as Australia.

And finally in this chapter, we come to yield. Are quantity and quality mutually

exclusive? This is a very complex question, the answer to which can only be: sometimes.

On the one hand, it does sound reasonable that growing, say, 3 tons of grapes on an acre of

land rather than 10 tons would result in more intensely flavored grapes. And to support

this, many of the greatest wine estates in the world limit (to some degree) the yield from

their vineyards, though it can seem counterintuitive, if not sacrilegious, to discard what

Nature and man have together worked so hard to foster.

Even so, there is no perfect linear correlation between yield and flavor. In the Napa

V alley, for example, fantastic cabernet sauvignons are made from vineyards that yield 2

tons per acre—as well as from vineyards with yields double that. Another good example is

the Champagne region of France, where top wines often come from vineyards that yield

more than 5 tons per acre.

All of this said,

“tons per acre” may eventually fade from the lexicon of quality. Today,

viticulturists worldwide have telescoped down to finer measurements based on each

individual vine. How many clusters does the vine support? What is the weight of each

cluster? Most important, what size are the berries? (A high ratio of skin to juice promises

lots of concentrated aroma, flavor, and structure.) As one viticulturist told me during

harvest,

“They may be grapes, but when they’re great, they look like blueberries.

”

In the end, each vineyard must be viewed as its own entity and every factor must be

considered before any specific assessments can be made of yield. How strong the vines

are, how old the vineyard is, the characteristics of the vineyard’s terroir, the intensity of

prevailing stress factors, the type of grapes grown—all of these dramatically influence the

quality that can be derived from any given yield. Despite all other contingencies, we do

know this: For every vineyard, there is a breaking point—a point where too many grapes

will cause the vineyard to be out of balance and where the subsequent quality of the wine

will plummet.

They may look a little industrial, but stainless-steel tanks transformed winemaking when they first began to be widely

used in the 1960s. Eventually, the tanks were “jacketed” (like the ones above), allowing them to be cooled or heated to

control fermentations more precisely.

HOW WINE IS MADE

Wine has been with us for more than six thousand years. Y et the natural, complex process

by which it is made—fermentation—has been understood for only a little more than 160

years. It was not until the 1850s, when Louis Pasteur’s research in microbiology linked

sugar’s conversion to alcohol (fermentation) to the living organisms called yeasts, that

winemaking moved out of the realm of the occult and into the realm of science. More than

a century more would pass before the next significant advances in wine-making occurred.

Up until World War II, most wines were made according to two classic methods, one

for white wine, the other for red. The only exceptions were fortified wines, such as Sherry

and Port, and sparkling wines, such as Champagne—all of which were made in

specialized, complex ways of their own. By the 1960s, advances in winemaking around

the world, plus the advent of more sophisticated winemaking equipment—especially

temperature-controlled stainless steel tanks—meant that winemakers possessed a far

greater ability to influence a wine’s aromas, flavors, texture, and finish. A powerful new

world of winemaking was born. In this chapter we look at how mere grape juice becomes

the stuff of poetry and legend.

Heat and alcohol generated during fermentation act as solvents, pulling red color out of the skins and tinting the juice

red.

WHY IS WHITE WINE WHITE AND RED WINE RED?

While starting this section with the question above might seem almost too basic, over the

years I’ve found that most people don’t get the answer quite right. It isn’t just “because of

the skins.

”

The juice of all grapes, red and white, is almost colorless (with a few rare exceptions).

Thus, red skins alone do not make red wine red. The big difference between red wine and

white wine is this: For red wine, the juice is fermented with the red grape skins. During

fermentation, heat and alcohol are generated. Both are solvents that help leach out the

reddish-purple color pigments from the skins, tinting the surrounding wine. In the absence

of this heat and alcohol,

“red” wine in a fermentation vessel would actually be a pinkish

liquid with red skins floating around in it.

With white wine, the skins aren’t necessary to tint the juice (it’s already clear), plus the

skins might add tannin, an undesirable element in white wine. So, in making white wine,

the skins are quickly separated from the juice before the juice is fermented.

MAKING DRY RED WINE

As we’ve just seen, since red wines are fermented with the grape skins present, red wines

contain substantially more tannin than white wines (see the tannin section in What Makes

Wine, Wine?, page 9). Tannin figures into the first decision that must be made in red

winemaking, namely: Should the stems be removed from the grapes before they are

crushed? It’s important to know that grape stems also contain tannin. With grapes that

already have a lot of tannin in their skins (cabernet sauvignon, for example), stems can

add excessive tannin to the juice. As a result, the stems are usually removed by putting the

grape bunches into a machine called a crusher-destemmer. With less-tannic varieties, such

as grenache from the Rhône V alley or pinot noir from Burgundy, winemakers may choose

to leave the stems on precisely because they do add a bit of tannic strength.

The soupy mass of crushed grapes, juice, skins, pulp, seeds, and possibly stems is

called the must. In the old days before stainless steel tanks were invented, this would be

fermented in large wooden vats, which would be used over and over again. Today, most

red wine is fermented in stainless steel or concrete tanks, which are both easier to control

in terms of temperature and easier to clean—someone, after all, is going to have to muck

out all those skins and seeds when the whole process is done. (As an aside, a small number

of prestigious, expensive cabernet sauvignons and Bordeaux-style wines are now being

fermented in new wooden barrels or new wooden vats. Though very labor intensive,

fermenting a red wine in a barrel allows oxygen to have a role in the process, and is

thought to result in a more soft-textured wine.)

A FEAST OF YEASTS

Yeasts, forty thousand of which could fit on the head of a pin, are single-cell organisms

that are part of the fungus family. Yeasts reproduce by “budding.

” One mother cell will

bud about twelve times, creating a new daughter cell each time, before the mother

eventually dies. Various strains of yeasts exist naturally in vineyard soils, cling to

grapes as they grow, and are present in the air and on the surfaces of wine cellars. As

winemakers unknowingly did throughout most of history, some winemakers today allow

these ambient, or “native,

” strains of yeasts to carry out fermentation. In effect, the

strains slowly compete with one another to consume the sugar in the juice. This

process takes time (often weeks), during which desirable aromas and flavors in the

wine may be created. But the opposite may be true, too: Ambient yeasts may produce

funky,

“off” aromas. They are often not just slow, but sluggish about fermenting. If a

fermentation takes too much time getting started, the juice may be harmed by spoilage

bacteria or other microorganisms. T o end-run these worries, many winemakers prefer to

use a strain of cultured yeasts, which can be depended on to multiply quickly at a given

temperature. There are many strains of cultured yeasts. A winemaker’s choice depends

on how fast and intense he wants the fermentation to be. This, in turn, may subtly affect

the flavors and aromas of the wine.

Before fermentation begins, the winemaker has another choice to make. Instead of

proceeding immediately, he may decide to chill the tank down and let the juice “cold

soak” for a few hours or days. During this time, the skins will ever so slowly and gently

release a small amount of tannin, aroma, and flavor compounds. Since fermentation has

not yet begun, no heat or alcohol are present, and the extraction effect is therefore subtle.

That said, putting a wine through a cold soak is definitely intended to make the wine a bit

more intense than it otherwise would have been.

Like any place where regular fermentations occur, a cellar is full of ambient yeasts.

With the help of these yeasts, a mass of crushed grapes left alone will turn itself into wine.

A winemaker, however, may choose to use cultured yeasts, thereby gaining control over

the onset and rate of fermentation. Something as simple as the speed at which

fermentation proceeds can profoundly affect the flavor of the wine. Slower fermentations,

for example, often produce more complex and aromatic wines.

The next step is the actual fermentation, a furious chemical reaction during which the

wine can almost look like it’s boiling (you can actually hear it). As the yeasts begin to

convert the grape sugar into alcohol, heat is thrown off and carbon dioxide bubbles up

from the fermenting mass, pushing the skins to the surface, where they form a thick “cap”

over the liquid.

Unattended, the skins will remain at the surface of the liquid, pushed from underneath

by the tremendous pressure of the CO2 for as long as fermentation continues. This

presents a problem. Since the skins contain the wine’s potential color and tannin, as well

as compounds that become aromas and flavors, it’s critical that they be mixed with the

pinkishwhite juice below. Indeed, the more the cap is broken up, pushed apart and

squished down into the juice, the more color, tannin, flavor, and aroma can be extracted.

Small amounts of wine evaporate through the oak staves of a barrel, creating a dangerous “head space” of air which

could cause the wine to oxidize. To keep the barrels full to the top (and keep air out), winemakers regularly “top off” the

barrels.

Sometimes (especially with fragile grapes like pinot noir), winemakers do this by

“punching down,

” which, despite its name, is considered a gentle method. The winemaker

simply takes a pizza paddle–like pole and pushes the skins under the surface of the liquid,

breaking up the cap in the process. A similar technique, stripping off most of one’s clothes,

hopping into the tank, and using one’s feet and legs as paddles, worked for centuries.

The cap can also be broken up by a technique called pumping over. In this case, a large

hose is run from the bottom of the tank to the top, where the juice is sprayed over the thick

mantle of skins and percolates through the cap, picking up color, tannin, aroma, and

flavor.

During fermentation, the temperature of the must rises to between 60°F (16°C) and

85°F (29°C). The winemaker does not want it to rise above 85°F, for at higher

temperatures the delicate aromas and flavors of the wine may be volatilized, or burned off.

After virtually all of the sugar has become alcohol (a process that usually takes from

several days to a few weeks) the wine is said to be dry. At this point, the wine will usually

contain anywhere from 10 to 16 percent alcohol. In any case, wine cannot, by natural

methods, be much more than 16.5 percent alcohol. At about this concentration, the yeasts

die by being poisoned by the very alcohol they created. Near the end of or after the

alcoholic fermentation, all red wines go through a months’ long transformation called

malolactic fermentation. The process is crucial to a red wine’s softness and microbial

stability. (I’ve described it in full in the section on Making Dry White Wine, page 43,

because I think it’s easier to understand in the context of white wine.)

Once a red wine has finished fermenting, the winemaker once again has a decision to

make. Should the wine be drained off the skins or be allowed to sit with those skins for

several more hours, or even days. This post-fermentation maceration (sometimes called

extended maceration) is a little like letting a warm homemade stock sit and “marinate”

longer with the meat bones and vegetables. In the case of wine, even more color, tannin,

aroma, and flavor are extracted from the skins. The winemaker must be extremely careful,

however, because at this point the wine is indeed wine, meaning that it contains alcohol,

which will act as a powerful solvent. A little too much maceration at this point could mean

a wine that is teeth-grittingly tannic and bitter beyond words.

W ARNING: THIS LABEL IS MISLEADING

“Contains Sulfites.

” With the initiation of that federally mandated warning label in 1988, wine drinkers

began to worry. What were sulfites and why were they suddenly being put into wine? In the confusion

that followed, wine was blamed for everything from headaches to rashes.

The facts are these: Wine has always contained sulfites. The compounds occur as a natural by-

product of fermentation. Historically, winemakers have also added small, controlled amounts of sulfites to

wine to prevent oxidation and spoilage.

Widespread concern over sulfites first occurred in the late 1970s and early 1980s, with the dawn of the

salad bar. Cut vegetables and fruits were routinely sprayed with large amounts of sulfites (up to 2,000

parts per million—[ppm]) to keep them from wilting and turning brown. The FDA received reports of cases

of adverse reactions from several hundred people. In response, strict regulations were enacted to protect

the estimated 0.4 percent to 1 percent of the population, most of them severe asthmatics, who are

considered at risk.

Historically, however, the regulations on sulfites in wine have been stricter than those applied to salad

bars. In wine the upper limit is 350 ppm. In practice, most wines today contain 100 ppm or less. In

wineries where the grapes are healthy and unbruised, and where sterilized equipment is used, the

amount of sulfites in the wine may be far less. Several wines around the world are now made entirely

without added sulfites. And, of course, wine isn’t the only product in the sulfite discussion.

Sulfites are found in beer, cocktail mixes, cookies, crackers, pizza crust, flour tortillas, pickles, relishes,

salad dressings, olives, vinegar, sugar, shrimp, scallops, dried fruit, and fruit juice, among other foods

and beverages.

When sulphur is used in winemaking in small, judicious doses, it cannot be smelled or tasted. Nor is it

responsible for headaches, according to scientists. Current research suggests that wine-related

headaches are probably more often the result of a simple imbalance: More alcohol has been consumed

than water. And there’s another possibility as the culprit—glycoproteins. Discovered in 2010 by Italian

scientists, glycoproteins are proteins coated with sugars and are produced naturally as grapes ferment.

The Italian research team found that many grape glycoproteins have structures similar to known

allergens, including proteins that trigger allergic reactions to ragweed and latex.

Finally ready to be separated from the skins for good, the wine is drained off to begin

the aging process. This wine, known as free run, is the best possible, and all luxury wines

are made from it. The remaining mixture of wine and solids is gently pressed to release

additional wine. This lightly pressed juice (called first press) may not be as virginal as free

run, but it often contains valuable tannin, as well as flavor and aroma components.

Fruity red wines meant to be quaffed but not contemplated will usually be kept for a

few months in a tank or vat, then bottled. More serious reds will go into small barrels for

periods ranging from several months to a few years, depending on the potential

complexity and structure of the wine. The barrels are virtually always oak. In them,

complex chemical interactions will take place that gradually and subtly alter the wine’s

aroma, flavor, and texture (see What Oak Does, page 48).

An important part of barrel aging is the racking of the wine. Racking is simply the

process of allowing solids to settle to the bottom of the vat or barrel, then pouring or

drawing the clear wine off. Depending on the grape variety, a red wine may be racked

numerous times as various types of solids continue to precipitate out. Racking also aerates

the wine, helping it mature.

During aging, there’s another winemaking process that is sometimes utilized: fining.

Fining helps remove excessive tannin, thus, hopefully, making the wine softer and less

bitter, and improving its balance. Fining can also clarify minute solids such as unstable

proteins, which may be suspended in the wine. There are several types of fining agents,

most of which are protein coagulants—egg whites, casein (a milk protein), gelatin (made

from skin, tendon, and muscle), and—hardest of all to imagine—isinglass (a gelatinous

substance derived from the air bladders of sturgeon). To fine a wine, the coagulant is

stirred into the wine. Like one half of a V elcro patch, the coagulant immediately attaches

itself (in this case, chemically) to the tannin, which acts like the other piece of the V elcro.

Together, the coagulant and the tannin form molecules that are too heavy to remain in

suspension, and thus fall to the bottom of the barrel. The wine can then be racked. (So, in

case you were wondering, no egg whites, milk, gelatin, or fish bladders remain in the

wine.) The choice of which type of fining agent to use is an important one. A wine fined

with egg whites may taste entirely different from the same wine fined with gelatin—not

because the fining agent itself contributes flavor, but because each fining agent is made up

of different-size protein molecules that attach themselves to different things in the wine.

Egg whites, for example, are widely used in Bordeaux and are considered excellent at

pulling out excessive tannin. Another fining agent—activated carbon (derived from

charcoal)—pulls out so many things, it can leave a wine stripped down to the point where

it smells and tastes completely neutral. Indeed, activated carbon is usually used only in

extreme cases, as when a wine has been adversely affected by smoke (so-called smoke

taint has been problematic a few times in the past decade in wine areas prone to massive

forest fires).

NOT ROMANTIC BUT REVOLUTIONARY

No single entity has had a more profound impact on white wine than the temperature-controlled stainless

steel tank. In such tanks, fermentation can take place slowly and at a cool temperature, resulting in white

wines with fruity aromas and great delicacy.

Before the tank’s invention in the latter half of the twentieth century, many of the world’s white wines

tasted slightly oxidized and flat. The best white wines came, virtually without exception, from Germany,

and from Champagne and northern Burgundy in France, where the naturally cold climates preserved the

wines’ freshness and finesse.

In 1912, the giant German industrial conglomerate Krupp filed for a patent on the first chrome-nickel-

steel-molybdenum tank. This stainless steel tank was not refrigerated, but it resisted corrosion from acids

far better than its predecessor, the simple chrome-steel tank. Still, it would be several decades before the

technology to cool such huge tanks would be invented and the temperature-controlled stainless steel

tank would become a common sight in European wineries.

In the United States, the first non-refrigerated stainless steel tanks were probably those commissioned

by Gallo after World War II. Finally, in the 1950s, advanced rotary compressors capable of refrigerating

25,000-gallon tanks became commercially available (and affordable). By the late 1960s, temperature-

controlled stainless steel tanks were a fixture in every American winery serious about white wine.

In addition to stainless-steel vessels and oak barrels, wines are sometimes made in concrete eggs, which look like giant

Easter eggs.

After oak aging and (possibly) fining, but before bottling, a wine may be filtered.

Highly controversial, filtering has generated so many invectives you’d think the subject

was taxes. The facts are these: There are times when a wine must be filtered to avoid

being spoiled by bacteria, and other times when filtering is undesirable as it may result in

a lesser wine. The art is knowing whether to filter, and exactly which method to use so

that the wine is improved, not harmed. Filtering helps to stabilize a wine microbiologically

and helps clarify it by removing suspended particles. Excessive filtering, however, also

removes desirable particles and thus strips the wine of some of its flavor and aroma.

There are several types of filters, most of which work in a similar manner. In one

commonly used type, the wine is pumped through a series of porous pads made of simple

cellulose fibers. The pores of the pads may be wide or narrow. In what is called a loose

polish filtration, wide-pore pads are used to clarify a wine without removing flavors and

aromas. Pads with smaller pores remove smaller particles. Filtered tightly enough, a wine

can be made to taste as bland and boring as sliced white bread.

Finally, after filtering (or not), the wine is bottled, often to be aged yet again. In a

bottle, the water and alcohol can’t evaporate and, assuming the cork is sound, oxygen

cannot readily penetrate. The bottle itself, unlike a barrel, is sterile and chemically inert. In

the bottle, the components in the wine interact alone, slowly coalescing into harmony.

Together, barrel and bottle aging work synergistically toward a level of optimal maturity.

The greatest red wines in the world always experience both barrel (oxidative) and bottle

(reductive) aging.

Before moving on to how white wine is made, let me add that most red wines in the

world roughly follow the process outlined above. There’s one well-known exception:

Beaujolais, which is made according to a second method called carbonic maceration (see

the Beaujolais chapter for how carbonic maceration works, page 228).

MAKING DRY WHITE WINE

Although conscientious winemakers everywhere take enormous care to harvest all types of

grapes quickly and as carefully as possible, white grapes require special speed and

handling. Crushing grapes on the way to the winery can cause the skins to leak tannin into

the juice, which can make a white wine taste coarse. Bruised, warm, sun-beaten white

grapes also risk losing their delicate range of fresh aromas and flavors. As a result,

winemakers in warm climates like much of Australia and California are often adamant

about harvesting white grapes when the grapes themselves are coolest—at night or in the

early morning. Once at the winery, the grapes may be chilled before any winemaking

process begins.

As we’ve seen, in making red wine, the color-packed skins remain with the juice during

fermentation and are only removed when fermentation is finished. With white wine,

however, the juice is separated from its skins immediately, well before fermentation

begins. To obtain the juice, whole bunches of white grapes are put directly into a press, or

may be put into a crusher-destemmer that removes the stems first. The press itself is often

what is called a bladder press—a large cylinder in the center of which a pliable air tube is

suspended (the bladder). As the bladder is inflated with air, it slowly pushes the grapes

against the fine screen inside the press. The grapes are squeezed so gently that the stems

and seeds are not broken.

Once the grapes are pressed, the juice is transferred to a settling tank so that particles in

suspension (mostly minute pieces of grape pulp) can sink to the bottom. In large wineries,

this may be done more quickly by filtering or centrifuging the juice instead. Regardless of

the method used, once the settling process is finished, the clean juice is ready to be

fermented.

As is true of red wine, white wine will ferment on its own as a result of ambient yeasts

in the environment. Some winemakers, however, prefer to introduce a yeast culture,

making the process of fermentation a surer, faster bet, and easier to control.

Either way, much effort is made to keep the fermenting juice cold (again, the idea is to

preserve freshness and aroma). Thus, white wines are often fermented in temperature-

controlled fermentation tanks, so they ferment at 50°F to 65°F (10°C to 18°C)—as

opposed to 75°F to 85°F (24°C to 29°C) for red wines. Temperature-controlled stainless

steel tanks are usually double-skinned, wrapped on the outside with a cooling jacket

through which glycol runs.

Although temperature-controlled stainless steel tanks preserve a white wine’s freshness

and delicacy, some grapes—notably chardonnay—can benefit from being fermented in

small oak barrels.

During barrel fermentation, the barrel is filled about three-quarters full to prevent the

wine from foaming over. As the wine ferments, the temperature rises to 70°F (21°C) or

more. Some fresh fruit aromas and flavors are sacrificed, but in the warm tango of

fermentation, the yeasts help pull toasty, sweet, vanillin flavors from the wood, creating

the barrel-fermented style. (To keep the white wine from getting too hot during barrel

fermentation, you can bet winemakers in warm climates have the AC cranked way up in

the fermentation room.)

At first thought, it might seem as though a barrel-fermented white wine would also take

on an undesirable amount of tannin from the barrel itself. Curiously, this is not the case.

During fermentation the developing wine does extract tannin lodged in the staves. But

when fermentation is complete and the spent yeast cells (lees) are removed from the wine,

many of the wood tannins cling to them and are removed as well.

When a white wine fermentation is nearly or totally complete, and the sugar in the juice

has been mostly converted to alcohol, the winemaker may decide to initiate another

amazing chemical transformation: malolactic fermentation (ML for short). Importantly,

this months-long process is carried out by bacteria (Oenococcus oeni)—unlike the

alcoholic fermentation, which is done by yeasts. What happens is simple: The bacteria

convert the malic acid in the wine to lactic acid. Why do we care? Because malic acid has

an extremely tart mouthfeel (imagine the crunchy acid in a crisp green apple). Lactic acid,

on the other hand, has a mouthfeel that is much softer (imagine the acidity in milk). Thus,

the goal of malolactic fermentation is to change the way the wine will feel on the palate. A

wine that has undergone malolactic fermentation has a texture that’s creamy.

Having put so much meticulous work into growing grapes well, then transforming them into fine wine, few vintners want

to see their wines served in anything less than a generous, well-shaped glass. Above, Riedel’ s Sommelier Series glasses

for white wine.

The story doesn’t stop there. During malolactic fermentation, a by-product called

diacetyl (die-ASS-i-tuhl) is produced. Diacetyl is the molecule that makes butter taste

buttery. So, wines that have experienced malolactic fermentation—like chardonnay—are

often buttery. Or, to turn the binoculars around: When a wine is described as tasting like

buttered popcorn, that flavor came not from the grapes themselves, but from malolactic

fermentation.

Mashed potatoes aside, not everything is better when it’s creamy and buttery.

Malolactic fermentation is intentionally not done with grape varieties like riesling, that

take their character from piercing snappiness and the purity of their fruit flavors. Would

anyone slather butter on a fresh, lively fruit salad?

In addition, even with wines that have gone through malolactic fermentation and

become softer, the winemaker may be able to lessen the buttery diacetyl flavor. (Really

expensive chardonnays, for example, are often creamy but don’t taste like buttered

popcorn). The technique involves leaving the wine in the barrel for several days after the

malolactic fermentation is complete, but before the wine is dosed with the antimicrobial

agent sulfur dioxide (most wine usually is given a bit of SO2 immediately after malolactic

fermentation). During this few-day period, the yeasts remaining in the juice will

metabolize the diacetyl, eating it up as a food source. Thus, diacetyl can disappear from a

wine as naturally as it appeared. As an aside, I’ve used chardonnay as an example here,

but it’s worth noting that red wines can also taste buttery. Most do not, since the diacetyl

flavor is masked by stronger flavors such as those contributed by tannin. But occasionally

a red wine will taste buttery and the effect is, to me, unpleasantly jarring.

So, how do you know for sure if a wine has gone through malolactic fermentation? Y ou

don’t. Its flavor and texture may inspire a hunch. But the technique is usually not listed on

the label.

In addition to being barrel fermented, full-bodied white wines, such as chardonnay,

may also be left sur lie, a French term meaning “on the lees,

” or “on the spent yeast cells.

”

(As a result of the hard work of fermentation, yeasts partially disintegrate and become

what is known in English as lees.) During this process, the wine rests in contact with a

thick layer of lees that have settled at the bottom of the barrel. In effect, the wines are

marinating on the yeasts. This process adds a slightly richer texture and sometimes more

complexity to the wine. To accentuate the effect, the lees may also be regularly stirred up

into the wine. (Continuing the culinary metaphor, this would be like basting.) A white

wine such as a good-quality chardonnay typically spends four to twelve months in contact

with its lees before the wine is finally racked off. The lees themselves will then be filtered

to recover as much wine as possible. As for the lees solids (which now look like a thick

brown milkshake), they will be thrown away.

HOW BARRELS ARE MADE

It’s estimated that approximately 100,000 to 200,000 new wine barrels are sold each year in North

America alone. The story of how each was made begins with the tree from which the wood came.

A tree, like a grapevine, is affected by climate. In cold, dry climates, a tree grows slowly, forming a

narrow growth ring for that year. In wetter, warmer climates, a tree grows more quickly and the growth

ring is wider. The widths of all the rings together become the wood’s grain.

Barrels, like great wine, are made in an artisanal manner.

As far as wine is concerned, oak flavors are extracted more gradually from tight grained (narrow ring)

oak trees. And these, as noted, always come from cool, dry forests. Winemakers generally prefer barrels

made from tight-grained oak, since the oak’s impact on the wine is usually better integrated and more

mellow.

Thus, barrels made from trees that grow in the cool, dry French forests of Tronçais, Vosges, and

Nevers are highly sought after. The forest of Tronçais, in particular, was planted in the late 1600s as a

source of superior ship masts for the French navy. Although American oak is not designated by the forest

from which it came, the best American oak also comes from cool places, such as Minnesota, Missouri,

Wisconsin, and Iowa.

In addition to the species of oak used (French or American), the manner in which a barrel is made

significantly affects the flavor of a wine. An oak tree is generally harvested when it is 150 to 250 years

old. In practical terms, this means that some forests being harvested today are made up of trees that

were growing when the U.S. Constitution was signed in 1787.

For centuries, the traditional European practice—still used today by the best coopers—has been to

hand split the oak into staves along natural grain lines, then air-dry the staves by leaving them stacked

outdoors in a stave yard, exposed to air, sun, rain, snow, wind, fungi, and microbes for two to four years.

Traditionally, the stacks are dismantled and restacked once a year so that all of the staves have similar

exposure to the elements. During this seasoning period, the wood’s physio-chemical composition

changes and, among other benefits, the harshest tannin is gradually leached out of the wood.

Pieces of oak wood are used for the fire over which the barrel is made.

After years of seasoning, the staves will be built into barrels. Historically this was done entirely by

hand, but today machinery is used for parts of the process. First, the large staves will be planed into

slightly smaller staves that can be fit together as tightly as possible, since an imperfect seam could result

in a leaky barrel. T o make the wood pliable enough to bend into a barrel shape, a cooper uses the

traditional method and heats the staves over an open fire pot. Since the fire in the pot can reach 800°F to

1,000°F (430°C to 540°C), and the temperature of the wood, 350°F to 400°F (180°C to 200°C), the

outside of the staves are constantly swabbed with a wet mop, ensuring that the wood doesn’t burst into

flames. As the wood groans and softens, it is pulled into a barrel shape with the help of winches and

chains, as well as iron hoops that must be hammered into place and act like belts holding the staves

together. It is backbreaking, hot, deafening work. (The saws are extremely loud.) If he does everything by

hand, a top cooper working swiftly can make just one barrel a day.

The fire reaches temperatures of 800°F to 1,000°F (427°C to 538°C).

After the barrel is built, it will be exposed to a fire again, this time to “toast” the inside. The fire

caramelizes the wood’s natural carbohydrates (think of a tree as a giant vegetable), bringing out

compounds such as vanillin, a molecule that occurs naturally in oak. Vanillin in oak tastes remarkably like

vanilla (which comes from the pods of a tropical plant). From this caramelization, the wine will ultimately

take on a complex repertoire of flavors that are toasty, charred, spicy, and sweet. Depending on the

degree and character of the flavors they want to impart, winemakers can order their barrels—like

breakfast toast in a coffee shop—lightly, moderately, or heavily toasted. A lightly toasted barrel spends

about twenty-five minutes over the fire; heavily toasted, up to an hour.

In addition to this traditional European method, there is a second method—one which, while sharply

criticized today, has been used extensively, especially in the past for American oak barrels. In this

method, the staves are dried over a few months in a kiln rather than outdoors over the course of years.

Although expeditious, kiln drying does not have the tannin-leaching or seasoning effect that air drying

has. As a result, kiln-dried barrels tend to impart coarse flavors. This doesn’t matter too much if the liquid

inside is bourbon, but if it’s pinot noir, the result can taste terrible.

Iron hoops hold the staves together . The hoops are hammered into place using a medieval-looking tool.

In addition, the staves for American barrels were traditionally bent over steam rather than fire. Barrels

with steam-bent staves impart a raw, less complex, less toasty character to wine than barrels made from

fire-bent staves. (Think of the difference between boiled beef and grilled beef.)

The world of American oak barrel making has changed, however. Since the mid-1990s, some

American oak barrels (the best ones) have been made according to the traditional European method.

American oak remains, of course, a different species than French oak, and thus the core flavors will

always be slightly different. But American oak barrels are no longer the stepchildren they once were.

ENCHANTED FORESTS

At the beginning of the Middle Ages, more than two thirds of France was covered in oak

forests. Alas, these began to rapidly disappear as the twelfth century dawned. The

population was growing; wood was the fuel of iron smiths; wars meant the French navy

needed a continual supply of wood for ships and masts. In 1285, Philippe I nationalized

the country’s forests and established the Bureau of Water and Forestry to ensure a

steady supply of materials for national defense. Over the next seven centuries,

France’s oak forests (many of which were geographically defined and given specific

names) were among the country’s greatest economic assets. T oday, 25 percent of the

land in France is still covered by nationally owned oak forest—some 35 million acres

(14 million hectares). Preserved and painstakingly managed by the Office National des

Forêts, these forests show no signs of declining—nor does the price of a French oak

barrel.

At this point, most white wines are cold stabilized—quickly chilled down to a point

slightly above freezing for a period of several days. The purpose of this process is to shock

the wine just enough for tartaric acid to precipitate out of the wine in the form of solid,

small, snowflake-like crystals. The clear wine can then be racked off the crystals. If

you’ve ever seen these crystals on the underside of a cork or in the bottom of your glass,

you have encountered a wine that has not been cold stabilized by the winemaker. No

matter, really: The crystals are harmless and tasteless. (If you pulverized them, you’d have

cream of tartar.)

After cold stabilization, some white wines, like red wines, are aged in oak, although for

considerably shorter periods. Oak aging (especially when the barrels are new) can

profoundly change the flavor of white wines (see What Oak Does, below). When aged in

wood too long, a white wine loses delicacy and the purity of its fruit, and instead takes on

the brazen flavor of wood and overt vanilla. In anthropomorphic terms, such a wine can

seem like the equivalent of a small-built woman wearing tons of makeup and a huge fur

coat. Conversely, when oak aged with care and restraint, such full-fruit grapes as

chardonnay can acquire greater lushness and complexity.

Finally, white wine, like red, may be fined or filtered to stabilize and further clarify it.

It is then bottled and, again like red wine, may be given further aging in bottle.

WHAT OAK DOES

Without oak, many wines as we know them would not exist. They would not taste the

same, smell the same, or have the same texture or structure. Nor are there good substitutes

for oak. Cherry, walnut, chestnut, pine, and many other woods can all be made into

barrels; none, however, enhances wine the way oak does. Nor has technology devised an

oak alternative. In short, wine and oak—inseparable for the past two millennia of

winemaking—show every sign of remaining married.

Why is there a special affinity between oak and wine? Oak has the ability to transform

wine, to coax it out of the genre of simple fermented juice and give it depth, length,

volume, and sometimes, more complexity and intensity. Oak wood is composed of several

classes of complex chemical compounds, which leave their mark on virtually every aspect

of a wine’s character. The most noticeable of these are phenols, some of which impart

vanilla-like flavors, notes of tea and tobacco, and impressions of sweetness. One of the

most important classes of phenols are the substances commonly called tannins.

CHIPS, BEANS, AND BLOCKS—OAK WITHOUT BARRELS

Consider the cost of a tree grown for two centuries, and the price of barrels made, largely by hand, from

that pristine wood. Not surprisingly, barrels are time consuming to make and breathtakingly expensive.

After salaries, they’re often the second biggest yearly expense for a winery. (In 2011, one of the largest

American wine companies spent a reported $22 million on barrels alone.) Yet, today, barrels are used

virtually exclusively for fairly expensive wines. For their part, modestly priced wines rarely, if ever, rest

inside barrels. Enter the brave new world of chips, powders, beans, blocks, and interstaves. Made from

oak wood that’s unsuitable for barrels, these barrel alternatives, as they are known, are a fraction of the

cost of barrels (and, of course, the time and labor involved in making them is less). How are they used?

Oak chips, beans, and blocks are added directly to the fermenting tank—either loose or enclosed in a

giant mesh teabag. Staves can be inserted into frames that can be dropped into older barrels or

suspended in stainless steel tanks. Finally, most barrel alternatives come toasted in a variety of ways and

flavors worthy of a Starbucks menu. Spicy staves, anyone? How about premium dark-roast chips with

extra vanilla and caramel?

No matter their range of flavors, barrel alternatives never achieve the subtle, complex effects of

barrels. And while such alternatives are an asset in the making of inexpensive wines, as of this writing, I

know of no great wine in the world that is made using them.

I do want to quickly add that not every wine benefits from time in a barrel. For some

wines—whites in particular—the weighty, sweet vanilla and toasted oak flavors of new

wood can be like a glob of sauce masking the purity of the fruit itself. Moreover, some

wines with oaky flavors haven’t actually spent time in barrels. It’s highly unlikely, for

example, that an $18 chardonnay was fermented in a new French oak barrel that cost

$1,300. The economics just don’t work. To get its oaky character, the chardonnay was

probably made with a “barrel alternative.

” For more about this, see Chips, Beans, and

Blocks—Oak Without Barrels, above.

Although open wooden buckets were used to hold and transport wine more than two

thousand years before the Christian Era, closed oak barrels first came into use during the

Roman Empire. Oak, extremely plentiful in the forests of Europe, had many desirable

qualities: It was strong enough to withstand considerable wear and tear without busting

apart, yet sufficiently malleable to be shaped into barrels that could be rolled and moved.

Moreover, oak barrels were leakproof, despite the fact that nothing was (or is) used

between the staves to seal them.

Lastly, oak usually had a desirable effect on the wine itself. Early winemakers

discerned that wine grew softer, and in many cases tasted richer and more substantial, after

oak aging. During the last third of the twentieth century, research on oak aging began to

unravel the reason why.

At least as far as wine is concerned, oak wood is porous to a perfect degree. Both water

and alcohol evaporate outward through the barrel’s staves and bunghole (the small access

hole, closed with a stopper, or bung). A 60-gallon (230 liter) barrel of cabernet sauvignon,

for example, may lose as much as 5 to 6 gallons (19 to 23 liters) of liquid per year—about

thirty bottles of wine. At the same time, minute amounts of oxygen from outside are

seeping through the grain and into the barrel, helping to weave together the elements of

the wine and giving it a softer dimension. Oxygen also becomes a factor in the equation

each time the winemaker removes the bung from the barrel and tops up the wine or

partially clarifies it by racking it into another barrel.

KOSHER WINE

The word kosher means “fit,

” thus, in Jewish tradition, kosher wines are considered fit to drink. There are

two types—non-mevushal and mevushal.

Non-mevushal kosher wine must be made, handled, bottled, certified, opened, poured, and drunk only

by Sabbath-observant Jews. If a non-Jew touches the wine, the wine loses its non-mevushal kosher

status, is considered unfit for sacramental use, and will be rejected by strict observant Jews, who will not

drink it. The second, and far more common type of kosher wine is mevushal (literally,

“cooked”).

Mevushal wines are made like non-mevushal wines, with one exception—they are pasteurized and can

therefore be bought, opened, and shared among Jews and non-Jews, as well as non-observant Jews

and observant Jews.

Religious scholars speculate that the reason for the two types goes far back in history. Traditionally, of

course, Jewish religious authorities knew that wine was used not just for sacramental purposes, but also

socially. Wine eased and encouraged social interaction. It’s thought that early Jewish intellectuals may

have feared such socializing, viewing it as the first step toward the disintegration of Jewish culture and

the assimilation of

Jews into other cultures. T o mitigate against this, two versions of kosher wine would be made.

Mevushal wine would be, quite literally, boiled, making it in a sense morally sterilized. Although mevushal

wine would therefore be less palatable than non-mevushal wine, it could be shared by non-Jews and

non-observant Jews with observant Jews.

Until recently in the United States, the wines were also produced from foxy-tasting native grapes, such

as Concord (of jelly fame). Such grapes thrived along the East Coast, where the largest centers of

Jewish population were to be found. Over time, American-made kosher wine became inextricably linked

with low-quality, syrupy-sweet wines that tasted like adult Kool-Aid.

T oday kosher wines—non-mevushal and mevushal—are in an entirely different league, and compete

with fine wines made anywhere in the world. They are made around the world from classic European

grape varieties, such as cabernet sauvignon and chardonnay. Importantly, mevushal wines are no longer

boiled, but flash pasteurized—a gentler form of sterilization—and the wine is then aged. According to

KosherWine.com, a leading kosher wine retail site, as of 2010, annual sales of kosher wine in the United

States alone had a value of approximately $45 million.

The impact oak has on wine depends, among other things, on the type of oak used. Of

the approximately three hundred species of oak that grow around the world, just three

main types are used in winemaking: the American oak Quercus alba (mainly from the

Midwest) and the French oaks Quercus robur and Quercus sessiliflora (also called

Quercus petraea).

The flavor American oak imparts to wine is different from the flavor French oak

imparts. American oak, which is heavier, denser, and less porous than French oak, also

tends to be less tannic and have more pronounced vanilla and sometimes coconut-like

flavors. French oak is more subtle in terms of flavor, somewhat more tannic, and allows

for slightly greater—but still gentle—oxidation. Neither is necessarily better than the

other, in the same way that basil isn’t necessarily better than rosemary. The idea is to find

a type of oak that will best support the fruit flavors in a given wine. To determine this,

winemakers generally age small lots of their wines experimentally in many different oak

barrels representing different oak species, different forests, and a variety of coopers, and

then decide which ones work best.

The age of the barrels also matters. A wine-maker can choose to put a wine into new

barrels, used barrels, or a combination of new and used barrels. (Note that sometimes used

barrels are euphemistically referred to as seasoned barrels—as in a “seasoned” person.)

New barrels have the strongest impact on a wine’s aroma and flavor (and for that reason,

some winemakers prefer not to use them). Second-use barrels have considerably less

impact, since most things that can be extracted from a barrel are extracted the first time

that barrel is used. After four uses or so, a barrel is generally considered “neutral”

—

though it can still be used (for decades) to store and age wine. In a neutral barrel, a small

amount of oxygenation will still occur, but little if any barrel flavor is left to be imparted

to the wine.

Aging in oak is not the same as fermenting in oak. The two distinctly different

processes have different consequences. Imagine, for example, a batch of chardonnay that

is fermented in oak and then aged in oak for six months. Imagine a second batch that is

fermented in stainless steel and then aged in oak for the same period. Although you might

expect that the wine receiving two doses of oak (during fermentation and aging) would

have the most pronounced oak and vanilla flavors and the strongest impression of tannin,

the opposite is usually true. When a wine is fermented in oak, the yeasts also interact with

the wood. When the spent yeast cells (lees) are ultimately removed from the wine, a

measure of the wood tannin (and wood flavors) may be removed with them. By

comparison, a white wine fermented in stainless steel and then put without the lees into

oak barrels readily absorbs the wood flavors and tannins to which it is exposed.

So, in the end, in using oak judiciously, a winemaker can opt to: ferment the wine in

oak but not age it in it; age the wine in oak but not ferment it in it; use some of both; or

use none of either.

The oak forests of France have been carefully maintained by continual replanting since the 13th century.

MAKING OFF-DRY AND SWEET WINE

As noted in What Makes Wine, Wine? (page 9), there are no internationally agreed-upon

definitions for terms such as off-dry and semisweet. Still, we could probably all recognize

a wine that’s just a touch sweet, in other words, a wine that’s not dessert-level opulent.

How are these wines—I’ll group them all together under the banner “off-dry”

—made?

As you know, during the fermentation of dry wines, yeasts convert the sugar in grapes to

alcohol. However, in making an off-dry wine, fermentation is stopped, usually by giving

the wine a small dose of SO2 (sulfur dioxide), which kills the yeasts before they have

converted all the sugar to alcohol. This leaves a wine with a touch of natural sweetness

and a slightly lower level of alcohol. In this scenario, the wine is not sweet enough to be a

dessert wine; in fact, the tiny bit of residual sugar may be just barely perceptible. Usually,

the goal of leaving this small snippet of sugar is simply to buttress the fruitiness of the

wine. Many rieslings are made in this way.

So, how does a wine come to be sweet enough to be dessert in itself? The process starts

with grapes that are very high in sugar because they were:

1 PICKED WHEN THEIR sugar content is very high; or

2 PICKED, LAID OUT on mats, and allowed to raisinate, thereby concentrating their sugar; or

3 PERMITTED TO FREEZE on the vine (as in eiswein) so that water can be separated from the

sugary juice; or

4 A TTACKED BY THE fungus Botrytis cinerea (the “noble rot” of French Sauternes), which

consumes some of the water in the grapes and helps more to evaporate, again

concentrating the sugar.

Each of these methods is explained in more depth later (the Botrytis cinerea responsible

for Sauternes, for example, is addressed fully in the Bordeaux section, page 157). What’s

important to know here is that all of these options are extremely risky—animals may eat

the sweet grapes, the grapes may be attacked by unfavorable molds or diseases, weather

may destroy the grapes before the crop can be picked, and so on. Moreover, each of these

processes is very labor intensive. Sweet wines, as a result, are almost universally rare and

expensive.

No matter which of the four methods is used, the resulting grape juice has a higher

sugar content than usual. Before the yeasts can convert all this sugar to alcohol, either the

winemaker stops the fermentation early, as for an off-dry wine, or the yeasts’ action is

halted by the very alcohol they have produced. (As you’ll recall, once the alcohol level has

reached about 16 percent, most yeasts die from “alcohol poisoning,

” and whatever natural

sugar is left remains.)

CHAPTALIZATION

Many people think sweet wines are made by adding sugar to them, but as you see from the

previous section, that’s not the case. Adding sugar—chaptalization—has a different

purpose. Named after Jean-Antoine Chaptal, minister of agriculture under Napoleon, who

first sanctioned the process, chaptalization is the act of adding sugar to a low-alcohol wine

before and/or during fermentation so the yeasts will have more sugar to convert to alcohol.

Thus, the goal is not to make the wine sweeter—it’s to make it higher in alcohol and

therefore fuller in body.

Importantly, you cannot taste sugar in the chaptalized wine; the process does not

increase the wine’s sweetness. Critics, however, contend that chaptalized wines take on a

blowsy, out-of-balance character, since the final alcohol has been artificially jacked up.

Many wines in northern Europe are chaptalized when the grapes do not get ripe enough

to produce a wine with sufficient body. Even though this process is usually illegal, it’s

rather easy—just by accident of course—to spill a huge sack of sugar into the fermenting

vat. Quel domage! Conversely, wines made in such sunny places as Australia and

California are rarely chaptalized because grapes in those places virtually always get ripe

enough to produce more than enough alcohol.

Cabernet sauvignon grapes ripen in the Napa V alley sunshine. Each grape variety is subtly unique in the shape and size

of its berries and clusters, as well as its leaves.

GETTING TO KNOW THE GRAPES

Airén (i-WREN) is a good place to begin. Recognize the name? What about rkatsiteli (are-

cat-si-TELL-ee) or savagnin (sa-va-NYEN)? They are, respectively, one of the most

widely planted grape varieties in the world; the most widely planted grape in the former

Soviet Union (it also grows in the United States, in New Y ork State); and the “mother” of

sauvignon blanc. But you may never have drunk wine made from airén or rkatsiteli or

savagnin.

There are five thousand to ten thousand varieties of grapes (see Drinking DNA, page

55). Scientists do not have an exact figure because many varieties are thought to exist

solely in laboratory collections, and are no longer cultivated. Of this large number, about

150 are planted in commercially significant amounts. I’ve chosen twenty-five of those—

the ones I think we are most likely to encounter—and have included here a profile of each.

Y ou’ll find them on the following pages, followed by a glossary of virtually every other

important grape worldwide.

One last note: I have tried, when it seemed appropriate (or just plain fascinating), to

include information on the parents or genetic relationships of the grapes in this chapter.

Hundreds of today’s grapes are, in fact, natural crosses (that is, they spontaneously

occurred in nature) of other grapes, and hundreds more are intentional crosses (made by

growers or scientists). My leading resource for this information has been the authoritative

and quite phenomenal reference work Wine Grapes by Jancis Robinson, Julia Harding,

and Dr. José V ouillamoz (2012).

THE TOP TWENTY-FIVE GRAPES TO KNOW

ALBARIÑO

One of the liveliest white wines in Europe and considered one of the best wines for

seafood, albariño (al-bar-EEN-yo) comes from the region of Rías Baixas (REE-az BUY -

shaz), along northeastern Spain’s ruggedly beautiful and very green northwestern coast (it

looks like Ireland). In the past decade, albariño has become Spain’s most notable and

delicious dry white table wine, even though the dry whites of Rioja (made from the grape

variety viura) were once better known. Albariño is floral and citrusy, but not quite as

aromatic as, say, riesling or gewürztraminer. It is rarely made or aged in oak and is best

when young and snappy. Interestingly, unlike most Spanish (or European) wines, which

are named for the place from which they come, albariño is always labeled just that—

albariño. (See also Rías Baixas, page 485). Albariño, for all its fame in Spain, probably

originated in northeastern Portugal, where it has grown for centuries and where it is

known as alvarinho. It is still grown widely there and is the core grape in vinho verde.

BARBERA

Barbera (bar-BEAR-a), the most widely planted red grape in the northwestern Italian

region of Piedmont, rose to prominence there after the phylloxera epidemic (page 30).

Genetic research suggests it probably originated someplace else and was brought to

Piedmont. Its parents are not known.

Even though nebbiolo (the grape used to make Barolo and Barbaresco) is more

renowned, it’s barbera, not nebbiolo, that Piedmontese winemakers invariably drink with

dinner. Beginning in the mid 1980s, the quality of barbera rose dramatically. By planting it

in better sites, limiting the yield, and aging the wine in better barrels, Piedmontese wine-

makers began making superbly mouthfilling, rich wines packed with flavor. Top barberas

also have a natural vivacity—a precision and vibrancy that comes from the grapes’

relatively high acidity. Today, all of the great barberas come from Piedmont, and the grape

is rarely planted elsewhere, although there is a small amount grown in northern California.

A century ago, Italian immigrants in California planted it in poor, usually hot areas,

hoping to make a hearty, low-cost red wine. After a brief resurgence as part of the “Cal-

Ital” movement of the early 1990s, barbera sadly began to decline in importance there.

CABERNET FRANC

While not as well known as its offspring, cabernet sauvignon and merlot, cabernet franc

(CAB-er-nay FRONK) plays an important role in many of the world’s top Bordeaux and

Bordeaux-style blends. Indeed, on the so-called “Right Bank” of Bordeaux, in the

appellations Pomerol and St.

-Émilion, cabernet franc can make up 50 percent of the blend

or more as is often the case with the legendary Bordeaux wine Château Cheval Blanc.

Compared to its Bordeaux confreres, cabernet franc is generally not as fleshy as merlot,

nor is it as structured and intense as cabernet sauvignon. For many wineries, it thus sits in

perfect mid-prance between the two. If it gets ripe, that is. When the grapes are unripe

(and it’s a challenge to ripen cabernet franc), the wine has a distinct green bell pepper

character—the result of compounds in the wine known as pyrazines. But in warmer years,

when sugars are high and pyrazines fall, cabernet franc can be fantastic, with its violet or

irislike aromas and minerally, dark chocolaty flavors. Loire V alley Chinon (100 percent

cabernet franc) is the most well-known, delicious example. But the grape has also made

quiet but stunning progress in California, as wines like Vineyard 29’s cabernet franc attest.

Most French grape varieties came from the east: France got its initial vines from Italy,

which in turn got them via Lebanon (historically, Phoenicia), which probably got them

from southern Turkey. But surprising genetic research in the 2010s revealed that cabernet

franc originated to the southwest of France, in Spain’s Basque country, and from there was

brought northeast to Bordeaux.

The highest quality wines come from clusters of grapes that are sometimes painstakingly destemmed by hand. Only the

most perfect grapes will be picked off the cluster; the rest are discarded.

DRINKING DNA

Throughout the entire history of winemaking—and indeed right up until the early 1990s—the only way to

try to tell, say, merlot from mourvèdre was by ampelography, the science of identifying vines by

measuring and characterizing their shoots, canes, leaves, buds, flowers, clusters, seeds, and grapes.

Not surprisingly, farmers sometimes got it wrong, growing renowned “pinot blanc” that turned out to be

chardonnay, and so on.

Since the early 1990s, however, grapevine identification has had quite a bit in common with, say, an

FBI forensic laboratory. Just as DNA (deoxyribonucleic acid, the chemical composition of genes)

obtained from a crime scene can be compared with the DNA of a suspect, so the DNA of a grape variety

being researched can be compared to the DNA of known varieties. Scientists, using complex techniques,

attempt to find genetic messages encoded in certain sequences of the grape variety’s DNA. These then

become the identification markers for any individual variety.

In groundbreaking research in 1997, such DNA typing was also used for the first time to reveal the

parentage of grapes. According to top genetic researchers such as Dr. José Vouillamoz, author, with

Jancis Robinson and Julia Harding, of Wine Grapes, the most authoritative reference work on vine

genetics, a small number of grape varieties have given birth to all of the varieties in the world today. Chief

among these “founder varieties” are pinot noir, gouais blanc, and savagnin (also known as traminer). The

first two together have begotten more than twenty different varieties over time, including chardonnay and

gamay. For its part, the Casanova-like gouais blanc has crossed with scores of varieties (some of which

no longer exist), resulting in the creation of more than eighty different varieties, including riesling,

blaufränkisch, and muscadelle, to name three very different progeny. The idea that all of the important

varieties—red and white—can be traced back to perhaps fewer than ten founder varieties, and a few

primary domestication sites (some of which are probably in modern-day Turkey) is startlingly new.

Finally, the very first original varieties that gave rise to the founder varieties were probably all red. It’s

thought that the first white variety was a mutation that occurred when pieces of DNA moved within the

gene, interrupting the coding for anthocyanins, molecules that create color. In early wine-drinking

civilizations, the rarity of white wines gave them social value and led to the perception that white wines

were more refined than reds, and as such, more desirable as upper-class drinks.

Ripe cabernet franc grapes, amazingly formed in a heart-shaped cluster.

CABERNET SAUVIGNON

The preeminent classic red grape variety, cabernet sauvignon (CAB-er-nay sew-vin-

Y AWN) is capable of making some of the most structured, complex, majestic, and

ageworthy reds in the world. It’s astounding that a wine so often angular and powerful

when young can meta-morphose into a velvety, rich, elegant, and complex wine with

several years’ aging. Cabernet can be like the awkward kid who grows up to be a Nobel

laureate, and sexy to boot. Not all cabernet sauvignons have this ability, of course. Many

modestly priced cabernets are made in an easy-drinking style that is simply simple. These

wines bear little of the depth, power, and intense concentration of, say, Château Latour

from Bordeaux, Sassicaia from Italy, or Harlan Estate from the Napa V alley.

But there’s something else that makes great cabernets like these so compelling. Few

other red wines in the world have cabernet’s counterintuitive ability to combine two of the

characteristics mentioned above—power and elegance. I think it’s this capacity to embody,

in one split second, two contrapuntal ideas that makes the great cabernets so intellectually

fascinating… a yin-yang of flavor.

HOW MUCH CABERNET IN THE CABERNET?

Labeling a wine based on the variety of grape used to make the wine has been commonplace in the New

World since the late 1960s. (In Europe, wines are far more commonly labeled according to the place where

the grapes were grown.) In the United States, the first varietally labeled wines were required by federal law

to be composed of 51 percent of the variety named. In 1983, the minimum was raised to the current level of

75 percent. Specific appellations can choose to exceed (but not lessen) the federal regulations (for example,

in the Willamette V alley of Oregon, all pinot noirs with that grape name on the front label must be at least 90

percent pinot noir).

Cabernet sauvignon’s aromas and flavors are well known and easy to indentify:

blackberry, black currant, cassis, mint, cedar, graphite, licorice, leather, green tobacco,

cigar, black plums, dark chocolate, sandalwood, and so on. These sensations are then

swirled into a delicious amalgam as the wine ages. I should add that unripe, poorly made

cabernet sauvignon, like poorly made sauvignon blanc, usually tastes vegetal—a dank

mixture of bell peppers, canned green beans, and cabbage water. This shared tendency

toward vegetative green flavors if the grapes are not ripe comes as no surprise, since

cabernet sauvignon is the offspring of sauvignon blanc (which, one day, thought to be in

the mid-1700s, had a nice moment in nature with cabernet franc, resulting in cabernet

sauvignon). Both cabernet sauvignon and sauvignon blanc are high in pyrazines—

compounds in grape skins that give the final wine a bell pepper flavor.

Because cabernet sauvignon is one of the most tannic of all the major red grapes, it has,

over the past few decades, been a prime focus in the study of tannin and tannin ripeness.

Twenty five years ago, for example, it was commonly thought that cabernet required

decades of aging to feel soft. Today, many cabernet sauvignons packed with large amounts

of tannin nonetheless possess a soft mouthfeel right off the bat. This is possible because

harvest decisions are now often based on the physiological maturity of the tannin in

cabernet grapes, rather than sugar (see the tannin section in What Makes Wine, Wine?,

page 12). So, even though it may seem like a public relations pitch: It is indeed possible

for the best cabernet sauvignons today to be ready to drink now and delicious decades in

the future.

Finally, historically, the world’s most prized cabernet sauvignons were cabernets

blended with merlot, cabernet franc, and perhaps malbec and petite verdot. They came

from the Médoc communes of Margaux, St.

-Julien, Pauillac, and St.

-Estèphe in Bordeaux,

where the wines were (and still are) ranked into “growths,

” from First Growth, the most

renowned, down to Fifth Growth. However, world-class cabernets are now regularly being

made in California (especially the Napa V alley), Italy, Australia, and Washington State.

THE MYTH OF CABERNET AND CHOCOLATE

It may sound romantic—even inspired—but as marriages go, cabernet and chocolate are a match made in

hell (or in the depths of the marketing department). Chocolate is an extremely powerful, profound, and

complex flavor . Its deep bitterness accentuates the tannin in cabernet sauvignon, making the wine taste

severe and angular . Chocolate’ s rich fruitiness blows away cabernet’ s graceful fruity nuances, making the

wine taste drab and hollow. Moreover , chocolate’ s profound sweetness makes most dry wines taste sour . In

short, the would-be dominatrix chocolate needs a partner more powerful and sweeter than herself. Which

may be one of the reasons sweet, luscious, opulent Port is a life necessity.

CHARDONNAY

To any wine drinker, it comes as no surprise that, for several decades, chardonnay

(shardoe-NAY) has been one of the most successful white wines in the world. The wine’s

easily understood, appealing flavors—vanilla, butter, butterscotch, buttered toast, custard,

minerals, green apples, exotic citrus fruits—are matched by equally effusive textures—

creamy, lush, and full-bodied. (It’s the Marilyn Monroe of white grapes, to be sure.) We

are talking here about the majority of chardonnays in the world; of course, lean, racy,

lightning-crisp Chablis (100 percent chardonnay) remains a brilliant sensorial exception to

the norm.

But chardonnay’s popularity is, indeed, relatively recent. Wine drinkers are often

surprised to learn that, as of the mid-1960s, there were but a few hundred acres of it in all

of California (by 2011, there were 95,000 acres/38,445 hectares!). Ditto for most of the

rest of the world. Little, if any, chardonnay existed in Chile, Argentina, Australia, South

Africa, Spain, or Italy, not to mention Oregon, Washington State, and other parts of the

United States. In fact, the only places chardonnay reigned were its homeland, the small

Burgundy region of France, and Burgundy’s northern neighbor, Champagne. (See

Burgundy, page 197.) It was in Burgundy, probably sometime in the early Middle Ages,

that chardonnay arose as a seedling—a natural cross of the white grape gouais blanc with

the red grape pinot noir.

Small as it was in terms of production, Burgundian chardonnay proved prodigious in its

ability to inspire winemakers worldwide. Today, chardonnay is virtually ubiquitous.

(Although I think it’s fair to say that few wines among the millions of cases now produced

ever manage to hold a candle to the best Burgundian versions.)

Stylistically, chardonnay is often said to be a “winemaker’s wine”

—meaning that wine-

makers like it for its capacity to be transformed by lots of winemaking techniques. Barrel

fermentation, malolactic fermentation, sur lie aging, and so on—chardonnay often gets the

whole nine yards of technical possibility. Of course, there’s a hitch. Today, too much char-

donnay tastes manipulated, diffused, flabby, overoaked, and overdone. In a sea of these

sad behemoths, however, the finest chardonnays remain among the world’s most luscious

and complex dry white wines.

IT’S ALL ABOUT SPECIES

All grapevines belong to the genus Vitis (VIT-tis). Sometime in the late T ertiary Period,

66 million to 2.58 million years ago, climatic changes caused the genus to split into

about sixty separate species. The most important species for wine drinkers is vinifera

(vin-IF-er-a). T oday 99.99 percent of the wines in the world are made from grapes

belonging to Vitis vinifera. Interestingly, this was and is the only species native to

Europe and Asia. Chardonnay, cabernet sauvignon, merlot, pinot noir, riesling,

sauvignon blanc, and zinfandel, for example, are all Vitis vinifera grapes. The other

dozens of species were and are all native to North America. Among these, the best

known among wine drinkers is Vitis labrusca, native to New England and Canada.

Concord belongs to this species. It was probably Vitis labrusca vines that inspired Leif

Eriksson to name North America Vinland in 1001. Wines (not to mention jelly and jam)

are still made from this species, especially in upper New York State.

CHENIN BLANC

The most famous, vibrant chenin blancs (SHEN-in BLAHNK) of the world come from the

Loire V alley of France, specifically from the appellations V ouvray and Savennières. The

Loire V alley is also the ancestral home of this grape, which arose as a natural cross of

savagnin and an unknown parent.

The best examples of chenin blanc are stunningly complex wines with a flavor of

apples and honey (although not necessarily honey’s sweetness). They are shimmering with

acidity, minerally, and long-lived. If modern life allowed for such seemingly lost pleasures

as sitting in a meadow reading Madame Bovary or The Age of Innocence, chenin blanc

would be the fitting wine to drink.

Loire V alley chenin blanc is made in a variety of degrees of sweetness, from bone-dry

to just a touch of sweetness (to balance the wine’s dramatic acidity) to fully sweet. The

latter can make for phenomenal dessert wines, as evidenced by the most legendary and

luscious of all, Quarts de Chaume, from a tiny area in the middle of the Loire V alley.

Chenin blanc is also a well-known white grape in South Africa, where it is sometimes

known as steen. There, however, it is unfortunately made mostly into a simple, innocuous

quaffing wine. In California, chenin blanc was a major white grape prior to the 1960s.

Today, most California chenin blanc grapes are over-cropped for high yields and are

destined for jug wines, a sad fate given the grapes’ potential character.

GAMAY

Gamay (gam-AY), or more properly gamay noir, is the source of the French wine

Beaujolais (including Beaujolais Nouveau), oceans of which are washed down in Parisian

bistros every year. Of all the well-known red grapes, gamay is perhaps the lowest in tannin

and thus, structurally speaking, more like a white wine than a red. It’s also exuberantly

fruity. In the hands of a great producer, and from grapes grown on a great site, this

fruitiness spirals around flavors that exude a sense of crushed rock and minerals, and the

total flavor effect can be dazzling. (Alas, gamay from a mediocre site, grown at high

yields, and then made in a commercial style, is fruitiness that’s back-fired. Indeed, cheap

commercial gamays are dead ringers for melted black cherry Jell-O and bubble gum.) The

most serious, best gamays in the world are from small producers in one of the ten “cru”

villages within the Beaujolais region. See the Beaujolais section (page 227) for more on

these.

Gamay noir’s parents are pinot noir and gouais blanc, making it a sibling of many

grapes, including chardonnay, Auxerrois, and melon de Bourgogne. It has existed in its

homeland, Burgundy, France, since the fourteenth century. Late in that century, however, it

was banned by one of the powerful dukes of Burgundy, and banished to the Beaujolais

region, south of Burgundy proper.

Several decades ago, so-called gamay (probably actually the French grape valdiguié, or

sometimes an undistinguished clone of pinot noir) was commonly grown in California to

be used in jug wines. Today, however, outside France, gamay is virtually nonexistent as a

varietal wine.

Though they make white wine, gewürztraminer grapes are deep pink in color.

GEWÜRZTRAMINER

More than almost any other wine we might regularly encounter, gewürztraminer’s (guh-

VURZ-tra-meen-er) nose is heady (sorry, couldn’t resist). In fact, the explosive aromas of

gewürztraminer—roses, lychees, gingerbread, orange marmalade, grapefruit pith, fruit-

cocktail syrup—come vaulting out of the glass. Gewürztraminer is nothing if not

extroverted. Even novice drinkers easily recognize it.

The prefix gewürz- means spice in German, although the meaning is more along the

lines of “outrageously perfumed” than anything that might come out of a kitchen spice

rack. The grape is not actually a distinct variety, but rather savagnin rosé—a pink-berried,

highly aromatic clone of savagnin, one of the so-called “founder varieties.

” (Traminer

aromatico, a specialty of the northern Italian province of Trentino-Alto Adige, is another

clone of savagnin.)

It’s important to note that gewürztraminer’s pungent aromatics and massive fruitiness

can be confusing, leading you to think that the wine you’re drinking is sweet. That’s

usually not the case (the telltale edge of bitterness at the finish is evidence). Indeed, the

world’s best gewürztraminers are decidedly dry (unless, of course, the wine in question is

specifically a dessert wine made from this grape).

In very warm years, grapes of all types can shrivel and dessicate. Most “raisined” bunches will be sorted out and

removed, though a small percentage can contribute extra sweetness, leading to a fuller-bodied wine.

The most intense and breathtaking gewürztraminers are made in France, in the

northeastern region of Alsace. Here the wine is legendary—deeply yellow with a coppery

cast, superbly concentrated, exquisitely balanced, full-bodied, full of extract, with just

enough acidity to hold it all together, and a mega-mouthful of flavor. (Because the wine

tends to be naturally low in acidity, poor-quality examples can come off oily.) No surprise

that top gewürztraminer is usually drunk with rich, complex pork dishes.

Outside of Alsace, there’s only one place in the world where gewürztraminer is reliably

sensational: the region of Trentino-Alto Adige in Italy.

GRENACHE

Grenache (gren-AHSH) is well known both as a white grape (grenache blanc) and a red

(grenache noir). The red grenache noir is especially valued and makes a slew of stunning

wines around the world. It is, for example, the lead grape in many southern French wines,

including Châteauneuf-du-Pape, Côtes-du-Rhône, and Gigondas, as well as the top grape

in many northern regions of Spain, including Campo de Borja and Priorat. And, when the

vines are old, grenache makes devastatingly great wine in Australia. In California and

Washington State, the grape continues to inspire many avant-garde winemakers, and there

are now remarkable examples of grenache and grenache blends in both states.

Although France is often thought of as grenache’s ancestral home, the grape is Spanish

in origin and rightfully ought to be known by its Spanish name, garnacha (gar-NA-cha).

While garnacha’s parents are not known, it is thought to have arisen in Aragon, one of the

seventeen autonomous communities in Spain.

That said, until recently, a strong scientific hypothesis had grenache originating in Italy,

first as a white grape called vernaccia (later the pronounciation was corrupted to garnaccia

or garnacha) and later brought to Spain (where it mutated to form a red clone) and from

there to France. But as similar sounding as the names vernaccia and garnacha are,

molecular analyses show no genetic relationship between the two grapes. The Italian

connection is not without merit, however, since DNA typing shows Sardinia’s important

grape cannonau to be garnacha tinta/grenache noir.

Like pinot noir, grenache is genetically unstable, is difficult to grow, and challenging to

make into wine. From less than ideal vineyards, grenache noir can be heavy-handed,

simple, and fairly alcoholic (there are countless examples of this in central and southern

Spain, southern France, and the Central V alley of California). But when grenache is at its

best, the wines that result have an unmistakable purity, richness, and beauty, plus the

evocative aroma and flavor of cherry preserves. Grenache is not particularly high in

tannin, and thus great examples have a sappy, luxurious texture.

In most places where it is grown, grenache is blended with other varieties—carignan,

syrah, and mourvèdre in particular.

GRÜNER VELTLINER

A decade ago, grüner veltliner (GREW-ner VELT-leaner) would not have made a top-25

list like this. But its place today is a testament to the quality of the variety and the surging

success of Austrian wine. Grüner veltliner is, in fact, the leading white wine of Austria—

more acres are planted with it than with any other variety. It’s also the vinous signature of

the country; the grape especially excels in the pristine vineyards along the flowing Danube

river north and west of Vienna. With the exception of the Czech Republic, Hungary, and a

few other, smaller areas in Eastern Europe, grüner veltliner is grown virtually no place

else.

The grape is an ancient natural cross of savagnin and a nearly extinct German variety,

St. Georgener. Going back even further in the family tree, grüner veltliner is related to

pinot noir (possibly as a grandchild), since pinot noir and savagnin are related.

Grüner veltliner has a forward personality. Precise, lively, bold, dry, and minerally, it’s

legendary for its lightening-strike of white pepper aroma and flavor, along with a subtle

hint of green legumes. Like riesling, grüner is virtually never blended with other grapes

and is made in a purist manner, which almost never involves new oak. Also like riesling,

the grape tends to be high in natural acidity, giving it a mouthwatering quality, as well as

considerable advantages when it comes to pairing with food.

As autumn approaches, a swallow has found a perfect spot to make her nest.

MALBEC

Indigenous to southwestern France, malbec (MAL-beck), the now-popular name for the

grape variety cot, is the offspring of two obscure French grapes—magdeleine noire des

Charentes and prunelard. While malbec is one of the five main red grapes that can be

blended to make red Bordeaux, plantings of it there have been declining for a long time

(the grape is prone to frost, and thus has steadily fallen out of favor in Bordeaux’s

maritime climate). Today, malbec generally makes up less than 10 percent of any

Bordeaux wine—if it’s used at all.

Half a world away, however, malbec is a star. In the mid-nineteenth century, the grape

was brought from Bordeaux to Argentina, where it is now the leading grape for fine red

wines. There, it is grown in the dry, sunny, extremely high-altitude vineyards that, like

steps, descend from the peaks of the Andes. And, in contrast to Bordeaux, malbec in

Argentina (pronounced, in that country, mal-BEC) is almost always made as a varietal

wine, rather than part of a blend.

Malbec tends to be low in acidity and slightly less tannic than cabernet sauvignon.

Indeed, it’s prized for its soft, mouthfilling texture (the wine equivalent of molten

chocolate cake), its deep, inky color, and its plummy, mocha, earthy aromas and flavors.

Outside of Argentina and Bordeaux, malbec is the historic grape of Cahors, in

southwestern France, where it has traditionally been known by its original name, cot. (In

an interesting marketing twist, Cahors now refers to its wine as the “French malbec,

”

although in Cahors the grape makes a rough-edged, tannic wine.)

Malbec shows good promise in the Napa V alley of California, where it is increasingly

grown to be used as part of top-notch cabernet blends.

MUSKRAT LOVE

The place:

My wine classroom in the Napa Valley.

The scene:

An exchange with a middle-aged CEO from abroad, during a class on and tasting of California

chardonnays.

The dialogue:

HIM: Number three chardonnay is, umm… a little musky.

ME, hoping he’s referring to muscat grapes: You mean like muscat blanc or moscato?

HIM: No. Not moscato. Musky.

ME: As in, ahem, the testicles of a male deer?

HIM: I think it’s the ducts in their legs.

Alas, we were both wrong on the anatomy. The word musk, probably originally derived from the

Sanskrit mushká (“scrotum”), refers to a strong-smelling substance secreted in a glandular sac under the

skin of the abdomen of the male musk deer, or a similar secretion of civets, otters, and muskrats.

Interestingly, despite the word’s rather sobering definition, the term musky is most often used to describe

fruity, feminine wines with aromatic allure.

MERLOT

V ery similar in flavor and texture to cabernet sauvignon, merlot (mehr-LOW) is easily

confused with it in blind tastings. Indeed, the two share the same father—cabernet franc.

But merlot’s mother is the grape magdeleine noire des Charentes, while cabernet’s mother

is sauvignon blanc.

In the regional French dialect of Bordeaux, the name merlot means “little blackbird”

(after the blackbirds—spelled “merlau”

—who reportedly love to eat the grapes). Merlot’s

aromas and flavors include blackberry, cassis, baked cherries, plums, licorice, dark

chocolate, and mocha. What merlot usually lacks is cabernet sauvignon’s occasional hint

of green tobacco or dried mint.

Much is made of merlot’s relative roundness, plumpness, and lack of tannin compared

to cabernet sauvignon. I think the idea is largely misleading. When merlot is planted in

rocky, well-drained soils in top appellations, it can be every bit as structured,

commanding, complex, and tannic as cabernet sauvignon. The problem is that too often

wine drinkers buy fairly innocuous, inexpensive merlot (sure it’s soft; maybe limp would

be a better word), then compare it with expensive cabernet sauvignon from a top site.

That’s apples to oranges.

As for cabernet sauvignon, the most famous region for merlot has historically been the

Bordeaux region of France, where merlot (not cabernet sauvignon) is the leading grape in

terms of total production. Merlot in Bordeaux is planted mostly outside of the Médoc, and

is especially renowned on the Right Bank—in the appellations of Pomerol and St.

-

Émilion. Here, merlot, too, is almost always blended with cabernet sauvignon, cabernet

franc, and possibly malbec and/or petit verdot. There is one extremely famous exception

to the blending notion—Château Pétrus (from Pomerol), one of the most expensive wines

in the world, is 99 percent merlot.

Merlot grapes growing in an unexpected place: Austria.

In addition to rich, complex, structured merlots from top regions, another compelling

style of merlot also exists: I’ll call it the sleek style. Northern Italy has many such merlots,

as does Long Island, in New Y ork State. But some of the best in this style come from two

places: Chile and Washington State. The sheer number of exciting, deeply concentrated

merlots coming from Washington State is astounding, and is growing larger year after

year. In Chile, merlots like Casa Lapostolle’s Cuvée Alexandre show the riveting potential

this grape has in the New World.

MOURVÈDRE

If you were ever an English major, you’ll know what I mean by this: Mourvèdre (moor-

VED-rah) is the Heathcliff of red grapes. Its dark, hard-edged, almost brooding flavors are

never light, juicy, or lively. Mourvèdre has gravitas.

Like carignan and grenache, the grape is Spanish in origin. It should properly be known

by its Spanish name, monastrell (or mataró, as it’s called in northern Spain and in the

Pyrenees). Today, it is grown in numerous provinces in the south-central region of

Castilla-La Mancha (especially in the denomination of Jumilla), where it’s used to make

delicious, sometimes muscular wines with dry, bitter espresso-like flavors (red meat is

helpful when consuming them).

The variety is thought to have originated next door to Castilla-La Mancha, in the

province of V alencia, where it was propagated by monks. The name derives from the Latin

monasteriellu, a diminutive of monasteriu, meaning “monastery.

”

In southern France, a small amount of mourvèdre is often used to give depth, color, and

kick to Rhône blends such as Châteauneuf-du-Pape and Côtes-du-Rhône. Indeed, before

the phylloxera epidemic, mourvèdre was widely planted throughout the south and was the

main red grape in Provence. Today, only the small Provençal appellation of Bandol

remains steadfast mourvèdre territory.

Mourvèdre was first brought to California from Spain in the mid-1800s, and sparse

plots of old-vine “mataro” can still be found. The grape became popular once again in the

1980s as a blending grape in California’s Rhône-style blends.

MUSCAT

No matter what anyone says, I doubt Eve was tempted by an apple in the Garden of Eden.

A cataclysm of original sin… all for a plain apple? It makes no sense. Some muscat

(MUScat) grapes, on the other hand, could have done it. Intensely aromatic and

awesomely delicious, muscat is irresistible. If every luscious, ripe fruit in the world were

compressed into one phantasmagoric flavor, it would come close to evoking muscat.

Or muscats to be more precise. For, muscat is not a single variety, but rather, a large

group of different ancient grapes that have grown around the Mediterranean for centuries.

Many scientists and anthrobiologists, in fact, think that some form of muscat may have

been the first domesticated variety of grape.

What most of these muscats share is the distinct, awesomely fruity muscat aroma. But

that’s where the easy part stops, for there are hundreds of named muscat-something-or-

others. To take but one example, muscat of Alexandria alone is known by approximately

two hundred different names around the Mediterranean.

Some of the varieties in the muscat group are genetically related, but not all. The two

main muscats that gave rise to numerous progenitors are muscat blanc à petits grains, a

high-quality, small-berried variety, and its daughter, the aforementioned muscat of

Alexandria.

Within the muscat group are varieties that can be and are made in virtually every style

imaginable: dry, sweet, still, sparkling, and fortified. In Alsace, France, and in Austria,

they are made into fantastic dry still wines (and are often served with asparagus). In

southern Italy and Spain, various muscats are dried on mats (passito) then made into

dessert wines.

In northern Italy, muscat blanc à petits grains is made into the sweet bubbly wine

almost everyone has had at some time in their lives (moscato d’Asti). In parts of southern

France, the same grape is made into a fortified sweet wine: muscat de Beaumes-de-V enise.

And the list goes on.

Today, some type of muscat is grown virtually everywhere in the world—from Cyprus,

South Africa, and Slovenia to Israel, Oregon, and Greece.

NEBBIOLO

One of the oldest and most important varieties in Piedmont, Italy, nibiol was first

mentioned in Piedmontese documents in the early thirteenth century. Its parents are

presumed extinct, but its origin does appear to be either Piedmont, or perhaps the

V altellina region of Lombardy, next door.

Massively structured and adamantly tannic when young, nebbiolo (neb-ee-OH-low)

from anything less than a fantastic vineyard can simply slam your palate closed and cause

your taste buds to shrink away. The finest nebbiolos, however, possess a combination of

complexity and power that’s unequaled. Those wines come only from certain spots within

the province of Piedmont, in northwestern Italy. Nebbiolo, alas, is the poster child for

grapes that don’t travel well. (Outside of Piedmont, there is only one place that has shown

even modest success with this difficult grape, and it’s a place that’s not on many people’s

wine radar: the Guadalupe V alley of Mexico.)

In the minds of Italians, nebbiolo is, in status and kingly reputation, equal to the great

cabernet sauvignons of France. The grape makes the exalted Piedmontese wines Barolo

and Barbaresco. Of course, expensive Barolo and Barbaresco are never better than when

served with Piedmont’s other jaw-droppingly expensive specialty: white truffles.

The word nebbiolo derives from nebbia, fog, a reference to the thick, whitish bloom of

yeasts that forms on the grapes when they are ripe (although many say the name may also

refer to the wisps of fog that envelop the Piedmontese hills in late fall, when the grapes are

picked). The wine has very particular flavors and aromas reminiscent of tar, violets, and

often a rich, espresso-like bitterness from the wine’s pronounced tannin.

At Ata Rangi estate in Martinborough, New Zealand, wildflowers grow as part of the cover crop between rows of vines.

The flowers draw up moisture from the soil, making sure the vines don’ t have “wet feet.

”

Lastly, until relatively recently, it was an unwritten but adamant rule within the wine

world that all great nebbiolos needed to be aged a decade or more before they could be

consumed (never mind enjoyed). Modern winemaking techniques (see the Piedmont

section, page 331) have changed that, and while the great Barolos and Barbarescos remain

utterly long-lived wines, they are also, when young, more delicious than ever.

PINOT GRIS

Depending on where it is grown, pinot gris (PEE-no GREE)—

“gray” pinot—can taste

strikingly different. Ironically, the best-known pinot gris—Italian pinot grigio—is

unquestionably usually the lowest in quality. It’s often utterly neutral stuff—serviceable

but not significant; the wine version of a white T-shirt. Of course, there’s no shame in

making basic wine. The crime is in charging a lot for it. (Hello, Santa Margherita.) As

always with wine, there are some delicious exceptions. I’ve always loved the purity and

freshness of the pinot grigios from Jermann (Friuli) and Alois Lageder (Alto Adige), for

example.

Then there are the pinot gris from Alsace, France—as opposite of pinot grigios as a

wine could be and still be from the same grape. The best Alsace pinot gris is complex,

opulent, often a bit smoky and spicy, but still precise and crisp. It’s considered one of the

four so-called “noble” varieties of Alsace, and is often the perfect wine if you don’t want

something as aromatic as riesling or gewürztraminer. In Germany, pinot gris (called

grauburgunder) can be something else again—broad, even Rubenesque by German wine

standards.

In Oregon, where pinot gris began to be planted in the 1990s, the best wines are very

tasty, with pear and spice-cake flavors. As for California pinot gris (some of which are

called pinot grigio), most are crisp, fresh wines, sometimes with an intriguing edge of

pepperiness or arugula-like bitterness. But undoubtedly, the most dependably delicious

pinot gris in North America are made in Canada—in the cold, sunny, dry, northern-latitude

Oakanagan V alley of British Columbia.

Although I have included it here because of its global popularity, pinot gris is not,

technically speaking, its own variety. Like pinot blanc, pinot gris is a clone of pinot noir

that includes a color mutation. As such, in the vineyard, pinot gris grapes can be any color

from bluish silver to mauve-pink to ashen yellow. As a result, this white wine varies in

color, too, although subtly.

GRIS AREA

Pinot gris is not the same as vin gris. The French term vin gris (literally,

“gray wine”) refers to any number

of slightly pinkish-tinted white wines made from red grapes. Vins gris are usually not as deeply colored as

rosé or blush wines. While there are dozens of pinot gris made in the United States, there are only a few vins

gris.

PINOT NOIR

Thought to be more than two thousand years old, pinot noir (along with savagnin and

gouais blanc) is considered one of the “founder varieties”

—the great great grandparent of

scores of other well-known grapes, from chardonnay and gamay to corvina and garganega.

It is also, according to geneticist Dr. José V ouillamoz, the likely grandparent of syrah.

While the parents and exact origin of pinot noir (PEE-no NW AHR) itself are not known,

the grape is thought to have come into existence in northeastern France. The name, by the

way, is generally thought to derive from pin, meaning pine, because the small clusters

resemble a pine cone.

By virtue of its old age and its genetic instability, pinot noir has also begotten hundreds

of clones of itself. The most well known is undoubtedly pinot meunier, the so-called third

variety grown in Champagne, France, but actually a clone of pinot noir that ripens earlier

(an asset in a cold region) and exhibits more fruity flavors. Two other main clones are

color mutations: pinot blanc and pinot gris (pinot grigio).

If a computer search were conducted on the words and phrases used to describe pinot

noir, this detail would emerge: More than any other wine, pinot is described in sensual

terms. Pinot noir’s association with sensuality derives from the remarkably supple, silky

textures and erotically earthy aromas that great pinot noirs display. Aromatically and in

terms of flavor, the best pinots can exude not only fruit flavors—warm baked cherries,

plums, rhubarb, pomegranate, strawberry jam—but also the sense of damp earth and

rotting leaves (the French call this sous bois, or forest floor), plus mushrooms, worn

leather, and what’s sometimes in Europe called animali—a highly attractive male sweaty

smell (like the smell of a man who has run one mile; I personally find that five miles is a

whole different situation). An old friend of mine who, for many years, was the winemaker

of California’s famous Etude pinot noir, used to say that great pinot noir always possesses

a “hint of corruption.

”

If a computer search were conducted on the words and phrases used to

describe pinot noir, this detail would emerge: More than any other wine, pinot

is described in sensual terms.

Clos de Tart, one of the greatest pinot noirs, comes from the very small Burgundian Grand Cru vineyard Clos de Tart.

The estate was founded in 1141 by nuns.

Pinot noir is lighter in body and far less tannic than cabernet sauvignon, merlot, or

syrah. It is lighter in color, too, leading beginning wine drinkers to assume that pinot

noir’s flavors are feeble. For the great pinots, just the reverse is true. Although they are

often frail in color, their aromas and flavors can be deep and riveting.

Of all the well-known grapes, pinot noir is considered the most difficult to grow and

make into wine. For example, pinot noir is highly sensitive to climate changes and

variations in soil composition, and it oxidizes easily during winemaking. This makes pinot

noir a riskier (and more expensive) proposition for the winegrower, the winemaker, and

the wine drinker than, say, cabernet sauvignon. But it’s precisely this enological gamble

that often makes pinot noir all the more fascinating and irresistible.

The region of Burgundy, in France, where all the red wines (except Beaujolais), are

made from pinot noir is, historically, the most renowned area for the variety. The most

expensive pinots still come from this small place, including the most expensive and

legendary pinot noir of all: Romanée-Conti from the Domaine de la Romanée-Conti.

Prices for this wine can be significantly different based on the quality of the vintage, but

even modest vintages command double-take prices. A few years after they were released,

two vintages in the late 2000s, for example, carried price tags of $4,800 and $12,900.

That’s per bottle.

In the New World, Oregon has specialized in pinot noir since the 1970s, and many of

the best delicate pinots in the United States come from here. And New Zealand is fast

emerging as the southern hemisphere’s Oregon. Y et, I’d argue that no place beats

California in terms of the sheer diversity, complexity, and deliciousness of pinot noir.

From the Sta. Rita Hills, Santa Maria V alley, and Santa Ynez V alley in south-central

California to the Santa Lucia Highlands in central California to Carneros, the Sonoma

Coast, and the Russian River V alley in the north (plus many other top small appellations in

between), California is a hotbed of fantastic pinot.

RIESLING

Riesling (REEZ-ling) is considered by many—possibly even most—wine experts to be the

most noble and unique white grape variety in the world. The grape is thought to have

originated in the Rheingau region of Germany, probably as one of the offspring of gouais

blanc and an unknown father.

Great riesling has soaring acidity, an incomparable sense of purity and vividness, plus

considerable extract (the nonsoluble substances in wine that add to its flavor). Y et the wine

is wonderfully graceful on the palate and has a sense of energy that makes it seem light.

Indeed, great riesling is dangerously easy to drink.

Given the right soil and winemaking methods, the triad of high acidity, high extract,

and relatively low alcohol leads to intensely flavorful wines of ravishing delicacy,

transparency, and gracefulness. Riesling’s refined structure is complemented by the

mouthwateringly delicate flavors of fresh ripe peaches, apricots, and melons, often pierced

with a vibrant mineral quality, like the taste of water running over stones in a mountain

stream.

More than almost any other white grape, riesling is temperamental about where it is

planted. It doesn’t grow well in very warm places, and even in cooler sites, the quality and

character of the wine can vary enormously. The most elegant and precise rieslings come

from cool to cold climates—Germany, the Alsace region of France, Austria, Slovenia,

Canada, and upstate New Y ork. Rieslings from a warmer climate, such as in Washington

State or California, are usually softer, slightly fuller, and can have less-precise, less-

minerally flavors. Usually is a key word here. Australia, for example, has a generally

warm climate. But in the cooler districts of the Clare and Eden valleys of Australia,

rieslings are usually ethereal, minerally, vibrantly fresh, and as taut as a tightrope.

On the topic of dryness and sweetness, it’s not correct to assume that any given riesling

is probably going to be sweet. That’s not the case. In fact, most of the rieslings in the

world are dry. The exception, of course, are intentionally sweet styles such as

beerenauslese (BA) and trockenbeerenauslese (TBA).

Admittedly some of the confusion about the sweetness level of riesling happens

because the wine is so fruity—that is, it tastes like fruits, especially peaches and apricots.

And in riesling’s case, the taster (you or me) confuses this dramatic fruitiness with

sweetness. To help clarify where a riesling stands in terms of the taste perception of

sweetness, the International Riesling Foundation (IRF), a global educational initiative,

created a Riesling Taste Profile chart. The chart, which producers use on the wine’s back

label, shows a spectrum from dry to medium dry to medium sweet to fully sweet. It then

pinpoints where that wine falls in terms of how sweet or dry it tastes. Importantly,

producers don’t just guess when it comes to their wine’s sweetness level. The IRF

developed sophisticated technical guidelines, which include the sugar-to-acid ratio and the

pH of the wine.

SANGIOVESE

Italy’s most famous grape, sangiovese (san-gee-oh-V AY -zee) is responsible for the three

great wines of Tuscany: Chianti Classico, vino nobile di Montepulciano, and brunello di

Montalcino. It’s also a major grape (if not the grape) in many of the prestigious wines

known as Super Tuscans. Outside Tuscany, sangiovese is used to make red wines in the

neighboring regions of Umbria and Emilia-Romagna (and there’s a bit in California), but

with a few notable exceptions, great sangiovese comes only from Tuscany, in central Italy.

This said, surprising DNA research in 2004 revealed one of the parents of sangiovese to

be southern Italian—Calabrese di Montenuovo (presumed to be from Calabria).

The other parent, ciliegiolo (Italian for “small cherry”), is cultivated all over Italy but

today is especially well known in Tuscany. It appears, then, that sangiovese may have

originated in southern Italy and only later spread to Tuscany.

Sangiovese, like pinot noir, is old enough (and possibly genetically unstable enough) to

have mutated considerably, leading to hundreds (perhaps thousands) of clones. The

differences among these clones, coupled with differences in the sites where sangiovese is

planted, mean that the wines made from the grape vary widely in style and quality. Indeed,

from poor clones in poor sites, sangiovese can be as thin and dreary as red-stained, watery

alcohol. The top sangioveses, however, are as earthy, rich, and complex as a great sauce.

A glass of great sangiovese, with its salty sensations, has historically been the

perfect partner to Tuscany’s other great classic—peppery extra virgin olive

oil.

In flavor and structure, sangiovese is, again, closer to pinot noir than it is to cabernet

sauvignon. Sangiovese, for example, takes its structure primarily from acidity, rather than

tannin. When it’s young, sangiovese has the wonderful appeal of a fresh, warm cherry pie.

As it ages, the wine takes on dried leaf, dried orange peel, tea, mocha, spicy, peaty, earthy

flavors, and a fabulous sensation of minerality, even saltiness. (The latter is just a

metaphor; wine never contains significant sodium per se.) In fact, a glass of great

sangiovese, with its salty sensations, has historically been the perfect partner to Tuscany’s

other great classic—peppery extra virgin olive oil. Indeed, as any visitor to Tuscany can

attest, sangiovese-based wines seem to taste so much better in Tuscany. Is this as simple as

salt and pepper, perhaps?

SAUVIGNON BLANC

The name sauvignon comes from the French sauvage, meaning “wild.

” It’s a fitting name

for a vine that, if left to its own devices, would grow with riotous abandon. Riotous,

untamed, and wild can also describe sauvignon blanc’s (SEW-vin-yawn BLAHNK)

flavors. Straw, hay, grass, smoke, green tea, green herbs, lime, and gunflint charge around

in your mouth with wonderful intensity. The wine appears almost linear on the palate, with

a clean, keen stiletto of acidity that vibrates through its center.

Some sauvignons push the envelope even further, taking on a feral, acrid character

wine pros describe as cat pee. (This is usually considered a positive attribute.)

WHAT GREEN CAN MEAN

One of the words most frequently used to describe the aroma and flavor of sauvignon blanc is green.

The theme of green can, however, have many permutations. Here are the ones I think you’re most likely

to find.

GREEN IDEA What you might smell or taste in the wine

GREEN FRUITS Green fig, honeydew melon

BITTER GREEN A rugula, green tea

EXOTIC GREEN Lemongrass, lime leaf

SMOKY GREEN Lapsang souchong tea

CITRUSY GREEN Lime pith

GREEN VEGETABLES Snap peas, lettuce, green beans

GREEN HERBS Sage, thyme, mint

GREEN SPICE Green peppercorns

PIQUANT GREEN Jalapeño peppers

GREEN OUTDOORS Mown grass, meadows

OCEANIC GREEN Seaweed, sea spray, briny saltwater

The best, most outrageous, tangy sauvignons come from the Loire V alley of France

(Sancerre and Pouilly-Fumé), from New Zealand, and from Austria. On the heels of these

come the sauvignons from South Africa and Chile. In Bordeaux, virtually all white wines

are made from a blend of sauvignon blanc plus sémillon. In blending the two, sauvignon’s

tart herbalness is mellowed by sémillon’s broad, clean character. Blending the two is also

sometimes done in California and Australia.

Despite the assumption that sauvignon blanc probably originated in Bordeaux, most

leading geneticists believe the grape to have begun life in the Loire V alley. One of its

parents was probably savagnin; the other is unknown. (For its part, sauvignon blanc, with

the help of co-parent cabernet franc, begot cabernet sauvignon.)

One of the widespread synonyms for sauvignon blanc is blanc fumé or fumé blanc (the

latter term is widely used in California, for example). This is purely a synonym; and it’s

not true that as a group, wines labeled fumé blanc have an especially smoky (fumé)

character.

When sauvignon blanc is poorly made, it tastes vegetal—like canned asparagus, or the

water that artichokes have been boiled in. Sauvignon blanc can become vegetal if it’s

made from unripe grapes. This could happen, for example, if the vines were planted in

wet, fertile, poorly drained soil, or if the vines were allowed to grow out of control, or if

the grapes simply did not receive enough sunlight for proper photosynthesis.

Sauvignon blanc grapes ripening in the summer sun.

SÉMILLON

A friend once told me that sémillon (SEM-ee-yawn) always brought back his childhood

memories of the smell and flavor of cotton sheets as he ran under the clothesline on a

summer day. Whimsical as that description might seem, there can indeed be something

pure, clean, and starched about many sémillons, especially when they are young.

In Bordeaux (sémillon’s birthplace), the grape is often blended with a bit of sauvignon

blanc (which is thought to be genetically linked, but the relationship between the two is

not yet clear). Sémillon’s broad, mouthfilling character gets a perfect lift from the lean

tartness of sauvignon blanc. In fact, the blend of sémillon and sauvignon is true not only

for dry white Bordeaux, but also for the region’s sweet wines, such as Sauternes. Sémillon

is ideal for Sauternes, as the grapes’ thin skins and loose bunches are readily attacked by

the noble rot, Botrytis cinerea (see page 157).

A bottle of red wine and two glasses—the historic makings of a great evening.

The name sémillon, by the way, may be derived from the old pronunciation of St.

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Émilion, the well-known commune in Bordeaux now devoted to merlot and cabernet

franc, and no longer a place where sémillon is commercially made.

With all due respect to Bordeaux, some of the greatest dry sémillons in the world are

made in Australia, where the wines are considered national treasures. Fascinatingly,

Australian sémillon (the Aussies pronounce it “SEM-i-lawn”) bears almost no

resemblance to the broad, lush sémillons of Bordeaux. Instead, Australian versions are

howlingly tart and full of almost tensile energy when young. With age, they become

radically transformed—taking on rich, honeyed flavors, a cashewlike nuttiness, and an

almost lanolin like texture. I will never forget being at Tyrrell’s, in the Hunter V alley of

New South Wales, and tasting their legendary “V at 1” sémillons going back to the mid-

1960s. The wines were nothing short of mesmerizing.

WHAT AMERICANS DRINK

According to The America, by John J. Baxevanis, for most of history, in nearly every wine-producing

country, red wines have been more popular than whites. Reds were easier to make in most parts of the world,

and seemed better suited to hearty meals and the hard physical labor that agriculturally based economies

required. Between the end of World War II and the early 1990s, however , white wine consumption in

America increased thirty-four times. Changing lifestyles, the drastic reduction in agricultural employment,

the rise in economic activity, central air-conditioning, refrigeration, and the dietary shift away from red

meat to lighter meats, fish, and vegetables all helped transform the United States into a white-wine-drinking

country. Today, however , the color split among wine drinkers in the United States is moving back to red. As

of 2010, for example, among those who drank wine once a week or more, about 50 percent of what they

drank was red, about 30 percent was white, and the rest was blush and rosé.

SYRAH

Syrah (sear-AH) has always reminded me of the kind of guy who wears cowboy boots

with a tuxedo. Manly yet elegant. In fact, at the turn of the twentieth century, the British

scholar and wine writer George Saintsbury described the famous Rhône wine Hermitage

(made exclusively from syrah) as the “manliest wine” he’d ever drunk.

In France (where plantings are on the dramatic increase), syrah’s potent and exuberant

aromas and flavors lean toward leather, smoke, roasted meats, bacon, game, coffee, spices,

iron, black olive, and especially white and black pepper. The best wines have a kinetic

mouthfeel, with flavors that detonate on the palate like tiny grenades. The most dramatic

syrahs in the world come from the northern Rhône V alley. There, in exclusive, small wine

districts, such as Hermitage, Côte-Rôtie, and Cornas, the only red grape allowed is syrah.

In the southern Rhône V alley, syrah is usually part of the blends that make up

Châteauneuf-du-Pape and Gigondas. It is also planted throughout the Languedoc-

Roussillon. In Australia and California, syrah takes on a less gamey, more fruity, syrupy

character, but remarkably often possesses the same potent pepper spice character (in 2007,

Australian researchers isolated this as the aromatic compound rotundone).

A long, conical cluster of shiraz (syrah) grapes.

THE NOT-SO-PETITE PETITE

What Californians call petite sirah (sometimes spelled petite syrah) is not the same as syrah, but the

histories of the two are interwoven. Vines called petite sirah have grown in California since the 1880s. In

the early days some of those vines were probably a type of syrah that had small—petite—grapes. (All

things being equal, winemakers prefer small grapes because there’s a high ratio of skin to juice. Since

color, flavor, and tannin come primarily from a grape’s skin, small grapes yield the most concentrated,

flavorful wines.) Indeed, there is nothing petite about petite sirah.

The wine is mouthfilling and often hugely tannic. Over the course of many decades in California’s early

history, other vine types were often mixed in with petite sirah vines, creating what are known as field

blends in the same vineyard. As more and different varieties found their way into California, and as new

vineyards were begun with unidentified cuttings from older vineyards, petite sirah’s true identity grew

more and more obscure. Then, in the 1990s, DNA typing revealed that most California petite sirah is

actually the French grape durif, a cross of peloursin and syrah created in the 1880s. T oday, some of the

oldest “petite sirah” vineyards remain field blends of many varieties, including true syrah, durif, carignan,

zinfandel, barbera, and even grenache.

At Cloudy Bay estate in Marlborough, New Zealand, the flavors of sauvignon blanc are explored in the context of food.

Now this is the sort of research you want to be in charge of.

In the seventeenth century, French Huguenots brought syrah from France to South

Africa’s Cape of Good Hope. From South Africa, it was brought to Australia, although, as

of the 1830s, Australian explorers were also bringing syrah to the Australian continent

directly from France. Australia, of course, calls syrah shiraz. For its part, South Africa

uses both syrah and shiraz, depending on the preference of the winery. Most scholars think

the name shiraz is a corruption of one of the colloquial French names for the grape.

(Frustratingly, many wine articles continue to reproduce the erroneous legends that

syrah/shiraz somehow came from the Iranian city of Shiraz, the Greek island of Syra, or

the city of Syracuse in Sicily. All false.) Today, of course, shiraz is Australia’s most

famous red wine. Indeed, in appellations such as the Barossa V alley, McLaren V ale, and a

half dozen others, shiraz can be a spellbinding, spicy blockbuster of a wine.

Syrah was brought to California three times, first in 1936, and then again in the early

1970s (see Syrah in California: Mysterious Beginnings, page 689). But syrah and other

Rhône grapes only began to grip the imaginations of maverick winemakers in California

in the 1980s, and a decade later, the same thing happened in Washington State. Today

syrah is well established in both places, although no single appellation has emerged as the

appellation of excellence. From a consumer standpoint, it’s important to know that syrah

producers in the United States can call their wine syrah or shiraz (depending on whether

the marketing department wants to channel its inner Aussie).

Syrah is the progeny of two fairly obscure French grapes—dureza (cultivated in the

Ardèche) and mondeuse blanche (cultivated in the Savoie). For its part, dureza appears to

be the grandchild of pinot noir, which would make pinot noir the great grandfather of

syrah.

TEMPRANILLO

Spain’s most famous red grape, tempranillo (tem-pra-KNEE-oh), makes a huge range of

wine styles depending on where it is grown in Spain—and it’s grown in dozens of places.

Tempranillo is, for example, the main grape in the country’s famous wine region of Rioja.

Traditionally styled Rioja can resemble red Burgundy (pinot noir) in its refinement,

earthiness, and complexity. At the same time, tempranillo is also the grape that makes

blockbuster dense reds like tinta del Toro, of the Toro region, and the tinta del país of

Ribera del Duero. In short, various clones of tempranillo have, over time, adapted to

Spain’s diverse regions, and the wines that have resulted often have such highly

differentiated characters that they almost seem like separate varieties. Indeed, tempranillo

has a slew of different names in Spain, including ull de llebre (“eye of the hare”), cencibel,

tinto aragónez, and escobera, in addition to those named above.

When young, tempranillo’s flavors are a burst of cherries. After aging, the

wine tends to take on a deep, complex earthiness.

Only one probable parent of tempranillo has been identified—the grape variety albillo

mayor, which today grows in Ribera del Duero. That said, tempranillo itself is thought to

have originated somewhere in the provinces of Rioja and Navarra, in northern Spain.

Tempranillo is usually well structured and well balanced. Its significant amount of

tannin allows it to age for long periods, although the wine is generally not as firm on the

palate as cabernet sauvignon. Tempranillo’s level of acidity gives the wines made from it a

sense of precision, yet tempranillo is not as high in acidity as pinot noir. When young,

tempranillo’s flavors are a burst of cherries. After aging, the wine tends to take on a deep,

complex earthiness.

Come early winter , a few last grapes, now frozen, still cling to the vine.

Tempranillo also grows in Portugal, where it’s known as tinta roriz and is one of the

grapes that make up Port wine. Additionally, the grape is grown in Argentina and

California.

VIOGNIER

A Los Angeles restaurateur once described viognier (vee-oh-NY AY) this way: “If a good

German riesling is like an ice skater (fast, racy, with a cutting edge), and chardonnay is

like a middle-heavyweight boxer (punchy, solid, powerful), then viognier would have to

be described as a female gymnast—beautiful and perfectly shaped, with muscle but superb

agility and elegance.

”

Viognier is one of the finest but rarest French white grapes. The grape nearly went

extinct in the 1960s, until it became fashionable in California and in Languedoc-

Roussillon. Today, fewer than 300 acres are planted in the grape’s home, the northern

Rhône. Through DNA analysis, it appears that viognier is related to mondeuse blanche,

and thus may be either a half sibling of syrah or possibly a grandparent of syrah.

In the northern Rhône, viognier makes the prestigious wines Condrieu and Château-

Grillet. (A minuscule appellation, Château-Grillet has just one estate, also called Château-

Grillet. It is now owned by the Artemis Groupe, proprietors of Bordeaux’s Château

Latour). A small amount is also planted in among the syrah vines of the Côte-Rôtie. These

white viognier grapes are harvested, crushed, and fermented along with the syrah grapes,

giving Côte-Rôtie (which is a red wine after all) a slightly more exotic aroma than it might

otherwise have.

Viognier is usually a full-bodied wine with honeysuckle, apricot, gingerbread, and

musky aromas and flavors, and a mesmerizingly lano-linish texture. Like gewürztraminer,

its extroverted fruity/floral aromas mean that many drinkers assume it’s a little sweet, even

when it’s bone-dry.

In Condrieu, in the northern Rhône V alley of France, the finicky viognier excels. The wines made here have aromas that

are simply ravishing.

Viognier exploded in popularity in the United States in the 1990s. In half a decade, the

number of California producers went from a mere few to more than thirty. By 1998 there

were more than a thousand acres of this variety planted in California. But the demand has

since ebbed there, and plantings are now in decline. One of the reasons may be that few

California viogniers have the beauty and purity of Condrieu. In California, viognier often

suffers from having too little acidity to give it definition, and the wine is too often oaked

to within an inch of its life (not true of Condrieu).

Besides in France’s Rhône V alley and California (and a few other U.S. states such as

Virginia), viognier is also well known in Australia. Among the most exquisite viogniers

I’ve ever tasted have been those from the Australian producer Y alumba.

ZINFANDEL

For decades, zinfandel (ZIN-fan-dell) was the most widely planted red grape in California,

until cabernet sauvignon surpassed it in 1998. Now number two in acreage, zinfandel is a

chameleon. It can be (and is) made into everything from blush wine to sweet fortified

wine. But the zinfandel that knowledgeable wine drinkers love—true zinfandel—is a soft-

textured dry red wine crammed with jammy blackberry, boysenberry, and plummy fruit.

Made in this style, it’s usually concentrated, medium to full in body, and notorious for

(temporarily) staining one’s teeth crimson if you drink enough of it.

Until 1972, zinfandel was always a hearty, rustic red wine. But in that year, the large

California winery Sutter Home made the first “white zinfandel”

—actually light pink—by

quickly removing zinfandel’s red skins before much color was imparted to the wine.

Soon after its invention, white zinfandel began to outsell true (red) zinfandel—a fact

that remains the case today. Y et because it is often slightly sweet and almost always mass-

produced from less-than-top-quality grapes, white zinfandel is considered a beginner’s

wine by serious wine drinkers.

For over sixty-five years, Sutter Home has played a key role in the history of zinfandel In California.

The zinfandel grape’s history in California goes back to the 1830s, when it was

imported from Croatia (then a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire). In the 1990s, DNA

typing revealed zinfandel to be the Croatian grape called, in modern times, crljenak

kaštelanski. During the Middle Ages and earlier, however, the grape was called tribidrag

and was grown all over the Dalmatian coast of Croatia. Linguistically speaking, it’s not

known how tribidrag evolved to crljenak kaštelanski evolved to zinfandel. Moreover, in

southern Italy, where it grows predominantly in the region of Apulia, the same grape has

yet another distinct name: primitivo.

Zinfandel vineyards are some of the oldest in California. Zinfandel vines well over a

hundred years old still thrive in Amador County and Sonoma County, for example. Wines

from old zinfandel vines are, in fact, especially prized, and many producers use the term

“old vine” on their zinfandel labels. The term has no legal definition, but many

winemakers suggest that a zinfandel vine—like a person—turns the corner, becoming

“old,

” after forty.

A GLOSSARY OF OTHER GRAPE VARIETIES WORLDWIDE

With five thousand to ten thousand grape varieties in the world, there are dozens a wine lover is bound to (and

should) discover. Following is a small handbook of the most noteworthy. While some of these grape varieties are

usually the sources of wines on their own—Spain’s verdejo and Italy’s dolcetto, for example—others, such as

France’s clairette, are very important as grapes used in blends. The list contains both red and white wine grapes,

designated as ● and ◯ respectively.

A

● AGIORGITIKO (AH-YOUR-YEE-TEE-KOH): The name, in Greek, means St. George’s grape. An

important, widely planted Greek grape, it is the source of Nemea, a spicy, earthy wine from the Peloponnese

peninsula. The grape variety has nothing to do with the rootstock called St. George.

● AGLIANICO (A-LEE-ANN-EE-CO): Ancient grape planted almost exclusively in southern Italy. In

Campania, it makes the famous wine called Taurasi, and in Basilicata, the wine aglianico del Vulture. Aglianico

appears to be related to several southern Italian grapes, but its parents are not known.

◯ AÏDANI (A-DAN-EE): Indigenous to Greece, this aromatic variety is mostly planted in Santorini and is used

in the island’s white blends.

◯ AIRÉN (I-WREN): The most widely planted grape of Spain, grown mainly on the central plains of Castilla-La

Mancha that were immortalized in Don Quixote. Used in blending (it’s often the base for inexpensive sparkling

wine around Europe) and on its own. Grown and made by small family wineries, it can make a fresh, lively,

minerally white (not unlike pinot grigio, only better) that’s a steal.

◯ ALBANA (AAL-BAAN-AAH): Ancient variety grown in the region of Emilia-Romagna, Italy, albana is

thought to be a descendant of garganega. The neutral, somewhat fruity, low-alcohol albana di Romagna was (rather

shockingly) the first wine to have been awarded the prestigious DOCG designation in Italy.

◯ ALBARIÑO: See page 54.

● ALBAROSSA (AL-BAR-OSS-A): A minor grape grown in the Piedmont region of Italy, a cross of barbera and

an obscure grape called chatus.

● ALEATICO (AL-EE-AT-I-KO): A fascinating, aromatic red possibly related to the white grapes greco and

muscat blanc à petits grains. Native to Tuscany, it is especially famous on the island of Elba, off the coast of

Tuscany, and the third largest island in Italy, after Sicily and Sardinia. Also grown in southern Italy.

● ALFROCHEIRO PRETO (AL-FRO-SHAY-ROO PRAY-TOH): Native to central or southern Portugal, high-

quality alfrocheiro preto is one of the important grapes in the red table wines of the Dão region.

● ALICANTE BOUSCHET (AL-I-KAN-TAY BOO-SHAY): The name for one of the last extant crosses of

garnacha (grenache) with petit Bouschet, crossed in France by Henri Bouschet in the mid-1800s. In Spain,

sometimes called garnacha tintorera. Innocuous in flavor but thick skinned, high yielding, and deeply colored. It is,

in fact, one of the very few grapes (red or white) in the entire Vitis vinifera family to have red flesh (known as

teinturier grapes). As such, alicante Bouschet has been used for decades in southern France to give light red wines

more color and the appearance of more flavor intensity. In California, it was used extensively during Prohibition to

make thin, watery wines seem like standard reds. Alicante Bouschet is still used in California, mainly in the Central

V alley, where it is a useful extender in jug wines. Should not be confused with the denomination Alicante in

southeastern Spain, where the main grape is monastrell (mourvèdre).

◯ ALIGOTÉ (AL-I-GO-TAY): Fairly rare grape of Burgundy, France, and a sibling of chardonnay (both grapes

are the progeny of pinot noir and gouais blanc). The light, tart white wine made from it is used with crème de cassis

in the Kir cocktail.

◯ ALV ARINHO (AL-V AR-EEN-YO): The main grape of the light, low-alcohol, slightly spritzy wine known as

vinho verde, a specialty of northern Portugal. The same as the Spanish grape albariño (see page 54).

◯ ANSONICA (AN-SON-EE-CA): Also known as inzolia. Floral, high-acid variety considered one of the best

native white varieties in Sicily, Italy, and also grown in southern Tuscany. In Sicily, it was once used for Marsala,

but is now part of the blend for many white table wines.

● ARAGONEZ (AIR-AH-GO-NEZ): One of the Portuguese names for tempranillo. Grown primarily in southern

Portugal, where it is used in the red wines of the Alentejo region.

◯ ARINTO (AR-IN-TOE): More correctly known as arinto de Bucelas. High-quality Portuguese grape from the

area of Bucelas, north of Lisbon. Planted throughout Portugal because of its attractive ability to retain acidity.

Known as pederña in the Minho region, it is one of the grapes used in vinho verde.

◯ ARNEIS (AR-NACE): One of the three top white grapes of Italy’s Piedmont region, the other two being

cortese and moscato (muscat blanc à petits grains). Makes refreshing dry wines.

◯ ASPRINIO (AZ-PRIN-EE-O): Commonly known as asprinio bianco, it is indigenous to southern Italy’s

Campania region. Strikingly, the grape is still grown by the ancient method of allowing the vines to climb up local

poplar trees so that the vines rise 30 feet or more in the air.

◯ ASSYRTIKO (A-SEAR-TI-KO): Greek grape with lively acidity. A specialty of the volcanic island of

Santorini, in the Aegean.

◯ ATHIRI (AH-THEE-REE): Greek grape variety that is easy to grow and produces simple, pleasant wines

even at high yields.

◯ AUXERROIS (AUCHS-AIR-WAA): Fairly common grape in Alsace, France, where it originated as a

progeny of pinot noir and gouais blanc, making auxerrois a sibling of chardonnay. Usually blended into pinot blanc

in Alsace. Confusingly, in southwest France, auxerrois is a synonym for the red variety côt, or malbec.

● AUXERROIS (AUCHS-EAR-WAH): A confusing synonym for cot (also known as malbec) in southwestern

France—confusing because auxerrois is also the name of a white grape grown in Alsace, France.

● AZAL TINTO (AH-ZAL TEEN-TOE): A Portuguese variety with considerable acidity, used to make the

strident, rare red version of Portugal’s vinho verde. Its more proper name is amaral.

B

◯ BACO BLANC (BAA-CO BLAHNK): A French-American hybrid, also known as Baco 22A, it was

developed in 1898 by French nurseryman François Baco. Used as the basis for Armagnac until the 1970s, it

continues to be used in that distilled spirit, although to a lesser extent.

● BACO NOIR (BAA-KO NWAHR): One of the most famous French-American hybrids, created in 1902 by

French nurseryman François Baco. To obtain it, Baco crossed folle blanche with grand glabre (a variety belonging

to the American species Vitis riparia). It was cultivated in Burgundy and the Loire V alley until France officially

barred all hybrids from being grown in French vineyards. Baco noir is now principally found in New Y ork State

and Canada.

● BAGA (BA-GAH): The word baga means berry in Portuguese. One of Portugal’s most widely planted red

grapes and the leading grape of the region of Bairrada.

● BARBERA: See page 54.

● BASTARDO (BAHS-TAR-DOE): Y es, the name means bastard (in Portuguese). A common workhorse grape

for dry Portuguese reds, including those made in the Douro and to a lesser extent, the Dão. Bastardo was brought to

Portugal some two centuries ago from its native homeland, the Jura region of France, where it is known as

trousseau.

◯ BLANC DU BOIS (BLAHNK DUE BWAA): A white hybrid developed in 1968 at the University of Florida

and now grown in Florida, Texas, and throughout the Gulf states. Unlike many grapes, it is well suited to humid

climates. Blanc du bois also has good resistance to Pierce’s disease, a fatal infliction, and one with no known

remedy to date, caused by insects known as sharpshooters. Blanc du bois’ genetic parentage is complex. The grape

is a cross of an American hybrid belonging to the muscadine family with the red grape cardinal, itself a cross of two

vinifera grapes, flame seedless and ribier.

● BLAUBURGUNDER (BLAUW-BRR-GUN-DER): The Austrian name for pinot noir; see page 594.

● BLAUER PORTUGIESER (BLAUW-ER POR-CHEW-GAY-ZER): A prolific vine that has nothing to do

with Portugal. V ery widely planted in Austria (its probable home) and elsewhere in Eastern Europe, including,

notably, Hungary. Also used in many simple red German blends.

● BLAUFRÄNKISCH (BLAUW-FRANK-ISH): A highly esteemed Austrian variety—probably of Austrian or

Hungarian origin—that can make delicious, spicy, precise, earthy, deeply colored reds, especially in Burgenland

(the warmest of the Austrian wine regions). Also the leading red in Hungary (where it is called kékfrankos) and

grown in Washington State, where it is called by its German name, Lemberger. DNA analysis indicates it is

probably the progeny of gouais blanc.

● BOBAL (BO-BAAL): Indigenous Spanish red that is grown principally in the Utiel-Requena region of north

central Spain. Historically used in blending, but increasingly made into fascinating, spicy, delicious wines that are

not unlike grenache.

● BONARDA (BO-NAR-DA): The second most popular variety in Argentina after malbec. Although it is called

bonarda, this grape is not the same as the relatively rare, indigenous Italian variety bonarda Piedmontese that is

grown in Piedmont. Rather, Argentine bonarda has been shown to be the French grape douce noir (sweet black),

which originated in the Savoie region of France. In France, the grape is also known as corbeau (meaning crow, a

reference to the grape’s black color) and char-bonneau, which was shortened in California to charbono. (Cult

followers of California’s now rare charbono will be happy to know they can switch to Argentine bonarda.)

◯ BOURBOULENC (BORE-BOO-LAHNK): Ancient, simple-tasting Provençal variety, today used in blends

throughout the South of France, in the white wines of appellations such as Châteauneuf-du-Pape, Côtes-du-Rhône,

Corbières, Minervois, and Bandol.

● BRACHETTO (BRA-KET-OH): Native to and found primarily in Piedmont, Italy, around the towns of Asti

and Alessandria, where it is used to make brachetto d’Acqui, a deep-red-colored and delicious, if somewhat soda

pop–like, sparkling wine.

◯ BUAL (BOO-ALL): Cultivated on the island of Madeira, bual—sometimes spelled boal—is the grape that

makes the rich, sweet style of Madeira also known as bual or boal. The grape is the same as malvasia fina and is

also used for dry white table wines in the Dão region of Portugal.

C

● CABERNET FRANC: See page 54.

● CABERNET SAUVIGNON: See page 56.

● CALITOR (CAL-I-TOR): One of the lesser red grapes used in France’s southern Rhône. Calitor is virtually

always blended.

● CANAIOLO (CAN-AYE-OH-LOW): An important blending grape in Tuscany and throughout central Italy.

Canaiolo is used as part of the blend in making Chianti, where it serves to soften sangiovese’s tannic firmness and

acidic bite.

● CANNONAU (CAN-AN-OW): The famous red grape of the Italian island of Sardinia. The same grape as

grenache/garnacha (see page 60).

◯ CAPE RIESLING (CAPE REEZ LING): A widely planted grape in South Africa, where it is used mostly in

cheap blends. Not the same as true riesling, Cape riesling is thought to be related to the obscure French grape

crouchen blanc.

● CARDINAL (CAR-DIN-AHL): A vigorous, high-yielding cross of a Hungarian table grape and a French table

grape, in which both grapes were themselves obscure crosses. Grown in Texas and Florida.

● CARIGNAN (CARE-I-NYAN): The French name for the Spanish grape mazuelo, which originated in

northeastern Spain, probably in Aragón, and is used today in Rioja as part of the blend. In some parts of Spain

(such as Priorat, which also grows a lot of the grape), mazuelo carries the name cariñena. (The French name

carignan is probably derived from cariñena.) Despite being an important grape in Spain, there is far more carignan

growing in France. Earthy-flavored and powerful, with dark color, relatively high acidity, and high tannin, it is

mostly used for blending in the Languedoc-Roussillon, and to a lesser extent in Provence and the Rhône. In Italy,

on the island of Sardinia, it’s known as carignano. Also grown in California, where it is spelled carignane and is

often a part of inexpensive blends.

● CARMENÈRE (CAR-MEN-AIR): An ancient Bordeaux variety (also known in Bordeaux as grande vidure)

whose parents are cabernet franc and gros cabernet. Carmenère’s half siblings are cabernet sauvignon and merlot.

While virtually extinct in Bordeaux today, the grape is now widespread in Chile, where it is considered the leading

red and can make complex, intensely red-hued wines. The name may derive from the word carmin—crimson in

Latin—and is a reference to the vivid red color of the variety’s leaves come harvest time. In China, carmenère is

known as cabernet gernischt or cabernet shelongzhu (literally cabernet snake pearl).

◯ CARRICANTE (CARE-I-CAHN-TAY): A white grape indigenous to Sicily and known for its high yield and

acidity. Also known as catarrato.

◯ CATARRATTO BIANCO (CAT-A-RHAT-O BEE-AHN-CO): Bland but hearty Italian variety grown widely

in Sicily and used as a blending grape, especially for Marsala. At lower yields it makes a more interesting wine. On

Mt. Etna in Sicily, it is called carricante. The grape is probably the progeny of garganega.

● CATA WBA (CA-TAW-BA): Found mostly in the northeastern part of the United States, where it is used for

juice, jams, and jellies, as well as wine. With its hard-to-describe grapey/animal fur aroma and flavor, often called

“foxy,

” the grape may be a hybrid or a cross; its parents are unknown. Made into light red and rosé wines,

especially in New Y ork State.

◯ CAYUGA (KAI-OOO-GA): An important French-American hybrid, especially in the Finger Lakes region of

New Y ork State, where it is made into off-dry and sweet wines.

● CHAMBOURCIN (SHAM-BORE-SAIN): A French-American hybrid created (through multiple crossings of

crossings) sometime in the late 1940s, but available only since the 1960s. Highly thought of thanks to its “lack of

hybrid taste”

—in other words, no pronounced grapey/animal fur aromas and flavors. Makes good and very good

wines in many eastern and midwestern states of the United States, including Missouri, New Jersey, New Y ork, and

Virgina.

● CHARBONO (SHAR-BO-NO): Native to the Savoie region of France, where it is properly known as douce

noir (“sweet black”), but is also known by the names corbeau and charbonneaux (in California this was later

shortened to charbono). Tiny amounts are still grown in California, where the wine has a small but cult following.

In Argentina, douce noir is called bonarda, which means that California’s charbono and Argentina’s bonarda are the

same variety.

◯ CHARDONNAY: See page 57.

◯ CHASSELAS (SHAAS-I-LAS): Ancient, low-acid variety also known as fendant. Best known in the French-

speaking part of Switzerland, where it probably originated near Lake Geneva. Also cultivated to a smaller extent in

Alsace. In Germany it is referred to as gutedel.

● CHENIN BLANC: See page 58.

● CILIEGIOLO (CHEE-LEE-EH-JOE-LOW): If you aren’t Italian, don’t try to say this three times fast. Once

only used sparingly in low-cost Italian red blends, ciliegiolo’s popularity has increased dramatically in the past ten

years, and this grape, with its fresh, cherrylike flavors (ciliegiolo means “cherry” in Italian), is now a component of

many DOC wines, especially in Tuscany. Ciliegiolo and Calabrese di Montenuovo are thought to be the parents of

sangiovese.

● CINSAUT (SIN-SO): Southern French grape today grown all over the south of France and in the southern

Rhône; most frequently used in blends, where it adds a slight spiciness. It can also be found in Algeria, Morocco,

and Tunisia. In South Africa, where the grape was confusingly called Hermitage (a region in the Rhône V alley, in

France), it was crossed with pinot noir to create pinotage. Sometimes spelled cinsault.

◯ CLAIRETTE (CLARE-ET): At low yields this variety is beautifully fresh and aromatic. A common blending

component in many white wines of southern France, including those of Provence, Châteauneuf-du-Pape, and Côtes-

du-Rhône.

◯ COLOMBARD: see French Colombard.

● CONCORD (CON-CORD): The most well-known American grape variety in New Y ork State. It belongs to the

species Vitis labrusca and was first found growing wild near the Concord River in Concord, Massachusetts. Makes

distinctly flavored but not very highly esteemed wines with brazen, candylike aromas and flavors. Although it is

used in basic kosher wines like Manischewitz, Concord is much more appreciated as juice and jelly than as wine.

● CORNALIN (CORE-NA-LAN): Ancient variety from the V al d’Aosta of northwest Italy, but now virtually

extinct there. Better known today in Switzerland, where it grows in the V alais, and is sometimes called humagne

rouge. Considered the top red in a country better known for its whites.

◯ CORTESE (CORE-TAYS-AY): Northwestern Italian grape that makes the medium-bodied wine Gavi,

historically the most prized white wine of Piedmont, Italy.

● CORVINA (CORE-VEE-NA): Considered the most important red grape in the blends that make the well-

known Italian wines Amarone and V alpolicella, in the V eneto. It probably originated in the area around V erona; one

of its parents is refosco dal peduncolo rosso (refosco with the red stem). The name corvina may derive from corvo

(crow, a reference to the color of the grapes). Usually blended with its progeny, rondinella, and with molinara.

● CÔT (CO): The enologically correct name for malbec. An old variety that originated near the southern French

region of Cahors, where it is still the specialty. In Cahors, côt makes a strapping, highly tannic wine that could not

be more different from plush Argentine malbec. Côt’s parents are prunelard and magdeleine noire des Charentes.

The latter is also the mother of merlot.

● COUNOISE (COON-W AZ): One of the common, if lesser, red grapes in France’s southern Rhône V alley. Used

in Gigondas and sometimes in Châteauneuf-du-Pape.

● CRIOLLA (CREE-OH-LA): Criolla, Spanish for creole, is a group of several Vitis vinifera varieties that are

historically important in the Americas, especially South America. Their story is convoluted. To begin with, the

criollas may have originated naturally in South America as the progeny of European varieties brought earlier, or

they may have been cultivated from seeds or cuttings brought by Spanish and Portuguese conquistadores. Here are

a few of the important criollas: Criolla grande is a pinkish-skinned grape that probably originated in Argentina,

where it is still used to make neutral cheap wine. Another criolla called cereza (the word means cherry in Spanish)

also originated in Argentina, as the progeny of criolla chica and muscat of Alexandria. For its part, criolla chica

(Creole girl) is the same as the Spanish grape listán prieto, an old variety from Castilla La Mancha. It was brought

to Argentina and Chile in the mid-sixteenth century. By the nineteenth century, criolla chica had, in Chile, been

renamed país (“country”). Around the same time, listán prieto was brought from Spain to Argentina and Chile, it

was also brought to Mexico by Franciscan missionaries, and there it was renamed misión. Later, in California,

misión’s spelling was changed to mission. Thus, in the end, Chile’s criolla chica (país) and California’s mission are

the same, and both are the Spanish grape listán prieto. Argentina’s criolla grande is related, but it’s not known how.

And Argentina’s cereza is a cross of criolla chica (aka país, aka listán prieto) and muscat of Alexandria. See also

Listán prieto.

D

● DELA W ARE (DELL-A-W ARE): More pink-skinned than truly red, this French-American hybrid (whose

parentage is cloudy) is grown primarily in the Lake Erie region of New Y ork State, but also in Michigan and Ohio,

where it was created. Makes soda pop-ish wines. Curiously, Delaware is also grown in Japan.

● DOLCETTO (DOLE-CHET-OH): A fruity, low-acid grape (the name means “little sweet”) made into a

delicious, fruity, licoricey, bitter-edged everyday wine—the quaffing wine of northern Italy’s Piedmont region,

although barbera is, more and more, taking over that role.

● DORNFELDER (DORN-FELL-DER): German cross of two crosses (Helfensteiner and Heroldrebe) bred in

1956 and honorifically named for an important eighteenth-century viticulturist—Immanuel August Ludwig

Dornfeld. Makes darkly colored, soft wines, mostly in the Rheinhessen and Pfalz.

● DOUCE NOIR (DUE-SAY NWAHR): Old French variety from the Savoie region, often called corbeau

(“crow”). In California, the now rare variety called charbono is douce noir, and in Argentina, the variety bonarda is

douce noir.

● DURIF (DUR-EEF): A variety created sometime just before the 1860s by French botanist François Durif. A

cross of syrah and the now obscure French grape peloursin. Although Durif has virtually disappeared in France, it

lives on in California, where it is known as petite sirah. Alas, some (but a minority) of so-called petite sirah

vineyards in California are simply peloursin, and some may be extensive field blends that include peloursin and

Durif.

E

◯ EHRENFELSER (ERRAN-FELL-SIR): A German cross of riesling and silvaner now popular in Canada,

where it’s often made into eiswein.

◯ EMERALD RIESLING (EM-ER-ELD REEZ-LING): A cross of muscadelle and garnacha developed at the

University of California at Davis. Now only tiny amounts are grown, and the grapes are used mostly for jug wines.

◯ ENCRUZADO (EN-CREW-ZAH-DOH): Important grape in the dry white wines of Portugal’s Dão region.

F

◯ FALANGHINA (FAA-LAN-GHEE-NA): More properly falanghina flegrea, this is an ancient grape made

into white wines in southern Italy’s Campania region, in the districts of Falerno del Massico and Sannio. The name

may derive from the Latin falangae, for the stakes that support vines.

◯ FENDANT (FEN-DAHNT): See Chasselas.

◯ FIANO (FEE-AH-NO): An ancient grape cultivated near Avellino, in Campania, in southern Italy. The fiano

of Apulia is thought to be an entirely separate variety.

◯ FOLLE BLANCHE (FOAL BLONCH): Once, but no longer, a leading grape in Cognac and Armagnac.

Today used mostly in the western Loire to produce the extremely tart, thin Gros Plant. Also known as mune

mahatsa in Spain’s Basque region, it is one of the varieties used to make the tart, dry white wine Txakoli.

● FREISA (FRAY-ZHAH): Bitter, acidic, aromatic red grape of the northwestern Italian province of Piedmont.

Thought to be an offspring of nebbiolo, it was traditionally made into a frothy, slightly sparkling, pale red wine with

a touch of sweetness. Today, it is often made in a still, dry style.

◯ FRENCH COLOMBARD (FRENCH CALL-UM-BARD): More correctly known simply as colom-bard, it

is widely planted in the southwest of France, where it is mostly distilled into eaux-de-vie, Cognac, and Armagnac.

In California, it is a high-yielding grape made into jug wines. Known as colombar in South Africa, where it is also

made into jug wines.

◯ FRIULANO (FREE-OO-LAHN-OH): Formerly known in Italy as tocai Friulano and planted mostly in the

northeastern Italian region of Friuli-V enezia Giulia, it is the source of somewhat spicy, lightly floral, medium-

bodied wines that are considered among the region’s best. The same grape as sauvignonasse, sometimes called

sauvignon vert, a grape well established in Chile.

◯ FURMINT (FUR-MINT): Native to Hungary and the major grape in the famous Hungarian botrytized sweet

wine Tokaji aszú. Furmint is also used for dry wine. Also grown in Austria.

G

● GAGLIOPPO (GAL-EE-OH-PO): An ancient grape variety and natural cross of sangiovese and mantonico

bianco, an obscure variety from the region of Calabria. Gaglioppo is the main grape today in Calabria, where it is

the source of the grapey red Italian wine Cirò.

● GAMAY: See page 59.

◯ GARGANEGA (GAR-GAN-I-GA): An ancient variety most closely associated with the northern Italian

region of the V eneto, and the major grape of Soave. Garganega is thought to be one of the parents of many other

Italian white varieties, including trebbiano Toscana, malvasia bianca di Candida, albana, and catarratto bianco.

● GARNACHA: See Grenache, page 60.

◯ GARNACHA BLANCA (GAR-NA-CHA BLAHNK-A): See Grenache blanc.

◯ GELBER MUSKATELLER (GEL-BER MUS-CA-TELLER): Sometimes simply muskateller, this is the

Austrian name for muscat blanc à petits grains. See Muscat, page 63.

◯ GEWÜRZTRAMINER: See page 59.

● GIRÒ (JEER-OH): An ancient grape variety that is grown on the large Italian island of Sardinia. Girò may be

of Spanish origin.

◯ GLERA (GLARE-AH): Ancient northern Italian grape also known as prosecco, and used to make the Italian

sparkling wine Prosecco. In 2009, when the wine Prosecco was awarded DOCG status (the highest rank for an

Italian wine), the grape name prosecco was officially discontinued to avoid confusion. Glera, which had been an old

synonym for the prosecco grape, henceforth came into official use.

◯ GODELLO (GO-DAY-YO): Major white grape made into wines in northwestern Spain, in the remote

mountainous region of V aldeorras, although the grape’s origin is probably in Galicia, next door. Makes wines that

can have a full body and a viscous, almost lanolin-like mouthfeel.

◯ GOUAIS BLANC (GOO-AY BLAHNK): One of the prolific ancient “founder varieties,

” and as such, a parent

and grandparent to a slew of other varieties, including such disparate varieties as riesling, muscadelle,

blaufränkisch, and colombard. No known wine from gouais blanc is made today, though a few isolated vines may

still exist in the Haute-Savoie region of France.

◯ GOUVEIO (GOH-V AI-YOU): One of the grapes used to make the dry white wines of the Dão and the Douro

V alley in Portugal, and also used in the making of white Port. The same grape as Spain’s godello.

● GRACIANO (GRA-SEE-AN-OH): High-quality, late-ripening Spanish grape, with delicate, slightly spicy

flavors and an ability to hold onto its acidity even in warm places. Used primarily in Rioja, as part of traditional

Rioja blends. Also found to a small extent in the Languedoc-Roussillon, where it is confusingly called morrastel

(which sounds like monastrell, but the grape is entirely different). On the Italian island of Sardinia, it’s known as

bovale sardo, and is much appreciated as an addition to blends.

◯ GRAŠEVINA (GRAH-SHEH-VINA): The most widely planted white grape in Croatia. Known in Austria as

welschriesling and in northern Italy as riesling Italico, although it is not related to riesling.

◯ GRAUBURGUNDER (GRAOW BUR-GUND-ER): One of the German names for the grape pinot gris, which

is also known as ruländer.

◯ GRECHETTO (GREH-CHET-OH): Grown in the central Italian province of Umbria, it is one of the grapes

that make the medium-bodied Italian wine Orvieto.

◯ GRECO (GREC-OH): An ancient variety now grown primarily in the southern Italian region of Campania,

where it is made into distinctive white wines, the most famous of which is greco di Tufo.

● GRENACHE: See page 60.

◯ GRENACHE BLANC (GREN-AHSH BLAHNK): A white-berried clonal mutation of the red grape

grenache. Grenache blanc is a leading blending grape in the white wines of southern France, including the whites of

Provence, the Languedoc-Roussillon, and the southern Rhône. More properly known as garnacha blanca, since it

originated in Spain.

● GRIGNOLINO (GREE-NO-LEE-NO): Native to Piedmont, Italy, where it is the source of light-reddish,

frothy, crisp wines that can also have a tannic bite. The name may come from grignòle, a Piedmontese dialect word

for pips or seeds, because grignolino is known for the high number of seeds in each berry.

◯ GRILLO (GREE-LOH): One of the main white grapes of Sicily, where it can make fantastically refreshing,

floral, peppery dry white wines. Also, along with catarratto bianco, one of the two grapes used in Sicily to make

Marsala. Grillo’s parents were catarratto bianco and muscat of Alexandria.

● GROLLEAU (GROW-LOH): A mostly uninspired grape used primarily in France’s Loire V alley, in the red and

rosé wines of Anjou.

◯ GRÜNER VELTLINER: See page 61.

◯ GUTEDEL (GOOT-I-DEL): German name for the Swiss grape chasselas. In Germany, it is planted mostly in

the Baden region, where it makes basic wines.

H

◯ HANEPOOT (HAHN-E-POOT): See Muscat, page 63.

◯ HÁRSLEVELŰ (HARSH-LEH-VEH-LOO): Aromatic Hungarian grape that lends a smooth, spicy character

to the renowned botrytized sweet wine Tokaji aszú. Native to Hungary, hárslevelű is a progeny of furmint.

● HONDARRIBI BELTZA (HONDA-REE-BEE BELT-ZA): Beltza means black in Basque. Used to make the

somewhat rare, light, lively, crisp red Txakolí (shah-co-LEE) of Spain’s Basque region. Like cabernet sauvignon

and carmenère, hondarribi beltza is one of the decendents of cabernet franc. Despite its name, it is not related to

hondarribi zuri (white hondarribi).

◯ HONDARRIBI ZURI (HONDA-REE-BEE ZURI): Indigenous to Spain’s Basque region, this is the name

given to the leading variety of grape in the region’s sassy, high-acid white Txakolí (shah-co-LEE) wines (zuri

means white in Basque). However, DNA analysis has revealed that what is called hondarribi zuri is actually not a

single variety but rather any one of three white grapes planted in the Basque region: courbu blanc, crouchen, or the

hybrid noah.

◯ HUXELREBE (HOUKS-EL-RAY-BA): Developed in Germany, this unusual cross of chasselas (also known

as gutedel) and the obscure grape courtillier musqué makes aromatic wines, especially in Germany’s Pfalz and

Rheinhessen regions.

I

◯ INZOLIA (IN-ZOL-EE-AH): See Ansonica.

◯ IRSAI OLIVÉR (EER-SHA-EE OH-EYE-VEHR): A white Hungarian grape that was originally bred to be a

table grape but is now often used to produce soft, aromatic wines that are best drunk young.

◯ ISABELLA (IS-A-BELL-AH): An American hybrid probably derived from a seedling that occurred in nature

when an unknown variety within the species Vitis labrusa crossed with an unknown variety of the Vitis vinifera

species. The grape was brought from South Carolina to New Y ork in the early 1800s by a grower, George Gibbs,

whose wife was named Isabella. Now planted in places as disparate as Japan, New Y ork State, India, and Brazil.

Unlike most grape varieties, Isabella grows well in semitropical and humid conditions.

◯ IZKIRIOT TTIPI (EE-SKEE-REE-OT TEE-PEE): The Basque name for petit manseng, which is grown in

Spain’s Basque region to make the tart, dry white wine known as Txakolí.

J

● JAEN (JAI-EN): See Mencía.

◯ JUHFARK (YOO-FARK): A minor white grape mostly grown in the volcanic soils of the Somló region of

Hungary. It makes wines that are high in acid and often more salty and minerally than fruity.

K

● KADARKA (KAH-DAR-KAH): An Eastern European variety, especially important in Hungary, where it is

grown throughout the country. Makes light-colored, spicy, earthy wines that have a similarity to simple pinot noir.

● KÉKFRANKOS (KEK-FRANK-OSH): A leading red grape in Hungary, probably of Hungarian or Austrian

origin. It makes spicy, earthy, deeply colored reds in Hungary, Austria’s Burgenland, and in Washington State,

where it is called by its German name, Lemberger. DNA analysis indicates it is probably the progeny of gouais

blanc.

◯ KERNER (KER-NER): A popular and often delicious German variety created by crossing the red trollinger

(schiava) grape with the white riesling grape. Named after a nineteenth-century medical doctor and songwriter,

Justinius Kerner, who prescribed wine as good natural medicine.

◯ KHIKHVI (KEEK-VEE): Rare variety from the Republic of Georgia, where it is still grown and made into

highly thought of dry and sweet wines.

◯ KIRÁLYLEÁNKYA (KEE-RAH-LEE-LEE-ANK-YA): Widely planted white Hungarian grape with fresh

acidity and citrus flavors, whose name means “little princess.

”

◯ KOSHU (KO-SHOO): Widely planted Japanese variety grown in several areas of that country, including the

Mt. Fuji area. Legend has it that the grape is a cross of a native, wild Japanese grape with a vinifera variety that was

brought from the Caucasus to China and then, by Buddhist monks, to Japan approximately a thousand years ago.

But DNA typing has revealed no relationships with other known varieties, and thus koshu’s origins remain a

mystery. The first mentions of the variety being made into wine in Japan go back to the 1870s. Historically the wine

was produced in a sweet style; today it is made as a dry, delicate, low-alcohol, crisp white, not unlike Muscadet.

● KOTSIFALI (KOT-SI-FAHL-EE): Unique to the Greek island of Crete, its home. Kotsifali makes a light,

strawberry-scented red, and is one of the varieties in the Greek wines Achárnes and Pezá.

● KRASSATO (KRAH-SAH-TOE): Fairly full-bodied Greek variety thought to be indigenous to the area around

Mt. Olympus, on the Greek mainland. Blended with xinomavro and stavroto to make the wine Rapsáni.

L

● LACRIMA DI MORRO D’ALBA (LAK-REE-MA DEE MORE-O DAL-BA): The word lacrima (meaning

“tears”) is used for several different Italian varieties and wines. The most important of the grape varieties is lacrima

di Morro d’Alba, which is the dominant variety in the wine also called lacrima di Morro d’Alba, a fruity red of

Italy’s Marche region (not the same as Alba in Piedmont).

● LAGREIN (LAH-GRAYNE): A distinctive, fruity, bitter northern Italian variety probably indigenous to the

Alto Adige region, where most of it grows today. One of its parents is teroldego; the other is unknown. It is

sometimes blended with schiava.

● LAMBRUSCO (LAM-BRUCE-KO): The name lambrusco means wild grape. There are more than thirteen

different varieties with the word lambrusco or lambrusca in their names. A small number are cultivated in

Piedmont, but the majority are more famously in Emilia-Romagna, where the refreshing, very slightly sweet or dry

fizzy wine called lambrusco is a specialty. Because of its fizz and acidity, lambrusco is traditionally drunk as a

counterpoint to Emilia-Romagna’s famous salumi and rich meat pasta sauces.

◯ LAŠKI RIZLING (LASH-KEE REEZ-LING): See Welschriesling.

● LEMBERGER (LEM BRR GER): The German name for the dark, spicy, Austrian grape blaufränkisch. Grown

in small amounts in Washington State, where it is called Lemberger. See also Blaufränkisch.

● LENOIR (LEN-NWAHR): A complex American hybrid originally created in the southeastern part of the United

States and named after Lenoir County, in South Carolina. It was eventually taken further south, to Mississippi, by a

Spanish man named Jacquez; hence Jacquez is a synonym, as is black Spanish, thanks to the deep color of the

grape’s skin. (Note that several different varieties have black Spanish as a synonym.) Widely planted in southeast

and central Texas, where it has appeared to evolve a natural resistance to Pierce’s disease (a potentially fatal vine

disease caused by insects known as sharpshooters) despite the heat and humidity of the climate. Also widely

planted in Brazil, where it is used for juice, jelly, and jug wines.

● LIATIKO (LEE-AT-E-KO): The most widely planted grape on the Greek island of Crete. Makes floral, spicy,

pale reds with relatively high acidity. Used for dry and sweet wines.

● LIMNIO (LIM-KNEE-OH): Ancient Greek variety said to have been appreciated by Aristotle. Native to the

island of Limnos, in the northern Aegean, and now planted all over northern Greece. Sometimes blended with

cabernet sauvignon and cabernet franc.

● LISTÁN PRIETO (LEE-STAN PRE-ET-OH): A dark-skinned grape (prieto means dark in Spanish) native to

the region of Castilla La Mancha in central Spain. In the sixteenth century, listán was brought on several occasions

to the Americas, where the grape had a profound influence on the early viticultural history of many countries.

Indeed, listán prieto was the first European (Vitis vinifera) variety to be cultivated in the Americas. The grape was

brought directly and independently to Argentina, Chile, and Mexico. In Chile, listán came to be known as criolla

chica,

“Creole girl” (see Criolla, page 81), and was later renamed país. In Mexico, listán was introduced by

Franciscan missionaries, who renamed it misión. It traveled eventually to Baja California (present day Mexico),

then up to Alta California, where it was planted (spelled mission) at the Mission San Diego de Alcalá around 1770.

In Argentina, listán prieto crossed naturally with muscat of Alexandria to create several grapes, including cereza,

torrontés Riojano, and possibly torrontés Sanjuanino. A small amount of listán prieto is still grown on the Canary

Islands in Spain, and a huge amount is still grown in Chile as país. In California, as mission, 600 acres (242

hectares) are left.

M

◯ MACABEO (MAC-A-BAY-OH): Northern Spanish grape also known as viura. One of the three grapes used

in cava, Spanish sparkling wine, and the primary grape in the white wines of Rioja. A small amount is grown in the

Rhône, in France, where it is used in the appellation of Lirac; it is also used to a small extent in the Languedoc-

Roussillon.

◯ MADELEINE ANGEVINE (MAD-EH-LIN AN-JE-VINE): A cross of a cross of a cross created in the Loire

V alley in the mid-nineteenth century and now grown in extremely limited amounts, mostly in British Columbia,

Canada. A seedling of madeleine angevine crossed with an unknown parent—so-called madeleine x angevine 7672

—is somewhat more famous as a pleasantly floral grape variety grown principally in England.

● MAGDELEINE NOIRE DES CHARENTES (MAG-DEH-LIN NWAHR DAY SHAR-AWNT): This obscure,

rare French variety is the parent (with cabernet franc) of merlot, and (with prune-lard) of malbec grapes. Thought to

have been cultivated since the Middle Ages, magdeleine noire des Charentes was rediscovered in the 1990s in the

Charente department of southwestern France, where it was known as raisin de la madeleine. But DNA typing

revealed no genetic relationship to other varieties with the word madeleine in the name. In the 2000s, the scientists

renamed the variety magdeleine noire des Charentes in a not-completely-successful attempt to distinguish it from

other magdeleines. (As part of a grape’s name,

“magdeleine” is thought to refer to the feast day of Mary Magdalene

—July 22—a recognition of the fact that all the “madeleines” are extremely early ripeners and are often harvested

in July.)

◯ MALAGOUSIA (MAH-LAH-GOU-ZYAH): Historic variety native to central Greece. Lively and perfumed,

it is grown with success in Macedonia in particular.

● MALBEC: See page 61.

◯ MALMSEY (MALM-ZEE): See Malvasia.

◯ MALV ASIA (MAHL-V A-ZEE-AH): Like muscat, malvasia is not a single variety but a collective name for a

wide variety of Mediterranean grapes (white, pink, and black skinned), most of which are not actually related. What

some of them do share, however, is an ability to result in sweet wines that are high in alcohol. Greece has been put

forward as the original home of malvasia, but DNA testing does not support this idea. Among the different varieties

—all with malvasia in the name—are malvasia bianca di Candia (the most planted type of malvasia, and common

in Italy); malvasia bianca lunga (used in Tuscany for vin santo, and historically in Chianti, where it was part of the

original Chianti “formula”); malvasia branca de São Jorge (the malvasia used to make malmsey Madeira); and

malvasia di Lipari (which makes the famous Sicilian passito dessert wine of the same name; confusingly, this is

also known as malvasia candida, which sounds awfully close to malvasia bianca di Candia). Malmsey is an English

corruption of the word malvasia.

◯ MALVOISIE (MAHL-VW A-ZEE): See V ermentino.

● MAMMOLO (MAM-MO-LOW): Old Tuscan variety grown in central Italy as well as on the island of Corsica,

where it is known as sciaccarello (“crunchy”). In Tuscany, it is often blended with sangiovese.

● MANDILARIA (MAN-DELL-ARE-EE-AH): A darkly colored, tannic grape native to the Greek islands of the

eastern Aegean. Blended in small amounts with kotsifali to make the wines Arhánes and Pezá, on Crete. Also

grown on numerous other Greek islands, including Santorini and Pylos, and all over the southern Peloponnese

peninsula.

● MARÉCHAL FOCH (MAR-EH-SHA WL FOSHE): A complex hybrid created in France in 1911 and named

after Maréchal Ferdinand Foch, a general in the French army during World War I. Deeply colored, tannic, and

somewhat herbaceous, and well suited to cold climates. Grown today in small amounts in Canada and the

northeastern United States.

◯MARSANNE (MAR-SAHN): The main white grape of the northern Rhône in France. Makes big-bodied wines

and is often blended with the aromatic and elegant grape roussanne, which may be either its parent or its offspring.

It is also grown in the Languedoc-Roussillon, as well as in California.

● MARSELAN (MAR-SE-LAN): A recent cross (1961) of cabernet sauvignon and garnacha/grenache, cultivated

in the Languedoc and the southern Rhône. The name refers to Marseille, the well-known city near the agronomy

institute in Montpellier, where the cross was developed.

◯ MAUZAC (MAO-ZAHK): In the Languedoc-Roussillon, in France, the grape used to make sparkling

Crémant de Limoux.

● MA VRODAPHNE (MA V-RO-DAFF-KNEE): Also spelled mavrodaphni, the name means “black laurel.

”

Probably native to Cephalonia (Kefalonia in Greek), one of the Ionian islands of western Greece, or the

Peloponnese peninsula. It is the leading grape in the famous Greek wines mavrodaphne de Patras and mavrodaphne

de Kefalonia, which are long-aged, sweet, fortified red wines made in Patras on the Peloponnese peninsula and in

Cephalonia, the largest of the Ionian islands in western Greece.

● MA VROTRAGANO (MA V-RO-TRAG-AH-NOH): Indigenous to the Greek island of Santorini, mavrotragano

produces wines with high tannin, and berry and spice characteristics. Once almost extinct, it is now experiencing a

renaissance.

● MA VROUDA (MA V-ROO-DAH): The name (also spelled mavroudi or mavroudia) for several unrelated dark-

skinned grape varieties grown all over Greece.

● MAZUELO (MA-ZWAY-LO): Native to northeastern Spain—probably the region of Aragón, mazuelo has

dozens of synonyms in Spain and elsewhere. In Spain, in Rioja, it is known as mazuelo and is used in many Rioja

blends for its acidity, tannin, and earthy flavors. But in Priorat and elsewhere in Spain, it is known as cariñena. In

France, especially in the Languedoc-Roussillon, Provence, and Rhône regions of southern France, it’s known as

carignan. Indeed, today, despite this grape’s Spanish origins, more of it is grown in France. In the United States,

carignan is often spelled carignane.

◯ MELON DE BOURGOGNE (MEL-AWN DE BORE-GOY-NYA): An ancient Burgundian variety, melon

was subsequently banned in Burgundy, but found a centuries-long home in the Loire V alley, where it’s the grape

that makes the light, tart, dry French wine Muscadet, considered the working man’s accompaniment to oysters.

● MENCÍA (MEN-THEE-AH): A spicy grape native to the area around Bierzo, in the province of León, in

northwestern Spain, that is currently undergoing a small revival. Also grown in Portugal’s Dão region, where it is

known as jaen.

● MERLOT: See page 62.

● MISSION (MI-SHEN): The first Vitis vinifera variety planted in California. Originally from Spain, and brought

to California by Franciscan missionaries traveling north from Mexico in the 1700s. Determined in the 1990s to be

the Spanish grape listán prieto. Mission remained the mainstay of the California wine industry until the Gold Rush

of 1848. There are still some 600 acres (242 hectares) of mission planted in California, mostly in the hot San

Joaquin valley. See also Listán prieto.

● MOLINARA (MOLE-IN-ARE-AH): A high-acid red grape probably native to the V eneto. It is not as high in

quality as corvina or rondinella, the grapes it is blended with (albeit in small amounts) to make Italy’s powerful

wine Amarone, as well as for the lighter wines V alpolicella and Bardolino.

● MONASTRELL (MON-AH-STRELL): A widely planted, very late-ripening grape that originated in V alencia,

Spain. Today it is used mostly in the central part of that country, in provinces such as Jumilla, to make powerful,

dark, dense red wines. See Mourvèdre (the French name of the grape), page 63.

◯ MONEMV ASIA (MO-NEM-VASE-EE-A): Greek variety found mainly on the Cyclades Islands in the

Aegean, notably Paros, and in the southern Peloponnese Peninsula. Makes both dry and sweet wines. The name is

said to come from the fortified medieval port city Monemvasia, which, thanks to an earthquake in A.D. 375, is now

an island connected to the mainland by one bridge. In Greek moni emvassis means single entrance.

● MONTEPULCIANO (MON-TI-PULL-CHEE-AH-NO): Confusingly, this is not the grape of the Tuscan wine

vino nobile di Montepulciano, which is made from sangiovese. Instead, the grape montepulciano is widespread

throughout central and southern Italy, and is especially well known in Abruzzi, where it makes the good, rustic

montepulciano d’Abruzzo.

◯ MORIO-MUSKAT (MOOR-EE-OH MUS-CAT): A German cross of unknown parentage found mostly in

Germany’s Pfalz and Rheinhessen regions. Makes a somewhat perfumed wine that can often be a bit too much like

cheap perfume.

◯ MOSCATEL (MOSS-CA-TELL): The general name used in Spain and parts of Portugal for both muscat

blanc à petits grains and muscat of Alexandria. In Jerez, moscatel bianco (muscat of Alexandria) is the third most

important grape, after Palomino and Pedro Ximénez, and there, it is made into a sweet, fortified wine that is

sometimes made by the solera system of fractional blending that is used to make Sherry. It is also made into

intriguing dry, aromatic still wines (both alone and as part of a blend) in several other parts of Spain.

◯ MOSCHOFILERO (MOW-SHO-FEE-YER-OH): Highly aromatic Peloponnesian grape that is the source of

the light, fresh Greek Peloponnesian wine Mantineia.

● MOURVÈDRE: See page 63.

◯ MTSV ANE KAKHURI (MUTZ-V AH-NEH KAH-KOO-REE): An old variety from southeastern Georgia,

but also grown in Ukraine, Russia, and the Republic of Moldova. Usually just called mtsvane. Used to make dry

and sweet wines, some of which are made in the traditional clay qvevri, a kind of large amphora without handles

that is buried in the ground.

◯ MÜLLER-THURGAU (MOO-LER TER-GAO): Well-known German grape variety that makes rather

neutral-tasting, undistinguished wine in Germany (but very good wine in surrounding countries, such as Italy and

Hungary). Recent DNA typing has established it as a cross between riesling and madeleine royale, a table grape of

unknown parentage. Müller-Thurgau was widely planted after World War II and became the leading grape in

Germany in the 1990s. Today, it has been supplanted by riesling, which makes vastly superior wine.

◯ MUSCADEL (MUS-CA-DELL): South African name for muscat blanc à petits grains. See Muscat, page 63.

See also Muscadelle.

◯ MUSCADELLE (MUS-CA-DELL): Perfumed grape blended in tiny amounts with sémillon and sauvignon

blanc to make some white Bordeaux. It’s more famous, however, in Australia, where it is used to make the famous

Australian fortified wine topaque (formerly known as tokay) in the Rutherglen region of Victoria. It is not the same

variety as any of the varieties called muscat. Confusingly, South African muscadel is a muscat.

◯ MUSCADET (MUS-CA-DAY): The name sometimes used for melon de Bourgogne, the grape that is the

source of the sharp, light, dry French wine Muscadet.

● MUSCARDIN (MUS-CAR-DEN): A relatively rare, fairly neutral grape used in France’s southern Rhône, in

such wines as Châteauneuf-du-Pape and Gigondas.

◯ MUSCAT: See page 63.

◯ MUSKATELLER (MUS-CA-TELLER): Austrian name for muscat blanc à petits grains. See Muscat, page

63. Also known as gelber muskateller.

N

● NEBBIOLO: See page 64.

● NEGOSKA (NE-GOES-KA): A northern Greek variety used with xynomavro to make the popular, full-bodied

Greek wine Goumenissa.

● NEGRAMOLL (NEG-RA-MOL): An old variety that probably originated in Andalucía, Spain, and from there

was brought to Spain’s Canary Islands, where it still is grown today and where it makes light aromatic reds. It is

better known, as tinta negra mole, on the Portuguese island of Madeira, where it is the leading grape planted and is

used for much of the basic Madeira produced.

● NEGRARA (NE-GRA-RA): A minor blending grape in the powerful Italian wine amarone and the lighter-

bodied V alpolicella. Considered lower in quality than corvina and rondinella, with which it is blended.

● NEGRETTE (NE-GRET): A variety that grows north of Toulouse, in southwestern France, where it is fruity

and simple, and not as popular as the other local variety, tannat.

● NEGROAMARO (NEG-RO A-MAR-OH): Negro (black) and amaro (bitter) tell it all. An appealing, southern

Italian grape with slight bitter espresso-like flavors and yet a soft texture. Widely grown in the Apulia region,

especially in the hot, dry Salento peninsula, the spur of the Italian boot. No parental relationships have yet been

established for this main variety.

● NERELLO CAPPUCCIO (NER-ELLO CA-POO-CHO): Grown on Mt. Etna, in Sicily, and is thought to be

related to sangiovese, much like nerello Mascalese, but produces a lower-quality wine that is mostly used to add

color and alcohol to red blends.

● NERELLO MASCALESE (NER-ELLO MAS-CA-LAY-ZE): Grown on the volcanic slopes of Sicily’s Mt.

Etna and thought to be distantly related to sangiovese. It is often bottled on its own, as well as being blended.

Produces wines with good acid and tannin content.

● NERO D’A VOLA (NER-O DA-VO-LA): This widely planted black (nero) grape was probably named after the

city of Avola, on the Italian island of Sicily. It’s the aristocratic red grape of Sicily, making wines that are

mouthfilling, structured, chocolaty, and often complex. It is sometimes called Calabrese. DNA analysis suggests

there are several clones of nero d’Avola, and possibly several different varieties that fall under the name.

● NERO DI TROIA (NER-O DEE TROY-A): Also known as uva di Troia. Rustic, tannic, productive variety

grown primarily in the Apulia region of Italy, in the province of Bari. The name translates as “black of Troy,

” but

DNA analysis shows no relationship to Greek varieties.

◯ NEUBURGER (NOY-BURGER): Austrian grape known to make golden-colored dry wines and some good

sweet wines. A natural cross between roter veltliner and silvaner that probably took place in Austria.

◯ NIAGARA (NIGH-AG-RA): A very pungently aromatic American cross of two Vitis labrusca varieties,

named after Niagara, New Y ork, where it was developed in the 1860s. Still best known in New Y ork State, where it

is the source of off-dry and sweet wines.

● NORTON (NOR-TEN): One of the oldest hybrids cultivated in the United States, having been discovered in

Virginia sometime around 1820. DNA typing suggests it is a natural cross that occurred in the wild of a Vitis

vinifera variety with a Vitis aestivalis variety. Today, it is grown in the Midwest and mid-Atlantic states, and is

especially successful in Missouri and Virginia, where it is the source of some surprisingly good zinfandel-like

wines.

O

● OSELETA (OH-SEH-LET-TAH): Used in small amounts in some amarone and V alpolicella blends, in

northeastern Italy. Originally thought to be extinct, it was revived by producers in the V eneto in the 1990s.

P

● PAÍS (PIE-EECE): The name means country in Spanish. A prolific variety in Chile, where it is the source of

common, undistinguished table wine. Originally known as criolla chica, país is the same as California’s mission

grape. In the mid-2000s, DNA typing revealed both país and misson to be the Spanish grape listán prieto, brought

to Mexico, Argentina, and Chile in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries by Spanish conquistadores and

missionaries.

◯ PALOMINO (PAL-OH- ME-NO): More correctly known as Palomino fino and grown in southern and central

Spain, this is the major grape of Spain’s famous fortified wine, Sherry. When just harvested, it has a fairly neutral

character, which is desirable for the solera process of making Sherry.

◯ PARELLADA (PAR-AH-YA-DA): The most refined of the three grapes used to make cava, Spanish sparkling

wine.

◯ PEDERNÃ (PEY-DARE-NYA): One of the minor grapes sometimes included in the blend to make the

Portuguese wine vinho verde. The same grape as arinto.

◯ PEDRO XIMÉNEZ (PEY-DRO HE-MEN-EZ): An Andalusian variety cultivated throughout the south of

Spain. Nicknamed PX, it’s the second most important grape for making Sherry. Aged unblended in a solera, it

makes an unreal, delicious dessert Sherry that has the deep mahogany color and sticky viscosity of molasses.

● PELOURSIN (PELL-OR-ZAN): An ancient French variety native to eastern France and now a minor grape in

the southern Rhône V alley. One of the parents (the other is syrah) of the grape Durif, commonly known in

California as petite sirah.

● PERIQUITA (PEAR-IH-KEY-TA): The name of this heart grape means parakeet. One of the most widely

planted grapes in Portugal, it is particularly successful in the south of the country, but grown as far north as the

Douro. Also known as castelão, periquita is a natural cross of the Portuguese grapes cayetana blanca and

alfrocheiro. Periquita is also the brand name of a popular Portuguese red table wine that is a blend of the grape

periquita with touriga nacional and touriga franca.

◯ PETIT CORBU (PEH-TEET CORE-BOO): An ancient grape grown primarily in the Gascony region of

southwest France and also grown in the Basque regions of France and Spain. Contributes a note of honey to blends.

Sometimes spelled petit courbut.

● PETITE SIRAH/PETITE SYRAH (PE-TEET SEAR-AH): The name is easy to remember, for nothing is

petite about the wines that come from petite sirah. Instead, the “variety” makes a blockbuster, blackish, peppery,

spicy, tannic wine. Most commonly grown in northern California, petite sirah is sometimes not a single variety.

DNA typing indicates that wines labeled petite sirah are most often the Rhône grape Durif (a cross of peloursin and

syrah), but they may also be a field blend of many varieties, including syrah, zinfandel, and several varieties

common to southern France.

◯ PETIT MANSENG (PEH-TEET MAN-SANG): Primarily used in the sweet wine Jurançon, a rare specialty

of southwestern France. Commonly, the grapes are left on the vine until they are shriveled and their sugar is

concentrated, although the noble mold Botrytis cinerea may also take hold. Also known as izakiriot ttipi in Spain’s

Basque region, where it is one of the varieties used to make the tart, dry white Txakolí.

● PETIT VERDOT (PE-TEET VER-DOE): Important, late-ripening Bordeaux grape, traditionally blended in

small amounts with cabernet sauvignon and merlot, for spice, depth, and color. In California, it is sometimes made

into powerful wines on its own. While petit verdot appears to have originated in or near Bordeaux, its parents are

not known.

◯ PICARDAN (PEE-CAR-DAN): One of the minor white grapes sometimes used in the wines of France’s

southern Rhône, especially in Côtes-du-Rhône and white Châteauneuf-du-Pape. On its own, picardan makes

neutral-tasting, fairly uninteresting wine.

◯ PICOLIT (PEE-KO-LEE): Highly regarded, rare grape native to the Friuli-V enezia Giulia region of

northeastern Italy, where it is the source of the prized dessert wine also known as picolit. The name is derived from

the small size of the clusters—piccolo in Italian means “small.

”

◯ PICQUEPOUL BLANC (PEEK-POOL BLAHNK): Also spelled picpoul. One of the minor grapes of

southern France, where it is used in the southern Rhône as part of the blend in Côtes-du-Rhône, Tavel, and

Châteauneuf-du-Pape. See also piquepoul noir.

● PIGNOLO (PIG-NYO-LOW): Rare Friulian (northeastern Italian) variety that was almost extinct before being

rescued and actively cultivated in the region since the 1970s. Makes distinctive, structured wines on its own, but is

often used in red Friuli blends.

◯ PINOT BLANC (PEE-NO BLAHNK): Generally makes good, not great, wines reminiscent of modest

versions of chardonnay. The best worldwide come from small producers in northeastern Italy; Alsace, France; and

in Austria (where it can be made into gorgeous sweet wines). In the New World, Oregon shows promise with the

grape. Like pinot gris, pinot blanc is not actually a separate variety; it is an ancient clone (based on a color

mutation) of pinot noir. Known as pinot bianco in Italy.

◯ PINOT GRIS (PEE-NO GREE): See page 65.

● PINOT MEUNIER (PEE-NO MOON-YAY): The word meunier means miller, a reference to the thin layer of

white hairs on the underside of the vine leaves, which gives them a downy, floury appearance. Pinot meunier is a

clone of pinot noir, although in the classic Champagne triumvirate of chardonnay, pinot noir, and pinot meunier, it

is usually presented as a variety in and of itself. The clone is valued for its early ripening, making it less susceptible

to winter frosts, and for its ability to ripen well in soils that have clay in them (as along the Marne river valley of

Champagne). See also Pinot noir, page 66.

● PINOT NOIR: See page 66.

● PINOTAGE (PEE-NO-TAJ): A South African cross, in 1925, of pinot noir and cinsaut (which at the time in

South Africa was called Hermitage). Makes a rustic red wine (opinions vary on its potential quality) often

consumed with South African barbecue.

● PIQUEPOUL NOIR (PEEK-POOL NWAHR): This black clonal mutation of piquepoul is now very rare, but

still allowed as a blending grape in several appellations of the southern Rhône V alley and Languedoc-Roussillon

regions of France.

● PLA V AC MALI (PLA-V ATZ MA-LEE): The most highly regarded ancient red grape native to Croatia; a

specialty of the Dalmatian coast, as well as other parts of Eastern Europe. A cross between crljenak kaštelanski

(also known as zinfandel and tribidrag) and dobričić, another Croatian variety. The name refers to the small, blue

grapes that the vines produce; in Croatian, plavo means blue and mali means “small.

”

● PRIÉ (PREE-EH): Native to the V alle d’Aosta region of northwest Italy, near Mont Blanc, and cultivated

almost exclusively there. A complex set of family relationships suggests this northern Italian variety is somehow

connected to northern Spain, but the exact genetic footprint is not known.

● PRIMITIVO (PRE-MA-TEE-VOH): The southern Italian twin of Croatia’s tribidrag, where it is more

commonly called crljenak kaštelanski.

◯ PROSECCO (PRO-SEC-OH): Common name for the grape grown especially in the Conegliano area of the

V eneto region of Italy, and used to make the bubbly Italian sparkling wine also known as prosecco. In 2009, the

grape was officially renamed glera to distinguish it from the DOC zone for the wine, called prosecco. The grape is

thought to have originated in the Istrian area of northern Croatia, a short distance from the Italian city of Trieste.

Prosecco wine is the traditional sparkler (along with white peach juice) in the Italian cocktail the Bellini.

R

◯ RA V AT BLANC (RA-VAHT BLAHNK): See Vignoles.

◯ REBULA (REH-BOO-LAH): See Ribolla gialla.

● REFOSCO (REH-FOSS-CO): The collective name for several distinct varieties grown in the Friuli-V enezia

Giulia region of Italy, and in Slovenia, where it is spelled refosko. The major one—refosco dal peduncolo rosso

(refosco with the red stem)—makes tasty everyday red wines. A more rare variety, refosco del botton, is another

name for tazzelenghe.

● REFOSKO (REH-FOHSK-OH): See Refosco.

◯ RENSKI RIZLING (RENZ-KEE REEZ-LING): Slovenian for riesling; see page 67.

◯ RHODITIS (ROW-DEE-TIS): An old Greek variety with pink berries that has begotten many clones. While

no conclusive DNA analysis is yet available, many scientists think that what is called roditis may actually be field

blends of various white varieties. It is the source of the simple white wine Patras, which is made on the

Peloponnese Peninsula of Greece.

◯ RIBOLLA GIALLA (REE-BO-LA GEE-AH-LA): A very old variety from the Friuli-V enezia Giulia region

of Italy, which makes high-quality, lemony white wines. The same grape as the Slovenian variety rebula.

◯ RIESLANER (REEZ-LAHN-ER): A German cross of riesling and silvaner, which is the source of good zesty

wines, especially in Germany’s Pfalz and Franken regions.

◯ RIESLING: See page 67.

◯ RIESLING ITALICO (REEZ-LING EE-TAL-I-CO): Grown in northern Italy, especially in Lombardy, to

make basic dry whites; not a true riesling but rather the Croatian grape graševina.

◯ RKATSITELI (ARE-CAT-SI-TELL-EE): The most planted grape of the former Soviet Union, and a

specialty of the Republic of Georgia, where the grape originated and is still widely grown. Also well known in

Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova, and in Eastern Europe. There are even historic plantings in New Y ork State.

Made into fascinating, spicy, floral, dry wines as well as sweet and fortified wines.

◯ ROBOLA (ROW-BO-LA): Grown principally on several Ionian islands of Greece. Makes powerful, lemony

dry wines.

◯ ROLLE (ROLL): Native to Italy, where it is known as vermentino. Grown in southern France, in particular in

the Languedoc-Roussillon and Provence (where it’s used for blending) and on the island of Corsica (where it is the

most important variety).

● RONDINELLA (RON-DIH-NELL-AH): With corvina and molinara, used to make the powerful Italian wine

amarone and the lighter-bodied wines V alpolicella and Bardolina. Corvina, which is a higher-quality grape, is one

of rondinella’s parents; the other is unknown.

● ROSSESE (ROH-SEH-ZEH): The name rossese is used in Liguria, Italy, for several different varieties. The

leading one, rossese di Dolceacqua (used to make the light red wine Dolceacqua), is the same as the Provençal

grape tibouren.

◯ ROTER VELTLINER (ROW-TER VELT-LEANER): Ancient, rather rare Austrian variety that can make

powerful spicy whites (despite its name; roter means red) not unlike grüner veltliner (though the two are not

related). One of the parents of rotgipfler.

◯ ROTGIPFLER (ROT-GIP-FLUR): Austrian variety, the result of a natural cross between roter veltliner and

savagnin. A specialty of the Thermenregion, south of Vienna, where it is often blended with zierfandler.

◯ ROUSSANNE (RUE-SAHN): A variety of France’s northern Rhône, appreciated for its greater elegance in

comparison to its sister marsanne, with which it is often blended and to which it is genetically related, although

scientists aren’t sure which is the parent of the other. Also grown in the Languedoc-Roussillon and in California.

● RUBY CABERNET (RUBY CAB-ER-NAY): A cross of cabernet sauvignon and carignan, created in 1936 by

the famous University of California at Davis scientist Harold Olmo, PhD. Olmo’s intention, to make a grape that

combined cabernet sauvignon’s quality and carignan’s drought tolerance, was not realized. Ruby cabernet does,

however, make good jug wines.

◯ RULÄNDER (RUE-LAHN-DER): See Grauburgunder.

S

● SAGRANTINO (SA-GRAN-TEE-NO): Native to the Montefalco area of Umbria, Italy, sagrantino is the

delicious, bold-tasting grape used in one of Umbria’s top wines, sagrantino di Montefalco.

◯ ST.

-ÉMILION (SANT-EH-MILL-E-YAWN): A name sometimes used in the Cognac region of France for the

grape ugni blanc, also known as trebbiano Toscano. Today, St.

-Émilion grapes are no longer grown in the town of

St.

-Émilion in Bordeaux, where merlot and cabernet franc are the reigning varieties.

● ST. GEORGE: See Agiorgitiko.

● ST. LAURENT (SAINT LOR-ONT): Probably native to Austria, and grown there to make velvety reds with

lovely cherry flavors. Also grown extensively in the Czech Republic, where it is known as svatovavŕinecké. St.

Laurent’s parents are not known, but it is one of the parents of another Austrian red, zweigelt.

● ST. MACAIRE (SAINT MA-CARE): An obscure Bordeaux variety now virtually extinct in Bordeaux, but

planted in limited amounts in California.

◯ SÄMLING (SAM-LING): Also known as sämling 88, it is a cross of riesling and an unknown grape, and is

grown in small amounts, principally in Austria. In Germany, it is known as scheurebe. Can make very good

eiswein.

● SANGIOVESE: See page 68.

● SAPERA VI (SAH-PER-RAV-EE): A very old Georgian variety whose name means “dye”

—a reference to the

dark color of the grape’s skins, which immediately turn their white juice pink. The most widely planted grape in

Georgia today, and widely planted in the former Soviet Union. Makes rich, darkly colored, full-bodied, savory dry

wines. Some producers ferment the wines in the traditional manner, underground in qvevri, large clay vessels that

look like amphorae without handles.

◯ SAUVIGNON BLANC: See page 68.

◯ SAUVIGNON GRIS (SEW-VIN-YA WN GREE): A grayish-pink-skinned genetic mutation of sauvignon

blanc (gris means “gray” in French). Somewhat more floral and less “green” tasting than sauvignon blanc, and less

edgy on the palate. It is grown primarily in Bordeaux and Chile, although there are also experimental plantings in

California.

◯ SAUVIGNON VERT (SEW-VIN-YA WN VERT): A lightly floral, slightly spicy grape that is not related to

sauvignon blanc, but rather is the same as Italy’s friulano, planted in the northeastern Italian region of Friuli-

V enezia Giulia. In the New World, the grape (also known as sauvignonasse) was popular in Chile right up through

the 1980s. Indeed many old-style Chilean wines labeled sauvignon blanc were actually sauvignon vert. Today,

sauvignon vert is rarely planted in Chile—its place having been taken by true sauvignon blanc and sauvignon gris,

though sauvignon vert has much to recommend it.

◯ SAUVIGNONASSE (SEW-VIN-YA WN-AHSS): See Sauvignon vert.

◯ SA V AGNIN (SA-V A-NYEN): An ancient variety indigenous to the area covering northeast France and

southwest Germany. One of the ancestral “founder varieties” that gave rise to scores of others throughout Europe,

including verdelho, grüner veltliner, sauvignon blanc, and chenin blanc. Also known as traminer in Germany and in

Italy’s Trentino-Alto Adige region. The pink-berried clone savagnin rosé is better known as gewürztraminer.

Savagnin has a genetic relationship with pinot noir—either as its progeny or its parent, but geneticists are not sure

which.

◯ SA V ATIANO (SA-V A-TEE-ANO): Widely planted in Greece, it is the grape most frequently used to make the

wine retsina.

◯ SCHEUREBE (SHOY-RAY-BA): Germany’s best-kept secret—especially in the Pfalz and Rheinhessen

regions—scheurebe has an unusual spicy/grapefruity/red currant flavor. A cross of riesling and an unknown grape.

● SCHIA V A (SKI-AH-V A): Italian name for a group of different varieties, all of which are grown in the north,

usually near the Alps. The name may come from schiavo, slave in Italian, a reference to the way the vines are often

trellised to limit their vigorous growth. The most widespread schiava is schiava grossa, grown in Trentino-Alto

Adige, where it makes light-colored, fruity wines. The grape is also called vernatsch. In Germany, schiava is known

as trollinger.

● SCHIOPPETTINO (SKI-OH-PE-TEE-NO): Fascinating though fairly rare grape native to northeastern Italy;

a specialty of the region of Friuli-V enezia Giulia, where it makes medium-bodied, spicy, aromatic wines.

◯ SCUPPERNONG (SCUPPER-NONG): The name in Native American Algonquin language means “place

where magnolias grow”

—a reference to the area near the mid-Atlantic U.S. island called Roanoke Island, and near

the Atlantic coasts of Virginia and North Carolina, where scuppernong is thought to have originated as one of the

first American wines. It belongs to the native American species Vitis rotundifolia. Around 1607, the Jamestown

colonists are thought to have made wine from scuppernong grapes they found growing in Virginia. By the

nineteenth century, the wine was so popular that North Carolina, where the vine grew rampantly, became the

leading grape producer in the United States.

◯ SÉMILLON: See page 69.

◯ SERCIAL (SIR-SEE-AHL): Esteemed Portuguese grape, today best known for making the lightest, driest

style of Madeira.

◯ SEYV AL BLANC (SAY-V AL BLAHNK): One of the most popular French-American hybrids, originally

developed in France for its disease resistance and ability to ripen early in cold climates, but now outlawed in that

country (as are all hybrids). Still planted in England, Canada, and the eastern United States, particularly in New

Y ork State and Michigan.

◯ SILV ANER (SIL-VAHN-ER): Austrian variety, mostly neutral in character, that is a cross of savagnin with

österreichisch weiss, an ancient white variety grown near Vienna. In Germany, silvaner makes a somewhat more

characterful, dry, firm, bold wine, especially in the Franken region. In Alsace, France, silvaner is known as

sylvaner, and some very good wines are made from the grape, although acreage in Alsace is declining.

◯ SIVI PINOT (SEE-VEE PEE-NOH): Slovenian for pinot gris; see page 65.

● SOUSÃO (SUE-SHAOW): Portuguese grape probably native to the Minho, where it is called vinhão and used

as the basis for good red vinho verde. Also used in small amounts in the Douro, as a part of the Port blend, for its

immensely saturated color and for the fact that it retains its acidity well and therefore contributes a sense of

freshness.

● SPANNA (SPAHN-AH): Synonym for nebbiolo in various districts of Piedmont, Italy; see page 333.

● SPÄTBURGUNDER (SHPATE-BRR-GUN-DER): German name for pinot noir; see page 550.

● STA VROTO (STA-VROW-TOE): Native to eastern Greece, mostly grown in the Rapsáni appellation, where it

is a required component (along with xinomavro and krassato) of blends labeled Rapsáni.

◯ SUBIRAT PARENT (SOO-BEE-RAHT PARE-ENT): A minor variety best known in Catalonia, Spain.

While it is sometimes said to be a malvasia, subirat parent is actually the same as the old Spanish variety alarije,

which originated in Extramadura. Occasionally used in cava, Spanish sparkling wine.

◯ SULTANIYE (SOOL-TAHN-EE-AY): A seedless variety, and one of the most wirely planted grape varieties

in the world. The vast majority of it is planted for table grapes and raisins, not for wine (a good thing, since wines

made from it are rather neutral and lack character). Named after the Ottoman (Turkish) sultans, for whom it was

widely grown. Its origin is unclear, but Turkey, Greece, Iran, and Afghanistan have all been suggested. In

California, it is called Thompson seedless.

● SYRAH: See page 70.

◯ SZÜRKEBARÁT (SOOR-KEH-BARAT): Hungarian name for pinot gris; see page 65.

T

● TANNAT (TAN-AHT): One of the leading grapes in southwest France, particularly used in the wines Madiran

and Irrouléguy. Robust, tannic, and deeply colored. Brought, probably, from the Basque region to Uruguay in the

1870s. Today, it is the main grape of Uruguay, where it makes softer, fleshier wines.

● TAZZELENGHE (TAZ-EH-LEN-GAY): In Italian, the name means “cut the tongue”

—a reference to the sharp

acidity of the wine made from this grape. A specialty of Italy’s Friuli-V enezia Giulia region. DNA analysis reveals

it to be the variety also known as refosco del botton.

● TEMPRANILLO: See page 72.

● TERAN (TARE-AHN): See Terrano.

● TEROLDEGO (TARE-OL-DIH-GO): One of the leading red grapes of Trentino-Alto Adige, the northernmost

region in Italy. The grape makes fascinating, highly structured wines with lively blackberry fruit and tar character.

Teroldego is a grandchild of pinot noir and an unknown variety, and itself has spontaneously crossed with an

unknown variety to produce lagrein.

● TERRANO (TARE-AH-NOH): Grown on the Italy-Slovenia border, and in Croatia (where it is known as

teran), it is part of the refosco group. The wines have firm tannins and elegant fruit flavors, and often age well.

◯ TERRANTEZ (TER-AHN-TZSH): Rare Portuguese grape historically grown on the island of Madeira,

where it was once used to make the highly appreciated, rare style of Madeira also known as terrantez. While bottles

of old terrantez Madeira still come up at rare wine auctions, the variety is virtually extinct as a commercial variety.

● TERRET NOIR (TARE-ETTE NWAHR): Grown in southern France, in the Languedoc-Roussillon, Provence,

and in the southern Rhône. Of good but rarely great quality, terret noir is often a minor part of the blend in southern

French appellations such as Fitou, Minervois, Cassis, Côtes-du-Rhône, Gigondas, and Châteauneuf-du-Pape.

◯ THOMPSON SEEDLESS (TOMP-SON SEED-LESS): The California name for the seedless table grape

variety sultaniye, one of the world’s most widely planted varieties, but consumed vastly more as table grapes or

dried for raisins than made into wine. A prolific grower, it was used in California jug wine blends after World War

II.

● TIBOUREN (TIB-OU-REN): A well-known variety all along the French Riviera, and especially along the gulf

of St. Tropez, where it is used primarily to make rosé wines. The same as rossesse di Dolceacqua, in Liguria, across

the Italian border.

● TINTA BARROCA (TIN-TAH BAR-OCA): The name means “black baroque.

” Native to the Douro region of

northern Portugal, where it is one of the grapes commonly used as part of the blend to make Port, as well as in dry

table wines.

● TINTA DEL PAÍS (TIN-TAH DEL PIE-EESE): A group of clones of tempranillo grown in Spain in Ribera del

Duero; see Tempranillo, page 72.

● TINTA DEL TORO (TIN-TAH DEL TOR-OH): A group of clones of tempranillo grown in Spain’s Toro

region; see Tempranillo, page 72.

● TINTA FRANCISCA (TIN-TAH FRAN-CEASE-KA): Native to the Duoro region of Portugal, where its name

means “French black,

” although DNA analysis reveals the grape has no links with France. Used as one of the minor

grapes in the blends to make Port.

● TINTA NEGRA MOLE (TIN-TAH NEG-RA MOLE-AY): Most often used on the Portuguese island of

Madeira for basic Madeiras of modest quality. The grape is Spanish in origin and its more proper name is

negramoll.

● TINTA RORIZ (TIN-TAH RO-REEZ): Spanish grape also known as tempranillo. One of the grapes

commonly used as part of the blend to make Port, as well as in the dry table wines of Portugal’s Douro region. See

Tempranillo, page 72.

● TINTO CÃO (TIN-TOE COW): The name means “red dog,

” but it’s not clear why a grape would be so named.

An old Portuguese variety native to the Douro and Dão regions, commonly used as part of the blend to make Port,

as well as in the dry table wines of those regions.

● TINTO FINO (TIN-TOE FEE-NO): A group of clones of tempranillo grown in Spain’s Ribera del Duero

region; see Tempranillo, page 72.

◯ TOCAI FRIULANO (TOE-KIGH FREE-OO-LAN-OH): See Friulano.

◯ TORRONTÉS (TORE-ON-TEZ): A specialty of Argentina, where it can make beautifully aromatic, slightly

viscous dry wines that are drunk as aperitifs. Y et torrontés is not a single variety, but three distinctly different ones

all indigenous to Argentina: torrontés Mendocino (not highly thought of); torrontés Sanjuanino (also unexceptional,

planted mostly in the province of San Juan); and torrontés Riojana (the most aromatic and highest-quality torrontés,

often grown in the high-elevation vineyards of the province of Salta). DNA typing suggests that torrontés Riojana is

a white-skinned natural cross of muscat of Alexandria and the red grape mission (listán prieto), both of which had

been brought to the Americas in the sixteenth century by Spanish missionaries and conquistadores. In Spain and

Portugal, the name torrontés is used for several other distinctly different varieties, causing complete confusion.

● TOURIGA FRANCA (TORE-EE-GAH FRANK-AH): High-quality variety native to the Duoro region of

Portugal, even though the word franca might seem to imply it came from France. Used as one of the leading grapes

in the blend to make Port, it has somewhat more finesse and a more refined aroma than touriga nacional, which is

one of its parents. The other is a Portuguese grape called marufo. Touriga franca is also used in the dry table wines

of Portugal’s Douro region.

● TOURIGA NACIONAL (TORE-EE-GAH NA-SEE-ON-AHL): Probably native to Portugal’s Dão region, but

today widely known as the leading powerhouse grape in many of the blends that make Port. The grape has many

attributes, including richness, depth, a commanding tannic structure, good deep coloring, and good aromas. Also

used in the dry wines of the Douro.

◯ TRAJADURA (TRA-JAH-DOO-RAH): Probably native to northern Portugal, and still grown in the Douro

and Minho and used as part of the blend for vinho verde, the grape was brought across the border into Spain. Today

it is more famous as one of the grapes (known as treixadura) grown in Galicia, Spain, where it’s used in the wine

regions of Ribiero and Rías Baixas. Makes dry, fresh whites with a slightly exotic character. Sometimes blended in

small amounts (along with loureira), into albariño.

◯ TRAMINER (TRAM-I-NER): Also known as savagnin, one of the “founder varieties” that led to dozens of

others. In the northern Italian region of Trentino-Alto Adige, a special clone of traminer—traminer aromatico—is

the source of delicious, exotically aromatic wines. It is also grown in Austria and other parts of eastern Europe. In

France, savagnin rosé—the pink-berried clone of savagnin (aka traminer)—is better known as gewürztraminer.

◯ TREBBIANO (TREB-EE-AHN-OH): The name given to a whole group of different varieties that share the

traits of large clusters and mostly vigorous growth. V arieties called trebbiano this or trebbiano that are among the

most prolific vines in the world, yielding millions of gallons of neutral, bland wine yearly. Grown principally in

Italy (where it is listed as one of the permissible grapes in more than eighty DOCs). There is a trebbiano in Abruzzi,

a trebbiano in Lazio, a trebbiano in Emilia-Romagna, a trebbiano in Umbria, and a trebbiano in Tuscany—and

genetically, they are all different varieties. (In Italy, so-called trebbiano is also part of the blend that makes up the

popular wine Soave, though that trebbiano is actually the better-quality grape verdicchio bianco.) In France,

trebbiano Toscano is also known as ugni blanc, and the grape is used in distillation to make both Cognac and

Armagnac. Trebbiano Modenese is the main grape in the top balsamic vinegars of Emilia-Romagna.

◯ TREIXADURA (TRAY-SHA-DUR-AH): See Trajadura.

● TREPAT (TRAY-PAHT): Native to Catalonia, in northeast Spain. Mostly used for making rosé cavas.

● TRINCADEIRA PRETA (TRIN-KA-DARE-RAH PRAY-TA): A darkly colored grape that probably

originated in central Portugal and is now grown all over southern Portugal, where it makes rustic wines. Sometimes

known by the synonym tinta amarela,

“black yellow.

”

● TROLLINGER (TRAWL-IN-JER): Common German variety making mostly undistinguished wines, especially

in the Württemberg area. Known in its homeland of northern Italy as schiava.

U

◯ UGNI BLANC (OO-KNEE BLAHNK): One of the leading grapes of France in terms of production, it is the

same as the variety known in Italy as trebbiano Toscano. Makes a thin, neutral-tasting wine that is the basis for

Cognac, and is one of the grapes used to make Armagnac. Also known as St.

-Émilion.

V

● V ACCARÈSE (V ACK-ARE-EZ): One of the common, if minor, red grapes in France’s southern Rhône V alley.

Sometimes used in Châteauneuf-du-Pape. Also known as brun argenté.

● V ALDIGUIÉ (VAL-DIH-GAY): Southwestern French variety, now virtually extinct there, but growing in tiny

amounts in California, where, in the past, it was the source of some wines known confusingly as Napa gamay.

◯ VERDEJO (VER-DAY-HO): Grown in (and probably native to) the north-central Spanish province of Rueda.

Makes one of Spain’s top dry whites, popular for its bay laurel and bitter almond flavors. V erdejo (from verde,

green in Spanish) can also show a slightly piquant green character in the manner of sauvignon blanc. Indeed, some

Rueda wineries blend the two grapes with successful results.

◯ VERDELHO (VER-DEL-YO): The most planted white grape on the Portuguese island of Madeira, where the

grape probably originated. The name is used on the label to indicate a medium-dry, nutty style of Madeira, which

falls between the styles sercial and bual. V erdelho is also grown in Australia. It is not the same as the Italian grape

verdello.

◯ VERDELLO (VER-DEL-OH): One of the minor blending grapes in the Italian wine Orvieto. Despite its

virtually identical-sounding name, it is not the same as verdelho, a key grape in making a medium-dry style of

Madeira.

◯ VERDICCHIO BIANCO (VER-DICK-EE-O BEE-AHN-CO): Usually simply known as verdicchio.

Cultivated principally in central Italy, where it’s usually made into simple, clean white wines in the region known as

the Marche. But in the top sites and at low yields, it can make a racy, bold, crisp wine with more personality. This is

the grape used in the V eneto, with garganega, to make the best Soaves (although there, it is confusingly called

trebbiano di Soave).

◯ VERDUZZO (VER-DOOTS-OH): More accurately verduzzo Friulano, it is grown in northeastern Italy,

primarily in Friuli-V enezia Giulia, where it makes both dry and deliciously honeyed sweet wines. The most famous

of the latter is verduzzo di Ramandolo.

◯ VERMENTINO (VER-MEN-TEEN-OH): Well known along the Italian Riviera, where it is the source of

dry, floral white wines considered indispensable partners for Ligurian fish soups. Also grown on the Italian island

of Sardinia and the French island of Corsica, where it’s sometimes called malvoisie. Grown in southern France,

vermentino is often known as rolle.

◯ VERNACCIA (VER-NAHT-CHA): Lively light, slightly bitter-tasting Italian wine grape grown around the

touristic Tuscan hilltop town of San Gimignano. V ernaccia di San Gimignano was the first Italian wine to be

awarded, in 1966, Denominazione di Origine Controllata (DOC) status. The grape has a long history in Italy and

was praised in the fourteenth-century poem, The Divine Comedy—The Vision of Paradise, Purgatory, and Hell by

Dante Alighieri. Italy’s other famous vernaccia—vernaccia di Oristano, grown on the island of Sardinia—is a

completely different variety and is used to make Sherry-like wines.

◯ VESPAIOLA (VES-PIE-OH-LA): Native grape of the V eneto region of Italy, where it is the source primarily

of honeyed sweet wines.

◯ VIDAL (VEE-DAHL): French-American hybrid created in France in the 1930s by Jean-Louis Vidal, who was

hoping to invent a hearty variety that could be used in making Cognac. Vidal’s parents are trebbiano Toscano (ugni

blanc) and rayon d’or, itself a hybrid. Now it is grown primarily in Virginia, New Y ork State, and Canada. In the

latter two places, it is made not only into dry wines but also into some terrific eisweins. Also known as Vidal blanc.

◯ VIDIANO (VID-EE-AH-NOH): A Greek variety that almost became extinct in the twentieth century, but is

now seeing a revival on the island of Crete.

◯ VIGNOLES (VEEN-YOLE): A French-American hybrid also known as Ravat 51. The biggest plantings in the

United States are in Missouri, where it is used to make both dry and sweet wines.

● VINHÃO (VEEN-YOW): Along with azal tinto, a high-acid Portuguese variety used in the rare red versions of

vinho verde.

◯ VIOGNIER: See page 73.

◯ VIOSINHO (VEE-OH-ZEEN-YO): A relatively old variety native to the Douro V alley of Portugal. One of

the grapes used in white Port and in the dry table wines of the Douro V alley region.

◯ VITOVSKA (VEE-TOVE-SKAH): Grown in the Isonzo and Carso regions of eastern Friuli-V enezia Giulia

and across the border in the Carso/Kras region of Slovenia. Makes fascinating, fleshy dry white wines with elegant,

floral, herbal, and fruit flavors. A surprising natural cross of Tuscany’s malvasia bianca lunga and the grape variety

glera, which is used to make Prosecco.

◯ VIURA (VYOUR-A): The leading white variety in Spain’s Rioja region, where it is the source of simple, dry

whites. In the Penedès region, where it’s used to make Spanish sparkling wine (cava), it’s known as macabeo. A far

smaller amount is grown in France, in the Languedoc-Roussillon, where it is known as maccabeu.

W

◯ WEISSBURGUNDER (VICE-BRR-GUN-DER): In Germany and Austria, the name for pinot blanc; see

page 91.

◯ WELSCHRIESLING (WELSH REEZ-LING): The name Austrians use for the grape graševina, which is

thought to have originated in Croatia (where it is the leading white grape variety). Used in Austria, especially in

Burgenland, to make delicious late-harvest, botrytized wines. Also widely grown in Slovenia (laški rizling) and in

Hungary (olasz rizling). In Italy it’s known as riesling italico and makes dry, light wines in Lombardy. Despite the

word riesling in its names, the grape is not directly related to riesling genetically.

X

◯ XAREL-LO (SHA-REL-OH): Highly regarded Catalan grape grown in the Penedès for cava, Spanish

sparkling wine. Used for cava, it contributes body, flavor, and structure. Also made into good, bold-flavored still

table wine in the Penedès.

● XINOMA VRO (ZEE-NO-MA V-RO): Sometimes spelled xynomavro. From xyno, acid, and mavro, black.

Greece’s most intense, well-respected red grape, it probably originated near the Náoussa region, in northern Greece,

and is still used to make the wine called Náoussa, one of the best Greek reds. Also used in blends to make many

other impressive Greek wines, including Gouménissa and Rapsáni.

Z

● ŽAMETOVKA (ZAH-MEH-TOV-KAH): An ancient Slovenian variety used as part of the blend in the crisp,

pale-red Slovenian wine called cviček. Known worldwide for a different reason—namely, that the presumed oldest

vine in the world, a 450-year-old vine in the Slovenian town of Maribor, is Žametovka. The vine’s nickname is,

logically enough, stara trta, Slovenian for “old grapevine.

”

◯ ZÉTA (ZEH-TAH): One of the four recommended varieties in the Hungarian sweet wine Tokaji aszú. It ripens

early and is highly susceptible to botrytis. Zéta was called oremus until 1999.

◯ ZIBIBBO (ZEE-BEE-BOH): The name, on the island of Sicily, for the ancient variety muscat of Alexandria,

and the source of several famous Sicilian dessert wines.

◯ ZIERFANDLER (ZEER-FAND-LER): An Austrian variety with powerful orange/spice flavors and

considerable body weight. It is blended with rotgipfler to make a powerful, spicy white that is a specialty of

Austria’s Thermenregion.

● ZINFANDEL: See page 74.

● ZWEIGELT (ZVEYE-GELT): An Austrian cross of blaufränkisch and St. Laurent made in 1922 by an Austrian

researcher named Fritz Zweigelt. It is now one of the most widely planted red grapes in Austria, and is the source of

grapey, fruity, purple/red wines in that country.

Scientific research suggests that the more you know about flavor , the more intense all flavors become.

SENSUAL GEOGRAPHY: TASTING WINE LIKE A

PROFESSIONAL

I think of this chapter as an exploration of sensual geography. (For that evocative term, I

thank super-chef Mark Miller, who first mentioned it to me in the mid-2000s.) We’ve

already addressed what to look for in wine; in this section, we’ll deal with how to do that.

To begin, suppose you were asked to write a ten-word description of a wine you drank

three nights ago. Could you? Unfortunately, it is possible (easy, in fact) to go for years

drinking wine without tasting it in a way that helps you understand and remember it. Most

of us—even those of us who are committed food and wine lovers—don’t really taste with

conscious intent, nor do we take time to concentrate on what we smell. Tasting and

smelling are often virtually mindless tasks. Y et, without sensory focus and without a

systematic method of smelling and tasting, it’s just about impossible to develop a taste

memory and, ultimately, impossible to understand anything significant about wine.

Most experts did not begin to develop sensory focus as soon as they started drinking

wine. Y ears of drinking wine—however enjoyable—do not automatically lead to an

increase in knowledge, or gratification. To gain expertise and—even more significantly—

to heighten the pleasure and impact of what you drink, you must learn to be a deliberate

taster. Moreover, wine expertise takes (remember those piano lessons?) practice.

Guests compare wines at one of my seminars at the Napa V alley Reserve.

How much practice? Here I have to thank my fellow wine writer Matt Kramer, who

reveals the research of cognitive psychologist Daniel Levitin, who runs the Laboratory for

Music Perception, Cognition and Expertise at McGill University in Montreal, Canada.

According to Levitin, it takes a minimum of ten thousand hours of practice (equivalent to

three hours a day for ten years) to achieve the level of mastery associated with being a

world-class expert—in anything. So no matter if you’re a concert pianist, a gymnast, a

poker player, or someone who really knows wine, ten thousand hours appears to be the

magic number. As it turns out, the brain learns through assimilation and consolidation in

neural tissues. Levitin’s work firmly suggests that the more experiences you have with

something, the stronger the learning becomes. But there’s one critical qualifier. Y ou can’t

just practice something—you have to actually care about what you practice. The research

suggests that the more emotional weight you bring to your practice, the more effective it

will be.

Of the one million genes in the human genome, thirty thousand are solely

dedicated to encoding smells.

So if you’re charged up, here we go. In this chapter, we’ll explore the six critical steps

pros go through when trying to determine the personality of a wine:

1 ASSESS THE AROMA

2 GAUGE THE BODY WEIGHT

3 FEEL THE TEXTURE

4 CONSIDER THE TASTE

5 FOCUS ON THE FINISH

6 CONFIRM THE COLOR

One last thought before we get started: Professional tasters usually spend a second

getting mentally prepared before they taste. (Okay, maybe not when they’re drinking some

quaffer in a beachside café in Hawaii… but short of those kinds of experiences.) So,

before you begin, remind yourself what you’re looking for in any wine. And what are you

looking for? It’s all in The Nine Attributes of Greatness (page 4).

ASSESSING THE AROMA

At the turn of the twentieth century, only a handful of elements in wine were known.

Today, more than thirteen hundred volatile (smellable) compounds have been identified in

alcoholic beverages. In wine, the perception of these aromas is exceedingly complex.

Wine aromas are more than the sum of their parts. It’s the interactions between them that

count. Aromatically, wine is more like a symphony than a series of instruments being

played at the same time.

Moreover, as sensory scientists point out, the genes that encode for olfaction are the

largest group of genes in the body. Of the one million genes in the human genome, thirty

thousand are solely dedicated to encoding smells. That’s a staggering number. Every bit of

evidence we have suggests that smelling a wine is critical to tasting it.

What many wine drinkers may not realize is that there are two centers of olfaction.

(Humans are thought to be the only creatures to possess two sensory locations for the

perception of smell.) The first, obviously, is the nose. Smelling via the nose is what

scientists refer to as orthonasal olfaction. But olfaction also happens at the back of the

mouth—or, as it is technically called, retronasal olfaction. When wine is mixed with your

saliva and warmed, volatile compounds in the wine are released and waft back through the

retronasal passage at the back of your mouth and up to the cavity behind the bridge of

your nose. There, they are registered by receptor nerve cells, five million of which flash

information to the olfactory bulb of the brain. These cells, stimulated by everything you

breathe in and out, are the most exposed nerves in the body.

“As soon as I attempt to distinguish the share of any one sense from that of

the others, I inevitably sever the full participation of my sensing body from

the sensuous terrain. Many indigenous peoples construe awareness, or

“mind,

” not as a power that resides inside their heads, but rather as a quality

that they themselves are inside of along with the other animals and plants, the

mountains, and the clouds.

”

— DA VID ABRAM,

The Spell of the Sensuous

Amazingly enough, the two centers of olfaction do not appear to do the same job. Some

molecules may be smelled via the nose, while others may only be smelled retronasally,

giving you an oblique sense that you just “tasted” something.

What is especially remarkable is the intensity with which smell can be registered. Dr.

Marian W. Baldy, PhD, writing in the American Wine Society Journal (“How the Nose

Knows”), says,

“The sensitivity of our sense of smell for some molecules is astonishing.

We can detect the off-odor of hydrogen sulfide in concentrations of three parts per billion

—the equivalent of locating a particular family of three in China—and even smaller

amounts—one to five parts per trillion—of the compound pyrazine which accounts for the

bell pepper aroma in cabernet sauvignon. This is like sniffing out a one-cent error in your

ten billion dollar checking account.

”

WINE CONUNDRUM #1

Sensory scientists have always suspected that the order in which you taste wines

affects your judgment of them. In 2009, Canadian research confirmed the idea. As

reported in the journal Psychological Science, Antonia Mantonakis, PhD, of Brock

University in Ontario, Canada, and her colleagues had volunteers taste two, three, four,

or five wines whose identities had been hidden and select their favorite. Some

volunteers were novices and others were wine professionals. Unbeknownst to the

participants, all of the wine samples were identical. Every group of volunteers preferred

wine #1 over wines #2 and #3. However, among wine experts in the study who tried

four or five samples, there was also a “recency effect”

—that is, wine #5 was preferred

over #4 and #3. Dr. Mantonakis believes that her study suggests that connoisseurs may

compare wines in such a way that each new wine has a chance to beat the current

favorite (setting up the possibility of selecting the last sample). Novice wine drinkers, on

the other hand, get overwhelmed with choices early on, and feel happy sticking by wine

#1.

It helps to have good “equipment” when smelling a wine. This includes a generous glass and a big… well, let’ s say, the

right anatomy.

Alas, depending on the compound, the sensitivity to smell is also highly individual.

Take, for example, the roselike aroma in gewürztraminer. In a group of eight to ten people,

there is greater than a ten thousand-fold difference in sensitivity between the most

sensitive and least sensitive sniffers. That means that there would need to be ten thousand

times more of this compound in the wine for the least sensitive person to smell it

compared to the most sensitive person.

Aroma is also highly dependent on temperature. A good example: Warm garlic smells

more garlicky than cold garlic. While some wines should be served cool to accentuate

their acidity, it’s also true that a wine can be chilled to the point that it appears to have no

aroma at all.

“I do not like broccoli. And I haven’t liked it since I was a little kid and my

mother made me eat it. And I’m President of the United States, and I’m not

going to eat any more broccoli.

”

— FORMER U.S. PRESIDENT GEORGE H.W. BUSH,

relaying evidence that the perception of taste is highly individual

In the end, if you do not smell a wine, or simply take a brief cursory whiff, very little

information goes to the brain and, not surprisingly, you have trouble deciding what the

wine “tastes” like.

How do you smell correctly? Start by swirling the wine in the glass. Swirling aerates

wine, helping to volatilize the aromas. The best way to do this is to rest the glass on a table

and, holding it by the stem, rapidly move it as if you were drawing small circles. (All

wines—whites, reds, and rosés—should be swirled.)

As for actually sniffing the wine, nothing is achieved by holding your nose 2 inches

above the glass and taking a polite whiff. Y ou must get your nose (a big one is an asset)

into the glass near the liquid. Then take a series of short, quick sniffs.

Why not one long inhale? Imagine putting a grilled steak at one end of the room, and

tying up a dog at the other. The dog wouldn’t take one long deep breath. Instead, its nose

would virtually vibrate as it figured out what that aroma meant. Sniffing, the corollary to

swirling, creates tiny air currents in the nose that carry aroma molecules up to the nerve

receptors, and ultimately to the brain for interpretation.

But beware of what I call the “Macy’s effect.

” As anyone who has stood in the

cosmetic section of a department store knows, the perfumed aromas are almost

overwhelmingly strong—initially. Within seconds, however, you smell nothing. That’s

because the nose fatigues amazingly quickly. The moral of the story for a wine taster:

Don’t acclimate your nose by keeping it in the glass for a long time. Put your nose into the

glass only when you’re absolutely ready to concentrate, and then try to put names to the

aromas. This is harder than it sounds. Although the nose “knows” and can distinguish

thousands of smells, most people, when presented with many aromas at once, can actually

name only a handful. Scientists hypothesize that smell is elusive because it is the most

primitive of the senses. Having evolved millions of years ago as a survival mechanism for

guiding eating and sexual behavior, smell is not easily grasped by the verbal-semantic

parts of the brain.

If you give someone a list of multiple choices, however, their ability to name aromas

improves dramatically. Again, there’s a wine lesson in this. Rather than tasting a wine and

then trying to think of what it smells like, run lists of possibilities (lemons? apple pie?

cowboy boots?) through your mind. By suggesting ideas to yourself, you’ll often have an

easier time hitting upon the aroma you’re searching for.

UMAMI

The fifth taste—in addition to sweet, sour, salty, and bitter—is umami (oo-MA-mee), a word that literally

translates as “deliciousness” in Japanese. Discovered in 1908 by Japanese scientist Kikunae Ikeda,

umami is based on the presence of glutamates, also known as glutamic acid, the most abundant type of

amino acid in certain foods and, as such, indicators of protein. In 2000, University of Miami researchers

found receptors in our taste buds designed to receive the umami compounds, and named the specific

receptors T1R1 and T1R3 in 2009. With that discovery, umami became the fifth official taste. Since then,

further research has revealed that umami exists in several forms. For example, as a simple compound,

umami is present in foods such as blue cheese, tomatoes, and fermented soy products like soy sauce.

But it is also present in a more complex, or what scientists call “synergizing” form, in foods like

mushrooms, truffles, and seaweed. Umami is also synergized in food by aging, fermenting, or long, slow

cooking. When the two types are combined, the experience is exponentially more satisfying—the so-

called umami “yum factor.

”

Although amino acids are present in grapes, it’s not clear if glutamates are powerfully at work in wine.

(Some research suggests that glutamates in wine are created by winemaking techniques such as sur lie

aging, or leaving wine in contact with the decomposed yeast cells after fermentation.) Of course, from an

empirical standpoint, what wine drinker doesn’t instinctively recognize the yum factor in wines that are

well made?

It’ s all in the wrist. A sommelier pours wine for a guest in the Priorat, Spain.

Finally, the smell of a wine is today often referred to as its aroma, bouquet, or a

combination of the two, the wine’s so-called “nose” (an old Britishism). Technically,

however, aroma and bouquet are completely different. Aroma is used to describe smells

associated with a young wine. A young merlot, for example, can have a cherry aroma.

Bouquet, on the other hand, describes the smell of a wine that has been aged for a

considerable period of time, and thus all of the early smells have evolved and coalesced.

Bouquets (unlike aromas) are almost impossible to describe. Which is why, when it comes

to old wine, you’ll often read a comment like “phenomenal bouquet,

” but no list of

specific adjectives.

TASTEVINS

Silver, shallow-sided tastevins (tasting cups) were invented possibly as far back as the fifteenth century,

for tasting in dark cellars. The cups are more portable and less fragile than glass would be. More

important, they have circular indentations in their sides that reflect candlelight across the metal base of

the cup and make it possible to determine, in a dark cellar, the clarity of a wine just drawn from the

barrel.

GAUGING THE BODY WEIGHT

The term body is used to describe the weight of a wine on your palate. A wine’s body is

described as light, medium, full, or some permutation in between. How do you decide?

Imagine the relative weights of skim milk, whole milk, and half-and-half in your mouth. A

light-bodied wine, like skim milk, sits lightly on the palate. A medium-bodied wine has

more weight, like whole milk. A full-bodied wine seems heavier still, like half-and-half.

Body is often poorly understood and misconstrued. For example, body tells you

nothing about the quality of a wine or the intensity of its flavors or how long the finish

will be. Think about great sorbet. It’s very light in body, but the quality, flavor intensity,

and sustained impact of its taste can be riveting.

So where does body come from, and why is it important?

Body comes primarily from alcohol. Low-alcohol wines have a light body. High-

alcohol wines have a full body. Alcohol, in turn, comes from sugar, or essentially, from the

sun. (See Alcohol, page 10.)

Thus, a wine’s body can tip you off to where the wine comes from. Here’s how it

works: Say you taste a wine and you decide it has a full body (it has the weight of half-

and-half). Y ou could then say to yourself: Aha, this wine must have a lot of alcohol. A lot

of alcohol, in turn, means that there must have been a lot of sugar in the fermentation tank

for the yeasts to eat (and convert to alcohol). A lot of sugar in the tank means those grapes

must have gotten quite ripe. V ery ripe grapes means that the grapes must have grown in a

very warm place. Therefore, this full-bodied wine probably came from some place that’s

relatively warm, like Australia or California. It could not have come from Austria,

Burgundy, Germany, or any other place that’s very cool.

THE MYSTERY OF MINERALITY

The word minerality is used to describe all sorts of different wines, from Sancerre to Chianti, yet

curiously, there is no agreement among the world’s wine-makers and scientists about what minerality is,

how it is perceived, where it comes from, or even whether it exists.

Metaphorically, the word is often said to describe wines that smell and/or taste of crushed minerals,

stones, wet stones, or even ocean water. For many wine professionals, however, a minerally wine is not

only a wine with stony/minerally aromas and flavors; it’s also a wine that’s remarkable for its relative

absence of fruit aromas and flavors. For example, the greatest French Chablis and Austrian rieslings (to

name two types of wines often said to be minerally) do not exude significant fruitiness.

Apart from aroma and flavor, however, the term minerally is also often used to describe wines that

carry a distinct tactile sensation (that is, they stimulate the trigeminal nerve). And while some tasters

associate this feeling with acidity, there is general agreement that the mouthfeel of minerality is not quite

the same as the mouthfeel of acidity. The two can be easily confused, however, because sometimes

minerality and acidity are found together in the same wine. This is the case with many white Burgundies,

for example. Yet there are also notable examples of low-acid wines that possess distinct minerality—

wines from Châteauneuf-du-Pape, for example, or tempranillos from central Spain.

In Europe, minerality in wine is often explained as the result of certain soils, especially limestone. In

this view, the roots take up minerals from the ground, and these are then expressed as aromas and

flavors in the wine. But, as logical as this idea seems, many geologists take issue with it. The problem is

that minerals in rocks and soils—geological minerals—are intricate, complex compounds that are not

easily broken down to yield their constituent elements. And even if a geological mineral were to

decompose, thus freeing its component elements, there’s no guarantee these elements could be

absorbed by the vine’s roots. Vinification adds to the already multipart problem. Yeasts eat various

inorganic compounds in order to ferment sugars into alcohol. Processes such as fining, filtering, and

aging add and subtract other compounds. In the end, the inorganic chemical profile of the matured wine

is virtually unrelated to the geological minerals in the vineyard. And then there’s the final icing on the

scientific cake: Most inorganic elements occur in amounts measured in mere hundreds of milligrams per

liter—which is to say, amounts that are not detectable by analytics and theoretically not tasteable.

None of this, of course, sways wine tasters for whom minerality is one of wine’s assets, no matter how

difficult it may be to explain.

I have shared with two sensory scientists, from Cornell and Yale universities, my own theory about

minerally wines, both white and red. Here it is: Minerally wines—whatever they are and wherever they

come from—activate the salt receptor taste buds. That is, they are picked up on the palate as salt is. As

such, minerally wines magnify other flavors and make them more lively; they make them “jump.

” So,

even though there’s never any actual salt in any wine, minerally wines enhance the foods around them

by acting as the “salt” in a meal equation. The scientists heard me out. Their conclusion? Said one of

them: “I think you’re on to something.

”

“To know is to be able to name.

”

— ÉMILE PEYNAUD,

Le Goût du Vin (The Taste of Wine)

FEELING THE TEXTURE

Closely related to body is texture, sometimes called mouthfeel. A wine’s texture is the

tactile impression it has in your mouth. This impression is the result of stimulation of the

trigeminal nerve. (The largest of the cranial nerves, the trigeminal nerve is responsible for

sensations in the face and mouth.) Fabrics are often used as metaphors for texture or

mouthfeel. A wine can be as soft as flannel (an Australian shiraz, for example), as

seamlessly smooth as silk (a pinot noir), or as coarse and scratchy as wool (some southern

French reds feel this way). It can also feel syrupy, gritty, crackling crisp, or have any of

dozens of other textures. In order to assess a wine’s texture, you must roll it around in your

mouth and feel it. And what’s causing a wine’s texture in the first place? Acidity, tannin,

alcohol, ripeness, and sweetness, to name the major influencers.

Texture is probably the least talked-about dimension of wine, but I’d argue that, as with

food, it’s one of the key characteristics in determining preferences. Does anyone think that

the texture of, say, steak is beside the point? That it’s only the flavor of the steak that

counts? Similarly, it’s rarely just the lightly herbal, minerally flavors of Sancerre that

someone loves, it’s also Sancerre’s spring-loaded snap of crispness.

HOW FAST ARE YOUR TASTEBUDS?

The human body can taste faster than it can see, touch, or hear. According to Dr.

Hildegarde Heymann, professor and enologist in the Department of Viticulture and

Enology at the University of California at Davis, taste perception is swift because the

tongue and mouth (assisted by the nose) are the body’s primary defenses against

poison. Here’s how fast perception occurs after initial stimulation, as measured in

thousandths of a second, for our four main senses:

TASTE: 1.5–4.0 milliseconds

TOUCH: 2.4–8.9 milliseconds

HEARING: 13–22 milliseconds

VISION: 13–45 milliseconds

CONSIDERING THE TASTES

Taste—along with aroma, appearance, and mouthfeel—make up what we call the flavor of

a wine (or the flavor of a food) as perceived by the tongue. The world of taste is

commonly described as encompassing five—possibly six—basic characteristics:

sweetness, sourness, saltiness, bitterness, savoriness (umami), and possibly heartiness

(kokumi). Note that although certain wines can seem to taste salty, actual salt—sodium

chloride—is never found in wine.

TASTE BUDS AND THE TOTALLY WRONG “TONGUE MAP”

T aste buds were first detected in the nineteenth century by two German scientists, Georg Meissner and

Rudolf Wagner. We now know that these buds—which are shaped like onions—each contain between

fifty and one hundred taste cells. The top of each taste bud has an opening called a taste pore. When we

taste something, it’s because chemical stimuli from that food have dissolved in our saliva and then come

into contact with the taste cells by slipping through the taste pores. From there, the stimuli travel via

cranial nerves to the medulla and then the thalamus and hypothalamus centers of the brain, where flavor

is perceived. T aste buds, incidentally, can be found not only on the tongue, but on the soft palate,

pharynx, larynx, and epiglottis as well.

The discovery of taste buds paved the way for the next step in taste research: determining the

mechanisms by which taste cells carry out their work. From the 1940s through the 1970s, virtually every

basic biology textbook—and certainly every wine book—perpetuated the myth that taste buds were

grouped in the mouth according to specialty. Correspondingly, the tongue was diagrammed into separate

areas where certain tastes were registered: sweetness at the tip; sourness on the sides, and bitterness

at the back of the mouth.

In the 1980s and 1990s, however, research at Yale University, Monell Chemical Senses Center, in

Philadelphia, and the University of Connecticut, and elsewhere demonstrated that the “tongue map”

explanation of how we taste was, in fact, totally wrong. As it turns out, the map was a misinterpretation

and mistranslation of research conducted in Germany at the turn of the twentieth century.

T oday, leading taste researchers, such as Dr. Linda Bartoshuk of Yale University School of Medicine,

believe that taste buds are not grouped according to specialty. According to Bartoshuk’s research,

sweetness, saltiness, bitterness, and sourness can be tasted everywhere in the mouth, although they

may be perceived at slightly different intensities at different sites. Moreover, the mechanism at work is not

place, but time. It’s not that you taste sweetness at the tip of your tongue, but rather that you register that

perception first. Similarly, bitterness is not perceived at the back of your mouth, rather, you taste it a few

milliseconds after sweetness.

A word about umami and kokumi. Umami was discovered in 1908 by Japanese chemist

Kikunae Ikeda. The word is Japanese for deliciousness or savoriness. Foods high in

umami share a high concentration of glutamates, which tend to magnify the flavor of the

food (see Umami, page 105). Kokumi (ko-KEW-mee) was first reported in 2009.

Scientists disagree on the taste (if any) of kokumi, but report that kokumi enhances taste

by triggering calcium receptors in the tongue. Kokumi is thought to be behind the fact that

meat slow-roasted for five hours tastes better than meat cooked for one, for example, or

why aged Gouda tastes better than new, young Gouda.

The ability to taste is fully developed in utero (except for saltiness, which develops

postnatally, at about four months). But despite our entire-life experiences tasting, the basic

tastes take a wine drinker only so far. For example, as a teacher, I know that fifty people in

that classroom, all tasting the same wine at the same time in the same circumstances, will

nonetheless generate dozens of different metaphorical ideas about what the wine tastes

like and how intense or mild those sensations are. Moreover, some people in the group

will say they taste only a scant few things, while others will go off into a long list of

evocative descriptors: puppy’s breath, old women sitting in the wooden pews in church,

nice baby throw up (all are actual quotes; the single wine in question was a pinot noir).

TIMING THE FINISH

The finish of a wine is the extent to which its aromas and flavors persist in your mouth,

even after you’ve swallowed. All truly great wines have a long finish. By contrast, the

flavor of, say, a jug wine disappears almost as soon as you swallow it (a blessing of

sorts).

You can get a good sense of the length of the finish by using a technique called

retronasal breathing. T o do this: T ake a sip, hold the wine in your mouth, swirl it around,

and swallow it, keeping your mouth closed. With your mouth still closed, breathe out

forcefully through your nose. (Make sure you swallow before breathing out, or you’ll be

in for a dry-cleaning bill.) Now notice the sensation. If the wine has a long finish, you’ll

still be able to smell and taste it even though you’ve swallowed. If it has a short finish,

you’ll sense very little, if any, flavor or aroma.

How long is a long finish? Using a stopwatch to time the finish may be a little too

geeky for most of us, but you can expect a really long finish to hang in for up to a

minute, and occasionally even longer.

ARE WOMEN BETTER WINE TASTERS THAN MEN?

Wouldn’t that be nice. Alas, there’s no scientific proof that women are categorically superior to men when

it comes to wine tasting. According to Dr. Ann Noble, who, until her retirement, was one of the leading

sensory scientists in the Department of Viticulture and Enology at the University of California at Davis,

women do not have better sensory skills, but they may, at least initially, have better language skills. Noble

theorizes that, because women spend more time in the kitchen and at the market working with food, they

have “larger aroma libraries in their brains” and are therefore more adept at describing what they taste.

So why is taste so hard to pin down and seemingly so different for each of us?

Moreover, why does every wine lover, at least some of the time, experience “language

block,

” that moment when you know for sure what you think about a wine but just can’t

say it?

Interestingly, language does describe other things quite well. Linguists point out, for

example, that we do have fairly accurate words to describe shape, size, color, and spatial

relationships. If I say that, in front of me, there’s a blue square plate 6 inches by 6 inches,

and on it is sitting a scoop of lemon sherbet about 2 inches in diameter, you can easily and

accurately visualize the dessert even if you never actually see it. But if I say the wine that

I’m tasting is elegant, well, it’s virtually impossible for you to share in that experience

because you can only guess at what I mean by elegant, and, moreover, you might use the

same word to describe a very different sensation.

Because there’s no good way to describe how a wine tastes, most of us resort to

comparing a wine’s flavors to objects whose meanings are generally agreed upon. We

might say, for example, that a wine tastes “like cherries” or “like chocolate.

” But food

isn’t the only arena that offers metaphorical possibilities. So does music, contemporary

culture, architecture, and so on. Of course, you might find some descriptions a bit over-

the-top (“it’s a precocious little wine and its femininity is alluring…

”). But the truth is that

these creative, if idiosyncratic, attempts to describe how a wine tastes do carry some

meaning that can orient the taster. Most people, for example, know what’s meant when a

wine is described as lemony. Describing a wine as “warm lemon meringue pie with bits of

burnt crust” is just going one step farther in the attempt to telescope down to what the

experience of tasting the wine was actually like, and to create a “memory note” so the

wine can be remembered later.

As with aroma, pros tend to suggest taste ideas to themselves as they are tasting, rather

than wait for specific flavors to occur to them (and risk that absolutely nothing will occur

to them). That is, while the wine is in his mouth, the professional taster is running possible

flavors through his mind—apples? caramel? grass? tobacco?—and in a sense, checking off

those flavors that are present.

Conducting a private wine seminar for a corporate client. I lead several such wine events each year.

ARE YOU A SUPERTASTER?

How intensely you experience a given taste sensation depends on whether you’re what scientists call a

“nontaster,

” a “taster,

” or a “supertaster.

” About a quarter of the population are nontasters, a quarter are

supertasters, and half are regular tasters. Looking at the data by gender, interestingly, 35 percent of

women are supertasters while just 10 percent of men are. Supertaster abilities are also more common in

Asians and in African Americans than in Caucasians. T o determine if a person is a nontaster, taster, or

supertaster, researchers give the subject a small taste of the nontoxic compounds 6-n-propylthiouracil

(known as PROP) or phenyl thio carbamate (known as PTC).

Supertasters experience this compound as so bitter they want to gag, while tasters detect a faint

whisper of bitterness and nontasters experience no taste sensation at all. Finally, but importantly, the

term supertaster sounds thoroughly desirable (who doesn’t want to be super at most things?)—but it is

not. Supertasters live in a neon taste world where many flavor impressions are just too intense to enjoy.

According to Dr. Hildegarde Heymann, professor and enologist in the Department of Viticulture and

Enology at the University of California at Davis, supertasters usually dislike the taste of broccoli, spinach,

cabbage, and sprouts; hot curry and chili; grapefruit and lemon; cigarettes; coffee; and (oh no) alcohol.

Good-bye wine.

SAUERKRAUT , SKUNKS, AND SWEATY SOCKS

You bought a bottle of wine that you’d been wanting to try. Finally, the moment arrived and you pulled the

cork. What greeted you was a smell one step away from sweaty socks. What went wrong?

Wines can develop foul odors and tastes for a wide variety of reasons, ranging from the presence of

offensive-smelling bacteria to overexposure to oxygen to unclean barrels. A full understanding of these

aromas would require mastery of organic chemistry. Here, instead, I’ve provided some simple

explanations of why you might think that the wine you just opened is not like anything you’d want to drink.

Keep in mind that the number of wines with off-putting aromas is a small fraction of the total number of

wines produced each year. Still, when you come across such a wine, can you return it to the shop where

you bought it? For most of the entries below, the answer is yes. A wine that smells like nail polish

remover or wet cardboard will immediately be taken back by any reputable wine shop. But keep in mind

that some of the concerns below are a matter of degree—brettanomyces (breh-tan-o-MY-seas) for

example. With brettanomyces, an amount that you consider objectionable may well seem just fine for

another wine drinker.

BANANA AROMAS: A by-product of malolactic fermentation, a process during which malic acid, which

has a crisp mouthfeel, is converted to lactic acid, which is softer. While a small amount of banana aroma

and flavor is not objectionable, a significant amount tastes odd, especially in red wines.

BAND-AID AROMAS: One of the manifestations of brettanomyces (see Barnyard).

BARNYARD/HORSE BLANKET/MANURE AROMAS: A sign of brettanomyces, sometimes called brett,

a strain of yeast that robs wine of its fruity aromas and flavors. While many winemakers—especially in

the New World—abhor even the faintest aroma of brettanomyces, other winemakers find a faint

suggestion of the barnyard aroma attractive. Brettanomyces can generally be prevented in wine by

scrupulous sanitation in the winery and during the winemaking process.

BURNING MATCH AROMAS: A sign of excessive sulfur dioxide. Sulfur has been used as a preservative

for centuries. It is used in the vineyard to protect vines from mildew and mold, and in the winery to protect

grapes and grape juice from oxygen, unwanted yeasts, and bacteria that may cause them to spoil. It is

impossible to produce a wine entirely without sulfur dioxide since, even when it is not added by

winemakers, the compound is a natural byproduct of fermentation (see Warming: This Label Is

Misleading on page 41). Burning match aromas usually dissipate as the wine opens up in the presence

of oxygen.

CANNED ASPARAGUS AROMAS: Often a sign that the vines were not carefully farmed and that the

grapes were picked unripe.

DIRTY SOCK AROMAS: Could be the result of myriad problems, anything from bacterial contamination

to unclean barrels.

FAKE BUTTER/OILY AROMAS: The result of excessive diacetyl, the buttery compound formed during

malolactic fermentation, when the wine’s crisp-tasting malic acid is converted to softer-tasting lactic acid.

Although a small amount of diacetyl can be attractive, a large amount tastes very offensive.

MOLDY AROMAS: Bacterial spoilage, moldy grapes, or unclean barrels can all produce a moldy aroma.

NAIL POLISH REMOVER/PAINT THINNER AROMAS: A sign of ethyl acetate, a harsh-smelling

compound that can be formed when acetic acid bacteria (also known as acetobacter) combines with

ethanol, the most common type of alcohol in wine. Acetic acid bacteria are the bacteria that eventually

turn wine into vinegar.

When it’ s not right, you know (usually right away).

OXYDIZED AROMAS: A sign that the wine has been excessively exposed to oxygen. It’s important to

note that a little bit of oxygen can help a wine taste open and evolved. In addition, certain wines—notably

Sherry, tawny Port, and Madeira—take their characters from intentional exposure to oxygen in a

controlled manner. But a table wine that has been damaged by too much oxygen is a different story. In

the winery, oxidation can be minimized by careful and quick handling of both the grapes and the wine. At

home, oxidation can be prevented by storing bottles on their sides, so that the cork remains moist and

forms a tight seal with the neck of the bottle. Oxidized wines take on a brownish or burnt orange color,

which is especially noticeable in whites.

ROTTEN EGG AROMAS: Hydrogen sulfide, a foul-smelling gas that can be created during or at the end

of fermentation, has the odor of rotten eggs or a dirty fish tank. Hydrogen sulfide can be the result of an

excessive amount of sulfur applied late to grapevines, usually to prevent mildew or rot. The formation of

hydrogen sulfide is exacerbated when the grape juice is deficient in nitrogen, which is present naturally in

the juice, as a result of nitrogen compounds in soil.

ROTTING ONION AROMAS: A sign of mercaptan compounds. These horrible-smelling compounds can

be created after fermentation, when hydrogen sulfide and other basic sulfur compounds combine to

create larger compounds that smell like rotting onions or spoiled garlic. Mild skunky aromas, on the other

hand, may indicate the wine is temporarily “reduced” and needs oxygen (vigorous swirling in the glass

will do), which will then dissipate the aroma.

RUBBING ALCOHOL AROMAS: Usually experienced as a hit high up in the nostrils, the aroma of

rubbing alcohol indicates that the wine’s alcohol is out of balance with its fruit and acidity. A wine that is

too high in alcohol feels caustic in the mouth and is described as “hot” (see What Makes Wine, Wine? on

page 9).

VINEGARY AROMAS: A sign of volatile acidity (VA) caused by acetic acid bacteria, which can begin to

grow in wines in which the fermentation is not handled properly, or at any time when alcohol, oxygen, and

acetic acid bacteria find themselves together, especially in a warm environment.

WET CARDBOARD AROMAS: A dank, wet cardboard aroma indicates that the cork and subsequently

the wine have been contaminated by one of a series of compounds, the lead one of which is

trichloroanisole (commonly called TCA), perceptible when present in amounts as minuscule as 5 to 10

parts per trillion (equal to a drop of water in an Olympic-size swimming pool). This fault in wine is referred

to as “corked.

” While a corked wine won’t hurt you, it smells unattractive—rather like a wet sheepdog

sitting on damp cardboard in a dank basement. The leading industry solution to corkiness is closing wine

bottles with a modern screw cap, rather than cork bark.

For my part, I start by imagining about fifty different common flavors as I taste a wine.

Finally, if there’s one practical aspect of tasting that’s important, it is this: Don’t

swallow too quickly. As with medicine, if you swallow a wine superquickly, you won’t

taste it at all.

“Down the hatch” is an idea best saved for cheap tequila.

SEDIMENT AND TARTRATES

Every now and then you may come across a wine that has small particles in it. Chances are, this is either

sediment or tartrates. Sediment occurs only in older red wines—wines that are usually ten years old or

more. As red wine ages, color pigments in the wine combine with tannin to form long chains of molecules

too heavy to stay in solution. These sometimes precipitate out, forming a sediment—a group of rather

large dark red particles that appear in the wine.

Sediment is tasteless and harmless, but it can feel a little gritty on your teeth, which is one of the

reasons red wines with sediment are decanted.

So-called tartrates (actually potassium bitartrate crystals) are also tasteless and harmless. These are

the whitish/clear snowflakelike crystals that are sometimes found floating in white wine or sticking to the

bottom of the cork. These crystals (which are the same as cream of tartar) are bits of natural tartaric acid

that have precipitated out of the wine, usually because of a quick and extreme drop in temperature.

CONFIRMING THE COLOR

Most wine books deal with color first. Indeed, the color of a wine “sets us up,

” giving us

some basis (or so we think) for anticipating a wine’s aromas and flavors.

But color is not necessarily tied to aroma or flavor. For me, in fact, the color of a wine

(beautiful though it may be) is the last thing I think about when I evaluate a wine. I’ve

therefore chosen to put color last in this discussion.

The color of a given wine comes from a group of pigments in grape skins called

anthocyanins. The correct way to look at color is not to hold the glass up in the air, but

rather to look down and across the wine-filled glass while holding it at a 45-degree angle.

Different grape varieties have different hues. Pinot noir makes a wine that is usually

light brick in color; gamay can be lipstick red; zinfandel, electric purple; and nebbiolo,

almost black. When an experienced taster is given an unidentified wine, color is often the

final icing on the cake as to the wine’s identity. Color is also a clue to age. White and red

wines behave inversely: White wines get darker as they get older; red wines get lighter as

they get older.

Beware the common mistake of thinking that the intensity of a wine’s color is related to

the intensity of its flavor. Despite how counterintuitive this seems, deeply red wines (like

cabernet sauvignon) are not necessarily more flavorful than pale red wines (like pinot

noir).

Finally, clarity of color—often called limpidity—is also important. Today, improved

winemaking means that virtually all well-made white wines have clarity. For red wine,

clarity is neither wholly good nor bad. Many great reds have perfect clarity, and others

(those that have not been filtered, for example) may seem more opaque.

The delicious triumvirate of wine, food, and great friends.

MARRYING WELL: WINE AND FOOD

Since its origins approximately eight thousand years ago, wine has always had a constant,

delicious companion: food. For most of European history, little distinction was drawn

between the two. Wine was food. A solace. A source of calories. As intimate a part of life

as breathing.

That we’ve come to a time when we need guidance on the marrying of these two primal

forces is an intriguing conversation in itself. But here, my purpose is different. Here, I

hope to remind us all about affinities. And set the course for some thrilling combinations.

Let me begin by admitting that I don’t think every wine always needs to be perfectly

matched to a food, or vice versa. And I don’t say this because I lack passion for food.

Flavor is flavor. It doesn’t matter to me if it’s liquid or solid in my mouth. Moreover, I

started out as a food (not a wine) writer; I love to cook, and as you will perhaps deduce

from the many food sections scattered throughout the chapters of this book, I have a deep

appreciation for the historic connection between the foods of a place and the wines of a

place. Together the two allow us, however briefly, to actually participate in the culture of a

place. And that, it seems to me, is one of the true gifts wine and food offer us.

“The food was average but the meal was great.

”

— ANDREW JEFFORD,

writing about a meal in The New France

Wine and food matching is a bit different. In the United States, beginning in the 1980s,

wine and food pairing became something of a national sport. Restaurants offered wine and

food dinners; food magazines began to suggest wines with certain recipes; the back labels

on bottles of American wines began to suggest accompanying dishes (although one of the

first wineries to do this in the world was Napa V alley’s Beaulieu Vineyard, back in the

1960s). It was all very exciting.

But as time went on, what started out as an exploration meant to heighten enjoyment

began to take the form of just another set of “rules” complex enough to make anyone

dizzy. Acidity contrasts with salt. Salt fights with fat. Umami decreases bitterness. And on

and on.

The problem with this sort of approach is that it has very little connection—today or

historically—to how we actually behave when we cook, eat, and drink. A hundred years

ago, did an Italian grandmother stop to consider the acidity level in her pasta sauce before

choosing a wine for dinner? I doubt it. Admitedly, she had very little choice; only a

limited selection of wines would have been available to her. But it’s also true that, both

then and now, we sometimes choose wines as much to match the mood as the food.

Sometimes maybe more so. All of this is simply to point out that wine and food don’t

always have to be technically perfect together to be delicious anyway.

That said, it’s certainly true that extraordinary flavor affinities do exist, and that most of

us have had at least a few of those “wow” moments when the wine-and-food combination

was unbelievably good.

How do you create those moments? It isn’t easy. A meal, after all, rarely highlights the

flavor of a single food, and many dishes present countless variables. Say you were trying

to choose a wine to go with grilled chicken breasts with spicy coconut sauce. What exactly

would you be matching? The chicken? The coconut milk? The spices and chiles in the

sauce? And what if those chicken breasts were just one part of the dish? What if they were

accompanied by a rice pilaf seasoned with coriander, cumin, and toasted almonds?

Lamb may be the most versatile meat for the world’ s greatest reds. Historically in Europe, it was the traditional

accompaniment to everything from great Bordeaux to fine Rioja to the powerful Naoussas of Greece.

There’s simply no absolute way to predict what might happen when all these flavors,

plus the multiple flavors in a wine, are all swirled together, like in a giant kaleidoscope.

And even if you could predict the result, would we really all agree on whether it was

delicious? Ultimately, taste preferences are highly individual.

So where does that leave us? To me, it leaves us squarely in the realm of instinct.

People who pair wine and food together well don’t have a set of rules as much as they

have good instincts. And good instincts can be acquired. It’s simply a matter of drinking

lots of different kinds of wines with different kinds of dishes and paying attention to the

principles that emerge. After years of doing precisely that, here’s what I’ve discovered.

RISKY RELATIONSHIPS

The following foods can be a challenge to pair with wine. Incorporate them carefully, using cooking

techniques like grilling and/or combining them with other ingredients, like bacon or cream, to minimize

the impact these foods can have on wines.

ARTICHOKES: Artichokes contain cynarin, an amino acid that can produce the impression of cloying

sweetness and an unpleasant, metallic taste in wines.

ASPARAGUS: Asparagus contains mercaptan, a skunky-smelling compound associated with a fault in

wine.

CHILES: Hot chiles contain capsaicin, which can make wines high in alcohol taste unpleasantly hot, and

accentuate astringency in tannic wines.

CRUCIFEROUS VEGETABLES: Broccoli, cauliflower, kale, and cabbage are examples of cruciferous

vegetables. All members of this healthy family contain sulfur and release sulfur compounds when

cooked, often contributing an off-flavor impression to wines.

EGGS: Eggs also contain sulfur, and release sulfur compounds when cooked, often contributing an off-

flavor impression to wines.

VINEGAR: Vinegar and foods pickled in vinegar contain high concentrations of acetic acid, which can

rob wines of their fruit flavors, and often create a bitter or astringent taste impression.

THE TEN MOST IMPORTANT PRINCIPLES BEHIND

GREAT MARRIAGES

THIS MIGHT SEEM LIKE THE MOST ELEMENTAL OF IDEAS, BUT FOR ME, THE FIRST IMPORTANT

PRINCIPLE IS SIMPLY: Pair great with great, humble with humble. A hot turkey sandwich

doesn’t need a pricey merlot to accompany it. On the other hand, an expensive crown rib

roast may just present the perfect moment for opening that powerful, opulent Napa V alley

cabernet sauvignon you’ve been saving.

SECOND, MATCH DELICATE TO DELICATE, BOLD TO BOLD. It only makes sense that a delicate

wine like a red Burgundy will end up tasting like water if you serve it with a dramatically

bold dish like curry. Dishes with bold, piquant, spicy, and hot flavors are perfectly cut out

for bold, spicy, big-flavored wines. Which is why various shirazes are terrific with many

“hot and spicy” cuisines.

“It takes me twelve minutes to eat a good plate of food and two hours to drink

a good bottle of wine, so who cares about the food?”

— PETER BARRY,

owner of Australia’s Jim Barry winery, renowned for its shirazes

DECIDE IF YOU W ANT TO MIRROR A GIVEN FLA VOR, OR SET UP A CONTRAST. Chardonnay with

lobster in cream sauce would be an example of mirroring. Both the lobster and the

chardonnay are opulent, rich, and creamy. But delicious matches also happen when you go

in exactly the opposite direction and create contrast and juxtaposition. That lobster in

cream sauce would also be fascinating with Champagne, which is sleek, crisp, and sharply

tingling because of the bubbles.

THE WHITE-WINE-WITH-FISH RULE

The old chestnut “white wine with fish; red wine with meat” is based on matching body

(the weight of the wine in the mouth) and color. The adage dates from the days when

many white wines were light in body and whitish in color (like fish), and many red wines

were weighty and, obviously, red (like meat). It is, however, the body and components

of the wine—not its color—that are important in matching wine with food. Some red

wines, for example, are far lighter in body than white wines (compare, say, an Oregon

pinot noir with a Sonoma chardonnay). T oday, many wine lovers have abandoned the

old rule and have begun drinking red wine with fish. Red Burgundy and sushi?—yes.

THINK ABOUT A WINE’S FLEXIBILITY. Although chardonnay is wildly popular in many parts

of the world, it’s one of the least flexible white wines with food. Chardonnays often have

so much toasty oak and high alcohol that they taste hard and dull when accompanied by

food. For maximum flexibility, go with a sauvignon blanc or a dry riesling, both of which

have cleansing acidity. Wines with high acidity leave you wanting to take a bite of food,

and after taking a bite of food, you’ll want a sip of wine. The perfect seesaw. The most

flexible red wines either have good acidity, such as Chianti, red Burgundy, and California

and Oregon pinot noir, or they have loads of fruit and not a lot of tannin. For the latter

reason, zinfandel, lots of simple Italian reds, and southern Rhône wines, such as

Châteauneuf-du-Pape, are naturals with a wide range of dishes, from such simple comfort

foods as grilled chicken to more complex dishes like pasta Bolognese.

Salmon works well with both red wine and white. Here, green beans dictate the final decision.

NOT SURPRISINGLY, DISHES WITH FRUIT IN THEM OR A FRUIT COMPONENT TO THEM—pork

with sautéed apples, roasted chicken with apricot glaze, duck with figs, and so forth—

often pair beautifully with very fruit-driven wines that have super-fruity aromas.

Gewürztraminer, muscat, viognier, and riesling are in this camp.

SALTINESS IN FOOD IS A GREAT CONTRAST TO ACIDITY IN WINE. Think about smoked salmon

and Champagne, or Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese and Chianti. Asian dishes that have soy

sauce in them often pair well with high-acid wines like riesling.

COOKING WITH WINE

Anywhere wine is made, it is used, usually liberally, in cooking. And for good reason. Wine layers in more

flavor and richness than water. In addition, wine is often included as a final splash of flavor in sauces and

various dishes.

The concern (if that’s the right word) has always been: What happens to the alcohol? And the

conventional wisdom has been that after a few minutes of cooking, the alcohol in wine evaporates and is

therefore eliminated.

That’s not exactly the case. Research conducted by the U.S. Department of Agriculture in the mid-

1990s showed that 85 percent of the alcohol remained when alcohol was added to a boiling liquid that

was then removed from the heat. The longer something is cooked, however, the less alcohol remains.

When a food is baked or simmered for 15 minutes, about 40 percent of the alcohol remains. After one

hour, only 25 percent remains and after 2½ hours, just 5 percent will be present. (Remember that wine

does not have huge amounts of alcohol to begin with—most wines are between 12 and 15 percent

alcohol by volume—so for most people, the final amount of alcohol remaining in a dish is usually not a

problem.)

As for cooking with wine, here are the most important guidelines:

NEVER use poor-quality wine. If you wouldn’t drink it, don’t pour it into the stew. A poor-quality wine with

sour or bitter flavors will only contribute those flavors to the dish.

NEVER use “cooking sherry” or other wines billed for cooking. These wretched liquids are horrible-

tasting, cheap, thin base wines to which salt and food coloring have been added.

“I cook with wine; sometimes I even add it to the food.

”

— W. C. FIELDS

IF A RECIPE calls for dry white wine, many whites from all over the world will work, but one of the best

and easiest choices is a good-quality sauvignon blanc or Sancerre, which will contribute a fresh, light

herbal lift.

IF THE RECIPE calls for dry red wine, think about the heartiness of the dish. A rustic, long-cooked

casserole or a substantial stew often needs a correspondingly hearty wine. Use a big-bodied shiraz,

zinfandel, or red from the south of Spain, Italy, or France.

DON’T pass up Port, Madeira, Marsala, and the nutty styles of Sherry, such as amontillado and oloroso. I

could not cook without these scrumptious wines. All four are fortified, which means they have slightly

more alcohol, but they all pack a bigger wallop of flavor, too. Plus, opened, they can be used for cooking

for several months or more. Be sure to use the real thing. Port from Portugal, Sherry from Spain, and so

on. Most ersatz New World versions are far weaker in flavor. Port has a rich, sweet, winey flavor, a real

plus in meat casseroles. Sherry’s complex, roasted, nutty flavors can transform just about any soup,

stew, or sautéed dish. Madeira can be mesmerizingly lush, with toffee and caramel flavors; use the

medium-rich style known as bual. And Marsala’s light, caramel-like fruitiness is incomparable in

Mediterranean sautés. I like to use dry Marsala rather than sweet.

A savory cheese tart. White wines high in acidity work best to balance the salt and fat in cheese.

SALTINESS IS ALSO A STUNNINGLY DELICIOUS CONTRAST TO SWEETNESS. Try that Asian dish

seasoned with soy sauce with an American riesling that’s slightly sweet, and watch both

the food and the wine pull together in a new way. This is the principle behind that great

old European custom of serving Stilton cheese (something salty) with Port (something

sweet).

A HIGH-FAT FOOD, SOMETHING WITH A LOT OF ANIMAL FAT, BUTTER, OR CREAM, USUALLY

CALLS OUT FOR AN EQUALLY RICH, INTENSE, STRUCTURED, AND CONCENTRATED WINE.

Here’s where a well-balanced red wine with tannin, such as a good-quality cabernet

sauvignon or merlot, works wonders. The immense structure of the wine stands up to the

formidableness of the meat. And at the same time, the meat’s richness and fat serves to

soften the impact of the wine’s tannin. A powerful California cabernet sauvignon with a

grilled steak is pretty hard to beat. This same principle is at work when a Bordeaux wine

(made primarily from cabernet sauvignon and merlot) is served with roasted lamb. And

pairing richness with richness is also the principle behind what is perhaps the most

decadent French wine and food marriage of all: Sauternes and foie gras.

BUT NONE FROM FAT

One 5-ounce glass of typical white wine contains about 104 calories; a typical red contains about 110.

Wines that have a small touch of sweetness may have an additional 5 to 10 calories. By comparison, the

same amount of grape juice has about the same number of calories—102.

CONSIDER UMAMI (see Umami, page 105), the fifth taste, which is responsible for a sense

of deliciousness in foods. Chefs increasingly use foods high in umami, such as

Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese, soy sauce, wild mushrooms, and most red meats, to build a

dish, and potentially make it sensational with wine. When wine and food are paired well

together, adding an umami component to the food often serves to heighten the overall

experience. So, for example, we know steak and cabernet sauvignon to be a successful

match. Topping the steak with grilled mushrooms gives the overall combination even

more punch.

WITH DESSERTS, CONSIDER SWEETNESS CAREFULLY. Desserts that are sweeter than the wine

they accompany make the wine taste dull and blank. In effect, the sweetness of the dessert

can knock out the character of the wine. Wedding cake, for example, can ruin just about

anything in a glass, although happily, no one’s paying attention anyway. The best dessert

and dessert wine marriages are usually based on pairing a not-too-sweet dessert, such as a

fruit or nut tart, with a sweeter wine.

So there they are, a group of pretty simple principles, meant only as a guide. The real

excitement is in the experimentation, and only you can do that.

I love this photo… memories of countless dinner parties and dining tables full of wineglasses. Why serve one wine with a

dish when two is so much better for conversation?

THE TEN QUESTIONS ALL WINE DRINKERS ASK

What makes wine continually fascinating is that, apart from the hedonistic pleasure it

provides, it appeals to the intellect in a way that, say, root beer or vodka do not. And

because wine entices the mind, wine lovers are always beset by questions: Should you let

a wine breathe? How much do vintages matter? How long does wine need to age? Even

simple issues present challenges: What constitutes a good wineglass? What’s the right

temperature at which to serve a wine?

I hope this final section will provide you with solid answers. I’ll begin with my own

first question/conundrum: How to feel comfortable in a wine shop.

HOW CAN I BUY WINE MORE COMFORTABLY?

In such a complex world, buying a bottle of wine for dinner should be one of life’s easier

(and happier) tasks. Unfortunately, it often doesn’t seem that way. When I first started

buying wine, I was so overwhelmed by the sheer number of bottles in my local wine shop

that for a good six months, I simply chose from a cache of assorted wines on sale, all

sitting in a bin positioned near the cash register (allowing at the very least for a quick

getaway should embarrassment set in). I was about twenty-one and, as I recall, I wound up

drinking a lot of cheap Bulgarian wine, which was (somewhat inexplicably) what the bin

usually contained. The fact is, navigating a wine shop isn’t a snap. Even a medium-size

wine shop might have seven hundred or so different wines and a large store, four thousand

or more. So how do you make buying wine a comfortable experience? Here are some

insider tips.

A thousand points of deliciousness. That’ s how I think of a wine shop. But having a shopping strategy is always helpful.

CHOOSE THE RIGHT WINE SHOP. Forget the stuffy places. At the same time, don’t

necessarily opt for a big, impersonal discount store. Many discount stores employ people

who know next to nothing about wine. Y ou want someplace different from either of these

—a place that lets you browse, ask questions (and get answers)—a place where, over time,

you can get to know one or two of the staff well enough to trust them to point out new and

exciting wines.

DON’T LET THAT LITTLE VOICE IN YOUR HEAD SAY,

“YOU’LL NEVER UNDERSTAND THIS.

” Don’t

forget, there was a time when you didn’t know what avocados, sushi, or peach ice cream

tasted like either. But you decided to give each of them a try anyway, and in so doing, you

expanded your knowledge about different foods and their flavors. Trying a wine you don’t

yet know is really the same thing.

TACKLE THE WINE WORLD ONE PLACE AT A TIME. Choose a single country—any country—

and for six months, drink only wines from that country, avoiding everything else. Let’s say

you choose Spain. What you’ll find, surprisingly enough, is that after six months of

choosing bottles only from Spain, you’ll have a feel for the flavors and textures of Spanish

wine. Once you’ve got country number one under your belt, move to the next country. In

this systematic way, you’ll build up a reservoir of wine experiences associated with certain

places and, best of all, in a controlled way you’ll begin to know the flavors you love, the

flavors you like, and the flavors you’d just as soon let somebody else have.

THE BEGINNINGS OF BOOZE

The word booze, once spelled bouse, comes from the medieval Dutch word büsen, meaning “to drink to

excess.

” Bouse dates back almost one thousand years, to medieval English, but was most commonly used

in the sixteenth century by unsavory characters—thieves and beggars—before becoming used more

frequently as general slang.

THE TWELVE APOSTLES, A DOZEN EGGS, AND… THE

TWELVE-BOTTLE CASE

One could make a case against cases. Why are the damn things so heavy? Why, for that matter, do they

contain twelve bottles? When it comes to the latter, surprisingly, no one seems to know. The leading

theory is that twelve bottles of wine (weighing 30 to 35 pounds/13 to 15 kilograms) is the upper limit of

what most people can lift and carry at one time. The configuration of three bottles by four bottles renders

the nearly-square case stable and therefore easy to stack in a warehouse or store. Stable stacking is

much harder, for example, when the case is configured six bottles by two bottles, though admittedly a

minority of cases are constructed this way. While it’s not clear when wine began to be shipped in case

boxes, various types of goods have been packaged in multiples of six for as long as wine has been

bottled (which is slightly more than three centuries). Indeed, a dozen is thought to be one of the most

primitive groupings, perhaps because there are a dozen cycles of the moon, and a dozen months in a

year. A dozen is also easily split up as ½, ⅓, ¼, ⅙, and . The Romans, in fact, first used twelve as a

way of subdividing their money. No matter how deeply embedded a dozen is in Western culture,

however, the twelve-bottle wine case may soon be a memory. Already several European countries,

including France, have banned twelve-bottle cases as being too heavy to lift and therefore potentially

injurious to health. The French now package and buy their wine in tidy boxes of six bottles. And thus, no

longer does un six-pack, s’il vous plaît just mean beer.

PUT PRICE IN PERSPECTIVE. A bottle of wine serves five. So that $25 wine is, per serving,

about what many people spend without a second thought on, say, a latte. In addition, there

are many very good, inexpensive wines—you just have to taste more widely to find them.

Wine professionals themselves often buy very reasonably priced wines for every-night

drinking.

THAT SAID, DON’T BE AFRAID TO TREAT YOURSELF. There are extraordinary wine

experiences to be had, and you should have them! Occasionally springing for a special,

expensive bottle enriches your wine knowledge and can be very satisfying.

SET ASIDE A MODEST BUDGET FOR NEW WINE EXPERIENCES. Then, once every week or two,

spend that money on a wine you’ve never had before. Remember: The best way to learn

nothing about wine is to continue to drink what you already know you like.

THINK OF WINE AS A W AY TO TRA VEL. Y ou may not be able to get to Tuscany or the south of

France next summer, but you can certainly have a lot of fun experimenting with Tuscan or

southern French wines anyway. Again, it doesn’t matter where you begin. If you’re

fascinated by Australia, start there. If you’ve never tried a wine from Argentina, try one

now.

BE ENDLESSLY CURIOUS. Y ou’re not the only one who doesn’t know what’s inside all those

bottles. Most people don’t. The wine drinkers who have the most fun and learn the most

are those who have the courage to be curious.

FINALLY, USE FOOD AS A LANGUAGE. If you’re trying to describe to the wine shop staff the

kinds of wines you like and you’re at a loss for words, think about foods. Wines can be big

and juicy like a steak; fresh and light like a salad; or spicy and bold like a Thai soup. It

isn’t necessary to use technical wine terms. One day, wanting an adventure, I asked a

salesperson to give me a wine like the late comedian Robin Williams. Amazingly enough,

and without a minute’s hesitation, he did just that.

The great Burgundian Grand Cru red, Le Corton. To drink this wine would be to drink a moment in time—in 1964.

Capturing time and nature in this way is a mind-blowing experience that only wine provides.

HOW MUCH DO VINTAGES MATTER?

Imagine this scenario: A waiter comes back to a group of diners and explains that the

restaurant is out of the 2010 Château Pavie but has the 2012; would the customers like

that? Eyebrows furrow. No one wants to make a mistake. Someone tries a Google search

under the table. Should vintages be so troubling?

Consider the reason behind giving wines vintage dates to begin with. Originally,

vintages were stated in order to give the buyer a date to count from. By knowing the

vintage, one could tell how old the wine was, and since old wines were often not very

good, this information was valuable.

The second premise of vintage dating is that, as a rule (especially in the Old World),

weather is not necessarily on a grapevine’s side. Historically, listing the vintage was a way

of alerting consumers to certain years when very bad weather led to wines that were

disappointingly thin. Such wines would generally be priced cheaply. People would drink

the poor vintage until a better vintage came along, but no one would buy up cases of the

wine and cellar it away to age.

Winemakers played a very small role in this annual drama. No matter how talented they

were, Nature had the upper hand and the final say. From both the winemakers’ and the

wine drinkers’ standpoints, vintages had to be accepted for what they were. Some were

poor, some were good, most were somewhere in between… and were happily drunk.

In the past thirty plus years, however, the picture has changed. Both winemaking

technology and viticultural science have advanced to such a degree that talented

winemakers can sometimes turn out delicious wines even when Nature is working against

them. The fact is, weather can now have a less detrimental impact on the final wine than it

once did. This is not to say that wines taste the same every year; they clearly do not. But

given the knowledge, skill, and access to technology winemakers now have, vintage

differences are often differences of character. For example, in a hot year many wines will

be packed with bigger, jammier fruit flavors. In a cool year they will be more austere,

lighter in body, and perhaps more elegant. Are any of these qualities terrible? Isn’t it at

least theoretically possible to like both kinds of wine? Unfortunately, vintage assessments

assume that, for all wines and all wine drinkers everywhere, greatness comes in one form.

But that is simply not true.

There is another problem: Vintages are generally categorized by the media once—when

the new wine is tasted in the spring following the harvest. But wine changes over time.

There are many examples of vintages deemed magnificent at first, only later to be declared

not as good as originally thought, as well as the opposite—vintages proclaimed average at

first and later awarded praise. From a wine drinker’s standpoint, what is the point of

memorizing the pluses and minuses of vintages if the pluses and minuses change? The

final, sensible approach can only be to have an open mind. Remember that wines evolve

and that one-shot vintage proclamations are entirely too superficial. Remember, too, that

talented winemakers can surprise us even when Nature has worked against them.

LEAD CRYSTAL

An English glassmaker named George Ravenscroft discovered, in 1674, that adding

lead oxide to molten glass made it softer and easier to work. As a result, lead crystal

could be cut into elaborate designs. But even more important, lead made glass more

durable and more brilliant.

In 1991, researchers at Columbia University found that wine and other acidic

beverages left in lead crystal decanters for several months could absorb possibly

dangerous amounts of lead. Subsequently, the FDA recommended against storing

acidic foods and beverages for long periods of time in lead-glazed pottery or lead

crystal decanters. The specific health hazards, however, are still not known. Since wine

does not stay in a crystal glass long enough to leach lead from it, drinking wine from

lead crystal glasses is considered safe.

WHERE AND HOW SHOULD I STORE WINE?

The ancient Greeks mixed wine with honey (sugar acts as a preservative), poured olive oil

on top of it (as a barrier to air), and stored it in large ceramic amphorae buried in the

ground to keep the wine cool. For thousands of years, wine lovers have been motivated to

store wine in a way that keeps it as wine, rather than expensive vinegar.

By the sixteenth century, much of the wine traded throughout Europe was high in

alcohol and further fortified with brandy to preserve it. The base wine itself may have

come from any warm place along the Mediterranean, from southern Spain to Crete. In

many cases, the origin did not matter; what was important was that the raw wine be

fortified sufficiently that it would still be drinkable when it reached England, Ireland, or

northern Europe. Any wine that was not fortified was drunk immediately. These young,

fresh wines were highly desirable. For most of history, in fact, young wine was always

more expensive than old. Intentionally storing wine to age it came into practice only after

the eighteenth century, when bottles came into widespread use. When aged in a bottle with

a tight-fitting cork, wine not only did not turn to vinegar, but some of it actually improved

—sometimes markedly so, especially if it was red. For the first time, certain older wines

began to command a higher price than young wines. And “laying a wine down” to better it

began to take on sophisticated connotations.

Cork—the historic closure for wine—is a miraculous material. But the 20th century gave us an additional asset: well-

made, expensive screw caps.

The legacy remains. Aging a wine still seems like the right thing to do with a

moderately expensive wine, even though the fact that most modern wine is actually not

meant to be aged for long periods of time. Virtually all white wines and rosé wines are

made to be drunk fresh and young. Even among red wines, only those with firm structure

and impeccable balance are meant for the long haul. The French make a distinction

between wines intended for current drinking and the far smaller universe of wines they

call vins de garde—wines to save.

In reality, of course, many wines—even vins de garde—are “saved” just about as long

as it takes to get them home from the store. Still, despite the pull of immediate

gratification, most of us will eventually be faced with the issue of wine storage.

First off, it’s important to recognize that wine doesn’t care if it’s stored in a $20,000

custom-built cellar, in the basement, or between shoes in the closet, as long as three things

are true:

• The environment is cool

• The bottle is lying on its side or upside down (not standing upright)

• There is no direct sunlight

Storage temperature matters because it can dramatically affect the rate at which various

chemical changes will take place as the wine matures. Wines forced to mature too quickly

show a sharp, exaggerated curve of awkward development, followed by dramatic

deterioration. In a hot room, a fine wine can be shoved so quickly through the stages of

aging that it begins to unravel. In order to develop properly and with stability, a fine wine

must mature slowly over a long period of time. Scientists say this happens best when

wines are kept at about 55°F (13°C). For less expensive, every-night wines, a constant

temperature of 70°F (21°C) or lower is fine.

What now comes to mind for many people is the wine-in-the-trunk question. How long

can a wine be exposed to imperfect temperatures and still remain good? Professor

Cornelius Ough, of the Department of Viticulture and Enology at the University of

California at Davis, notes that most wines of average quality could be heated to 120°F

(49°C) for a few hours (as in the trunk of a car in summer) and remain unscathed.

However, several days at such temperatures would cause the wines to taste cooked or

stewed. Speaking personally, I wouldn’t leave a rare, older, or great wine in a hot trunk for

even ten minutes.

Scientists also insist that violent swings of temperature are detrimental—as, for

example, when a wine is alternately taken out of a hot closet and put into a cold

refrigerator several times because plans to drink it have changed. Extreme fluctuations in

temperature can affect both how the wine matures and the pressure inside the bottle, which

in turn shifts the cork and thus may allow air to enter, oxidizing the wine. So once you’ve

chilled that bottle, drink it!

SMELLING THE CORK

You order a bottle of wine in a restaurant and the waiter puts the cork down beside you. Are you

supposed to:

• Smell it?

• Feel it?

• Glance at it, then ignore it?

The answer is the third option. The practice of placing the cork on the table dates from the eighteenth

century, when wineries began branding corks to prevent unscrupulous restaurateurs from filling an empty

bottle of Château Expensive with inferior wine, recorking it, then reselling it as Château Expensive.

In honest restaurants, the cork was placed on the table so the diner could see that the name on it

matched that on the label, a guarantee that the wine had not been tampered with. Admittedly, feeling the

cork tells you if the wine was stored on its side, and that can be a clue to its soundness. But a moist cork

is no guarantee that the wine is in good condition; similarly, a dry cork does not necessarily portend a

wine gone awry. As for smelling the cork, alas, many flaws—such as cork taint—can be detected only by

smelling the actual wine. The smell of the cork itself is never a reliable indicator of a fault or of a wine’s

character or quality.

Similarly, when a wine is stored upright, the cork begins to dry out and shrink. After a

few months, air may begin to slip between the cork and the neck of the bottle, oxidizing

the wine. A bottle is best kept on its side or upside down, so that the cork, moist with the

wine, stays swollen against the neck of the bottle.

Sunlight is harmful because ultraviolet light in particular causes free radicals (basically,

atoms with unpaired electrons) to develop in wine, resulting in rapid oxidation. This is

why the best wine stores don’t display wine in the windows, unless those bottles are

dummies that are not going to be sold.

Finally, vibration may be detrimental, although scientists have not seen conclusive

evidence for this. Before Les Caves de Taillevent, one of the most famous wine shops in

central Paris, was built, the owners embarked on an extensive and nearly impossible

search to find a neighborhood location far away from all metros. Although the rumble of

Parisian trains is barely discernible anywhere beyond the train platform itself, the owners

decided not to take any chances with their multimillion-dollar inventory.

WHAT ALLOWS A WINE TO LAST?

In order to withstand time and age well, wine must have the right amount of sugar, acid, or

tannin. These are the three preservatives in wine. Without a significant amount of any of

them, most wines are better off being drunk at the next opportunity.

Sugar is clearly a preservative. If you needed some honey and found a jar that had been

sitting in the back of your kitchen cabinet for ten years, you’d nonetheless (rightfully) use

it. (And a bottle of French Sauternes in your cellar is destined to go the long run.)

Like a jar of honey, an old bottle of vinegar (acid) could always be employed in a salad

dressing. Wines high in acid—German rieslings for example—have amazing aging

potential.

Tannin is the third preservative, but since it comes from the grapes’ skins, it is a factor

mainly in red wines. Y et it’s the most obvious entity in most collectors’ cellars, filled as

they are with high-tannin wines such as Bordeaux, Napa V alley cabernet sauvignon, and

Barolo, for example.

To take wine from a barrel, winemakers use a tool called a “thief” that can be inserted into the bung hole. A “barrel

sample” is usually not fully ready to drink, but it can give the taster an inkling of the wine’ s character and what’ s to

come.

WHEN IS IT READY?

The question of readiness is a frustrating one. Drinking a wine when its most interesting

flavors are being fully expressed is clearly preferable to drinking a wine that’s too young

to have anything much to say. On the other hand, opening a bottle you have patiently

saved only to find the wine has wizened and dried up in old age is sad, to say the least.

So, let’s suppose you were given a bottle of Château Latour (current vintage) as a

birthday present. How would you know when to drink it? The first important realization is

this: Drinking wine is not like baking a cake. There is no magic moment when the wine is

ready. Most very good to great red wines evolve and soften progressively. They start out

with rather “tight” fruit that seems difficult to discern and, bit by bit, slowly

metamorphose into a supple, more complex drink with flavors that seem more vivid.

Where a wine lies along this spectrum at any point in time is a matter of conjecture.

Interestingly, a wine somewhere in its midlife can also go into what winemakers call a

dumb phase, where it may actually taste almost blank—without charm, without depth. In

Bordeaux, this is called the wine’s age ingrat, difficult age. Like adolescence, it is not

permanent. And some wines never go through it. At some unknown point, however, every

wine turns its own corner and begins to move toward maturity.

Predicting the arrival of that maturation remains anything but easy. Each wine is a

living substance that changes according to its own rhythms. This should not be

disillusioning. In fact, it is just the opposite. The unpredictability of wine makes it all the

more compelling. Never truly knowing what to expect is part of the attraction; it is why

wine appeals to the intellect in a way that, say, vodka does not. Best of all, the

incontrovertibly inexact nature of readiness is a good excuse for buying more than one

bottle of a fine wine, then opening them at several stages to see how they’re developing.

I know. Y ou still want a specific idea of when that bottle of Château Latour might be

ready, right? Use this as a bold-stroke guiding principle: The firmer and more structured

the wine (i.e., the more tannin or acid it has), the longer it can be kept. Drink inexpensive

and moderately priced wines now. With a very expensive, high-quality cabernet

sauvignon, merlot, nebbiolo, or other structured wines, the simplest rule of thumb is to

wait at least five years, and ten is better. If you want to get a sneak peek and drink it in

three years, you’ll probably still have a terrific experience (even though you will have

knowingly decided to forgo the additional nuances the wine might have slipped into given

more time).

SERVING DESSERT WINES

Here are the major dessert wines from around the world, as well as information about how to serve them.

(Note that the dry styles of Madeira and Sherry are not included, since the dry styles are usually served

as aperitifs or with savory dishes.) Although some dessert wines are traditionally served in specially

designed glasses, the standard glass for white wine works fine for most dessert wines. A typical serving

is 2 to 3 ounces.

WINE CHILL BOTTLE\* DECANT

Sparkling dessert wine and demi-sec Champagne Yes No

Sweet muscat (including orange muscat, black muscat,

moscato, moscato d’Asti, muscat canelli, and muscat de

Beaumes-de-Venise)

Yes No

Icewine and eiswein Yes No

Late-harvest white wine and botrytized wine (including

Sauternes, Barsac, late-harvest riesling, German

beerenauslese (BA) and trockenbeerenauslese (TBA), late-

harvest sémillon, Austrian ausbruch, sweet Vouvray, Quarts

de Chaume, Coteaux du Layon, Alsace vendange tardive,

and sélection de grains nobles)

Yes No

T okaji aszú Slightly chilled No

Dried grape wines (including vin santo and recioto della

Valpolicella) No No

Banyuls Yes No

Sherry (amontillado, palo cortado, oloroso, Pedro Ximénez) No No

Madeira (bual, malmsey) In summer, slightly

chilled No

Australian Port-style wines (Australian tawny, topaque, and

muscat) No No

Port

T awny Slightly chilled No

Reserve, Late-Bottled Vintage No No

Vintage, Single Quinta No Yes

\*No dessert wine should be served icy chilled. Most dessert wines taste best with a moderate chill of

45°F to 55°F (7°C to 13°C). One to two hours in the refrigerator should be sufficient.

DOES SERVING TEMPERATURE MATTER?

On the first day of my wine classes, I serve two red wines, the identities of which have

been concealed, and ask the participants to pick the one they like better and describe why.

Invariably, most people like B, but there are always votes for both wines and a lively

discussion of how different the two wines are. In fact, wines A and B are the same red

wine—with one difference: B is about three degrees cooler than A.

The class is always surprised, but perception of alcohol, acidity, fruitiness, and balance

are all influenced by small differences in a wine’s temperature. Temperature, in fact, can

make the difference between enthusiasm and indifference for the same wine.

At cool temperatures, a white wine’s acidity is highlighted and the wine seems to taste

lighter and fresher. It is also possible, however, to chill a white down to the point where it

is so cold, it can barely be tasted at all since extreme cold anesthesizes the taste buds.

Increases in temperature have a different effect. As the temperature of a white wine rises,

its alcohol becomes more obvious and the wine begins to taste coarse. An already high-

alcohol chardonnay can taste almost caustic at too warm a temperature.

Red wines are more tricky. While a red wine served too warm can also taste alcoholic

and coarse, the same wine overchilled can taste thin. Historically, the solution for red

wines has been simple: Serve them at room temperature—European room temperature

prior to central heating, that is. In other words, 60°F to 65°F (15°C to 18°C). Room

temperature today is, of course, generally far warmer, and many red wines don’t taste their

best as a result. Y ou can easily demonstrate this for yourself. Pour a glass of good red

wine from a bottle that has been kept in a warm room. Now chill the rest of the bottle in a

bucket of ice and water for five to ten minutes. The idea is not to make the red wine cold,

but simply to bring its temperature down to about 65°F (18°C). At that temperature, good

red wines taste balanced, focused, and full of fruit. Because most of us don’t get a

thermometer out when we open a bottle of wine, a good rule of thumb is this: Imagine the

temperature of a movie theater in summer. That’s where most red wines need to be.

There are, of course, exceptions to the idea above. Extremely fruity, low-tannin red

wines—Beaujolais is the main example—should be cooled almost as much as white

wines, so that their fruitiness is magnified.

MAN’S BEST FRIEND: A GOOD CORKSCREW

Canines aside, man’s best friend is surely an obliging corkscrew—one that does not

require the user to have bell-shaped biceps; one that does not shred the cork to smithereens

half the time. Today, decent corkscrews exist. For most of history, however, they have

been frustrating, imperfectly designed tools.

Originally called bottle-screws, corkscrews were invented in England between 1630

and 1675, where they were used not for wine but for beer and cider. Both sparklers

required tight-fitting corks (often tied on) capable of trapping fermenting gas (which

would have quickly dissipated had the cider or beer been stored in casks). Such corks,

forced deep into the neck of the bottle, often proved impossible to extract without the help

of some kind of tool.

The first tool took its inspiration from a gun. Manufacturing records from the 1630s

describe a bullet-extracting “worm” that was to be used with muskets and pistols. By the

1800s, several English firms that manufactured steel worms for muzzle-loaded firearms

also made corkscrews.

The Ah-So cork remover , invented in 1879, is especially helpful with older wines that have fragile, crumbling corks.

Corkscrews went from being helpful to being essential with the discovery that wine

matures favorably in bottles, as well as in casks. New, cylindrical aging bottles, meant to

be laid on their side and stacked for long periods of time by the winery or merchant selling

the wine, were designed. The cork now had to be fully driven into the neck of the bottle

for a leakproof fit. Corkscrews became a necessity.

The early T-shaped corkscrew, with its simple handle and worm, spawned thousands of

design variations. Double-wormed, folding, left-handed, brush-tipped, and combination

corkscrews (walking-stick corkscrews, cigar-cutter corkscrews, and so on) were made of a

variety of materials: silver, gold, bronze, steel, gilt on copper, wood, mother-of-pearl,

ivory, horn, teeth, tusks, seashells, bone, and later, plastic. Decorative handle shapes knew

no bounds, from a cardinal’s cap to a woman’s legs.

The flat, lever-type waiter’s corkscrew was invented in Germany in 1883, by Carl

Wienke, a civil engineer. Its convenient, fold-up design and concealed knife has made it

an artifact of virtually every restaurant in the world.

“During one of my treks through Afghanistan, we lost our corkscrew. We

were compelled to live on food and water for several days.

”

— CUTHBERT J. TWILLIE

(played by W. C. Fields) in My Little Chickadee

A somewhat less popular corkscrew—actually more of a cork puller—is the Ah-So,

patented in 1879. Originally named the Magic Cork Extractor, the Ah-So has been so

called since the 1960s. The derivation of the name is unclear, although some speculate that

it describes the user’s surprise at how the device works. The Ah-So has no worm, but

rather two flat metal blades that are inserted down the side of the cork. This makes the Ah-

So especially useful when trying to extract a disintegrating cork with a crumbling interior.

In England, this cork puller was nicknamed the butler’s friend because it enabled a

disaffected butler to remove a cork, sample some of his master’s best, replace that with

inferior wine, and then recork the bottle with no telltale hole as evidence.

The most important advance in corkscrew design occurred in 1979, with the birth of the

Screwpull, the first nearly infallible corkscrew. Invented by the late Herbert Allen, a Texas

oil field equipment engineer, the Screwpull’s extremely long worm is coated with Teflon,

so it glides without friction through the cork. As the worm descends, the cork is forced to

climb up it and out of the bottle, requiring no effort (or expertise) on the part of the puller.

All good corkscrews have a helical worm with a thin, needle-sharp point. A helix is a

straight line wrapped around an imaginary cylinder. Thus, the center of a good corkscrew

is not its worm but the space framed by the worm. Y ou can drop a toothpick into a helix-

shaped worm. Such a design means that as the point spirals down through the cork, the

rest of the worm follows the exact same path, minimizing damage to the surrounding cork

cells. Because the cork is basically intact, it does not shred as you pull up. By comparison,

a worm that is the central shaft of the corkscrew (as is true of most “rabbit ears”

corkscrews) plows a hole through the belly of the cork, ripping apart cells and causing the

cork to disintegrate into bits.

CORK: A FUTURE OR FAREWELL?

In a technologically advanced civilization, sealing wine with a hunk of bark may seem hopelessly archaic.

Indeed, cork has a growing number of critics. Yet the promising thwock as a cork leaves a bottle, a

familiar sound for centuries, may continue to be heard for decades to come—at least with some

expensive wines.

Cork, the bark of the cork oak tree (Quercus suber), is native to the poor, rocky soil of southern

Portugal and Spain, as well as Sardinia, Algeria, Tunisia, Italy, and Morocco. Most top-quality corks used

today come from Portuguese trees.

Cork’s structural composition is remarkable. A cubic centimeter of cork contains roughly 40 million

fourteen-sided cells arranged in rows and filled with a mixture of gases similar to oxygen. With a specific

gravity of 0.25, it is four times lighter than water, yet highly elastic, capable of snapping back to its

original shape after withstanding 14,000 pounds of pressure per cubic inch. Cork is impervious to air,

almost impermeable by water, difficult to burn, resistant to temperature changes and vibration, does not

rot, and has the ability to mold itself to the contour of the container it is put into (such as the neck of a

wine bottle).

A cork tree is harvested, or stripped, for the first time when it is twenty-five years old, and thereafter

once every nine years. Although stripping does no permanent damage, the tree will need two years or

more to recover its vitality. A cork tree will be stripped, on average, sixteen times in its 150 to 200 years

of life.

The stripping itself is grueling work. Using special wedge-shaped axes, workers peel four-foot planks

from the bark during the intense summer heat when the tree’s sap is circulating, making it possible to pry

the bark off. Once the bark is stripped off, it is stored in rooms with concrete floors (not on the ground,

where it could be contaminated by soil) and left to season and dry for several months. The bark is then

boiled or steamed to improve its elasticity and flatten it, and then dried again and left in a dark cellar to

dry out for three to four weeks. Finally, the bark is trimmed into rectangular planks and separated

according to quality and thickness. Wine corks are shaped from the planks, graded, and washed in a

mild hydrogen peroxide solution to remove dust, sanitize them, and lighten their color.

Before the mid-1990s, most corks were washed in a chlorine solution. Chlorine, alas, can react with

moisture and fungi inside the cork to facilitate the growth of 2,4,6-trichloroanisole (TCA) and related

compounds, chemicals responsible for the “wet dog sitting on damp newspapers in a dank cellar” aroma

wine can pick up from corks. A wine tainted with TCA is said to be “corked” (see page 113). Although

chlorine is no longer used in cleaning corks, the problem of corked wines has not gone away, in part

because wineries use water to clean barrels and equipment, and municipal water contains chlorine.

Indeed, the average incidence of corked wine is now estimated at 2.5 percent. TCA can also be

generated by other means. Sometimes the compound exists naturally in raw cork bark. But it has also

been found in soil, inside barrels, on cardboard boxes, on wooden pallets, even just in the air—and from

there, it can contaminate corks, which in turn taint the wine.

T oday, cork’s future is anything but clear. While the Portuguese government has taken measures to

encourage improvements in cork manufacture and cork oak tree reforestation, wine producers around

the world appear to be increasingly fed up with the cost and loss of reputation associated with tainted

bottles. In response to the problem, a modern screw-cap initiative began in the Clare Valley of Australia

as far back as 2000, with New Zealand soon following. (Wines with screw caps do not get tainted by

TCA.) T oday, about 45 percent of all Australian wine is stoppered by screw cap, as is 85 percent of all

New Zealand wine. Worldwide, the number of wine bottles with screw caps continues to grow.

DOES WINE REALLY NEED TO BREATHE?

The idea that many wines soften and open up after breathing—being exposed to air—is

true. To effectively aerate a wine, you have to pour it into a large glass, carafe, decanter,

pitcher, or some other vessel so that it mixes with oxygen as it pours from the bottle.

Allowed to breathe in this way, the flavors of many wines—especially young, tannic reds,

such as cabernet sauvignon, merlot, nebbiolo, and petite sirah—will almost seem to

unfurl. White wines, too, will open up as a result of exposure to oxygen.

Interestingly, this process of aerating a young wine is often called decanting, even

though true decanting is entirely different (see next section).

Keep in mind that simply pulling the cork out of a bottle and letting the bottle sit,

opened, for a few minutes is not an effective way to aerate a wine (even though you often

see this done in restaurants). The amount of air in the tiny space of the neck of an opened

bottle is simply much too little, relative to the volume of wine, to have an effect—unless,

perhaps, you left it open for nearly a day. Of course, many devices on the market purport

to aerate wine perfectly. As of this writing, I have found that most of them jostle the wine

so vigorously as to discombobulate it. For me, the tried and true method of using one’s

hand to swirl the glass (at no cost whatsoever) is still the best.

Also keep in mind that there are some wines that should never be aerated. These reds

are too sensitive to oxygen and, splashed into a carafe or decanter, will fall apart and taste

dull and lifeless. The wines that should never be aerated include older pinot noirs and red

Burgundies, along with older gran reserva Riojas (made from tempranillo) and older

Chianti Classicos (made from sangiovese).

WHEN DOES A WINE NEED TO BE DECANTED?

Decanting a wine, a more complex procedure than aerating, means pouring the wine off

any sediment in the bottom of the bottle. So, in order to truly decant a wine, there has to

be sediment in the first place.

Sediment—long, chain molecules of color and tannin that have precipitated out of

solution—is generally present only in older red wines (10-plus years old) that were once

deeply colored, such as cabernet sauvignon, Bordeaux, and vintage Port. If you carefully

take an older cabernet out of its resting place and hold it up to a light, you’ll often see a

sort of crusty material clinging to the inside of the bottle. That’s sediment. (It’s more

difficult to see the sediment in an old vintage Port, since many Port bottles are

traditionally made from dark, opaque glass.) Of course, you could drink an old wine that

has thrown some sediment without decanting it; the sediment is not harmful, just slightly

teeth-clinging.

Decanters can be useful for very old wines (which have thrown a sediment) or very young wines (to help “open up” the

wine’ s aromas and flavors).

Decanting a wine is not difficult. First, the wine bottle must be placed standing upright

for a day or two to let all the suspended sediment gently settle to the bottom of the bottle.

Without picking the bottle up or turning it around, remove the cork slowly. Now pick the

bottle up and begin pouring the clear wine slowly into a decanter. It’s best not to shake the

bottle too much or tilt it back and forth as you pour. (Note: Y ou can do this with the help

of a light source, like a candle or flashlight, behind the neck of the bottle, or not.) When

less than 2 inches of wine is left, you should begin to see sediment coming into the neck of

the bottle. That’s when to stop. The clear wine is now all in the decanter; the sediment

remains in the bottle.

Exactly when should a wine be decanted? To be on the safe side, the general rule of

thumb is to decant older, tannic wines—vintage Port, cabernet sauvignon, Bordeaux,

Barolo, and Rhône wines, for example—less than an hour before serving. Decant it earlier

than that, and the wine may become tired and dull by the time it’s drunk.

CLEANING WINEGLASSES

A wine that smells or tastes strange may be perfectly fine. The culprit could be (and

often is) the glass. While glass looks perfectly smooth, the inside, examined under a

microscope, looks like the surface of the moon. Bacteria and residue easily live in these

microscopic pits, and these can react with components in the wine, making it smell

stinky and taste odd. Additionally, less than perfectly clean glasses mean that sparkling

wines and Champagnes will immediately appear flat and bubbleless.

The best way to wash wine-glasses is by hand (I know, I know), using your hand (not

a sponge) and a small amount of diluted soap and lukewarm water. Glasses should be

rinsed several times in hot, but not scalding, water. Very hot water can cause the glass

to expand rapidly and crack. Drain the glasses briefly upside down, then turn the

glasses upright and let them dry in the air. Any drops or spots can be finished off with a

clean, soft cloth. And once it’s dry, a wineglass should be stored right side up, standing

on its foot, not on its more fragile rim.

Interestingly, in Italy, in many homes and virtually all top restaurants, a washed

wineglass is not yet considered ready for use. The Italians always pour a small amount

of wine in the glass, swirl it around, then throw this wine rinse out—a process known as

avvinare i bicchieri, preparing the glasses to receive the wine. A baptism of sorts.

ARE SOME WINEGLASSES BETTER THAN OTHERS?

In a word: Y es. Although wine can be happily drunk from just about anything, from

Mason jars to Baccarat crystal, most wine drinkers would agree that a good wineglass can

heighten the pleasure of wine drinking and actually enhance the aroma and flavor of

wines. This is not just psychological. A well-designed glass allows the wine’s aromas and

flavors to evolve. Moreover, the wine itself will flow over the rim in a direct stream that

focuses it on the palate.

How do you go about buying good wineglasses when there are dozens of glass

manufacturers to choose from, and prices for wineglasses can range from five to a hundred

dollars a glass? Here are some guidelines:

• BUY ONLY WINEGLASSES YOU CAN AFFORD TO BREAK. If spending fifty dollars per glass

means you’d never use them, buy less expensive ones.

• BUY MORE GLASSES THAN YOU THINK YOU’LL NEED. Glasses break. And besides, there

may be times when you want to serve two different wines side by side for comparison.

• NEVER BUY SMALL GLASSES. Drinking wine out of a small glass feels as awkward as

sitting on a too-small chair or eating dinner off a bread plate.

• CONSIDER BUYING ONE GREAT GLASS TO USE FOR BOTH RED AND WHITE WINES. A well-

designed, good wineglass—whether it will eventually hold red or white wine—should

have a generous bowl. An ample bowl gives the wine’s aromas and flavors room in which

to evolve. Closer to the rim, however, the bowl should narrow, forcing the aromas to be

focused toward your nose.

• BUY GLASSES THAT ARE ABSOLUTELY CLEAR AND SMOOTH, not faceted, to show off the

depth and richness of the wine’s color. Colored and/or cut glass may be beautiful, but you

cannot see the wine.

• MAKE SURE THE GLASS HAS A THIN RIM, so that the wine glides over it easily, and so that

you don’t feel like you have to chew on the glass to get to the wine.

• CHOOSE A GLASS WITH A STEM, to give you something to hold other than the bowl.

Holding the glass around the bowl can warm the wine. And besides, without a stem, it’s

almost impossible to swirl the wine in the glass.

• IN ADDITION TO REGULAR WINEGLASSES, BUY TULIPS/FLUTES for serving Champagne and

sparkling wines. The slightly tapered shape of a tulip/flute encourages a steady stream of

bubbles, and with these wines, bubbles are part of the pleasure.

THE END… BUT REALLY THE BEGINNING

Whether you read Mastering Wine in its entirety, or flipped back and forth between

sections, I want you to know that you’ve just finished what I think is the most important

part of The Wine Bible. An intimate knowledge of anything necessarily begins with the

fundamentals of that thing. With wine, I’d even go one step further and say that the

capacity for pleasure—the capacity to be thrilled by wine—is ineluctably tied to

understanding it in all its most basic details. Anyone can drink good wines, and anyone

wealthy enough can drink super-expensive wines. But without knowledge, the soulful,

satisfying part of the experience is lost. All of this is by way of saying, Bravo! Y ou did it.

This may be the last section of “Mastering Wine,

” but it’s the beginning of many delicious

things to come.

And now for the world of wine…

FRANCE

BORDEAUX | CHAMPAGNE | BURGUNDY | BEAUJOLAIS | THE RHÔNE |

THE LOIRE | ALSACE | LANGUEDOC-ROUSSILLON | PROVENCE

FRANCE RANKS FIRST AMONG WINE-PRODUCING COUNTRIES WORLDWIDE. THE FRENCH DRINK

AN AVERAGE OF 14 GALLONS (52 LITERS) OF WINE PER PERSON PER YEAR.

France produces more fine wines than any other country in the world. This fact alone has

elevated some French wines to almost mythic status. Indeed, French winemaking

techniques, viti-cultural practices, even French grape varieties have been adopted by wine

regions around the world. Like French food, French wine has been (and largely remains)

the benchmark against which greatness elsewhere is judged.

But France’s impact extends even further. The country has molded the very way we

think about great wine. It was in France that the fundamental concept of terroir (the idea

that the site determines the quality of the wine) became pervasive and flourished (see page

17). Traditionally the French have been so convinced that nature and geography make the

wine that there has never been a French word for winemaker. Instead, the term commonly

used, vigneron, portrays man’s role as more humble. Vigneron means “grape grower.

”

France’s near obsession with geography (plus numerous episodes of wine fraud,

including cheap wine being passed off as more expensive wine) resulted, in the 1930s, in

the development of a detailed system of regulations known as the Appellation d’Origine

Contrôlée (AOC). This system designated those places where, today, most of the best

wines in France are made, and then went on to define how those wines must be made.

Given the emphasis on place of origin, most AOC wines are logically known by their

geographic names (Sancerre, Côte-Rôtie, V olnay, and so on), not by the names of the

grape varieties from which they are made (see France’s Wine Laws in the Appendix on

Wine Laws, pages 923–924).

WORDS ON WINE

While it’s tempting to assume that, when it comes to wine, the French invented almost

everything, there’s one pursuit they largely overlooked: wine writing. For that, we first

have to thank ancient Greek and Roman writers, then later, the English, for whom

writing about wine has been a specialty for the last several centuries.

The first book on wine in the English language was A New Boke of the Natures and

Properties of All Wines, written in 1568 by William Turner. Turner’s book is thought to

have been a guide for William Shakespeare, who laced his texts with numerous

references to wine. Then, during the eighteenth century, dozens of major wine books

were written—many of them, interestingly, by English physicians.

In 1775, Sir Edward Barry’s Observations—Historical, Critical, and Medical—on the

Wines of the Ancients and the Analogy Between Them and Modern Wines was

published. The book’s engraved illustrations are impressive and the beautiful text was

printed on a wooden press not unlike the one Gutenberg used for his bibles. Later, in

1824, Alexander Henderson wrote A History of Ancient and Modern Wines, an opus

devoted to French and German wines.

For the next century and a half, most English writers shared Henderson’s view that

no other countries need be included in a comprehensive wine book, since, as educated

drinkers knew, fine wine wasn’t and couldn’t be produced anyplace else.

Luckily for the French, their homeland is blessed with numerous locations in which

fine wines can be made. The first of these areas was established in southern France, near

Montpellier. Here, at the archaeological site of Lattara on the French coast, wine was

imported from Etruscan cities in central Italy. By approximately 500 B.C., the enterprising

French had established a small wine culture all their own. Later, with Roman help,

viticulture spread throughout what is now southern France. Indeed, Provence gets its name

from the Romans, who called it nostra provincia—

“our province.

”

By the fifth century A.D., with the collapse of the Roman Empire, the vineyards of

France increasingly fell under the control of the Catholic Church. In particular, such

powerful monastic orders as the Benedictines painstakingly and systematically planted

vineyard after vineyard until vines stretched north beyond Paris.

From the Middle Ages until the eighteenth century, the vineyards of France flourished

under the guidance of hundreds of thousands of monks. But the French Revolution of

1789 to 1799 forever severed the intimate relationship between the Church and the

country’s vineyards. Under the orders of Napoléon I, vineyards were ousted from Church

ownership and given away or sold, often to local peasants. In some areas where the

Church’s authority had been especially powerful (such as Burgundy) entire new systems

were developed for owning and inheriting vineyards. This included the stipulation that all

children must inherit equally (today, Burgundy’s small vineyards have been so

progressively divided that some family members now own mere rows of vines).

SOMMELIERS

During the French Renaissance, a sommelier (so-mel-YAY) bought the title and paid to become part of

the retinue of the king or a nobleman. The sommelier, responsible for stocking food and wine for

journeys, kept the provisions in a carriage called a somme. Simply stocking provisions, however, was not

the sommelier’s most important job; ensuring the condition of the perishables was. He did this rather

riskily, by taking a bite of each food and a sip of each wine before it was presented to his lord. If the food

or wine had been poisoned by an enemy, the sommelier was the first to know.

COMMUNES

The term commune is used in France to denote a wine village, as in Burgundy’s commune of Chambolle-

Musigny, or Bordeaux’s commune of Margaux. But a commune in France isn’t necessarily only related to

wine. In fact, communes are the lowest level of administrative division in France, and as such, the

equivalent of incorporated cities in the U.S. Communes have revolutionary beginnings. Following the

storming of the Bastille prison and the start of the French Revolution in 1789, the first commune—Paris—

was created. The idea was to do away with the burdens of class and tradition and create a perfect

society—one where everyone was equal, and reason, not tradition, ruled. Indeed, the word commune

comes from the medieval Latin word communia, meaning “a small gathering of people sharing a common

life.

” The actual size of a commune, however, can vary from millions, as with Paris, to a dozen or so.

There are currently close to 38,000 communes throughout France—and their structure remains largely

the same today as when they were set up two centuries ago.

Perhaps the most dramatic period in France’s wine history is the era it would most like

to forget. Sometime between 1860 and 1866, the deadly, root-eating phylloxera insect

arrived from America. The subsequent devastation it unleashed is thought to have begun

in the southern Rhône V alley. From there, the microscopic insect spread throughout the

country, throughout Europe, and eventually throughout much of the world (see box, page

30). Even after French vineyards recovered by planting phylloxera-tolerant American

root-stock, the country’s wine areas were never the same. Many French regions today are

half the size they were before the phylloxera epidemic.

Vineyards are enclosed by hand-built stone terraces on the steep hillsides of Cornas in the northern Rhône V alley.

The French take their food and wine very seriously. (The national school lunch

program consists of a four-course meal that ends with cheese!) Indeed, historically, under

the auspices of the Ministry of Culture, French schoolchildren have gone on field trips to

three-star restaurants in order to taste foods such as foie gras, Bresse chickens, Isigny

butter, and other famous french products, including, sometimes, wines.

The Café du Palais is a favorite people-watching spot in the center of Reims in Champagne. Behind the pedestrians, a

few of the café chairs are occupied by dogs, content to sniff the occasional platter of frites as waiters whisk by, mostly

with trays of wine.

And, needless to say, the French are a proud people. Many of them spend their entire

lives drinking wine from their local area alone. (The word chauvinism, perhaps not

surprisingly, comes from the French.) Even today, it is not unusual to find Burgundians

who have never tasted Bordeaux or Bordelais who have never tasted a wine from Alsace.

And it’s not as though France is that big; the whole country would fit inside Texas.

Nonetheless, 204 different varieties of grapes are grown here and, with nearly 2 million

acres (809,000 hectares) (now, perhaps more) planted with grapevines, France produces

more wine than virtually every other country (although in some years, Italy produces a

tiny bit more).

Climatically and geographically, France can be thought of as being divided into three

parts. In the north, such regions as Champagne and Burgundy have a continental climate,

with severe winters and cool, often rainy autumns, meaning that grapes may not fully

ripen, and thus produce wines that can be delicate and refined. By comparison, southern

France has a Mediterranean climate. Achieving ripeness presents little problem, and the

wines are fleshier, fuller, more “sunny” in the mouth. Lastly, on the Atlantic coast, the

wine regions of Bordeaux and the western Loire have a maritime climate. Here, the Gulf

Stream tempers what might otherwise be too harsh an environment, but again, rain and

humidity can present problems. There are some silver linings. Bordeaux’s muggy

summers, for example, make the great sweet wine Sauternes possible.

“La vie est trop courte pour boire du mauvais vin.

” (“Life is too short to drink

bad wine.

”) Tellingly, the French were the first people to assert this now

common bit of wisdom.

FRENCH WINE CULTURE BEGAN IN (MON DIEU) . . . ITALY

The French may have been the undisputed masters of the art of winemaking for the past thousand years,

but they learned it from the Italians. Indeed, startling research reported in 2013 suggests that French

wine culture began about 600 B.C. when the Etruscans, a pre-Roman civilization based in central Italy,

began shipping wine to southern France, and establishing a market for the beverage. The

entrepreneurial French soon initiated their own winemaking industry by importing Etruscan grapevines

and emulating Etruscan winemaking techniques (including mixing wine with basil, thyme, rosemary, and

other herbs). For their part, the Etruscans learned about wine sometime around 800 B.C., from the

Phoenicians (based in what is modern-day Lebanon), who themselves had learned how to grow vines

and make wine from tribes in the area that, today, is Turkey. These tribes were the first to domesticate

grapevines, more than eight thousand years ago.

The research team that made the discovery was headed by Dr. Patrick McGovern, Director of

Biomolecular Archaeology at the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology,

and the study was reported in the journal Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences.

During the research, excavations at the ancient port site of Lattara (near Montpellier) in southern

France unearthed well-preserved Etruscan amphorae, vessels used to transport wine and other goods in

the ancient Mediterranean world. Using extremely sensitive chemical analytics, the scientists revealed

that the amphorae contained the residues of wine, herbs, and pine resin (which was used to preserve

wine during long journeys). Even more amazing was the discovery of an ancient limestone platform

covered in wine residue—thought to be among the first French wine presses.

About 90 percent of French wine is based on thirty-six grapes. The wines made from

these varieties run the full gamut from dry to sweet and from still to sparkling. And in

addition to wine, of course, two of the world’s most famous grape-based spirits are

French: Armagnac and Cognac (see pages 313 and 318, respectively).

Notwithstanding the worldwide prestige of several French white wines, the French

themselves tend to drink red wine. Copious amounts of rosé are tossed down, too,

especially in summer. Indeed, more rosé is consumed (27 percent of all wine) than white

wine (16 percent of all wine).

Unlike the wines of most other European countries, French wine is known in virtually

every corner of the globe. A thirsty traveler in Fiji, Nairobi, or Taipei can easily hunt down

a bottle of Champagne, even when all other wine possibilities seem exhausted. Of course,

the quality of French wine accounts for a good measure of its appeal, but so do various

historic and geographic considerations. France was the first European country to develop

significant international trade for its wines. This was possible thanks to the proximity of

most French wine regions to large, navigable rivers. As early as the twelfth century,

Bordeaux wines were being shipped down the massive Gironde Estuary and out to sea,

headed for England and Scotland.

PDO, PGI–THE EUROPEAN UNION WINE LA WS

Each wine-producing country has its own wine laws (you’ll find them in the Appendix on Wine Laws; see

pages 923–930). But in Europe, somewhat confusingly, there are now two sets of wine laws: laws

imposed by each country and, as of 2009, laws enacted by the European Union. The latter are applicable

to all twenty-seven EU member countries, including the major wine-producing countries of France, Italy,

Spain, and Portugal.

It’s important to know that EU laws and national country laws exist in parallel and contemporaneously.

For example, French wine regions continue to be governed by that country’s Appellation d’Origine

Contrôlée (AOC) laws; Italy by the Denominazione di Origine Controllata (DOC) laws, and so on. But

there are now concomitant laws, designations, and even graphic logos that apply to wines across the

EU. The main EU designations for wine are:

•PROTECTED DESIGNATION OF ORIGIN (PDO)

•PROTECTED GEOGRAPHICAL INDICATION (PGI)

Wineries can choose to use either their national designations or the European Union

designations/logos. Thus wineries from AOC areas such as Bordeaux or Champagne can use the term

AOC or the European Union term PDO plus the PDO logo.

Similarly, French wineries that have commonly been designated as vin de pays can now, at their

discretion, use PGI instead. (T o make matters extremely confusing, some producers that use the

designation PGI invert the acronym to correspond with the local language. So in France, PGI is

sometimes written as IGP , for Indication Géographique Protégée.) But even if a vin de pays producer

chooses to stay with the term vin de pays, the PGI logo is now compulsory on the label.

The EU’s goals—consumer protection and a single, unified system that identifies quality and origin—

would appear to be sound. But for those who just mastered DOCG, DOC, AOC, DOP , and other national

designations, adding two more possibilities—PDO and PGI—doesn’t seem (at the moment anyway) to

make the picture a lot clearer.

But France has given the world more than just her wine. From the seventeenth to the

nineteenth centuries, as the New World began to be colonized, French vine cuttings—

often from revered estates and châteaux—were shipped, smuggled, or lugged in suitcases

to South Africa, the Americas, New Zealand, and Australia. For the settlers of those

territories, French vines held out the hope that one day they, too, might bring into the

world a great wine.

We’ll look at France’s most important wine regions in the order that, I believe, reflects

their importance and prestige, although Bordeaux, Champagne, and Burgundy could

arguably all be first in line.

BORDEAUX

Bordeaux—the word alone fires the mind with the anticipation of greatness. No other

wine region is more powerful, more commercially successful, or more important as a

source of profoundly complex, ageworthy wines. The challenge is to comprehend it all,

for this single region—the largest Appellation d’Origine Contrôlée in France—covers

more territory than all of the vineyard areas of Germany put together, and is three and a

half times larger than the vineyard acreage of New Zealand. In Bordeaux, some 8,650

growers and dozens of top-class estates—plus thousands more of lesser standing—

produce more than 661 million bottles of wine every year, including many of the priciest

wines in the world.

While it makes stunning, long-lived white table wines and superb white sweet wines

(notably, Sauternes), Bordeaux is primarily a red-wine region. Nearly 90 percent of the

wine made is red.

The name Bordeaux derives from au bord de l’eau, meaning “along the

waters.

” Bordeaux lies within the French region of Aquitaine, a word whose

Latin roots mean a well-watered place.

The range of red Bordeaux is astounding. At the most basic level there are scores of

utterly simple Bordeaux stacked, by the case, on the floor of any large wine shop. Wines

labeled simply Bordeaux or Bordeaux Supérieur fall into this category, and they can cost

$20 a bottle or so. At the most rarefied level, however, the famous Bordeaux we all hear

about—the First Growths and wines in their league—can be the apotheosis of refinement.

While these wines represent just a fraction of all of the Bordeaux produced, their

complexity and age-worthiness are legendary. As are their astronomical prices. Indeed, by

2013, the First Growths and wines in their orbit often cost up to $1,500 a bottle (and

sometimes more) for current vintages. This has effectively (and sadly) removed them from

the wine-drinking experiences of all but the most well-connected, high-net-worth wine

lovers. A generation ago, an upper-middle-class person—say, a university professor—

could have saved up and splurged on a First Growth once a year. Today, top Bordeaux

exist in their own realm, far outside the culture of normal wine drinking.

THE QUICK SIP ON BORDEAUX

MORE THAN PERHAPS any other wines in the world, the top Bordeaux wines have set

the standard for greatness and commercial success. They are renowned and sought

after by collectors everywhere on the globe. In addition to these iconic wines, Bordeaux

is the source of large quantities of every-night dinner wine.

BORDEAUX’S TOP WINES are known for their ability to be elegant while still

possessing concentrated, powerful flavors.

BOTH RED AND WHITE BORDEAUX are almost always blends of two or more

varieties. Blending is used to achieve complex flavors. Plus, growing multiple varieties

that ripen at different times is a practical way of spreading the agricultural risk in

Bordeaux’s sometimes difficult maritime climate.

“Terroir is a way by which man uses soil, vine, and climate to express a trait

in wine. Terroir isn’t a hierarchy for quality, but rather a mantle for the sense

of identity. This notion is a sensitive one in times of changing fashions. Wine

is diversity, and terroir is a real way to escape the monotony of daily life.

”

— JEAN-CLAUDE BERROUET,

renowned French enologist and winemaker of Château Pétrus from 1964 to

2008

THE LAND, THE GRAPES, AND THE VINEYARDS

Just about halfway between the North Pole and the equator, Bordeaux is one of the largest

fine wine regions in the world—some 290,350 acres (117,500 hectares), encompassing

sixty different appellations. (For comparison’s sake, Bordeaux is six times larger than

Napa V alley and slightly more than four times larger than Burgundy.)

The region lies along the path of three important rivers—the mighty Gironde Estuary,

plus the two large rivers that feed it, the Dordogne and the Garonne. To the immediate

west, just an hour’s drive away, is the Atlantic Ocean, and everywhere the region is

crisscrossed by small streams. All of this water has played a critical role in the wines

Bordeaux produces. Indeed, these waterways were partially responsible for the region’s

early success. As of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, barges would dock along the

wharves of the Gironde, ever ready to ferry wine to and fro between merchants and

ultimately to ships headed for England. This, at a time when most other wine regions in

France were relatively unknown beyond their own borders.

THE GRAPES OF BORDEAUX

WHITES

MUSCADELLE: A minor native grape sometimes incorporated into modestly priced blends for its light

floral character. Not related to varieties with the word muscat in their names.

SAUVIGNON BLANC: Major grape. Crisp, austere, lively. Has an herbal freshness. Usually blended with

sémillon.

SÉMILLON: Major grape. Dry and clean. Provides weight and depth and, with age, a honied character.

Usually blended with sauvignon blanc. The primary grape for Sauternes.

REDS

CABERNET FRANC: An important grape in Bordeaux, highly valued in blends even in small amounts.

Often said to contribute aromatic intensity and notes of violets and spices. Especially important in the

Right Bank communes of St.

-Émilion and Pomerol. The only one of the major Bordeaux reds to have

originated elsewhere. (Cabernet franc is native to the Basque region of Spain.)

CABERNET SAUVIGNON: The second leading red grape in terms of acreage, after merlot. At its best,

intense, deeply flavored, and complex. Provides the framework and structure behind many of the top

wines. Most of the wines of the Left Bank (the communes of Margaux, St.

-Julien, Pauillac, and St.

-

Estèphe) are based on it.

CARMENÈRE: Ancient Bordeaux variety (also known as grande vidure). The progeny of cabernet franc,

but nearly extinct in Bordeaux today.

MALBEC: Old southwestern French variety also known by its original name, côt. Planted in only tiny

amounts in Bordeaux today, used to add touches of nuance.

MERLOT : Bordeaux’s major grape in terms of production, constituting more than 60 percent of all

planted acres. Along with cabernet sauvignon, one of the two main grapes in most blends. At its best,

round and supple. Sometimes characterized as the flesh on cabernet sauvignon’s bones.

PETIT VERDOT : A minor grape in terms of production, but even small amounts are highly valued in

blends. Contributes vivid color, flavor intensity, and tannin.

Most important, the rivers and adjacent sea (warmed by the Gulf Stream) act to temper

the region’s climate, thereby providing the vineyards with a milder and more stable

environment than would otherwise be the case. In addition, Bordeaux is edged on the

south and west by Les Landes—2.5 million acres (1,012,000 hectares) of manmade pine

forests that also help to shield the region from extreme weather. Were it not for the

maritime climate and the presence of these forests, Bordeaux’s vineyards would be at even

greater risk of damage by storms, severe cold snaps, and potentially devastating frosts.

Many of the vineyards of Bordeaux—and especially of the Médoc, including Margaux,

Pauillac, St.

-Émilion, and St.

-Estèphe—appear quite flat. And they are, if one compares

them to, say, the steeply sloped vineyards of the northern Rhône, those of northern

Portugal, or most precipitous of all, the vineyards of Germany’s Mosel region. But

although it’s hard to see with the naked eye, Bordeaux does have gently rolling hills that

create variations in topography, orientation to the sun, soil, and drainage patterns.

CLARET

The British often call red Bordeaux claret. The word comes from the French clairet, which originally

referred to a light red wine (to distinguish it from Port). Today, of course, the top red Bordeaux are

anything but light in color or in body.

Drainage is key, for the grape varieties that grow in Bordeaux are very sensitive to too

much water, and water is everywhere around them. Thus, the best vineyards tend to be on

very well-drained soils of gravel and stone, and sometimes (especially in St.

-Émilion)

limestone. In the Médoc, these deep gravel beds are frequently near the Gironde Estuary.

An old Bordeaux saying has it that the best vineyards “can see the river,

” and not

surprisingly, if you stand in the middle of the vines at Château Latour, at Château Pichon-

Longueville Comtesse de Lalande, or at many of the other top estates, you can indeed

watch the boats moving up and down the Gironde.

If the gods had been generous, every bit of Bordeaux would have been gravel and

stone. Unfortunately they were not, and it is not. Many Bordeaux soils are based primarily

on clay, which doesn’t drain water as well. As a result, clay stays cool in the spring,

delaying the vines’ budbreak and slowing the start of ripening. If the grapes are to ripen

fully and if the tannin is to be physiologically mature, the vines will need to make up for

this slow start by benefiting from lots of warm weather throughout the growing season.

Because of its slightly less tannic structure to begin with, and because it tends to ripen

early, merlot is often thought to have a better chance of doing this than cabernet

sauvignon. As result, merlot is often planted in areas with a high percentage of clay. Of

course, when clay is more abundant, being located on a good slope with significant

drainage becomes critical.

In a moment, I’ll address the specific regions within Bordeaux, but first, here’s an

overview of the grapes.

By law, red Bordeaux wines must be made from one or more of six red grapes: merlot,

cabernet sauvignon, cabernet franc, petit verdot, carmenère, and malbec. Merlot is by far

the most widely planted of these, constituting more than 60 percent of all the vineyard

land planted with red grapes. In Bordeaux, merlot is often described as fleshy,

mouthfilling, and supple. By comparison, cabernet sauvignon (which accounts for just

over 20 percent of vineyard plantings) is more angular and gives many of the great red

Bordeaux their framework, or structure. Structure comes principally from tannin, and both

cabernet sauvignon and merlot have considerable amounts. Tannin also acts as a

preservative in wine, which is why so many top Bordeaux can be aged for such long

periods of time.

France takes her marriages seriously. Here, Atlantic oysters, a traditional partner for exuberant white Bordeaux.

THE MOST IMPORTANT BORDEAUX WINES

LEADING APPELLATIONS

BARSAC white (dry and sweet)

GRAVES white and red

MARGAUX red

PAUILLAC red

PESSAC-LÉOGNAN white and red

POMEROL red

ST .

-ÉMILION red

ST .

-ESTÈPHE red

ST .

-JULIEN red

SAUTERNES white (dry and sweet)

APPELLATIONS OF NOTE

CANON-FRONSAC red

CÔTES DE BORDEAUX red

CÔTES DE BOURG red

CÔTES DE CASTILLON red

CÔTES DE FRANCS red

ENTRE-DEUX-MERS white

FRONSAC red

LISTRAC red

MOULIS red

PREMIÈRES CÔTES DE BLAYE red

Together, merlot and cabernet sauvignon make up more than 80 percent of all the

vineyard land devoted to red grapes in Bordeaux. Cabernet franc (just over 10 percent of

vineyard plantings) is Bordeaux’s third most important variety, and all of the other reds

(carmenère, malbec, petit verdot) are planted only in tiny amounts, and together constitute

no more than 2 percent of red grapes grown.

As far as genetics, all of Bordeaux’s red varieties appear to have originated in the

southwestern quadrant of France, except cabernet franc, which is of Spanish Basque origin

and was later brought to France. Cabernet franc is the father of merlot, cabernet

sauvignon, and carmenère (each grape had a different mother), while malbec is a cross of

prunelard and magdeleine noire des Charentes. For its part, petit verdot’s parents are not

known. For more on these varieties, see their descriptions in Getting to Know the Grapes

(page 53).

For white Bordeaux wines, seven grapes are permitted: the main three—sémillon,

sauvignon blanc, and muscadelle—plus ugni blanc, colombard, merlot blanc, and

sauvignon gris, although these final four exist only in extremely tiny amounts and tend to

be used only in the least expensive wines. Of the important three white grapes, sémillon,

considered the soul of white Bordeaux, originated there and is the most widely planted.

With age, sémillon takes on a wonderful honey flavor and a creamy, almost lanolinlike

texture. Indeed, it is the high percentage of sémillon that allows legendary Bordeaux

whites, such as Château Haut-Brion Blanc and Château La Mission Haut-Brion Blanc, to

age so gracefully and deliciously.

Then there’s sauvignon blanc, which, although widely assumed to have first appeared

in Bordeaux, actually originated in the Loire V alley. Only one of its parents—savagnin—

is known. Muscadelle appears to have originated somewhere in southwestern France,

possibly Bordeaux, and again only one parent is known—gouais blanc (interestingly,

gouais blanc is also chardonnay’s mother). Muscadelle is not related to any of the varieties

with muscat in their names.

The fact that three red and three white grape varieties are widely used in Bordeaux (and

thirteen are actually grown and permitted) makes the practice and philosophy of

winemaking extremely different from that in Burgundy, Bordeaux’s northeastern neighbor,

where there is just one leading red and one white. For the Bordelais winemaker, blending

is critical. And while thirteen permissible grape varieties may seem like a lot, that number

is far fewer than in the past. As of the 1780s, for example, thirty-four red varieties and

twenty-nine white varieties could still be found in parts of St.

-Émilion and Pomerol.

Château Palmer , along with Château Margaux, makes one of the silkiest, most luscious wines in Margaux. The

magnificent estate, built in 1748, was bought by Englishman General Charles Palmer in 1814 for about $17,000 (15,000

Euros).

CHÂTEAU, CUVERIE, AND CHAI

Three of the most important words in Bordeaux are château, cuv-erie, and chai. Though we think of a

château as a palatial estate, anything can be a château in Bordeaux—from a farmhouse to a garage. The

word simply refers to a building attached to vineyards, with winemaking and storage facilities on the

property. Within the château is the cuverie (coo-ver-EE), the building where the wine will be made, and

the chai (pronounced shay), the cellar where it will be stored and aged.

AN OVERVIEW OF BORDEAUX’S MAJOR REGIONS

Bordeaux is divided into multiple subregions. I’ve listed here the most important ones;

you’ll find sections on each of these later in this chapter. Keep in mind, however, that

Bordeaux has many less-well-known subregions from which come numerous delicious

wines that represent good value. These include Listrac and Moulis, Entre-Deux-Mers,

Fronsac and Canon-Fronsac, and the outlying districts known collectively as the Côtes.

We’ll look at each of these as well, although in less detail.

Before we begin, there are two terms that are important to know: Left Bank and Right

Bank. To understand them, imagine you are standing in the city of Bordeaux, at the

southern end of the Gironde Estuary. Looking northwest (toward where the Gironde

empties into the Atlantic Ocean), all of the vineyards left (or west) of the Gironde Estuary

and the Garonne River constitute the so-called Left Bank. All of the vineyards to the right

of the Gironde Estuary and the Dordogne River make up the Right Bank. (In between

these lies Entre-Deux-Mers—literally “between two seas.

”)

Starting on the Left Bank of the Gironde Estuary and then moving southward in a big U

to end on the Right Bank, the most important subregions are:

MÉDOC AND HAUT-MÉDOC: Together referred to as the Médoc. Inside the Haut-Médoc

(literally, the upper Médoc) are six communes, or smaller appellations. Four are famous.

Starting from the north and going south to the city of Bordeaux, they are: St.

-Estèphe,

Pauillac, St.

-Julien, and Margaux.

GRA VES: Inside Graves is one famous smaller appellation, Pessac-Léognan.

SAUTERNES AND BARSAC

ST.

-ÉMILION

POMEROL

In the past, the wines from Bordeaux’s different regional appellations manifested

significant differences in flavor and texture. The wines of Pauillac, for example, shared

characteristics of soil and climate that made them taste quite different from Pomerol

wines. As is true in most places today, however, these regional distinctions have been

considerably blurred by modern winemaking techniques that have become nearly global in

reach.

In the impressive cellars of Haut-Brion, one of the top Bordeaux châteaux, barrels are never stacked but rather laid out

like showpieces.

THE MULTIPLE CLASSIFICATIONS

Fasten your seat belt. Bordeaux is an amalgam of regional classifications that can seem

insanely complicated. To begin with, the classifications are different from one region to

the next, even though the terms used may be the same or similar. Thus, the words Grand

Cru Classé mean one thing in St.

-Émilion, something slightly different in Graves, and

nothing at all a few miles away in Pomerol.

What do the classifications classify? It might seem like an odd question, but it’s

important to know that in Bordeaux, the main classifications (those that apply in the

Médoc and in Graves) are based on the estate, not on the land (as is true in Burgundy).

Thus, when a famous grand château in either of these regions buys a neighboring lesser

château, the lesser château could be elevated to the higher rank. This is quite at odds with

the philosophy that terroir makes the wine, but it is nonetheless the way the Médoc and

Graves classifications are legally structured.

Finally, before we tunnel down into the specifics of the rankings, it’s important to know

that the classifications are highly politically charged. The entire 2006 classification of St.

-

Émilion, for example, was annulled in a tumult of legal action following the demotion of

some châteaux and the ascendancy of others. This is no surprise, for more than pride is at

stake. When a château’s ranking changes, the value of the property changes

astronomically, with a higher rank resulting in hundreds of millions of euros in added

value for the château owner. For example, in 2012, a Grand Cru property elevated one step

up to Premier Grand Cru Classé B status was immediately worth nearly ten times what it

had been just the day before.

As for the classifications and rankings themselves, the classification of the Médoc was

the first and remains the most famous classification. It occurred in 1855 and is called,

logically enough, the 1855 Classification (see The Immutable 1855 Classification, page

151). It ranked sixty top châteaux in the Médoc, plus one, Château Haut-Brion, in Pessac-

Léognan, in Graves. The châteaux were ranked into five categories, from Premier Cru, or

First Growth (the best) down to Cinquième Cru, or Fifth Growth. (In Bordeaux, the

French word cru, translated as “growth,

” is used to indicate a wine estate, vineyard, or

château. Thus a Premier Cru, or First Growth, is a wine estate of the top rank. The word is

the past participle of the French verb croître, meaning “to grow.

”)

CLASSIFICATIONS: THE CHEAT SHEET

Here’s a quick take on the confusing world of Bordeaux classifications. Each area has

its own system as well as its own terminology. Unfortunately, wine labels don’t always

indicate a wine’s classification.

THE MÉDOC: In 1855, sixty châteaux in the Médoc and one château in Pessac-

Léognan, in Graves, were classified from Premiers Crus (First Growths), down to

Cinquièmes Crus (Fifth Growths).

SAUTERNES AND BARSAC: Also classified in 1855. One château was designated as

Premier Cru Supérieur Classé (Château d’Yquem), the next best as Premiers Crus

Classés, followed by Deuxièmes Crus Classés.

GRAVES: In 1953, and revised in 1959, the top châteaux in Graves were not ranked

but all given the same title: Grands Crus Classés for their red wine, white wine, or both.

ST .

-ÉMILION: In 1954, the châteaux of St.

-Émilion were classified, with the provision

that the classification be revised every ten years. The top level is Premiers Grands Crus

Classés, divided between an A level (the very best) and a B level. Below these two

come the Grands Crus Classés. As a result of various amendments and annulments

over the decades, the last revision was in 2012.

POMEROL: Pomerol, as well as outlying areas such as Fronsac and Canon-Fronsac

were never classified.

The châteaux of Sauternes and Barsac were also part of the 1855 Classification,

although they were categorized differently. Here, the best château (there was only one—

Château d’Y quem) was called Premier Cru Supérieur Classé, First Great Classified

Growth. The second-best châteaux were called First Growths and the third-best, Second

Growths.

(If you’re on the verge of skipping the next couple of paragraphs, I understand.)

The wines of Graves, including Haut-Brion, were classified in 1953 and revised in

1959. (Because it was already classified as part of the Médoc’s 1855 Classification, Haut-

Brion today boasts two different classifications.) In both the original and revised

classifications, no hierarchical order was established. The sixteen châteaux recognized for

their red wines, white wines, or both were simply given the legal right to call themselves

Grand Cru Classé, Great Classified Growth.

Château Pétrus, unranked in the 1855 Classification because it was a Pomerol, is today one of the world’ s most

expensive wines.

THE IMMUTABLE 1855 CLASSIFICATION AND THE FIRST

GROWTHS

The legendary treatise known as the 1855 Classification established four First Growths—the elegant

Château Margaux and Château Lafite-Rothschild, the powerful Château Latour, and the earthy, sensual

Château Haut-Brion. (As we’ll see, Château Mouton-Rothschild was added later.) Here’s how it

happened: In 1855, Napoléon III asked Bordeaux’s top château owners to rate their wines from best to

worst for the Paris Universal Exhibition, a fair. One imagines that the château owners cringed. The

prospect of rating the wines, one against the other, was nightmarish. The château owners stalled.

Eventually, the Bordeaux Chamber of Commerce was invested with the job. There was no fretful

hand-wringing about terroir. The Chamber members ranked the châteaux based on one stark

quantitative measure: how much the wine sold for. The wines that sold for the most were called Premiers

Crus, or First Growths. The Deuxièmes Crus, Second Growths, sold for a little less. The system

continued down to Fifth Growths. In all, sixty-one châteaux were classified. The hundreds of châteaux

whose wines cost less than the Fifth Growths were apparently not worth bothering about and were not

classified at all.

There was one other provision: The classification—clearly immutable as far as its authors were

concerned—was never to be revised.

As you would expect, since that time, entire books have been written on the 1855 Classification and

the validity (or lack thereof) of its now-controversial rankings. For their part, château owners have, for

decades, reasoned that the market will ultimately establish value. And that’s what has happened. In

2009, for example, the electronic wine exchange company Liv-ex reclassified the top châteaux using the

same parameter—price—that was used in 1855. In the latest Liv-ex list (2011), Château Palmer, ranked

twenty-eighth in 1855 (a Third Growth) has moved into seventh position (it would be a Second Growth

today). Château Duhart-Milon, ranked thirty-eighth in 1855 (a Fourth Growth), would now be number

eleven (it would also be a Second Growth today). And, seemingly against all odds, Château Lynch-

Bages, ranked fiftieth in 1855 (a Fourth Growth), would now be number twelve (making it, too, a Second

Growth today). In addition to the three châteaux just mentioned, a slew of others have climbed up to a

higher rank, including Clerc-Milon, Pontet-Canet, Beychevelle, Grand-Puy-Lacoste, d’Armailhac, Cos

d’Estournel, and Ducru-Beaucaillou.

An important footnote: One man did challenge, and ultimately change, the classification of his

château: Baron Philippe de Rothschild. Obstinate and relentless, he petitioned the government for twenty

years to upgrade Mouton-Rothschild from a Second Growth to a First. His persistence paid off in 1973;

Château Mouton-Rothschild was moved up to First Growth rank. The classification was thereby changed

for the first and last time.

In the end, rankings and ratings are intellectually fascinating, but they remain temporal things. If the

1855 Classification has taught us anything, it’s that wines can soar above (and below) their historic

reputations. Rankings, in other words, can never fully replace the best evaluation method of all—tasting.

FUTURES

The most expensive red Bordeaux wines are commonly sold as futures. Under this system, referred to in

France as selling en primeur, the châteaux set (much anticipated) opening prices for the wines produced

each year. During the spring after the harvest, these wines go on sale for the opening amounts. The wine

itself will not be delivered for another two or more years, when it is done aging and is ready to be

released for the first time. For their part, châteaux get cash flow out of the deal, and customers—usually

negociants, importers, and ultimately retailers, who may then in turn sell futures to their customers—

secure wines they might otherwise not, at what is usually (but not always) a better price than if they’d

waited for the wine’s release. Buying futures is, in effect, buying on speculation. In a global, fast-paced,

wine-as-profitable-investment marketplace, some Bordeaux may be traded multiple times through

middlemen before the wine even leaves the château. The system, well entrenched in Bordeaux for

decades, exists virtually no place else. In 2012, Château Latour stunned the world by being the first top

château to discontinue the practice of selling futures, saying it preferred to sell the wine directly to the

consumer and only when it was deemed ready to actually drink.

St.

-Émilion was first classified in 1954, with the provision that the classification be

revised every ten years (this is not true for the Médoc or Graves classifications, which, by

current law, are never revised). In St.

-Émilion, the best wines were termed Premier Grand

Cru Classé, First Great Classified Growth. The second-best were named Grand Cru

Classé, Great Classified Growth. Below that came Grand Cru, Great Growth. The top

level, Premier Grand Cru Classé, was further divided into an “A” group and a “B” group.

As of 2012, and in the midst of ongoing legal challenges, four wines are in the “A” league:

Château Angélus, Château Ausone, Château Pavie, and Château Cheval Blanc. All other

Premiers Grands Crus Classés are designated “B,

” although these are still, of course,

considered above the Grands Crus Classés. The St.

-Émilion classification in particular has

experienced considerable turmoil, including many legal battles that have resulted from

demotions made when the original rankings have been revised. In the midst of so many

classifications, the vineyards of Pomerol were, sanely enough, never ranked. For a

complete list of the Bordeaux châteaux classified in 1855, see the Appendix, pages 965–

967.

Finally, it’s interesting and a little startling to realize that, even in those regions with

classifications, most of the châteaux within those regions were never classified. Which

brings us to the Cru Bourgeois.

In the Médoc, there’s a collective name for the châteaux (now numbering 250 estates)

that were not classified. They are called the Crus Bourgeois du Médoc, and since 2010, a

new list of them is published each year by the Alliance des Crus Bourgeois du Médoc. For

the most part, Cru Bourgeois are extremely well priced. Today, a well-regarded Cru

Bourgeois, for example, costs the price of a First Growth, the latter, of course, being

stratospherically priced.

The vineyards of Château Mouton Rothschild. In 1855, the estate was classified as a Second Growth. But in 1973, thanks

to the relentless lobbying by Baron Philippe de Rothschild, the rankings were changed for the first and last time. Mouton

was elevated to First Growth status.

THE MÉDOC

The largest of the famous regions of Bordeaux, the Médoc starts at the city of Bordeaux (a

UNESCO World Heritage Site) and stretches northward like a snake for fifty miles along

the left bank of the Gironde Estuary. The Médoc is made up of two smaller appellations.

One is, confusingly, also called the Médoc (the northern third of low-lying land, near

where the Gironde empties into the Atlantic), and the other is called the Haut-Médoc

(literally the upper Médoc; the part closest to the city of Bordeaux and farthest away from

the Atlantic). It is in the Haut-Médoc, all at the river’s gravelly edge, that you find the

famous communes (villages) of Margaux, St.

-Julien, Pauillac, and St.

-Estèphe. Virtually

all the châteaux rated in the 1855 Classification are scattered throughout these four

communes. Farther inland are the Haut-Médoc’s two less important communes, Listrac

and Moulis. Here, away from the river, the heavier, less-well-drained soils often result in

less refined wines.

Almost all the Médoc’s wines are red. The dominant grape is cabernet sauvignon

(forming up to 70 percent of all blends), followed by merlot. Both do well in the Médoc’s

stony soil, which, here and there, is interspersed with clay.

Amazingly, the flat plateaus of the Médoc were originally marshlands—low-lying

semi-swamps badly suited to making any wine at all, never mind great wine. In the

seventeenth century, however, the Bordeaux nobility brought in Dutch engineers to cut

huge drains in the land, effectively lowering the water table and creating riverside gravel

banks. With the marshes drained, Bordeaux’s emerging class of wealthy lawyers and

merchants seized the opportunity to become significant landowners. Huge parcels of land

along the banks of the Gironde were purchased, grand estates were built, and a vine-

growing revolution ensued. During the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, many

of the most prestigious châteaux and vineyards were established, including Lafite-

Rothschild, Latour, and Mouton-Rothschild.

The ancient cobblestoned streets of St.

-Émilion. The medieval village is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

MARGAUX

The southernmost and largest commune of the Médoc, Margaux (mar-GO) has more

classified estates than St.

-Estèphe, Pauillac, or St.

-Julien. The aristocratic Château

Margaux is here, of course, plus twenty other well-known properties.

The soil in Margaux is among the lightest and most gravelly in the Médoc, giving the

best wines in the best years a sort of soaring elegance and refinement, plus wonderful,

generous aromas. Margaux are often described as being like an iron fist in a velvet glove.

It is this combination of power with delicacy that has given these wines their vaunted

reputation.

The two most renowned Margaux are the First Growth Château Margaux, and the Third

Growth Château Palmer. In top years these wines can be superbly elegant, with long, silky,

hedonistic flavors. Other exceptional Margaux to consider: Château Rauzan-Ségla,

Château Lascombes, Château Kirwan, and Château Giscours.

ST .

-JULIEN

Just north of the largest commune, Margaux, is the smallest, St.

-Julien (SAN ZHU-lee-

ahn). It’s easy to drive right through it and not realize you’ve been there. Of all the

communes, St.

-Julien has the highest percentage of classified growths—about 95 percent

of the wines here are Second, Third, or Fourth Growths, although there are no Firsts. If

you were to drink only the wines from this commune for the rest of your life, you could be

very happy.

Among St.

-Julien’s most well-known wines are the three Léovilles (Léo is from the

Latin leon, meaning “lion”): Léoville-Barton, Léoville-Las Cases, and Léoville-Poyferré.

All are classified as Second Growths and all are structured and intense, although in many

years, Léoville-Las Cases and Léoville-Poyferré in particular can broach First Growth

status.

Like those of Margaux, the leading wines of St.

-Julien are known for their precision

and refinement. Others not to miss: Château Ducru-Beaucaillou, Château Gruaud-Larose,

Château Branaire-Ducru, Château Langoa-Barton, and Château Clerc-Milon.

PAUILLAC

This word is music to the ears of Bordeaux lovers. Pauillac (POY -yack), just north of St.

-

Julien, is where much of the excitement in Bordeaux is centered. Three of the five First

Growths are born in this soil: Château Lafite-Rothschild, Château Mouton-Rothschild, and

Château Latour. In all, Pauillac has eighteen of the sixty-one classified wines, including

many of the best.

Pauillac wines can lean several ways. Some have a sort of full-bodied luxuriousness;

others, a bold structure; still others, a subtle, precise refinement. The best are always

complex, with rich black currant and cranberry flavors, often overlaid with cedary and

graphite notes. The range of styles within this commune is due to variable terroir and

marked differences among the châteaux in the composition of their blends. In the north,

Lafite-Rothschild sits on bits of limestone scattered through the gravel (its wine exudes

elegance). Farther south, Pichon-Longueville Comtesse de Lalande (often called simply

Pichon-Lalande) is situated on gravel and clay (its wine is often more fleshy).

IN PRAISE OF DELAYED GRATIFICATION

No matter how delicious a young top Bordeaux is, it will almost always be more thrilling

when it’s older, after it’s had a chance to evolve and reveal other facets and nuances of

its personality. How much older? No one can say for sure. There is never one magic

moment when a wine is ready. Most Bordeaux—most structured red wines—evolve and

soften progressively. If they are very good, they usually go from being slightly tight to

being supple and having a wider range of more complex flavors. But where a wine is

along this spectrum at any point in time is a matter of conjecture. (And no matter where

it stands on this spectrum, it will have its positive points.) Generally, the more structured

the wine when young (i.e., the more tannin it has), the more slowly it will evolve. Since

most top Bordeaux are very structured wines, they usually take at least eight or ten

years of aging before beginning to soften and show more complex nuances. For a truly

great Bordeaux, however, a good rule of thumb is to wait a decade before you think

about opening it. Then add on another year (or however much you can bear) of delayed

gratification time.

If money is no object and one has the sort of access usually reserved for those in the

Fortune 100, then drinking one of the Pauillac First Growths is certainly the best

introduction possible to Pauillac flavors. But the cost of the Pauillac First Growths—in

2013, about $1,500 a bottle or more for a current vintage—effectively removes these

wines from many people’s “must-try” list. There are, luckily, many other very good

Pauillacs, including: Château Pichon-Longueville Comtesse de Lalande, Château Pichon-

Longueville Baron, Château Lynch-Bages, Château Duhart-Milon, Château Pontet-Canet,

Château Beychevelle, and Château Clerc-Milon.

ST .

-ESTÈPHE

Stacked on top of Pauillac is the northernmost Médoc commune of St.

-Estèphe (SAN es-

TEFF), known for wines that, at least by Bordeaux standards, have the staunchness of an

army general and a sense of ruggedness from the commune’s heavier soil, closer to the

mouth of the Gironde Estuary. (Many wines, as a result, are simply good, hearty Cru

Bourgeois.) Only a few of the very top wines—notably Cos d’Estournel (which is so close

to the border with Pauillac, you could hit a golf ball into the courtyard of Château Lafite-

Rothschild)—have captivating intensity and exquisite concentration and profundity of

flavor. Cos (the s is pronounced; the word is an old Gascon term for “hill”) makes a

blatantly sensuous wine (about 65 percent merlot), with waves of chocolaty, pipe-tobacco-

like, earthy, black currant fruit flavors that, when the wine is young, often seem to be

bursting at the seams. The Asian-inspired nineteenth-century château itself, with its show-

stopping copper pagoda roof and massive carved door, is one of the most intriguing in

Bordeaux. Other top St.

-Estèphes to seek out: Château Calon-Ségur and Château

Montrose.

GRA VES

South of the city of Bordeaux, Graves (GRAHV) extends like a sleeve dangling off the

arm of the Médoc. It is named for its famous gravelly soil, the gift of Ice Age glaciers. The

glaciers also deposited tiny white quartz pebbles easily found in all the best vineyards.

Château Haut-Brion, the only estate outside the Médoc (it’ s in Graves) to be ranked a First Growth in the 1855

Classification. The wine has a distinct, complex earthiness and exquisite texture.

Graves holds the distinction of being the only part of Bordeaux where both red and

white wines are made by most châteaux. The vineyards, some of the most ancient in the

region, were the first to be known internationally. Casks of wine from the region were

shipped to England as early as the twelfth century, and by the sixteenth century several

important estates were already established, including Graves’s most famous château,

Haut-Brion. Spelled “Ho Bryan” at the time, the wine it produced was praised by the

seventeenth-century British. A century later, Thomas Jefferson, third president of the

United States, wrote about how delicious “Obrion” was and purchased six cases to be sent

from the château in Graves to Virginia.

So stunning was Château Haut-Brion that it was the sole Graves wine to be included in

the 1855 Classification. Powerful yet haunt-ingly supple, Haut-Brion has an almost

primordial earthy character. The other top wines of Graves were first classified in 1953

and the classification was revised in 1959.

Within Graves is the appellation Pessac-Léognan. Many of the best red and white

Graves come from this area of ten tiny communes, grouped together by the French

government in 1987.

Although many wine drinkers think of dry white wines when they think of Graves,

slightly more red wine than white comes from here, and in fact, about a dozen of the

region’s most stunning wines, all of which, incidentally, carry the Pessac-Léognan

appellation, are red. Cabernet sauvignon, merlot, and cabernet franc are all used

extensively. Château Haut-Brion has by far the most merlot (often as much as 45 percent)

and the most cabernet franc (sometimes up to 20 percent) of any of the First Growths.

In addition to the voluptuous Château Haut-Brion, Château La Mission-Haut Brion,

Château Domaine de Chevalier, Château Pape-Clément, and Château Haut-Bailly all make

outstanding red wines, with rich, earthy, chocolaty, plummy, cherry, spicy flavors and,

sometimes, a very appealing earthy/animal quality.

Classically, all white Graves are blends of sémillon and sauvignon blanc. From

sémillon comes richness, body, depth, and the ability to age with honeyed overtones. From

sauvignon comes sprightly acidity and a fresh snap of flavor. Indeed, simple white Graves

has undergone an enormous revolution in quality since the late 1980s, and the wines are

more concentrated as a result.

But within Graves, a step even farther up are the top white Pessac-Léognan wines.

These range from very good wines, such as Château Carbonnieux, with its minerally

vibrancy and satiny mouthfilling texture, to outstanding. (White Pessac-Léognan wines

are considered the classic companions for the icy cold, briny oysters caught off

Bordeaux’s Atlantic coast.) Among the most outstanding, the whites of Château La

Mission Haut-Brion, Château Haut-Brion, and Domaine de Chevalier, for example, are

mind-boggling in their intensity and complexity, and with age, take on ravishing flavors

that are unlike any other white wines in France, indeed, unlike any other white wines in

the world.

SAUTERNES AND BARSAC

Quite a bit south of Graves, along the Garonne River, are Bordeaux’s five sweet-wine-

producing communes, the two most important of which are Sauternes and Barsac (the

other three are Bommes, Fargues, and Preignac). Sauternes and Barsac are not simply two

unique, small places within Bordeaux; they are among the few regions in the world

devoted to sweet wines. Sauternes, the more famous of the two, is about four times larger

than tiny Barsac, but the wines from each can be extraordinary. At their best, these are

wines with an apricotish opulence that detonates in your mouth and then spreads over your

taste buds like liquefied honey. The British wine expert Hugh Johnson has described them

best. Of one Sauternes, he wrote,

“It was glorious in its youth; a creamy, stinging, orange-

scented, head-filling quintessence of pourriture noble. It is still awesome: now deep gold

and smelling of crème brûlée, but still racily potent and endlessly sweet.

”

Needless to say, it takes merely a sip of a great Sauternes or Barsac to create a convert.

The great examples are wonderful not because of their sweetness, however, but because of

their extraordinary balance. The best are luscious without being cloying, richly honeyed

without tasting like candy. To achieve this, the wines must have just the right acidity and

alcohol and must be complex.

How is this done? Sauternes and Barsac are made mostly from sémillon and, to a lesser

extent, sauvignon blanc grapes left on the vine well into the fall, whereupon they usually

become infected with the benevolent fungus Botrytis cinerea, also known as pourriture

noble or noble rot. Sémillon, the leading grape in the area, is especially susceptible to the

fungus because of its large bunches of thin-skinned grapes with a high sugar content.

Graves is the only region of Bordeaux where almost every château produces

both a red and a white wine.

Although it seems unlikely that grapes left to decay into furry, moldy raisins will

become magnificent wine, they can. In Sauternes and Barsac the process occurs naturally,

though erratically, by virtue of the region’s singular climate. For the botrytis fungus to

take hold on healthy, ripe grapes, the region must have just the right amount of humidity

and warmth (too little or too much can produce problems). Sauternes and Barsac, the

farthest south of all the important regions of Bordeaux, are ideally situated. Here, the

Ciron River meets the Garonne River, creating gentle morning mists. If all goes well,

nearby forests will help to hold the moisture in the air. When the day warms up and grows

drier, a perfect stage is set for botrytis to appear.

As the beneficial mold punctures the grapes’ skins in search of water to germinate its

spores, the water begins to evaporate and the grapes dehydrate. Inside the shriveled

berries, the sugar in the juice becomes progressively more concentrated. The botrytis also

alters the structure of the grapes’ acids, but the amount of acidity in the wine is not

diminished.

Beyond a technical approach. Caroline Frey, winemaker of Chateau La Lagune.

Château d’Y quem, that ranked a Premier Cru Supérieur Classe in the 1855 Classification, is the only estate to be given

this super status. D’Y quem makes what is arguably the best known sweet wine—Château d’Y quem Sauternes.

The process begins in late September, but the rate at which botrytis takes hold is

unpredictable. In great years, the berries will begin to desiccate, forming a tiny amount of

liquorous sweet juice by late October. In other years, the process may be painfully slower.

Throughout, the château owner is sitting on pins and needles. First, he or she hopes for a

good warm growing season so that as fall approaches, the grape bunches are healthy and

ripe. Next, he prays for just the right balance of moisture, dryness, and warmth so that the

bunches will become botrytized as evenly and uniformly as possible. But the most nerve-

wracking part is the race against winter. Day by day as winter approaches, the risk of

losing the crop increases. One cold snap, one heavy rain, one winter storm could knock

the fragile berries off the vine, swell them with water, or freeze them before the botrytis

has fully taken hold. In each case the crop could be ruined, and the château could

conceivably be left with nothing. (About twice a decade, the weather is so borderline that

Château d’Y quem [pronounced dee-KEM]—of all the châteaux specializing in sweet

wine, the one ranked the highest in the 1855 Classification—chooses not to make any

sweet wine at all.)

As the botrytis spreads through the vineyard, the château owner is keenly aware of its

growth pattern. Botrytis that takes hold sporadically means a difficult, laborious harvest,

for only perfectly rotted berries with concentrated juice can be picked and pressed. Grapes

only partially infected by the mold can give diluted juice or juice with funky off-flavors.

Unfortunately, the fragile and erratic botrytis rarely reaches readiness at one moment

throughout an entire vineyard. To harvest each grape at perfect “rottenness,

” therefore,

pickers must go into the vineyards four to ten times over the course of several weeks in

October and November, sometimes picking whole clusters, but sometimes picking

individual botrytized grapes out of the clusters. The cost of such painstaking repetition is

considerable. In the end, for the greatest of estates, like Château d’Y quem, the grapes

picked from one vine may ultimately yield just one glass of wine.

The individually handpicked grapes and whole bunches are brought into the cellar.

There, they are pressed with great difficulty since the grapes are so dehydrated, and the

must is transferred into oak barrels, where it will ferment. Because of the concentration of

sugar in the must, fermentation is difficult and takes a long time—up to a year (by

comparison, a dry white wine generally ferments in two weeks to one month).

During fermentation, yeasts convert the sugar in the must into alcohol (see How Wine

Is Made, page 37). As you know, a dry wine is dry because the yeasts convert all but the

merest trace of sugar into alcohol. With Sauternes and Barsac, the yeasts begin to convert

the sugar as usual. At a certain point, however, the concentration of alcohol is so great, it

kills the yeasts. Fermentation stops, even though there is unconverted natural grape sugar

left in the must. What remains, in other words, is a wine with leftover, or residual, sugar—

a naturally sweet wine. Sauternes and Barsac usually have 10 to 15 percent residual sugar.

EATING SAUTERNES

Sauternes is one of the most magical things you can drink—and (as it turns out) eat. Now, you may have

yet to come across dark chocolate–covered, Sauternes-soaked raisins, and indeed there are only a

scant few places (both in Paris) where you can get these little nubbins of hedonism. But get them you

must. They will look innocent enough. But the minute you take a tiny bite and the mind-blowing flavor of

Sauternes seeps into the luscious dark chocolate, well, this is when (as with everyone else who

experiences them) your eyes will go wide and you momentarily won’t know what to do with yourself. I

have been told that Parisians think it’s quite romantic to spend rainy mornings in bed, eating dark

chocolate–covered Sauternes raisins with a loved one. You will have to test this for yourself.

Only a few confiserie (candy shops) in France sell chocolate-covered Sauternes, requiring that you

keep a close lookout for the delicious nuggets when you are in that country. For decades, the best of

these (and a temple of gastronomy for anyone with a sweet tooth) was L’Etoile d’Or, in Paris’s 9th

Arrondissement. (Alas, the historic shop closed in 2014 after a fire.) T oday, luckily, a French shop called

Oulala (sweet.oulala@gmail.com), sells them by mail order. Oulala indeed.

These are not feeble wines. The sensory impact of a wine with 14 percent alcohol and

10 to 15 percent residual sugar is formidable. Plus, another factor comes into play: the

botrytis itself. When the grapes being pressed have been perfectly infected, the mold, as

well as the alcohol, can help kill the yeasts. As a result, the fermenting must may reach

only 13 percent alcohol before the mold and alcohol working in tandem destroy the yeasts

and cause fermentation to stop. At 13 percent alcohol, a sweet wine tastes more refined,

elegant, and in balance than it does at a higher level of alcohol. Thus, with Sauternes and

Barsac the finesse and complexity of the wines is directly related to how thoroughly and

uniformly the botrytis takes hold in the vineyard.

Can you taste botrytis in the wine? An experienced taster can. The mold is not washed

off or in any other way removed from the grapes and bunches, and it does contribute to the

flavor. That flavor, however, is not like something that was left too long in the back of the

refrigerator. Botrytis adds an extra dimension, sometimes described as being faintly like

sweet corn or mushrooms, to the overall complexity of the wines.

Botrytized sémillon grapes about to be harvested at Château Lafaurie-Peyraguey.

BON APERITIF

The word aperitif comes from the Latin aperire, meaning to open, and indeed, a variety of fresh, slightly

bitter drinks have traditionally been used to open both meals and appetites. More than mere cocktail-

hour stimulants, however, wine aperitifs are also thought to be healthful because many contain minute

amounts of quinine, an ingredient thought to have beneficial anti-inflammatory properties and one that

was originally added to aperitifs to protect French soldiers from malaria (for most of history, French

soldiers have been given—even paid with—considerable amounts of wine).

Currently, one of the bestselling French aperitifs in the United States (thank you, James Bond) is Lillet,

first created in 1872, when two French brothers blended white Bordeaux wine with a mixture of

macerated fruits and a small amount of quinine. T oday, numerous fruits—some of which are a well-kept

secret—along with green oranges from Morocco, sweet oranges from Valencia, Spain, bitter oranges

from Haiti, and cinchona bark (quinine) from the Peruvian Andes are cold-macerated in French brandy

for four to six months before the brandy is mixed with wine and aged.

Two types of Lillet are made: nonvintage, also called classic, and vintage, known as Jean de Lillet, the

only vintaged aperitif in the world. Vintage Lillet is aged in newer oak barrels than nonvintage. Lillet

Blanc, both vintage and nonvintage, is produced from Bordeaux-grown sauvignon blanc, sémillon, and

muscadelle grapes. Lillet Rouge, whether vintage or nonvintage, is a blend of merlot and cabernet

sauvignon.

After a Sauternes or Barsac has completed fermentation, it remains in a cask for at least

two years of aging. It then goes on to age in the bottle. After thirty or more years, a top

Sauternes or Barsac can still be remarkably alive. Which is not to say you have to age

these wines for three decades. The wines’ honeyed apricot flavors are almost irresistible

when the wine is young, say, five years after the vintage date. But it’s only after about ten

years, once the obvious hit of sweetness has passed and the flavors have totally coalesced,

that the wines’ mesmerizing opulence comes into full force.

In France, this vinous opulence is usually juxtaposed against a food that’s equally

intense and flamboyant. Historically, for example, Sauternes was often served with foie

gras—a hedonistic marriage if ever there was one—astoundingly, often as a first course

(in my opinion, making every wine and dish that followed pale by comparison).

The wines of Sauternes and Barsac were the only ones rated, along with the Médoc, in

the famous 1855 Classification. One Sauternes was singled out and given the highest

rating of Premier Cru Supérieur Classé: Château d’Y quem. Y quem is still the ultimate,

richest, most perfectly balanced Sauternes. After Y quem, eleven châteaux are classified as

Premier Cru and fifteen as Deuxième Cru.

Dry white wines are also made in Sauternes and Barsac, although they are not as well

known. Château d’Y quem named its dry wine Y (ygrec, pronounced E-GREK, the French

name for that letter of the alphabet). This set off a trend. Now, most dry Sauternes are

named after the first letter of the château’s name. Château Rieussec’s is called R; Château

Guiraud makes G. Dry Sauternes have an unusual, bold flavor. Made principally from

sémillon, they are very full-bodied, thick-textured, and relatively high in alcohol.

Among the most exceptional Sauternes (and one Barsac) to try, in addition to Château

d’Y quem, are: Château Suduiraut, Château Rieussec, Château Climens (Barsac), Château

Lafaurie-Peyraguey, Château Guiraud, and Château de Fargues.

ST.

-ÉMILION

Like Pomerol, its soul mate nearby, St.

-Émilion is not a part of the Médoc or Graves but,

instead, is on the other side of the Gironde Estuary, on Bordeaux’s Right Bank. It is a

region that, in every way, is as different from the Médoc as it can be. The vineyards of St.

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Émilion tend to be smaller than those in the Médoc, and the châteaux more modest. Often,

much of the work, both in the vineyard and in the cellar, is done by the proprietor and his

family.

The first thing that strikes most visitors is the village of St.

-Émilion itself. A small,

fortresslike medieval town carved out of limestone, it is by far the most stunning Old

World village in the Bordeaux region, and it, like Bordeaux city, is a UNESCO World

Heritage Site. In the center of the village is the twelfth-century Église Monolithe, one of

Europe’s only underground churches, carved by hand by Benedictine monks out of one

massive block of limestone. The church, which is quite large, is built on the site of a cave

said to be the hermitage of an eighth-century saint. Visitors to the church can see two

blocks of stone, each with shallow indentations, said to be the saint’s chair and bed. (A

local superstition has it that women who sit on the saint’s chair will become pregnant.)

From the Middle Ages on, St.

-Émilion was the home of several monastic orders.

Community life was extremely religious. All governing power was exercised by the

Jurade, a coterie of men given complete authority through a charter granted them in 1199

by King John of England. Part of the Jurade’s mandate was ensuring the quality and

prominence of St.

-Émilion wine.

Unlike the long, flat stretch of the Médoc, or the long, gently rolling landscape of

Graves, St.

-Émilion has hillsides (the côtes)—limestone outcroppings and plateaus, plus

gravelly terraces. Over centuries of geologic upheaval, clay, sand, quartz, and chalk have

been intermixed there. The twists and turns and different soil compositions make St.

-

Émilion, small as it is, a patchwork quilt of varying terroir. A fairly wide range in the style

and quality of the wines is the result. Merlot and cabernet franc are the dominant grape

varieties.

THE JURADE

The Jurade de Saint-Émilion, a fraternity of jurats, or aldermen, traces its beginnings

back to 1199, when a royal charter issued in England gave local notables and

magistrates the power to govern the region and its wines. Banned after the French

Revolution of 1789, the Jurade was revived in 1948 as a wine brotherhood dedicated to

the advancement and promotion of St.

-Émilion wines. Twice a year, during the first

flowering of the vines in spring, and again during the autumn harvest, the Jurade

conducts a majestic pageant. Members, wearing flowing red robes, white gloves, and

puffy red caps, proceed through the streets of St.

-Émilion to a solemn, candlelit mass in

the cloister of the town’s monolithic church. As part of the pageant, visiting dignitaries—

princes, ambassadors, politicians, famous artists—are inducted into the Jurade. Alan

Shepard, the first American astronaut in space, has been made a member, as has the

cellist Mstislav Rostropovich. The Jurade tries not to take itself too seriously, however. It

has also inducted the comedian Mel Brooks.

The Jurade de Saint-Émilion, a fraternal organization, parading in red robes through the cobbled streets of St.

-Émilion.

Only red wines are made in St.

-Émilion, and the wine community is extremely

chauvinistic about them—there are more than fifty wine shops in the village! The pride is

justified; in very good years, the top wines can be positively riveting.

Arguably, the very best St.

-Émilion is the super-elegant Château Cheval Blanc. Along

with Château Ausone, Château Angélus, and Château Pavie, it is one of the four wines

designated in 2012 as “A” among St.

-Émilion’s Premier Grand Cru Classé.

Cheval Blanc has the highest percentage of cabernet franc of any well-known Bordeaux

estate—40 to 50 percent in recent vintages, with the remainder of the blend being merlot.

In great years the wine can have an almost unnerving texture—it is, all at the same time,

deep, luxuriant, and kinetically alive in the mouth. When young, the wine fairly oozes

with decadent blackberry fruit laced with vanilla, rather like eating a bowl of squashed,

ripe blackberries drizzled with crème anglaise. (One of the greatest Bordeaux—indeed,

one of the greatest wines—I have ever drunk was a 1947 Cheval Blanc, considered among

the most majestic wines Bordeaux produced in the twentieth century.)

The vineyard of Cheval Blanc is on a mostly gravelly terrace several miles north of St.

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Émilion, almost in Pomerol. However, many of the châteaux producing the best St.

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Émilion are those on the southwestern limestone hillsides hugging the village. Château

Ausone, Château Canon, Château Magdelaine, and Château Pavie are all here. In addition

to wines from these vineyards, some others to try include: Château La Dominique,

Château Figeac, Château Trotte Vieille, Château l’Arrosée, and Château Troplong

Mondot.

POMEROL

The tiniest of all the major Bordeaux wine regions, Pomerol has definite cachet. This

wasn’t always so. The area was obscure and the wines were unknown in the nineteenth

century (and were not ranked in the 1855 Classification). At the turn of the twentieth

century, Pomerol’s wines were considered merely average. The region’s current fame is

based, in part, on the ascendency of Château Pétrus, which produces Pomerol’s most

famous, expensive, and sought-after wines. Often ravishing, opulent, and complex, it sets

the aesthetic criteria for other Pomerols.

Like its neighbor, St.

-Émilion, Pomerol is on the Right Bank of the Gironde Estuary.

The wines here are exclusively red, and the majority are based on merlot and cabernet

franc. Merlot alone accounts for more than 80 percent of all the grapes planted in Pomerol,

and not surprisingly, it is extremely well suited to the region’s gravel and clay beds.

Cabernet sauvignon is rarely part of a Pomerol blend.

Pomerols from the best sites stand out with a velvetlike texture and a plum/cocoa/violet

richness. This is Bordeaux’s harmonic convergence of intensity and elegance at its best.

Their relative softness make Pomerols fairly easy to drink young.

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

Pomerol and St.

-Émilion remained far less well known than the Médoc even after the first bridges over

the Gironde Estuary and the Garonne and Dordogne rivers were built in the mid-1800s. Wine estates in

the two regions were small; no château had an established, bankable reputation; and for Bordeaux’s wine

brokers, it was difficult to get to these inland vineyards and even harder to transport the wine out. It made

much more sense for the brokers to do business with the larger, well-known Médoc châteaux in Margaux,

Pauillac, St.

-Julien, and St.

-Estèphe, which were also far more accessible thanks to their proximity to the

Gironde Estuary just north of the city of Bordeaux.

As noted, Pomerol was, until the 1980s, a fairly unknown region that only began to

emerge from its obscurity in the 1940s and 1950s. It was then that Jean-Pierre Moueix, a

talented businessman with a keen palate, began buying exclusive sales and marketing

rights to Pomerol’s best châteaux. In 1964, he bought a 50-percent share of what was to

become the most prized property of all, Pétrus.

Improving quality was an obsession for Moueix. Soon, news of the supple, rich,

plummy character of the wines under his direction spread by word of mouth. By the mid-

1960s, Pomerols began to develop a cult following among collectors. Today, the firm is

headed by Jean-Pierre Moueix’s son Christian. In addition to the portfolio of Moueix

wines in Pomerol and in neighboring Fronsac, Moueix owns Dominus, a top estate in the

Napa V alley of California.

The tiny town of Pomerol encompasses the square around the small church and not

much more. Similarly, most Pomerol properties are small, especially compared to those in

the Médoc. In general, a proprietor here owns a vineyard less than 10 acres (4 hectares) in

size, and eighty Pomerol châteaux have fewer than 2 acres (under 1 hectare). By

comparison, vineyards in the Médoc span dozens and sometimes hundreds of

acres/hectares. Finally, Pomerol châteaux are extremely modest; there are no breathtaking

mansions.

If price and availability were indeed no object, the Pomerol we should all experience

would be Pétrus. In the best vintages, the wine’s exotic aromas of licorice and rich fruits

leap out of the glass, after which, a creamy, black raspberry explosion fills your mouth. It

is hard to imagine a more luxurious red wine, where each of the components is so

seamlessly integrated into the whole.

But Pétrus aside, there are a number of other terrific, seductive Pomerols.

Unfortunately, many of these are, like Pétrus, made in small quantities and thus hard to

find. Nonetheless, among the ones to seek out: Château Le Pin, Château La Fleur de Gay,

Château Lafleur, Château L’Évangile, Château La Conseillante, Château Certan de May,

and Château Trotanoy.

OTHER REGIONS OF BORDEAUX

The less-important wine districts of Bordeaux are less important for a good reason.

Without the benefit of coming from the best terroirs, much of the wine made there is

simply simplistic. That said, some wines are definitely diamonds in the rough. And,

importantly, the regions that follow are good hunting grounds for wines that don’t give

you sticker shock.

I’ll begin with Listrac and Moulis, which are the other regions of the Médoc, and then

move on to Entre-Deux-Mers, east and south of the city of Bordeaux, over to Fronsac and

Canon-Fronsac, near Pomerol, and finally to the Côtes. There are many other outlying

districts making simple, good table wines (Entre-Deux-Mers-Haut-Benauge, Lussac-St.

-

Émilion, Montagne-St.

-Émilion, Lalande de Pomerol, Puisseguin-St.

-Émilion, Ste.

-Foy-

Bordeaux, and St.

-Georges-St.

-Émilion), plus a number of outlying appellations producing

mostly sweet wines—Cadillac, Cérons, Côtes de Bordeaux-Saint-Macaire, Loupiac, and

Ste.

-Croix-du-Mont among them. Y et the districts below have, I think, a bit better track

record for making wines worthy of discovery.

IF MONEY WERE NO OBJECT

Let’s say you were willing to pay $20,000 to $36,000 per case for Château Pétrus (the cost for

contemporary vintages). How would you go about buying it? Alas, the process wouldn’t be easy—Pétrus

is rarely available. Here’s why.

Each year, 2,500 to 3,000 cases of Pétrus are made. In the United States, as one example, about four

hundred of these cases are allocated to Pétrus’s United States importer. The importer, in turn, offers the

wine to a small, select group of wholesalers around the country who have consistently bought Pétrus in

the past. These wholesalers, in turn, offer their limited allotments only to a small, select group of

exclusive wine shops and a few prestigious restaurants that have seniority based on their past record of

purchases.

A wine shop or restaurant will offer the wine, often personally, to a select group of customers, mostly

collectors who buy Pétrus every year regardless of the cost.

It can be next to impossible to break into this loop.

LISTRAC AND MOULIS

Listrac and Moulis are inland communes of the Médoc, that is, they are not positioned on

the gravelly banks of the Gironde Estuary like their more famous sisters, Margaux, St.

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Julien, Pauillac, and St.

-Estèphe. Away from the riverbanks, the soil tends to be heavier

and to hold more water. As a result, the wines of Listrac and Moulis (based on cabernet

sauvignon, with merlot and cabernet franc added) are generally rougher-textured and less

polished, but also a fraction of the cost. They can sometimes seem straitjacketed by tannin.

There are exceptions. Several of the best Crus Bourgeois, for example, are here, including

Château Poujeaux, Château Chasse-Spleen, and Château Fourcas-Hosten.

ENTRE-DEUX-MERS

Entre-Deux-Mers (literally “between two seas”) is the vast expanse of rolling hills and

forested land between the Dordogne and Garonne tributaries of the Gironde Estuary.

Although it is a large wine region and a picturesque one, the wines are generally very

simple and are never as high in quality as the wines of the Médoc, Graves, Pomerol, or

St.

-Émilion.

It’s important to know that the appellation Entre-Deux-Mers applies to dry white wines

only. These are primarily sauvignon blanc, sometimes with a bit of sémillon and

muscadelle, which adds a faint spicy-flowery quality. They are fresh, zesty, and light—

perfect for pairing with fish and shellfish, or just for plain pleasure. A significant amount

of red wine is made here, too, but because these wines are often lower in quality than the

region’s whites, they must carry the appellation Bordeaux or Bordeaux Supérieur, not

Entre-Deux-Mers.

The wine harvest at Château Figeac. Everyone—young and old; male and female—helps with the work.

Entre-Deux-Mers wines have never been classified. Among the Entre-Deux-Mers

worth seeking out are: Château Bonnet, Château Turcaud, Château Nardique la Gravière,

Château de Camarsac, and Château Peyrebon.

FRONSAC AND CANON-FRONSAC

Over the past decade Fronsac and Canon-Fronsac have gained some momentum and risen

out of “lesser-dom” into greater recognition. The two communes are spread over the

hillsides just north and slightly west of Pomerol and St.

-Émilion, and they sometimes

share a similar topography with their famous cousins, as well as clay/sand soils interlaced

with limestone. At their best, the wines can be full of black raspberry flavors and have a

kind of edgy power and rusticity.

The wines are all red. Merlot is the dominant grape, followed by cabernet franc, with a

bit of cabernet sauvignon sometimes blended in for strength and balance.

This is similar to the grape profile in St.

-Émilion and Pomerol, yet the wines from

Fronsac and Canon-Fronsac tend to be far more rustic. Among the wines worth seeking

out: Château La Vieille-Cure and Château Dalem.

THE CÔTES

Outlying the four communes of Pomerol, St.

-Émilion, Fronsac, and Canon-Fronsac are a

handful of satellite regions called the côtes (hillsides): the Côtes de Bourg, Côtes de

Castillon, Côtes de Francs, and Premières Côtes de Blaye. With the 2008 vintage, these

wines were also allowed to use the broader, simpler name Côtes de Bordeaux if they

preferrred.

SECOND IN LINE

T o make the best possible wine, a top château will blend together only its very finest lots of wine. These

generally come from the most mature and well-sited vineyard plots. What happens to all the other wine?

In many cases, the château makes a second wine, which will have its own brand name and its own

distinct label. (A second wine is different from a Second Growth.)

A second wine is usually made by the same winemaker in essentially the same manner as the famous

wine, and it will usually come from the same vineyard, although the age of the vines will generally be

younger. Although the second wine may not be as complex or ageworthy as the grand vin, it will also be

a lot less expensive. Of course, for many experienced wine drinkers, the second wine of a great château

like Château Lafite-Rothschild may be preferable to the top wine from a far less well-known château.

Châteaux rarely promote their second wines, preferring to be known for their famous ones. Often, the

label on a second wine does not reveal the château it came from, but the name may be close enough to

tell.

Some of the best second wines and the châteaux they come from:

LE CARILLON DE L’ANGÉLUS (Château Angélus)

CARRUADES DE LAFITE (Château Lafite-Rothschild)

LE CLARENCE DE HAUT-BRION (Château Haut-Brion)

CLOS DU MARQUIS (Château Léoville-Las Cases)

LA CROIX DE BEAUCAILLOU (Château Ducru-Beaucaillou)

ECHO DE LYNCH-BAGES (Château Lynch-Bages)

LES FORTS DE LATOUR (Château Latour)

LES PAGODES DE COS (Château Cos d’Estournel)

PAVILLON ROUGE DU CHÂTEAU MARGAUX (Château Margaux)

LE PETIT CHEVAL (Château Cheval Blanc)

RESERVE DE LA COMTESSE (Château Pichon-Longueville Comtesse de Lalande)

The rural, hilly côtes are some of the oldest wine regions in Bordeaux. Vines were

planted here by the Romans. The wines are mostly reds for everyday drinking—medium-

bodied and juicy when they are good, shallow when they are not. Merlot is the leading

grape variety, but côtes wines very rarely have the plummy depth and lushness of merlot

planted in, say, Pomerol or St.

-Émilion. Often, this is due to the fact that the grapes are

planted in more fertile soil and harvested at higher yields.

Among the best red côtes are Château Puygueraud (Côtes de Francs), Château Roc de

Cambes (Côtes de Bourg), Château Les Jonqueyres (Côtes de Blaye), and Château de

Francs (Côtes de Francs).

SWEET SUCCESS: MACARONS AND CANELÉS

Who would imagine that two of the famous food specialties in the world’s most prestigious wine region

are a chewy cookie and a miniature, cakelike sweet? What’s more, no one seems to know how these

simple items became so legendary. Nonetheless, you have not truly experienced Bordeaux until you go

on an expedition in search of the ultimate example of each.

Macarons won’t present a problem. These almond cookies, thought to date from the early 1600s, are

a specialty of just one place: the ancient walled village of St.

-Émilion. Virtually every pâtisserie in the

village sells them.

Then there are canelés, which are often eaten accompanied by a glass of red wine on a Sunday

afternoon. If anything can drive a Bordeaux pastry chef to fits of fanaticism, these homey, much-loved

sweets can, for they are a challenge to make perfectly (and easy to make poorly). Nonetheless, virtually

all top Bordelais pastry chefs are members of the Confrérie du Canelé de Bordeaux, an organization of

pâtissiers devoted to the tradition of baking them.

A canelé looks like a molded cream puff. The center is sort of custardy; the outside, crunchy and

caramelly. But a canelé is not a pastry per se, not a cookie, and not really a cake either. If they weren’t

French, canelés would be perfect as part of English afternoon tea. The confection’s origin is not clear,

although one historical account suggests that the first canelé may have been baked by a nun who

accidentally overcooked her pastry cream sometime in the thirteenth century.

Chewy yet delicate macarons, a specialty of St.

-Émilion, were created sometime in the 17th century and now come in

myriad flavors.

THE FOODS OF BORDEAUX

Bordeaux may have many of France’s most impressive wines but, on the whole, it comes

nowhere close to having France’s most impressive food. Admittedly, describing French

food, any morsel of it, as less than stellar seems gastronomically sacrilegious. After all,

French food at its lowest ebb is still French food. And so goes the cooking in Bordeaux. It

is French; it is good. Y et, the paradox is nagging. How can a region of France produce

wine so incredibly inspired and food that, for the most part, is so incredibly “un”?

My first suspicion that Bordeaux might not be as electrifying culinarily as enologically

came while dining at a renowned château. The regal eighteenth-century dining room was

dominated by a 20-foot-long table on which rested heirloom silver and three antique

crystal decanters containing some of the château’s older vintages. Dinner consisted of

potatoes, green beans, and chicken.

Not cookies exactly; not cakes; not pastries, canelés are the star “sweet” of Bordeaux, often nibbled with a glass of red

wine alongside.

Potatoes, green beans, and chicken? To be sure, these were delicious, waxy French

potatoes, pencil-thin haricots verts, and chicken that was scrumptious. But still.

When I asked why Bordeaux had such simple food compared to other parts of France,

several hypotheses were suggested. The first was that cooking in Bordeaux is partly

Anglo-Saxon in orientation, thanks to the long-standing, deep ties between the Bordelais

and the British. In fact, for three centuries, beginning with the marriage of Eleanor of

Aquitaine to Henry II in 1152, the people of Bordeaux considered themselves citizens of

England, not France. The bonds that formed were so strong that, to this day, Britain

remains one of Bordeaux’s most important markets, and a large percentage of château

owners speak flawless English.

Several Bordelais, however, rejected this theory. The simple cooking of Bordeaux, they

said, reflected the region’s close-knit, hardworking, conservative families who prefer

locally grown, unadorned cooking. By way of evidence, they pointed out that many of the

best restaurants in the region are the simplest ones that serve local specialties like lamprey

(large, fatty, eel-like fish caught from nearby rivers and usually baked in casseroles, often

with red wine), or—more appealingly—roast lamb. Indeed, before the 1970s, sheep were

often taken from the rural areas ringing Bordeaux to graze over the winter in the vineyards

of Pauillac, St.

-Julien, St.

-Estèphe, and Margaux. There, they would feed on the grasses

that grew between the rows of vines—grasses said to give their meat an especially

delicious flavor. And there, too, among the dormant vines, lambs would be born.

WHEN YOU VISIT… BORDEAUX

BORDEAUX IS A VERY LARGE REGION, and traffic—especially near the cities—can

be staggering. Concentrate your visits day by day in a given area (today Pomerol,

tomorrow Graves, and so on).

STAYING IN BORDEAUX CITY? Check out the charming Le Boutique Hotel Bordeaux.

Housed in an eighteenth-century UNESCO World Heritage building, this gem boasts

everything luxe right down to the Hermès bath amenities. Out in the country, one of the

most impressive hotels is Cordeillan-Bages (cordeillanbages.com) which is housed in a

seventeenth-century mansion. The hotel’s wines are made at Château Lynch-Bages.

FOR A BREAK FROM WINE TASTING, the spa at Château Smith Haut Lafitte is

famous for its relaxing treatments, including spa products made with extracts from local

grapes.

BORDEAUX TENDS TO BE a somewhat formal region. Leave the shorts and flip-flops

home.

AN ADVANCE APPOINTMENT (not to mention your best manners) are essential.

FINALLY , don’t miss a meal at La Tupina, the legendary restaurant in Bordeaux’s old

quarter. Besides the roast chicken (acclaimed by many as the best roast chicken in

France), the must-have specialties include hand-cut potatoes deep-fried in duck fat,

and country French bread soaked in chicken fat, then fried. You only live once.

The Bordeaux Wines to Know

I won’t include any of the First Growths here, although in great vintages they are all truly stunning experiences.

There are wines like the 1966 Château Latour, or the 2000 Château Margaux, that, for me, had such beauty they

were impossible to believe. But those are (and should be) rare experiences, and they are surely rare opportunities.

So here are some other incredible wines. Admittedly, most, like all great Bordeaux, are still expensive and much in

demand.

WHITES

CHÂTEAU CARBONNIEUX

PESSAC-LÉOGNAN | GRAND CRU CLASSÉ

Approximately 75% sauvignon blanc, 25% sémillon

This is one of the great classic white Pessac-Léognans, and because it is relatively affordable, you see the bottle,

wet and chilled, being opened next to huge platters of iced local oysters in brasseries all over Bordeaux. V ery good

white Bordeaux like Carbonnieux has a distinctive, smooth, broad texture—it reminds me of the feel of cool cotton

sheets on a hot night. The aromas and flavors are completely atypical of so much white wine drunk today—they

evoke chamomile tea, dried flowers, hay, nuts, beeswax, minerals, and the flavor (but not the sweetness) of honey.

Château Carbonnieux was founded in the thirteenth century by the Benedictine monks of the Abbey of Sainte-

Croix, and is among the oldest châteaux in Bordeaux.

DOMAINE DE CHEV ALIER

PESSAC-LÉOGNAN | GRAND CRU CLASSÉ

70% sauvignon blanc, 30% sémillon

If there were only ten wines left to drink in the world, I’d want this to be one of them. It is, for me, a wine of great

sophistication, a wine that ignites imagination and emotion. Once, I wrote about Domaine de Chevalier that

drinking it was “like being washed out to sea; your senses exquisitely alive with the freshness of the ocean air; the

purity of the sunlight, the saline taste of the minerally sea-water.

” With age, Domaine de Chevalier takes on a

honeyed complexity that even honey would envy. The estate is one of the few in Bordeaux to be called a domaine

rather than a château.

CHÂTEAU LA MISSION HAUT-BRION

PESSAC-LÉOGNAN | GRAND CRU CLASSÉ

Approximately 80% sémillon, 20% sauvignon blanc

Bordeaux has but a handful of regal white wines. This is my vote for the best of them. Racy yet sublime, elegant,

and deeply complex, La Mission Haut-Brion is one of the world’s most stunning examples of the mesmerizing

richness that can be achieved by blending exquisite-quality sémillon and exquisite-quality sauvignon blanc. The

white wine has existed only as of the 2009 vintage (before that, the estate produced only its stupendous red). The

white was made possible when the grapes that had been used to make Laville Haut-Brion wine henceforth were

designated for La Mission Haut-Brion Blanc (and the Laville wine ceased to exist). Given the near perfection of

both its red and white wines, La Mission Haut-Brion has often been named as an estate that deserves to move to

First Growth status (as Mouton-Rothschild did in 1973). The château is owned by Domaine Clarence Dillon, which

also owns Château Haut-Brion.

REDS

CHÂTEAU LA CONSEILLANTE

POMEROL

Approximately 80% merlot, 20% cabernet franc

I have always loved Conseillante’s grace, yet underlying power. The wine is supple and cocoa-y on the one hand

(so very like Pomerol), yet full of fascinating dark bitters and waves of exotic spices on the other. Best of all, it

moves like a pendulum across the full range of the palate. The finish fades and flickers out slowly, like some old

French film. The estate, located near the border with St.

-Émilion, has the famed Château Cheval Blanc for a

neighbor. For the last 140 years, La Conseillante (and now its modern, new, ovoid-shaped winery) has been owned

and cared for by the Nicolas family.

CHÂTEAU ANGÉLUS

ST .

-ÉMILION | PREMIER GRAND CRU CLASSÉ “A”

Approximately 55% merlot, 45% cabernet franc

Angélus is as majestic and thunderingly impressive as a French cathedral. But when it’s young, it’s wound tight

with espresso bean, dark plum, earth, and exotic spice aromas and flavors. With time (and this is a wine that can

teach one about time), there’s a slow reveal, and you can almost feel the surrender in the wine—a kind of descent

(or ascent) into loveliness. In 2012, Château Angélus was promoted to “A” status among St.

-Émilion’s Grand Cru

Classés. The estate has been owned by the de Boüard de Laforest family for more than a century. The name refers

to the three bells still rung for the custom of Angélus (the eleventh-century monastic practice of reciting three Hail

Marys during the evening bell), which are audible from the château’s vineyards. The bells are located in the nearby

chapel at Mazerat, the church in Saint-Martin de Mazeret, and the church in St.

-Émilion.

CHÂTEAU PICHON LONGUEVILLE, COMTESSE DE LALANDE

PAUILLAC | SECOND GROWTH

45% to 70% cabernet sauvignon (depending on the vintage) followed by merlot, with tiny amounts of

cabernet franc and petit verdot

Pichon Lalande, as it is simply called, is located beside Château Latour and across the road from its deeply

powerful and intense cousin Château Pichon Longueville Baron (usually just called Pichon Baron). Pichon Lalande

is the more feminine and elegant of the two, indeed the wine almost lifts off the palate, with cassis and cocoa

flavors infused with spices, minerals, and a sense of beautiful fresh pine trees. Y et, for all of its flavor, the wine is

never weighty or ponderous. It knows how to creep up on you. Pichon Longueville Comtesse de Lalande is owned

by the Champagne house Louis Roederer.

CHÂTEAU BRANAIRE-DUCRU

ST .

-JULIEN | FOURTH GROWTH

Mostly cabernet sauvignon, with merlot, cabernet franc, petit verdot

Branaire-Ducru has steadily climbed the charts in reputation and price over the past several years. Although a

Fourth Growth in 1855, the wine sells on par with many Second Growths today. And it’s a stunner. Exquisite

richness. Structurally immaculate. Intense. Focused. Enduring. And possessing a rarified kind of beauty. It’s a wine

that Colette or Hemingway would have admired.

CHÂTEAU LÉOVILLE-POYFERRÉ

ST .

-JULIEN | SECOND GROWTH

Mostly cabernet sauvignon, with merlot, petit verdot, cabernet franc

Imagine eating milk chocolate candy bars your whole life and then someone gives you a piece of intense, 80

percent cacao dark chocolate. A whole new sensory universe opens in the chocolate center of your brain. That’s

how I’ve felt about the last several vintages of Léoville-Poyferré. The structure and intensity are formidable. The

flavor is molecularly dense. The texture is molten softness. And yet the wine is not bombastic or out of balance.

Indeed, it is thrilling to see the flavors of Bordeaux taken to the nth power. At the time of the French Revolution,

there was one grand Léoville (Lion) estate. It was subsequently broken up into two estates, Château Léoville-Las

Cases and Château Léoville-Barton. Eventually Léoville Las Cases was again divided and Château Léoville-

Poyferré was created on the unnamed piece of land.

CHÂTEAU COS D’ESTOURNEL

ST .

-ESTÈPHE | SECOND GROWTH

Approximately 65% merlot, plus cabernet sauvignon

The boundary line between the tiny communes of Pauillac and St.

-Estèphe finds Château Lafite in the former, Cos

d’Estournel in the latter. Y et Cos, as it is known (the s is pronounced), is indisputably one of the most distinctive

Bordeaux. In great years it has an exotic, earthy, you-just-opened-a-humidor sensuality to its aroma (not unlike

Château Haut-Brion), but the classic, soaring structure, deep concentration, and supple elegance of Lafite-

Rothschild. In great years (1985, 1995, 2000) and with some age, the wine’s savory richness and almost creamy

tannin leave most tasters awestruck. The château was one of the first in Bordeaux to develop an Asian market—in

the 1820s!

In Champagne, a traditional basket press is often still used for grapes.

CHAMPAGNE

For many wine drinkers, Champagne is not simply a wine; it is also a state of mind.

Handed a glass, we simply abandon ourselves to its dizzying pleasure. How a mere

beverage achieved such distinction is a complex story, made all the more rewarding

because of its unlikeliness.

The story begins 70 million years ago, in the Mesozoic era, when a vast prehistoric sea

covered northern France and Britain. As the waters receded and the so-called Paris Basin

sank, a great crescent of limestone, rich with minerals and marine fossils, was left behind.

From this geologic legacy would eventually emerge the beautiful, chilly vineyards of

Champagne. Sunlight here is painfully scarce, and vines exist at their limits of cold

tolerance—the average temperature, amazingly, is no more than 50°F (10°C).

“Remember gentlemen, it’s not just France we are fighting for, it’s

Champagne!”

— SIR WINSTON CHURCHILL

The wine Champagne comes from the region of Champagne, 90 miles northeast of

Paris. Here, the vineyard land—considered among the most expensive in the world—is

owned, primarily, by fifteen thousand small growers. A majority of the grapes they raise

will be made into Champagne by nearly 350 wine firms, known as houses (Moët &

Chandon, V euve Clicquot, and Taittinger are famous examples). In addition, more than

4,500 of the 15,000 growers make their own limited-production, often stellar,

Champagnes. And there are also 136 cooperatives, several of which, like Collet and

Nicolas Feuillate, boast Champagnes of very good quality.

Well-known wines have been made in the Champagne region since Roman times.

Those wines (both red and white) were, for much of their history, only slightly

effervescent, not bubbly. By the Middle Ages, the wines had found a receptive audience

among affluent locals, for Champagne was a wealthy region known for its superb and

expensive textiles. Indeed, many Champagne houses were eventually begun by the well-

to-do German accountants of textile firms—men with names like Krug, Heidsieck,

Mumm, and Deutz.

The name Champagne was first used in the sixth century and is derived from

campagnia remensis, a Latin term for the countryside around the city of

Reims.

As the seventeenth century drew to a close, the blended sparkling wine we recognize as

Champagne began to emerge. It was not suddenly invented, as the story goes, by a monk

named Dom Pérignon (although he was important in its development). Rather,

Champagne was the curious result of decades of work by many Champenois, based on a

happenstance of nature.

Climate is key to the explanation. Champagne is one of the coolest wine-producing

areas in the world. Historically, wines would be made in the fall and left to settle over the

winter. The cold temperatures would generally paralyze the yeasts, temporarily halting the

fermentation before all of the grape sugar had been turned into alcohol. Once spring

arrived and the wines (and yeasts) warmed up, the wines would gently bubble or sparkle—

a sign that fermentation had resumed. For centuries, the Champenois were not amused. At

a time before Louis Pasteur’s discovery (in 1860) of yeasts and the actions of

fermentation, wines that foamed were frightening. Worse, it seemed that only the wines of

Champagne behaved so strangely. Wines made in Burgundy—Champagne’s archrival to

the south—never bubbled.

THE QUICK SIP ON CHAMPAGNE

CHAMPAGNE IS AROMATICALLY , texturally, and in terms of flavor, one of the most

distinct wines in the world. It comes from only one region, also called Champagne,

where the cold temperatures and limestone soils help to create a definitive terroir.

ALL CHAMPAGNES ARE BLENDS of as many as a hundred separate still wines and,

among winemakers in the region, the art of blending is considered paramount.

THE COMPLEX AND PAINSTAKING process by which Champagnes are made

involves a secondary fermentation during which natural carbon dioxide gas is trapped

inside each bottle. The trapped CO2 will eventually become Champagne’s bubbles.

Frustrated by Champagne’s foam, many clerical winemakers of the seventeenth

century, including Dom Pérignon, strove painstakingly to develop techniques that would

quell the fizziness. By today’s standards, their Champagnes would have been

unrecognizable. They were cloudy, gritty, pinkish wines, often oxidized and heavily

sweetened (probably with a molasses-like product) to disguise their tartness.

One possible improvement, experimented with by some Champenois, was to keep the

wine in glass bottles, where it might remain fresher, longer. Most Champagnes at the time

were, by law, sold in barrels, since the liquid, contained in that manner, was easily

measured and therefore easily taxed. Barrels would then be shipped by boat down

Champagne’s Marne River to the Seine River, and on to Paris, and often to Great Britain.

DOM PÉRIGNON

Although no one person invented Champagne, Pierre Pérignon (Dom is an honorific title for a monk) was

among a group of innovative clerics whose techniques furthered Champagne’s evolution.

Pérignon was sent, at the age of twenty-nine, to the Abbey of Hautvillers (now owned by Moët &

Chandon). Soon thereafter, he became its procureur, the administrator in charge of all the goods that

provided a living for the monks, including wine.

Pérignon (who may not have drunk wine himself) was an avid winemaker and savvy businessman. He

increased both the size of the abbey’s vineyard holdings and the value of the wine produced. By 1700,

the wines of Hautvillers were worth four times that of basic Champagne.

Pérignon and his monk/winemaker colleagues were the first to master the art of making a clear white

wine from red grapes. Although this is easily done today, all white wine made at the turn of the

seventeenth century either came from white grapes, or the “white” wine was actually gray from skin

contact with red grapes. Pérignon was fanatical about consistency, precision, and discipline in grape-

growing and winemaking. He insisted that vines be pruned severely and only sparingly fertilized, thus

lowering the yield of each grapevine and improving the concentration of the wine. He mandated that

grapes be picked early in the morning so that their delicate aromas and flavors would not be

compromised by the afternoon sun. And he had pressoirs (winepresses) built in the vineyards, so that

the grapes could be pressed as quickly as possible.

Pérignon was also the first to keep the wines from different vineyard lots separate and the first to

realize that blending several still wines ultimately leads to a more interesting Champagne. Most

important, he was the first to experiment with glass flasks as a way to preserve Champagne’s freshness,

instead of leaving it in wooden barrels, where it easily oxidized.

All of these innovations made Champagne a vastly better wine. What we don’t know for sure is how

Dom Pérignon felt about Champagne’s sparkle. He was, of course, never able to prevent it, despite his

initial attempts. Champagne historians believe that Pérignon, renowned for his business acumen,

eventually came to see that sparkle as the key to Champagne’s future commercial success.

“The sparkling froth of this fresh wine is the dazzling image of us, the

French.

”

— VOLTAIRE

In Britain, where the Industrial Revolution was about to begin, sturdy glass was widely

available. Indeed, British wine merchants were already beginning to transfer the barrels of

Champagne they imported into British bottles. Soon, to satisfy the national sweet tooth,

many British merchants began adding sugar to the bottles before sealing them. That bit of

added sugar, eagerly consumed by yeasts in the air and exisiting naturally inside the

bottles, restarted fermentation, throwing off even more CO2—this time, trapped inside

each bottle. The coincidental result—a bigger pop when the bottle was eventually opened

—was, as far as the Brits were concerned—amusing, not to mention wonderfully

distinctive.

THE LOOK OF LUXURY

For centuries, artistically arresting bottles have been part of many houses’ strategies to inspire desire for

the “art” within. But no bottle is more stunning or renowned than Perrier-Jouët’s art-nouveau-style “flower

bottle,

” with its enameled arabesque of white anemones. Meant to celebrate the period known as the

Belle Époque (1840s to 1914) the bottle was designed by renowned art-nouveau glassmaker Émile

Gallé. Soon after its creation in 1902, the flower bottle was abandoned due to the difficulty in

manufacturing it. T o fire the design, Gallé had to heat the enamel to 1,112°F (600°C), just below the

melting point of glass. In the early 1960s, Pierre Ernst, then president of Perrier-Jouët, found one of the

original Gallé bottles and resolved to recreate it for Maxim’s, the legendary Parisian nightclub. Ernst

found an artisan enamel specialist who created a technique for manufacturing the bottles en masse. The

modern flower bottle premiered in 1969 and held the 1964 vintage of the house’s prestige wine, logically

named cuvée Belle Epoque. The very first of those bottles was opened in Paris at a seventieth birthday

party for jazz musician Duke Ellington. In 2012, a hundred years after its creation, the famous flower

bottle was exquisitely updated by Japanese floral designer Makoto Azuma, who added golden vines and

delicate dotted flowers to the classic pattern of anemones. A mere one hundred bottles (containing the

2004 vintage) were produced.

The Champenois started to think the same way. In 1728, French King Louis XV

standardized bottle sizes and allowed Champagne’s wines to be shipped in glass bottles for

the first time. The product met with extraordinary success abroad. Although bottled

Champagne cost twice as much as barreled Champagne (at the time, as many as 20

percent of glass bottles exploded from the pressure of the bubbles inside, and moving

hundreds of thousands of bottles from place to place was long, tedious work), the drama of

Champagne’s quivering bubbles and effusive pop had become unquestionably chic. Soon,

the forests ringing Champagne were replete with giant, wood-fired kilns where beautiful

French glass bottles were made.

There were still problems, however. Although glass had improved and wineglasses

themselves were now clear, Champagne remained a cloudy liquid because of the spent

yeast cells in it. Increasingly, drinkers wanted to be able to see those curious bubbles. By

the early 1800s, Champagnes were sometimes being decanted from bottle to bottle to

remove the cloudy sediment of spent yeast cells. Of course, the more a Champagne was

decanted, the more likely it was to go flat.

The solution was a process called rémuage (from the verb remuer, to move something

several times), known in English as riddling, which allows the yeasts to be removed from

the wine in one frozen clump. The process was developed in 1816 by Antoine de Müller,

the chef du cave (head of the wine cellar) of Nicole Ponsardin Clicquot, owner of the

Champagne house eventually known as V euve Clicquot.

Slowly, more improvements ensued. The flavor of Champagne was getting better,

thanks to better work in the vineyards, and, as a result, there was less need to camouflage

it with sweetness. Champagnes began to get drier. More and more, houses hoping to

capture new markets and increase sales positioned Champagne as an aperitif perfect to

begin an evening, rather than a sweet wine suited to the end of one. First came half-dry

Champagnes—demi-sec. When these proved successful, producers began making sec, or

dry, Champagnes (these were actually fairly sweet by today’s standards). By the 1840s,

the British in particular began to covet decidedly dry Champagnes. V ery dry Champagnes

intended just for them were made and sold with the designation extra-dry, a term in

English rather than French. Finally, as time passed, an even drier version—called brut—

was made (which is how extra-dry turns out to be, in effect, slightly sweeter than brut).

Moët & Chandon, founded in 1743 by Claude Moët. One of the preeminent Champagne houses today, the company owns

2,840 acres (1,150 hectares) of vineyards and produces approximately 26,000,000 bottles of Champagne each year.

In 1846, in a radical move at the time, Perrier-Jouët made a Champagne without any

sugar at all. But Champagne drinkers found it too severe—too brutelike, indeed. It took

another generation before brut wine gained widespread acclaim. In 1874, the Pommery

wine called Nature was the first to establish Champagne as a dry wine. It’s interesting to

note that the evolution of Champagne as a drier and drier wine continues to this day. Two

decades ago, most brut Champagnes had a dosage of 12 to 15 grams of residual sugar.

Today, the dosage of most top houses’ brut Champagnes is 9 or 10 grams. (Read about

how dosage works in Making Champagne, page 181.)

Champagne’s improvements in the nineteenth century were met with such success (and

sales) that the houses launched elite promotional campaigns aimed at aristocrats, royalty,

and the world’s most wealthy individuals. By the beginning of the twentieth century,

Champagne’s luxury status was nothing short of legendary.

THE LAND, THE GRAPES, AND THE VINEYARDS

Three billion bottles of sparkling wine are made every year in the world. But no matter

where they are from, these sparklers are always distinguished from Champagne (see

California Sparklers and French Champagne: Comparisons, page 691).

Mapped out by the Institut National des Appellations d’Origine (INAO) in 1927, the

Champagne region includes some 85,000 acres (34,000 hectares), which is about half the

size it was prior to phylloxera (see page 30). Of this total area, 97 percent (82,800 acres;

33,500 hectares) is already planted. Thus, all the vines of Champagne would easily fit

into, say, the city limits of Denver, Colorado.

The harvest at Taittinger , one of Champagne’ s great traditional houses. In the cold northern climate of the region,

harvesting is chilly work.

THE GRAPES OF CHAMPAGNE

WHITE

CHARDONNAY: Major grape and the only white grape grown in the region. Used in virtually all

Champagnes generally for its finesse. Champagnes called blanc de blancs are based exclusively on

chardonnay.

REDS

PINOT MEUNIER: Major grape, although the least ageworthy of Champagne’s three grapes. It usually

contributes fruitiness and body. T echnically not a separate variety, but rather a clone of pinot noir.

PINOT NOIR: The more revered of Champagne’s two red grapes. It often contributes body, texture, and

aroma.

Unlike Burgundy, which has more than one hundred controlled and specified

appellations (AOCs) within it, and Bordeaux, which has more than fifty AOCs, all of

Champagne falls into just one appellation—Champagne. (The appellation is governed by

some of the strictest self-imposed regulations of any area in the world.) The region

comprises 320 villages, boasting some 275,000 separate vineyard plots. These villages are

ranked as either Grand Cru (17 villages), Premier Cru (42 villages), or Cru (258 villages).

Every vineyard in a village holds the same rank. Collectively, the villages produce about

320 million bottles of Champagne a year.

The region has two phenomenal natural assets that are key to the style of wine made

here: its iffy, northerly climate and its limestone-laced soils. Climatically, Champagne

lives life on the edge. As noted, the average temperature is just 50°F (10°C), a bare

minimum for photosynthesis. It can be wet and rainy at the worst possible time—in late

summer, when rot can erupt and the grapes themselves can become waterlogged or

attacked by the mold Botrytis cinerea. It’s also very cold in the winter, and annihilating

spring frosts and summer hailstorms are not unusual. In short, the grapes usually have a

difficult time surviving and then ripening evenly. In fact, the small vines are intentionally

trained low to the ground so they can absorb whatever warmth might be reflected off the

white soil.

The famous white soil of Champagne is more than 75 percent limestone, and in many

parts, a specific type of porous limestone known as chalk. Like a great white crescent, the

area that spans from Britain’s White Cliffs of Dover to Champagne was once the basin of

a vast prehistoric sea. Some 70 million years ago, the waters receded, leaving behind

minerals, such as quartz and zircon, plus fossils of sea urchins, sea sponges, and other sea

animals. These fossils helped form the chalk. Millions of years later, violent earthquakes

erupted, mixing the chalk with material from within the earth and creating the sloping hills

over which the best Champagne vineyards now lie.

Walking in the countryside, it is not unusual to see stark white outcroppings, bare slices

of ashen-colored earth pierced by the ends of deeply burrowed grapevine roots. The soft

and porous chalk encourages the roots to delve deeply into the earth in search of water.

Chalk drains well but also acts as a reservoir that can provide water back to the vines,

even in very dry summers.

Champagne may only be made from three varieties of grapes: chardonnay, pinot noir,

and pinot meunier (the “fourth grape” of Champagne is often said to be time itself, in

recognition of how long the wine is aged). Of the three, pinot meunier is technically not a

separate variety but rather a clone of pinot noir. Each of these grapes has its own assets—

and its own needs in terms of soils and sunlight. Thus, each tends to be planted in certain

areas within Champagne, but not in others.

For me, a great Champagne possesses the contrapuntal tension of opposites—

like a sword enveloped in whipped cream. The sword is the Champagne’s

dramatic acidity. The whipped cream is the hedonic texture that comes from

sur lie aging.

In general, chardonnay tends to be planted in the chalkiest sites, and when well made,

contributes an almost unreal sense of purity, laciness, linearity, and finesse to the blend.

Chardonnay grown on chalk also contributes a flavor often described as chalky or

minerally. Indeed, the Champenois believe firmly that minerality in wine is a flavor

derived specifically from chalk.

IS IT CHALK OR IS IT LIMESTONE?

In wine conversations, the words chalk and limestone are often used interchangeably to refer to

especially prized soils. But the two are not exactly the same. Chalk is limestone, but limestone is not

necessarily chalk.

Limestone, a soil type found in Champagne, Burgundy, parts of the Loire Valley, central Spain, and

several other wine regions, is a marine sedimentary rock made from decomposed seashells and marine

skeletons that are extremely high in calcium. Limestone can form under a variety of conditions; thus,

there are many different types, including chalk, marble, marl, coquina (a sedimentary rock composed of

fragments of mollusk and invertebrate shells), and oolitic limestone (a carbonate rock made up of ooliths

or ooids, which are sand-size carbonate particles that have concentric rings of calcium carbonate). Not

all types of limestone are conducive to grape-growing—but chalk, in particular, is. Defined as soft

limestone that is porous and cool, chalk allows for easy root penetration. It provides good drainage, and

works well with high-acid grapes. It is, as a result, especially appreciated in Champagne and Burgundy,

where the grapes are indeed high in acid and the significant rainfall means good drainage is a must.

Pinot noir has more gravitas, more structure. In famous Grand Cru villages such as Aÿ,

on the Montagne de Reims, pinot noir can be rich and complex. (As an aside, no

Champagne village is more cherished or lauded than Aÿ. Indeed, the name of the

Champagne town Epernay evolved from après Aÿ, or “after Aÿ.

”)

And pinot meunier is a savior. Less prone to frost and botrytis than the other two, it can

be planted in the Marne V alley nearer the low-lying river, and thus in more humid

conditions. Pinot meunier has a supple, fresh fruitiness to it and is often used in

nonvintage blends for that reason. It’s considered the variety least capable of long aging,

and thus tends not to be used in vintage and prestige cuvée Champagnes.

THE INCREDIBLE CRAYÈRES

In order to have enough stone to construct the city of Reims in what was then Gaul, in the fourth century,

the Romans dug three hundred immensely deep quarries in the chalky rock. These same vertical chalk

pits, called crayères, are used today by the Champagne houses to age Champagne. They are miracles

of construction that seem to defy physics, and descending into their eerily quiet, cold, dark, humid

chambers is an otherworldly experience that no wine drinker should miss. Because the best chalk was

often well underground, the crayères often go down as far as 120 feet (36 meters). They are shaped like

pyramids, so the deepest parts of the crayères are also the widest and the tops of the pits are narrow

(this limited air exposure in the quarry and kept the chalk moist and soft, and thus easier to cut into large

construction blocks). During World War I, when Reims was extensively bombed, twenty thousand people

lived for years in the dark crayères (no sunlight penetrates). Indeed, the crayères under Veuve Clicquot

and Ruinart were makeshift hospitals, and under Pommery, a school.

The Grand Cru vineyard of Aÿ, in the V allée de la Marne.

Finally, while, as I’ve said, there is only one AOC in Champagne—that is, Champagne

—the region encompasses five main vineyard areas (below). These are usually not listed

on the label, but in investigating any wine, you’ll find references to them.

1 MONTAGNE DE REIMS, the “mountain of Reims”; an essentially south-facing slope where

the chalk layer is deep. Mostly planted with pinots noir and meunier.

2 CÔTE DES BLANCS, the “hillside of whites”; named for the chalky outcroppings near the

surface of the ground here. Planted almost exclusively with chardonnay. Mostly east

facing.

3 V ALLÉE DE LA MARNE,

“valley of the Marne River”; mostly planted with pinot meunier.

Soils tend more toward marl, clay, and sand.

4 CÔTE DE SÉZANNE, just south of the Côte des Blancs, and like it, mostly east facing and

planted with chardonnay.

5 CÔTE DES BAR (also known as the Aube), a region relatively far to the south of the other

regions; mostly planted with pinot noir. Many young growers are making exciting small-

production wines there.

Of these areas, Montagne de Reims, Côte des Blancs, and V allée de la Marne are the

three most important. The first two between them share all seventeen Grand Cru villages.

THE CATHEDRAL OF KINGS–THE WINE OF KINGS

Champagne’s characterization as the wine of kings is based on its association with the

Cathedral of Reims, the coronation site of virtually every French king. Built in the

thirteenth century, the cathedral (which is dedicated to the Virgin Mary) marks the site

of the baptism of Clovis I, King of the Franks, in 496. (The year of Clovis’s baptism is

also considered the birth of modern France.)

Construction of the cathedral began in 1211 on the site of two former Romanesque

cathedrals. By the time it was completed almost 100 years later, the cathedral, with its

dramatic, 114-foot-high (35-meter) great rose stained-glass window, and its 2,300

(originally, brightly painted) statues, was considered among the most stunning Gothic

cathedrals of all time.

Ranking with those at Chartres, the cathedral’s immense stained glass windows

have remained under the care of one family of glassmakers—the Simon family—since

the seventeenth century. During the bombings of World War II, the main stained glass

windows were, piece by piece, painstakingly removed and hidden, and thereby saved

from the destruction suffered by the rest of the city. In 1954, Jacques Simon was

commissioned by the Champagne producers to create three additional triptych windows

portraying the art of vine growing and winemaking in Champagne.

The facade’s portals contain some of the most impressive statuary to be seen in any

Gothic cathedral, including figures representing David and Goliath, the coronation of the

Virgin, the kings of France, and the famous Smiling Angel, l’ange au sourire. The local

Champenois expression for joy—the smile of Reims—is based on the statue’s beaming

countenance.

MAKING CHAMPAGNE

Champagne, along with Sherry, Port, and Madeira, is one of the world’s most complicated

wines to make. Not only are the steps involved numerous and demanding, but the

winemaking itself requires a specific type of intellectual dexterity that can be daunting.

The Champagne maker makes not one or even ten wines, but hundreds of still wines.

These are sometimes referred to as the base wines, and they look like typical white wines.

They are all made from one of Champagne’s three grapes: chardonnay, pinot noir, or pinot

meunier. All will eventually be blended. And that is where the plot thickens.

The Champagne maker’s goal is not to make a blend of wines that immediately tastes

good. This, in any case, would be difficult, for the base wines used to make Champagne

are virtually vibrating with acidity and often taste rather simple at first. Instead, the

Champagne maker blends these base wines with an idea, an imagining of what the blended

wine will taste like years later, once it has undergone a long period sur lie, plus a second

fermentation, has possibly been sweetened by some dosage, and has developed bubbles.

Y ears of skill, experimentation, and experience are needed to understand what a given

blend might taste like post-transformation. (The sensory demands are so complex that few

houses employ just one winemaker. Most have a team of individuals, often headed by a

senior winemaker, the so-called “memory of the house,

” who remembers distant vintages,

how the wines were made, and how they turned out decades after aging.)

HOW DRY IS THAT CHAMPAGNE?

After the yeasts are removed from each bottle, Champagnes may be topped up with sweetened reserve

wine, or liqueur d’expédition. The number of grams of sugar in this liqueur—known as the dosage—will

determine the category of Champagne made.

The vast majority of Champagnes now produced are brut (less than 1.2 percent sugar), and some

Champagnes (known as dosage zero) have no added sugar whatsoever. As for the categories sec,

demi-sec, and doux—while they are treasured in some countries, these Champagnes are increasingly

rare, and constitute only a tiny percentage of the Champagnes now made.

Below are the categories of Champagne based on their dosage. Keep in mind that, relative to, say, a

luscious dessert wine, no Champagne today is extremely sweet. Sauternes, for example, often contains

120 grams of sugar per liter, making it 12 percent sugar.

BRUT NATURE: less than 3 grams of sugar per liter (.3 percent sugar)

EXTRA BRUT : 0 to 6 grams per liter (0 to .6 percent sugar)

BRUT : less than 12 grams per liter (less than 1.2 percent sugar)

EXTRA-DRY: 12 to 17 grams per liter (1.2 to 1.7 percent sugar)

SEC: 17 to 32 grams per liter (1.7 to 3.2 percent sugar)

DEMI-SEC: 32 to 50 grams per liter (3.2 to 5 percent sugar)

SWEET : more than 50 grams per liter (5 percent sugar)

The process begins with the harvest. To ensure elegance in the final wine, the grapes

must be harvested gently and quickly by hand so that the juice doesn’t pick up any tannic

coarseness from the skins. The grapes are often therefore not transported to a winery to be

pressed, but rather pressed right in the vineyard in some two thousand pressing houses.

Each lot of grapes is kept separate.

In most cases, the juice is fermented in stainless steel vats, which allows the wine-

maker to control the temperature and pace of the fermentation and completely inhibits

oxidation. However, a few houses (notably Krug, Bollinger, Louis Roederer, and

Jacquesson) still ferment some of their wines in used wooden barrels, as was historically

done. Champagnes that have been fermented in barrels often take on a slight nuttiness and

a fuller mouthfeel as a result of slight oxygen exposure. And since the barrels are never

even close to new, there is never any oak flavor. After fermenting their wines, most

producers (but not all) will put those wines through malolactic fermentation to soften the

impression of the wines’ acidity.

The actual number of separate lots of base wine can be astounding. A typical house, for

example, will have hundreds of separate lots of base wines available for use. The largest

house, Moët & Chandon has some eight hundred separate base wines available for use

each year.

In a region of architectural majesty, the Cathedral of Reims is perhaps the most majestic building of all. Construction of

the cathedral began in 1211. When it was finished 100 years later , the cathedral became the coronation site of French

kings.

THE SOUND OF TASTE

I think I like Champagne because of its taste and the way it feels. But Oxford University professor

Charles Spence has shown that sound also plays a major role in what any of us think about flavor. Some

of Spence’s research, for example, showed that potato chips taste better if they sound noisier when you

bite into them. (And who can deny the charming hiss of Champagne being poured into the glass?)

Moreover, even the sound of a food’s or drink’s packaging can influence our perceptions. (The pop of a

Champagne cork?—totally appealing.) Interestingly, according to Spence, the perceived flavor of a

substance can also be affected by background sounds—bacon tastes more bacony if you can hear the

sound of it sizzling in a pan; eggs are more eggy if you hear chickens.

In addition, every producer also has a stock of reserve wines held back from former

years, principally the past three years. (As a matter of law, a small amount of reserve wine

is held back each year to ensure consistency of flavor year to year and as a hedge against

tiny crop yields in difficult vintages.) Even a small amount of this reserve wine can give a

Champagne blend extra depth and complexity, although it might mitigate against a sense

of freshness.

In the spring after the harvest, the wine-makers for a given house will start the process

of making that house’s nonvintage wine by blending dozens of base wines from different

years. The blend finally arrived at (still a still wine) is called the assemblage. The flavor of

every Champagne hinges on its blend. Thus, in the region, blending is considered not only

a phenomenal skill, but also a high art.

If the weather has been particularly good, certain lots of wine will be set aside as

blending material for the house’s vintage Champagne (a type of Champagne in which the

blend is composed only from the wines of a single year) and other lots for a prestige cuvée

(the house’s top, most expensive wine). However, no house will use up all of its great lots

making a vintage or a prestige cuvée wine at the expense of turning out a mediocre

nonvintage. Since the lion’s share of what every house makes every year is nonvintage,

making an inferior one would make no business sense.

COMPARING NONVINTAGE, VINTAGE, AND PRESTIGE

CUVÉES

Nonvintage Champagnes differ from vintage and prestige cuvée Champagnes in a number of ways,

detailed below.

VINEYARDS

In Champagne, some forty-two villages (and all of the vineyards in them) are considered superior and are

ranked Premier Cru. Seventeen more villages (and the vineyards within those) carry an even higher

status: Grand Cru.

NONVINTAGE CHAMPAGNE: Grapes come from good vineyards (neither Premier Cru nor Grand Cru)

although some Premier Cru wine may be blended in.

VINTAGE CHAMPAGNE: Grapes come from good to great vineyards, many of which are ranked

Premier Cru or Grand Cru.

PRESTIGE CUVÉE: Grapes come from the greatest vineyards, historically, ranked Grand Cru

exclusively.

GRAPES

Most Champagnes are a blend of chardonnay, pinot noir, and pinot meunier. However, because pinot

meunier is usually not as capable of long aging as chardonnay and pinot noir, some houses prefer to use

it only in nonvintage Champagnes, which tend to be drunk early, not cellared for many years.

NONVINTAGE CHAMPAGNE: Pinot meunier is almost always included in the blend.

VINTAGE CHAMPAGNE: Pinot meunier is sometimes included in the blend.

PRESTIGE CUVÉE: For most—but not all—houses, pinot meunier is rarely included in the blend.

BLENDING

All Champagnes are blends. Blending, in fact, is considered the most critical skill a Champagne maker

must possess.

NONVINTAGE CHAMPAGNE: Dozens—sometimes hundreds—of still wines are used, from several

different years.

VINTAGE CHAMPAGNE: Dozens of still wines are used, from a single year that was considered

exceptional.

PRESTIGE CUVÉE: A blend of only the best wines from the best vineyards to which the producer has

access.

AGING ON THE YEASTS

Most houses far exceed the legal minimums below.

NONVINTAGE CHAMPAGNE: fifteen months sur lie.

VINTAGE CHAMPAGNE: three years sur lie.

PRESTIGE CUVÉE: No requirement; common practice is four to ten years sur lie.

Next, the nonvintage blend will be mixed with a small amount of yeasts plus a liqueur

de tirage—a combination of sugar and wine—and then bottled and capped. The

predictable happens. The yeasts eat the sugar (this constitutes a second fermentation),

forming a bit more alcohol and throwing off carbon dioxide gas. Or trying to. Because the

bottles are capped, the CO2 cannot escape. It becomes physically trapped in the wine as

dissolved gas. When the bottles are eventually opened, this trapped gas will explode and

become bubbles.

Legally, the bottles must rest in the cellars for at least fifteen months at this point, but

in practice, most producers leave them there for about three years. Because the yeasts are

still inside the bottles, the wine is said to be resting sur lie (on the yeasts). Although it may

seem as if the yeasts’ job is done, they continue to have a profound effect on the wine

inside the bottle. Through a process called autolysis, the yeasts’ cell walls begin to

disintegrate, spilling the contents of each yeast cell (amino acids, lipids, and enzymes) into

the wine. The effect is to give the wine an almost magical sense of creaminess, and greater

complexity. Indeed, it is Champagne’s long aging on the yeasts that gives the wine what I

call contrapuntal tension. In the same split second, Champagne’s sensory impact is

lightning crisp (from acidity) yet lusciously creamy (from sur lie aging).

If the nonvintage Champagne was sold at this point, it would be cloudy with yeast

cells. To remove the yeasts and create a clear Champagne, the bottles are riddled—turned

upside down, then slightly rotated some twenty-five times. Traditionally, bottles to be

riddled were placed in an A-shaped frame known as a pupitre, and turned by hand by a

person called a rémueur. A good rémueur can riddle thirty thousand to forty thousand

bottles a day, and pupitres are still used, primarily for prestige cuvée Champagnes. Most

nonvintage Champagnes today are riddled equally effectively, but more efficiently, by

large machines called gyropalettes. At work twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, a

gyro-palette can riddle a Champagne in one to two weeks, versus two months or more

when the wine is in pupitre.

Magnums of Ruinart Blanc de Blancs lie in the house’ s spectacular crayères.

THE PUNT

While it’s tempting to pour a Champagne by holding the bottle with one’s thumb inserted in the punt, the

indentation in the bottom of the bottle was never intended for such a purpose. Originally, the punt was a

way of preventing the jagged pontil mark—the point left over after a glass bottle was blown and shaped—

from scratching the surface of a table. By pushing the pontil up into the interior of the bottle, a punt was

formed and the table was saved. When mold-made wine bottles were introduced, the punt remained, since

it adds stability to the bottle when the bottle is upright. With Champagne bottles, however, the punt has

even greater purpose. During the second fermentation, which ultimately gives Champagne its bubbles, six

atmospheres of pressure are built up inside the glass wall of the bottle. The Champagne bottle’s

prominent punt allows for a more even distribution of pressure inside the bottle, preventing the disastrous

explosions that were a common and serious problem for early Champagne makers.

The vin clairs (base wines) at V euve Clicquot. In the late fall after the harvest, houses taste each of their wines from

different villages and vineyards in order to begin making the assemblage or master blend.

As the bottles are riddled, the yeast cells collect in the necks of the bottles. Now

removal is easy. In a process called dégorgement, each bottle is placed, still upside-down,

in a glycol solution, which freezes the entire length of the neck and its contents. When the

bottle is then quickly turned upright and the cap removed, the frozen plug of yeasts shoots

out. This leaves a clear, bone-dry wine.

But it also leaves about ¼ inch (½ centimeter) of space unoccupied. Immediately, the

Champagne is topped up with the liqueur d’expédition, a combination of reserve wine and

sugar. The number of grams of sugar in the liqueur, also known as the dosage, determines

how dry or sweet the Champagne will be (see How Dry Is That Champagne?, page 182).

During the time the Champagne stays in contact with the yeast lees, it is aging

reductively—that is, without the presence of oxygen—because the broken down yeast

cells bind any oxygen present. Once the wine is disgorged, however, and the yeasts are

removed, the wine begins to age oxidatively—that is, oxygen is present. These two types

of aging are radically different. Y ou could easily experience the difference by tasting two

bottles of the same vintage Champagne that have been disgorged at different times. Let’s

say bottle A is a 2005 V euve Clicquot that was disgorged in 2009 (after four years on the

yeasts) and you drank it in 2013. Bottle B is 2005 V euve Clicquot that was disgorged in

2012 (seven years on the yeasts) and, again, you drank it in 2013. Although the bottles are

the same age, and you opened them at the same time, they’d taste very different. In the

first case, the wine was aged for four years oxidatively, without yeast lees present. In the

second case, the wine aged oxidatively, without the yeasts, for just one year.

Many (but not all) Champagne connoisseurs would prefer the bottle B scenario—aging

as long as possible with the yeasts and disgorging only at the relative last minute before

the wine goes to market. For that reason, a handful of Champagne firms now mark their

Champagnes with a disgorgement date on the wine label. Doing so is controversial in the

region, however. Several houses, for example, point out that some consumers, confused by

the concept of disgorgement, read the date and think it’s a “drink by” date, which it most

certainly is not.

BIBLICAL BOTTLES

The smallest Champagne bottles hold about one glass of bubbly; the largest, about one

hundred glasses. Large Champagne bottles are rarities and are individually handblown.

For unknown reasons, in the late 1800s, such bottles were given the names of biblical

kings.

SIZE EQUIVALENT

SPLIT 187.5 milliliters, about 1½ glasses

HALF-BOTTLE 375 milliliters, about 2½ glasses

BOTTLE 750 milliliters, about 5 glasses

MAGNUM 2 bottles, about 10 glasses

JEROBOAM 4 bottles, about 20 glasses

METHUSELAH 8 bottles, about 40 glasses

SALMANAZAR 12 bottles, about 60 glasses

BALTHAZAR 16 bottles, about 80 glasses

NEBUCHADNEZZAR 20 bottles, about 100 glasses

Jeroboam was a king of the northern kingdom of Israel. Methuselah, not an ancient

king, was distinguished by his incredible longevity, living 969 years. The Assyrian king

Salmanazar ruled over the Judean kingdom. Balthazar was the name of one of the

Three Wise Men, known as the Lord of the Treasury and also considered to be a

grandson of Nebuchadnezzar. The king of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar was a prominent

and powerful ruler who destroyed Jerusalem.

THE BUBBLES

For starters, how many bubbles does a bottle of Champagne have? The answer, for a

standard 750-milliliter bottle, is approximately 100 million. But that’s only if the bottle is

open; in an unopened bottle, the gas is still dissolved in the wine and thus, in an unopened

bottle, there is only the potential for bubbles. The 100 million figure comes from Gérard

Liger-Belair, PhD, in the department of physics at the University of Reims Champagne-

Ardenne, in France, where he has been conducting bubble research for more than a

decade.

Through the use of special high-speed cameras, Liger-Belair has also discovered that

bubbles play a part in determining the aromas a drinker smells. Each bubble appears to

contain hundreds of chemical components, some of which can affect taste, aroma, and

feel. When the bubble bursts on the surface of the wine, tiny droplets of Champagne are

projected into the air, allowing the drinker to smell the wine more acutely.

Research in the cold cellars 120 feet (36 meters) underground. I think I was wearing four layers of clothing.

In Champagne, bubble size and persistency are signs of quality. Tiny bubbles,

considered the best, are the result of a long aging on the yeasts and the temperature of the

aging cellar (the cooler the smaller). Equally important is how the bubbles behave in the

glass. A high-quality Champagne will have streams of bubbles arising from different spots

in the liquid (as many as fifty bubbles per second), coming together to create a spiraling

cascade. At the top of the glass, these collect to form a snowy layer called the mousse.

Champagne makers insist that the feel of the bubbles should be extremely delicate

(nothing like, for example, the harsh, large bubbles in, say, a cola).

TYPES OF CHAMPAGNE

By far, most Champagne produced is golden in color and made from all three Champagne

grapes: chardonnay, pinot noir, and pinot meunier. However, there are two somewhat less

well-known types of Champagne that can be quite special: blanc de blancs and rosé. (A

type of sparkling wine known as blanc de noirs also exists but, as you’ll see, it is virtually

nonexistent in Champagne.)

MY FAIR BUBBLY

Just 80 miles (129 kilometers) north of Champagne is a cool, fairly sunny region with white, chalky

limestone soils—soils that are strikingly similar to those found in Champagne. Indeed the region is so

close to Champagne and seems so ideal for making sparkling wine that you’d think the Champenois

would want to annex it. There’s just one problem. The region in question is in England.

The English, of course, have always loved bubbles. The country continues to be, as it has been for

decades, the leading export market for Champagne. But sometime in the 1990s, the English began to

think big. Why merely buy bubbly? Why not try to make it… especially since southeast England—near

Sussex, Kent, and of course the White Cliffs of Dover—bears a remarkable resemblance to the

Champagne region?

They’ve done just that. More than a dozen British companies, including Ridgeview Estate, Nyetimber,

Rathfinny, Camel Valley, Hush Heath, and Chapel Down, all make English sparkling wines, and several

more ventures are in the works. For their part, numerous Champagne houses have scouted the region in

anticipation of future deals.

They’ve had a royal welcome. Camilla Parker Bowles, Duchess of Cornwall (and second wife of

Charles, Prince of Wales) is the current president of the United Kingdom Vineyards Association.

BLANC DE BLANCS CHAMPAGNE

Literally “white from whites,

” blanc de blancs Champagne is made entirely from

chardonnay grapes. This type of Champagne was created in 1921 by Eugène-Aimé Salon,

founder of the Champagne house Salon, whose intention was to create a Champagne with

maximum finesse, lightness, and elegance. Easy to say, but exceedingly difficult to do,

since the winemaker limited to one grape variety has fewer overall wines with which to

work.

The best blanc de blancs are treasured for their lightnesss and their gymnastic lift on

the palate. They, among all Champagnes, are the sopranos, capable of hitting the high

notes of flavor and displaying an especially filigreed sense of texture. Blanc de blancs

generally come from the chalky slopes of the Côte des Blancs, one of the premier grape-

growing regions in Champagne and the one planted almost exclusively with chardonnay.

Within the Côte des Blancs is the grand cru village of Le Mesnil-sur-Oger, home to two of

the most extraordinary blanc de blancs Champagnes in the world: Krug’s Clos du Mesnil

and Salon’s Le Mesnil. Blanc de blancs Champagnes may be nonvintage or vintage. They

are generally expensive.

BLANC DE NOIRS CHAMPAGNE

Blanc de noirs (“white from reds”), is the opposite of blanc de blancs, an ever-so-slightly

pink-tinged golden Champagne made entirely from red grapes (pinot noir and/or pinot

meunier). Blanc de noirs Champagnes are extremely rare in Champagne itself (although

common in, for example, California). Champagne makers seem to like definitiveness

when it comes to color; if they’re not making a golden Champagne, then they’re making

an unapologetically rosy pink rosé.

ROSÉ CHAMPAGNE

Among wine drinkers who know their Champagne, rosé Champagnes, which are richer

and fuller-bodied than goldens, are considered the crème de la crème. They are usually

significantly more expensive than golden Champagnes, a reflection of the fact that they

are more difficult to produce, and they’re more rare, forming just over 6 percent of all

exports. There are two methods for making them. The first—and historical—method

(called saignée) involves letting some of the base wine sit in contact with pinot noir skins

until it picks up enough color to tint the wine pink. The other method, more modern and

more common, involves adding a small amount of still pinot noir wine into each

Champagne bottle before the second fermentation. Both processes are complex, and

achieving a certain exact coloration is difficult, as a lineup of rosé Champagnes will attest.

A rosé Champagne needn’t be made mostly from red grapes. The assemblage (blend of

base wines) might be a blend of 80 percent pinot noir and 20 percent chardonnay—or just

the opposite, 80 percent chardonnay and only 20 percent pinot noir. A rosé can be made

either way, but when you drink them the impressions the two wines make will be quite

different.

SERVING CHAMPAGNE—NOT WITH A BANG BUT A

WHISPER

Champagne is classically served well chilled, and a cold temperature helps maintain the

bubbles when the Champagne is poured. Because Champagne bottles are made with

thicker glass than regular wine bottles, the time required to chill them is longer. Allow

twenty to forty minutes in a bucket of ice and water.

“The pop of the cork should sound like a gunshot with a silencer.

”

— CLOVIS TAITTINGER,

Taittinger Champagne

Opening Champagne is not difficult, but it is different—and far more exciting—than

opening a bottle of still wine. Each Champagne bottle is under six atmospheres of

pressure, about the same as a truck tire. With so much pressure behind it, a cork can fly an

astounding distance. But that’s only if you open the bottle incorrectly. The correct, safe,

and controlled way to open and serve Champagne is:

1 BREAK AND REMOVE the foil, not the wire cage, from around the cork.

2 PLACE YOUR THUMB firmly on top of the cork to keep the cork from flying.

3 WITH YOUR OTHER hand, unscrew the wire (it takes about six turns) and loosen the cage.

Y ou actually don’t have to take the cage off completely.

4 HOLDING THE CORK firmly, begin to twist it in one direction as, from the bottom, you

twist the bottle in the other direction. Contrary to popular opinion, a Champagne cork

should not make a loud thwock! Y ou’re supposed to ease the cork out, so that it makes just

a light hissing sound. Unbidden, more than one older Frenchman has advised me that a

Champagne bottle, correctly opened, should make a sound no greater than that of a

contented woman’s sigh. Frenchmen are French men after all.

5 FILL EACH GLASS with about 2 inches (5 centimeters) of Champagne. Then go back and

top them all up. Do not immediately top up glasses with fresh Champagne every time a sip

or two has been taken. Just as topping up a half-filled cup of coffee ensures that you’ll

never have the satisfaction of a fresh, steaming hot cup, so too, frequent topping up of

Champagne can mean the wine is never nicely chilled.

GROWER CHAMPAGNES

Most wine drinkers are familiar with at least a few Champagnes made by the famous houses. But fewer

know or have tasted many of the so-called grower Champagnes. From the top producers, grower

Champagnes are distinctive, exquisite, and often mind-blowingly delicious.

Grower Champagnes are, as the name implies, made by small growers, often family firms who make

what might be called artisanal Champagnes. Growers do not buy grapes or wine as the houses do.

Rather, they make Champagnes exclusively from the grapes they grow themselves. As a result, a

grower’s Champagne is usually based on a very much smaller number of base wines that are blended

together before the wine undergoes the second, bubble-inducing fermentation. Because a grower is

using just his own grapes from a small area, grower Champagnes tend to reflect the place where they

are made. In a sense, grower Champagnes exhibit what might be thought of as a more Burgundian

approach, wherein individual terroirs are prized above all. Among my favorite grower Champagnes are

those made by: Pierre Peters, René Geoffroy, Pierre Gimonnet, Gatinois, Doyard, Michel Loriot, Jean

Milan, Varnier-Fannière, Chartogne-T aillet, and Jean Lallement.

THE RIGHT GLASS

Ever watch people being handed glasses of Champagne? At least half of them

immediately stand up straighter and adopt a sexier tone of voice. The elegant and long-

lined Champagne glass is about as sophisticated as glassware gets.

Tall, tulip-shaped glasses evolved from conical glasses made between 1300 and 1500 in

V enice. These, in turn, were inspired by some of the earliest drinking vessels, such as

animal horns. Serendipitously, the art of glassmaking was reaching its apex just as

Champagne making was at its pivotal beginnings. By the late seventeenth century,

V enetian glassmakers were capable of creating fragile goblets that possessed remarkable

clarity. Historians theorize that the transparent beauty of such glass may have been one of

the considerations that ultimately led winemakers to develop techniques for making

crystal-clear, sediment-free Champagne.

Tall Champagne glasses allow the wine’s bubbles to swell as they rise in long, spiraling

streams to the surface. However, the glass should be slightly wide in the middle so that a

bowl is formed within which aromas can congregate. (Severely narrow flutes are not ideal

Champagne glasses.)

Riddling Cristal, the first prestige cuvée, in the cellars of Louis Roederer.

As for the wide, shallow, saucer-shaped Champagne coupe (often used at weddings),

legend has it that the first was a porcelain version invented by Marie Antoinette, who used

her breast (reportedly the left breast because it was closer to her heart) as the mold.

Notwithstanding so compelling a beginning, the coupe is terrible for Champagne. In it,

bubbles dissipate quickly, the Champagne is easily warmed by the drinker’s hand, and,

frustratingly, the vessel itself hardly holds more than two sips.

A Champagne cellar worker stacking barrels at Krug, one of the few houses that vinifies some of its base wines in oak

barrels.

THE STARS AMONG THE CHAMPAGNES

Prestige cuvées are the most expensive and highest-quality category of Champagne. Nearly every house

and significant grower makes a golden prestige cuvée, and several make a rosé version as well. The first

prestige cuvée was made in 1876 by the house of Roederer for Czar Alexander II of Russia, who wanted

an exclusive Champagne not available to (god forbid) the lower aristocracy. The czar further dictated that

it be shipped in leaded crystal bottles. Roederer’s prestige cuvée was hence named Cristal. Among the

other well-known and exquisite prestige cuvées are Bollinger’s “La Grande Année,

” Perrier-Jouët’s

“Belle Epoque Fleur de Champagne,

” Pol Roger’s “Cuvée Sir Winston Churchill,

” V euve Clicquot’s “La

Grande Dame,

” and Taittinger’s “Comtes de Champagne.

” Note that Dom Pérignon and Krug consider

all of their wines prestige cuvées. Dom Pérignon also produces Oenothèque, two rare, breathtakingly

expensive bottlings—one golden, one rosé—that have been aged fifteen to thirty years on the yeast lees.

The Champagnes to Know

Champagne is my downfall. While other people might spend money on really nice clothes, the latest technology,

exotic travel, and so on, I spend money on bubbles. Champagne has always seemed to me to be the most affordable

luxury. Below are several of my favorite exquisite Champagnes—from large houses to small growers. Had I more

room to write, this list could have easily been three times as long.

WHITES

PIERRE PETERS

CUVÉE DE RÉSERVE | BLANC DE BLANCS | GRAND CRU | NONVINTAGE | BRUT

100% chardonnay

The grower Champagnes from Pierre Peters are jewels—ravishingly beautiful, exquisite, crystalline. Their

animated minerality plays on your palate like high notes on a piano. Y et the flavors are deeply resonant and

complex. There’s something salty, like the breeze on a pure white beach; something evanescent, like the lure of a

delicate white flower; and something familiar yet exotic, like citrus tied up in ribbons of vanilla. Virtually all of the

Pierre Peters vineyards are in the Côte des Blancs, with many in the heralded village of Le Mesnil-sur-Oger.

J. LASSALLE

BLANC DE BLANCS | VINTAGE | BRUT

100% chardonnay

One of the first grower Champagnes to be brought into the United States (by importer Kermit Lynch, in 1976), J.

Lassalle is a small, family-run business in the village of Chigny-les-Roses on the Montagne de Reims. Since 1982,

the company has been run by three generations of the women in the family, giving rise to the firm’s unofficial

adage, une femme, un esprit, un style (one woman, one spirit, one style). The Lassalle Champagnes—all of which

undergo malolactic fermentation and are based entirely on Premier Cru vineyards—have exquisite balance. Their

intensity of flavor fills your head like music floating in a room. The Blanc de Blancs is somewhat unusual in that

the chardonnay is grown on the Montagne de Reims, which is prime pinot territory. Is it just my imagination that

this leads to resonance and depth?

RUINART

BLANC DE BLANCS | NONVINTAGE | BRUT

100% chardonnay

Ruinart’s Blanc de Blancs, in its rounded, ancient-shaped bottle, is the house’s signature Champagne and a wine of

such elegance and weightlessness that it seems to float around you and then eventually melt on your palate… a

snowflake of sensation, then gone. Y et the wine’s flavors are intense—juicy pears, whipped cream, spices, star fruit,

minerals. Interestingly, there’s a coolness to these flavors, in the way that mint is cooling, no matter what its actual

temperature. Ruinart, founded in 1729 by Dom Ruinart, a contemporary of Dom Pérignon, was the first Champagne

house. Its crayères, vast amphitheaters 60 to 120 feet (18 to 37 meters) deep, are the region’s most impressive. The

house’s prestige cuvée, Dom Ruinart, is another not-to-be-missed wine—an exotic, primordial-tasting wine that,

with age, can smell like truffles.

PIERRE GIMONNET ET FILS

BLANC DE BLANCS | PREMIER CRU | NONVINTAGE | BRUT

100% chardonnay

The top Pierre Gimonnet Champagnes taste as if chalk itself underwent some wizardly molecular transformation

and emerged as exquisitely delicious froth and foam. In the Gimonnet playbook, the Blanc de Blancs is my favorite

wine—an exotic riot of quince and bergamot, with a fresh, green note like lemongrass and a tingling minerality. At

the same time, the wine is very suave, gentle, and creamy. It feels soft yet refreshing, like cool water on a hot day.

Pierre Gimonnet, a relatively large grower Champagne firm, is family owned, with almost all of its vineyards in the

Côte des Blancs.

POL ROGER

EXTRA CUVÉE DE RÉSERVE | NONVINTAGE | BRUT

Approximately 33% each of chardonnay, pinot noir, and pinot meunier

Pol Roger is a Champagne drinker’s Champagne—winey, rich, citrusy, yet a bit custardy, with a sublimeness and

seriousness on the palate. The house’s Champagnes have always been favorites in England (Winston Churchill, a

huge admirer, had cases delivered to 10 Downing Street on a regular basis). For me, the Pol Roger Champagnes

always feel like just fallen snow, light yet clingy. And the balance of creaminess versus acidity is impeccable. In

particular, their nonvintage brut, known as Extra Cuvée de Réserve, is an exquisite wine with tiny beads of bubbles

and the wispy elegance that make the top bruts so compelling.

TAITTINGER

VINTAGE | BRUT

50% chardonnay, 50% pinot noir

Taittinger’s vintage bruts have an exquisite sense of choreography—they dance and spark on the palate like beams

of light. The wine begins with a rush of crème brûlée-like richness, then moves on to a fierce crispness, with flashes

of wet stone—as if the wine could rain with chalky minerality. Only the most deliciously complex Champagnes

move like this through different worlds of flavor and texture, all in one sip. The house of Taittinger is located on the

site of the ancient Benedictine Abbey of Saint Nicaise, begun in 1231, and a locus of artistic and intellectual

activity for monks until it was destroyed in the French Revolution.

KRUG

GRANDE CUVÉE | NONVINTAGE PRESTIGE CUVÉE | BRUT

Approximately 50% pinot noir, 30% chardonnay, and 20% pinot meunier

Krug, broodingly rich and positively Rubenesque in its fullness, is a Champagne with such a distinct style that no

one who has tasted it has ever forgotten it. Every molecule aches with density and intensity. (I always imagine what

roasted nuts would taste like if each little one could be filled with pastry cream.) But the wine is stunning not only

because of its gravitas, but also because of its exquisite balance. Indeed, the contrapuntal tension of Krug—the

simultaneous weight and lightness, impact and stillness—is what makes it such a connoisseur’s wine.

BOLLINGER

LA GRANDE ANNÉE | VINTAGE PRESTIGE CUVÉE | BRUT

Approximately 66% pinot noir and 33% chardonnay

Founded in 1829, Bollinger is one of the best-known of the grand historic Champagne houses—and the wines are

always round, rich, winey, luxurious, and toasty. More like lemon curd than fresh lemons; more like caramelized

apple tart than fresh apples. The richness is the result of extremely long aging periods on the yeast lees, as well as

micro-oxygenation. The latter occurs because Bollinger is one of the last remaining houses to vinify their best

wines in impeccably-cared-for old oak barrels. (Indeed, the house has its own cooper and cooperage—the last ones

to exist in Champagne.) La Grande Année, Bollinger’s prestige cuvée, always has a low dosage (just 7 or 8 grams

of sugar per liter, .7 to .8 percent) and comes entirely from Premier Cru and Grand Cru vineyards.

ROSÉS

GATINOIS

ROSÉ | GRAND CRU | NONVINTAGE | BRUT

90% pinot noir, 10% chardonnay

The Gatinois family—père, maman, and fils—are the twelfth generation of growers to make Champagnes from 14

acres (5 hectares) of Grand Cru vineyards in the famous village of Aÿ. (Father Pierre, a lawyer by training, is also

the former deputy mayor of the village.) In their tiny dirt-floor cellar behind the village church, everything is done

by hand—even the disgorging of every single one of the fifty thousand bottles they produce each year. The Gatinois

Champagnes are all finely etched and full of personality, but I love the rosé especially—a winey, spicy, minerally

Champagne redolent of kirsch and crushed strawberries that finishes with beautiful richness on the palate.

LOUIS ROEDERER

ROSÉ | NONVINTAGE | BRUT

65% pinot noir, 35% chardonnay

While many Champagne houses in the nineteenth century counted the Russian nobility among their best customers,

the firm of Louis Roederer was especially successful, for the czar himself was its best customer. In 1876, at the

request of Alexander II, Louis Roederer’s son created Cristal, then a sweet Champagne (it’s now dry) presented in a

custom-designed crystal bottle. Cristal became the first prestige cuvée, and it is still the house’s most famous and

expensive wine (both golden and rosé Cristal are made). While Cristal is certainly a Champagne to have at least

once in one’s life, Louis Roederer’s nonvintage brut rosé—made by the old saignée method and a rare wine in and

of itself—is, for me, the can’t-resist wine. Among rosé Champagnes, it is especially stunning, and has a

sumptuousness that is nothing short of all-enveloping. The complex aromatics of pinot noir surge through the wine

until the end, when a beam of bright crispness shatters all sensations. Great rosés such as this must be made from

ripe grapes (difficult to come by in Champagne), and thus the grapes for this wine are sourced on a steep

limestone/clay slope that benefits from light bouncing off the Marne River.

BURGUNDY

Burgundy is not what most people choose to begin their journey with wine; but Burgundy

is often where many of us find ourselves at the end. For Burgundy—Bourgognes in French

—is the most spiritual of wines. Of all the wines in the world, it is the one that poses the

deepest questions, and reminds us that the answers still lie in mystery.

What is it about this wine from a small, almost secluded region that makes it so

compelling? Above all, great Burgundies are stunningly complex. Drinking them can be

an exercise in discernment, refinement, and delicious patience as subtle layer of flavor

after subtle layer of flavor reveals itself. Indeed, Burgundy is most certainly the “quiet

music” of wine—not the rap.

The great Burgundies are also indisputably sensual. For centuries they have been

described in the most erotic of ways, and sipping them has been compared, among other

things, to falling in love. This sensuality extends beyond the wines’ provocatively primal

aromas and flavors. The top Burgundies, white and red, have beguiling textures that melt

over or dance upon the palate in ways that make them unforgettable. Unlike many types of

wine, Burgundy’s physicality is trenchant.

“What else do we have, in the end, except Nature?”

— FRANÇOIS MILLET,

winemaker, Domaine Comte Georges de V ogüé

While a small handful of grape varieties are grown in Burgundy, just two dominate

production: chardonnay and pinot noir. Both grapes achieve their greatest elegance when

planted in a cool climate, and that Burgundy has. Of all the wine regions in the world that

are famous for red wine, Burgundy is the coolest and northernmost. The downside of

Burgundy’s marginal climate is that there are years when the lack of sun and/or the

frequency of rain results in grapes that are not fully ripened and mature, leading to

considerably leaner, less flavorful wines. These less-than-ideal years are not uncommon,

and as a result, there are very apparent differences among vintages of Burgundy. Thus,

even the priciest and most pedigreed Burgundies can occasionally be very disappointing.

As spellbinding as a great Burgundy is, a poor one is almost depressing.

THE QUICK SIP ON BURGUNDY

BURGUNDY , a fairly small wine region in northeastern France, makes some of the

world’s most sought-after, expensive, and exquisite wines.

THE SYSTEM OF LAND OWNERSHIP is complex. Burgundy has thousands of tiny

vineyards, each of which has dozens of owners.

TWO GRAPE VARIETIES DOMINATE. All top white Burgundies are made from

chardonnay. All top reds come from pinot noir.

Later in this chapter, we will explore how (and why) Burgundy is an infinitesimally

detailed study in terroir. But for now, it’s important to know that of France’s

approximately five hundred designated appellations (AOCs, or Appellations d’Origine

Contrôlée), just over one hundred are in Burgundy alone.

Lastly, this chapter addresses the four main regions that wine drinkers think of when

they think about Burgundy—Chablis, the Côte d’Or, the Côte Chalonnaise, and the

Mâconnais. While legally, from a governmental standpoint, Beaujolais is also considered

part of Burgundy, everything about Beaujolais—from soils and grapes to winemaking and

philosophy—is entirely different. So I’ve given Beaujolais its own chapter, following this

one.

Burgundy got its name in the sixth century, in the aftermath of the fall of the

Roman Empire, when the wandering Germanic tribe known as the Burgondes

established a settlement in the area. They called it Burgundia.

HISTORY, MONKS, THE ESTABLISHMENT OF

TERROIR, AND THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

Burgundy’s first documented vineyard was planted in the village of Meursault in the first

century A.D. But the population was minuscule and grape growing did not expand. With

the Romans came a somewhat greater emphasis on wine, but Rome’s ties were never as

strong here in the north as they were in southern France. By the fifth century, as the

Roman Empire collapsed, the region was repeatedly plundered by wandering barbarian

tribes. Eventually, in the year 450, the Germanic Burgondes settled in the area, calling it

Burgundia. In 534, Burgundia was absorbed into another Germanic entity, the Frankish

kingdom established by Clovis, the king of the Franks. Clovis eventually went on to unify

the numerous barbaric Germanic tribes that operated throughout what was then called

Gaul. With Clovis’s coronation, modern France (the name is derived from Franks) was

born, and Clovis’s eventual conversion to Christianity established France as a Christian

nation. With Christianity in place, the course of Burgundy’s history changed, as it went on

to become a nucleus for Catholicism and monastic power.

But the period most crucial in the region’s history was the thousand-year period from

the eighth century to the French Revolution, when much of the land and most of its wines

were under the powerful command of Benedictine and Cistercian monks.

The Benedictine Abbey of Cluny, founded in the year 909 near Mâcon, was the most

well-endowed order in Europe and the largest landowner in Burgundy until the French

Revolution. At the height of their dominance, the Benedictines controlled more than

fifteen hundred monasteries. The magnificent Abbey of Cluny remained the largest

cathedral in Europe until it was surpassed by the “new” magnificent St. Peter’s in Rome,

consecrated in 1626 (built on the spot of the original small St. Peter’s basilica, dating from

the fourth century).

At the end of the eleventh century, a reform movement within the Benedictines resulted

in the formation of a second order, the Cistercians. The Cistercian Abbey of Citeaux,

founded in 1098, was one of Europe’s most magnificent workshops devoted to the

creation of books, with monks serving as copyists, illuminators, and book binders. By the

time of the Revolution, its library boasted more than ten thousand volumes.

Contemplative by nature, patient in temperament, systematic in approach, committed to

grueling physical labor, well bestowed with land, and most important, literate, the monks

were uniquely prepared for their mission: to delineate and codify Burgundy’s vineyards.

Plot by plot, they cleared and cultivated the most difficult limestone slopes of the Côte

d’Or, studiously comparing vineyards and the wines made from them, recording their

impressions over centuries. Tantamount to a millennium-long research project, the work of

these monks not only revealed Burgundy’s greatest vineyards—but, in fact, for the first

time, established terroir as the critical core of viticulture.

A gray stone cross towers over the renowned Grand Cru vineyard Romanée-Conti.

BURGUNDY’S DOMAINES

In Burgundy, the term domaine is not precisely equivalent to that of château in Bordeaux. In Bordeaux,

a château is a single estate composed of vineyards surrounding a building or house that is sometimes

quite palatial. In Burgundy, a domaine is a collection of vineyard parcels, often extremely small, owned

by the same family or entity (Domaine Leroy, Domaine Dujac, Domaine Leflaive, and so on). Usually

these parcels are scattered throughout many villages and appellations, and the domaine will make a

separate wine from each. A typical Burgundian domaine produces many wines, all in tiny quantities.

There are six thousand domaines in Burgundy today. Interestingly, some domaines are now dropping the

word domaine from their labels, in favor of just the producer’s name.

Burgundy’s monastic orders shared their power with a series of flamboyant and

wealthy dukes who, in return for religious approbation, bestowed even more land upon the

monks. The dukes served as strong promoters for Burgundy; their connections put

Burgundian wines on the tables of popes, French kings, and the nobility. When the pious

among the nobility began donating land to the monks as well, it seemed as though the

fortunes of the church would know no bounds.

THE VILLAGES OF BURGUNDY

T o name every important appellation in Burgundy would take pages because, in

addition to all the villages, there are no fewer than 629 Premier Cru vineyards and 33

Grand Cru vineyards (see The 33 Grand Cru Vineyards of Burgundy, page 209). Here’s

a list of Burgundy’s four main regions (in capital letters) and the most significant villages

within them listed from north to south, and the type of wine each specializes in.

CHABLIS

CHABLIS white

CÔTE D’OR

Côte de Nuits

MARSANNAY red

FIXIN red

GEVREY-CHAMBERTIN red

MOREY-ST .

-DENIS red

CHAMBOLLE-MUSIGNY red

VOUGEOT red

FLAGEY-ECHÉZEAUX red

VOSNE-ROMANÉE red

NUITS-ST .

-GEORGES red

Côte de Beaune

LADOIX-SERRIGNY red

ALOXE-CORTON white and red

CHOREY-LÈS-BEAUNE red

SAVIGNY-LÈS-BEAUNE red

BEAUNE white and red

POMMARD red

VOLNAY red

MONTHÉLIE red

MEURSAULT white

AUXEY-DURESSES white and red

PULIGNY-MONTRACHET white

CHASSAGNE-MONTRACHET white and red

SANTENAY red

CÔTE CHALONNAISE

RULLY white and red

MERCUREY predominantly red

GIVRY predominantly red

MONTAGNY white

MÂCONNAIS

VERGISSON\* white

SOLUTRÉ-POUILLY\* white

FUISSÉ\* white

CHAINTRÉ\* white

ST .

-VÉRAND\*\* white

\*One of the villages that produces the well-known wine Pouilly-Fuissé.

\*\*The village that produces St.

-Véran.

IT TAKES A RIVER… OR A POPE

Burgundy has always been comparatively less well known than Bordeaux, largely due to its inland

location. For most of history, wine has been transported over water—that is, if it hasn’t been completely

consumed by the population at hand. As early as the thirteenth century, barrels of Bordeaux were being

shipped down the Gironde Estuary, then out to sea, headed for England. But Burgundy, deep in France’s

interior, was without a great waterway. Transporting its wines meant hauling heavy loads over potholed

dirt roads. It wasn’t until the fourteenth century, when the papal court and residence moved from Rome

to Avignon, in southern France, that Burgundy began to achieve recognition. Not surprisingly, the newly

arrived pope and entourage of clerics were keen to drink the wines so intimately cared for by Burgundy’s

monks. Demand soared. Later, as towns grew and roads got somewhat better, Burgundy’s fame spread.

In 1789, the French Revolution ended forever the hegemony of the church and

Burgundy’s infamous dukes. Immense tracts of land were confiscated, split up, and

redistributed to the farmers who had worked those lands. Later, these small plots were

further fragmented as a result of the Napoleonic Code of 1804, which stipulated that upon

the death of a parent, all children must inherit equally. As a result of this successive

fragmentation, it’s not unusual today for a Burgundian to own just a few scant rows of

vines.

PLACE, NOT PERSON

The idea of terroir is a kind of mental construct that, at least in Burgundy, is inescapable.

Y ou cannot think of the region simply in terms of pinot noir and chardonnay, for in the

most elemental sense, Burgundy is not about pinot noir and chardonnay. Pinot noir and

chardonnay are merely the voices through which the message of a site is expressed.

Indeed, it’s important to remember that there is no exact word in French for winemaker. In

Burgundy, the term most often used is vigneron, which means “vine grower.

”

To some, this distinction might seem awfully precious. Y et terroir—and, in Burgundy,

the incredible specificity of terroir—cannot be easily dismissed or avoided. Taste two

wines from the same domaine and you may find enormous differences between them.

How can these be explained when both wines were made by the same person, in the same

exact manner, from the same variety of grapes grown in the same way? The clearly

apparent variable, and the factor that reasonably seems responsible for those differences, is

place.

LIEU-DIT AND CLIMAT

Two special wine terms are used in Burgundy (although only rarely elsewhere in France): lieu-dit (leh

DEE) and climat (KLEE ma). Lieu-dit (literally,

“said location”) is the term used for a specific vineyard that

has an established name. A lieu-dit is usually tiny (smaller than an appellation or AOC) and usually not

inhabited. Sometimes the lieu-dit appears on the wine’s label along with the AOC. Lieux-dits do not

necessarily carry a rank, such as Premier or Grand Cru.

The term climat is sometimes used interchangeably with lieu-dit, but the two are actually slightly

different. A climat is a specific parcel within a vineyard that has unique terroir characteristics. Most

climats are within classified vineyards. For example, the Grand Cru vineyard Clos de Vougeot has

sixteen climats that make it up. The name of a climat may appear on the label, as is the case with the

seven climats that make up the single vineyard Chablis Grand Cru (see Chablis, page 212).

UNDERSTANDING HOW BURGUNDY WORKS

Burgundy is often thought of as one of the world’s most difficult wine regions to

understand (a distinction it shares with Germany). And it is complicated—especially when

compared to, say, California or Australia. But understanding Burgundy is a “road in” to

thinking about all fine wine at a deeper, more philosophical level. Here are eight key

points essential to beginning to understand Burgundy.

1 VIRTUALLY ALL WHITE BURGUNDY is made exclusively from chardonnay, and virtually all

red Burgundy is made exclusively from pinot noir. (This said, the wines are so distinctive

that white Burgundy in particular has very little flavor resemblance with most of the

chardonnay made in the world today.) In Burgundy, at least for the top wines, chardonnay

is never blended with another variety, and neither is pinot noir.

2 AS MENTIONED, BURGUNDY comprises four major regions—Chablis, the Côte d’Or, the

Côte Chalonnaise, and the Mâconnais (again, Beaujolais, the fifth region, technically

speaking, is given its own chapter following this chapter). The wines in these regions are

grouped into four levels. Starting with the most basic (least expensive) wine and moving

to the most sophisticated (and most expensive), the levels are:

• Burgundy Red and White: Bourgogne Rouge and Bourgogne Blanc, as they are known

to the French, are usually simple, basic regional wines, generally blends of various lots of

wine made from grapes of the same variety grown anywhere in the entire region of

Burgundy. Often, wines such as these lack the specificity of terroir that Burgundy is

acclaimed for, although they do have a basic regional character. These basic regional

wines account for 52 percent of Burgundy’s total production, and they are the most

affordable Burgundies. Finally, while basic white and red Burgundy have historically been

considered “entry wines” for the budget conscious, the quality of basic Burgundy has risen

dramatically in the past ten years, and wines like the basic Bourgogne Blanc of, say,

Domaine Leflaive or Pierre Matrot, are fantastic.

• Village Wine: This is where Burgundy begins to get dependably interesting. As the name

implies, a village wine is made entirely from grapes grown in and around that village. This

is a step up in price (and usually quality) from a regional wine because the grapes come

from a smaller, more well-defined place. The name of the village—Beaune, V olnay,

Gevrey-Chambertin, Pommard, Meursault, Nuits-St.

-Georges, Chambolle-Musigny, and

so on—will appear on the label. There are forty-four villages, and the wines that come

from these account for 36 percent of Burgundy’s total production.

• Premier Cru: The smallest, most well-defined place of all is a vineyard. In 1861, the top

vineyards of Burgundy were classified as either Premier Cru—First Growth—or given an

even higher designation, Grand Cru. There are 629 Premier Cru vineyards. Wines from

these vineyards are invariably expensive. The name of the vineyard (which I have put in

quotes here for clarity) will appear on the label, after the name of the village; for example,

Beaune “Clos de la Mousse” or Gevrey-Chambertin “Aux Combottes.

” Premier Cru wines

account for 10 percent of Burgundy’s total production.

Chambertin-Clos de Bèze, a Grand Cru vineyard in the village of Gevrey-Chambertin. A knockout in terms of its beauty,

the wine has sophistication, nuance, and restraint.

• Grand Cru: The highest designation a Burgundian vineyard can hold is Grand Cru—

Great Growth. Wines made from Grand Cru vineyards are the most treasured and

expensive wines in Burgundy and rank among the most costly wines in the world. In the

Côte d’Or, there are only thirty-two vineyards designated as Grand Cru, and there is one

Grand Cru in Chablis (more on this in a moment), for a final total of thirty-three Grands

Crus in the entire Burgundy region (see The 33 Grand Cru Vineyards of Burgundy, page

209). The Grands Crus are so famous that their names alone appear on the labels, along

with the words Grand Cru. Thus, for example, La Tâche and Le Musigny are Grand Cru

vineyards, but the label won’t mention the villages (V osne-Romanée and Chambolle-

Musigny, respectively) where those vineyards are located. Wines from Grand Cru

vineyards account for just 2 percent of Burgundy’s total production.

THE ECCLESIASTIC WISDOM OF A SLOPE

Long before the French appellation system was established in the twentieth century, the Benedictine and

Cistercian monks of Burgundy had already begun to define, differentiate, and characterize the region’s

vineyards and the quality of the wines that came from them. The wines from the lower part of the slope,

which had the heaviest soils and suffered most in the rain, were known as the cuvées des moines (“wines

for the monks”). Wines from the top of the slope, which had the least rain but where the sun did not have

solar-panel-like focus, were called cuvées des cardinals (“wines for the cardinals”). Wines from the

preferred, middle “thermal belt” of the slope, which had perfect sun orientation and where rain runs off,

were called the cuvées des papes (“wines for the popes”).

THE GRAPES OF BURGUNDY

WHITES

ALIGOTÉ: Very minor grape. Grown principally in the Mâconnais, where it is used to make inexpensive

quaffing wines, although some surprising examples can be found. This is the classic white with which a

traditional Kir cocktail is made. Also a frequent component in the sparkling wine Crémant de Bourgogne.

CHARDONNAY: Major grape. Used to make everything from simple wines like Pouilly-Fuissé and St.

-

Véran to Burgundy’s most profound and lush whites, including the wines of Chassagne-Montrachet,

Puligny-Montrachet, and Meursault.

RED

PINOT NOIR: Major grape. All of the red wines discussed in this chapter are made from this variety,

including humble reds, such as Montagny and Givry, as well as the world-renowned wines from such

villages as Chambolle-Musigny, Aloxe-Corton, and Vosne-Romanée.

How would you know if the name on the label is a village name or a vineyard name?

Short of memorizing every village and vineyard in Burgundy, there’s no foolproof method.

However, a fairly good way of guessing is to know that vineyards are sometimes (but

admittedly not always) preceded by “the” (le or la in French). Thus, La Tâche, Le

Montrachet, and Le Chambertin are all vineyards, but Pommard, Beaune, and V olnay are

all villages.

It’s also helpful to know that many Burgundian villages (but not vineyards) have

hyphenated names—like Chambolle-Musigny, Gevrey-Chambertin, and so on.

Interestingly, these hyphenated names have a purpose—the village has annexed the name

of its top vineyard in order to benefit from the prestige of that vineyard. Thus, Chambolle-

Musigny was originally called just Chambolle until it appended the name of its most

famous vineyard, Le Musigny, to its own name. Similarly, the village Aloxe added the

name of its renowned vineyard, Le Corton, to become the village of Aloxe-Corton, and the

village of Gevrey became Gevrey-Chambertin by incorporating the vineyard Le

Chambertin into its name. A hyphenated name on the label invariably means a village

wine.

3 YOU PROBABLY THINK of a vineyard as that piece of land owned by a single vintner. In

other words, vineyards are commonly defined by the legal construct of ownership. Even

though the property within a vineyard may contain highly variable terroir, it is still

considered one vineyard when it’s owned by one person. The opposite holds true in

Burgundy. There, the boundaries of most vineyards were established centuries ago by

monks attempting to define parcels of ground solely on the basis of terroir. To the monks,

what in the modern world would be considered one vineyard could be two, four, ten, or

more vineyards, depending upon the number of different terroirs the monks observed.

Each of those distinct vineyards, an entity unto itself, would have been different—

sometimes decidedly so—from neighboring vineyards.

4 SINCE VINEYARDS IN BURGUNDY are defined by their terroirs, not necessarily by who owns

them, ownership itself takes on a different spin. Although it’s a bit hard to picture at first,

most vineyards in Burgundy, even the tiniest ones, have more than one owner. Perhaps the

most well-known example is the Grand Cru vineyard Clos de V ougeot. At 125 acres (50

hectares; less than half the size of, say, Château Lafite-Rothschild in Bordeaux), Clos de

V ougeot has eighty owners. Each of these owners makes a wine called Clos de V ougeot.

By way of a simple analogy, a Burgundian vineyard is like a condominium. There are

several owners, all of whom own distinct parts of the condominium. Still, each of the

separate parts is a portion of the same condominium.

Domaine J. Grivot’ s entrance to their section of Burgundy’ s Grand Cru vineyard Clos de V ougeot. The vineyard has 80

owners in all.

5 A HANDFUL OF VINEYARDS have only one owner. These vineyards are known as

monopoles. They are rare.

6 AS YOU CAN SEE, the conventional, tidy image of a wine estate surrounded by vineyards

isn’t really applicable to Burgundy. Instead, most growers own many small parcels of

many different vineyards in many different villages. For the top wines, although not for

the basic ones, the grapes from those parcels will almost never be blended together, even

though they might all be the same variety—say, pinot noir. Instead, the grower will make a

separate pinot noir from each village and/or vineyard. Indeed, growers often own parcels

of several different vineyards within the same village. The grower Domaine Roumier, for

example, makes three wines from the village of Chambolle-Musigny: a village wine—

Domaine Roumier Chambolle-Musigny; a Premier Cru—Domaine Roumier Chambolle-

Musigny “Les Amoureuses”; and a Grand Cru—Domaine Roumier Le Musigny. And

those are just the wines the domaine makes from one village. Domaine Roumier also has

vineyard holdings in several other villages.

BURGUNDIAN WINEMAKING

In the New World, wines are sometimes said to be made using “Burgundian methods.

”

What does that mean exactly? In general, it involves the following:

HARVESTING THE WINE in small lots and then making each lot separately

USING INDIGENOUS YEASTS (that is, not adding commercial yeasts)

BARREL FERMENTATION OF WHITE WINES

MALOLACTIC FERMENTATION OF WHITE WINES

LONG LEES CONTACT (sur lie) and stirring of the lees (bâtonnage) of white wines

SMALL, OPEN-TOPPED FERMENTERS for red wine

VERY GENTLE and minimal handling of the wine after it is made

FINING WITH CASEIN OR ISINGLASS for chardonnay; egg whites for pinot noir

FIFTEEN TO EIGHTEEN MONTHS OF AGING in small oak barrels, usually not 100

percent new

Why go to the added trouble and expense of making, aging, bottling, marketing, and

selling multiple pinot noirs when you could blend them together and make just one pinot

noir, as much of the rest of the world does? It’s a matter of philosophy and purpose. For

wines above the level of basic Bourgogne, the Burgundian grower’s goal is to let the

personality of the place emanate through the wine. Making one large blend would

obliterate the differences in flavor and aroma derived from place. Still, it’s a decision with

practical consequences, for vineyard parcels can be tiny. It is not unusual for a grower to

own just a few rows of vines, enough perhaps to make but a single barrel (twenty-five

cases) of wine from that appellation.

The “backyard” of pinot noir vines behind Domaine de L’Arlot in Nuits-St.

-Georges. Below the house are some of the

most enchanting old cellars in the village.

THE D’OR IN CÔTE D’OR

The name Côte d’Or is often translated as “golden slope,

” perhaps because the wines from here cost a

ransom, or perhaps because the vineyards turn golden in autumn. However, the term is actually a

contraction of Côte d’Orient,

“eastern-facing slope”

—a reference to the fact that the vineyards face east

to catch each day’s morning sun.

7 IN TERMS OF their sensory characteristics, Burgundies don’t lend themselves to quick

evaluation. The wines are extremely elegant, highly nuanced, and often rather ethereal.

They require a lot of concentration on the part of the taster. It’s not uncommon (even for

professional tasters) to have to delve deep into their sensory aptitude in order to grasp each

wine.

8 UNTIL THE 1980S, most of the commerce in Burgundian wine was controlled by powerful

brokers known as négociants. The négociants rose to power after the French Revolution,

when fragmented ownership of small parcels of land in Burgundy made it economically

and physically difficult for small growers to bottle, market, and sell their own wine.

Traditionally, négociants bought (negotiated for) dozens if not hundreds of small lots of

wine from numerous growers, then blended these lots into several wines, bottled them,

and sold them under their own labels. A négociant house, such as Louis Jadot, would buy

many tiny lots of Gevrey-Chambertin to bottle a Louis Jadot Gevrey-Chambertin, and

many lots of Pommard to bottle a Louis Jadot Pommard. The négociant would, of course,

also buy many lots of a Premier Cru vineyard. For example, Louis Jadot might buy several

lots of the Premier Cru vineyard Les Amoureuses (the name means “the women in love”)

and make a Louis Jadot Chambolle-Musigny “Les Amoureuses.

” Generally speaking, the

négociants of the past owned few—if any—vineyards themselves.

REVOLUTION RECOVERY: BURGUNDY BROKEN; BORDEAUX

BACK IN BUSINESS

Burgundy is full of tiny vineyard estates—some less than 3 acres (1.2 hectares) in size. Bordeaux, on the

other hand, is made up of many large estates—Château Mouton-Rothschild, for example, is 208 acres

(84 hectares); Château Lafite-Rothschild is 272 acres (110 hectares). Why are Burgundy’s vineyards so

small, and Bordeaux’s so large comparatively?

Burgundy’s far smaller geography and remote location deep in the center of France are certainly both

factors. But a far greater one was this: By the end of the seventeenth century, Burgundy’s vineyards were

owned primarily by the Roman Catholic Church. This made Burgundy distinctly different from Bordeaux,

a large, commercially successful, sophisticated area where vineyard estates were owned by wealthy

merchants and aristocrats. With the French Revolution of 1789 to 1799, the course of Burgundy’s future

changed radically. T o establish principles of equality and redistribute wealth, the new state ended the

French monarchy and confiscated the church’s holdings, breaking up vineyards into tiny parcels and

auctioning them off to local peasants. T o further strengthen the new state, in 1804, Napoléon Bonaparte

issued the Napoleonic Code, a set of sweeping civil laws, including one that barred privilege based on

birth order, and mandated that all children must inherit equally. (As a result, in Burgundy today, some

members of a family each own just a few rows of vines.)

In Bordeaux, the revolution and its tumultuous Reign of T error had a different impact. All four of the

most prestigious châteaux (Margaux, Lafite-Rothschild, Latour, and Haut-Brion) were confiscated,

divided, and, in three cases, their owners beheaded. But Bordeaux’s properties had been important

financial institutions (the equivalent of the corporations that today are deemed too big to fail). In the wake

of the Revolution—and often through graft and insider deals among the bankers and architects of the

new French state—the properties were reassembled more or less to their original size. Eventually these

were resold to rich merchants or, in the case of Lafite, a foreign corporation that sold shares (at the time

a radical idea) to acquire it. By the third decade of the nineteenth century, Bordeaux was back in

business, but Burgundy, broken up, was more isolated than ever.

By the 1960s and 1970s, however, the négociant business began to change. Many small

growers—even the tiniest ones—decided to bottle their wines under their own labels,

leaving fewer available sources of grapes for négociants to buy. The wines many

négociants produced began to suffer in quality. To remedy this, négociant houses

increasingly became growers themselves. Louis Jadot, for example, owned one small

vineyard when it was founded in 1859. Today the firm has 519 acres (210 hectares) of

vineyards and makes wines from more than ninety appellations. However, with the

exception of a few top négociant houses, such as Louis Jadot (which makes extraordinary

Burgundies), large négociant wines are often considered far less exciting than the wines

from small domaines.

THE LAND, THE GRAPES, AND THE VINEYARDS

Just driving down the Côte d’Or’s famous main wine road—RN74—reveals how

intimately connected growers are to the land and portends just how site specific the wines

can be. On the slopes above each tiny village, instead of vast tracts of vineyards, the thick

carpet of vines is parcelled into paddocklike plots, often enclosed by field-stone walls. To

encourage competition among them, the vines are closely spaced—about 4,000 plants per

acre (.4 hectare). As astounding as this seems, it is not as dense as plantings once were.

Before phylloxera, for example, vines in Burgundy were not planted in rows, but simply

helter skelter in a tight fashion—a manner that suited the monks who tended the vines by

hand. It wasn’t until horses were employed in the work that planting in straight rows

became commonplace. Today, thanks to the huge number of tiny plots owned by different

growers, the visual effect of the vineyards, even from a short distance, is that of a

patchwork quilt of vibrant green. Together, all of these tiny vineyards amount to just over

66,000 acres (26,700 hectares) of vines. By comparison, Bordeaux, with over 290,000

acres (117,400 hectares), is nearly four and a half times larger.

The region is composed of four main sub-regions. We’ll look at these individually,

beginning on page 212, but for now, here’s a very brief overview:

In Burgundy, pinot noir is held in absolute reverence.

CHABLIS This is the northernmost subregion of Burgundy, just 100 or so miles (160

kilometers) southeast of Paris. Chablis is entirely devoted to growing chardonnay grapes.

CÔTE D’OR Most of Burgundy’s legendary wines (and most of the Grand Crus) come from

the Côte d’Or, the collective name for the Côte de Nuits and the Côte de Beaune. The Côte

d’Or is a 30-mile-long (48-kilometer) limestone escarpment, or ridge, with villages on the

eastern side of the slope. Because the vines primarily face east, they are perfectly oriented

to catch the morning sun each day. The Côte de Nuits (the northern half of the escarpment)

is planted virtually entirely with pinot noir, and hence makes red wines only. The Côte de

Beaune (the southern half) is planted with both pinot noir and chardonnay, and makes both

red and white wines.

CÔTE CHALONNAISE Just south of the Côte d’Or is the Côte Chalonnaise, which while not

as famous as its sisters, nonetheless produces some quite good, reasonably priced red and

white wines.

MÂCONNAIS Moving south from the Côte Chalonnaise, you come next to the Mâconnais, a

fairly large region devoted to making oceans of good, everyday, inexpensive chardonnay,

as well as a handful of finer chardonnays. The three most well-known wines are Mâcon-

Villages, Pouilly-Fuissé, and St.

-Véran.

PLUS BEAUJOLAIS From a government administration point of view, Beaujolais is also

considered a subregion within Burgundy. But because Beaujolais has little in common

with the rest of Burgundy, it has its own chapter, beginning on page 227.

Because the entire Burgundy region is 140 miles (225 kilometers) from north to south,

each of these subregions has many specific characteristics of climate and soil that define

it. But in general, what makes Burgundy Burgundy are two enormously important

realities. First, it is a cool place. As I mentioned earlier, of all the regions in the world that

are famous for red wine, Burgundy is the most northern. Summers here are generally

cooler than in Bordeaux and much cooler than in most of California. And because

Burgundy is a cool place, its wines are not massive, syrupy, and overtly fruity. Instead, at

their best they are intensely flavored but have a light to medium body and an almost

gossamer gracefulness.

THE 33 GRAND CRU VINEYARDS OF BURGUNDY

There are thirty-two Grand Cru vineyards in the Côte d’Or, plus one in Chablis, for a

total of thirty-three. They are listed here from north to south. The village where each

Grand Cru vineyard is located follows in parentheses.

CHABLIS GRAND CRU (Chablis)

CHAMBERTIN CLOS-DE-BÈZE (Gevrey-Chambertin)

CHAPELLE-CHAMBERTIN (Gevrey-Chambertin)

CHARMES-CHAMBERTIN (Gevrey-Chambertin)

GRIOTTE-CHAMBERTIN (Gevrey-Chambertin)

LATRICIÈRES-CHAMBERTIN (Gevrey-Chambertin)

LE CHAMBERTIN (Gevrey-Chambertin)

MAZIS-CHAMBERTIN (Gevrey-Chambertin)

MAZOYÈRES-CHAMBERTIN (Gevrey-Chambertin)

RUCHOTTES-CHAMBERTIN (Gevrey-Chambertin)

BONNES MARES (part in Morey-St.

-Denis; part in Chambolle-Musigny)

CLOS DE LA ROCHE (Morey-St.

-Denis)

CLOS DES LAMBRAYS (Morey-St.

-Denis)

CLOS DE TART (Morey-St.

-Denis)

CLOS ST .

-DENIS (Morey-St.

-Denis)

LE MUSIGNY (Chambolle-Musigny)

CLOS DE VOUGEOT (Vougeot)

ECHÉZEAUX (Vosne-Romanée)

GRANDS ECHÉZEAUX (Vosne-Romanée)

LA ROMANÉE (Vosne-Romanée)

LA TÂCHE (Vosne-Romanée)

LA GRANDE RUE (Vosne-Romanée)

RICHEBOURG (Vosne-Romanée)

ROMANÉE-CONTI (Vosne-Romanée)

ROMANÉE-ST .

-VIVANT (Vosne-Romanée)

CHARLEMAGNE (Aloxe-Corton)

CORTON-CHARLEMAGNE (part in Pernand-Vergelesses; part in Aloxe-Corton; part in

Ladoix-Serrigny)

LE CORTON (part in Pernand-Vergelesses; part in Aloxe-Corton; part in Ladoix-

Serrigny)

BÂTARD-MONTRACHET (part in Puligny-Montrachet; part in Chassagne-Montrachet)

BIENVENUES-BÂTARD-MONTRACHET (Puligny-Montrachet)

CHEVALIER-MONTRACHET (Puligny-Montrachet)

LE MONTRACHET (part in Puligny-Montrachet; part in Chassagne-Montrachet)

CRIOTS-BÂTARD-MONTRACHET (Chassagne-Montrachet)

DOMAINE DE LA ROMANÉE-CONTI

The most-renowned estate in Burgundy, perhaps in all of France, Domaine de la Romanée-Conti, has

been the subject of entire books. The DRC, as it is referred to, is owned by the de Villaine and Leroy

families and is made up of parcels of seven vineyards, all of which are Grands Crus and all of which

have been considered exemplary for centuries. These include one vineyard devoted to white wine, Le

Montrachet, and six devoted to red: Romanée-Conti and La Tâche (both of which are monopoles, owned

exclusively by the domaine), as well as Richebourg, Romanée-St.

-Vivant, Echézeaux, and Grands

Echézeaux. T ogether these seven holdings make up just a little more than 62 acres (25 hectares) of

vines. Because the yields from these vineyards are kept extremely low, production is minuscule. The

entire production of the DRC’s wine from the Romanée-Conti vineyard is a mere six thousand bottles

(five hundred cases) a year. This is about 1/40 the production of Château Lafite-Rothschild in Bordeaux.

As for cost, year in and year out the wines of the DRC are the most expensive in Burgundy. Vintages in

the mid-2000s (2004–2007) sold at auction for $6,500 to $10,500 a bottle.

Burgundy’s cool climate also means that the region is well suited to pinot noir and

chardonnay. Worldwide experience with pinot noir suggests that the grape will produce

wines that possess finesse, nuance, and complexity only when it is planted in a cool place,

so that the grapes are allowed to ripen slowly and methodically over a relatively long

period of time. (Pinot noir planted in hot, sun-drenched areas produces unfocused, dull

wines that taste like flat cola.) As for white Burgundies, while chardonnay can be, and is,

planted in quite warm places around the world, many knowledgeable chardonnay lovers

would argue that the most nuanced and elegant wines come from grapes that are grown in

cooler spots.

“[Chambolle Musigny] is a wine of silk and lace; supremely delicate with no

hint of violence yet much hidden strength.

”

— GASTON ROUPNEL

French poet (1871–1946)

Because of Burgundy’s cool northern climate, achieving ripeness is a concern, and thus

it’s no surprise that for the best wines, yields must be kept low (vineyards maxed out by

trying to ripen too much fruit end up not ripening any of it very well).

Another concern is deciding when to pick. In Burgundy, it often rains in early fall.

Growers who pick early in the season might avoid rain, but the slightly underripe grapes

they harvest might also produce thin, bland wines that no amount of winemaking wizardry

will improve. Growers who pick late are gambling that they can dodge the rain, thus

letting the grapes benefit from a longer ripening time, with richer wines as the result. But

such growers are also betting that if it does indeed rain, they’ll be able to harvest the crop

before the grapes get waterlogged or before a serious rot sets in.

In the small, cool, damp, dark, often earthen-floored cellars of Burgundy, pinot noir ages gracefully.

Of course, growers who pick early can chaptalize—a practice that’s legal in Burgundy.

Chaptalization involves adding plain old sugar to the fermenting vat. This, in turn, gives

the yeasts more material to ferment. And the more sugar the yeasts have to ferment, the

fuller in body (and higher in alcohol) the wine will be. It’s safe to say that top producers

avoid chaptalization, since wines with high alcohol but meek flavors can often taste out of

balance and discombobulated.

What else makes Burgundy Burgundy? Limestone and limestone-rich clays called

marls. In many areas—especially in the Côte d’Or and in Chablis—limestone rocks

embedded with visible sea fossils are scattered everywhere in the vineyards, and

outcroppings reveal entire blocks of fractured limestone under the barest minimum of

topsoil. This particular limestone (with sea fossils) is known as Kimmeridgian limestone,

since it dates from the Kimmeridgian period within the Jurassic epoch. Tiny filaments of

roots burrow between the crevices of these limestone blocks, going down to depths

reaching 70 feet (20 meters) or more. In Burgundy, it is common wisdom that such

limestone is the source of both red and white wines’ vivid minerality.

No one describes the soil more poetically than Anthony Hanson, in his authoritative

book Burgundy:

During the Jurassic period (135–195 million years ago), the whole of Burgundy sank

beneath shallow seas. Archaeopteryx, or some other ancestral bird, took wing, great

dinosaurs roamed the land, while on the sea bed, marine sediments were slowly laid down.

The shells of myriads of baby oysters piled one on another , while the skeletons of countless

crinoids or sea lilies were compacted together; from such petrified remains, limestone is

formed. Jurassic limestone rocks, interspersed with marlstones, are fundamental keys to

the excellence and variety of Burgundy’ s wines.

And finally, a few more words about the grapes.

Although it’s hard to imagine now, until the modern wine revolution of the 1950s and

1960s, chardonnay and pinot noir were hardly heard of outside central France. Just a

smattering of acres/hectares existed in the entire New World. Today, of course, that has all

changed. California alone has slightly more than 950,000 acres (384,500 hectares) of

chardonnay and nearly 40,000 acres (16,200 hectares) of pinot noir. Factor in Australia,

New Zealand, South America, and other U.S. states like Oregon and Washington, and both

of these once rare Burgundian varieties are very much on wine’s contemporary world

stage.

Y et chardonnay and pinot noir don’t merely grow in Burgundy; Burgundy is where

chardonnay and pinot noir reach dizzying heights of beauty and individuality. Indeed, the

Burgundian versions of both of these grapes stand distinctly apart from wines elsewhere

that are made from the same varieties. A lifetime of experience with California

chardonnay, for example, would give you little idea of what to expect from a white

Burgundy. And it’s not a matter of a special group of clones. Vineyards in Burgundy today

are planted and replanted as they have been for centuries—not by planting selected

individual clones, but rather by the method known as massale selection (taking cuttings

from numerous vines within a vineyard and using buds from all of them to begin a new

vineyard, thus replicating the original vineyard’s genetic diversity).

CHABLIS

The northernmost subregion of Burgundy, Chablis sits like an isolated island far north of

the Côte d’Or and the rest of Burgundy. In fact, the vineyards of Chablis are closer to

Champagne, about 20 miles (32 kilometers) away, than they are to the rest of Burgundy,

more than 60 miles (97 kilometers) away. This far north, Chablis’s harsh, wet, and very

cold temperatures are influenced by the Atlantic Ocean, and frosts in both spring and fall

shorten the growing season. The wines, not surprisingly, are so crisp and racy that they

vibrate with spring-loaded acidity.

The place itself is amazing looking. Vineyards roll this way and that, as if they grew on

ocean waves. The whitish, crusty limestone soil—full of baby oyster shells and crinoids

entroques (cousins of sea lilies and starfish)—is so stark that at twilight you feel as though

you’re on the moon.

CHARDONNAY—THE PLACE

One of the historic, tiny villages in the Mâconnais region of Burgundy is called Chardonnay. The name is

derived from the Latin Cardonnacum, which in turn comes from carduus, Latin for “a place with

thistles.

” (Carduus is the genus for ninety species of thistles.) Interestingly, during the Roman era, a

nobleman named Cardus is also thought to have owned the area where the village now exists. The village

of Chardonnay and the surrounding Mâconnais region may indeed be where chardonnay was born as a

natural crossing. DNA typing reveals chardonnay’s parents to be the red grape pinot noir and the white

grape gouais blanc.

While Chablis was justifiably famous in the late nineteenth century (its proximity to

Paris ensured its reputation as a brasserie favorite), the wine is perhaps less well known

today. The area, which suffered tremendously during the phylloxera crisis, had a difficult

time regaining financial stability, and with the establishment of France’s major railway

systems, cheaper, heartier wines were easily shipped north, weakening Chablis’s position

even further. That said, the 2000s saw a resurgence of its popularity, perhaps because the

minerally, steely flavors, exuberant freshness, and kinetic feel of Chablis are wholly

different from chardonnay made anywhere else in the world, and thus the wine has, in a

commercial sense, little competition. The French often call the unique flavors of a good

Chablis goût de pierre à fusil—gunflint. When, with a great Premier or Grand Cru

Chablis, these gunflint flavors are spliced by edgy minerality, the effect can be sensational.

Most Chablis are made entirely in stainless steel to preserve the purity of their flavors.

Some domaines ferment in stainless steel but go on to briefly age their Chablis in small,

used oak barrels in order to deepen the wine’s flavors. Still other producers (a small

number) barrel ferment their Chablis, especially their Grands Crus, which are thought to

be intense enough to stand up to the oak’s impact.

Chablis has numerous Premier Crus and one Grand Cru—a magnificent sweeping

hillside of Kimmeridgian limestone and marl covering 247 acres (100 hectares).

Somewhat confusingly, the Grand Cru is known by the seven contiguous parcels—climats

—situated along the hillside (leading some to imagine there are seven Grands Crus).

These parcels are Blanchot, Bougros, Grenouilles, Les Clos, Les Preuses, V almur, and

V audésir. A bottle of Grand Cru Chablis will list one of these names on the label along

with the words “Chablis Grand Cru.

”

SOME OF THE BEST PRODUCERS OF CHABLIS

Alice et Olivier de Moor • Billaud-Simon • Christian Moreau Père et Fils • Jean Dauvissat • Jean-Marc

Brocard • Jean-Paul & Benoît Droin • Laroche • Louis Michel et Fils • Pattes Loup • Raveneau • René et

Vincent Dauvissat • Servin • Verget • Vocoret et Fils • William Fèvre

THE CÔTE D’OR

The 30-mile-long, 1,000-foot-high (48-kilometer, 305-meter) escarpment known as the

Côte d’Or is Burgundy’s most renowned wine region. When wine drinkers talk about

being left spellbound by Burgundy, they are almost assuredly talking about wines from

here.

The Côte d’Or is a narrow ridge of limestone, divided almost equally in half. The

northern part, known as the Côte de Nuits, produces red wines almost exclusively. The

southern half, the Côte de Beaune, produces both red and white wines, although whites—

including the ultra-famous wines Puligny-Montrachet and Chassagne-Montrachet—

dominate. (For the villages in each part, see The Villages of Burgundy, page 200.) In

between the Côte de Nuits and the Côte de Beaune is the village of Comblanchien—

famous not for wine, but for its dusty quarries full of Comblanchien limestone and marble.

SERVING BURGUNDY—A FEW SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

Serving a great Burgundy, white or red, in too small a glass is considered a crime. Burgundies are, by

their nature, aromatic wines. The only way to experience the full impact of these wines is to drink them

from generous glasses with ample bowls that taper toward the top.

Know, too, that Burgundies are among the wines in the world that change a lot after being poured. In

fact, it’s almost impossible to accurately assess a great Burgundy after the first one or two sips. In twenty

minutes, the wine may be transformed substantially, offering a whole new world of flavors and aromas.

For many wine drinkers, this propensity to evolve in the glass is part of what makes top Burgundy

intellectually intriguing.

With a fine red Burgundy, the wine’s inclination to evolve and the relative fragility of the pinot noir

grape mean that, in general, you should not open the bottle many hours before dinner or, worse, decant

it. Pinot noir is the complete opposite of cabernet sauvignon in this regard. When pinot noir, especially a

pinot that is ten years old or more, is given too much oxygen, its flavors can seem to fade and fall apart.

So pour red Burgundy from the bottle (not a decanter) and drink it soon after it’s opened.

Tasting in the cellars of Aurelien V erdet. Every Burgundian domaine, no matter how humble, serves their Burgundies in

good, thin-rimmed, generous glasses.

Every village in the Côte d’Or is said to have its own character—the wines of

Chambolle-Musigny, for example, are frequently considered among the most elegant pinot

noirs, while the pinots of Nuits-St.

-Georges are thought to be more structured.

There is one broad generalization that can be made concerning red wines: The top reds

from the Côte de Nuits (Gevrey-Chambertin, Flagey-Echézeaux, V osne-Romanée, Nuits-

St.

-Georges, and others) often have greater intensity and a firmer structure than red wines

from the Côte de Beaune (Aloxe-Corton, Beaune, V olnay, Pommard, and so on). By

contrast, the top Côte de Beaune reds are frequently softer and sometimes more lush. In

general, reds from all over the Côte d’Or are prized for their soaring, earthy flavors, often

laced with minerals, exotic spices, licorice, or truffles. Of all the red wines in the world,

these are some of the most heady in aroma and long in the mouth. They are also some of

the most frail in color. (As with all pinot noirs, the intensity of a red Burgundy’s color is

not a reflection of the intensity of its flavor.)

The church spire and bell tower in Savigny-lès-Beaune in the Côte de Beaune. The long and intimate relationship

between wine and religion is evident in every Burgundian village.

As for white wines (again, all of which come from the Côte de Beaune), the most

famous villages are Meursault, Puligny-Montrachet, Chassagne-Montrachet, Ladoix-

Serrigny, and Beaune. The top Premier and Grand Cru wines from these villages can be

amazingly rich and concentrated without being heavy or ponderous. Their tightly woven

flavors are dripping with hints of toasted nuts, truffles, and vanilla. A wine such as the

Grand Cru Corton-Charlemagne from Domaine Bonneau du Martray, for example, can

have such exquisite elegance, it’s toe curling.

The word côte is translated as “slope,

” and where a vineyard is located on the slope of

the Côte d’Or is usually a clue to its rank. The humblest place to be on the slope is at the

bottom. Village wines generally come from these bottom-slope or flatland vineyards. Here

the soil is heaviest, least well drained, and most full of clay. A better place to be on the

slope is on the top third. The soil is thinner and there’s more limestone, but the sun is not

entirely ideal (many Premier Cru vineyards are on the top third of the slope). The best

vineyards of all—and where the Grands Crus are located—are those vineyards that are

mid-slope. Here, the limestone and marl is abundant and there’s a solar-panel-like 45-

degree exposure to sun throughout the day. This midslope area is often called the thermal

belt.

WHITE BURGUNDY AND LOBSTER

Move over Champagne and caviar. Among the world’s most indulgent and sensational food-and-wine

combinations is surely a Premier Cru or Grand Cru white Burgundy, especially an opulent Puligny-

Montrachet or Chassagne-Montrachet, with Maine lobster drizzled with butter. When the sweet, rich

creaminess of the wine meets the sweet, rich meatiness of the lobster, well, if you don’t die of poverty first,

you’ll die from the pleasure.

SOME OF THE BEST PRODUCERS OF THE CÔTE D’OR

There are hundreds of producers in the Côte d’Or alone. Here are some of my favorite domaines.

Armand Rousseau • Aurélien Verdet • Bonneau du Martray • Christian Sérafin • Clos de T art • Coche-Dury •

Comte Armand • Comte Georges de Vogüé • Comtes Lafon • Daniel Rion • Denis Mortet • Domaine de la

Pousse d’Or • Domaine de l’Arlot • Domaine de la Romanée-Conti • Dujac • Jean Grivot • Etienne Sauzet •

Georges Roumier • Henri Jayer • J. Confuron-Cotetidot • Jean-Marc Morey • Leflaive • Leroy • Perrot Minot

• Ponsot • J. F . Mugnier • Jean-Noël Gagnard • Joseph Drouhin • Louis Jadot • Méo-Camuzet • Michel

Lafarge • Mongeard-Mugneret • Paul Pernot • Philippe Colin • Philippe Leclerc • Pierre Gelin • Pierre Matrot

• Ramonet • René Leclerc • T ollot-Beaut et Fils

CÔTE CHALONNAISE

A few miles/kilometers south of the Côte d’Or is the Côte Chalonnaise, also devoted to

both chardonnay and pinot noir wines. There are five main wine villages here: Mercurey,

Bouzeron, Rully, Givry, and Montagny. In addition to wines from these villages, much

basic Bourgogne is also produced here. There are no Grand Cru vineyards in the Côte

Chalonnaise. There are, however, numerous Premiers Crus.

The wines of the Côte Chalonnaise are almost always less expensive than the wines of

the Côte d’Or, so this is the subregion bargain hunters love to explore. Of course,

Chalonnaise wines generally don’t match the Côte d’Or in quality either. But delicious

surprises can crop up, especially from the top producers.

The area’s best-known and largest village, Mercurey, can produce very good pinot noirs

with lots of spicy cherry character (although there are also Mercureys that are watery and

weak). And while Mercurey is thought of as a red-wine village, it also produces a small

amount of lovely, appley, minerally chardonnay.

The winemakers of Domaine Laroche taste their exquisite Chablis. The domaine makes filigreed, minerally Chablis that

taste of ocean air and ancient seabeds. Their Grand Cru Chablis in particular are show stoppers.

THE HÔTEL DIEU AND THE HOSPICES DE BEAUNE

One of the most prestigious wine events anywhere is the Hospices de Beaune, a charity auction held

each November in Beaune’s stunning Hôtel Dieu (literally,

“God’s House”). Built in 1443 by Nicolas Rolin,

chancellor of the duchy of Burgundy, and his wife, Guigone de Salins, the Hôtel Dieu is perhaps the most

magnificent refuge ever created for the sick and the destitute. Its numerous enormous rooms include

large galleries with curtained bed chambers where the sick slept, two to a bed (for warmth), chapels for

the bedridden to attend daily Mass, grand kitchens, and a pharmacy outfitted with distillation stills for the

making of medicines. The building’s steep roof is covered in dazzlingly colored glazed tiles and can be

seen from miles away. Sunlight hitting the roof creates a halo of amazing light. The Hôtel Dieu (now a

museum and wine domaine) owns almost 150 acres (60 hectares) of vineyards (much of it classified as

Premier or Grand Cru), which have been donated to it over centuries. Each year since 1851, the wines

made from these vineyards have been sold in a highly publicized auction that brings in considerable

sums to benefit the hospitals of Beaune.

Bouzeron is the northernmost village of the Côte Chalonnaise. It is known primarily for

aligoté. In fact, perhaps the best wine made from aligoté in France is produced here, by

Aubert de Villaine, codirector of the prestigious Domaine de la Romanée-Conti in the

Côte d’Or.

The village of Rully used to be one of the centers of sparkling wine production in

Burgundy, and a fair amount of Crémant de Bourgogne (a sparkling wine produced using

the Champagne method) is still produced there. Otherwise, the village is known mostly for

its simple pinot noirs and somewhat better chardonnays, which can be crisp and lemony,

with nutty overtones.

Givry is better known for its pinot noirs, although chardonnays also come from there.

Quality, of course, depends on the producer, but there are some very good wines with

earthy and cherry flavors.

Finally, Montagny, the small, southernmost village of the Côte Chalonnaise, is

exclusively devoted to chardonnay. Many Burgundy insiders consider Montagnys the best-

value white Burgundies going, and this village has the highest number of Premiers Crus in

the Côte Chalonnaise—forty-nine. Indeed, about two-thirds of the 740 acres (300

hectares) here are ranked Premier Cru and encompass more than fifty named sites.

Because of the high proportion of top-rated vineyards within this single, small appellation,

the significance of naming the individual vineyard is diluted. Thus, unlike the rest of

Burgundy, a majority of Montagny Premier Cru wine is sold without reference to a

specific vineyard.

SOME OF THE BEST PRODUCERS OF THE CÔTE CHALONNAISE

A. & P . de Villaine • Dureuil-Janthial • François Raquillet • J. M. Boillot • Joblot • Louis Jadot • Louis Latour •

Meix-Foulot

Perhaps more than any other place in the world, Burgundy is vulnerable to vintages of widely differing quality.

Nonetheless, to come upon a stash of really old Burgundy excites the imagination in a way few other wines ever do.

MÂCONNAIS

South of the Côte Chalonnaise is the Mâconnais, a large area of low-lying hills,

woodlands, farmland, and meadows. Some soils here are limestone and marl, but toward

the southern end, granite and schist are also found. The top three Mâconnais (all made

from chardonnay) are: Mâcon, Pouilly-Fuissé, and St.

-Véran. Oceans of basic, serviceable

chardonnay are also made. There are no Grands Crus or Premiers Crus in the Mâconnais.

Mâcon is found as either simple Mâcon (about 80 percent of production; much of it

from cooperatives) or the even better Mâcon-Villages. And, in one further step up, twenty-

six villages have the right to append their names to the word Mâcon: Mâcon-Lugny,

Mâcon-Viré, Mâcon-Fuissé, and so on.

Pouilly-Fuissé, the most highly thought of appellation within the Mâconnais thanks to

its generous limestone soils, comes from the area around the four small hamlets of

V ergisson, Solutré-Pouilly, Fuissé, and Chaintré. PR got to Pouilly-Fuissé early on, and

some producers’ wines are dreadful and overpriced. But the top Pouilly-Fuissés are bold,

dense chardonnays—delicious, although never as elegant as the hugely more expensive

top whites of the Côte d’Or. (Don’t confuse Pouilly-Fuissé with Pouilly-Fumé. The latter

is a sauvignon blanc from France’s Loire V alley.) And last, from the village of St.

-Vérand

comes the wine St.

-Véran (minus the d in its name), which is usually less expensive than

Pouilly-Fuissé, and sometimes better.

SOME OF THE BEST PRODUCERS OF THE MÂCONNAIS

Château Fuissé • Daniel Barraud • de Bongran • des Comtes Lafon • Guffens-Heynen • J. A. Ferret •

Joseph Drouhin • Louis Jadot • Robert Denogent • Roger Lassarat • Valette

WHERE’S THE BOEUF?

Burgundy’s famous boeuf bourguignon is a slowly braised beef stew made with local Charolais beef,

pearl onions, mushrooms, bits of fried bacon, and a whole bottle of Burgundy wine. Needless to say, no

sane cook—and certainly no Burgundian cook, since most of them are known for their thriftiness—

would pour a Premier Cru or Grand Cru into the pot. No, the stew is made with a basic Burgundy,

something that won’t require the cook to pawn the family silver. The Burgundy you drink with the stew,

well, that’s a different story. In the end, however, it’s the combination that counts, and a rich, winey stew

of slowly braised beef is one of the most stunning partners a bottle of great Burgundy could have.

BUYING BURGUNDY AND THE QUESTION OF

VINTAGES

Depending on your viewpoint (and the amount of money you can afford to lose on some

wines that may prove disappointing), buying Burgundy is either frightening or exciting,

for there are few absolutes that can be counted on. Indeed, buying Burgundy is a matter of

trial and error, luck, intuition, and, you hope, some good advice. Actually, there is one

absolute: Bargain Burgundies do not exist. Like caviar, the top Burgundies are dependably

expensive.

Y ou might logically think that Grands Crus are better than Premiers Crus and that

Premiers Crus are better than village wines. While this is a solid, historically based idea

that often proves to be the case, there are also times when it’s a wrong assumption.

Burgundy, alas, is the ultimate moving target.

Then there’s the issue of aging. Burgundies can take on remarkably different qualities

as they age. There is no good rule of thumb for knowing when a given Burgundy will

move into the scrumptious zone (or even if it will), for Burgundy rarely ages in a linear,

predictable way.

And, of course, buying Burgundy encourages you to consider the place as much as, if

not more than, the producer. A wine from the village of Chambolle-Musigny traditionally

tastes quite different from a wine from the village of Nuits-St.

-Georges. It’s fascinating to

try to taste these “flavors of place” and see if you can recognize the commonalities among

wines from the same village, just minutes down the road from another village and its

wines.

A wine shop and tasting room in the ancient walled city of Beaune.

As for producers, remembering which producer is which in Burgundy can be daunting,

since many growers are siblings or cousins with the same last name. For example, in the

small, sleepy village of Chassagne-Montrachet alone, there are three producers with the

last name Morey (Domaine Bernard Morey, Domaine Jean-Marc Morey, and Domaine

Marc Morey), two producers with Ramonet in their name (Domaine Ramonet and

Domaine Bachelet-Ramonet), and four producers with the name Gagnard—and that’s just

in tiny Chassagne-Montrachet! It’s easy to see why taking exact notes on the name of a

Burgundy is essential if you ever want to find it again.

At the celebrated bistro Ma Cuisine in Beaune, chef Fabienne Escoffier writes her daily menu on a blackboard. Roast

pigeon and boeuf Bourguignon are specialties.

As for vintages, Burgundy—more than most of the rest of the world—is a place where

the differences among vintages are clearly apparent. The region’s coolish, rain-prone

continental climate, the variations in sites and soils, and the exigencies of growing pinot

noir and chardonnay in such a place mean that harvest conditions and wines can vary

considerably. While all of this is true, it misses the most important truth of all: Most

vintages are neither great nor poor. They are someplace in between. It doesn’t make sense

to think about Burgundian vintages in such black-and-white terms when, in fact, that sort

of thinking has little basis in reality. Y ears ago, François Millet, the wine-maker at Comte

Georges de V ogüé, told me something I’ve never forgotten. Vintages, he said, are simply

the mood of the wine. Some years the wine is in an exuberant mood; some years it is shy.

And, of course, there are countless moods in between.

THE FOODS OF BURGUNDY

If any one dish epitomizes the intimate connection of wine and food in Burgundy, it is coq

au vin (hen or rooster cooked in Burgundy wine). Rustic, hearty, and slow cooked, it is

soulful, humble fare that speaks of the earth, not of artifice. Burgundian cooking may not

be cutting edge or elaborate, but it is honest and true to centuries of good home cooks who

knew how to take snails, rabbits, and guinea hens and make them irresistible.

Burgundy’s most famous vineyards are bracketed by two of the legendary food capitals

of France—Dijon and Lyon. Dijon calls itself the mustard capital of the world, and

mustard, simple as it is, is France’s best-loved condiment. Y ou can find a little pot on

every table of virtually every bistro in the country. About 70 percent of France’s mustard

is moutarde de Dijon, which refers to the style—a creamy, smooth, especially pungent

mustard—originally developed in Dijon. Today, many Burgundian villages have their own

moutarderie, or mustard shop, where artisanal mustards are made, sometimes with slightly

fermented white grape juice rather than vinegar.

Although snails are cooked and eaten all over France, no snail preparation is better

known than escargots à la bourguignonne, snails cooked Burgundy style. Today, canned

and frozen snails from Turkey and Algeria show up in many restaurants worldwide, but in

Burgundy, wild snails can still be collected in the vineyards. Traditionally, these are

stuffed with garlic butter, cooked, and served piping hot.

The beef dishes of Burgundy are also much acclaimed, especially the slowly braised

beef stew known as boeuf bourguignon. But the most exciting beef of all is Charolais,

named for the town of Charoles in southwestern Burgundy, and one of Europe’s finest

breeds. These massive cattle have meat that is tender and succulent, with an incomparable

full, rich flavor. A hunk of roasted Charolais and a glass of Pommard or V olnay is

Burgundy gift-wrapped. With Charolais cattle, meat is just the beginning, however. From

the Charolais’s milk come cylinders of rich Charolais cheese, which are also prized.

But the most legendary Burgundian cheese of all must be the pungent, runny Époisses

de Bourgogne, named after the village Époisses. Sought after all over the world, Époisses

is aged slowly and given a daily washing with marc de Bourgogne, the local eau-de-vie.

A mural on a wall in the old city of Beaune depicts a young Dionysus.

Finally, there’s pain d’épice, Burgundy’s spice bread. In Gallo-Roman times, Burgundy

was one of the corridors of the spice trade to the northern countries. Dijon’s love of

mustard resulted from this propitious positioning, and so did spice bread. The dense

loaves, made with honey, cinnamon, cloves, nutmeg, coriander, aniseed, and orange peel,

are not exactly sweet; they’re more of a hearty snack. Who knows how many generations

of vignerons, come winter, have devoured an entire pain d’épice after a day spent pruning

in the damp, cold vineyards of Burgundy.

WHEN YOU VISIT… BURGUNDY

BURGUNDY IS FILLED WITH QUIET , charming villages, many of which surround

impressive medieval churches or cathedrals. There are scores of fabulous tiny

restaurants specializing in the region’s humble, delicious cooking, and dozens of small,

comfortable hotels.

ALL OF THIS NOTWITHSTANDING, Burgundian domaines can be very difficult to visit,

since they are so tiny and there is nothing that resembles a winery in the California

sense. Small producers are simply not set up to receive visitors, and even if you call in

advance and speak in French, your request may be refused. If luck is on your side

however, you’ll end up going with the proprietor down into a cold, damp cellar, and

tasting great Burgundies out of the barrel. No wine experience is more thrilling.

TWO MAGNIFICENT , HISTORIC buildings are must-sees: the château of Clos de

Vougeot, sitting like a jewel in the middle of a walled vineyard in the village of Vougeot,

and in the city of Beaune, the impressive fifteenth-century Hôtel Dieu, with its colorful

glazed tile roof and breathtaking grand hall. Each year, this is where the prestigious

Hospices de Beaune wine auction is held.

The Burgundies to Know

When I approached the writing of this section, I had all the enthusiasm of a woman going to have a root canal.

Frankly, recommending Burgundies is fraught with problems, chief among them the knowledge that, thanks to their

infinitesimally small quantities in a global marketplace, great Burgundies are hard to get one’s hands on (which

doesn’t mean you shouldn’t try).

Then there’s the worry over the wines themselves—the wines of Burgundy are fragile. Vintages, the age of the

wine, and how the wine was handled all dramatically leave their stamp. Despite these hesitations, the wines here

have all provided me with stellar experiences, and I’ve loved them to the very last drop. I offer them in the hope

that these bottles will also find their way to you, and that you’ll be equally pleased.

WHITES

RENÉ ET VINCENT DAUVISSAT

CHABLIS | VAILLONS | PREMIER CRU

100% chardonnay

Shiveringly vibrant with acidity, René and Vincent Dauvissat’s Chablis always seems to personify the stark cold,

white landscape that is Burgundy’s most northern enclave. Chablis should never be unfocused, and this one, from

the Premier Cru vineyard known as V aillons, certainly isn’t. Although this Chablis can have a honey-peach aroma

that sets you up for something mellow and lush, it’s almost savagely exact, pure, and cleansing. V aillons is one of

the finest Premier Cru vineyards, and no one makes better wines from this small parcel than the Dauvissat family.

DOMAINE LAROCHE

CHABLIS | LES BLANCHOTS | GRAND CRU | RESERVE DE L’OBÉDIENCE

100% chardonnay

Can Nature speak more vividly than this? Domaine Laroche’s Chablis from the Grand Cru vineyard Les Blanchots

is as pristine as a deep mountain lake, and the tension in the wine—the electricity between its acid and its fruit—is

haunting. I love this wine’s aroma, a smell that takes you back to ancient seabeds, ocean air, fresh brineyness.

Massively chalky on the palate at first, the wine turns ethereal, with notes of chamomile tea, lime, honey, and rocks.

I’ve always thought of this as the soprano of wines—high notes that linger and hold you, suspended in a state of

sensory purity. Domaine Laroche is one of the oldest domaines in Chablis and is built on an ancient cellar that dates

from the ninth century. The Reserve de l’Obédience is a special bottling of the Blanchots. L’obédience is an old

French term for a monastery.

DOMAINE RAMONET

CHASSAGNE-MONTRACHET | LES RUCHOTTES | PREMIER CRU

100% chardonnay

All-enveloping, rich and powerful, Ramonet’s wines make stunning statements. (A friend describes this wine as,

“like James Bond—elegant and a badass at the same time.

”) What I’ve always loved about Ramonet’s Chassagne-

Montrachet is its midpalate density… a ticking atomic bomb of chalk, salt, and citrus that washes over the taster in

waves of minerality and fruit. And then lasts and lasts. Ramonet is a legendary estate in the Côte de Beaune. The

late Pierre Ramonet—known simply as the père (“father”)—was an eccentric peasant farmer who, at age seventy-

two, reportedly paid for a tiny sliver of the Le Montrachet vineyard by taking massive wads of French francs out of

his pockets and handing them to the lawyer conducting the transaction. The estate is now run by his grandsons Noël

and Jean-Claude.

LAFON

DOMAINES DES COMTES | MEURSAULT | LES PERRIÈRES | PREMIER CRU

100% chardonnay

Like spun filaments of gold, Lafon’s Meursault from the Les Perrières vineyard is a wine of great intricacy and

great opulence. The aromas, not of simple fruits, plunge you down into a deeper world of chalk beds, sassafras,

hazelnuts, caramel, and the flavor of honey as if all of the sweetness were removed from it and you were left with

the taste of gold and earth. Lafon is known for having an exquisite touch with Meursault, for capturing its

sensuality and elegance.

DOMAINE LEFLAIVE

BÂTARD-MONTRACHET | GRAND CRU

100% chardonnay

Bâtard-Montrachet is never an understated wine. Y ear in and year out, this Grand Cru vineyard makes some of the

most dramatic, bold chardonnays in Burgundy, indeed in the whole world. The arc of flavor on the palate is mind-

blowing. The first sensation is one of massive richness, but then the wine seems to lift off in wave after wave of

chalky, minerally, honeyed flavors. Just when you think the wine can’t get any more intense, the subtle, exquisite

finish comes and saves you. Domaine Leflaive, headed by Anne-Claude Leflaive, practices biodynamic viticulture.

The domaine dates from from the sixteenth century, although many of the family’s vineyards were cultivated by

monks as far back as two thousand years ago.

BONNEAU DU MARTRAY

CORTON-CHARLEMAGNE | GRAND CRU

100% chardonnay

Possibly the most sought-after white Burgundy of all, Corton-Charlemagne is the world’s greatest chardonnay, and

Bonneau du Martray is the largest owner of vines within the Grand Cru Corton-Charlemagne vineyard, which lies

partly in the village of Pernand-V ergelesses. The centuries-old vineyard is thought to have been owned in the late

700s by Charlemagne himself. With the vineyard’s perfect exposure and soil, Corton-Charlemagne is a wine that

ought to be mind-blowing, and it is. In the hands of the prestigious, small estate Bonneau du Martray (the only

estate in Burgundy to produce wines exclusively from Grand Cru vineyards), the wine is as exquisite, vibrant,

sensual, and long as Corton-Charlemagne can be. I love the way the wine lifts out of the glass and seems to levitate

on some higher plane of flavor. Chardonnay doesn’t get more poetic, more ethereal, than this.

REDS

AURÉLIEN VERDET

MOREY-ST .

-DENIS | EN LA RUE DE VERGY

100% pinot noir

In the Côte de Nuits village of Morey-St.

-Denis, right below the Grand Cru vineyard Clos de Tart, lies a lieu-dit

called En la Rue de V ergy, considered one of the best vineyards in Morey-St.

-Denis. From a tiny 3.5-acre (1.4-

hectare) parcel within En la Rue de V ergey, Aurélien V erdet makes an ethereal pinot noir with a velvety, sappy

texture and exquisite balance. The wine is rich and alive with morello cherry and cinnamon notes, plus

undercurrents of something that exudes umami—black truffles maybe, or fine miso. Driven and enthusiastic,

Aurélien V erdet is one of Burgundy’s young (born in 1981) star vignerons and was a race car driver when his father

asked him to come back to the vineyards.

DOMAINE DANIEL RION & FILS

CHAMBOLLE-MUSIGNY | LES CHARMES | PREMIER CRU

100% pinot noir

Great Burgundy is often the equivalent of quiet but insistent music. Something about it pulls you back again and

again—as if the mystery of its taste could be solved with just one more sip. The Daniel Rion Chambolle-Musigny

from the Premier Cru vineyard Les Charmes can be like this. Seamless and supple, in great years it displays a

beautiful core of delicious things evocative of grenadine, cherry syrup, Asian spices, and earth. And all so

impeccably balanced, silky, and understated, it’s unnerving. In general, Chambolle-Musignys are more about grace

than power, as Rion’s Les Charmes charmingly shows. The Rion family, considered to be among Burgundy’s top-

ranking producers, is also known for their sumptuous Nuits-St.

-Georges.

DOMAINE DUJAC

CHAMBOLLE-MUSIGNY | LES GRUENCHERS | PREMIER CRU

100% pinot noir

This domaine, begun in 1967 by the influential, highly praised winemaker Jacques Seysses, is now run by his two

sons, Alec and Jeremy, and Jeremy’s wife, Diana. The domaine’s wines are among the most sublime from

Burgundy. As a village, Chambolle-Musigny is known for the almost lacy elegance of its wines. Add to that a top

Premier Cru vineyard like Les Gruenchers (just down the slope from the Grand Cru Bonnes Mares) and an artist

family like the Seysses’

, and you have magic. When I have tasted it, Les Gruenchers has been the epitome of

sensuality, with long, creamy mocha and earth flavors.

COMTE GEORGES DE VOGÜÉ

CHAMBOLLE-MUSIGNY | LES AMOUREUSES | PREMIER CRU

100% pinot noir

The name of this vineyard—Les Amoureuses (women in love)—says it all, for the wine’s comingling of femininity

and sensuality is complex and beautiful. The rich flavors of raspberry and pomegranate are driven deep into the

wine and entwined there with a fresh, pure sense of minerality. Drinking this wine is, I must say, an ethereal

experience, as if every one of one’s senses has taken flight. The cellars of Comte Georges de V ogüé are

mesmerizing and hypnotic—a silent sanctuary for exquisite wines resting until they slowly unfurl themselves.

There is no doubt that these cellars are among the most spiritual places in all of Burgundy.

DOMAINE LEROY

CLOS DE LA ROCHE | GRAND CRU

100% pinot noir

In top vintages, this wine is incomparable and as close to sheer perfection as Burgundy gets. Its sappy cherry

quality—like fruits drenched in syrup—is pure hedonism. Its smell, like a damp forest—sweet, fresh, dying and yet

vividly alive—is sensual. Spices and minerals form a kind of intricate lacework within the wine. The texture is silk

against your cheek. All in all, the wine leaves you exhausted with pleasure. It is from the great Grand Cru vineyard

Clos de la Roche, in the village of Morey-St.

-Denis. And the woman who makes it—Lalou Bize Leroy, the owner

of Domaine Leroy—is something of a legend in Burgundy, and one of its most flamboyant and influential

winemakers.

CLOS DE TART

CLOS DE TART | GRAND CRU

100% pinot noir

The monopole Clos de Tart, in Morey-St.

-Denis, is a 17-acre (7-hectare) Grand Cru vineyard. The original estate,

founded by medieval nuns, once belonged to the Abbaye de Tart, itself part of the famous Abbaye de Cîteaux. The

wine is sumptuous, with a vivid, fresh richness evocative of pomegranates, cranberry compote, and raspberry jam,

plus whorls of spice and sassafras. Clos de Tart is known for its profound and incredible structure—qualities that

carry it for decades of aging. But I like it when it is young, when the pent-up power is palpable.

BEAUJOLAIS

The vineyards of Beaujolais extend for some 35 miles (56 kilometers) over low granite

hills to the south of Burgundy. For French administrative purposes, Beaujolais is

considered part of Burgundy, even though, aside from proximity, the two regions have

almost nothing in common. The climates are dissimilar; the soils and geology are

different; the grapes are not the same; the way the wines are made varies radically. Even

the spirit of each place is singular. Beaujolais is fruit and joy; Burgundy is earth and

solemnity.

Beaujolais is both the name of the place and the wine made there. For several decades

now, the sad misconception about the wine Beaujolais has been that it’s a once-a-year

experience, drunk around the end of November when signs in restaurants and wine shops

from Paris to Tokyo trumpet Le Beaujolais Est Arrivé! (“The Beaujolais Has Arrived!”)

What has arrived, to be exact, is the PR exploit Beaujolais Nouveau, a grapey young red

wine made immediately after the harvest. Beaujolais Nouveau—with its bubble-gum-like

flavors—can be amusing (kids in France get to drink it), but as wines go, old-style,

traditional Beaujolais is infinitely better.

Beaujolais has been called the only white wine that happens to be red. Indeed, despite

its vivid magenta color, Beaujolais can seem like white wine in its expressiveness,

freshness, and thirst-quenching qualities. The wine’s personality begins with the gamay

noir grape (usually known simply as gamay), virtually the only one used in Beaujolais’s

production. Gamay’s flavors are unmistakable: a rush of black cherry and black raspberry,

then a hint of peaches, violets, and roses, often followed by peppery spiciness at the end.

And because gamay is naturally low in tannin, its already profuse fruitiness seems even

more dramatic.

With its rush of vivid cherry, raspberry, and peach flavors, good Beaujolais is irresistible and as exuberant-tasting as

childhood itself.

THE QUICK SIP ON BEAUJOLAIS

TWO WORLDS OF BEAUJOLAIS exist—old-style Beaujolais wines made in a

traditional manner, and contrived Beaujolais that are very commercial. The marketing

phenomenon known as Beaujolais Nouveau belongs to the latter group.

ALL BEAUJOLAIS is made from gamay, a deliciously, deeply fruity grape.

MOST BEAUJOLAIS is made by a special fermentation technique—carbonic

maceration—that maximizes the wine’s inherent fruitiness.

Beaujolais’s character comes, however, not solely from gamay, but also from the

unusual, traditional manner in which many of the wines are made. Called carbonic

maceration, the process enhances fruity aromas and fruity flavors in wine. During this

process, entire clusters of grapes (usually hand-harvested so that the clusters are rot-free

and perfectly intact) are put whole into the fermenting tank. The grapes on the bottom,

crushed by the weight of the grapes on top, release their juice, which immediately starts

fermenting naturally due to wild yeasts on the grape skins, bathing the grapes on top in

carbon dioxide gas (a byproduct of fermentation). Those top-layer grapes eventually

explode from the pressure of the CO2, exposing them to yeasts in the tank and thus

causing them to ferment as well. Carbonic maceration could theoretically be used with any

grape, but it is particularly successful with ultrafruity grapes, such as gamay.

After Beaujolais is fermented, it rests in tanks (a few growers also put it briefly in

small, relatively new oak) for several months or more before being sold.

COMMERCIAL VS. OLD-STYLE BEAUJOLAIS

Several decades ago, all Beaujolais was what I’ll call old-style—meaning, made as a

serious wine. But fueled by the popularity of Beaujolais Nouveau in the 1960s and 1970s,

growers and producers began to increase their productions, making cheap, cheerful wines

that—in the beginning—were easy to sell and a cash-flow dream come true. As the hype

wore away, the practice turned in on itself and became a self-fulfilling prophecy. Growers,

paid increasingly little, were forced to take more and more shortcuts, increasing yields;

chaptalizing thin, unripe wines; filtering the wines severely; and releasing them early.

Beaujolais made in this large-scale, commercial way tasted more tutti-frutti than truly

fruity. Its bouncy, sophomoric flavor was often a dead ringer for Jell-O.

Today, while commercial Beaujolais is widely available, so are wines from the serious,

old-style producers. Traditionally made Beaujolais from small estates often costs more,

but the pure deliciousness of the wines is incomparable. In many cases, they possess an

almost electric richness of fruit, floral, and spice notes that’s like drinking happiness.

Among the old-style producers to search out: Marcel Lapierre, Jean-Paul Thévenet, Jean-

Paul Brun, Guy Breton, Dominique Piron, Michel Tête, Jean Foillard, Domaine du Granit,

and Julien Sunier.

In total, there are some three thousand growers and eighteen cooperatives in Beaujolais

today. Many growers sell to the region’s well-established négociants, including the largest

well known négociant, the firm Georges Duboeuf.

Finally, like chardonnay, its sibling, gamay is the progeny of pinot noir and gouais

blanc. The grape originated in Burgundy in the fourteenth century, but was harshly (and

unfairly) judged by one of Burgundy’s powerful dukes (Philippe the Bold) who issued an

edict in 1395 banishing the grape from the Côte d’Or to the southern Burgundian region of

Beaujolais. His edict read, in part,

“a very bad and disloyal variety called Gaamez (the old

name of gamay), from which come abundant quantities of wine… And this wine of

Gaamez is of such a kind that it is very harmful to human creatures, so much so that many

people who had it in the past were infested by serious diseases, as we’ve heard; because

said wine from said plant of said nature is full of significant and horrible bitterness. For

this reason we solemnly command you… all who have said vines of said Gaamez to cut

them down or have them cut down, wherever they may be in our country, within five

months.

”

THE GRAPES OF BEAUJOLAIS

RED

GAMAY: More correctly called gamay noir, gamay is effectively the sole grape of Beaujolais, where it

makes everything from utterly simple quaffs to more sophisticated fruity wines.

CATEGORIES OF BEAUJOLAIS

By law, Beaujolais is made in three ascending categories of quality (and price). They are:

BEAUJOLAIS

BEAUJOLAIS-VILLAGES

BEAUJOLAIS CRU

Basic Beaujolais—about 50 percent of all the Beaujolais made—is the result of grapes

grown mainly in less distinguished (less granitic) vineyards in the south. Soil here is more

fertile, the land is flatter, and the wines tend to be lighter and less concentrated.

THE BEAUJOLAIS CRUS

From north to south, here are the ten villages—crus—that produce the most distinctive Beaujolais. The

labels on bottles of Beaujolais Cru will usually name the producer and the cru only. The word Beaujolais

will not appear.

ST .

-AMOUR: Rich, silky, and sometimes spicy wines; the aroma can suggest peaches. St.

-Amour means

“holy love.

” One theory suggests the name is derived from a Roman soldier who, after escaping death,

converted to Christianity and set up a mission. He was canonized as St. Amour.

JULIÉNAS: Rich and relatively powerful, the aroma and flavor of Juliénas is floral and spicy. Named after

Julius Caesar.

CHÉNAS: A supple and graceful wine, with a subtle bouquet of wild roses. At just under 700 acres (280

hectares), Chénas is the smallest Beaujolais cru.

MOULIN-À-VENT : Hearty, rich, and well-balanced in texture, bouquet, and flavor. With Fleurie and

Morgon, Moulin-à-Vent is one of the crus said to age the best. The name means “windmill,

” in honor of a

three-hundred-year-old stone one that rises above the vines.

FLEURIE: Velvety in texture, with a bouquet both floral and fruity. Fleurie, situated on east-facing slopes

that get gentle morning sun, is considered the most feminine of the Beaujolais crus.

CHIROUBLES: Grapes for Chiroubles come from some of the vineyards located at the highest altitudes

in Beaujolais. The wines are very low in tannin and light-bodied, often with a bouquet of violets.

MORGON: With its soils rich in iron and manganese, Morgon has a personality that stands apart from all

the other crus. Rich, masculine, and deep purple in color, it’s rather full in body for a Beaujolais. It tastes

of apricots, peaches, and the earth.

RÉGNIÉ: The newest cru, established in 1988, Régnié is relatively full-bodied and round, with red

currant and raspberry flavors.

BROUILLY: The wines of Brouilly are fruity with aromas of raspberries, cherries, blueberries, and

currants. The pinkish-colored granite soils here yield light-bodied wines. At more than 3,000 acres (1,200

hectares), this is the largest cru.

CÔTE DE BROUILLY: Wines from the Côte de Brouilly are heady and lively, with a deep fruity quality.

The more powerful expression of fruit is said to be the result of the Côte de Brouilly’s elevated location on

the slopes of Mont Brouilly, an extinct volcano.

Beaujolais-Villages—25 percent of production—is a notch better in quality, and comes

from thirty-nine villages in the hilly midsection of the region. Soil here is poorer,

composed of granite and sand, forcing the vines to yield better, riper grapes.

Better still are the Beaujolais Crus—the final 25 percent of production. In Beaujolais

the word cru does not indicate a vineyard as it does in other French regions, but instead

refers to ten distinguished villages. Beaujolais Cru wines come from these villages, all of

which are located on steep granite hills (about 1,000 feet/305 meters in elevation) in the

northern part of Beaujolais. Cru wines are denser, richer, and more expressive than basic

Beaujolais. Not surprisingly, they are also capable of aging, thanks to their greater

structures.

Nicole Chanrion (left), shown with her sister Michèle, runs her family’ s winery Domaine de la V oûte des Crozes in Côte-

de-Brouilly. Chanrion does every task herself—from pruning the vines and driving the tractor to making the wine and

bottling it.

THE LAND, THE GRAPES, AND THE VINEYARDS

The 42,000 acres (17,000 hectares) of Beaujolais vineyards carpet a corridor 35 miles (56

kilometers) long and about 9 miles (14 kilometers) wide. On the east is the Saône River

valley, on the west, the Monts de Beaujolais, a mountainous spur of the Massif Central.

The climate is continental, with cold winters and hot, mostly dry summers. The region is

divided in two. The northern (Haut) Beaujolais is where the highly desirable granite soils

are found. All ten of the Cru Beaujolais villages are located in the north. The southern

(Bas) Beaujolais is dominated by sedimentary rock and clay soils. Basic Beaujolais tends

to come from vineyards in the south.

BEAUJOLAIS NOUVEAU

Beaujolais Nouveau is regular Beaujolais, from the lesser districts, that is seven to nine

weeks old. Nearly a century ago, casks of the just-made, grapey wine would be shipped by

paddleboat down the Saône River to the bars and bistros of Lyon (and later, Paris). By the

1960s, the wine had become a successful PR campaign—a way of getting quick

recognition (and cash), all under the guise of celebrating the harvest. Nearly half a million

cases of Nouveau were being sold. Today, Beaujolais Nouveau still accounts for about half

of all basic Beaujolais made.

The church of Régnié la Durette amid the gamay vines of Régnié. The westernmost of the Beaujolais cru, Régnié became

the tenth cru in 1988.

TO CHILL OR NOT TO CHILL?

Chill it—but just a little. When Beaujolais is served just below room temperature, but not cold to the

touch (fifteen minutes in the refrigerator will work), its flavors explode with fruit and spice. Chilling the

wine is also customary in the region. Historically in Beaujolais, on summer Sundays, jugs of the wine

would be set in buckets of cold water and placed under the shade of a tree in the center of the village so

that men playing boules would have something to slake their thirst.

In 1985, France’s Institut National des Appellations d’Origine (INAO) established the

third Thursday in November as the wine’s uniform release date. (Interestingly, in the rush

to release Nouveau on the official date, growers sometimes have to pick early, before the

grapes are ripe, thus undermining the quality of the wine.) While theoretically there is

better and worse Nouveau, in fact, much of the wine tastes merely like melted purple

Popsicles. Drinking it gives you the same kind of silly pleasure as eating cookie dough.

WHEN YOU VISIT… BEAUJOLAIS

WINEMAKERS IN BEAUJOLAIS are warm and welcoming, and the region is

unpretentious and joyfully focused on eating and drinking. It’s been said that Beaujolais

flows in the veins of every cook here, and indeed the region is full of terrific country

restaurants specializing in home cooking. Lyon—considered the gastronomic capital of

France and the place where bistros first began—is less than 15 miles (24 kilometers)

from the southern part of Beaujolais and just north of where the Rhône Valley begins.

Many lovers of French cuisine consider a meal in Lyon worth the price of an

international plane ticket.

TWO OF THE CRUS especially worth visiting are Moulin-à-Vent with its famous

windmill (the unofficial symbol of Beaujolais) and Chiroubles. the highest in elevation,

so hikers take note, this is the hill to climb. At the top is the reward—a panoramic view

of the Haut Beaujolais and an excellent tasting cellar where you can taste an array of

local wines.

The Beaujolais to Know

The wines below are all what might be called “serious” Beaujolais—made by small-scale producers using artisanal

methods. (Nothing reminiscent of Popsicles and melted Jell-O here.) Beaujolais such as these are utterly delicious

fruit-driven, mineral-spiked wines waiting for food.

DOMINIQUE PIRON

MORGON | CÔTE DU PY

100% gamay

Dominique Piron’s Morgon makes me envision black raspberries nudged against chocolate cake. It’s joyful,

hedonistic wine to be sure. But the structure is also serious and impeccable, and the light waves of sandalwood-like

spice add an especially enticing note to the aroma. The Piron family has been growing grapes here since the

sixteenth century, making Dominique a fourteenth-generation winemaker. The Côte de Py is a small hill within

Morgon that produces especially concentrated flavors.

MARCEL LAPIERRE

MORGON

100% gamay

Deliciously spicy, the Morgons of Marcel Lapierre are also very pure and racy. The gorgeous burst of gamay fruit in

the wines is counterbalanced by high notes of flowers and deep notes of minerals, creating a very complex sensory

experience. Marcel Lapierre became legendary for spearheading the Gang of Four, a group of four Beaujolais

winemakers who, starting in the 1970s, fought against the use of pesticides and argued for a return to the old days

of high-quality wine production.

JULIEN SUNIER

RÉGNIÉ

100% gamay

Julien Sunier is a small producer whose elegant Régniés have intense floral and spicy notes. One could, for all the

world, be standing in a sunny field of wildflowers on the hills of Beaujolais. The wines’ textures are so silky, the

fruit in the wine is so seductive, that it’s nearly impossible to stop drinking. The son of a hairdresser, Julien caught

the wine bug from his mother’s client Christophe Roumier (of Domaine Georges Roumier) and traveled the world

learning about wine before settling down on his tiny estate to make his magnetic wines.

JEAN-PAUL BRUN

FLEURIE | DOMAINES DES TERRES DORÉES

100% gamay

Although granite soils do not yield granite-tasting wines (the mechanisms by which minerality in wine occur are

intricate and poorly understood), the stony flavors in this wine, coupled with the lively, fresh, palate-drenching

splashes of cherry fruit, are in a word, sensational. Lipsmacking yet sophisticated. My kind of wine.

MICHEL TÊTE

JULIÉNAS | DOMAINE DU CLOS DU FIEF

100% gamay

Deliciousness hit dead-on. The mineral-strewn, rich cherry fruit in this wine seems so deeply embedded that the

wine just keeps evolving for hours after the bottle is opened. (If it lasts for hours, that is.) I love the synthesis of

flowers, minerals, and fruits; and the texture is utterly silky. Michel Tête, grandson of a barrel manufacturer who

started the estate, uses Burgundian techniques to create his concentrated wines.

DOMAINE DE LA VOÛTE DES CROZES

CÔTE DE BROUILLY

100% gamay

This wine changed the way I view Beaujolais. Its serious aromas of rocks, minerals, granite, and salt are anything

but frivolous. But then, a split second later, a firehose of gushing fruit (pomegranates, peaches, and raspberries)

comes at you. And in their wake, you feel as if the sky just rained down violets. In a way that is totally charming,

this irresistible Beaujolais has both impact and beauty. The domaine is owned and worked by Nicole Chanrion, one

of the few women winemakers in the region, who tends all 16 acres entirely by herself, from pruning the vineyards

and driving the tractors to making and bottling the wine.

THE RHÔNE

If I had to name France’s three greatest regions, I would say: Bordeaux (for the aristocracy

of the best wines made there); Burgundy (for what it teaches us about elegance in wine);

and the Rhône (for the uninhibited, fearless, almost savage flavors that the top wines

possess). There is no question that among the world’s greatest red wines, Rhônes are the

most untamed. Their howlingly spicy, dark flavors can seem almost caged, ready to

explode with fierceness. Rhônes are the wine equivalent of a primal scream.

The Rhône V alley takes its name from the Rhône River, which begins high in the Swiss

Alps and flows into France through the canyons of the Jura Mountains. South of Lyon and

just north of Ampuis, where the vineyards begin, the river makes a sharp turn and plunges

southward for 250 miles (400 kilometers) until it washes into the Mediterranean, just west

of Marseille.

The valley is divided into two parts: the northern Rhône, smaller and a bit more

prestigious, and the southern Rhône, larger and better known. It takes about an hour to

drive between the two, and along the way, you see only patches of isolated vineyards. In

fact, the northern and southern Rhône are so distinct and different that, were it not for the

river that connects them, they would almost certainly be considered separate wine regions.

In both the north and the south there are multiple wine districts, or appellations. The

most renowned northern reds are Côte-Rôtie and Hermitage; the most famous southern red

is Châteauneuf-du-Pape. The popular, well-priced wines known as Côtes-du-Rhône—

staples in French cafés and many others worldwide—can come from either part of the

valley, although most come from tracts of vineyards in the south.

THE QUICK SIP ON THE RHÔNE

THE RHÔNE VALLEY in southeastern France is divided into two parts: the northern

Rhône and the southern Rhône. Wines from each are distinctly different.

RED WINES DOMINATE THE REGION, although whites and rosés are also made in

the Rhône. The most famous northern Rhône reds are Côte-Rôtie and Hermitage; the

most famous southern red is Châteauneuf-du-Pape.

SYRAH IS THE SOLE RED GRAPE in the north. Southern Rhône reds are usually

blends of many grapes, the most important of which are grenache and mourvèdre.

Although twenty-seven varieties of grapes are grown in the Rhône V alley, only a

handful of these are of major importance. The others—many of them grapes that have

grown in the Rhône for centuries and are simply inter-planted with the main varieties—are

today used almost nostalgically, to add nuance and what winemakers sometimes call the

flavors of tradition. As a matter of law, each appellation specifies which of the twenty-

seven grapes can be used within its borders (see The Major Appellations, Wines, and

Principal Grapes of the Northern Rhône, page 241, and The Major Appellations, Wines,

and Principal Grapes of the Southern Rhône, page 249). Winemakers are then free to

create their “personal recipe” blend from the permissible varieties.

The grapes of the northern Rhône are the easiest to remember. All red wines come from

only one red grape—syrah. All white wines in the north are made from either viognier or a

blend of marsanne and roussanne.

The southern Rhône is just the opposite. In such appellations as Châteauneuf-du-Pape,

Gigondas, and V acqueyras, a small chorus of red and white grapes come out to sing,

including grenache and syrah, as well as mourvèdre. As we’ll see, there is a good reason

northern Rhône reds are the expression of one grape and southern Rhônes the expression

of many.

The Rhône V alley is one of the oldest wine regions in France. When the Romans

arrived some two thousand years ago, the inhabitants of what was then Gaul were drinking

wines that the Roman writer Pliny described as excellent. Indeed, wine had been

introduced to southern France well before—sometime around 500 B.C.

—by the Etruscans

(a pre-Roman Italian tribe), and the French had quickly learned the art of winemaking

themselves.

All of this said, Rhône wines are not a singular idea. Among the top wines, the large

number of small growers here, plus the huge differences in the terroirs, plus the wide

range of grape varieties, all add up to a mountain of highly individual, exciting wines.

THE NORTHERN RHÔNE

The northern Rhône is where many of the Rhône V alley’s rarest and most expensive reds

and whites are made. The region begins with Côte-Rôtie, the northernmost appellation,

and extends about 50 miles (80 kilometers) south, as far as Cornas and the small,

inconsequential St.

-Péray. In between are the five appellations: Condrieu, Château-Grillet,

St.

-Joseph, Hermitage, and Crozes-Hermitage.

The best vineyards cling to narrow, rocky terraces on the steep slopes that loom over

the river. The ancient, shallow granite and slate soil there is poor. Erosion is such a threat

that, were it not for the terraces and the hand-built stone walls that wearily hold them in

place, the vines would slide down the hillsides. Even so, some of this weathered, crumbly

soil usually does wash down the slopes in the winter rain, and when it does, Rhône

winemakers do what they’ve always done: haul the precious stuff back up in small

buckets.

Harvesting marsanne grapes in the steep vineyards of Hermitage above the city of Tain.

The climate in the northern Rhône is continental, entirely unlike the climate in the

south, which is Mediterranean. In the north, the winters are hard, cold, and wet; the

summers are hot. Late spring and early fall fog make the southern orientation of the

vineyards critical. Without this good southern exposure, the grapes would not receive

enough sunlight and heat to ripen properly. It helps that the well-drained, fractured granite

soils retain heat, for the howling, icy northern wind, known as Le Mistral (in the Occitan

dialect of southern France, the word means master), can quickly cool the vines.

The only red grape permitted in the northern Rhône is syrah, a natural cross of the

white grape mondeuse blanche and the red grape dureza (which itself is a descendent of

pinot noir). The cross is thought to have occurred in the Rhône-Alps region of eastern

France.

Divine enological wisdom must have been operating when the northern Rhône settled

on syrah, for syrah planted there makes what are unquestionably some of the world’s most

intense wines. Darkly savage and dramatic, they exude corruption, and almost pant with

gamy, meaty, animal flavors. (Then there’s blood and offal. Y ou can count on Rhône

syrahs taking you down into realms of flavor that can’t be talked about in polite company.)

Plus the flavor that tips you off that you’re in the northern Rhône—white pepper, which is

evident in virtually every wine here. But pepper is just the beginning. From there, the

wines explode with aromas of exotic smoky incense, forest, and leather, while the flavors

of black plums, blackberries, and blueberries pile on. The fervor of these flavors is due in

part to the age of the vines. Many are at least forty years old, and some broach a hundred.

These centurians don’t produce many bunches of grapes, but the grapes they do produce

are packed with power and concentration.

As for white wine, only a small amount is made here. Condrieu and Château-Grillet are

the most renowned and expensive northern whites. Both are made exclusively from the

perfumed, lush white grape viognier (also indigenous to the Rhône and also the progeny of

mondeuse blanche). All other northern Rhône whites—Hermitage Blanc, Crozes-

Hermitage Blanc, St.

-Joseph Blanc, and so on—are made from two other white grapes:

marsanne, the heartbeat of the blend, and roussanne, added for its finesse and exotic

aromas and flavors of quince, peaches, and lime blossoms. And finally, no rosés are made

in the northern Rhône, although as we’ll see, the southern Rhône is well known for them.

THE GRAPES OF THE RHÔNE

WHITES

BOURBOULENC: A component in southern Rhône blends, especially in white Côtes-du-Rhône, where it

adds acidity.

CLAIRETTE: Fresh and beautifully aromatic when grown at low yields, clairette plays a leading role in

virtually all of the white Côtes-du-Rhône.

GRENACHE BLANC: The white mutation of grenache and the workhorse white grape of the southern

Rhône. Has high alcohol and low acidity.

MACCABEO, PICARDAN, PICPOUL, AND ROLLE (AKA VERMENTINO): Blending grapes of modest

quality that are used in southern Rhône blends.

MARSANNE: Important white grape of the northern Rhône. Makes up the majority percentage in

Hermitage Blanc, Crozes-Hermitage Blanc, and St.

-Joseph Blanc. Also used widely in the south. Usually

blended with other white grapes.

MUSCAT BLANC À PETITS GRAINS: The deeply aromatic grape that makes the Rhône’s famous

fortified dessert wine, Muscat de Beaumes-de-Venise. Considered one of the best grapes among the

varieties with muscat in the name.

ROUSSANNE: Elegant, aromatic white of the northern Rhône. Often added to marsanne for finesse.

Difficult and hence expensive to grow.

UGNI BLANC: French name for the grape trebbiano T oscano, a prolific white grape grown all over

southern and central France. Used as filler in inexpensive southern blends.

VIOGNIER: The most perfumed white of the Rhône. Grown in small quantities in the north, where it

becomes Condrieu and Château-Grillet. Small amounts of viognier are also grown in the southern

Rhône, where it makes its way into some of the top Côtes-du-Rhône.

REDS

CALITOR: Relatively neutral red used in blends but declining in importance.

CARIGNAN: Used mostly in the south in Côtes-du-Rhône and rosé wines.

CINSAUT : Blending grape in southern Rhônes. Adds finesse and cherry nuances and can make

especially lovely rosés.

CLAIRETTE ROSE, COUNOISE, MARSELAN, MUSCARDIN, MUSCAT NOIR, PICPOUL NOIR,

TERRET NOIR, AND VACCARÈSE: Minor blending grapes used in many southern Rhônes for aromatic

and flavor nuances.

GRENACHE: Leading grape of the southern Rhône. Makes up the dominant percentage of virtually all

red blends. Has elegant cherry and raspberry confiture flavors. (A mutation known as grenache gris [gray

grenache] is not as high in quality.)

MOURVÈDRE: Major blending grape in southern Rhônes. Gives structure, acidity, and leather and game

flavors. It also originated in Spain, where it is called monastrell, or sometimes mataro.

SYRAH: Star grape of the northern Rhône, where it is used alone to make bold, spicy, peppery wines. In

the south, it is an important part of such blends as Châteauneuf-du-Pape, Gigondas, and Côtes-du-

Rhône.

Northern Rhône wines are made by tiny, family-owned estates; by larger, well-known,

family-owned firms such as M. Chapoutier and E. Guigal; by négociants who buy wine,

blend it, and then bottle it under their own brand label; and by a few cooperatives (which

make the least interesting wines). The small producers are very small. In Côte-Rôtie, for

example, there are only sixty vineyards, but more than a hundred producers who make

wine from those vineyards.

As they are most everywhere else, winemaking styles in the northern Rhône are

moving in a modern direction. Y et certain traditional methods live on. Key among these is

the old custom of including the stems along with the grapes during fermentation. Stems

profoundly affect a wine, imbuing its aroma and flavor with notes of sandalwood, spice,

and a briary character. In addition, since stems as well as grape skins contain tannin, not

removing the stems increases the tannin and gives the wines more edge, more grip.

Because the production of most northern Rhônes is limited, and because many

vineyards are extremely difficult to work, the wines—especially the top Côte-Rôties and

Hermitages—are expensive.

CÔTE-RÔTIE

Some of the most thrilling wines of the Rhône carry the appellation Côte-Rôtie (literally,

“roasted hillside”). They are dramatic wines with incisive, earthy, and gamy flavors.

Pepper seems to pace back and forth in the glass like a caged animal. All Côte-Rôties are

red and based on syrah. No white wine is made in this appellation.

There are slightly less than 600 acres (240 hectares) of Côte-Rôtie vineyards, the best

of which are on precipitous granite slopes with grades of up to 60 degrees, facing due

south. There are other Côte-Rôtie vineyards on the plateaus above the slopes (the ironic

“non-côtes” Côtes). These newer vineyards were permitted to be established when the

original appellation was slightly expanded several times in the 1970s and 1980s. In

acknowledgment of the inferiority of certain plateau vineyards, some producers willingly

declassify the wines made from those vineyards, labeling them Côtes-du-Rhône, rather

than the more prestigious Côte-Rôtie.

Wherever they are found, steep vineyards that happen to fall in direct sun are coveted,

for the grapes are drenched in light (for ripeness) but cooled by the altitude and breezes

(preserving acidity and finesse). Syrah, in particular, needs this yin and yang of warmth

and coolness. When it is grown in the hotter, southern Rhône, syrah can be fatter on the

palate, but it loses the savage precision and striking ferocity of a great Côte-Rôtie.

Within the Côte-Rôtie are two famous slopes: the Côte Brune and the Côte Blonde.

According to a predictable legend, these were named after the daughters—one brunette,

one blonde—of an aristocratic feudal lord. The wines are just what the stereotypes

suggest. Côte Brunes are generally more tannic and powerful; Côte Blondes, more elegant

and racy. If a Côte-Rôtie comes from one of these slopes, or is a blend of the two, the label

will say so.

Producers in Côte-Rôtie, and in the Rhône in general, commonly blend grapes from

different vineyard sites to achieve complexity. Occasionally, if the vineyard is

extraordinary, grapes from it may be vinified separately and made into a wine labeled with

the name of the vineyard. Such wines are expensive and ravishing. Among the top

vineyards are La Mouline, La Landonne, La Chatillone, La Garde, La Chevalière, and La

Turque.

Côte-Rôtie is one of only two top French red wines that, by law, may be made with a

small quantity of white grapes blended in (the other being Hermitage). The reason for this

is largely practical, since in Côte-Rôtie viognier vines are scattered in among the syrah

vines in many vineyards. Historically, viognier’s creamy texture (the result of its high

glycerine and low acid levels) was thought to soften the sometimes blunt edges of syrah.

Today viognier is included for its exotic aroma as well, making Côte-Rôtie more

fascinating. Although up to 20 percent viognier can, by law, be included in red Côte-Rôtie,

most producers include less than 5 percent.

THE MOST IMPORTANT RHÔNE WINES

LEADING APPELLATIONS—NORTH

CHÂTEAU-GRILLET white

CONDRIEU white

CORNAS red

CÔTE-RÔTIE red

CROZES-HERMITAGE red and white

HERMITAGE red and white

ST .

-JOSEPH red and white

LEADING APPELLATIONS—SOUTH

CHÂTEAUNEUF-DU-PAPE red and white

CÔTES-DU-RHÔNE red and white

CÔTES-DU-RHÔNE-VILLAGES red and white

GIGONDAS red and rosé

MUSCAT DE BEAUMES-DE-VENISE white (fortified; sweet)

VACQUEYRAS red

APPELLATIONS OF NOTE—SOUTH

RASTEAU red

TAVEL rosé

The tiny appellation of Côte-Rôtie (literally,

“Roasted Slope”) makes some of the most treasured and hauntingly

delicious wines of the Rhône.

The four fairly large, well-known firms in Côte-Rôtie are Guigal, M. Chapoutier, Paul

Jaboulet Aîné, and Delas Frères (today owned by the Champagne house of Louis

Roederer). In the 1970s, Guigal was one of the first Rhône wineries to age wines partially

in new French oak. In the 1990s, Chapoutier wines, in particular, soared in quality as the

family firm was taken over by the ambitious son, Michel Chapoutier. In addition to the

four impressive firms above, some of the most exciting Côte-Rôties are made by tiny

producers, including René Rostaing, Robert Jasmin, Henri Gallet, Jamet, Michel Ogier, J.

M. Gerin, Benjamin et David Duclaux, and Château de St. Cosme.

CONDRIEU AND CHÂTEAU-GRILLET

Condrieu and Château-Grillet are the northern Rhône’s most famous white wines

appellations. One is tiny; the other, microscopic. Château-Grillet, of course, sounds as

though it is one producer, not an appellation. It is both. Within the appellation Château-

Grillet there is but one producer: Château-Grillet. At 8.6 acres (3.5 hectares), it is one of

the smallest appellations in France and sits like an enclave within Condrieu. Today it is

owned by the Artemis Group, the parent company of Bordeaux’s Château Latour.

THE MAJOR APPELLATIONS, WINES, AND PRINCIPAL

GRAPES OF THE NORTHERN RHÔNE

The appellations are listed following the Rhône River north to south. All of the red wines of the northern

Rhône are made from one red grape exclusively—syrah. While the region is primarily devoted to red

wine, the two small appellations Condrieu and Château-Grillet are both devoted entirely to white wines

made from viognier. (No rosés are made in the northern Rhône.)

APPELLATION WINES(S) MADE PRINCIPAL RED

GRAPE

PRINCIPAL WHITE

GRAPE

CÔTE-RÔTIE red syrah none

CONDRIEU white none viognier

CHÂTEAU-GRILLET white none viognier

ST .

-JOSEPH red and white syrah roussanne, marsanne

HERMITAGE red and white syrah roussanne, marsanne

CROZES-HERMITAGE red and white syrah roussanne, marsanne

CORNAS red syrah none

Both Condrieu and Château-Grillet are made from viognier, an exotically aromatic

variety that, to its admirers, is one of the most drippingly sensual white grapes in the

world. In great years, and when it’s perfectly made, viognier explodes with the heady

aromas of honeysuckle, peaches, white melons, lychees, fresh orange peel, and gardenias.

The wine’s texture is as soothing as fresh whipped cream. But, the grape is notoriously

fickle, sensitive to its site, low in acidity, and difficult to grow. If the producer isn’t

careful, the wine can seem like cheap perfume.

There is very little viognier in France. In addition to the 270 or so acres (100 hectares)

in Condrieu and the 8.6 acres (3.5 hectares) in Château-Grillet, there are smatterings in

other parts of the Rhône, as well as a small amount in the Languedoc-Roussillon. Outside

of France, California is the leading producer—growing ten times more viognier than is

grown in the Rhone.

The village of Condrieu sits at a curve in the Rhône River. The name comes

from the French coin de ruisseau,

“corner of the brook.

”

At the summit of the Hermitage hill is La Chapelle—a small stone chapel built as a sanctuary in 1235 by the knight

Gaspard de Stérimberg. Today, La Chapelle and the renowned vineyards surrounding it are owned by Paul Jaboulet

Aîné.

The most well-known, top producer of Condrieu is Georges V ernay. Look also for

excellent Condrieu from E. Guigal, René Rostaing, André Perret, Dumazet, Y ves

Cuilleron, Philippe Faury, and Robert Niero.

ST .

-JOSEPH

When it was first established in 1956, St.

-Joseph was a small, hilly appellation directly

across the river from Hermitage. The red wines in particular had a very good reputation.

Today, while some St.

-Josephs are dynamite, many others lack stuffing, seeming coarse

and thin. One reason for this is the appellation’s expansion. St.

-Joseph has grown into a

long, 2,500-acre (1,000-hectare) corridor stretching from Condrieu to the bottom tip of the

northern Rhône. Vineyards are now planted where the exposure to the sun is less ideal.

Today as in the past, most St.

-Joseph wines are red and based on syrah, with up to 10

percent of the white grapes marsanne and roussanne blended in. About 10 percent of the

production of the appellation is white; St.

-Joseph Blanc logically is made from marsanne,

with touches of roussanne. One of the best, Roger Blachon’s, has, in great years, the

ethereal texture of the finest honey.

Among the top producers of white and red St.

-Joseph are M. Chapoutier, Jean-Louis

Chave, Y ves Cuilleron, Jean-Louis Grippat, Alain Graillot, and André Perret.

HERMITAGE

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Hermitage was France’s costliest red wine. Not

only was it more expensive than the best Bordeaux, but the best Bordeaux (including the

First Growths) were often—if secretly—

“hermitaged,

” meaning that Hermitage was

secretly blended in to give the Bordeaux extra depth, color, and richness.

The appellation Hermitage is a single 1,000-foot-high (300-meter) hill, with just 300

acres (120 hectares) of vineyards clinging to its mostly southern-facing slope. The whole

of Hermitage is smaller than some wine properties in California. The famous soils here are

mostly granite, interspersed with gravel, flint, and limestone.

BISTRO LESSONS

The vineyards of the Rhône V alley lie just south of the city Lyon, known as the gastronomic capital of

France (north of Lyon, the vineyards of Beaujolais begin). In a country that takes its belly seriously, this

unofficial title is no small feat, and Lyon lives up to the challenge with 1,500 restaurants (one restaurant

for every 333 residents!). It’s no surprise that France’s first bistros—and their simpler predecessors,

known as bouchons—originated here as family-owned taverns where working men could eat and drink

cheaply but well. Even today, a no-frills, roll-up-your-sleeves approach to food remains the city’s

signature. And no one gets too uppity about wine either—carafes of Côtes-du-Rhône and Beaujolais are

never more than an arm’s length away. And what better way to wash down poached pork offal sausages

(andouillettes), cold chicken liver salad, cheesy potato gratin, curly endive with chunks of salty bacon, or

a wine-soaked chicken fricassee?

Predictably, there are many legends concerning hermits who supposedly gave

Hermitage its name. The one most often told concerns a medieval crusader, Gaspard de

Stérimberg, who, after being wounded in war, was granted, by Queen Blanche de Castille,

the right to establish a sanctuary on top of the hill. A small, ancient stone chapel still

marks the spot. It is for this chapel that La Chapelle, the impressive top wine of Paul

Jaboulet Aîné, is named.

Along with Côte-Rôtie, red Hermitage is the most revered wine of the northern Rhône.

In great years, Hermitage is a leathery, meaty red, packed with blackberry and black

cherry fruits and smoky, damp earth flavors. The famous English scholar and wine writer

George Saintsbury once described Hermitage as “the manliest wine” he’d ever drunk.

As in Côte-Rôtie, the only red grape in Hermitage is syrah. It is generally vinified in a

traditional manner and aged either in large casks for up to three years or in small oak

barrels, some percentage of which are new. Up to 15 percent white grapes (marsanne

and/or roussanne) are allowed in red Hermitage, but few producers add them.

The rare white wine Hermitage Blanc, made from marsanne and roussanne, tends to be

a full-throttle, full-bodied, bold-tasting, rich, almost masculine white wine, sometimes

with a fascinating oily, resiny texture. In the best wines, the roussanne lifts the wine and

adds hints of peaches, quince, almonds, honeysuckle, and lime. The two best examples of

Hermitage Blanc are Jean-Louis Chave’s Hermitage Blanc and M. Chapoutier’s Ermitage

l’Ermite Blanc. Both are massive wines with swaths of flavor so bold they seem like

brushstrokes on an Impressionist painting.

The top Hermitage producers, some of whom make both red and white wine, include E.

Guigal, Jean-Louis Chave, Marc Sorrel, M. Chapoutier, and Paul Jaboulet Aîné.

CROZES-HERMITAGE

Following Hermitage tradition, Crozes-Hermitage makes red wines from syrah, as well as

a tiny amount of white wine from marsanne and a bit of roussanne. The Crozes-Hermitage

vineyards, however, are mostly on the flatlands that spread out south and east of the hill of

Hermitage. The area they cover is ten times larger than Hermitage; indeed Crozes-

Hermitage is the largest appellation in the northern Rhone.

Because Crozes-Hermitage comes from less distinguished, higher-yielding vineyards, it

is usually less concentrated than either Côte-Rôtie or Hermitage. That said, there are a few

top-notch producers of Crozes-Hermitage, notably Alain Graillot, whose wine—vibrant,

complex, severe, and peppery—is easily the equal of many Hermitages, at less than half

the price. Other top producers to know are Albert Belle, M. Chapoutier, and Domaine

Combier.

The Rhône V alley takes many of its culinary cues from the city just north of it—Lyon (known as the gastronomic capital

of France). The restaurant Le Petit Glouton specializes in crepes and traditional bistro fare.

CORNAS

Cornas, from the old Celtic word for burnt or scorched earth, is a tiny region that sits at

the southern end of the northern Rhône. Only red wines are made here, all of them

exclusively from syrah. At their best, Cornas are dense, edgy, masculine wines with a

phalanx of white pepper that hits you in the teeth. A split second later, a briary character

explodes on your palate, and, if the Cornas is especially untamed, that may be followed by

what can only be described as the sense that your tongue is being lashed by strips of black

leather. Cornas is not everyone’s cup of tea, but those of us who love it, love it madly.

Aging is a critical factor. In the Rhône V alley, Cornas is generally drunk after it has been

aged for seven to ten years and has taken on a fine leatheriness and earthiness.

As in Côte-Rôtie and Hermitage, Cornas’s best vineyards are on dangerously steep

hillsides precariously held in place by ancient terraces with stone walls. The vineyards,

interspersed with patches of oak and juniper forest, face due south. The hills above block

cool winds from the north. Both the light and the heat of the sun are intense. It’s a perfect

equation for powerful wine. Top Cornas producers include Auguste Clape, Jean-Luc

Colombo, Thierry Allemand, and Franck Balthazar.

WHEN YOU VISIT… CHAMPAGNE

CHAMPAGNE IS A SOLEMN, spiritual place—a place of great religious and historic

significance. It has none of the carefree abandon of, say, Tuscany; none of the sunny

energy of the Napa Valley. Indeed, for all its joyfulness as a wine, the region itself has

been continually torn apart by tragedy, especially during World Wars I and II, when it

was a gruesome battlefield. As a result, there’s a soulfulness here that’s as palpable as

the dazzling bubbles in every glass you’ll have.

OF CHAMPAGNE’S TWO MOST IMPORTANT cities, the larger one, Reims, boasts

many of the great houses, including Ruinart, Veuve Clicquot, and T aittinger, plus the

majestic underground cellars called crayères. Reims is also the home of one of the

most breathtaking cathedrals of the world—the Cathedral of Reims, site of the

coronations of French kings. Don’t miss Maison Fossier (fossier.fr) in the center of the

city. Founded in 1756, this jewel of a shop (decorated entirely in pink) is famous for

Biscuits Roses de Reims, tiny, crunchy, pink-colored biscuits that are traditionally eaten

by first dipping them in Champagne.

THE SMALLER TOWN OF EPERNAY is considered the unofficial capital of

Champagne. Here, along the Rue de Champagne, are the side-by-side gleaming

mansions and cellars of Perrier-Jouët, Moët & Chandon, and Pol Roger. Just outside

the town is the Abbey of Hautvillers, where Dom Pérignon lived and worked.

AS IS TRUE IN BORDEAUX, Champagne is a fairly formal region, and it’s mandatory

to have an appointment to visit the Champagne houses. (This is not the time to be

wearing running shoes, unless you want to feel vastly underdressed.)

The Northern Rhône Wines to Know

Be prepared. The wines below are a collective primal scream. Northern Rhône wines are tempests of wild flavor…

and for those of us who love them, the wilder, the better. In particular, the daringly intense syrahs here have no

equivalent elsewhere in the wine world. Falling in love with them isn’t easy at first, but it is a right of passage.

WHITES

M. CHAPOUTIER

ERMITAGE | L’ERMITE

100% marsanne

This is my vote for the most massive white wine of France. So strong and “present,

” its impact (though not its

flavor) is like Cognac—a full-throttle experience to be sure. Great Hermitage whites, such as L’Ermite (spelled

without the H, the way it was before the nineteenth century, when the British, who had a monopoly on distribution,

added the H), are hard to describe. They are relatively low in acid, not fruity, not spicy, and not sweet, although,

like this one, they often taste a bit like honey or caramel, absent the sugar. Bold and broad on the palate, L’Ermite

can only be described as commanding, with a gravitas that rivals the most intense red. The Chapoutier family also

makes wines in the southern Rhône, and their Châteauneuf-du-Pape, called Barbe Rac, is sensational.

YVES CUILLERON

CONDRIEU | LES CHAILLETS

100% viognier

Y ves Cuilleron is one of the Rhône’s shining lights. His exquisite Condrieu fills your mouth as opulently as a

spoonful of whipped cream. The incredible honeysuckle and soft vanilla flavors are utterly refined, yet rich. More

than many other producers, Cuilleron has enormous talent when it comes to weaving lushness together with

elegance.

REDS

ALAIN GRAILLOT

CROZES-HERMITAGE | LA GUIRAUDE

100% syrah

Graillot makes one of the few great Crozes-Hermitages, a wine many believe is the equal of Hermitage—at less

than half the cost. This is a dark, brooding, edgy, Clint Eastwood of a wine, with flavors that wrestle each other in

the glass. Spices, pepper, earth, blackberries, and violets all collide in a delicious explosion. La Guiraude, a special

selection of the best lots of wine, is made only in very good years. Not to worry. Graillot’s regular Crozes-

Hermitage is also pretty wonderful.

DOMAINE JEAN-LOUIS CHA VE

HERMITAGE

100% syrah

Hermitage has been called the manliest of wines, and this one has the sort of sensual darkness that fits the bill

precisely. At first, the huge, mesmerizing aromas and flavors suggest smoking meat, leather, sweat, and damp earth.

But Chave’s wines are so complex, they can pour forth new flavors by the minute. The Chave family has been

making Hermitage since the fifteenth century, and over those centuries very little about the winemaking has

changed.

E. GUIGAL

CÔTE-RÔTIE | LA MOULINE

Almost entirely syrah, with a trace of viognier

Guigal is one of the most outstanding producers in the Rhône, year in and year out making textbook Rhônes,

sensuous wines of profound depth and concentration. When I was just beginning my wine career, it was a Guigal

Côte-Rôtie, Brune et Blonde, (a blend of grapes from two vineyards evocatively named the brunette and the

blonde), that convinced me that nothing on earth was quite as mesmerizing, as intellectually riveting as a great

wine. I still love Brune et Blonde, but if one of Guigal’s stars shines just a little bit brighter than all the others, it is

its Côte-Rôtie known as La Mouline, one of three esteemed single-vineyard wines in the Guigal portfolio (the other

two are La Turque and La Landonne, leading collectors to give them the nickname “the La La’s”). Sweetly rich and

ripe, a great La Mouline is fat with velvety-textured boysenberry/cassis fruit interwoven with violets and exotic

spices, and buttressed against a dramatic, almost primal gaminess. The heady aroma alone is enough to stop you in

your tracks.

JEAN-LUC COLOMBO

CORNAS | LES RUCHETS

100% syrah

Here it is—quintessential Cornas: brooding, black, massive, earthy, leathery, and yet somehow voluptuous at the

same time. Jean-Luc Colombo, restless, driven, and impatient, turns out some of the most sensational Cornas today.

In Colombo’s hands, Les Ruchets (the beehives) sacrifices none of its power, but there’s an elegance, a sweet

ripeness here, too, that’s seductive. Colombo’s mother was a chef, and he makes all of his wines, he says, with food

in mind. So what did he have in mind with this? Wild hare.

PAUL JABOULET AÎNÉ

HERMITAGE | LA CHAPELLE

100% syrah

Named for the thirteenth-century chapel on the top of the Hermitage hill, this is a legendary wine, and a wine every

syrah lover should have at least once. As with all great wines, you can lose yourself in it. The animal fur and

campfire aromas have savage appeal, and the texture—like black licorice melting on your palate—is hedonistic to

be sure. Despite its suppleness and grace, La Chapelle has enormous structure and is one of the most age-worthy of

all Rhônes.

RENE ROSTAING

CÔTE-RÔTIE

100% syrah

The flavors in Rostaing’s Côte-Rôties usually begin quietly, like a whisper, then crash in wave after wave of

delicious intensity. Taste buds need seat belts for this wine. All of the quintessential northern Rhône flavors and

aromas are here: white pepper and exotic spices, incense, roasted meat, gaminess, plowed earth, blueberries, and

blackberries. Rostaing, a small producer, is known for wines full of energy and personality.

The forbidding, impossible-to-farm vineyards of the southern Rhône V alley defy belief. Pieces of rock sheared off Alpine

glaciers tumbled and rolled as they were carried down the Rhône River , ultimately becoming the rounded “galets” in

which the vineyards of Châteauneuf-du-Pape are planted.

THE SOUTHERN RHÔNE

No one can resist the charm of southern France—especially the magical place known as

Châteauneuf-du-Pape (“new castle of the Pope”). The southern Rhône’s best-known

appellation, Châteauneuf-du-Pape is close by the striking historic walled city of Avignon,

and has some of the most rocky, breathtaking vineyards in France. And the wine—the

wine is sheer sensuality.

Châteauneuf, however, is just one of several wine regions in the southern Rhône. The

other two major ones are Gigondas and V acqueyras, followed by southern France’s self-

styled capital of rosé, Tavel. In addition, most of the Côtes-du-Rhône and Côtes-du-

Rhône-Villages wines come from southern vineyards.

The southern Rhône does not begin where the north leaves off but about an hour’s drive

farther south. In between, only a few patches of vineyard can be found. The gulf of

separation is significant. The southern and northern Rhône have little in common, except

the river that gives them their names. The differences in climate are major. The southern

Rhône is part of the sunny, herb-scented, lavender-strewn, olive-growing Mediterranean.

Hot days are pierced by Le Mistral, the savage, cold wind that blows down from the Alps

and through the Rhône River valley, gathering speed and ferocity as it goes. Although you

can barely stand up when the mistral is blowing hard, it nonetheless is often a grape

grower’s friend.

“The inseparable connection in southern France between wine, food, and the

earth reminds me that wine is a gift from God. In a visceral sense, drinking

Châteauneuf-du-Pape and eating local sausages becomes a way of

transcending time, of experiencing that which, though it may seem temporal,

is, in fact, timeless.

”

— STEVE EDMUNDS,

co-owner, Edmunds St. John Winery, which specializes in Rhône wines made

in California

THE MAJOR APPELLATIONS, WINES, AND PRINCIPAL

GRAPES OF THE SOUTHERN RHÔNE

Twenty-three grape varieties are permitted in the southern Rhône, although not all of them are legal in all

appellations. The twenty-three fall into two groups: principal varieties and secondary varieties. The principal

varieties are listed below. Today, many of the secondary varieties are used only in tiny amounts, if they are used at

all. These secondary varieties include, for red wines: calitor, carignan, counoise, gamay, muscardin, pinot noir,

terret noir, and vaccarèse; and for white wines: marsanne, roussanne, picardan, picpoul, viognier, ugni blanc,

macabeo, and muscat blanc à petits grains. Rosé wines can be made from a combination of any of the grapes, red

and white. As always with wine, however, there are some notable exceptions. Roussanne, for example, is the grape

on which Château de Beaucastel’s famous white Châteauneuf-du-Pape Vieilles Vignes is based. There are also

interesting peculiarities. Muscat is grown only in Beaumes-de-V enise. And only Châteauneuf-du-Pape allows

slightly more than half of all the twenty-three varieties (see The Châteauneuf “Thirteen,

” page 251).

APPELLATION WINES(S) MADE PRINCIPAL RED

GRAPE(S)

PRINCIPAL WHITE

GRAPE(S)

CHÂTEAUNEUF-DU-

PAPE red and white grenache, syrah,

mourvèdre, cinsaut

grenache blanc,

clairette, bourboulenc

GIGONDAS red and rosè grenache, syrah,

mourvèdre, cinsaut none

VACQUEYRAS red, white, and rosè grenache, syrah,

mourvèdre, cinsaut

grenache blanc,

clairette, bourboulenc

RASTEAU red grenache, syrah,

mourvèdre

none

TAVEL rosè grenache, syrah,

mourvèdre, cinsaut clairette, bourboulenc

CÔTES-DU-RHÔNE

AND CÔTES-DU-

RHÔNE-VILLAGES

red, white, rosè

grenache, syrah,

mourvèdre, cinsaut,

carignan

grenache blanc,

clairette bourboulenc,

roussane, viognier

MUSCAT DE

BEAUMES-DE-VENISE fortified sweet white none

muscat blanc à petits

grains

LE MISTRAL

No one who has ever experienced Le Mistral will ever forget it. The treacherous wind (named after the

Occitan—Provençal—dialect word for masterly, or master) barrels out of the Alps unexpectedly, traveling

hundreds of miles/kilometers south, picking up speed as it goes. The mistral is especially treacherous by

the time it gets to the southern Rhône, and caught in it, you can be lifted into the air or slammed to the

ground.

The mistral is helpful for vines in some ways; detrimental in others. During the growing season, it cools

down the vines, helping the grapes retain acidity. Near harvest time it acts like a giant blow-dryer, making

sure the grapes are free of humidity and mold. The wind also causes substantial evaporation, which then

concentrates the sugar and acid inside the grapes. The mistral can be so violent, however, that it can rip

apart the vines. As a result, the best vineyards are found in partly sheltered pockets of land, and the

vines are pruned low to the ground. The older, gnarled ones look like twisted black dwarfs slanted

sideways from years of trying to hang on to the earth despite the strong, cold wind whipping through.

There are significant differences between northern and southern Rhône in the proximity

and orientation of the vineyards to the river. In the north, vineyards are poised above and

so close to the river they almost seem as though they could fall into it. In the south, they

spread out from the river for 20 to 30 miles (32 to 48 kilometers) over flatter land and

gentler hillocks.

Soil in the south is also fundamentally different from the granitic soils of the north. In

many parts of the south, vines are planted in what looks like a vast carpet of riverbed

rocks, some the size of cantaloupes. Elsewhere, the soils are either clay, sandy limestone,

or gravel.

Grenache, not syrah, is the leading red grape of the south. But what is even more

significant is that, unlike northern Rhône wines, which are intense wines based on a single

grape variety, southern Rhône wines are almost always, like rainbows of flavor,

combinations of many different varieties. The reason? In the southern Rhône’s hot, dry

climate, such classic grapes as syrah can lose their focus and intensity. Other, less noble

grapes may adapt well to the heat, but they rarely possess enough character on their own

to make a satisfactory wine. Blending is a way of creating a whole wine that is more than

the sum of its parts (see The Major Appellations, Wines, and Principal Grapes of the

Southern Rhône, page 249).

The southern Rhône has almost sixty cooperatives, and they have amazing clout. They

make dozens—sometimes hundreds—of different blends that they bottle under scores of

brand names, some of which, cleverly, seem like the names of estates. In addition, the

cooperatives sell to dozens of négociants who do the same thing on a smaller scale.

À droit ou à gauche? A street corner with helpful advice for visiting the wineries of Châteauneuf-du-Pape.

THE CHÂTEAUNEUF “THIRTEEN”

There are actually fourteen grape varieties permitted to be used in Châteauneuf-du-

Pape, if the white form of grenache is counted independently from the red. The most

important grapes are listed first.

RED WHITE

grenache grenache blanc

syrah clairette

mourvèdre bourboulenc

cinsaut roussanne

muscardin picpoul

counoise picardan

vaccarèse

terret noir

Two additional types of wine are made in the south that, with minor exceptions, cannot

be found in the north: rosés and sweet wines. Tavel, the leading rosé of the southern

Rhône, is also (thanks to tourism in southern France) one of the most well-known rosés in

the world. The south’s sweet wine is equally famous: muscat de Beaumes-de-V enise.

Of all the southern Rhône’s important wine appellations, the one that can rival the

north’s Côte-Rôtie or Hermitage is Châteauneuf-du-Pape, so it leads off our exploration of

the southern Rhône.

CHÂTEAUNEUF-DU-PAPE

The most southern of the major southern Rhône wine appellations, Châteauneuf-du-Pape

is just a fifteen-minute drive from the historic city of Avignon. The region, which

encompasses the plateaus and slopes around the town of Châteauneuf-du-Pape, plus four

adjacent villages, is large by Rhône standards—slightly more than 8,000 acres (3,200

hectares) (Hermitage has only about 300 acres/120 hectares). More wine is made in this

one place than in all of the northern Rhône. To put Châteauneuf in perspective, however,

the Napa V alley is more than four times larger, and Bordeaux is thirty-four times larger.

Before World War I, much of the Châteauneuf-du-Pape harvest was sold in bulk to

Burgundy, to be used as vin de médecine—a quick fix of alcohol to boost Burgundy’s

strength. Decades later, the practice was still commonplace. Only since the 1970s has the

number of quality-minded southern Rhône producers increased significantly, and today

more than any other wines, the top reds of Châteauneuf-du-Pape define the southern

Rhône. They are often not the big, blowsy, easygoing wines you might expect from a

warm Mediterranean region. Just the opposite. These are penetrating, sassy wines that can

come at you with a dagger of earthy, gamy flavors. They have a wildness to them, a

fascinating edge of tar, leather, and rough stone. They beg for a hot night, chewy bread,

and a dish loaded with garlic, black olives, and wild herbs.

CHÂTEAUNEUF-DU-EXTRATERRESTRIAL

The vintners of Châteauneuf-du-Pape have always been fastidious when it comes to creating laws that

will protect their vineyards. In a legendary 1954 municipal decree, they mandated the following:

ARTICLE 1. The flying overhead, landing, and taking off of aeronautical machines called “flying saucers”

or “flying cigars,

” of whatever nationality they may be, is strictly forbidden on the territory of the commune

of Châteauneuf-du-Pape.

ARTICLE 2. Any aeronautical machine—

“flying saucer” or “flying cigar”

—that lands on the territory of the

commune will be immediately taken off to the jail. (No joke.)

THE NAME CHÂTEAUNEUF-DU-PAPE

Châteauneuf-du-Pape,

“new castle of the pope,

” refers to the time in the fourteenth century when the

pope resided not in Rome but in the walled city of Avignon, just south of these vineyards. (At the time,

what we call Châteauneuf-du-Pape was called Châteauneuf-Calcernier, after a nearby village and its

limestone quarry.) The pope who instigated this startling change in residence was the Frenchman

Clement V (in Bordeaux, Château Pape-Clément is named after him). Later, his successor, John XXII,

built a new papal summer home out among the vineyards. It wasn’t until the twentieth century, after vast

improvements were made in the vineyards and winemaking, that the new name Châteauneuf-du-Pape

took hold. Today most bottles of estate-grown Châteauneuf-du-Pape are embossed with the papal crown

and St. Peter’s keys, as an acknowledgment of the region’s holy history.

Of all the things that set Châteauneuf apart, the most startling is its “soil” composed

largely of smooth, rolled stones. They are everywhere. Many vineyards are simply vast

rock beds with no visible dirt whatsoever. The stones and rocks—known as galets—which

range from fist-size to the size of a small pumpkin, are the remnants of ancient Alpine

glaciers. The withdrawal of these glaciers, along with temperature increases, ripped

quartzite off the flanks of the Alps. Over many millennia, these chunks of quartzite were

rolled, broken, and rounded by the tumultuous waters of the then larger Rhône River. As

the river receded, the stones were left scattered over the plateaus and terraces. Although

there is soil underneath the stones, varying from clay to sandy limestone to gravel, the

land is extremely difficult to work, and tending the vineyards is a painstakingly slow

process.

What southern Rhône vineyards do not lack is heat. Unfortunately, the stones retain this

heat and therefore hasten ripening. At the same time, however, the stones protect the

ground from becoming parched and dry and help hold moisture in the soil, a boon for the

vines, especially as summer proceeds.

Approximately 95 percent of Châteauneuf-du-Pape is red, although there are white and

rosé wines. The grapes that can be used are the so-called Châteauneuf thirteen (actually

fourteen)—eight reds and six whites. Almost no producer other than Château de

Beaucastel grows and makes wine from the whole gamut. The majority of Châteauneufs

are based on grenache grown until it is sweetly ripe and tasting like homemade jam.

Blended into the grenache are syrah, to deepen the color and add spice, as well as

mourvèdre, which adds structure. Other red grapes may play a role, too, but none are as

important as these three.

Among the top Châteauneuf-du-Pape whites are two from Château de Beaucastel: their

leading wine, known as Cuvée Classique, and the rarer Vieilles Vignes (remarkably, made

solely from roussanne); as well as those from Château Rayas, Clos des Papes, Château La

Nerthe, Château de la Gardine, Les Cailloux, and Domaine du Vieux Télégraphe.

Old bottles lying in the cellars of Vieux Télégraphe in Châteauneuf-du-Pape. The estate was named after an old

telegraph station that stood on the hill of the Le Crau plateau where the winery was eventually established in 1898.

Two important factors in the making of Châteauneuf-du-Pape are yield and oak

(actually, the absence of oak). Yield is pivotal because at high yields, the grapes that make

up Châteauneuf all taste terrible and thin. As a result, and not surprisingly, by law,

Châteauneuf-du-Pape is required to have the lowest yields in France—35 hectoliters per

hectare (368 gallons per acre). This is about half the yield at most Bordeaux estates, for

example.

As for oak, you don’t see many small, new oak barrels in the southern Rhône, and

there’s a reason for that. Grenache is usually vinified in large cement tanks (grenache is

easily susceptible to oxidation, so wooden barrels, which are porous, are not ideal). Wines

made from other grapes, such as syrah and mourvèdre, are usually made in large, old

barrels called foudres. Because the wines are generally not put in small, new oak barrels,

they don’t have the unmistakable toast/vanilla character that new oak imparts. Instead, you

taste what Châteauneuf-du-Papes (as well as Gigondas and V acqueyras) are truly about:

stones and soil—the unadorned flavors of their terroir.

MADE FOR FROMAGE

Maybe it’s their dark intensity, or the way they evoke an almost primordial earthiness, but Châteauneuf-

du-Pape, Vacqueyras, and Gigondas all beg for a good—a really sensual—cheese. If you visit these

wine regions, there is no better place to find one (or several) than La Fromagerie du Comtat, in the

center of the old walled city of Carpentras, which is about ten minutes from Châteauneuf-du-Pape. The

aroma that hits you as you open the door of the fromagerie assures you that you’re in the right place, for

it’s unmistakably the sort of aroma that would make a U.S. health department inspector blanch. The

cheeses, all handmade raw milk cheeses from local, small farms, are sensational. Don’t miss the tiny

chèvres (goat’s milk cheese) wrapped in chestnut leaves, or the utterly amazing sheep’s milk cheese

wrapped in crushed white wine grapes that have been affected by Botrytis cinerea, or “noble rot.

”

ONE OF THE PLACES WHERE PHYLLOXERA BEGAN

Just north of T avel is Lirac, a modest place that makes even more modest wines. But Lirac does have

one claim to fame: It’s thought to be one of the areas where the European phylloxera epidemic began.

According to John Livingstone-Learmonth, in The Wines of the Rhône, sometime around 1863 the

innovative owner of Château de Clary decided to plant a few California vine cuttings to see how they’d

fare in the south of France. The cuttings, unable to adapt, died. The microscopic insects (phylloxera)

clinging to the cuttings’ roots survived. Phylloxera destroyed the vineyards at Château de Clary and from

there spread through neighboring vineyards. But phylloxera’s presence already extended beyond the

southern Rhône, for at that time Europe permitted extensive importation of living plants. Also in 1863, a

professor at Oxford University reported finding phylloxera in plants growing outside London. Within a few

years, there were several reports of the pest in the Languedoc, and by 1869, there was evidence of

phylloxera in Bordeaux.

Finally, it’s interesting to note that, in the wake of phylloxera and World War I,

regulations enacted in the early 1920s to improve Châteauneuf-du-Pape later became the

basis for France’s monumental Appellation d’Origine Contrôlée (AOC) laws.

SOME OF THE BEST PRODUCERS OF CHÂTEAUNEUF-DU-PAPE

Château de Beaucastel • Château de la Gardine • Château La Nerthe • Château Rayas • Clos des Papes •

Clos du Mont Olivet • Domaine de Beaurenard • Domaine de Chante-Perdrix • Domaine de la Charbonnière

• Domaine de la Janasse • Domaine du Pégau • Font de Michelle • Le Bosquet des Papes • Le Vieux

Donjon • Les Cailloux • M. Chapoutier • Vieux Télégraphe

GIGONDAS

The Gigondas vineyards cover a series of hills just below the jagged spurs of rock known

as the Dentelles de Montmirail. This is the most northern of the important southern Rhône

appellations. A few miles/kilometers south of it is V acqueyras, and south of that and to the

west is Châteauneuf-du-Pape.

Maybe Gigondas took its cue from the rugged Dentelles, for its wines are as strong and

appealing as a firm handshake. The best have explosive raspberry, leather, and spice

aromas and flavors and chewy textures. They are often characterized as robust versions of

Châteauneuf, but the truth is they have an altogether different personality. To drink

Gigondas is to go back to a time when great red wines were muscular—a time before

winemakers knew how to soften up wine and give it polish.

The Pont-Saint Bénezet—better known as the Pont d’Avignon—about which many poems and songs have been written.

The bridge spans the Rhône River within the famous medieval town of Avignon to which the papacy was temporarily

relocated (from Rome) in the 14th century.

Ninety-nine percent of Gigondas is red; 1 percent is rosé. By law, the reds must be no

more than 80 percent grenache, with no less than 15 percent syrah and/or mourvèdre

blended in. The remaining fraction is often cinsaut, but may be made up of any other red

Rhône grape except carignan.

The top producers include Domaine du Cayron, Domaine la Garrigue, Les Hauts de

Montmirail, Grand Bourjassot, Domaine Santa Duc, St. Cosme, and Domaine les

Pallières.

VACQUEYRAS

Just south of Gigondas, V acqueyras became an appellation in 1990. Before that, wines

from this area were labeled Côtes-du-Rhône-Villages. V acqueyras are sturdy, bold red

wines—rather like even more rustic versions of Gigondas. The best smell and taste like

the land itself; there’s the aroma of sun on the hot, stony ground, of scrappy dried brush

and wild herbs. Charging through this is the flavor of black currants, blueberries, and

pepper.

Grenache, syrah, mourvèdre, and cinsaut are the dominant grapes. But whereas

Gigondas are weighted toward grenache, most V acqueyras have significantly higher

percentages of syrah. A minuscule number of white wines and rosés are also made.

BEAUMES-DE-VENISE

Beaumes-de-Venise, one of the top small villages of the southern Rhône, is associated with two types of

wine. The wine simply called Beaumes-de-Venise is a dry red, like its better-known sisters Vacqueyras

and Gigondas. But the village is more famous for its historic fortified sweet wine, muscat de Beaumes-

de-Venise, made from the brazenly aromatic grape muscat blanc à petits grains.

Drinking a glass of it is a powerful experience thanks to the fortification, and while peach, apricot, and

orange flavors dance in the glass, the wine is not sugary sweet. Indeed, southern Rhône locals often

drink it as an aperitif. Among the best muscats de Beaumes-de-Venise are those from Paul Jaboulet

Aîné, Domaine Durban, Domaine Coyeux, and Vidal-Fleury.

AN ANCIENT MEDITERRANEAN MARRIAGE

Throughout the Mediterranean, the affinity between lamb and wine is centuries old. And for good reason.

Historically, much of the Mediterranean’s ancient, arid, impoverished soils could support only the least

demanding crops and livestock. And thus, in regions as diverse as Bordeaux, Greece, north-central

Spain (Rioja and Ribera del Duero), and southern France (the Rhône and Provence), grazing sheep and

planting vineyards became a way of life. T oday, in each of those wine regions, lamb is considered the

quintessential accompaniment for the local wine. Which of those wines is best with lamb? An immediate

answer would be: all of them. Yet, there is something especially satisfying about the rich, gamy flavors of

lamb fed on the wild herbs and grasses of southern France, then crusted with herbs and roasted, when it

is mirrored by the Rhône’s rich, wild, gamy wines made from syrah, grenache, and mourvèdre.

Among the producers to try are Domaine de la Charbonnière, Domaine le Sang des

Cailloux, and, most especially, the sensational Domaine des Amouriers (which seems like

it ought to mean the domain of lovers, but amouriers are actually mulberry trees).

A stone religious niche in the vineyards of Tardieu-Laurent, Châteauneuf-du-Pape.

TAVEL

Tavel—one of France’s most famous rosés—is precisely the kind of wine you fall in love

with on vacation. What better color than pink when you’re on a beach in St.

-Tropez?

Despite their pretty pink colors, most Tavels are rugged wines with robust, spicy berry

flavors. Bone dry, they have an appealing roughness, an edge that makes them perfect for

washing down southern French dishes laden with garlic, olive oil, and fresh, wild herbs.

Tavel rosés are made in the tiny, sleepy village of the same name, less than 10 miles (16

kilometers) southwest and across the river from Châteauneuf-du-Pape. No red or white

wines come from here—just rosé. Nine Rhône grapes, both red and white, can be used, but

grenache is generally the leader. Interestingly, the wine is usually made by putting whole

red and white grapes together in a single tank. The weight of the grapes on top begins to

crush the ones below. The pink color comes as the juice sits in contact with the red skins.

As seemingly straightforward as Tavel rosé is, it is not easy to make a good one—one that

has freshness and bright flavors.

Tavel should be drunk young and chilled, so that its exuberant flavors explode in your

mouth. A delicious one to try: the rosé from Prieuré de Montézargues, a former abbey

founded by monks in the twelfth century.

CÔTES-DU-RHÔNE AND CÔTES-DU-RHÔNE-VILLAGES

Amazingly, 70 percent of all Rhône wines are Côtes-du-Rhône and Côtes-du-Rhône-

Villages. Unlike Côte-Rôtie, Hermitage, or Châteauneuf-du-Pape, however, wines with

these two designations do not come from a single place. Instead, the terms refer to wines

made from grapes that, in the case of Côtes-du-Rhône specifically, are grown on vast, non-

contiguous tracts of less prestigious vineyards totaling more than 148,000 acres (59,900

hectares). Y ou’ll find both appellations all over the Rhône V alley, although most vineyards

are in the south. Alas, the quality of these wines ranges all over the board, from wines that

have little going for them to sensational, juicy, spicy wines with real character.

The relatively large, reputable Rhône producers like E. Guigal, M. Chapoutier, and

Beaucastel all make dependable Côtes-du-Rhône, and so do a number of small producers.

So just what are the differences between Côtes-du-Rhône and Côtes-du-Rhône-

Villages? Côtes-du-Rhône is the basic appellation; theoretically, Côtes-du-Rhône-Villages

is a step up in quality. Generally speaking, this is true. However, several of the very best

wines of all are simply Côtes-du-Rhône, so no hard-and-fast rules can be made. Y ou

should know this, however: Of the ninety-five tiny villages legally entitled to make Côtes-

du-Rhône-Villages, fewer than twenty are considered superior, and in recognition of that

fact, they are allowed to append their name to the appellation as, for example, with

Cairanne Côtes-du-Rhône-Villages.

As for top producers, look for Château de Fonsalette (made by Château Rayas),

Domaine Gramenon (especially its wine called Cuvée de Laurentides), St.

-Cosme,

Domaine Santa Duc, Domaine du Trignon, Domaine Le Clos des Lumières, Jean-Luc

Colombo (especially the red Les Forots and white Les Figuières), and Domaine de la

Renjarde.

WHEN YOU VISIT… THE RHÔNE V ALLEY

THE OLD CELLARS of the Rhône Valley were built on sites dating back to the

Romans. The wineries themselves are generally small, modest, and practical: often

with dirt floors and lots of cobwebs. The tasting table may be an old board balanced

between two barrels. It is almost always necessary to have an appointment, and it is

greatly helpful to speak French.

IN THE SOUTHERN RHÔNE, visit the historic city of Avignon, the papal seat in the

fourteenth century, and be sure to see the massive gothic palace, the Palais des

Papes. In addition, the old city of Orange boasts some of the best-preserved Roman

ruins in the world. Indeed, the Ancient Theater is the most intact Roman theater in the

world, and the acoustics are still so perfect that the internationally acclaimed opera

festival, Les Chorégies d’Orange, is held there every summer.

THE RHÔNE VALLEY is full of small country restaurants that make you feel as though

you’ve stepped into the France of a half century ago where la cuisine de grandmère still

deliciously dominates. And if you’re in the mood to smell and “taste” the sea, Marseilles,

and its many restaurants specializing in bouillabaisse, is less than 70 miles (110

kilometers) away from Châteauneuf.

The Southern Rhône Wines to Know

Southern Rhône wines have a sumptuousness that is undeniable. From aroma to flavor to texture, the wines below

are uninhibited, sophisticated, and sensual—just what you’d expect from the south of France. I’d be happy to spend

years drinking the wines of just this one place, for place speaks explosively and deliciously here.

WHITES

CHÂTEAU DE BEAUCASTEL

CHÂTEAUNEUF-DU-PAPE | VIEILLES VIGNES

100% roussanne

If ever there was a wine that you’d like to smell for eternity, this is it. The utterly refined, totally sensual top white

from Château de Beaucastel has no equal in Châteauneuf-du-Pape. Made entirely from roussanne from a patch of

eighty-year-old vines, it’s unearthly in its complexity and in the way the flavors of honey, roasted nuts, quince, and

crème brûlée embrace your tongue. And this is a dry wine! When young—and with age—it’s a showstopper.

Beaucastel’s owners, the Perrin family, drink this, drinks this with another southern Rhône masterpiece: buttery

scrambled eggs cooked with the local black truffles.

REDS

CHÂTEAU DE SAINT COSME

GIGONDAS

80% grenache, 15% syrah, 5% cinsaut

In medieval times, doctors regularly prescribed wine for various ailments, including the wine Saint Cosme

(pronounced comb), a nice coincidence since St. Cosme is the patron saint of medicine. I’m not sure if this wine is

healing, but it’s wonderfully hedonistic and very evocative of its terroir. Imagine leather and cherry jam somehow

combined and then poured over minerals and black earth, and you’ve got this gripping Gigondas.

CHÂTEAU LA NERTHE

CHÂTEAUNEUF-DU-PAPE

Approximately 50% grenache, 20% mourvèdre, 20% syrah, 5% cinsaut, 5% other

Château La Nerthe (pronounced la NAIRT) was built in 1760, and it is unquestionably one of the most majestic

sites in Châteauneuf-du-Pape. The precious old vineyards ring the graceful, grand château, which also houses

immaculate (rather rare in France) winemaking cellars. And the wine is stupendous. Long and saturated on the

palate, it is suffused with the flavors of chocolate, espresso, grenadine, game, spices, and stones. As with all top

Châteauneufs, there’s real grip here, but also real elegance. In addition, La Nerthe makes a special (more expensive)

Châteauneuf called Cuvée des Cadettes. One of the rare Châteauneufs to be aged in 100 percent new oak, it’s a

massive wine that has a dark, minerally lusciousness, as if rocks were coated in black licorice. Cuvée des Cadettes

is often most expressive after a decade of aging.

CHÂTEAU DE BEAUCASTEL

CHÂTEAUNEUF-DU-PAPE

Approximately 30% grenache, 60% mourvèdre, 10% syrah

In what seems like an impossibility, Beaucastel’s Châteauneuf-du-Pape hits the palate with all five basic tastes

moving at full throttle—salty, bitter, sour, sweet, and savory. It’s a shocking first sip. But maybe not as shocking as

the aroma—a feral immersion into leather, offal, and animal notes. Some love this about Beaucastel and find the

wine distinctive and complex; for other tasters, it’s the most unsettling Châteauneuf. I promise you this: Tasting it,

you won’t be bored.

DOMAINE DU VIEUX TÉLÉGRAPHE

CHÂTEAUNEUF-DU-PAPE

Approximately 70% grenache, 15% syrah, 15% mourvèdre

Known for wines with grip, complexity, and elegance, Vieux Télégraphe (“old telegraph”) is one of the great

historic estates of Châteauneuf. When first poured, the wine seems almost biting, with its sharp tar, earth, and spice

aromas and flavors. But after a short time in the glass, the texture begins to turn to cashmere and a wealth of other

gamy and boysenberry jam flavors emerge. Vieux Télégraphe’s vineyards are beds of stone.

DOMAINE LE SANG DES CAILLOUX

VACQUEYRAS

Approximately 65% grenache, 20% syrah, 10% mourvèdre, 5% cinsaut

Translated, the name of the domaine is the blood of stones. No title could be more perfect, for while juicy and

sensual, this V acqueyras nonetheless smells and tastes like hard stone. At first. Then, right behind the stoniness,

comes a mouthful of what the southern French call garrigue—that flavor of the Rhône and Provence, reminiscent

of wild thyme and rosemary, dry scrub brush, and warm earth. Did I forget to mention blueberries? This is one of

the most complex, satisfying V acqueyras around.

DOMAINE LES PALLIÈRES

GIGONDAS

80% grenache, 10% syrah, 5% mourvèdre, 5% other

On the beautiful, sloping hills of Gigondas sits the old estate Les Pallières. In 1998, just about the best thing

possible happened to this estate: It was bought by the Brunier family (owners of Vieux Télégraphe) and the

American wine importer Kermit Lynch. Under their direction, the wines have become stunning. Gamy, peppery,

sweetly rich, explosively fruity, and with a soaring structure, Pallières is once again one of the top Gigondas.

THE LOIRE

The Loire is the most diverse wine region in France. Just about every style of wine is

made here, from dry still wines to snappy sparkling wines to elegant, long-lived sweet

wines. The most familiar of these are the white still wines Sancerre, Pouilly-Fumé,

Muscadet, and V ouvray. Y et the Loire is also well known for rosés, reds, and sparkling

wines. Indeed, rosé d’Anjou and reds such as Chinon are comforting fixtures in Parisian

bistros, where they are served with everything from grilled sausages to onion soup.

The Loire is defined by the massive, often writhing Loire River—France’s longest—as

well as the surreal pastoral valley (known as the garden of France) that extends along its

banks. Thanks to silt, the river is now too shallow to be navigated, but it was once a

flowing engine of transport. Thus, even as early as the Middle Ages, Loire V alley wines

were being shipped north to Flanders and Britain.

For its part, the river erupts from deep within the volcanic peaks of the Massif Central,

in the heart of France. From there, it flows north for about 300 miles (480 kilometers),

makes a left turn, and then flows west for another 300 miles until it pushes out into the

Atlantic. It is in this east-west, 300-mile stretch that all of the Loire’s best wine regions are

found. Farthest east is Pouilly-Fumé and its neighbor, Sancerre. Farthest west, a five-hour

drive away, is Muscadet, bordering the Atlantic Ocean. In between are more than sixty-

three appellations. Indeed, were it not for the wild river connecting them, the diverse wine

areas of the Loire would never share the same pages in a book. In the pages that follow,

we will examine the Loire in the above direction. We’ll start with the far inland, eastern

Loire (Sancerre and Pouilly-Fumé), then look at the middle Loire (V ouvray, Savennières,

Quarts de Chaume, Chinon, and Bourgueil, among others), and finally end with the

western Loire (Muscadet).

THE QUICK SIP ON THE LOIRE

THE LOIRE is one of the largest and most diverse wine regions in France. Virtually

every type of wine is made there—still and sparkling; dry and sweet; red, white, and

rosé.

THE SIGNATURE characteristic of all Loire wines is their zesty freshness.

THE LEADING WHITE GRAPES of the Loire—chenin blanc and sauvignon blanc—

make wines that are so extraordinary, they are, in many cases, the world’s standard-

bearers for these grapes.

But before delving into these three main areas, here are a few more important points to

know. The Loire is one of France’s larger wine regions (although it is smaller than in times

past, when it was the main supplier of wine to Paris and northern countries). Slightly more

than 124,000 acres (50,200 hectares) are planted with vines, making the region just less

than half the size of Bordeaux. Of France’s wine regions, however, the Loire is the least

easy to characterize. Those sixty-three appellations produce wines that, in almost every

way, are more different than they are similar. Except for one thing: The wines all share a

taut, wiry freshness thanks to the region’s cool, northern climate. Like Champagne, the

Loire exists on the fringe of the lowest temperatures at which grapes can ripen. Often the

vines have not even begun to flower (that is, produce tiny flowers that, once fertilized, will

become grapes) until June 1, a month and a half behind warmer places like the Napa

V alley, in California. While in difficult, rainy years, this can be agonizing for local

growers (and result in chaptalization of the wines, see page 52), the cool climate can also

be a plus, leading to elegant, lacy wines with haunting precision (the result of high

acidity). In great years, the best wines can have such dynamic tension they seem poised on

a tightrope, or even spring loaded. In French, their refreshing vigor is described as

nervosité.

Wine estates in the Loire V alley are generally small and often family owned. In the

past, little capital was available for expansion or major improvements. This opened the

door for the creation of cooperatives, as well as a widespread network of négociants, who

buy wines, blend them, and then bottle them under their own labels. As of 2013, there

were about a hundred négociants and some twenty cooperatives in the Loire.

The two leading white grapes of the Loire are sauvignon blanc and chenin blanc. Both

originated in the Loire V alley, and as both have savagnin as a parent, they are most likely

siblings or half siblings. For its part, sauvignon blanc has gone on to make inspired wines

everywhere from New Zealand to Austria. But chenin blanc is a different story; it has

seemingly retreated back to its homeland. Today, chenin blanc achieves extraordinary

heights only in the Loire V alley—especially in the top, mesmerizing wines from V ouvray,

Savennières, Coteaux du Layon, Coteaux de l’Aubance, and Quarts de Chaume.

Peter Hahn, owner of Le Clos de la Meslerie, holds a chunk of flint from his vineyard in V ouvray.

THE GRAPES OF THE LOIRE

WHITES

ARBOIS: Minor grape native to the Loire. The use of arbois (in small amounts in blends) is declining.

CHARDONNAY: Minor grape. Found in blends for both white and sparkling wines of the middle Loire.

CHENIN BLANC: Major grape, also called pineau de la Loire. Historically, the most important grape of

the middle Loire, used for numerous wines, including Savennières and Vouvray. Wines made from it may

be still or sparkling, dry or sweet.

FOLLE BLANCHE: Minor grape. Used to make the wine called Gros Plant in the Muscadet region of the

western Loire.

MELON DE BOURGOGNE: The source of Muscadet, in the western Loire.

SAUVIGNON BLANC: Major indigenous grape. Used to make the famous wines Sancerre and Pouilly-

Fumé, as well as Menetou-Salon, Reuilly, and Quincy, plus many simple whites from the middle Loire.

REDS

CABERNET FRANC: Major grape. The source of the best Loire reds, Chinon, Bourgueil, and St.

-

Nicolas-de-Bourgueil. Also used as a blending grape in the reds, rosés, and sparkling wines of the

middle Loire.

CABERNET SAUVIGNON, CÔT (MALBEC), PINEAU D’AUNIS, AND PINOT MEUNIER: Minor grapes.

Used as blending components in the red, rosé, and sparkling wines of the middle Loire.

GAMAY: The grape that makes Anjou and T ouraine gamay. Also a blending grape for red, rosé, and

sparkling wines of the middle and eastern Loire.

GROLLEAU: Native grape. Usually the dominant grape in Rosé d’Anjou. Also blended into other rosé,

red, and sparkling wines of the middle Loire.

PINOT NOIR: Used for the red wines of Sancerre and the eastern Loire, and as a blending grape in the

reds, rosés, and sparkling wines of the middle Loire.

Most of the best Loire reds and rosés are made from cabernet franc, although seven

other red grapes are grown, including cabernet sauvignon, pinot noir, gamay, and native

varieties, such as grolleau. Loire reds are unmistakably stamped by their northern climate.

Zesty and vivid, they are appreciated precisely because they are energetic and fresh, not

weighty or full-bodied.

THE EASTERN LOIRE:

SANCERRE, POUILLY-FUMÉ, AND MENETOU-SALON

The eastern Loire may be 300 miles (480 kilometers) from Muscadet and the Atlantic

coast, but it’s less than half that distance from Paris, and the region’s main wines—

Sancerre and Pouilly-Fumé—are accordingly well known. The dry whites from Menetou-

Salon are also from this easternmost part of the Loire, as are the less well-known regions

of Reuilly and Quincy. All are made from sauvignon blanc.

THE MOST IMPORTANT LOIRE WINES

LEADING APPELLATIONS

BOURGUEIL red

CHINON red

CRÉMANT DE LOIRE white (sparkling)

MENETOU-SALON white

MONTLOUIS white (dry and sweet)

MUSCADET white

POUILLY-FUMÉ white

QUARTS DE CHAUME white (sweet)

SANCERRE white

SAVENNIÈRES white

VOUVRAY white (dry, sweet, and sparkling)

APPELLATIONS OF NOTE

ANJOU-VILLAGES red

BONNEZEAUX white (sweet)

COTEAUX DE L’AUBANCE white (sweet)

COTEAUX DU LAYON white (sweet)

QUINCY white

REUILLY white, red, and rosé

ROSÉ D’ANJOU rosé

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-NICOLAS-DE-BOURGUEIL red

SAUMUR-CHAMPIGNY red

SPARKLING SAUMUR white (sparkling)

SPARKLING TOURAINE white (sparkling)

SPARKLING VOUVRAY white (sparkling)

TOURAINE white and red

But that’s saying it too simply, for Loire sauvignon blancs are in no way routine,

herbal-inflected sauvignon blancs. With their racy, flinty, tangy, and smoky flavors, the

best of these wines are true to the word sauvignon’s root, sauvage, meaning “untamed.

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They are the world’s model for frisky, nervy, pinpoint-focused sauvignon blanc, and are

considered some of the best white wine matches for food. (Most are fermented in stainless

steel and undergo no malolactic fermentation, although some are made or aged in barrel.)

The vineyards of Sancerre are spread over chalky limestone and flint hills near the

small town of the same name on the western bank of the river. (In the late spring, the

rolling green hills are covered in red poppies, making the whole area appear like the fall-

asleep scene in The Wizard of Oz.) While the soils here are disparate, thanks to abrupt fault

lines running through the region, many of the soils are highly valued for what growers say

is the minerality they contribute to the wines. These soils include Kimmeridgian-era

limestone (limestone and clay imbedded with sea fossils); Portlandian-era limestone

(straight limestone without many sea fossils); the so-called terres blanches (“white

earth”), which is chalk on top of clay; and les caillottes, gravel intermixed with limestone.

In addition, about 30 percent of the vineyards here contain silex, a flint- and sand-based

soil that combines clay, limestone, and silica. Highly desired locally, silex is said to give

the best wines their especially vivid minerality and dramatic freshness.

The village of Sancerre and its vineyards. Lying on well-drained, perfectly sunlit slopes, the vineyards are located

slightly lower on the hillsides than the domes of the hills (which, more exposed to the climate, are better for forests).

IT TAKES TWO TO BE TANGY

Although many of us immediately think of red wine when we think of cheese, the tangy, creamy, chalky,

salty, and fatty flavors of most goat cheeses can neutralize the flavor of many red wines. Sancerre and

Pouilly-Fumé, on the other hand, are perfect counterpoints, in part because they are so tangy themselves.

In particular, the combination of Sancerre and Crottin de Chavignol, a small disk of goat cheese from the

nearby village of Chavignol, is considered to be a French classic. (Crottin is French slang for goat turd.)

There are a number of excellent vineyards here, but the three called Le Grand

Chemarin, Chêne Marchand, and Clos de la Poussie are especially exemplary. As of the

mid-1990s, however, a curious Sancerre ruling prevented wine producers from using the

name of the vineyard on their labels. Wine producers therefore resorted to “creative” ways

of letting consumers know where the grapes came from. The producer Jean-Max Roger,

for example, calls his tangy and deliciously exotic top Sancerre “Cuvée GC” (meaning

Grand Chemarin). There are many first-rate Sancerre producers. Among them: Cotat

Frères, Pascal Cotat, Lucien Crochet, Henry Pellé, Domaine Laporte, Reverdy-Ducroux,

Matthias et Emile Roblin, Domaine Prieur Pierre et Fils, Domaine Vincent Delaporte,

Pascal Jolivet, André Neveu, and as just mentioned, Jean-Max Roger.

A final word on Sancerre: Although the very word brings to mind white wine, red and

rosé Sancerres are also made. Red Sancerre, in fact, accounts for about 12 percent of the

total production. Both red and rosé Sancerres are made from pinot noir with some gamay.

Opposite Sancerre, on the eastern bank of the Loire, is the town of Pouilly-sur-Loire. In

Pouilly (poo YEE) the landscape is more gentle and the soil contains slightly more

limestone and flint. This soil, it was believed, gave the wine a more pronounced gunflint

or smoky flavor, hence the name of the wine—Pouilly-Fumé. (The word fumé means

“smoke;” Pouilly is a reference to the Roman general Paulus, who presided here.) In truth,

few people except perhaps local experts can tell Pouilly-Fumé and Sancerre apart in a

blind tasting.

THE SECRET TO MARRIAGE: ACIDITY

Two of the Loire’s most famous wines, Sancerre and Pouilly-Fumé, are among the world’s most flexible

when it comes to pairing wine with food. The reason is: acidity. Bone-dry and refreshing, both Sancerre

and Pouilly-Fumé possess the kind of clean, bracing acidity that can counterbalance a surprising ethnic

diversity of dishes, from Chinese chicken salad to shrimp tacos with guacamole. At the same time, both of

these sauvignon blanc–based wines are dramatic enough so that their own flavors are not subdued by

most foods. As for a time-honored partnership, Sancerre or Pouilly-Fumé with seafood is certainly one.

(The Loire boasts a number of seafood festivals, including an oyster fair, a crayfish fair, and even a deep-

fried fish fair.)

Crottins of goat cheese from the village of Chavignol, one of the culinary treasures of the Loire V alley.

As noted, a small number of new-wave Sancerres and Pouilly-Fumés, made in small

oak barrels, have appeared since the 1980s. The best producer of this style was the late so-

called “wild man of Pouilly,

” Didier Dagueneau (an ex–motorcycle racer with no formal

training as a winemaker), whose intensely delicious barrel-fermented and barrel-aged

Pouilly-Fumés set off a quiet storm of controversy in the Loire. The wines, now made by

Dagueneau’s son Louis-Benjamin Dagueneau (under whose name the wines are now

labeled), are complex, lush, super-rich, full-bodied, and expensive—especially the ones

called Pur Sang (the name means “pure blood”) and Silex (“flint”). These are not to be

missed by anyone who loves Loire wines. Along with the Louis-Benjamin Dagueneau

wines, other top producers include: Ladoucette, Francis Blanchet, Domaine Seguin et Fils,

and Domaine Serge Dagueneau et Filles (second cousins of the Didier/Louis-Benjamin

clan).

The eastern Loire has three other appellations that are perhaps less well known outside

of France itself. Menetou-Salon, just west of Sancerre, can make sauvignon blanc with all

the fireworks of the best Sancerre and Pouilly-Fumé. Among the top producers are Henry

Pellé (also known for his Sancerres), Domaine Jean Teiller, and Domaine de Chatenoy.

COULÉE DE SERRANT—MODEL BIODYNAMICS

One of the Loire’s most famous and longest-lived whites, Clos de la Coulée de Serrant, comes from a

17-acre (7-hectare) vineyard that was one of the first vineyards in the modern era to be farmed according

to biodynamic principles. First propounded by the Austrian philosopher Rudolf Steiner in the 1920s, and

later developed by his followers, biodynamics is a holistic system of “living agriculture” whereby the soil

and plants growing in it are nurtured through natural forces. Biodynamics envisions soils and plants as

living in a “middle world” influenced from below by the forces of the earth and elements, and influenced

from above by the cosmos (see Biodynamic Viticulture in the Mastering Wine section, page 34).

The Joly family, owners of Coulée de Serrant since 1959, believe that modern agricultural methods

have thoroughly ravaged the earth’s soils. They have become the leading proponents of biodynamics

worldwide and have influenced a number of other famous French producers to adopt the practice,

including Domaine Leroy in Vosne-Romanée, Burgundy, and M. Chapoutier in the Rhône.

Château de Brissac in Anjou, built in 1621. Privately held today by the 14th Duke of Brissac, the château still produces

a range of wines.

Quincy and Reuilly are two tiny appellations near the river Cher, a tributary of the

Loire. Again, the sauvignons can be quite crisp and delicious—and less expensive than

Sancerre or Pouilly-Fumé.

THE MIDDLE LOIRE:

SA VENNIÈRES, QUARTS DE CHAUME, COTEAUX DU LAYON, ROSÉS

D’ANJOU, VOUVRAY, CHINON, BOURGUEIL, AND OTHERS

The middle Loire is where the Loire can get especially confusing, because there are so

many (often overlapping) appellations and wine styles. This is where the best rosés and

reds are made (Rosé d’Anjou and Chinon, for example), as well as sparkling wines

(Crémant de Loire) and whites that are sometimes dry, sometimes medium-sweet, and

sometimes sweet (V ouvray). While several grape varieties are grown, the leading white

grape is chenin blanc, and the leading red, cabernet franc.

The middle Loire is divided into two general, broad areas known as Anjou-Saumur and

Touraine. Anjou-Saumur, in the west near the city of Angers, includes the appellations

Savennières, Quarts de Chaume, Bonnezeaux, Coteaux du Layon, and Coteaux de

l’Aubance, all of which produce white wines.

Touraine, in the east near the city of Tours, includes the appellations Chinon,

Bourgueil, and St.

-Nicolas-de-Bourgueil, which produce red wines, and V ouvray and

Montlouis, which produce white wines.

SAVENNIÈRES

The middle Loire’s most extraordinary dry white wine, Savennières, is possibly the

greatest dry chenin blanc in the world. Made in a tiny area just southwest of the city of

Angers, in Anjou-Samur, Savennières are densely flavored wines with such intensity, grip,

minerality, and taut acidity that they can be aged for decades. The vineyards are spread

over steep, south-facing slopes of volcanic schist. Yields from these vineyards are among

the lowest in the Loire, which accounts, in part, for Savennières’ concentration and depth

of flavor. The Loire wine expert Jacqueline Friedrich calls Savennières the most cerebral

wine in the world. But sheer hedonistic flavors are operating here, too, for Savennières

tastes like nothing else. It’s a whirlwind of quince, chamomile, honey, and cream, all

pierced by a lightning bolt of citrus.

SIDETRACKED BY TARTE TATIN

One of the most famous rustic desserts of France, tarte tatin originated in the Touraine region of the

Loire, in the tiny village of Lamotte-Beuvron. An upside-down caramelized apple tart, it was created in

the nineteenth century by two sisters, Stephanie and Caroline Tatin, owners of the Hôtel-Terminus Tatin,

a wayside stop for travelers across from the train station. Tarte tatin is the perfect accompaniment for

one of the Loire’s other prizes—Quarts de Chaume, the gorgeously sweet, lightly honeyed dessert wine

made from chenin blanc grapes.

LOIRE SPARKLING AND CRÉMANT DE LOIRE

One of the middle Loire Valley’s specialties is French bubbles at an unfussy price. Indeed, more

sparkling wine is made in the Loire than in any other French region except Champagne. Loire sparkling

wines fall into two categories: first, the large general category known as Crémant de Loire, and second,

sparkling wines from a specific smaller appellation—sparkling Saumur, sparkling Vouvray, sparkling

T ouraine, and so forth. All are made according to the traditional (Champagne) method of secondary

fermentation inside each bottle.

Crémant de Loire—a simple splash of a wine—is usually based on chardonnay, but chenin blanc and

cabernet franc are also often used and the law allows for any other grape grown in the Loire Valley.

Crémant de Loire is aged just a year on the yeast lees (far less than in Champagne), and is generally

made in a dry (brut) style. As for sparklers from small appellations, such as sparkling Samur, a grab bag

of different grape varieties can be used, including chenin blanc, chardonnay, sauvignon blanc, cabernet

franc, cabernet sauvignon, côt (malbec), gamay, pinot noir, pineau d’Aunis, and grolleau. Idiosyncratic

but fun, these sparklers are also dry and aged only briefly on the yeast lees.

Among the great producers of Savennières are Domaine des Baumard, Château

d’Epiré, Château de Chamboureau, and Domaine du Closel. But the most famous of all

Savennières is Clos de la Coulée de Serrant, considered one of the greatest white wines in

the world. Coulée de Serrant is made on the single estate also called Coulée de Serrant.

The prized vineyard (first planted by monks in the year 1130) is owned by the Joly family

(see box Coulée de Serrant—Model Biodynamics, page 267). Though it is just 17 acres (7

hectares) in size, Coulée de Serrant has its own appellation. (Only a handful of other

appellations in France are made up of a single property, including Romanée-Conti, La

Tâche, and Clos de Tart, all in Burgundy, and Château-Grillet in the Rhône.)

QUARTS DE CHAUME AND THE SWEET WINES OF THE MIDDLE LOIRE

The Anjou-Samur part of the middle Loire is devoted to a slew of medium-sweet or fully

sweet whites that carry the appellations Quarts de Chaume, Bonnezeaux, Coteaux du

Layon, or Coteaux de l’Aubance. The vineyards for these sweet wine appellations are

spread out along the steep slate, schist, and clay slopes that form the banks of the Layon

River, a tributary of the Loire. In good years, the grapes receive just the right combination

of morning moisture from the river, followed by afternoon sun, for Botrytis cinerea, or

“noble rot,

” to form. Thus, each of these wines gets much of its complexity from botrytis

(as does Sauternes).

In all four appellations the wines are always made from chenin blanc, which, here in

the middle Loire (although virtually no place else in the world), exudes gorgeous floral,

peach, apricot, and ripe red apple flavors. Y et the wines, even when made in a sweet style,

are also naturally taut and energetic thanks to high acidity in the grapes and the “cool”

soils. The smallest appellation and most prestigious of these wines, Quarts de Chaume,

can be an absolute masterpiece, with soaring elegance, lightness, sheerness, and purity of

fruit.

Among the wonderful wines to try from this part of the Loire are the Quarts de Chaume

from Domaine des Baumard and Château de Bellerive, as well as the Bonnezeaux from

Domaine de la Sansonnière.

THE ROSÉS OF ANJOU

Just over half the wine produced in the Anjou-Samur part of the middle Loire is not white,

but delicious rosé—the kind of rosé meant to be chilled cold and then disappear quickly

over a family meal. Rosé d’Anjou is usually low in alcohol (often no more than 11.5

percent) and ever so slightly “tender,

” as the locals say (meaning it has 1 to 1.5 percent

residual sugar). It’s usually made primarily from the local red grolleau grape, although

five other red grapes can be part of the blend: gamay, cabernet franc, cabernet sauvignon,

côt (aka malbec), and pineau d’Aunis.

A curious version of rosé d’Anjou is rosé Cabernet d’Anjou—made solely from

cabernet franc or cabernet sauvignon. Although the thought of cabernet is appealing, a

rosé with green flavors (a characteristic of cabernet) is something of an acquired taste. To

counterbalance the “gherkin” effect, more residual sugar is left in rosé cabernet d’Anjou

than in rosé d’Anjou.

Wines from two of the great sweet wine appellations of the Loire: Coteaux de L’Aubance and Quarts de Chaume.

VOUVRAY–DRY TO SWEET

Vouvray can be made at four official levels of dryness/sweetness, according to the amount of residual

sugar in the wine. Like Champagne or German riesling, however, the actual impression of sweetness for

any given Vouvray is based not only on the quantity of residual sugar present, but also on the degree of

acidity. Thus, a Vouvray with, say, 1 percent residual sugar (the classic, main style) generally tastes

totally dry, since Vouvray possesses a soaring level of acidity. A Vouvray label may not indicate the level

of sweetness of the wine.

SEC (VERY DRY)

0% TO 0.8% RESIDUAL SUGAR (8 grams or less of sugar per liter)

CLASSIC OR DEMI-SEC (PERCEIVED AS DRY ON THE

PALATE)

0.8% TO 1.2% RESIDUAL SUGAR (8 to 12 grams of sugar per liter)

As you can see, the classic version of Vouvray has some minor sweetness to balance the wine’s high

acidity. These are sometimes called by the French term demi-sec, which means “half dry.

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MOELLEUX (MEDIUM SWEET ; LITERALLY ,

“MELLOW”)

1.2% TO 4.5% RESIDUAL SUGAR (12 to 45 grams of sugar per liter)

DOUX (QUITE SWEET)

MORE THAN 4.5% RESIDUAL SUGAR (more than 45 grams of sugar per liter)

Château de la Grille, one of the top Chinons.

CHINON, BOURGUEIL, AND ST .

-NICOLAS-DE-BOURGUEIL

The Touraine, a fairly large area in the middle Loire, due east of Anjou-Saumur, surrounds

the city of Tours. It is a wine region befitting Cinderella. Centuries-old storybook

châteaux, replete with turrets, moats, and drawbridges, rise up from verdant rolling fields

and vineyards. The châteaux were built by seventeenth-and eighteenth-century aristocrats

attracted by the agricultural wealth and abundance of the region.

Chinon and its famous cabernet franc vineyards as viewed from the Château Chinon, built in the 10th century on the site

of earlier castles. Chinon lies along the Vienne River , a tributary of the Loire River.

Touraine is where the climate shifts from the milder western Loire (Muscadet),

influenced by the Atlantic, to the eastern Loire (Sancerre, etc.), with its hot summers and

extremely cold winters. The top vineyards in Touraine seem to have gotten the best of

both worlds—mildness as well as warmth, a situation ideal for red wines.

The three most famous red wine appellations of the Loire are found here: Chinon,

Bourgueil (it only looks hard to pronounce; it’s bore-GOY), and St.

-Nicolas-de-Bourgueil.

All three types of wine are almost always made entirely from cabernet franc. Of the three,

Chinon is generally the fullest and most elegant. But the quality of all three has increased

greatly in recent years, as top estates incorporate more gentle maceration techniques,

helping the wines achieve richness and freshness, while avoiding a hard tannic grippiness.

No bona fide bistro is ever without red wines from at least one of these three places,

especially in summer, when they are served cool. Among the most delicious of these reds

are the Chinons from Charles Joguet, Domaine Bernard Baudry, Domaine du Roncée,

Château de la Grille, Philippe Alliet, and Domaine de la Perrière, and the Bourgueils from

Pierre-Jacques Druet.

Chinon, Bourgueil, and St.

-Nicolas-de-Bourgueil can vary quite a bit with the vintage.

In good years, when the cabernet franc grapes ripen fully, the wines burst with raspberry,

violet, cassis, licorice, and briary/spicy flavors, but in poor years, the wines that are not

from the very best producers can be on the thin side.

Two final notes: If you are in the Loire, you’ll also encounter basic Touraine Rouge

(largely forgettable generic red), and you may encounter a fantastic specialty that you

should not miss tasting: white Chinon made from chenin blanc. From a top producer, such

as Trois Coteaux or Domaine de la Noblaie, it’s an exquisite, complex, minerally, dry

white wine that can be quite exotic.

The chenin blanc vineyards of Gaston Huet sit peacefully in front of the bell tower of V ouvray.

VOUVRAY AND MONTLOUIS

One white wine appellation of the middle Loire is well known the world over: V ouvray,

made from 100 percent chenin blanc. No other place in the world produces chenin blancs

that are so gossamer, richly flavored, and honeyed—even when dry. (Just across the Loire

River is V ouvray’s “little sister,

” Montlouis—also all chenin blanc—although the wines

here are not as exciting.) Most astonishing of all is how long a great V ouvray lasts. It

would seem counterintuitive that a white wine could taste vibrant and luxurious after half

a century or more, but the top V ouvrays can and do (the wines’ ultra-high level of acidity

preserves them). Not surprisingly, these have always been collector’s wines. Top is an

important word here, for truly great V ouvray exists alongside a small ocean of basic, nice-

tasting commercial examples for which a low price is the main attraction. Among the top

V ouvrays I love are those from Domaine le Haut Lieu (Gaston Huet), Domaine de la

Fontainerie, Domaine des Aubuisières, Philippe Foreau, Champalou, and Le Clos de

Meslerie.

V ouvray can be dry (sec), medium dry (demi-sec; sometimes called classic), or medium

sweet (moelleux). Medium dry is the traditional main style, but even with a modest

amount of residual sugar, classic V ouvray generally tastes completely dry and balanced

thanks to its dramatic acidity. In addition, a share of the total production is sometimes, but

not always, made into sparkling V ouvray. The amount of sparkling wine depends on the

weather. V ouvray has one of the coolest climates in the Loire. Harvests here are some of

the latest in Europe—as late as in, say, Germany, often well into November. Thus, in

extremely cool years when the acidity in the grapes remains high, some producers may

make twice as much sparkling wine as still. In warmer years with riper grapes, the

situation flip-flops and more still wines are made—both dry and sweet.

The best medium-sweet (moelleux, literally “mellow”) V ouvrays are always the product

of Botrytis cinerea, the beneficial fungus that also produces Sauternes. As in many areas

of the middle Loire, the vineyards of V ouvray get just the right proportion and progression

of sun, moisture, and dryness to be infected with the “noble rot.

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Château Chenonceau, was built in 1513 on the Cher River , a tributary of the Loire, to make it easily accessible to

Parisian royalty who often came to stay. Still private, it is considered the most impressive castle in France after

V ersailles. The château is owned by the Menier family, who were once well known for their chocolate business.

Because they are also full of daggerlike acidity, V ouvray’s greatest sweet wines are an

extraordinary taste sensation. When the tension of opposites—sweetness and acidity—is

perfectly balanced in these wines, they can be otherworldly in their vibrancy and richness.

Often they must be aged for three to seven years before the counterpoint tastes

harmonious. Moelleux (pronounced moi-LE) V ouvrays are traditionally drunk with rich

dishes, especially those with complex sauces, or served as dessert wines. Finally, though

rarely, you may also come across an extremely sweet “Doux” V ouvray. With more than 45

grams per liter of residual sugar, these V ouvrays have mind-blowing opulence.

Some of the vineyards and cellars of V ouvray almost defy existence. Vineyards cling to

the tops of cliffs, with cellars and houses below them, cut into the soft, tuffeau rock, a type

of limestone, that forms the face of the cliff. Many cellars were chiseled into the caves left

behind long ago, after the tuffeau was quarried for building materials for châteaux.

As for Montlouis, as I mentioned, in general it tends to be softer and less dramatically

focused than V ouvray. That said, certain producers, such as Domaine Deletang, make

extraordinary Montlouis that is every bit the equal of V ouvray.

In addition to V ouvray and Montlouis, the middle Loire is also home to simple whites

that can come from anywhere in the region. These can be made from a variety of grapes,

including chenin blanc, sauvignon blanc, and even a minority percentage of chardonnay.

The most popular of these wines is Touraine sauvignon, made from sauvignon blanc

grapes, which tastes like an extremely simple relative of Sancerre and makes for good

carafe wines.

It would seem counterintuitive that a white wine could taste vibrant and

luxurious after half a century, but the top V ouvrays can and do.

THE WESTERN LOIRE: MUSCADET

The westernmost part of the Loire, hard up against the cold, wet Atlantic coast, is known

for one wine alone—Muscadet, the leading wine of the Loire by volume. A dry, lean,

fresh, stainless-steel-fermented white meant for drinking (not thinking), Muscadet’s claim

to fame has always been its easy partnership with seafood—especially homey French

classics like moules frites (a pot of mussels steamed in wine with a tangle of thin French

fries on top). It is made from the melon de Bourgogne grape, often referred to simply as

melon. The grape’s name refers to Burgundy (Bourgogne), not the Loire, thanks to an

especially destructive frost in 1709, which destroyed most of the Loire’s vineyards.

Afterward, Burgundian monks came to help replant, bringing with them a local, frost-

hearty Burgundy variety—melon de Bourgogne. Recent DNA analysis indicates the grape

is a cross of pinot blanc and gouais blanc. As of the early eighteenth century, the grape

was forbidden in Burgundy in favor of chardonnay, and today, melon is extinct there.

The Muscadet area is a sea of vines, some 30,000 acres (12,100 hectares) of them,

spread over gently rolling terrain (the vineyards of Sancerre, by comparison, cover just

6,700 acres/2,700 hectares). Like an upside-down fan, the region spreads in a vast arc

west, south, east, and northeast of the city of Nantes. The soil here is highly variable, but

the best vineyards tend to be planted on mixtures of granite, gneiss, and/or schist. Within

this area is one important subzone: Muscadet de Sèvre-et-Maine, named for the small

Sèvre and Maine Rivers that flow through the district. Virtually all of the tastiest Muscadet

wines come from Muscadet de Sèvre-et-Maine, or from one of the three small areas

allowed to append their name to Muscadet de Sèvre-et-Maine: Gorges, Clisson, and Le

Pallet.

The labels of most of the top Muscadets read sur lie, on the lees, meaning that the wine

was left in contact with the yeast lees for several months—theoretically until it was

bottled. A Muscadet made this way takes on extra flavor and a bit more “baby fat” on its

lean frame, plus, sometimes, a very slight refreshing spritzyness. The practice dates from

the beginning of the twentieth century, when producers would put aside an especially good

barrel of Muscadet for family celebrations. Over time, they noticed that the wine in this

barrel, known as the honeymoon barrel, got even better thanks to its longer contact with

the yeasts.

Muscadet is made by six hundred growers, most of whom sell their wines to some forty

négociants, who blend and bottle the wines under their own labels. Many of these wines

are quite good as well as inexpensive. Should you ever encounter them, here are the

Muscadets to buy: Domaine de l’Ecu, Louis Métaireau, Chéreau-Carré, Château de la

Cassemichère, Domaine de la Grange, Domaine de la Pépière, Domaine Luneau-Papin,

and Château du Cléray.

Crates of older Muscadet in a cellar . Because of its high acidity, fine Muscadet can age amazingly well.

WHEN YOU VISIT… THE LOIRE V ALLEY

THE LOIRE VALLEY can be reached in about two hours by car from Paris. The region

(known as the garden of France) is beautiful, full of forests and fields, plus stunning

châteaux.

THE EASTERN PART OF THE LOIRE, around Sancerre, is known for its artisanal goat

cheeses; the western part of the Loire, where Muscadet is made, is known for oysters

and fish dishes.

IN ANGIERS, do not miss a chance to visit Chenonceau, the most famous castle in

France (in addition to Versailles), and site of the Apocalypse T apestries, considered

among the masterpieces of French art.

The Loire Wines to Know

I love wines that have precision and snap, wines that seem spring-loaded with freshness. That characteristic is a

calling card for the Loire, and in particular for the lively dramatic wines below. The Loire is a big region, of course,

but the through-line for the wines is a certain “thirst-quenchingness”

—true of reds, as well as whites.

WHITES

DOMAINE PELLÉ

SANCERRE | LA CROIX AU GARDE

100% sauvignon blanc

This is the Ingrid Bergman of Sancerres—ravishing, polished, and effortlessly elegant. In great years, besides

having perfect tension between acidity and fruit, the wine has a unique kind of purity and clarity, with absolutely

vivid smoky/minerally flavors. Henry Pellé himself was considered one of the legendary masters of the sauvignon

blanc grape, and now his family carries on, making wines that are widely admired. The Pellé estate is perhaps best

known for its extraordinary, rich, dramatic Menetou-Salon, which is also where the estate is located.

MATTHIAS ET EMILE ROBLIN

SANCERRE | AMMONITES

100% sauvignon blanc

I could not write notes fast enough when I tasted the Matthias and Emile Roblin wines—creamy yet tight; spicy yet

herbal; peppery yet salty; turbulant yet refined; flashy and focused, with not a whit of fat on their bones. Best of all,

the wines were evocative of the ocean—with rolling waves of seawater-like, briny flavors. Among the slew of

terrific wines they make, this one, named Ammonites for the large seashell fossils in the vineyard, is most

memorable.

DOMAINE PRIEUR PIERRE ET FILS

SANCERRE | LES COINCHES

100% sauvignon blanc

Whenever I taste this wine, I feel like someone has just slammed a door made of chalk and flint, and molecules of

aroma and flavor are flying in all directions. Vivid, sharp, starched, and mouth-filling, yet all the while, lacy, it’s

Sancerre to the core. Domaine Prieur Pierre et Fils—a 42-acre (17-hectare) estate dominated by caillottes and silex

—is run by brothers Bruno and Thierry Prieur. The vines are planted on a hillside so steep, a winch is needed to

harvest the grapes. Les Coinches is a corner of sorts, where rows of vines meet.

DOMAINE LAPORTE

SANCERRE | LE ROCHOY

100% sauvignon blanc

Nothing soft or mellow going on here. Domaine Laporte’s Le Rochoy is a firecracker of a Sancerre. Spicy, edgy,

zingy, and smelling like you just put your nose into a dynamited cliff (or perhaps smelled the barrel of a gun), it’s

invariably loaded with all the wild, tangy, flinty flavors hard-core sauvignon blanc drinkers love. Not for the timid.

Le Rochoy, a single vineyard owned by the Laporte family, is one of the vineyards closest to the Loire River.

LOUIS-BENJAMIN DAGUENEAU

POUILLY-FUMÉ | SILEX

100% sauvignon blanc

The late Didier Dagueneau was considered both a renegade and a genius in the Loire. In the 1990s and 2000s,

Dagueneau, an ex–motorcycle racer with no formal winemaking training, upended conventional winemaking in

Pouilly-Fumé by, among other practices, severely reducing yields, allowing his grapes to get very ripe, and then

making several of his sauvignon blancs in oak. The results were racy, tightly wound, super-concentrated, expensive

sauvignon blancs that often took years of aging before the full extent of their flavors unfurled. The wines are now

being made by Dagueneau’s son, Louis-Benjamin (whose name is now the brand). Of the Dagueneau cuvées, the

one called Silex (flint) is my favorite—dramatically aromatic, thrillingly vibrant, and sophisticated, it has flavors so

alive the wine dances in your mouth. For pure, opulent hedonism, however, the Louis-Benjamin Dagueneau Pur

Sang (“Pure Blood”) has few competitors for its profoundly complex matrix of stone, saline, chalk, spice, and citrus

flavors.

CLOS DE LA COULÉE DE SERRANT

SAVENNIÈRES

100% chenin blanc

The most famous Savennières, Coulée de Serrant, is also one of the most famous white wines in the world. In great

years, it is chenin blanc from another galaxy. The wine can be so suffused with apple-caramel flavors, you feel as

though you’re inside a tarte tatin. The finesse, the nuance, the incisive focus, the gripping flavors that melt into a

silky, honeyed body—it’s all here in great years. The 17-acre (7-hectare) Coulée de Serrant vineyard is cared for by

the Joly family, the world’s leading proponents of the bio-dynamic approach to viticulture (see page 267).

LE CLOS DE LA MESLERIE

VOUVRAY

100% chenin blanc

In the first decade of the 2000s, expat American Peter Hahn restored by hand a rundown old stone house built in the

1600s, and the few hectares of clay-chalk vineyard surrounding it, naming the wine Le Clos de la Meslerie. Hahn’s

V ouvrays are massive, intense, very ripe, full-bodied wines, yet they manage to have an amazing tightness and

through-line of energy. And while energy may seem like an odd word, there’s no better term for their explosive

quince, citrus, honey cake, and minerally character.

CHÂTEAU DE LA CASSEMICHÈRE

MUSCADET SÈVRE-ET-MAINE | CLOS DU BON CURÉ | SUR LIE

100% melon de Bourgogne

From fifty-year-old vines comes this pretty, lacy, delicate Muscadet that’s gentle and fresh and makes you want to

drink a ton of it. When Muscadet is in top form, as this one is, it has a light minerality to it that’s thirst quenching.

The impressive castle of Château de la Cassemichère was built in the early 1700s. Alas, like many royals, the

family that owned the estate at the end of the 1700s, the Cottineaus, were beheaded during the French Revolution.

REDS

DOMAINE DE LA PERRIÈRE

CHINON

100% cabernet franc

This serious Chinon, with its beautiful streak of spiciness, opened my mind about Chinon. When Chinon is very

good, as this is, it has a trim, fit body (it could be in a health club commercial), plus a pure, lively drive of freshness

more often associated with white wine than red. Best of all, great Chinon, such as Domaine de la Perrière’s, has an

almost miraculous structure—one senses the tannin from the cabernet franc—yet there’s no bitterness, dryness, or

raspyness. Just vivid, licoricey, violety fruit.

CHÂTEAU DE LA GRILLE

CHINON

100% cabernet franc

Château de la Grille is one of the most masculine and muscular Chinons. It’s usually jet-black in color and bursting

with pent-up flavors evocative of licorice, violets, and something like café au lait. The way this wine unfurls itself

on the palate is especially captivating. Tightly wound at first, it unleashes itself in a whirlwind of moves, as though

it were, itself, a martial art. Built in the fifteenth century, the château grows only cabernet franc on its 69 acres (28

hectares) of land. Today owned by Baudry-Dutour, the estate’s reputation was firmly established by Albert Gosset,

of Champagne fame, who purchased it in 1951 and installed state-of-the-art equipment and updated the viticultural

practices.

Quite possibly the most beautiful wine region in France, Alsace has it all—gorgeous scenery, quaint villages and towns,

exquisite wines, and dozens upon dozens of toprated restaurants.

ALSACE

Alsace is one of the rare wine regions in the world devoted almost exclusively to white

wine. More than seven different varieties are common and, with few exceptions, they are

whites rarely made in other parts of France. Although by law (and in spirit), Alsace is a

French wine region, it has also at various times in its past belonged to Germany. Indeed,

within one seventy-five-year period in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the two

superpowers exchanged ownership of the region four times, for Alsace is one of Europe’s

strategic geopolitical crossroads.

It is also a wine region so charming it may as well have emerged straight out of a fairy

tale. The vineyards are sun dappled, the half-timbered houses are cheerfully adorned with

flower boxes, the 119 villages—centuries old—are immaculate. All are set against the

grand backdrop of the V osges Mountains. Perhaps it was all of this beauty that inspired the

Alsatian artist Frédéric Auguste Bartholdi; he sculpted the Statue of Liberty, a gift from

France to the United States.

The most important grapes are the four white varieties: riesling, gewürztraminer, pinot

gris, and muscat. A fifth white, pinot blanc, is used to make basic quaffing wine. The lone

red grape, of which only a tiny amount is grown, is pinot noir. And interestingly, unlike

the practice in most of the rest of France, Alsace wines are labeled according to these

varieties, rather than by the place where the grapes grow.

Founded in the 7th century, the village of Hunawhir (officially considered one of the “most beautiful villages of

France”) is set among the vines. In the center is the 15th-century church of St Jacques le Majeur , named for one of

Christ’ s twelve apostles.

THE QUICK SIP ON ALSACE

THE TOP WINES of Alsace are the dry, aromatic whites: riesling, gewürztraminer,

muscat, and pinot gris.

A SINGLE, PASSIONATE PHILOSOPHY pervades Alsace winemaking: to create wines

with pure fruit flavors. New oak is almost never used.

THANKS TO THE FAR NORTHERN but immensely sunny climate, Alsace wines are

usually medium- to full-bodied. The best are concentrated wines, often with a dramatic

streak of acidity.

The great unsung heroes of France, Alsace whites are not the demure wines that you

might imagine. Nor do they usually taste sweet, a common misconception (unless, of

course, a sweet late-harvest wine is intentionally being made). The best among them are

powerful, bold, and dramatic. They virtually always taste dry. For some wines, a tiny

amount of residual sugar may be left in the wine, but this is balanced out—and, in effect,

negated—by a considerable amount of acidity. Moreover, they are made according to a

single, deeply held philosophy—namely, that great wine should be the purest possible

expression of two factors: the grapes it is made from and the ground it is grown in. An

Alsace winemaker’s goal is not to craft a wine with certain flavors, it’s to showcase the

inherent character of the grape itself when grown in a certain plot of earth. The emphasis

on the grape is so strong that blending is (almost) unthinkable. The most highly regarded

wines are almost always 100 percent of the variety named on the label.

For wines to be truly expressive of grape and ground, the winemaking must be hands-

off. In Alsace, the top wines are fermented with indigenous yeasts instead of commercial

yeasts, and the wines are usually made in neutral containers—either stainless steel or

cement tanks, or older, inert casks called foudres. The lightning bolt of natural acidity in

the wines is rarely mollified by letting them go through malolactic fermentation, a process

that would soften the impression of acid. The combination of lively acidity, dryness, and

unhampered, uninhibited, unleashed fruit and minerality is what defines the great Alsace

wines and makes them some of the best all-around marriage partners for food.

Besides dry table wines, two other categories of wine are made in Alsace: Vendange

tardive wines and wines known as sélection de grains nobles. V endange tardive wines are

made from super-ripe, late-harvested grapes. Powerful and concentrated, VT wines, as

they are known, can taste slightly sweet. The second category, even more rare than VT, is

sélection de grains nobles (SGN). These are ravishingly unctuous wines made from super-

concentrated, late-harvested, botrytis-affected grapes. Curiously, the final taste impression

of both VT and SGN wines is not of sugariness but of hauntingly dense concentration.

Finally, many of the top Alsace wine estates are family-owned firms. Some own all of

their own vineyards, others supplement their grapes with those bought from the region’s

4,600 small growers. As luck would have it, many wines that are exported from Alsace—

especially the rieslings and gewürztraminers—are of very high quality. This makes buying

them a pretty safe bet even if you don’t know the producer.

TYPES OF WINE

Amazingly, most leading Alsace producers—even small producers—make twenty to thirty

different wines. The majority of these can be broken down into three types: regular,

reserve, and late harvest.

The regular bottlings are the producer’s standard bread-and-butter wines. A typical

producer will make regular bottlings of all five leading grapes—riesling, gewürztraminer,

pinot gris, pinot blanc, and muscat.

Next are the reserve bottlings. Although the word reserve might cause you to imagine a

single, special wine, in Alsace producers usually make multiple reserve wines. There can

be three reserve rieslings, four reserve gewürztraminers, and so on, all from the same

producer. Alas, reserve wines may be labeled in a number of ways. The label may carry

the name of a special, well-known vineyard, such as Zind Humbrecht’s Clos St.

-Urbain.

Or, if the reserve wine happens to come from a Grand Cru vineyard (not all do), it may be

labeled with the words Grand Cru plus the name of the vineyard. And finally, a reserve

wine may be given a title such as réserve personelle or réserve exceptionnelle.

A rocky outcrop of the Kitterle Vineyard, Domaines Schlumberger . The vineyard is nicknamed the “calf breaker ,

”

because its steep slopes can reach inclines of 50 degrees.

The third type of wine—late-harvest wine—is made when the harvest permits. A

producer may make up to six of the rare specialties, vendange tardive and sélection de

grains nobles. They will be among the estate’s most precious and expensive offerings.

On top of all this, just for the fun of it, many producers also make a pinot noir or a

sparkling wine or an inexpensive blended quaffing wine—or all three. It’s easy to see how

all these wines add up. From the perspective of an Alsace producer, more wines mean the

ability to show off how distinctly different the flavors derived from different sites can be.

CRÉMANT D’ALSACE

All of the sparkling wine made in Alsace is called Crémant d’Alsace, and like all

crémants, it is made in the same, painstaking way as Champagne. A blend of grapes is

used, including pinot blanc, Auxerrois, pinot noir, pinot gris, and/or chardonnay (which by

law is permitted only in Crémant d’Alsace; it cannot be made into a still table wine on its

own). All of the grapes used for Crémant d’Alsace are harvested earlier than grapes for

Alsace still wines, so that their acidity is pronounced. It’s this vivid acidity, of course, that

will give the final wine its snap, crackle, and pop.

Crémant d’Alsace, which is an official appellation, accounts for more than 20 percent

of all Alsace wine. Indeed, thanks to its terrific quality and very affordable price, the

bubbly is getting more and more popular. In 1979, fewer than one million bottles of

Crémant d’Alsace were made. Today, that figure is more than 30 million bottles a year.

Try the ones from Pierre Sparr and Lucien Albrecht.

THE LAND AND THE VINEYARDS

Alsace lies about 300 miles (480 kilometers) due east of Paris. The vineyards run north to

south in one long, thin strip over the foothills along the eastern flank of the V osges

Mountains. Germany’s Rhine River is about 12 miles (19 kilometers) to the east, and even

closer (about 6 miles/10 kilometers to the east) is Alsace’s river, Ill (pronounced EEL).

After Champagne, this is France’s northernmost wine region, yet it is not generally

overcast and cool, as one might presume, but surprisingly sunny and dry. Thanks to the

protective mantle of the V osges Mountains, less rain falls on the vineyards here than on

vineyards elsewhere in France.

The best vineyards are south-facing for maximum sun, and most are located in the

southern part of the region, known as the Haut Rhine or upper Rhine. The growing season

is long, ensuring that even at this northern latitude, grapes growing in the best, sunniest

sites develop full physiological maturity.

Soil in Alsace is varied enough to be a geologist’s dream. Wide variations in soil often

mean wide variations in the flavor and quality of the wines. And, in fact, there is an

enormous difference in flavor between an average wine from a nondescript vineyard and a

wine from an extraordinary vineyard, such as Trimbach’s Clos Ste.

-Hune, which produces

one of the greatest rieslings in the world.

THE MOST IMPORTANT ALSACE WINES

LEADING WINES

GEWÜRZTRAMINER white (dry and sweet)

MUSCAT white (dry and sweet)

PINOT GRIS white (dry and sweet)

RIESLING white (dry and sweet)

WINES OF NOTE

CRÉMANT D’ALSACE white (sparkling)

PINOT BLANC white

PINOT NOIR red

The checkerboard of soil types in Alsace includes chalk combined with clay, limestone,

granite, schist, volcanic rock sediment, and sandstone. Alsace’s pinkish-colored sandstone,

called grès de V osges, is a favorite building material for local cathedrals.

THE GRAND CRU

In 1983, twenty-five of the very best vineyard sites in Alsace were, for the first time,

legally recognized as superior, and designated as Grand Cru. The act, however, was wildly

controversial. For two decades prior to this designation, Alsace producers and growers had

debated not only which vineyards were indeed the crème de la crème, but also what the

boundaries of those vineyards should be and what, if any, limits should be set on a Grand

Cru’s yield. Clearly, the stricter the requirements, the more impact and validity the

designation Alsace Grand Cru would have.

SURPRISING AGING POTENTIAL

Only exceptional white grapes can be made into wines that will stand up to long aging—say, twenty years

or more. Riesling is the world’s preeminent white grape in this regard, followed by (in no particular

order) sémillon, pinot gris, gewürztraminer, and chardonnay from cold climates. In general, for a white

wine to age, it must have an impeccable balance of fruit and alcohol, and it helps if the wine has high

acidity. When made by the best producers, three of the most important Alsace whites—riesling,

gewürztraminer, and pinot gris—all age remarkably well. Alsace rieslings, in particular, have an amazing

ability to become graceful and honeyed the older they get.

As it turned out, the standards set were not as stringent as many producers would have

liked. To add fuel to the fire, twenty-six more vineyards were later added to the original

twenty-five, bringing the total number of Grand Cru vineyards to fifty-one. That’s far too

many to suit a number of producers. Moreover, the yield set for Grand Cru vineyards 686

gallons per acre (65 hectoliters per hectare), is considered by many to be too high for the

production of great wine.

On the other hand, just because the regulations could be stricter does not mean that no

great Grand Cru wines are being made. They are. In fact, most wines labeled Grand Cru

are far more intense, elegant, complex, and structured than the producers’ regular

bottlings. But, some top producers, as a quiet form of protest, refuse to use the term Grand

Cru even though they own Grand Cru vineyards. Instead, they call their best wines by a

vineyard name or a proprietary name. The producer Hugel simply uses the word Jubilee

(as in Hugel Riesling Jubilee) to designate wines that come from Grand Cru vineyards.

By law, only wines made from four grape varieties are allowed to be called Grand Cru,

and they are the varieties that, over many decades, producers have deemed capable of

greatness: riesling, gewürztraminer, pinot gris, and muscat. If a producer chooses to label

his wine Grand Cru, the label must also state the specific Grand Cru vineyard from which

the wine came. Grand Cru wines are several times more expensive than regular bottlings,

and production of them is small. Indeed, only 4 percent of the total production of Alsace

wines are Grands Crus.

“True quality is that which succeeds in surprising and moving us. It is not

locked inside a formula. Its essence is subtle (subjective) and never rational. It

resides in the unique, the singular, but it is ultimately connected to something

more universal. A great wine is one in which quality is contained. Such a wine

will necessarily be uncommon and decidedly unique because it cannot be like

any other, and because of this fact it will be atypical, or only typical of itself.

”

— ANDRÉ OSTERTAG,

winemaker, as quoted in Kermit Lynch’s Inspiring Thirst

Half-timbered houses are one of Alsace’ s architectural signatures. Here, houses in Colmar , the “capital” of Alsace wine

country.

THEY BRING BABIES, DON’T THEY?

In Alsace, everyone looks up. Not only because they’re admiring the architecture, but also because

they’re hoping to spot a white stork—or a whole nest of them. The animal best known as a baby-delivery

agent is, in fact, the official bird of Alsace. Indeed, the species was in rapid decline until Alsace’s activists

initiated successful repopulation efforts. The bird itself has enchanted humans for centuries. Storks are

referenced in everything from Egyptian hieroglyphics to Greek mythology. To this day, they symbolize

good luck and fertility. Their posture and size are quite striking in flight, so have your camera ready.

THE GRAPES AND WINES OF ALSACE

Alsace wines are based on and named after the grapes from which they’ve come. Here are

the main wines.

RIESLING

Riesling is Alsace’s most prestigious grape, although the wine made from it is as

thoroughly different from German riesling as a wine can be and still come from the same

grape—and grown virtually next door to boot! The best German rieslings are fruity, finely

etched, exquisitely nuanced wines, low in alcohol, vibrating with acidity, and usually

balanced with a softening pinch of sweetness.

Alsace rieslings are not nearly as dainty. These are mostly very dry, broad wines with

palate-coating flavors that lean toward gunflint, steel, and minerals, with a limey sort of

citrus. Tight and austere when young, the wines begin to come around after two to three

years. With a decade or more of age, they take on a richness, as well as a viscosity, that

can be stunning.

Riesling is known to be a grape sensitive to its terroir, and this is as true in Alsace as it

is elsewhere. Grown in a merely decent vineyard, it makes merely okay wine.

Extraordinary riesling requires near-perfect vineyard conditions.

No discussion of great Alsace riesling could fail to include Trimbach’s Clos Ste.

-Hune

and Cuvée Frédéric Emile; as well as Domaine Zind Humbrecht’s Clos Saint Urbain

Rangen de Thann; Domaine Weinbach’s Cuvée Ste.

-Cathérine; Domaine Ostertag’s

Fronholz; and Domaine Marcel Deiss’s Altenberg de Bergheim.

THE GRAPES OF ALSACE

WHITES

CHARDONNAY: Legally permitted to be used only in the sparkling wine Crémant d’Alsace, where it adds

finesse and body.

late-harvest wines.

GEWÜRZTRAMINER: A major grape. Makes flamboyant, dry wines full of personality, plus extraordinary

MUSCAT : Two types grow in Alsace, muscat blanc à petits grains and muscat ottonel. These are often

blended to make stunningly aromatic wines usually drunk as aperitifs.

PINOT BLANC: Makes medium-bodied quaffing wines of good, not usually great, character. Also known

as klevner.

PINOT GRIS: A major grape. The source of unique, full-bodied wines, totally unlike pinot gris planted

elsewhere in the world. Very old vintages may carry pinot gris’s former name, tokay or tokay-pinot gris.

RIESLING: A major grape and the most prestigious one. Alsace rieslings can have remarkable

complexity and aging potential. Also used for late-harvest wines.

SYLVANER: A minor grape. Can make very good wines in Alsace, especially when the sylvaner vines

are old. The same as the grape silvaner in Germany.

RED

PINOT NOIR: A minor grape, but noteworthy because it is Alsace’s only red. Occasionally makes

fascinating wine.

GEWÜRZTRAMINER

It’s often said that gewürztraminer (or, gewurztraminer without the umlaut, as you’ll

almost always see it, this being France) is something you either really like or really don’t.

I suspect that the people who “really don’t” have never had a Grand Cru gewürztraminer

from Alsace. In fact, gewürztraminer (like nebbiolo) is one of the grapes that simply

doesn’t travel well. Virtually all of the great ones—the ones with gripping flavors, finesse,

and complexity—come from Alsace (the gewürztraminers from Italy’s Trentino-Alto

Adige region are their only competitors).

The aromas and flavors are extroverted. Lychees, gingerbread, vanilla, fruit-cocktail

syrup, grapefruit, smoke, spice, stones, minerals, honeysuckle, and a wonderful

bittersweet character rather like marmalade, do not simply rest in the glass—they rage

about in it. Such massive fruitiness is sometimes mistaken for sweetness, but as already

noted, most Alsace gewürztraminers are dry or nearly so (unless a late-harvest wine, a

vendange tardive, is being made).

To go along with their big 3-D fruit, Alsace gewürztraminers have an enormous body

and low natural acidity. The existing acidity therefore must be carefully protected by the

winemaker. With age, Alsace gewürztraminer seems—if this is possible—even bigger-

flavored. Made as a vendange tardive, it can be a knockout.

The grape gewürztraminer is a rose-colored mutation—that is, a clone—of the ancient

grape savagnin, which originated centuries ago somewhere in what is today the area of

northeastern France and southwestern Germany.

Many Alsace producers make excellent gewürztraminers. Some of my favorites:

Domaines Schlumberger Kessler Grand Cru; Kuentz-Bas Pfersigberg Grand Cru;

Domaine Zind Humbrecht Goldert Grand Cru; Domaine Weinbach Altenberg Grand Cru

Cuvée Laurence; Hugel et Fils Hommage à Jean Hugel; and Domaine Marcel Deiss

Altenberg Grand Cru.

PINOT GRIS

Riesling may be the most prestigious grape in Alsace, but pinot gris is the well-loved

hometown girl. The variety is, technically speaking, not a variety, but a clone of pinot noir,

and originated in Burgundy. Indeed, in Alsace, pinot gris has such depth and richness it’s

reminiscent of white Burgundy. What it is generally not like, however, is pinot gris from

Italy (pinot grigio) or from Oregon. Both of those are usually lighter in body and

somewhat more subtle in flavor. Alsace pinot gris, on the other hand, is a high-impact

wine, with a full body and bold, concentrated flavors of bitter almonds, peach, ginger,

smoke, vanilla, and earth.

ASPARAGUS, MEET WINE

If opening a restaurant for just three months a year seems crazy, consider a three-month-only restaurant

that also serves only one food. In Alsace, from April until June, small restaurants dedicated to asparagus

alone open their doors. Every single dish on the menu will be composed of the fat, juicy spears.

Asparagus aficionados believe there to be only one perfect wine accompaniment: dry muscat. Indeed,

after a long winter, the most sensational way to celebrate the arrival of spring is with a huge platter of

asparagus drizzled with hollandaise sauce, and a cold bottle of a great Alsace muscat like Domaine Zind

Humbrecht Goldert Grand Cru.

Among the great pinot gris are those from Kuentz-Bas, Léon Beyer, Domaine Marcel

Deiss, Domaine Ernest Burn (especially the Clos St.

-Imer), and Zind Humbrecht. Pinot

gris is often made into lush vendange tardive wines.

MUSCAT

Grapes with the word muscat in the name have been grown around the Mediterranean (and

indeed, around the world) for centuries, and represent many different varieties, only some

of which are related.

In Alsace, two types of muscat are grown, then blended. Muscat blanc à petits grains

(literally,

“white muscat with the small berries”), with its outrageously floral and citrus

flavors, is considered the best of the named muscats. The other muscat, muscat ottonel, is

more delicate, earlier ripening (an advantage in a northern climate), and has lower acidity.

But muscat ottonel (a cross of chasselas and another cross called muscat d’Eistenstadt) is

somewhat rare, since it can have problems with coulure (a condition whereby the buds

lose their flowers before those flowers can be fertilized to become grapes).

Alsace is one of the few places where muscat is made in a dry style. Indeed, Alsace

muscat is a bone-dry, dramatically aromatic wine redolent of peaches, orange peel,

tangerine, and musk. It is one of the world’s most evocative aperitifs.

The muscats to search out? Those from Domaine Albert Boxler, Domaine Ernest Burn,

Léon Beyer, Domaine Ostertag, and Zind Humbrecht.

PINOT BLANC

Just like pinot gris, pinot blanc is, genetically speaking, a clone of pinot noir. Alsace’s

pinot blanc (also known as klevner) is easy to like, dependable, and safe. It’s never as

thrilling as riesling, as dramatic as gewürztraminer, or as novel as pinot gris; nonetheless,

the top Alsace pinot blancs are tasty wines with baked-apple flavors and a light texture.

Unfortunately, there are also many bland versions.

Historically, some older pinot blanc vineyards also contained a small percentage of

vines later identified as the Burgundian white grape Auxerrois. Thus, some Alsace pinot

blancs may be, technically speaking, field blends. Top producers of pinot blanc include

Domaine Albert Boxler, Josmeyer, and Domaine Weinbach.

PINOT NOIR

The only red wine made in Alsace is pinot noir. In the past, the quality was so variable that

much of it ended up looking like rosé. Then, in the 1990s, a few of the top wineries began

rethinking their approach, planting pinot noir in better sites, lowering the yields, using

better equipment and aging the wine in new barrels. As expected, the wine got better. A lot

better. In good vintages Marcel Deiss’s Bergheim Burlenberg pinot noir, Ostertag’s

Fronholz pinot noir, and Hugel’s Jubilee pinot noir show earthy, complex, almost

Burgundy-like flavors.

Like all other Alsace wines, pinot noir must, by law, be bottled in tall, Germanic flute

bottles. Because it’s surprising, if not a little unnerving, to see red wine flow from what

looks like a bottle of riesling, several producers are battling the bottle law, in hopes of

having the rule changed.

VENDANGE TARDIVE AND SÉLECTION DE GRAINS NOBLES

Two sensational types of late-harvest wines, vendange tardive (VT) and sélection de

grains nobles (SGN), can be made only in certain favorable years (sometimes only once or

twice a decade) and even then they generally make up less than 1 percent of the region’s

production.

But sensational isn’t nearly adequate as an adjective. These wines can be astonishing in

the depth and vividness of their flavors. By law, only the four grape varieties allowed for

Grand Cru wines may be used: riesling, gewürztraminer, pinot gris, and muscat. By the

time they are picked, the grapes for VT wines may be (but don’t have to be) infected with

Botrytis cinerea, the noble rot responsible for Sauternes.

The rolling vineyards of Alsace lie over the foothills of the V osges Mountains.

V endange tardive wines are not exactly dessert wines but, rather, wines of such

profound concentration that they seem to have atomic density. Lush but underscored by

exuberant acidity, they may be a touch sweet or dry. (Unfortunately, there’s no way to tell

from the label.) VTs are so spellbinding, they are generally drunk by themselves or with

something utterly simple. (I always skip the pie, and drink one as the finale to

Thanksgiving dinner.)

Sélections de grains nobles are late-harvested wines that are always sweet and always

infected with botrytis. To say that the wines are sweet, however, is an understatement.

SGN wines can make Sauternes seem shy. Wines of ravishing unctuousness, SGNs are

balanced by such soaring acidity, profound alcohol, and huge extract that they actually

finish in a way that is exquisitely balanced.

Because a significant amount of botrytis does not appear in Alsace vineyards every

year (or even very easily in any year), the production of SGNs can range from nothing to a

barely commercial amount.

A producer’s VTs and SGNs will often come from the same vineyard, usually one of

the best. First, the pickers will go through the vineyard choosing, berry by berry, only the

botrytis-infected grapes for SGN. Then, they’ll go back and pick the remaining super-ripe

grapes for VT.

VT and SGN wines are governed by extremely strict regulations. Producers must

officially declare their intentions to produce them; the grapes must be handpicked and

analyzed as they are being pressed. The wines cannot be chaptalized. Once they are made,

they are subjected to a taste test before they can be sold. In some years, up to 35 percent of

the wines fail to pass the test! VT and SGN wines are expensive, but they are unequaled in

the world. Do not miss a VT or SGN from any of the following producers: Léon Beyer,

Domaine Albert Boxler, Domaine Marcel Deiss, Hugel et Fils, Kuentz-Bas, Trimbach,

Domaines Schlumberger, Domaine Weinbach, or Domaine Zind Humbrecht.

THE FOODS OF ALSACE

After a few days in Alsace, even the most insatiable food and wine lover is ready to beg

for mercy. The sheer number of delicious regional dishes is daunting, and the number of

great restaurants—both humble and grand—is second only to that of Paris.

Kugelhopf is a good example of the irresistibility of Alsace specialties. These mildly

sweet, turban-shaped rolls, rich with eggs and butter, are dusted with sugar or flecked with

walnut pieces and sometimes diced bacon. In every bakery, they line the shelves like

perfect soldiers, along with pains paysans, golden, crusty loaves studded with raisins and

almonds, and petits pains au lait, soft, doughy milk rolls.

Alsace’s most stunning “bread,

” however, is flammekueche, also known as tarte

flambée—best described as pizza meets the onion tart. First, a thin layer of bread dough is

stretched across a chopping board; it’s then smeared with fromage blanc (a fresh white

cheese) and heavy cream. Next it’s topped with smoked bacon and onions, and finally it’s

baked in a fiery, wood-burning oven until blistered. In winstubs (“wine bars”) all over

Alsace, flammekuechen can’t be baked fast enough for the hoardes of happy families and

friends who come to share it.

Since roughly the tenth century, Alsace has been the capital of Munster, a creamy,

pungent cheese. Almost as important as driving along the Route du Vin is driving along a

smaller side road, the so-called Route du Fromage (cheese route), where country

restaurants offer homemade Munster, baked with potatoes and onions and served with

bacon and ham.

With due respect to the Romans, who fattened snails on choice tidbits and housed them

in special snail boxes, the French, and especially the Alsatians, have raised the eating of

escargots to a fine art. Drizzling snails with garlic butter is merely the tip of the iceberg.

There are dozens of ways of preparing snails, including a famous one in which the

mollusks are simmered with wild chanterelle mushrooms, garlic, and shallots in a wine

and whipped cream stock, then served with a chilled riesling.

WHITE WINE AND THE OTHER WHITE MEAT

Among all the world’s rieslings, pinot gris, and gewürtztra-miners, those of Alsace are usually the most

full-bodied and concentrated. This makes them great choices when you’re having meat but want to drink

a white wine. Which is what happens in Alsace all the time. The region’s robust, down-to-earth, cold-

weather food revolves around pork and game that are often cooked with hearty vegetables, such as

potatoes, onions, and cabbage. The region’s specialty, choucroute garni, a dish of sauerkraut, pork,

sausages, bacon, and potatoes, is stellar with riesling. But choucroute aside, even a simple pork roast is

raised to new heights when it’s served with a powerfully fruit-packed, crisp Alsace riesling.

An irresistible kugelhopf, rich with eggs and butter , and dusted lightly with sugar . Alsace is for those with insatiable

appetites.

In Alsace, April is not the cruelest month; it is the time for unrestrained asparagus

madness. The vegetable inspires such devotion that there are restaurants open only from

mid-April until the end of June that serve nothing but asparagus and dry muscat (see

Asparagus, Meet Wine, page 286).

Alsace is one of the two capitals of foie gras (the other is southwestern France). While

many animal activists would see the food universally banned, it is still allowed here, and

many consider it one of the treasures of French gastronomy. Geese are force-fattened until

their livers are large and rich. The livers are then seasoned with salt, pepper, and a touch

of Cognac and coddled in a bain-marie. In pâté de foie gras, the liver is flecked with

truffles and wrapped in a rich pastry crust, then cooked. But Alsatian chefs also stuff game

birds with it, sauté it in gewürztraminer, and even top plebeian sauerkraut with it.

Speaking of cabbage, although its exact origins are not known, choucroute is so

undeniably Alsatian that locals are often referred to as choucroute-eaters by the rest of

France. Choucroute is prepared by shredding young white cabbage and layering it with

salt in large crocks until it ferments. The fermented cabbage is then cooked in wine—

usually a riesling—and served with a stunning array of potatoes, several cuts of pork,

sausages, and if the choucroute is fancy, suckling pig.

Given the heartiness of Alsace cooking, it might seem as though only the lightest of

sorbets should be in order for dessert. Fat chance. Dense, creamy cheesecakes are

common, as are apple tarts, plum pies, and soufflés made with the local kirsch (cherry

brandy). One thing never shows up with dessert, however. That is a vendange tardive or

sélection de grains nobles. These rare, late-harvest wines are so extraordinary and

complex that dessert only seems to get in the way.

WHEN YOU VISIT… ALSACE

THE BEST WAY TO VISIT the wineries of Alsace is to follow the wine route of Alsace,

which winds for 75 miles (120 kilometers) along the eastern side of the Vosges

Mountains, over the vineyard-covered hillsides, and along the floors of deep valleys.

The close-to-poetic atmosphere includes charming old-world towns with bell towers and

ramparts, storybook inns, and lovely churches. Castles overlook the plain, paths run

through the vineyards, and everywhere, wine taverns and cellars invite you to drop in

on the spur of the moment.

IN THE HEART OF THE VINEYARDS, a few miles/kilometers from Colmar, is the

Kintzheim castle, headquarters of the fascinating Alsace Wine Museum and the

Confrérie Saint-Etienne, a society dating from the 1400s, which now acts as a

promotional organization, hosting, among other events, some of the most lavish

banquets in France.

The Alsace Wines to Know

It’s almost impossible to go wrong drinking Alsace wine. The quality of the wines is so high and the deliciousness

factor so great that you are virtually guaranteed to be happy, impressed (and sometimes blown away). Unlike

Burgundy, in Alsace, the Grand Cru wines are often not stratospherically more expensive than regular bottling… a

reason to indulge.

SPARKLING

LUCIEN ALBRECHT

CRÉMANT D’ALSACE | BRUT ROSÉ

100% pinot noir

One of the best-known producers of Crémant d’Alsace, the family-owned firm of Lucien Albrecht was founded in

1425. The winery’s blanc de blancs is widely known, and deservedly so. But it’s this rare rosé—made entirely from

pinot noir—that’s extra special. Beautifully made according to the traditional (Champagne) method, the wine is a

slice of cold, spiced-strawberry freshness.

WHITES

DOMAINE MARCEL DEISS

RIESLING | ALTENBERG DE BERGHEIM | GRAND CRU

100% riesling

All of the best Alsace rieslings have lift. They are like Gothic arches, soaring in their elegance, never heavy, never

weighted down. Marcel Deiss’s rieslings are a prime example. These are wines of impeccable elegance. In the best

years, they are thoroughly concentrated with fruit but so carefully balanced by a tightrope of acidity that the overall

impression is not of fruit or acid, but simply of beauty and delicacy.

DOMAINE OSTERTAG

RIESLING | FRONHOLZ

100% riesling

The wines of André Ostertag have a cult following for their distinctive, mesmerizing character and for the flavors

that ignite like sparks against your palate. The riesling from the vineyard known as Fronholz is amazing, with

thrusts of minerals, cool jets of citrus, damp swaths of earthiness, and an almost levitating sense of spiciness. After

tasting this wine, I usually can’t get the memory out of my head for hours.

DOMAINE WEINBACH

PINOT GRIS | CUVÉE LAURENCE

100% pinot gris

Built in the early eighteenth century as a Capucin monastery, Domaine Weinbach is now owned and run by two

women, Madame Colette Faller and her daughter, Catherine, who is in charge of marketing. (In 2014, daughter

Laurence—for decades the estate’s winemaker—died unexpectedly at an early age.) The wines from this estate are

among the most expressive, powerful, and elegant in all of Alsace. They have a purity to them that can seem

absolutely regal. The domaine’s pinot gris Cuvée Laurence is a stunning example. Rich, minerally, spicy, creamy,

and utterly dense with flavor, it is nonetheless a wine with a long, refined finish. The Cuvée Laurence

gewürztraminer from the estate’s best gewürztraminer vineyards is also mind-bending in concentration.

DOMAINE ZIND HUMBRECHT

GEWÜRZTRAMINER | GOLDERT | GRAND CRU

100% gewürztraminer

From the Grand Cru vineyard Goldert comes this richly dense and opulent, yet refined and intriguing,

gewürztraminer, evocative of tropical fruits fused with roses and exotic spices. Few white grapes are more

expressive and powerful than gewürztraminer, and gewürztraminer is nowhere more expressive or powerful than in

Alsace, especially from a top Grand Cru vineyard such as Goldert. This wine has it all. But then, virtually all Zind

Humbrecht wines are massively lush and fleshy, with bold, extroverted flavors. Not for the faint of heart.

KUENTZ-BAS

GEWÜRZTRAMINER | PFERSIGBERG | GRAND CRU

100% gewürztraminer

Kuentz-Bas makes some of the most stunning gewürztraminers in the world. This one, from the Grand Cru

vineyard Pfersigberg (“hill of peach trees”), is so taut, hard, and sleek, the sensation is akin to running your hand

over the biceps of a bodybuilder. In great years, the creamy, spicy flavors are massively concentrated, and yet the

wine is also ravishingly elegant. The aroma is so heady, you’d swear you’re lying in a bed of acacia and

honeysuckle blossoms.

TRIMBACH

RIESLING | CUVÉE FRÉDÉRIC EMILE

100% riesling

A family-owned estate, Trimbach makes scrumptious gewürztraminer and pinot gris, but their rieslings can be

simply devastating in their elegance and concentration. The Cuvée Frédéric Emile, named after an ancestor, comes

from old vines in two Grand Cru vineyards: Osterberg and Geisberg. The aroma is quintessentially riesling—like

cold stone that has been rubbed with peaches and apricots—and the vivid acidity is almost crunchy.

SWEET WINES

DOMAINE WEINBACH

PINOT GRIS | ALTENBOURG | VENDANGES TARDIVES

100% pinot gris

One of the best wineries in Alsace, Domaine Weinbach is an extraordinary producer of VTs and SGNs. This is the

domaine’s least expensive (though still pricey) vendange tardive, yet it is a masterpiece. Sensationally pure and

deep aromas and flavors of orange marmalade and dried peaches predominate. The texture is like cool silk, though

the body is opulent. Although sweet, the wine does not come off sugary but has a refinement that is both beautiful

and memorable.

DOMAINES SCHLUMBERGER

GEWÜRZTRAMINER | CUVÉE ANNE | SÉLECTION DE GRAINS NOBLES

100% gewürztraminer

The largest of the top producers, Domaines Schlumberger has 350 contiguous acres (140 hectares), half of which

are classified Grand Cru. The rieslings from this family-owned estate are delicious, but the gewürztraminers truly

leave you dazzled. Cuvée Anne, a rare, late-harvest gewürztraminer SGN, is produced on average only twice a

decade. The wine is so opulent and powerful it tastes as though every molecule of water has been siphoned out of it,

leaving only the utter essence of fruit. The flavors and aromas zigzag among ginger, apricots, and wet granite, with

flying sparks of acidity.

Harvesting grapes in the Languedoc-Roussillon, the large, strikingly beautiful swath of land in southern France, along

the Mediterranean.

LANGUEDOC-ROUSSILLON

Spread over an immense crescent of land along the Mediterranean coast from Spain in the

west to Provence in the east, the Languedoc-Roussillon is, in many ways, France’s best-

kept secret. Despite its considerable size (700,000 acres/283,000 hectares), historical

importance, and innovative winemaking, the region is still relatively unknown in the New

World. Y et, a century ago, almost half of all French wine was made in this one place.

Today about 25 percent still is.

The wines of the Languedoc-Roussillon cover a broad spectrum, from white to red, dry

to sweet, still to sparkling, and even fortified (the famous fortified wine Banyuls is made

here). But the region’s best wines are its reds, which possess a rustic, juicy,

earthy/minerally/fruity “south of France flavor” that’s irresistible.

The Languedoc-Roussillon is sometimes called le Midi, loosely translated as

“the land of the midday sun.

”

During the Middle Ages, when most vineyards here were in the care of monks, the

wines were prized. In the fourteenth century, wines from certain parts of the Languedoc-

Roussillon were so famous that the hospitals of Paris prescribed them for their healing

powers. But for most of the twentieth century, the Languedoc (as it is often simply called)

produced mostly the sort of no-name, no-frills vin ordinaire that was bought in bulk and

cost less than water. (During the world wars, the ration of wine given daily to French

soldiers usually came from here.) In fairness, there were small enclaves where making fine

wine had always been important, but they were just that—small enclaves.

THE QUICK SIP ON LANGUEDOC-ROUSSILLON

THE WINES of Languedoc-Roussillon are the quintessential wines of southern France

and represent the most exciting, best-value French wines.

THE LANGUEDOC is the largest wine-producing region in France. More wine is

produced in this one area than in the entire United States.

DOZENS OF GRAPE VARIETIES are grown, from carignan, mourvèdre, and grenache

(all of which originated next door in Spain), to French varieties such as syrah, cabernet

sauvignon, and chardonnay.

A transformation began in the 1980s, as the Languedoc became an insider’s paradise

for bargain hunters seeking easy-to-drink French wines that go well with Mediterranean

foods. The transformation was initiated at all levels of the industry, from small producers

like Borie de Maurel, Domaine de Villemajou, Domaine de l’Hortus, Gilbert Alquier,

Domaine de l’Arjolle, and Mas de Daumas Gassac; to large companies, such as Fortant de

France; and to very large (27 million gallons/102 million liters of wine a year!), quality-

oriented cooperatives, such as V al d’Orbieu/UCCOAR.

The Languedoc-Roussillon is bordered and sheltered by mountains on two sides—the rugged Pyrenées to the southwest,

and the Cévennes Mountains part of the Massif Central, in the north.

Languedoc-Roussillon reds are often blends based on several of the same traditional

grapes used in the southern Rhône V alley: syrah, mourvèdre, grenache, and carignan.

(Interestingly, the latter three are all Spanish in origin, and were brought from Spain over

the Pyrenees and into the Roussillon part of the Languedoc-Roussillon.) These red wines

are known, as are most wines in France, by their appellations—Corbières, Faugères, St.

-

Chinian, and so on. However, the Languedoc is also one of the few regions in France

where wines can be named after a grape variety. More on this in a moment, in The

Categories of Languedoc-Roussillon Wine, page 297.

THE LAND OF YES

The Languedoc region is named after a group of languages and dialects spoken in southern France

during the Middle Ages, known collectively as the langue d’oc, or “language of oc,

” oc being the word

for “yes” in the Occitan language of southern France. In the north of France, the word for “yes” was oïl,

which later evolved to oui.

THE MOST IMPORTANT LANGUEDOC-ROUSSILLON

WINES

LEADING APPELLATION-DESIGNATED WINES

BANYULS red (fortified; sweet)

CORBIÈRES red

CÔTES DU ROUSSILLON VILLAGES red

FAUGÈRES red

LA CLAPE red

LANGUEDOC white, rosé, red

MINERVOIS red

MONTPEYROUX red

MUSCAT DE FRONTIGNAN white (fortified; sweet)

MUSCAT DE RIVESALTES white (fortified; sweet)

MUSCAT DE ST .

-JEAN-DE-MINERVOIS white (fortified; sweet)

PIC SAINT LOUP red

PICPOUL DE PINET white

QUATOURZE red

ST .

-CHINIAN red

ST .

-SATURNIN red

TERRASSES DU LARZAC red

LEADING VARIETALLY DESIGNATED WINES—

PAYS D’OC IGP

CABERNET SAUVIGNON red

CHARDONNAY white

MERLOT red

PINOT NOIR red

SAUVIGNON BLANC white

SYRAH red

VIOGNIER white

APPELLATIONS OF NOTE

BLANQUETTE DE LIMOUX white (sparkling)

COLLIOURE red

CÔTES DU ROUSSILLON red

CRÉMANT DE LIMOUX white (sparkling)

FITOU red

The Languedoc and Roussillon were two separate provinces for most of history. The

Languedoc became part of France in the late thirteenth century, but Roussillon belonged to

Spain until the mid-seventeenth century. Nonetheless, the regions have always been

entwined culturally and financially; they were finally joined administratively in the late

1980s. Today, while the province is French, threads of Spanish culture (such as the local

passion for bullfighting) are still evident.

Like Provence and the southern Rhône, the Languedoc is warm, arid, and so

luminously full of light it can seem as though the sky itself is somehow bigger there.

Compared to the vineyards of northern France, it is an easy place in which to grow grapes.

The landscape is dominated by the scratchy patchwork of low bushes, resinous plants, and

wild herbs known as garigue. Indeed, the wines themselves are often described as exuding

garigue, a heady commingled aroma of wild, resinous thyme, rosemary, and lavender,

intermixed with scrub brush and broom.

THE GRAPES OF LANGUEDOC-ROUSSILLON

WHITES

BOURBOULENC, CLAIRETTE, GRENACHE BLANC, PICPOUL, MARSANNE, MACCABEU, ROLLE

(VERMENTINO), AND ROUSSANNE: Used in numerous traditional white wines throughout the region.

When yields are low and winemaking is skillful, blends of these grapes can be delicious.

CHARDONNAY: Major grape for international-style Vin de Pays d’Oc. Also used in the traditional

sparkling wine Crémant de Limoux, and in the still wine Limoux.

CHENIN BLANC: Minor grape used primarily in the traditional sparkling wine Crémant de Limoux.

MAUZAC: Native Languedoc grape used mainly in the sparkling wines Blanquette de Limoux and

Crémant de Limoux.

MUSCAT BLANC À PETITS GRAINS: Considered the greatest of the muscat grapes in terms of quality.

Used to make the sweet fortified wines Muscat de Frontignan and Muscat de St.

-Jean-de-Minervois.

MUSCAT OF ALEXANDRIA: One of the dozens of grapes with muscat in the name. Considered less

prestigious than muscat blanc à petits grains. Used to make the popular sweet fortified wine Muscat de

Rivesaltes, among others.

SAUVIGNON BLANC: Used for international-style Vin de Pays d’Oc.

VIOGNIER: Major grape. Source of some of the best white Vin de Pays d’Oc.

REDS

CABERNET SAUVIGNON: Major grape. Used for high-quality Vin de Pays d’Oc.

CARIGNAN: Historically a major grape, but declining in importance. Used in small amounts in numerous

traditional red wines, including Corbières, Faugères, Minervois, and others. Although widely grown in the

Languedoc-Roussillon, the grape originated in Spain, where it is referred to as mazuelo and cariñena.

CÔT (MALBEC), LLADONER PELUT , PICPOUL NOIR, AND TERRET NOIR: Minor grapes. Used in

small amounts in traditional reds and rosés, although plantings are mostly on the decline.

CINSAUT : Workhorse grape used in inexpensive traditional red table wines and rosés.

GRENACHE: Major grape. Used for blending in traditional dry red wines, but also famous as the

principal grape in the renowned, sweet fortified red wine Banyuls. Known in Spain, its original home, as

garnacha.

MERLOT : Major grape for international-style Vin de Pays d’Oc.

MOURVÈDRE: Major grape. Used in numerous traditional red wines, including Corbières, Faugères,

Fitou, Minervois, and others. Like grenache and carignan, Spanish in origin (referred to in Spain as

monastrell).

SYRAH: Major grape. Used in numerous modern and traditional red wines, including those of Corbières,

Faugères, Minervois, and others.

A masterpiece of ancient Roman architecture, the Pont du Gard was built halfway through the 1st century A.D. It is the

principal construction in 27-mile-long (50-kilometer), three-level-high limestone aqueducts that supplied the

Languedoc-Roussillon city of Nîmes with water.

THE CATEGORIES OF LANGUEDOC-ROUSSILLON

WINE

In most French wine regions, wines are labeled according to the appellation from which

they come, not the grape variety (or varieties) from which they are made. Sancerre, St.

-

Émilion, and Meursault, for example, are all French appellations—specific, delimited

areas where wines are made in a traditional way according to strict regulations. For most

of modern history, these wines were known as Appellation d’Origine Contrôlée (AOC)

wines; as of 2009, however, appellation wines in France may also now use the European

Union’s designation, Protected Designation of Origin (PDO).

Appellation wines are meant to reflect their terroir, to taste of their place. In the

Languedoc-Roussillon, such wines as Corbières, Faugères, and Minervois, for example,

are traditional appellation wines. The best of them can be downright sensational. Indeed,

within these traditional appellations, the wines from four places have been singled out as

the best of the best. Known on their labels as “Crus de Languedoc,

” the four are

Corbières-Boutenac, Minervois La Livinière, St.

-Chinian Roquebrun, and St.

-Chinian

Berlou. More crus are awaiting official approval.

But the Languedoc can be confusing, because coexisting with these appellation wines

are wines labeled according to the variety of grape from which they are made

(chardonnay, merlot, and the like). These fall into the all-encompassing category of Vin de

Pays d’Oc, which has smaller vins de pays inside it, such as Vin de Pays de l’Hérault. For

wines labeled simply Vin de Pays d’Oc, the grapes may be sourced from anywhere in the

entire Languedoc-Roussillon region, so the wines may or may not, in the conventional

sense, reflect the flavors associated with a place. Among the most famous vins de pays are

those from the estate Mas de Daumas Gassac, the red wine of which (principally cabernet

sauvignon) costs as much as very good quality Bordeaux. (This estate gained even greater

fame in the 2000s when it was prominently featured in the “underground” wine film,

Mondovino.)

CRÉMANT DE LIMOUX

The word crémant is used to describe a French sparkling wine that is made outside the

Champagne district but according to the traditional (Champagne) method. Crémants

come from all over France; some of the best-known include Crémant d’Alsace, Crémant

de Bourgogne, Crémant de Loire, and Crémant de Limoux.

Crémants de Limoux are simple, tasty sparkling wines made in some forty-one small

villages surrounding the town of Limoux. The wines must be made primarily from

chardonnay and chenin blanc grapes, although together the two cannot exceed 90

percent of the blend. The rest can be made up of the local grape mauzac and/or pinot

noir. In the end, Crémants de Limoux are 40 to 70 percent chardonnay, 20 to 40

percent chenin blanc, 10 to 20 percent mauzac, and 0 to 10 percent pinot noir. Crémant

de Limoux must spend at least fifteen months aging on the yeast lees.

A more traditional style of sparkling Limoux is called Blanquette de Limoux. It is

made by the traditional method but consists of at least 90 percent mauzac and is aged

just nine months on the lees, thus less than crémant. Interestingly, blanquette is the

Occitan word for the mauzac grape and also refers to the dusty, white, powdery

appearance of the leaves on mauzac vines.

Medieval villages dot the western hills of the Languedoc-Roussillon.

Prior to European Union legislation in 2009, these wines were always referred to as Vin

de Pays d’Oc. Today they may still be referred to that way, but in some cases, wineries

choose instead to use the European Union designation Pays d’Oc IGP (Indication

Géographique Protégée), written in English as Pays d’Oc PGI (Protected Geographical

Indication).

THE LAND, THE GRAPES, AND THE VINEYARDS

The majority of the vineyards of the Languedoc-Roussillon are planted on a curved plain

that forms a giant, sunny semicircle facing the Mediterranean Sea. In so dependably warm

a climate, the best wines generally come from vineyards on slopes or on high, cool

plateaus along the foothills of the Pyrenees or the Cévennes Mountains. Soils in the region

vary from alluvial soils near the sea to chalk, gravel, and limestone farther inland. Some of

the best vineyards are filled with round, ancient riverbed stones, similar to those in

Châteauneuf-du-Pape.

VINS DOUX NATURELS AND BANYULS

The Languedoc-Roussillon has a long tradition of producing sweet fortified wines, known collectively as

vins doux naturels. Translated, this means natural sweet wines, although they achieve their sweetness

by human intervention, specifically by being fortified with clear brandy (grape spirits) in order to stop

fermentation early, thereby leaving the sweetness of unfermented grape sugar in the wines. There are

expensive versions, and very affordable ones.

Several of the best-known vins doux naturels are based on muscat grapes, including the locally

famous wines Muscat de Frontignan and Muscat de St.

-Jean-de-Minervois, both of which are made from

the best type of muscat—muscat blanc à petits grains—which was cultivated by the Romans around the

historic cities of Narbonne and Frontignan, on the Languedoc coast. A third fortified sweet wine, Muscat

de Rivesaltes, is made with the somewhat less distinguished grape muscat of Alexandria.

With many vins doux naturels (especially the less expensive versions), you can taste a strong

alcoholic punch, even though they are often no higher than 16 to 17 percent alcohol by volume. They are

certainly sweet, but not sugary, at 8 to 10 percent residual sugar. In the past, inexpensive vins doux

naturels were often drunk as hearty aperitifs (or, the truck driver’s preference—with a shot of coffee in the

morning). For most everyone else today, they are commonly drunk with (or as) dessert.

Although the muscat-based vins doux naturels are the most pervasive of the Languedoc’s sweet

fortified wines, the most unusual one is Banyuls, a reddish-colored wine made principally from grenache.

When you think about sweet fortified reds, Port might spring to mind, but Banyuls is not Portlike. Neither

massive in size nor dense in texture, it’s deceptively (even dangerously) elegant and easy to drink,

thanks to its heady flavors of coffee, chestnut, mocha, and tea, which can be irresistible. Then there’s the

chocolate-compatability factor. Banyuls is one of the small handful of wines in the world that pairs well

with chocolate and chocolate desserts.

Before phylloxera invaded southern France in the latter part of the nineteenth century,

the Languedoc-Roussillon was home to more than 150 different varieties of grapes. Today,

more than fifty grape varieties still grow here, but the lesser grapes that once dominated

production—aramon, macabeo, and the like—have been in a free-fall decline for more

than three decades in favor of the well-regarded Mediterranean varieties syrah, mourvèdre,

grenache, and others grown in the Rhône V alley and Provence, as well as international

varieties. It’s interesting to note, for example, that in 1968 there was no merlot in the

Languedoc. Today there are 76,000 acres (30,800 hectares) of it.

THE TOP VILLAGES OF THE LANGUEDOC-

ROUSSILLON

If you go into a neighborhood wine shop in Paris, you’ll see numerous shelves sporting

wines from villages such as Corbières, Faugères, Minervois, St.

-Chinian, and others,

alongside wines from the large area known simply as Languedoc. In addition, within the

Languedoc are many cru or especially high-rated villages, some of which are pending

appellation status of their own. These include Pic Saint Loup, Picpoul de Pinet, La Clape,

Quatourze, Montpeyroux, St.

-Saturnin, and others. Wines from any of these well-known

villages—especially from small producers—are usually steals.

The fortified village of Carcassonne, recognized since pre-Roman times for its strategic location along two axes—linking

the Atlantic and the Mediterranean and linking the Pyrenees and the Massif Central.

THE CAPITAL OF MUSSELS

Culinarily speaking, the Languedoc is not as famous as its next-door neighbor, Provence, with perhaps

one exception: mussels. The Languedoc’s tiny hamlet of Bouzigues, near the town of Sète, is considered

the unofficial mussel capital of France. Bouzigues, in fact, is really just a string of no-frills seafood cafés

that jut out over the glistening blue saltwater lagoon called Bassin de Thau. Here in the lagoon’s slow-

moving current, fat, juicy mussels are cultivated in special nets or clinging to wooden frames. In just

about every café, the mussels show up, often strewn with bits of grilled sausage, along with bottles of red

Corbières, Faugères, Minervois, and St.

-Chinian. While on first consideration mussels may seem

exclusively white wine fare, the cafés of Bouzigues prove otherwise. Juicy, rustic Languedoc reds, with

their supple, earthy, slightly spicy flavors, can be real winners in this combination.

Corbières is spread over the undulating northern foothills of the Pyrenees, in the

western part of the Languedoc-Roussillon. This fairly large region (about 34,000

acres/13,800 hectares) specializes in dense, juicy, slightly spicy, rustic, garigue-infused red

blends based on carignan. One of the four crus of the Languedoc is here—Corbières-

Boutenac. Top small Corbières producers include Domaine du Grand Crès, Gérard

Bertrand, Ollieux Romanis, Domaine de Villemajou, and Château Mansenoble.

Faugères, in the center of the Languedoc-Roussillon, near the little town of Béziers, is

about one-eighth the size of Corbières and makes spicy, earthy, and powerful reds,

especially from old carignan vines. Faugères’ top producers include Leon Barral, Château

La Liquière, and Gilbert Alquier.

North of Corbières, in the hilly western Languedoc, Minervois (about 12,000

acres/4,900 hectares) is known for well-priced red wines that, at their best, have

outrageously good flavor. That’s especially true of the cru de Languedoc called Minervois

La Livinière, which is up in the rocky hills above the flat plateau. Here, old, low-yield

vines of carignan, along with grenache, syrah, and other southern French varieties, are

made into wines that are dense, rich, and for all the world taste like blackberry syrup

poured over stones. Among the best producers here are Borie de Maurel, Domaine Anne

Gros, Château Massamier la Mignarde, Gérard Bertrand, and Domaine Combe Blanche.

Between Minervois and Faugères lies the small (about 6,000 acres/2,400 hectares) red

wine appellation of St.

-Chinian. From the northern part of the region come gutsy red

wines with sharp-edged grip, while wines from the southern part are usually softer. As is

true in Corbières, Faugères, and Minervois, carignan is still a player in the blends here, but

increasingly it is being supplanted by syrah, grenache, and mourvèdre. Two of the crus de

Languedoc are here: St.

-Chinian Roquebrun and St.

-Chinian Berlou. Look for the

producers Clos Bagatelle, Canet-V alette, Domaine de Viranel, Laurent Miquel, and

Château Maurel Fonsalade.

Bouzigues, a tiny village on the Mediterranean, is one of France’ s top spots for fresh-out-of-water mussels and oysters.

WHEN YOU VISIT… THE LANGUEDOC-

ROUSSILLON

THE LANGUEDOC-ROUSSILLON is one of France’s most compelling regions from the

standpoints of history, architecture, and religion. Ancient monasteries and magnificent

Roman ruins exist side by side with sun-drenched vineyards, creating a cultural

tapestry that is both fascinating and poignant.

ONE OF THE BEST EXAMPLES OF MEDIEVAL ARCHITECTURE IN THE WORLD IS

HERE: the ancient Cité de Carcassonne, a medieval town located within the core of the

modern city of Carcassonne. The Cité has been named a UNESCO World Heritage

Site for its impeccably preserved stone walls and citadel.

THE LANGUEDOC-ROUSSILLION’S annual extravaganza—the raucous Féria de

Béziers—takes place every August in the city of Béziers (the French equivalent of

Pamplona in Spain). A four-day festival of bullfighting, eating, drinking, and dancing, it’s

attended by more than one million people.

AND DON’T MISS THE STUNNING, 24,000-seat amphitheater in the ancient city of

Nîmes. Built around A.D. 1 by the Romans, using stones but no mortar, it remains one

of the best-preserved amphitheaters in existence. Nearby is the Roman stone temple

La Maison Carrée, originally dedicated to the adopted sons of Augustus Caesar.

AND FINALLY , A GASTRONOMIC MUST : the tiny coastal village of Bouzigues, near

Sète, where extraordinary oysters and mussels are farmed in saltwater lagoons. The

only establishments in Bouzigues are no-frills seafood cafés, where the platters of

shellfish are incomparable.

The Languedoc-Roussillon Wines to Know

The most spectacular wines of the Languedoc-Roussillon are generally not the easy-to-find Vin de Pays d’Oc wines

(Mas de Daumas Gassac excepted) but, rather, the region’s great traditional reds from villages like St. Chinian,

Faugères, and Minervos. These wines—often made from old vine carignan, syrah, and mourvèdre—have beautiful

richness and spiciness, and I’ve focused on them below.

WHITE

MAS DE DAUMAS GASSAC

VIN DE PAYS DE L’HÉRAULT

Approximately one-third each of chardonnay, viognier, and petit manseng, plus a touch of muscat,

marsanne, and roussanne

Mas de Daumas Gassac is widely acknowledged as one of the first estates to prove that wines without AOC status

(such as this vin de pays) could nonetheless be serious, complex wines capable of long aging (and of commanding

high prices). Indeed, the estate’s first wine was produced in 1978 under the guidance of the famous French

enologist Émile Peynaud, who considered the estate’s geography and terroir exemplary for fine wine production.

Mas de Daumas Gassac was founded by the irascible Aimé Guibert, who still owns it (Guibert was prominantly

featured in the documentary film, Mondovino). The Mas de Daumas Gassac red is a beauty of a wine, structured

much like a fine Bordeaux. But I also love the estate’s white, made in smaller amounts, and perhaps more

distinctive. The richness of chardonnay, the floral-ness of viognier, and the exotic-ness of petit manseng make a

fascinating combination, and the wine possesses an uncanny elegance.

REDS

DOMAINE RIMBERT

ST .

-CHINIAN | LE MAS AU SCHISTE

40% carignan, 30% syrah, 30% grenache

The old vineyards of Jean-Marie Rimbert (some with vines broaching a century of age) are in the scenic foothills of

the Cévennes Mountains, part of France’s huge Massif Central. (The area of the Cévennes is one of the original

homes of the French Protestants known as Huguenots.) This wine is unmistakable as a St.

-Chinian, and evidence

that carignan, at least in the Languedoc, can be coaxed to great heights. Violety and minerally, with dark berry

flavors, it belongs to the school of red wines that have huge, savory intensity without heaviness. Immaculately “on

point,

” the flavor of this wine is not diffused by broad vanilla strokes of oak, nor is the fruit dulled down to mush

from overripeness. Instead it has that sexy, vivid, floral/earthy character that makes the traditional appellations of

the Languedoc-Roussillon so desirable.

HECHT & BANNIER

FAUGÈRES

55% syrah, 35% mourvèdre, 10% carignan

In 2012, Gregory Hecht and François Bannier formed a négociant business focused on extraordinary small

vineyards in the best traditional appellations of the Languedoc-Roussillon. Their wines seem to hit the mark every

time—loaded with character, they exude a southern French sophistication. This Faugères, for example, is massive

and masculine in structure and vividly alive, with notes of peat, violets, minerals, black tea, savory dried herbs, and

a salty/iodine-like character. Plus, of course, waves of dense fruit that seem like a tasty fabric woven from black

and red cherries. The partners’ other signature wine—the Côtes du Roussillon—is a savory, gamy, berry-infused

implosion of earth, spice, and fruit.

DOMAINE DE L’HORTUS

PIC SAINT LOUP

Approximately 50% syrah, 30% grenache, 20% mourvèdre

Domaine de l’Hortus is known for soft, dense reds with waves of wild resinous herbs (garigue) and the scent of

woodlands floating through them. At their best, they are dark reds with a delicious savoriness reminiscent of meat

juices. This wine comes into your mouth with a big arc of flavor and finishes with a spicy/minerally bang. The

domaine is a family estate lying in a valley between two facing limestone cliffs, the Pic Saint Loup and the

Montagne de l’Hortus. The word hortus is Latin for “garden,

” a reference to the many gardens the Romans found,

to their surprise, when they arrived in the area. Long before then, this valley and the many natural caves embedded

in the surrounding, protective mountains are thought to have been one of the areas where Neanderthals found

refuge.

GÉRARD BERTRAND

MINERVOIS LA LIVINIÈRE | LE VIALA

60% syrah, 25% grenache, 15% carignan

Gérard Bertrand makes several terrific, honest wines in the Languedoc-Roussillon, but it’s this wine—his

Minervois La Livinière called Le Viala—that I find the most special. Loaded with sexy, spicy, sweaty, firm, and

powerful aromas and flavors, it sits on a delicious precipice between flavors reminiscent of the earth (rocks,

minerals, bark) and flavors evocative of darkness (dark plums, black figs, bitter chocolate). As in so many really

good Languedoc wines, there’s also a sophisticated hint of gaminess and animal fur. The small, 15-acre (6-hectare)

vineyard for Le Viala sits on a south-facing, clay- and limestone-covered hillside of the Montagne Noire—Black

Mountains.

SWEET WINES

DOMAINE CAZES

RIVESALTES | AMBRÉ

100% grenache blanc

A completely unique, elegant, complex, orange/amber–colored wine, the ravishingly distinct Ambré is reminiscent

of exotic spices, tea, caramel, brown sugar, dried fruits, mushrooms, and brandy. It is made by Domaine Cazes,

founded in 1895 and one of the leading estates making vin doux naturel (the estate has no relationship with the well

known Cazes family of Bordeaux). The grapes grow in a brilliantly sunny, limestone/clay amphitheater halfway

between the Pyrenees Mountains to the west and the Mediterranean Sea to the east. Often served chilled as an

aperitif, the wine is somewhat like amontillado Sherry, and somewhat like tawny Port. Its complexity and unreal

color come in part from its aging for seven to ten years or more in large oak casks (foudres) before release.

LES PETITS GRAINS

MUSCAT DE SAINT JEAN DE MINERVOIS | SAINT JEAN DE MINERVOIS

100% muscat blanc à petits grains

This vin doux natural is one of the most lip-smacking wines of the Languedoc—and a wine so abuzz with fresh,

delicious apricot flavors that you feel like you’ve just fallen into a pool of cool apricot and orange puree. The wine

is not syrupy sweet, not heavy, not viscous, and nothing like, say, Sauternes. And there’s no punch of alcohol (even

though the wine is lightly fortified). Instead, this dessert wine floats over to you on a cloud of fruit, then opens up

and drenches you with irresistible flavor. Located on a high limestone plateau above Minervois proper, the small

appellation Saint Jean de Minervois makes some of the most luscious fortified sweet wines of France.

The sheer magnificence of the Provence coast eventually captures us all. Here, the Corniche d’Or , the coastal route

along the Esterel Mountains on the French Riviera.

PROVENCE

The word Provence induces hunger, not thirst. One hardly thinks of wine at all, except as

something to brace you for the oncoming wave of a great, garlicky aioli. It’s not that the

wines of Provence do not deserve attention. The problem is getting sidetracked by

bouillabaisse—or by landscapes so beautiful that van Gogh, Renoir, Matisse, Picasso, and

Cézanne could not stop painting them. Y et Provence’s wines are both special and

delicious. Provençal rosés (what everyone drinks with the local cuisine) are famous for

their refreshing slash of flavor. The region’s reds—bold and distinctive—are creating a

small surge of new excitement. And although the quality of the white wines ranges across

the board, the best of them are perfect with a plate of grilled Mediterranean fish. One thing

is for sure: Provençal foods do throw the switch that makes Provençal wines come alive.

The Romans called this region nostra provincia, our province, hence

Provence.

Provence encompasses the vast, rambling countryside of far southeastern France. In

fact, one can’t get any farther south, for Provence dead-ends on the beaches of the French

Riviera. From the coast, with its famous seaside towns of Marseille, Bandol, and St.

-

Tropez, Provence extends inland. How far is hard to say; it sometimes overlaps with the

Rhône V alley. Indeed, the French often define Provence more by its remarkable landscape

—which is to say, by the presence of garigue. The word describes the character of the

land: sunbaked, low, rolling hills covered in thin, rocky soils of limestone, schist, and

quartz, plus old oaks and dry, scrubby, resiny plants—especially wild rosemary, wild

thyme, and wild lavender. The best Provençal wines are said to smell and taste of garigue.

THE QUICK SIP ON PROVENCE

PROVENCE, in the far southeastern corner of France, along the Mediterranean Sea,

has only recently emerged as a region producing serious wines.

THE MAJORITY OF PROVENÇAL WINES are blends based on a curious array of

international as well as Rhône grape varieties.

PROVENCE MAKES DELICIOUS red wines, but the most popular Provençal wines are

zesty, refreshing rosés, which are the gold standard for rosés everywhere.

Provence’s four most important wine appellations all fall in the far south, with some

bordering on the Mediterranean. They are: Bandol, Cassis, Coteaux d’Aix-en-Provence

(and its terrific, tiny subregion, Les Baux de Provence), and Côtes de Provence. Bandol is

the most prestigious; Côtes de Provence is the largest.

Provence’s eclectic hodgepodge of grape varieties reflects the region’s rich history of

political affiliations with just about every Mediterranean power, large and small. Most of

the Rhône grapes are grown, as well as traditional Provençal grapes; Italian grapes, such

as vermentino; and even Bordeaux grapes, such as cabernet sauvignon.

Viognier grapes bask in the warmth that emanates from the rocky soils of the famous Domaine Trévallon near Les Baux.

ROSÉ, JUST RIGHT

If there’s a lesson to learn from Provence in matching wine and food, it’s the amazing versatility of

snappy fruity rosés in complementing countless Mediterranean dishes. In particular, Provençal rosés are

delicious with the region’s seafood dishes, seasoned as they usually are with generous amounts of olive

oil, garlic, herbs, and spices. The supreme example is bouillabaisse, the traditional Provençal fish stew

flavored with olive oil, saffron, and dried orange peel, and then usually served with croutons and rouille,

a super-garlicky, pepper-spiked mayonnaise. The flavor of many wines would disappear or be distorted by

such dramatic ingredients. Not so with Provençal rosés. Boldly fruity and substantial in body, they are

tailor-made for bouillabaisse and other hearty seafood dishes.

The climate of Provence is dramatic. The sun (three thousand hours of sunlight a year!)

bounces off the land and sea, creating relentless light—no wonder painters love it. As in

the Rhône, the aggressive wind from the north, known as Le Mistral, cools the vines and

helps prevent rot, but it can also tear the vines apart. The best vineyards are therefore

located in protected pockets, mostly facing south toward the Mediterranean, with the hills

at their backs.

THE GRAPES OF PROVENCE

Provençal wines have historically been blends of many grape varieties that on their own would be

undistinguished.

WHITES

BOURBOULENC: Commonly used in blending. Rustic and undistinguished on its own.

CHARDONNAY , MARSANNE, SAUVIGNON BLANC, SÉMILLON, AND VIOGNIER: Commonly used in

blends, especially in more modern avant-garde wines.

CLAIRETTE: Very common blending grape in traditional white wines. Can have pretty aromas and good

acidity.

GRENACHE BLANC: White clone of grenache. Very common blending grape in traditional white wines.

Can make delicious, citrusy wines of personality.

ROLLE: Also known as vermentino. Adds freshness and vivacity to blends.

UGNI BLANC: Undistinguished, common blending grape.

REDS

BRAQUET , CALITOR, CARIGNAN, CINSAUT , FOLLE NOIRE, AND TIBOUREN: Grapes used in

blending. At low yields, carignan can have real character, and cinsaut is a major force in many rosés.

CABERNET SAUVIGNON: Used in some of the best reds and rosés, especially in the appellations

Coteaux d’Aix-en-Provence and Côtes de Provence.

GRENACHE: Common blending grape used in many reds and most rosés. Can add delicious berry

flavors.

MOURVÈDRE: Major grape, used in many of the top reds and rosés for structure.

SYRAH: Fairly minor grape in Provence, but used in some of the very best reds.

BANDOL

The best appellation in Provence, Bandol is a relatively small seaside region about a 30-

mile (48-kilometer) drive southeast from the center of Marseille. The best Bandol rosés

(Domaines Ott’s Cuvée Marine, for example) usually have a higher percentage of spicy,

structured mourvèdre than less well-favored examples. But red wines are where the real

action is. These are deep, wild, leathery, spicy wines. By law, they must be 50 percent

mourvèdre, and some producers use as much as 100 percent.

There are dozens of small producers in Bandol, as well as cooperatives. The most

famous producer is Domaine Tempier, owned by the Peyraud family. Like romantic

characters out of a novel on the alluring back-to-basics Provençal lifestyle, the Peyrauds

not only make some of Provence’s most ravishing red and rosé wines on their humble,

charming estate but they are also among the region’s best cooks. The matriarch of the

family, Lulu Peyraud, was a mentor to the famous California chef Alice Waters.

Butter and cheese. The king and queen of French gastronomy in a region that lives to eat (and drink).

COTEAUX D’AIX-EN-PROVENCE

North and west of the old town of Aix, in the heart of Provence, is the wine region of

Coteaux d’Aix-en-Provence. At about 9,100 acres (3,700 hectares), it’s roughly twenty

times larger than Cassis. Within this large appellation is a smaller, renowned appellation

known as Les Baux de Provence. Here, the limestone soils and hot days are perfect for red

grapes (the surrounding valley is known as the V al d’Enfer—

“V alley of Hell”).

PASTIS

The most well-loved aperitif in Provence is pastis, a greenish-yellow, licorice-flavored liqueur served with

a carafe of ice water. When the water is added to the pastis, the drink immediately turns ominously

cloudy. The licoricey forerunner of pastis, absinthe, was outlawed by the French government in 1915

because of the toxicity of the wormwood leaves from which it was made. Today, pastis, which does not

include wormwood and is not toxic, is made by infusing either licorice or aniseed in a distilled spirit.

THE MOST IMPORTANT PROVENÇAL WINES

LEADING APPELLATIONS

BANDOL red and rosé

COTEAUX D’AIX-EN-PROVENCE white, red, and rosé

CÔTES DE PROVENCE white, red, and rosé

LES BAUX DE PROVENCE red and rosé

APPELLATION OF NOTE

CASSIS white

The best wines are made from grenache, cinsaut, mourvèdre, and syrah, with cabernet

sauvignon and carignan allowed to make up 30 percent of the blend, but no more.

Cabernet is the surprise here, for it’s not a Mediterranean grape and is extremely rare in

other parts of Provence, and nonexistent in the Rhône. Less rosé (and far less white wine)

is made in Coteaux d’Aix, although some local finds are surprisingly good.

Among the top producers are Mas de la Dame, Domaine de Trévallon, and Château

Vignelaure. It was the former owner of Château Vignelaure, Georges Brunet, who, among

others, brought cabernet sauvignon to Provence from Bordeaux in the 1960s. Brunet had

once owned Bordeaux’s Château La Lagune.

CÔTES DE PROVENCE

Like Côtes-du-Rhône, the appellation Côtes de Provence is not a single place but rather

many vast tracts (almost 50,000 acres/20,200 hectares in all) of noncontiguous vineyards.

These are found in every part of Provence except the west. Côtes de Provence wines are

therefore the product of numerous small, individual climates and terrains. They range a lot

in quality.

Almost 90 percent of the wine is dry rosé, based on grenache, cinsaut, and the local red

grape tibouren. A lion’s share of this is simply chugalug co-op pink. But there are also a

few fine estates concentrating on making serious rosés from the grapes listed above, as

well as reds based increasingly on cabernet sauvignon or syrah.

The most famous and largest of the top estates is the family-owned firm of Domaines

Ott, the wines of which are sold in unique, amphora-shaped (some say bowling-pin-

shaped) bottles. The Otts own several properties in the Côtes de Provence, plus one in

Bandol. Although white wines are fairly rare in the Côtes de Provence, the Otts make

three, as well as two earthy, spicy reds. But most famous are the Ott rosés. The regular

one, called Clair de Noirs, is a wine you could easily drink all summer long, and the

sharper, more bracing one, called La Déesse, is just waiting for any food slathered in aioli.

CASSIS

The cassis most of us first knew is a black-currant liqueur, which, when added to white wine, makes an

aperitif called a Kir. Although the names are the same, Cassis, the wine region, has nothing to do with the

liqueur. A popular (but minor) appellation of Provence, Cassis is a small fishing village a few miles

southeast of Marseille. Stories are told about how the prostitutes of Marseille, in times past, helped pick

the grapes at harvest. Surrounding the fishing village are the vineyards, fewer than 400 acres 160

hectares) in all. Most of the wine is mouthfilling dry white, made principally from clairette and marsanne

grapes.

WHEN YOU VISIT… PROVENCE

Provence is undoubtedly one of the world’s most charming wine regions, conducive to

aimless wanderlust and weeks spent crisscrossing the countryside, visiting wine

estates, and making a habit of cold carafes of rosé twice a day in countless cafés. Most

Provençal wine estates are small and fairly humble. It’s good to make an appointment

in advance and very helpful to speak French.

The Provençal Wines to Know

Sitting in a café, you could drink the best wines of Provence all day long. They are mostly not intellectual wines,

but wines of pleasure… wines that remind us of the time when reaching for a gulp of wine was as natural and

common as reaching for a hunk of bread.

WHITE

MAS DE LA DAME

LES BAUX DE PROVENCE | LA STÈLE

80% rolle, 20% roussanne

Mas de la Dame (“Farm of the Women”) makes some of the most distinctive (and good-value) wines of Provence—

wines that speak of the luminous sun and of the hard scrabble of the wild, herb-covered, stony escarpment called

the Alpilles. This wine—their white—smells like a southern French kitchen with sage and thyme hanging from the

rafters and wild anise and lavender growing in flowerpots on the windows. It’s a weighty white in terms of body

(all the better when in the company of garlic), but has no oakiness or sweetness. The La Stèle Rouge (grenache and

syrah)—a spicy/peppery red—is also stellar. The name La Stèle (the word is Latin for a stone erected for funereal

or commemorative purposes) comes from a quote by Nostradamus,

“un jour , la mer recouvrira la terre et s’arrêtera

à la stèle du Mas de la Dame” (“One day, the sea will once again cover the land and will stop at the stele of Mas de

la Dame”). Nostrodamus, a sixteenth-century Provençal apothecary and healer during one of Europe’s worst

plagues, was also purported to be a “seer” of the future (he made 6,338 prophecies). The original fifteenth-century

estate (upon which the current Mas de la Dame was founded in the early 1900s) was owned by a woman named

Hélène Hugoléne, the first “dame.

” It is not known exactly how Nostrodamus came to be familiar with the estate

and its wines, though the property would probably have been known to any educated inhabitant of Provence at the

time.

ROSÉS

CHÂTEAU D’ESCLANS

CÔTES DE PROVENCE | ROSÉ

Mostly grenache with some rolle (vermentino)

The beautiful, unreal color of this rosé could not be characterized as pink, exactly—it’s more like light with a

translucent copper/silver sheen. The wine itself is fantastically fresh—chalky and palate coating, with a bracingly

dry finish. It’s a bold wine, with dramatic impact on the palate—a character all the best Provençal rosés possess. It

deserves to be served unabashedly cold, next to cold poached lobster. Owned by Sacha Lichine, whose family is the

former owner of Bordeaux’s Château Prieuré-Lichine, and Patrick Léon, the former managing director of Château

Mouton-Rothschild, the estate also produces a less-pricey rosé called Whispering Angel, and what may be the only

$100 bottle of rosé in the world—called Garrus—but I find this wine, known as the estate wine, so much more pure

and true.

CHÂTEAU BEAULIEU

COTEAUX D’AIX-EN-PROVENCE | ROSÉ

40% grenache, 40% syrah, 20% cabernet sauvignon

The color of this superb wine—an ever-so-delicate neon orange-pink—could set off a fashion rage. But the flavor—

utterly refined, with a starburst of pure watermelon and strawberry—is the best part. Then there’s the way the wine

moves on the palate, a sort of zoom/splash/bite effect. Vivid yet elegant rosés such as this seem to encapsulate

happiness.

REDS

DOMAINE TEMPIER

BANDOL | LA TOURTINE

Approximately 80% mourvèdre, plus cinsaut and grenache

From a single chalky-clay hillside vineyard above the village of Le Castellet comes Domaine Tempier’s almost

menacingly powerful La Tourtine. It is a textbook example of the dark, masculine wines that emerge from

mourvèdre, one of the latest-ripening grapes in the world (and thus a grape that absolutely needs the massively

sunny, dry climate of Bandol. The edge and grip of this wine is astounding, as is its savory Provençal meaty

character—a flavor not unlike the crust of a lamb chop that has been covered in olive oil and herbs and then roasted

(a dish, by the way, that a wine like this really needs). The four-hundred-year-old Domaine Tempier is a legendary

estate in Provence. In 1936, Lucie Tempier married Lucien Peyraud, and throughout their marriage, the Peyrauds

worked tirelessly to elevate the wines of Bandol and the status of mourvèdre as one of France’s great grapes. Their

impact also extended into cuisine. Lucie Tempier (known as Lulu), a highly accomplished French cook, was a

mentor to California’s famous chef Alice Waters, whom many credit with ushering in a new culinary era in the

United States.

CHÂTEAU DE PIBARNON

BANDOL

100% mourvèdre

This is what I think of as an honest wine—a wine that mirrors its landscape and offers it back as something to be

tasted and taken into the body. The edgy, minerally, rocky flavors are animated, and the sense of fresh red cherries

and raspberries gives the wine a brightness. But there’s intrigue here, too… notes of animal fur, strange spices,

coffee, roasted meats—the kind of primordial aromas and flavors that are the apogee of mourvèdre, and that take

our senses to a darker side. One of the top estates of Provence, Pibarnon sits above the rocky limestone

amphitheater that is Bandol, on hillsides facing the sea.

DOMAINE DE TRÉV ALLON

VIN DE PAYS DES BOUCHES DU RHÔNE

Approximately 50% cabernet sauvignon, 50% syrah

This absolutely scrumptious and legendary wine is not to be missed. Black, thick, and silky, in most years it’s got

an almost hauntingly masculine, earthy, minerally aroma. The flavors all suggest wildness—wild blackberries and

brambles; wild resiny herbs; wild tangles of dried brush; wild exotic spices. Domaine de Trévallon’s vineyards are

on the edge of the rocky Alpilles Mountains, surrounded by the eerie, desolate landscape of the V al d’Enfer

(“V alley of Hell”). The domaine specializes in cabernet sauvignon, which here turns into wines as startling and

dramatic as the land itself. Indeed, were it not for the large percentage of cabernet, the wine would carry the AOC

designation Les Baux de Provence. But Les Baux limits the amount of cabernet a wine can have, and thus the

appellation of this fantastic red is Vin de Pays des Bouches du Rhône.

Autumn in Gascony, Armagnac’ s home in the southwestern corner of France.

ARMAGNAC & COGNAC

THE TWO FAMOUS GRAPE-BASED SPIRITS OF

FRANCE

ARMAGNAC

Deep in France’s southwest corner, about 100 miles (160 kilometers) south of Bordeaux,

lies Gascony, a bucolic farming region and an enclave for perhaps the most sensual, rich,

rustic cooking in France. Indulgences (if not contraband) elsewhere, foie gras and confit of

duck are virtually daily fare here, and the propensity to sauté the accompanying potatoes

(or just about any other vegetable) in duck fat, too, leaves French nutritionists wondering

why the local population isn’t keeling over. But in Gascony, eating traditionally matters.

Not surprisingly, so does drinking well.

Monsieur Gessler sits among his oldest Armagnacs at Domaine de Joÿ.

As the local desserts—soufflé of prunes in Armagnac and fruit strudel laced with

Armagnac—reveal, this is the home of one of France’s most well-loved brandies.

Armagnac (ARE-ma-nyack) is far less famous than its sister, Cognac, and the two are

usually assumed to be quite similar, since both are distilled from grapes. Not so. In

everything from how it tastes to how it is made, Armagnac is distinct and unique. It is

decidedly not Cognac, and when you’re in Gascony, you get the feeling that the

Armagnacais, as the people of the region are called, like it that way. Proud and somewhat

stubborn, they quickly remind you that this, after all, is the home of d’Artagnan, the most

famed of the fictionalized king’s musketeers who, in the nineteenth century, were

immortalized by Alexandre Dumas.

Armagnac has the longest history of any French brandy. By the thirteenth century,

simple distilling techniques first used in the Arab world (primarily for perfumes) had

spread into Spain and over the Pyrenees into southwest France. Like distillations of local

herbs and flowers, the first distillations of the region’s grapes, thought to have occurred in

the early fifteenth century, were for medical purposes. The clear brandies that resulted—

the seminal Armagnacs—were said to inspire a sense of well-being, relieve toothaches,

diminish mental anguish, and promote courage. (Joan of Arc, although not from the

region, came to be known as l’Armagnacaise, because of her courage.)

Being first didn’t guarantee Armagnac the prominence you might expect. Unlike the

region of Cognac, Armagnac was isolated inland, with no navigable river that could serve

as an easy means of promoting commerce. Nonetheless, by the seventeenth century Dutch

traders installed themselves in Gascony, as they did in Cognac, and the production of

Armagnac increased, even though it had to be transported overland before it could be

loaded on ships destined for northern markets. By the middle of the nineteenth century, a

canal built on a local river connected Armagnac to Bordeaux, and for the first time its

brandy became readily accessible.

The top Armagnacs are masculine spirits—more rustic, robust, and full-

bodied than the top Cognacs.

CALV ADOS

Unlike its French cousins Cognac and Armagnac, both of which are distilled from

grapes, Calvados (CAL-va-dose) is distilled from apples (and sometimes pears)—but

not just any apples. Approximately 800 or so heirloom varieties of apples grow in

Normandy, the French region most famous for this drink. Of these, most producers

would grow 20 to 25 different varieties, among them, Douce Moen, Kermerrien, Douce

Coet Ligne, Bedan, Binet Rouge, Frequin Rouge, Marie Menard, and Petit Jaune. The

apples fall into four flavor categories: sweet, bittersweet, bitter, and acidic. By distilling

different kinds of apples in different proportions, the Calvados maker crafts a subtle,

complex apple spirit. About 17 pounds of apples are needed to make one bottle of

Calvados.

By law, Calvados can be made only in Normandy. It’s a staunch tradition for diners in

the region to imbibe a shot of Calvados in the middle of a long, rich meal. The shot,

called a trou Normand (Norman hole), supposedly creates a hole in the stomach,

temporarily halting digestion and allowing even more food to be eaten!

The most famous district within the Calvados region is the Pays d’Auge, known for

its chalky soil and superior apples. All Calvados Pays d’Auge is double-distilled in a pot

still and aged in oak casks for a minimum of twenty-four months, although some of the

finest spirits may be aged in oak for more than six years. (Calvados made in a sister

region of the Pays d’Auge—Calvados Domfrontais—is made from at least 30 percent

pears in addition to apples.) Notable producers include Michel Huard, Boulard, Busnel,

Christian Drouin, and Roger Groult, as well as the artisanal producer/growers Domaine

de Montreuil, Lemorton, and Adrien Camut.

A farmhouse in Normandy where Calvados is distilled from heirloom apples.

The vineyards dedicated to the production of Armagnac cover some 11,776 acres

(4,766 hectares) and are divided into three subdistricts: the Bas Armagnac, Armagnac-

Ténarèze, and the Haut Armagnac. Of the three, the Bas Armagnac (lower Armagnac, so

named for its lesser altitude) not only produces the most wine for distillation (67 percent),

but it’s also home to most of the top producers and best Armagnacs, with their flavor notes

of plums and prunes. Situated in western Gascony, near the immense pine forests of the

Landes, the Bas Armagnac is noted for its sand-based soil, often with a high iron content,

plus small pieces of clay. Armagnacs from Ténarèze can be more floral, lively, and sharp

when young, although they develop finesse with age. Some 32 percent of the wine

destined for distillation is made in this subregion. As for the Haut Armagnac, only 1

percent of all Armagnacs are produced there today. If an Armagnac is from the Bas

Armagnac, it will say so on the label. Armagnacs from Ténarèze are sometimes labeled as

such, but more often the label will simply read Armagnac.

The old copper still of the Samalens Distillery, one of the top producers of Armagnac. Most Armagnacs are distilled only

once, giving the spirit a robust character.

The top Armagnacs are more rustic, robust, fragrant, and full-bodied than the top

Cognacs, and the reason begins with the grapes. In Cognac, the neutral-tasting grape ugni

blanc makes up most of the blend. In Armagnac, ugni blanc is only about 55 percent of the

blend to be distilled. The rest comes from up to eleven other white grapes, although just

four—folle blanche, colombard, ugni blanc, and to a declining extent, Baco blanc—are of

importance. While all provide a so-called “neutral foundation” for Armagnac, folle

blanche is also thought to contribute some faint elegance, plus floral and fruity notes, and

colombard is said to add a slightly herbal note. As for Baco blanc, or Baco 22A, as it is

more technically known, the grape is a hybrid. It was developed after the phylloxera

epidemic and was well appreciated for its resistance to rot and mildew. In Armagnac it

adds such fullness and character to the blend that the resulting eau-de-vie is almost fat.

Armagnacs made with a significant amount of Baco are instantly loved for their rich

fruitiness, even if they do lack a little elegance. Interesting, in the 1990s the French

government stipulated that wines and brandies with Appellation d’Origine Contrôlée

status (which Armagnac has) must, as of 2010, discontinue any use of hybrids and instead

be based exclusively on vinifera varieties. The outcry in Armagnac was so strong that in

2005 a legal exception was made. Today, Armagnac is the only AOC wine in France that

may legally include hybrid grapes.

Armagnac is distilled in a way that accentuates its already bold character. Rather than

being double distilled, as Cognacs are, most (but not all) Armagnacs are distilled only

once. Single distillation results in a more gutsy, aromatic, and less polished eau-de-vie

when it is young. The distillation takes place in what is known as a continuous still. The

process (simplified) goes like this: The base wine enters a gas-fired still and is heated in a

chamber. From there it passes into the main column of the still, where it cascades over a

number of hot plates. When it reaches the bottom, it begins to evaporate. The alcoholic

vapors then rise back up through the incoming wine, causing the eau-de-vie to take on

more flavors and aromas. Finally, the vapors exit through the top of the column into a

condensing coil (where they become liquid as they cool). This liquid is ultimately

collected in wooden casks where it will remain to age, becoming, in time, Armagnac.

Since Cognac’s double distillation results in a more polished, elegant brandy that can

ultimately be drunk younger, you might wonder why single distillation is appealing to

most Armagnac producers. The answer is historic. Armagnac producers tend to be tiny

(there are no large firms equivalent to Cognac’s Courvoisier, Martell, Rémy Martin, or

Hennessy) and comparatively poor. Many never had the capital required to own their own

stills. Producers traditionally relied on distillers who, with movable stills (alambics

ambulants), went from farm to farm from November to January. The continuous still was,

and is, both easier to transport and cheaper to run.

The eau-de-vie that emerges from the still in precious drops is not yet an Armagnac,

however. What turns the eau-de-vie into brandy is aging in oak barrels, in this case 106- to

111-gallon (400- to 420-liter) casks, often from the black oak of the Monlezun forest in

Bas Armagnac, or from the Limousin forest of southern France. While the Armagnac-to-

be is left in wood to mature, evaporation of both water and, to a somewhat lesser extent,

alcohol concentrates the liquid. Because of this, Armagnacs, like Cognacs, are gradually

cut with water or petites eaux, a weak mixture of water and Armagnac, to bring their final

alcohol level down to 40 percent, or 80 proof.

Armagnacs are sold in three ways: by such terms as VSOP and XO, by age

designations, and by vintage. Armagnacs that carry designations like VSOP are blends of

a variety of eaux-de-vie of different ages. As in Cognac, the designations indicate the age

of the youngest eau-de-vie in the blend but the average age of the Armagnac is usually

older. Here are the lengths of time the youngest eau-de-vie in an Armagnac blend must be

aged in barrel:

VS (VERY SUPERIOR) OR THREE STAR (\*\*\*): one to three years

VSOP (VERY SUPERIOR OLD PALE): four to nine years

NAPOLÉON: six to nine years

XO (EXTRA OLD) AND HORS D’AGE: ten to nineteen years

XO PREMIUM: more than twenty years

Finally, Armagnacs are often labeled according to vintage, something that’s rare in

Cognac. The eau-de-vie in a vintage Armagnac must come entirely from that vintage and

be aged for a minimum of ten years in barrel prior to release. (The bottle must indicate a

bottling date so that you know when the Armagnac was taken out of the barrel.)

Armagnacs don’t really age once they are removed from the barrel and put in glass

bottles, where they’re protected from oxygen. A 1947 Armagnac that stayed in the barrel

for twenty years, for example, is different from a 1947 Armagnac that stayed in the barrel

for forty years before being bottled. But an Armagnac distilled in 1947 and put in bottles

in, say, 1975, and one distilled in 1970 and bottled in 1998 are equally mature—twenty-

eight years—even though they bear different vintage dates.

A great Armagnac has a complex flavor reminiscent of prunes, quince, dried apricots,

vanilla, earth, caramel, roasted walnuts, and toffee, and it is best when it is well aged,

which is to say ten years old or older. Y ounger Armagnacs have not developed any of the

extraordinary nuances of older ones, and they often taste too blatantly fiery. It’s easy to tell

how old a vintage Armagnac is; ditto for an Armagnac labeled trente ans d’age (thirty

years old). But it’s not so easy to tell when the Armagnac is labeled with letters or names,

such as Extra or Napoléon, since those letters and names tell you only the minimum age of

the youngest eau-de-vie in the blend, not the average age of blend as a whole. The best

advice here is to let price be your guide. There’s no such thing as a cheap, well-aged

Armagnac. Among the top producers of Armagnac are the négociants Sempé,

Larressingle, Samalens, Marquis de Caussade, Darroze, Château de Laubade, and

Tariquet, as well as the artisanal producers Château de Ravignan, Domaine d’Ognoas,

Domaine Boingnères, Delord, Domaine du Miquer, Château de Briat, and Pellehaut.

COGNAC

I’m not sure I knew what to expect the first time I visited the Cognac region, but the

throttling potency of the (not-very-high-quality) Cognacs I had drunk up until then

certainly did not prepare me for so gentle, so pastoral, so enchanting a landscape. This is

France at her most timeless—waves of green vineyards, thick cornfields, and meadows

noisy with birds are dotted here and there with stone farmhouses and unassuming hamlets.

The region, 197,000 acres (79,700 hectares) of vines, is about a one-and-a-half hour drive

north of Bordeaux and worlds apart in character.

Technically, the Cognac (CON-nyack) region falls into two French administrative

départements (the rough equivalent of states): Charente-Maritime on the Atlantic coast

and, just inland from that, Charente. (Besides Cognac, this part of France is renowned for

its butter, snails, and fleur de sel, the finest type of natural French sea salt.) Both

départements take their name from the Charente River, which meanders through them, and

on whose banks are the two important towns, Cognac and Jarnac. Cognac, of course, has

given the brandy its name, and about 10 miles (16 kilometers) away, Jarnac, the other hub

of Cognac activity, is home to such prestigious firms as Courvoisier, Hine, and Delamain.

As the saying goes, all Cognac is brandy, but not all brandy is Cognac. Good-quality

Cognacs can cost $200 or more a bottle, and the dozen or so most expensive cost about

$5,000 a bottle. (The single most expensive Cognac—of which there is only one bottle—is

the Henri IV Dudognon Heritage, valued at 2 million dollars. It was aged in barrel for

more than 100 years and, for good measure, the bottle is dipped in 24-karat gold and

sterling platinum, and decorated with 6,500 diamonds.)

Poised between the ocean and the Massif Central, where maritime and continental

climates collide, Cognac straddles a northern French climate and a southern one. These

factors, combined with wide variations in the soil, have led Cognac to be divided into six

smaller subdistricts, or crus, each of which produces a Cognac of a different character and

quality. (The name of the subdistrict usually appears on the label; if there is no sub-district

name, then the Cognac is a blend of different crus.) The top three crus, in descending

order of quality, are Grande Champagne, Petite Champagne, and Borderies. The word

champagne here has no relationship to the region of the same name. Rather, champagne in

Cognac derives from the Latin campagna, meaning “open fields,

” as distinguished from

the French bois,

“woods.

” Cognac’s three less-highly-regarded subdistricts, Fins Bois,

Bons Bois, and Bois Ordinaires (“fine woods,

” “good woods,

” and “ordinary woods,

”

respectively) were all once forests. Grande Champagne is indisputably the most renowned

of the districts, and its porous chalky soil is thought to produce the richest-tasting Cognacs

with the most elegance and finesse. (A confusing designation you might come across—

Fine Champagne—is not a subdistrict itself, but rather the term for a Cognac distilled from

wines made exclusively in Grande and Petite Champagne.)

The Rémy Martin distillery, founded in 1724. The house makes its Cognacs from grapes grown in the very best districts

within Cognac, the areas known as Grande Champagne and Petite Champagne.

STORING, SERVING, AND TASTING FRANCE’S

SPIRITS

Cognac and Armagnac are very different from wine when it comes to storing, serving,

and drinking. First, none of them improve with age after they are bottled; each is ready

to drink when you buy it. Not drinking the entire bottle immediately, however, presents

no problem. An open bottle of Cognac or Armagnac will remain in good condition for

about a year.

Bottles of Cognac and Armagnac should be stored upright, not on their sides. The

high alcohol content in the spirits can rot the cork, causing unpleasant aromas to form.

As for giant balloon snifters, forget them. Impressive as they may appear, such

snifters dissipate brandy’s aroma, meanwhile propelling alcohol vapors toward you so

forcefully that you may feel like you’ve been smacked between the eyes. In the regions

of Cognac and Armagnac, the preferred glass is a relatively small (it should be easy to

cradle in your hand), chimney-shaped glass with a thin rim. And, all the Hollywood

portrayals to the contrary, neither the glass nor the spirit should be warmed over a

flame; direct heating discombobulates the brandy’s aroma and flavors. Generally

speaking, a 1- to 2-ounce serving is customary.

Wine tasters commonly plunge their noses into wineglasses and inhale deeply—not

a good idea with any of these spirits. They are meant to be sniffed gently and at a slight

distance. Similarly, taking tiny, not large, sips accentuates the spirits’ smoothness.

Finally, don’t assume that a deep, rich color indicates that the spirit has been aged a

long time. Caramel is allowed as a coloring agent, enabling some Cognacs and

Armagnacs to appear older than they really are.

Cognac is made from the most innocuous of grape varieties. The leading one by far is

ugni blanc, which in the Cognac region is called St.

-Émilion, even though it has nothing to

do with the wine district of that name in Bordeaux. Colombard and folle blanche are used

in much smaller amounts. (By law, six other varieties—sémillon and five very obscure

varieties—may also be included, but none can account for more than 10 percent of the

grapes grown and used.) All of these grapes are grown to produce enormous yields,

resulting in a thin, high-acid blended wine that is barely palatable on its own. Distillation

changes everything. Indeed, a high-acid blend is ideal for distillation, for acidity

contributes to the brandy’s structure.

The vineyards of Cognac stretch over the bucolic landscape north of Bordeaux. This is pastoral France at her best. In

Cognac, time takes on another dimension.

Distillation involves boiling a liquid and then condensing the vapors that form. These

condensed vapors are a highly concentrated form of the original liquid. The first distillers

were Egyptians who, as early as 3000 B.C., used crude stills to make perfumes. But in the

Cognac region, distillation—and the birth of Cognac as we know it today—was the result

of Dutch intervention. From the end of the Roman Empire until the sixteenth century, the

area surrounding the Charente River was known for neutral-tasting wine, most of it white

and low in alcohol. The Dutch traded in the area, primarily for salt, and despite their

disappointment with the wine’s proclivity to deteriorate during the sea voyage, they began

to purchase it and ship it to England and other northern countries. Eventually, to delay the

deterioration, they began to distill the wine once it reached the Netherlands, and then sell

the more durable result, which they called burnt wine—brandewijn. By the seventeenth

century, the Dutch began to install stills in the Charente region itself. Today more than

three hundred firms distill Cognac, although just six—Hennessy, Martell, Rémy Martin,

Camus, Otard, and Courvoisier—account for about 90 percent of the sales.

Cognac is distilled twice (unlike most of the world’s other brandies) in small copper pot

stills, known as alambics charentais. The first distillation produces a cloudy liquid that is

roughly 30 percent alcohol (the brouillis). This is distilled a second time (la bonne

chauffe, literally, the good heating) to produce a clear Cognac that is 70 percent alcohol, or

140 proof, about twice what it will be once it’s bottled. During each distillation the

distiller must expertly make la coupe, the cut, separating the “heads,

” the liquid distilled

first, and the “tails,

” what is distilled last, from the coeur, or “heart.

” The heads and tails

contain off odors and flavors; only the heart is used to make Cognac.

The heart at this point is a clear, rather harsh brandy traditionally called eau-de-vie

—

“water of life.

” What transforms this into Cognac is long aging in moderately large

barrels that hold between 71 and 119 gallons (270 and 450 liters) and are made of oak

from one of two famous French forests, Tronçais or Limousin. Immediately as it leaves

the still, the brandy is put into barrels (either new or old depending on the firm’s

preference for intense or delicate flavors). Left in these barrels for years, the water in the

brandy gradually evaporates, as does, usually to a lesser extent, the alcohol. Between 2

and 5 percent of pure alcohol, called the angel’s share, evaporates from each barrel each

year. (Given the vast number of barrels in the region, it’s estimated that about 20 million

bottles’ worth of brandy evaporates yearly.) During this process, the level of humidity in a

firm’s huge barrel-holding warehouse, or chai, is crucially important. Too little humidity

and the brandy loses its alcohol more slowly because more water evaporates. This hardens

and dries out the brandy. Too much humidity and the Cognac will be flabby and lack

structure. The perfect level of humidity is found right beside the Charente River, where

many of the old warehouses are located. Throughout the process of evaporation and

concentration, the brandy is also acted on by oxygen, which, through numerous natural

chemical reactions, causes the brandy to soften and become more fragrant. All the while,

the brandy is also absorbing the subtle vanilla and crème brûlée–like flavors of the oak,

and taking on a rich brownish amber color.

Although the brandy progressively loses alcohol as it rests in the barrel, it does so

slowly. Its strength must still be brought down to the level stipulated by law for bottling,

40 percent alcohol, or 80 proof. This is done by gradually adding distilled water to the

brandy as it ages in barrel, or by adding faible, a weak mixture of distilled water and

Cognac that has been aged.

Unlike most wines, most Cognacs are expected to be consistent year after year, so most

don’t carry a vintage date. Each Cognac firm achieves consistency by a complex and

continual process of blending different lots of brandy, each of which may be a different

age. In practice, many brandies are aged in barrels for twenty-five to sixty years. (After

sixty years, most brandy is thought to decline rather than improve.) It’s said that no truly

great Cognac can be produced without including a proportion of very old brandy, which

contributes a pungent, earthy character known as rancio.

When a Cognac firm advertises that its Cognac has been aged thirty-five years, that

figure is the average age of all the brandies that went into the blend. This is not, however,

what you will see on the label. Such label designations as XO or VSOP refer to the

youngest eau-de-vie in the blend, not the average age of all of them. In Courvoisier XO,

for example, the youngest eau-de-vie must be aged six-and-a-half years. (The average age

of the eaux-de-vie in this Cognac, however, is thirty-five to fifty years. The average age of

the eaux-de-vie in any Cognac blend does not appear on the label.)

Here are the lengths of time the youngest eau-de-vie in a Cognac blend must be aged in

barrel:

VS (VERY SUPERIOR) OR THREE STAR (\*\*\*): not less than two-and-a-half years

VSOP (VERY SUPERIOR OLD PALE), VO (VERY OLD), AND RÉSERVE: at least four-and-a-half

years

XO (EXTRA OLD), NAPOLÉON, EXTRA, VIEUX, VIEILLE RÉSERVE, AND HORS D’AGE: at least six-

and-a-half years

As for vintage Cognacs, although they’re a rarity, they do exist. Initially prohibited by

law, they were often made anyway by houses who set aside lots of especially good

harvests to watch the evolution of those brandies. In 1987 French law changed, and

vintage Cognac is now legal. To prevent fraud, barrels of vintage Cognac must be aged in

special locked cellars, which can only be opened with two keys, one of which is kept by

the government, the other by the Cognac firm.

At its best, Cognac should taste complex, balanced, and smooth, and have long-lasting

aromas and flavors that subtly suggest flowers, citrus, honey, vanilla, smoke, and earth.

Among the top Cognacs (their average age is noted in parentheses) are: A. de Fussigny

Fine Champagne Vieille Réserve (thirty years); A. E. Dor XO (twenty-five years);

Courvoisier XO (thirty-five to fifty years); Delamain Très Vénérable (forty-five to fifty

years); Martell Extra (forty to fifty years); Rémy Martin XO (twenty-two years); and Hine

Triomphe (forty to fifty years).

About 20 million bottles’ worth of Cognac—called the angel’s share—

evaporate annually.

ITALY

PIEDMONT | VENETO | FRIULI-VENEZIA GIULIA | TUSCANY

TRENTINO-ALTO ADIGE | LOMBARDY | LIGURIA | EMILIA-ROMAGNA | UMBRIA | ABRUZZI | THE

SOUTHERN PENINSULA: CAMPANIA, APULIA, BASILICATA, AND CALABRIA | SICILY AND SARDINIA

ITALY RANKS SECOND AMONG WINE-PRODUCING COUNTRIES WORLDWIDE. THE ITALIANS DRINK

AN AVERAGE OF 13 GALLONS (50 LITERS) OF WINE PER PERSON PER YEAR.

In Italy, making wine—like eating or breathing—is so utterly natural it almost seems

instinctive. Grapevines grow everywhere; they are Italy’s version of the American lawn.

There is simply no region, no district, virtually no cranny of the country that does not

produce wine. The numbers are astonishing: 1.9 million acres (769,000 hectares) of

vineyard; 384,000 wineries; and some 377 different grape varieties cultivated (more

varieties than in any other country), leading to a dizzying number of wines.

Wine at this order of magnitude can seem unfathomable—but of course, not all of these

wines are considered to be of major importance. Scores of Italian wines are simple

quaffing wines consumed almost entirely in or near the villages where they are made.

The Italian wines that knowledgeable wine drinkers get excited about come

predominantly from a few major areas. These include Piedmont, V eneto, Friuli-V enezia

Giulia, and Tuscany. I’ll cover these in the most depth, but I’ll also provide overviews of

numerous other wine regions. North to south, these include Trentino-Alto Adige, the

Alpine home of some of Italy’s most pristine white wines; Lombardy, the source of Italy’s

best sparklers; Liguria, the crescent-shaped region known for wines that are easily paired

with fresh seafood; Emilia-Romagna, one of the greatest regions in the world for food, and

the birthplace of cheerful, fizzy lambrusco; Umbria, the home of dry, refreshing Orvietos;

Abruzzi (the English name for Abruzzo), memorable for such soft, thick, mouthfilling reds

as montepulciano d’Abruzzo, a wine just waiting to be paired with rustic pasta dishes; and

finally, Italy’s most southern regions: Campania, Apulia, Basilicata, and Calabria, plus the

islands of Sicily and Sardinia, all of which are sources of delicious wines that are good

values, and several make wines from rare, ancient grape varieties as well.

CHAOS ON THE BOTTLE—ITALIAN WINE LABELS

T o learn about Italian wine, it is necessary to abandon yourself to the chaos of Italian wine labels. Here’s

one: Feudi di San Gregorio Piano di Montevergine Riserva T aurasi. Okay, um… This happens to be a

delicious wine, but unless you already know what’s what, it’s nearly impossible to look at a label like this

and understand it. And also understand what it doesn’t say. For example, this label does not mention the

grape variety used to make the wine (it’s aglianico; you’d just have to have that part memorized).

Moreover, who is the producer here? T o drive one really crazy, the name of the producer, the name of the

estate or villa, the name of the brand, and the proper name of the wine may all be listed. (In this case, by

the way, the name of the producer is Feudi di San Gregorio).

Even the simplest Italian wine labels can be confusing, because sometimes the wine may be named

after the grape variety used to make it (such as barbera) and at other times named after the place where

the grapes grew (such as Barolo). T o make matters even more internecine, the names of some Italian

wines (and even some grapes) combine both grape and place. The wine named montepulciano

d’Abruzzo, for example, pairs montepulciano, the grape, with Abruzzo, the place. And, you’d just have to

know that that wine is different from the wine vino nobile di Montepulciano, which isn’t made from

montepulciano at all (it’s made from sangiovese). And finally, with characteristic Italianness, some Italian

vintners simply abandon the whole system and just give the wine a fantasy name like “W… Dreams,

” the

name of a famous Friulian chardonnay (it’s up to you to figure out what it means).

The ancient Greeks called Italy Oenotria, the land of wine.

St. Peter’ s Square in V atican City. The V atican consumes more wine per capita than any other country.

Although wine and food are inextricably linked in most parts of the world, in Italy they

are fervently wedded. Wines that seem slightly lean, tart, or bitter to some are highly

appreciated by the Italians precisely because they have the grip and edge to slice through

the dauntless flavors of Italian food. But it goes even further than that. In Italy, wine is

food. Not so long ago, a daily supply of basic village wine cost Italians less than their

daily supply of bread, according to Italian wine expert Burton Anderson, and both were as

essential to an Italian diner as a fork and knife (probably more so). Along with olive oil,

wine and bread make up what the Italians call the Santa Trinità Mediterranea—the

Mediterranean Holy Trinity. An Italian friend once summed up the special affinity

between Italian wine and food this way: “In Italy, if someone drinks a little too much

wine, the Italians don’t say he has drunk too much; they say he hasn’t eaten enough food

yet.

”

Villa Sparina in the Gavi DOC in Piedmont, which lies over the foothills of the Alps. Go 736 miles (1,185 kilometers)

south, and you can stand on Italian soil and see North Africa.

THE V ATICAN: IN VINO VERITAS

Vatican City, with a population of fewer than one thousand people, confined in a mere

.27 square mile (.7 square kilometer) within Rome, consumes more wine per capita

than any other country in the world—more than 16 gallons (61 liters) per person in

recent years. By comparison, U.S. per capita consumption is about 3 gallons (11 liters).

The Vatican’s voluminous wine usage is, in part, the result of an important Catholic

ritual—the celebration of the Holy Eucharist, in which bread and wine are consecrated

during Mass and thus believed to be transubstantiated into the body and blood of Jesus

Christ.

Italian wines can vary substantially in flavor, texture, and body—even when the wines

being compared are the same type. Two Chianti Classicos from estates less than a half

mile apart can taste remarkably dissimilar. Some of this variability is due to differences in

winemaking, for Italy is a country of fiercely maintained ancient traditions and, at the

same time, extremely sophisticated modern methods. But an equally compelling reason is

this: Italy is a tangle of different, tiny mesoclimates that powerfully influence the character

of any given wine.

What creates those mesoclimates? The geography and variable climates of the land

itself. Y ou can stand on Italian soil and look at the Alps, but you can also stand on Italian

soil and look at North Africa. The country is about 40 percent mountains (even Sicily has

them!) and another 40 percent hills. As any drive from one village to the next proves,

straight lines don’t seem to exist in this country. The combined zigzagging slopes of hills

and mountains, plus the close proximity of four seas (the Tyrrhenian, Adriatic, Ligurian,

and Mediterranean), plus the geologic impact of numerous earthquakes has produced an

almost pointillistic profusion of environments in which grapes grow.

Men and women harvest chardonnay at Ferrari in Trentino-Alto Adige. The winery, founded in 1902, has become one of

Italy’ s top producers of metodo classico (Champagne method) sparkling wine.

In Italy, if someone drinks a little too much wine, the Italians don’t say he has

drunk too much; they say he hasn’t eaten enough food yet.

Although Italy’s most revered wines are known worldwide, the grape varieties that

constitute them are rarely found outside the country. Y ou won’t find sangiovese, the

leading grape of Chianti, or nebbiolo, the grape that makes Barolo, growing in France,

Spain, or Australia (except perhaps as an oddity). Even in the United States, the brief, so-

called “Cal-Ital movement” of the late 1980s and early 1990s has been largely abandoned

as California wineries have acknowledged that Italy grows her own indigenous grapes so

much better.

THE ULTIMATE GIFT

In ancient Rome, wine was linked with authority. Of all the pleasures and privileges of

power, none was rated more highly than the possession of a vineyard. The highest

favor bestowed by the Roman emperor Julian was the gift of a vineyard prepared—

actually planted and pruned—by his own hands.

As of the 1980s, the Italians, however, adopted cabernet sauvignon and other

international varieties with lightning speed and total confidence. (The first wave of

cabernet sauvignon plantings in Italy actually occurred in the late eighteenth century,

although the appeal of this uva francesca—French grape, as the Italians called it—was

initially found to be limited.) Today, Italian wine is a dual world where ancestral grape

varieties and contemporary grape varieties easily exist side by side.

HOW THE ITALIANS EAT PASTA

Pasta became commonplace in Italy in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Early pasta dishes all had

a similar sauce: melted butter and some type of hard cheese, such as Parmigiano-Reggiano. T o make

the dish even more special, the pasta would often be sprinkled with sugar and spices as well. (T omato

sauces did not appear until sometime after the tomato was brought from the New World, in the sixteenth

century.) The difficulty of eating buttery pasta with the fingers may have contributed to the early use of

the fork in Italy.

Watch Italians eat slender pasta, such as spaghetti, and you will not see them twirling the strands

around a fork set into the bowl of a spoon. Italians eat pasta with a fork only. The correct technique

involves stabbing some pasta near the edge of the bowl, usually at the twelve o’clock position (not in the

center of the mound), and then twirling the fork while bracing it against the inside rim of the bowl. It’s

considered appropriate to have a few strands hanging down from the fork as you lift it to your mouth.

The American habit of twirling the fork against a soup spoon is thought to have originated around the

turn of the twentieth century, when poor Italian immigrants came to the United States and found bountiful

supplies of affordable food. As the ratio of sauce to pasta increased, a spoon became necessary to

scoop it all up. Inevitably, someone got the cunning idea of using the spoon to assist in eating the pasta

as well.

In Italy, pasta and wine are made with a loving hand.

ITALY’S FINE WINE REVOLUTION

To gain insight into Italian wine today and to understand the revolution in quality that

Italian wine underwent in the latter part of the twentieth century, it’s important to

understand something of the history that led up to Italy’s current wine laws. (For the laws

themselves, see the Appendix on Wine Laws, page 924). Admittedly, governmental

regulations usually make for pretty dry reading but, in Italy’s case, it’s almost impossible

to comprehend the country’s wines without a grasp of how the wines are categorized by

the Italian government and by the Italians themselves.

GRAPPA

You can always tell when Italians don’t want the night to end. Out comes the grappa. This, in turn,

causes everyone to recount their most infamous grappa-drinking stories—which leads to the pouring of

more grappa, which leads to more stories. Although today grappa is made and drunk all over Italy,

historically it was a specialty of the northern part of the country, where a small shot in the morning coffee

helped one get going on a freezing day.

Grappa is the clear brandy that results when grape pomace (the pulpy mash of stems, seeds, and

skins left over from winemaking) is refermented and distilled. Depending on the quality of the raw

material and the method of distillation, the final product can taste as though a grenade has just ignited in

your throat, or it can taste smooth, winey, and powerful. Ue, a softer, lighter type of grappa invented and

made famous by the firm Nonino, is a distillate of actual grapes rather than pomace. And grappa di

monovitigno is a grappa from a single grape variety, such as riesling, moscato, gewürztraminer, or picolit.

These grappas are considered superior because the result carries a faint suggestion of the aroma and

flavor of the original grapes. Expensive and rare, such grappas incite cult worship. In fact, grappa fans

are called tifosi di grappa, a phrase that implies almost feverish allegiance (the word tifosi also refers to

people suffering from typhoid).

The bottles are part of the attraction. Since the late 1980s, the dazzling, avant-garde designs of

grappa bottles have been nothing less than astounding. No northern Italian enoteca is without an

astonishing display of these elegant bottles, each holding a grappa that looks far more innocent than it

tastes.

When grappa seems like a good idea, it usually means I should have already gone home.

Italy’s wine revolution was provoked by a set of regulations defining the areas where

specific wines can be made. These laws—Denominazione di Origine Controllata,

Denominazione di Origine Controllata e Garantita, and Indicazione Geografica Tipica—

are known by their acronyms, DOC, DOCG, and IGT. More than 330 wine zones have

been designated as DOCs and 73 as DOCGs, yet the wines from these zones, widely

regarded as many of the best wines in the country, represent only a small percentage of all

the Italian wines produced. Some 118 wine areas have been named IGTs, a more humble

designation. (These same laws are the ones that ensure that cheeses such as Parmigiano,

hams such as prosciutto, condiments such as balsamic vinegar, and a host of other foods

can come only from their designated traditional areas.)

Piero Antinori and his successors—daughters Albiera, Allegra, and Alessia. The family has been in the wine business

since Giovanni di Piero Antinori joined the Florentine Guild of Vintners in 1385.

Most Italians think about wine the way they think about a Ferrari. It ought to

be red. That said, white wines account for 50 percent of the production of

Italian wine, and most of the best of those come from the northeastern part of

the country, bordering the Alps.

The story behind these pivotal regulations begins in the 1960s. Although great wine

families, such as the Antinoris, Frescobaldis, Contini-Bonacossis, and Boscainis, had all

been making fine wine for centuries, many Italian wines were still the product of peasant

winemaking. But with the enactment of the DOC laws in 1963, an official regulation

stipulated standards for certain types of wine. The first wine given DOC status was the

Tuscan white vernaccia di San Gimignano, in 1966. The course of Italian wine changed

dramatically.

No sooner had the DOC commandments been handed down than innovative Italian

winemakers began to chafe against them. As comprehensive and protective as the DOC

laws sought to be, they failed to take into consideration a key reality—advances in wine

quality often come through creativity, innovation, and the introduction of new techniques.

The DOC stipulations for any given type of wine were formed around what was traditional

practice in that region. Traditional practice reflected traditional taste. And traditional taste

was, in many cases, that of palates rarely exposed to anything more than the wine from

vineyards within a 20-mile (32-kilometer) radius. By the 1970s, Italian winemakers were

restless.

Piero Antinori, head of a centuries-old Tuscan winemaking family and a prominent

force within the Italian wine industry, made the first well-publicized break with DOC

regulations in 1971. Antinori’s wine, called Tignanello, was modeled after a wine that

virtually no one had ever heard of or tasted: Sassicaia. Although Sassicaia was made in

Tuscany, it was neither a Chianti nor any other familiar type of Tuscan wine. It wasn’t

even based on the traditional Tuscan grape, sangiovese. Sassicaia was a cabernet

sauvignon; the inspiration behind it was French Bordeaux. Sassicaia was then a quiet,

“underground” project, but Antinori knew about it because his cousins were its creators

(see the section on Tuscany, page 382).

The 1974 vintage of Castello di Nipozzano Chianti Rufina Riserva, aging gracefully in the cellars of Marchesi de

Frescobaldi.

Like Sassicaia, Antinori’s Tignanello was made in the Chianti region, but it was not—

as far as the Italian government was concerned—a Chianti, since it had not been made

according to the DOC regulations. Therefore, like Sassicaia, it could officially be

considered only a vino da tavola (table wine), the lowest status an Italian wine can hold.

Tignanello and Sassicaia thus became the first two vini da tavola to cost a small fortune in

an ocean of vini da tavola that cost peanuts. None of this seemed to bother wine drinkers

or the wine press, who bestowed on these wines (and the others like them that followed)

their lasting nickname, the Super Tuscans.

Then, in 1980, just as the first steps toward better-quality wine were being taken in

many parts of Italy, the government enacted the DOCG—Denominazione di Origine

Controllata e Garantita—for wines of exceptional quality and renown. The DOCG

regulations were even more strict than the DOC. The first four DOCGs were brunello di

Montalcino and vino nobile di Montepulciano, in Tuscany; and Barolo and Barbaresco, in

Piedmont, all designated in 1980. By 1999, there were twenty-one DOCGs. And by 2013,

there were, as mentioned, seventy-three.

Most of the initial DOCGs were red. Alas, the first of the white DOCGs, albana di

Romagna, granted in 1987, made the government look silly. Albana, a fairly neutral wine

from the Emilia-Romagna region, comes nowhere close to being one of Italy’s top white

wines. Albana’s status as the first white DOCG threw a cloak of suspicion over the whole

system.

A more serious flaw in the DOCG, however, was the misleading word garantita

(guarantee) in its title. In fact, the DOCG designation does not guarantee the quality of the

wine. A DOCG is applied to an entire region. Both the greatest wine in that region and the

worst get to say they are DOCG.

Finally, neither the DOC nor DOCG addressed the growing number of creative,

nonconformist Italian wines, many of which came from places outside DOC and DOCG

wine areas, and all of which continued to be officially considered mere vini da tavola.

Therefore, in 1992, the third designation, Indicazione Geografica Tipica (Typical

Geographic Indication), was created. While IGT wine zones include many places that

make good, even great, wines, they are places that historically have never been considered

as prestigious as the areas awarded DOC and DOCG status. Most IGT wines are the

equivalent of French vins de pays, or country wines.

So what does all this mean in the end? From a practical standpoint, knowing that a

wine has IGT, DOC, or DOCG status doesn’t guarantee that that particular wine will be

exemplary. Nor are these designations a classification system (like, say, the Grand

Cru/Premier Cru classification of Burgundy, France). But Italy’s designations are a tip-off

to the places that are recognized for the quality or prestige of their wines. Think of the

designations as forming a pyramid of Italy’s wines. Vini da tavola constitute the broad

base; IGT are next, in the middle; DOC wines are nearer the top; and DOCG wines are at

the apex. Fantastic wines are to be found at every level.

PIEDMONT

Lying in a remote white amphitheater created by the Alps, Piedmont is Italy’s preeminent

wine region. Barolo and Barbaresco—two of the country’s most legendary and serious

reds—are born here. (So is the world’s least serious sparkling wine, the playful spumante

known as Asti.)

If Italy is sometimes thought of as the cradle of Bacchanalian frivolity, you’d never

know it in Piedmont. Winemakers here are prudent and diligent about their work. Shake a

Piedmontese vintner’s hand, and it’s the rough, heavy, calloused hand of someone who has

worked forever in a vineyard. The winemaking style in Piedmont (as well as the culinary

traditions of the region) has strong links to that of their closest neighbor, France. Indeed, if

Piedmont has an enological soul mate, it is not Tuscany, as one might expect, but France’s

Burgundy. In both regions, wine estates are meticulously cared for and mostly small (the

average vineyard estate in Piedmont is 3 to 5 acres/1.2 to 2 hectares). The wine traditions

of both were firmly molded by centuries of monastic (Benedictine) rule. Most important

of all, Piedmont and Burgundy share the philosophic belief that great wine is the progeny

of a single, perfectly adapted grape variety (nebbiolo in Piedmont; pinot noir in

Burgundy). This is in complete opposition to most of the rest of Italy, and indeed most of

France, where wines tend to be made from a blend of grapes.

It’s difficult to describe just how esteemed Piedmont’s leading wines Barolo and

Barbaresco are, not just in Piedmont, but in Italy as a whole. At their best, these wines are

supremely complex and riveting. But Barolo and Barbaresco are also lauded because

nebbiolo, one of the world’s most site-specific grape varieties, is, in terms of viticulture

and winemaking, one of the most difficult to master. Indeed only 8 percent of all plantings

in Piedmont are nebbiolo. Y et no place in the world has more nebbiolo than this one place,

and no place in the world has had more success with this complicated, demanding,

challenging grape.

Old Italian farms usually engaged in “promiscuous agriculture.

” Each farm would have vineyards, orchards, olive

groves, vegetable gardens, and livestock—everything a family needs to subsist on. Here, barbera vineyards on a farm in

the Monferrato hills of Piedmont.

THE QUICK SIP ON PIEDMONT

TWO OF ITALY’S MOST MAJESTIC, powerful red wines—Barolo and Barbaresco—

come from Piedmont. Like great red Bordeaux, they can be and often are aged a

decade or more before being drunk.

BAROLO AND BARBARESCO are made from the nebbiolo grape, a highly sitespecific

variety known for its forceful tannin.

PIEDMONT is also known for Asti—a playful, delicious, semisweet sparkler that is the

complete opposite of serious Barolo and Barbaresco.

Like the great red Bordeaux, Barolo and Barbaresco are highly structured, expensive

wines that can be aged for years, even decades. Until the 1990s, Piedmontese winemakers

routinely advised waiting no less than fifteen years, and sometimes as many as twenty-five

years, before drinking them. Today most Barolos and Barbarescos are made in a way that

renders them softer (but not soft, exactly) at a younger age, and thus enjoyable earlier.

Still, as we’ll see, Barolo and Barbaresco are not casual, happy wines. They aren’t good

for taking to the beach. They aren’t good with salads. But in their cultural context, the

wines make utter sense. These formidable, firm, black-red wines are meant for

carnivorous drama—for whole roasted pigs or lambs—or with grand pastas showered with

white truffles and costing a ransom.

Needless to say, Barolo and Barbaresco are decidedly not what the Piedmontese drink

with dinner every night. That distinction goes to two other red wines that stand next in the

hierarchy of importance: barbera and dolcetto. Barbera, made from the barbera grape, is a

vibrant, sometimes rustic wine, oozing with a wealth of fruit flavors. The grape is

Piedmont’s most widely planted variety, but genetic research suggests it was probably

brought there from someplace else. Dolcetto is a juicy quaffing wine and often has an

attractive, bitter edge. It’s made from the dolcetto grape.

In addition to these important wines, there are a number of others that, like Barolo and

Barbaresco, are made from nebbiolo, although they are usually less polished, less

complex, and generally more rough and lean. The best known and most important of these

wines is Gattinara, followed by Ghemme, nebbiolo d’Alba, and wines called spanna,

spanna being a synonym for nebbiolo.

Piedmont is also home to four principal white wines: the dry whites Gavi and arneis;

the slightly sweet, refined moscato d’Asti; and, as already mentioned, the irrepressibly

popular semisweet sparkler Asti.

THE LAND, THE GRAPES, AND THE VINEYARDS

Piedmont, meaning “foot of the mountain,

” is the largest region of the Italian mainland.

As its name suggests, Piedmont is comprised of mountains and rolling foothills. Since

much of this land is too steep or too cold for vines, Piedmont, despite its size, is not Italy’s

leading producer of wine. If only fine wines are considered, however, it excels. More than

15 percent of all the DOC and DOCG wines in Italy are made here. (This is more than any

other region except for Tuscany.) Indeed, 84 percent of all the wines made in Piedmont are

either DOC or DOCG.

Nearly all of Piedmont’s best vineyards are located in the eastern and southern parts of

the region, where it is warmer than in the more Alpine northern part. The best vineyards

lie over two hilly, southeastern ranges known as the Langhe (from lingue—tongue—a

reference to the mountains, which are said to be shaped like tongues) and Monferrato.

Here are found the important wine towns of Alba, Asti, and Alessandria. Of them, the

most treasured is Alba.

THE MOST IMPORTANT PIEDMONT WINES

LEADING WINES

ARNEIS white

ASTI white (sparkling; semisweet)

BARBARESCO red

BARBERA red

BAROLO red

DOLCETTO red

GAVI white

MOSCATO D’ASTI white (semisweet)

WINES OF NOTE

GATTINARA red

GHEMME red

NEBBIOLO D’ALBA red

SPANNA red

The tiny villages of Barolo and Barbaresco (from which the wines take their names) lie

about a dozen miles (19 kilometers) apart on either side of Alba, which, despite being a

rather humble town, holds an almost mythic place in the minds of food and wine lovers—

not solely for mighty Barolo and Barbaresco, but also for the world’s most astonishing

white truffles, which are unearthed here each fall. Just imagining autumn in Alba—

drinking sumptuous Barolos and dining on homemade taglierini generously mounded (this

is Piedmont, after all) with white truffles—is enough to send shivers up my spine.

THE GRAPES OF PIEDMONT

WHITES

ARNEIS: Makes a bold, fresh wine of the same name. The variety, once nearly extinct, was rediscovered

and “rescued” in the late 1960s and is now planted mainly in the Roero area north of Barolo.

CORTESE: Source of the dry, crisp, but neutral-tasting wine Gavi.

MOSCATO: The Italian word for muscat. In Piedmont, the main type of muscat used is muscat blanc à

petits grains, an ancient variety with extremely fruity, floral, and musky aromas and flavors. Used to make

sparkling Asti and moscato d’Asti. Sometimes called moscato bianco (white muscat) or moscato Canelli

(Canelli is a reference to the village, south of Asti, which is famous for the grape).

REDS

BARBERA: The most widely planted grape in Piedmont; the source of a vibrant, mouthfilling, often

slightly rustic wine of the same name; it’s a favorite local dinner wine and an easy companion to food,

thanks to its relatively high acidity and low tannin.

BONARDA AND VESPOLINA: Two minor blending grapes used with nebbiolo in the wines Gattinara

and Ghemme.

DOLCETTO: Makes a simple, fruity quaffing wine also called dolcetto.

NEBBIOLO: Piedmont’s star grape and one of the most renowned red grapes in all of Italy. Known for

power, structure, and tannin; makes the legendary reds Barolo and Barbaresco; and is the primary grape

in Gattinara and Ghemme. In some parts of Piedmont, nebbiolo is known as spanna.

The soil around Alba is clay, limestone, and sand. The best vineyards, most of which

are planted with nebbiolo, are located on the domes of hills that are tilted south, resulting

in maximum exposure to the sun, and hence ripeness. The names of the vineyards

underscore the sun’s importance. The producer Ceretto, for example, makes a famous

Barolo from a vineyard called Bricco Rocche; in Piedmontese dialect a bricco is the sun-

catching crest of a hill. Similarly, the producer Angelo Gaja makes an extraordinary

Barbaresco from a vineyard called Sorì Tildìn; a sorì is the south-facing part of a slope

where, in winter, the snow melts first.

Piedmontese vintners are as obsessed with the individual characteristics of vineyards as

are their Burgundian counterparts. Rather than making a single Barolo or Barbaresco,

most top producers make tiny amounts of multiple versions of both, designating each

according to the specific vineyard from which it came (such wines are, not surprisingly,

expensive). In a nod to France, the top vineyards are often referred to as cru vineyards.

Among the most famous Barolo vineyards are Rocche, Cannubi, Cerequio, Brunate, and

Bussia-Soprana. Top Barbaresco vineyards include Rabajà, Sorì Tildìn, and Asili.

The word nebbiolo derives from nebbia,

“fog,

” a reference to the thick,

whitish bloom of yeasts that forms on the grapes when they are ripe (although

many say the name may also refer to the wisps of fog that envelop the

Piedmontese hills in late fall when the grapes are picked).

About 20 miles (30 kilometers) northeast of Alba, the town of Asti will forever be

linked with moscato (muscat blanc à petit grains). Two moscato-based wines take their

names from Asti: the gorgeously refined, low-alcohol wine moscato d’Asti, which the

Piedmontese adore, and the widely popular, slightly sweet sparkling wine Asti, formerly

known as Asti Spumante (a non-collector’s wine if ever there was one). Piedmont’s most

important and most traditional white grape, moscato, accounts for 22 percent of all

plantings in the region.

Tiny, compact clusters of nebbiolo in the vineyards of the Barolo producer Roberto V oerzio.

And finally, the town of Alessandria, the farthest east, near the border with Lombardy,

lies in the limestone-laced hills of the Monferrato range. This area is well known for the

red wines barbera and dolcetto.

BAROLO AND BARBARESCO

Close your eyes and imagine it is evening in the cold, dark, hard foothills of the Alps. A

fire smolders in the hearth of a stone farmhouse; game is being roasted in the old oven.

Wine in this setting becomes more than wine. It is reassurance; it is solace.

Barolo and Barbaresco are located in the Langhe hills of southeastern Piedmont. Both

wines can be powerful and both are made solely from nebbiolo, an ancient variety that

originated in Piedmont (or possibly in Lombardy next door) but whose parents are

presumed extinct. Nebbiolo has very specific aromas and flavors, often characterized by

Italian wine experts as “tar and roses,

” along with licorice, violets, leather, chocolate,

prunes, and black figs. None of these characteristics emerges gently and in an orderly

fashion from the wines. With most Barolos and Barbarescos, flavors hurl themselves over

you like a stormy ocean wave.

Grown on steeper, cooler sites, Barolo is generally the more robust, austere, and

masculine of the two wines. Barbaresco tends to be slightly more graceful, even though it,

too, is often described as having brooding power. Another difference concerns supply.

Each year, about a third as much Barbaresco is produced as Barolo. While Barbaresco is

made in three tiny villages—Barbaresco itself, plus Neive and Treiso—Barolo is made in

eleven, the most important of which are Barolo, La Morra, Castiglione Falletto, Monforte

d’Alba, and Serralunga d’Alba. Because Barolo spans a larger number of mesoclimates, it

is said to be more variable in quality and style, from producer to producer, than

Barbaresco.

GAJA

No man has heralded the virtues of Piedmont more than the dynamic, ambitious, and inventive Angelo

Gaja (pronounced GUY-ah). For decades he has traveled around the world, talking about Barbaresco

and Barolo to every journalist and restaurateur who would listen (and making converts of most of them).

Gaja’s wines can have spellbinding intensity and power. The best seem not simply great but virtually

unreal in their ability to be massively opulent and yet finely etched at the same time. They are also

gaspingly expensive.

Gaja made his mark with his estate-grown Barbarescos, especially his intense single-vineyard

Barbarescos called Sorì Tildìn and Sorì San Lorenzo. Later, he bought a famous but rundown property

outside Alba and began making the now legendary single-vineyard wine called Sperss (dialect for

nostalgia) in the Barolo region (but not labeled Barolo because it contains a small amount of barbera

blended in with the nebbiolo).

For all of his inventive vineyard and cellar practices, Gaja is a traditionalist in his devotion to nebbiolo.

When he made Piedmont’s first cabernet sauvignon in 1978, he called it Darmagi, in honor of his father.

In the local dialect, darmagi means “what a pity”; this was what Gaja’s father mumbled every time he

passed the cabernet vineyard and thought about the nebbiolo vines that had been pulled out to plant the

cabernet. Although Darmagi was highly praised internationally (as were Gaja’s two chardonnays, Rossj-

Bass and Gaia & Rey), Gaja maintains that it was merely a marketing ploy. Making a cabernet that could

rival the great Bordeaux, he says, was just a clever way of drawing the world’s attention to Barbaresco

and Barolo, and to Piedmont.

The ancient small town of Barolo gave its name to the wine Barolo, long considered one of Italy’ s most magnificent

wines.

Until the late 1980s, Barolo and Barbaresco were almost unpalatable unless they had

been aged fifteen to twenty years, whereupon the wines’ fierce tannin might begin to

mellow. Often they required a twenty-five- or thirty-year wait. Daring (or foolish) drinkers

who opened the wines earlier often ended up with tongues that felt as though they’d been

sheathed in shrink-wrap.

The wines’ severity was the result of several factors. First, nebbiolo is genetically high

in tannin. (The common Barolo descriptor “tarry” is not just a flavor, but a reference to the

way the tannin feels.) Second, and to make matters worse, nebbiolo is a late-ripening

variety, often harvested on the brink of winter when the ambient temperature is cold. Two

problems are embedded here. Late-ripening grapes often don’t get ripe, so the wines,

rather than having a soft texture, end up feeling like sandpaper. In addition, historically,

Piedmont’s small cellars would be very cold by the time the grapes were brought in. As a

result, fermentation would choke along in fits and starts (yeasts work best in warm

environments, not cold ones), often for months, before it got rolling effectively.

Piedmontese winemakers of the past were forced to stand by and let nebbiolo run its

course, even though, in the long process, hard, bitter tannins were extracted from the grape

skins. Many winemakers then inadvertently exacerbated that harshness by leaving the

wine for years in large oak or chestnut casks, often desiccating any little fruitiness the

wine might have had, and sometimes oxidizing the wine in the process.

The vaulted cellars of Ceretto. Historically, Barolo was deemed drinkable only after it had aged 15 to 20 years in barrel.

Today, thanks to improved viticultural and winemaking techniques, the wines are drinkable (but maybe not as heavenly)

when they are far younger.

As modern tastes swung toward soft, flavorful wines that could be drunk the night they

were bought, consumers began bypassing Barolo and Barbaresco. It seemed as if Italy’s

two greatest wines were on their way to becoming the dinosaurs of fine red wine. But

eventually, using modern technology, winemakers in the 1980s began making Barolos and

Barbarescos that possessed a certain suppleness, even while they remained majestic,

monolithic wines. Most notably, the introduction of temperature-controlled tanks meant

that fermentation could be immediately warmer and quicker, thereby avoiding astringent

tannins. Juice could be pumped over the grape skins in a way that imparted maximum

color to the wine but, again, minimized harsh tannin. Finally, winemakers began to

understand how to divide the aging of nebbiolo between small French barrels and bottles

so that the lush fruit quality of the wine would not be sacrificed. By the 1990s, a new era

for nebbiolo had been born.

Of course, although most Barolos and Barbarescos are now made to be drunk sooner,

sooner is a relative term. A Barolo or Barbaresco less than five years old may still be

imprisoned by tannin and may taste closed, and not particularly complex. With these

wines, you simply must make yourself wait, for with time, the wines reward you. They

unfurl themselves, revealing layers of flavor and richness of texture that weren’t even

hinted at when the wines were young. Perhaps more than any other wines, Barolo and

Barbaresco need at least half a decade (and a decade is better) to evolve into themselves.

Finally, by law, Barolo and Barbaresco are among the longest-aged wines in Italy.

Barolo must be aged a total of thirty-eight months, eighteen of which must be in oak, and

for Barolo riserva, the total is sixty-two months, eighteen of which must be in oak.

Barbaresco must be aged a total of twenty-six months, nine of which must be in oak, and

for Barbaresco riserva, the requirement is fifty months of aging, nine of which must be in

oak.

SOME OF THE BEST PRODUCERS OF BAROLO

Aldo Conterno • Bruno Giacosa • Ceretto • Domenico Clerico • Elio Altare • Elio Grasso • Gaja • Giacomo

Conterno • Giuseppe Mascarello • Giuseppe Rinaldi • Luciano Sandrone • Luigi Einaudi • Marcarini • Paolo

Scavino • Renato Ratti • Roberto Voerzio • Vietti

SOME OF THE BEST PRODUCERS OF BARBARESCO

Bruno Giacosa • Ceretto • Cigliuti • Gaja • La Spinetta • Marchesi di Gresy • Moccagatta • Renato Ratti •

Sottimano • Vietti

GATTINARA, GHEMME, NEBBIOLO D’ALBA, AND

SPANNA

A slew of wines besides Barolo and Barbaresco are made from nebbiolo, including

Gattinara, Ghemme, nebbiolo d’Alba, and spanna. Nebbiolo d’Alba is slightly different

from the others in that, like Barolo and Barbaresco, it is produced in the famous Langhe

foothills near the town of Alba. But the grapes that go into nebbiolo d’Alba come from

outlying areas and don’t quite have the finesse and power that nebbiolo intended for

Barolo and Barbaresco possesses. Still, nebbiolo d’Alba is a good, lower-priced “starter”

wine before one jumps into the deep end of the pool with Barolo and Barbaresco, and

because it’s less powerful, it doesn’t require the same aging that its more famous sisters

do.

Gattinara and Ghemme are produced far north of Alba, in colder Alpine foothills with

glacial soil and terrain. Although Gattinara in particular can occasionally seem like a mini

Barolo, with fairly powerful flavors, both Gattinara and Ghemme are generally leaner than

Barolo or Barbaresco, with simpler flavors and tannin that is sometimes aggressive. The

Italians would never drink these wines without food (they’d taste too harsh), and indeed

the wines can taste entirely transformed if drunk with a juicy roast or creamy risotto.

Gattinara and Ghemme are frequently made with a small percentage of bonarda or

vespolina, two minor blending grapes that help tone down and soften the northern-grown

nebbiolo. The best known of these wines in the United States is the Gattinara made by

Travaglini, shipped in an almost square-shaped black bottle.

DOLCETTO—EAT, DRINK, DO A LITTLE BUSINESS

Dolcetto, a model of versatility, has been used by the Piedmontese in a number of creative (and

commercial) ways. The wine is a traditional accompaniment to dishes such as tajarin (thin, gold-colored

pasta made with up to forty egg yolks) with butter and sage. But the grapes themselves—unlike most wine

grapes—can also be delicious eaten raw as table grapes. They are even cooked down and made into

cognà, a jam served with local hard cheeses such as Murazzano, from sheep’s milk, and Castelmagno,

mainly from cow’s milk. And why not do a little business while you are eating? Historically, the

commercially savvy Piedmontese also used dolcetto grapes to barter with neighboring Ligurians for their

famous green-tinged olive oil, salt, and anchovies.

The Vietti family has made stellar single-vineyard Barolos and Barbarescos for decades. But the family’ s barbera is the

sort of wine that’ s so irresistible and delicious you just can’ t put the glass down.

Curiously, in northern Piedmont nebbiolo is called spanna. Thus, both Gattinara and

Ghemme are usually said to be made from spanna, not nebbiolo. Wines labeled simply

with the word spanna are basic wines made from nebbiolo grown in northern Piedmont.

Rustic defines them best.

BARBERA

The word barbera may sound as though it could be related to barbaric, but in reality, this

is Piedmont’s most juicy, straightforwardly delicious red wine. Scan any Piedmontese

restaurant around dinnertime; a bottle of barbera will be on most tables. In many ways,

barbera is the antithesis of Barolo and Barbaresco. It usually does not have hard, tannic

edges, nor does it require super-long aging. Instead of Barolo’s blackish hue, barbera is

almost shockingly magenta. And unlike Barolo and Barbaresco, it is not considered a

classic. Barbera, at its best, is simply a captivating wine with lots of flavor muscle.

The barbera grape is Piedmont’s most widely planted variety (it was brought to

Piedmont after the phylloxera epidemic and met with good success). Historically it was

grown almost everywhere—everywhere, that is, except in the best soil on the best south-

facing slopes. Those went to Barolo or Barbaresco. In the winery, barbera received

stepsister treatment as well. The best barrels were reserved for Barolo and Barbaresco,

which also got more winemaking attention. Worst of all, barbera was often cultivated for

quantity. Instead of limiting yields, producers stretched them. Given barbera’s second-

class treatment in the past, it’s surprising that the wine was as good as it was.

In the 1980s, however, the forward-thinking Piedmontese vintners Giacomo Bologna

and Renato Ratti began to view barbera as a diamond in the rough. Planting it on better

sites, they limited yields, vinified it more carefully, and began aging it in small, new

French oak barrels. Quality soared. Today, many producers make very tasty modern

barberas with supple, feltlike textures, and mouthfilling chocolaty, licoricey, cherry, figgy

fruit. And because the barbera grape is naturally high in acid, the wines also have a kind of

vibrancy and zip that make them great counterpoints to food.

PIEDMONT’S OTHER TREASURE: WHITE TRUFFLES

I think I can say this: No food in the world is more riveting than the Piedmontese white truffle. Its aroma

and flavor is, in a word, narcotic. Of the more than seventy species of truffles that can be found

throughout the world, white truffles are the most cherished and highly sought after. They grow in

unpredictable spots, a foot or more underground, generally near oak, chestnut, or beech trees. They

ripen throughout the late fall; their harvest corresponds with that of Piedmont’s grapes.

No one knows why white truffles grow mainly in Piedmont or why the Piedmontese type is superior in

flavor to the small quantity that can be unearthed in Tuscany, Umbria, Emilia-Romagna, and Croatia.

White truffles have never been successfully cultivated, and even in Piedmont, their existence varies

greatly year to year based on the weather.

Because white truffles that are buried underground cannot be detected by humans, dogs and pigs are

trained to sniff them out. The truffle hunter (trifalao) must be careful to pull the animal away at just the

right moment lest the truffle become pet chow. White truffles are always hunted under the cover of night,

so that the location of the truffle bed remains secret. This, in turn, is important because white truffles

command exceedingly high prices—$4,000 to $5,600 per pound most recently—and are bought and sold

almost like illicit drugs.

According to research conducted in Germany and England, truffles are profoundly and appealingly

aromatic because they contain a special substance that is also found in the testes of men and boars.

This substance is secreted by the sweat glands in a man’s armpit and can be detected in the urine of

women. Researchers report that the substance has a powerful psychological effect on human beings.

Ugly. But to every food and wine lover , a thing of beauty.

White truffles are ugly things—gray, knobbed balls that look as though they have been deformed by

some especially evil bit of witchcraft. They range in size from marbles to baseballs, although the larger

ones are exceedingly rare. And although they are breathtakingly expensive, only a tiny amount is needed

to transform a dish. In Piedmont, white truffles are shaved raw over homemade pasta, risotto, polenta,

soft scrambled eggs, veal carpaccio, or veal tartare. The earthy pungency of the truffle seems to intensify

the earthiness of the Barbaresco or Barolo that is usually served alongside.

Each autumn in Alba, a truffle market is held under a long medieval arcade. Truffle hunters with scales

at their sides display their finds. The air is heady with the collective aroma of thousands of truffles.

Restaurateurs, buying in quantity, have sometimes been accompanied by bodyguards.

A final note: T artufi Ponzio, in the center of Alba, is a tiny shop that sells products related exclusively to

truffles and wine. There are white-truffle oils, pâtés with truffles, truffle sauces, truffle slicers, and so forth,

plus a small but stunning collection of Piedmontese wines (tartufiponzio.com).

T oday, barbera is grown everywhere in Piedmont, although the two places that

produce most of the outstanding wines are the area around the town of Alba

(barbera d’Alba) and near Asti (barbera d’Asti). A small number of producers have

begun to blend barbera and nebbiolo in the hopes of fusing barbera’s blackberry-

fruit vibrancy with nebbiolo’s structure and complexity. Some of these blends, like

Conterno Fantino’s Monprà, are delicious.

SOME OF THE BEST PRODUCERS OF BARBERA

Aldo Conterno • Coppo Camp du Rouss • Elio Altare • Elio Grasso • Gaja • Giacomo Bologna • Giacomo

Conterno • Giuseppe Mascarello • La Spinetta • Marcarini • Moccagatta • Paolo Scavino • Pio Cesare •

Prunotto • Renato Ratti • Vietti

DOLCETTO

The appealing simplicity of dolcetto (the name means “little sweet”) has caused it to be

misleadingly pegged as Italy’s Beaujolais. In fact, the two wines taste quite different.

Dolcetto, made from dolcetto grapes, has firm, spicy fruitiness set off against a subtle

bitter-chocolate background. Beaujolais, made from gamay, has a grapey fruitiness and at

its best, a minerally edge.

Dolcetto has relatively little acid, not much tannin, and is lighter in body than barbera,

making it so easy to drink it becomes almost gulpable. It, too, is a favorite every-night

wine in Piedmont, and is often served with the gargantuan Piedmontese antipasto misto.

Though most dolcetto is made to be merely easy-drinking stuff, a few producers make

serious versions—wines with such forthright grip, structure, and depth that they hardly

seem like dolcetto. These producers include Chionetti, Marcarini, and Vietti.

VERMOUTH

The indispensable ingredient in a martini, vermouth was first created and commercially sold in Piedmont

in the 1700s. Vermouth is red or white wine that has been infused with a secret blend of more than a

hundred aromatic spices, barks, bitter herbs, and flavorings, among them angelica, anise, bitter almond,

chamomile, cinnamon, coriander, ginger, nutmeg, peach, quinine, rhubarb, and saffron. Until it was

banned in the early twentieth century because of its potential psychoactive toxicity, wormwood was also

included. In fact, the word vermouth comes from the German wermut,

“wormwood.

”

Historically, the Piedmontese used muscat grapes for their base wine, and thus most vermouth was

white. T oday, cheap red or white bulk wine from the south of Italy is usually used as the base, and as a

result, the quality of vermouth is not as high as it once was. After the wine has been infused, it is then

fortified to raise the alcohol content to 15 to 21 percent (table wine is usually 12 to 14 percent). Red

vermouth is generally sweet; white vermouth may be dry or semisweet. Both are consumed solo, as

aperitifs, or mixed into various cocktails, including Manhattans. The large, commercial vermouth firms,

such as Cinzano, Martini & Rossi, and Punt e Mes, are all headquartered around Turin, the capital of

Piedmont.

The Gothic-Romanesque Abbey of V ezzolano in Asti, the region made famous by the semi-sweet sparkler also known as

Asti (once called Asti Spumante). Dizzingly fruity and a joy to drink, Asti is made from moscato (muscat blanc à petits

grains) grapes.

Dolcetto is made in selected spots all around Piedmont, but the best wines generally

come from near Alba (dolcetto d’Alba) and from around the small village of Dogliani

(dolcetto di Dogliani), which calls itself the birthplace of dolcetto thanks to sixteenth-

century documents that reference the grape, though the origin and parentage of the variety

has not been established by DNA typing.

GA VI AND ARNEIS

In Piedmont, red wine has always been a religion, and white wine, something of a

postscript. Nonetheless, a small number of good (and moderately expensive) white wines

are being made in the region, notably those called Gavi and arneis. Gavi, the wine made

around the village of Gavi, in the southeast, near the border with Liguria, once had more

than just a local reputation. During the 1960s and 1970s, when Italy was in the midst of its

fine wine revolution, many wine experts considered it the best dry white wine in the entire

country. (Pinot grigio, at the time, was considered so characterless it didn’t warrant

consideration.) By the 1980s, however, the stunning whites of Friuli-V enezia Giulia and

Trentino-Alto Adige began to challenge Gavi’s standing, and today they are far more

highly thought of.

Gavi is made from the cortese grape, presumed to be native to Piedmont, and

mentioned in early-seventeenth-century literature. At its best the wine is bone-dry and

crisp, with citrus and mineral notes—pleasant enough, to be sure. About thirty estates

specialize in Gavi, most in and around the small village of that name. The area’s proximity

to the Ligurian coast, the Italian Riviera, has made Gavi a natural partner for seafood.

Arneis, which means “rascal” in the Piedmontese dialect, has gone through several

fashion cycles. For decades, plantings were in decline, and there still isn’t very much

produced, but in the mid-1980s arneis began to acquire underground cult status as another

chic match for seafood in fashionable restaurants along the Ligurian coast. The vagaries of

fashion notwithstanding, this can be a delicious wine—dry, lively (like that rascal), and

fairly full in body, with light pear and apricot flavors. Arneis is made mostly in the hills of

Roero, northwest of Alba. The best producers include Vietti, Ceretto, Bruno Giacosa, and

Castello di Neive.

ASTI

Italy produces sparkling wines from more different grape varieties than any other country

in the world. The best known is Asti, formerly known as Asti Spumante, an aromatic,

semisweet sparkler made from moscato grapes grown all over southeastern Piedmont but

especially around the famous wine towns of Asti and Alba. South of Asti and east of Alba

is the tiny village of Canelli, where Asti production began in the latter part of the 1800s.

The village is such a hub of Asti production that this particular type of moscato is

sometimes called moscato Canelli. It has another name, too—moscato bianco, white

muscat. Both of these names refer to the same grape that in French is known as muscat

blanc à petits grains.

If everyone in the world were sitting down together for one immense lunch party and

only one wine could be served, a top Asti might be a good choice. The frothy spumante

(the word spumante means “foaming”) is as irresistible as chilled peaches on a hot day.

Y et the wine has anything but a good public relations image. Lots of poorly made,

commercial Asti Spumante exported after World War II gave it a cheap-fizz reputation that

has been slow to die. The best modern Astis are far from that. They are not sugary sweet

like candy but, rather, dizzyingly fruity and evocative of perfectly ripe peaches and

apricots. Plus, there’s the wine’s intriguing muskiness—a hallmark of moscato grapes.

Asti is also quite light—7 to 9 percent alcohol (standard wines are 12 to 14 percent). It

should be served very well chilled—cold, in fact, and in a tall, narrow glass.

There are dozens of grape varieties that have the word muscat (or moscato) in their

names, and they are some of the oldest vines around the Mediterranean. Indeed, moscato

may well have been the first grape cultivated in Piedmont, although nebbiolo, too, is an

ancient variety. Despite moscato’s long sojourn in Piedmont, its use in sparkling wine is

relatively recent. The first Asti is attributed to Carlo Gancia, who introduced sparkling

wine to the region around 1870. Gancia is still a leading commercial maker of the wine.

BRACHETTO… RUBY FIZZ

Legend has it that both Julius Caesar and Mark Antony presented gourds of sparkling brachetto to

Cleopatra, as the wine was an aphrodisiac. While that last idea is hard to fact-check, the sparkler has

undeniable charm. Brilliant ruby red in color, with intense floral and fruity notes, brachetto is made

exclusively from brachetto grapes in the Acqui region of Piedmont, hence its full name, brachetto

d’Acqui. The wine is frizzante (“lightly sparkling”), very low in alcohol, fresh, and loaded with sweet

raspberry and black cherry flavors. It is the perfect ending to a meal, and is one of the few wines in the

world that pairs extremely well with chocolate.

Most Asti is not made according to the traditional (Champagne) method (with

secondary fermentation in the bottle) but by the Charmat, or tank, method. In this type of

fermentation, the grapes are crushed and the must is put in large vats and chilled to near

freezing to prevent immediate fermentation. The wine is then fermented in batches as

needed, which preserves the sensational fruitiness of the grapes. The process takes place in

enormous, pressurized, sealed tanks that trap the natural carbon dioxide gas and cause it to

dissolve back into the wine (the trapped carbon dioxide will become the wine’s bubbles).

When the wine has reached about 7 to 9 percent alcohol, and about 3 to 5 percent of the

natural grape sugar (residual sugar) remains, it is chilled down to stabilize it, centrifuged

to remove all remaining yeasts, and bottled. At that point the sparkler is immediately

shipped, so that it can be consumed at its freshest and liveliest. Asti producers do not

generally put vintage dates on bottles, since the wines for sale should always (you hope)

be from the immediate past harvest.

Each year, 68 million bottles of Asti are made by a handful of giant companies,

including Cinzano, Contratto, Gancia, Fontanafredda, and Martini & Rossi. In fact, more

than five times as much Asti is made yearly than Barolo.

MOSCATO D’ASTI

Asti’s more prestigious cousin, moscato d’Asti is generally made in tiny batches and in

limited quantities by small Piedmontese producers using selected muscat blanc à petit

grains grapes. Delicate, lightly sweet, and gorgeously fruity, moscato d’Asti is particularly

low in alcohol—no more than 5.5 percent by law (Asti is usually 7 to 9 percent alcohol).

This makes moscato d’Asti a fairly fragile wine, which in turn has made it highly

desirable among Italian wine connoisseurs.

Moscato d’Asti is also less effervescent than Asti. It is not considered spumante

(foaming) at all, just a bit frizzante (fizzy). Since it is under less pressure than Asti, it is

stoppered with a regular cork, not a sparkling wine cork with a wire cage. Moscato d’Asti

is vintage dated and is served well chilled, generally in regular wineglasses, not flutes. It

should be drunk while fresh, soon after release. In Piedmont it’s traditional to drink a glass

on Christmas morning.

SOME OF THE BEST PRODUCERS OF MOSCATO D’ASTI

Cascina La Spinetta-Rivetti • Icardi • I Vignaioli di Santo Stefano • Marchesi di Gresy • Vietti Cascinetta

THE FOODS OF PIEDMONT

Northern Italian food, including the food of Piedmont, is not what many people imagine it

to be—and for a good historical reason. The great wave of Italian emigrants who left Italy

at the beginning of the twentieth century consisted mostly of extremely poor people from

southern villages. To their new home countries, they brought a modest repertoire of

regional peasant dishes that revolved around pasta, olive oil, tomatoes, and vegetables.

Dishes like “spaghetti and meatballs” were among the immigrant inventions that bore little

resemblance to what was being cooked and eaten in southern Italy itself.

The cuisines of northern Italy went largely unknown around the world until the past

few decades. And then, their appeal was said to be their lightness. Whoever suggested

that, however, certainly wasn’t thinking about Piedmontese food. Here, hearty, copious

dishes evolved as the logical sustenance of people who lived in the cold shadow of the

Alps and drank robust red wines to keep warm.

Thanks to Piedmont’ s cold winters and its inland location on the foothills of the Alps, the local cuisine is meat-based and

hearty.

Moreover, Piedmont, on the border of France, was once part of the Kingdom of Savoy.

As the cuisines clanged together, Piedmont adopted the most luxurious French ingredients.

Butter, cream, and eggs are used more extensively here than in any other region of Italy,

with the possible exception of Emilia-Romagna.

Perhaps the most startling difference between the cooking of Piedmont and that of the

rest of Italy is the prominence of meat. In no other region are diners presented with such

he-man-size hunks of roasted game, veal, and lamb. Remarkably, the carnivorous feast is

usually preceded by a herculean Piedmontese antipasto misto—a series of up to twenty

dishes (egg frittatas, sausages with beans, veal tartare, and so on) that could feed at least a

dozen people more than are at the table.

One of the single most compelling Piedmontese appetizers is bagna cauda (literally,

“hot bath”), a hearty fall specialty always served during the grape harvest. Extra virgin

olive oil, butter, anchovies, and garlic are whisked together, heated to near boiling, and

served with a variety of vegetables that you dip in the hot oil. These include cardoons (a

member of the artichoke family), red peppers, fennel, leeks, radishes, onions, cabbage,

beets, and bitter lettuces. Bread is put to use as an edible plate, helping to convey the

vegetables from the pot to the mouth without dripping oil all over the tablecloth.

The two famous Piedmontese pasta dishes are tagliatelle and agnolotti. Tagliatelle are

long, thin, handmade egg noodles lavishly but simply dressed with nothing more than

melted butter and sage. In the fall, white truffles will be shaved over the pasta, falling like

snow-flakes on top of the glistening yellow strands. (Heaven when accompanied by

Barolo.) Agnolotti are small, half-moon-shaped ravioli, frequently stuffed with veal and

sage, or such vegetables as pumpkin or spinach and, again, drizzled lightly with melted

butter.

Stretching across the north of Italy is a vast corn and rice belt, with the result that

polenta and risotto are as customary as pasta. Piedmontese risottos, made with rich meat

broths and the region’s earthy wild mushrooms, are irresistible. Polenta (cornmeal as art)

is often pan sautéed in butter and served (like American mashed potatoes) as a foil for

roasts.

In Piedmontese restaurants, large bread-sticks—grissini—are immediately brought to

the table, lest anyone go hungry in the first few seconds after arrival. These impressive

specimens can be as long as the width of the table, or just big and fat. Baking in general is

more significant in the north thanks to both French and Austrian influences.

Above all else, however, the food that immortalizes Piedmont is the white truffle—one

of the world’s most rarified specialties and a tribute to Italian hedonism.

WHEN YOU VISIT… PIEDMONT

Virtually all of the best wine estates in Piedmont are small and family-run. Visiting is by

appointment only. Luckily, most are also within easy driving distance from Alba, a

charming small town as famous for white truffles as it is for wine. (Late November is

white truffle season.) Conveniently, many of Piedmont’s best restaurants, such as

Guido, Boccondivino, Cacciatori, Piazza Duomo, La Rei, and La Ciau del T ornavento,

are also located in this part of the wine country.

The Piedmontese Wines to Know

WHITES

VIETTI

MOSCATO D’ASTI | CASCINETTA VIETTI

100% muscat blanc à petits grains

For sheer abandon, nothing beats this wine. The flavor is a juicy riot of peaches, apricots, oranges, and ginger, all

framed by effusive bubbles. I could drink this all day. (I think I really could; it’s only 5.5 percent alcohol.) Much of

the moscato d’Asti made today (especially by very large wine companies) is little more than a cheap, fruity fizz.

But the small-estate moscatos d’Asti made by quality-oriented producers, such as the Vietti family, are wholly

different. Their artisanal flavor and pure scrumptiousness are irresistible. In fact, well-made moscato d’Asti is a

wine nobody doesn’t like.

GAJA

CHARDONNAY | ROSSJ-BASS

100% chardonnay

Angelo Gaja makes two delicious chardonnays: Rossj-Bass and Gaia & Rey. Although the latter is more famous

and more voluptuous, the Rossj-Bass is the more pure, high-toned, elegant wine. (The wine is named after Angelo

Gaja’s youngest daughter, Rossana, Rossj for short.) There’s just a hint of oak to enrich the fruit, plus a dense,

creamy pear-nectar quality, always spiked with jazzy, appley acidity.

REDS

MARCARINI

DOLCETTO D’ALBA | BOSCHI DI BERRI

100% dolcetto

Marcarini makes seriously delicious dolcetto from the century-old, pre-phylloxera vineyard known as Boschi di

Berri. The wine is a vibrating bowl full of burstingly ripe, maddeningly red cherries laced with violets and vanilla

crème anglaise. The fruit is effusive, the balance is perfect, the finish is remarkably long, and the crave factor is at

an all-time high.

VIETTI

BARBERA D’ALBA | SCARRONE

100% barbera

The spirited Vietti family is intensely hardworking, and their passion shows in their wines. The family members are

considered barbera experts, although their Barolos and even their moscatos are delicious wines full of personality.

They make several single-vineyard barberas and each has explosive, rich fruit. The most profound, refined, and

ageworthy is the Scarrone, which, with even a few years of age, can stop you in your tracks. This is a kinetic

barbera, a barbera where berry, licorice, citrus, leather, and vanilla flavors rage around, tempestlike, in the glass.

GAJA

BARBARESCO | SORÌ TILDÌN

100% nebbiolo

Gaja makes a number of stunning Piedmontese wines, including his four Barbarescos, which are the heart and soul

of the winery. Although all are richly flavored, complex wines, the single-vineyard Sorì Tildìn is incomparable. The

sensation of sipping this wine is rather like coming in from the cold and being wrapped up in a warm blanket. The

wine unleashes a torrent of compelling aromas and flavors—violets, chocolate, roses, tar, and figs, and the tannin

broaches silk in its ability to be strong and soft at the same time.

PIO CESARE

BARBARESCO

100% nebbiolo

Founded in 1881, in the center of Alba, the estate of Pio Cesare has been one of the pillars of winemaking in the

Langhe for more than a century. The Barolos and Barbarescos here are especially sumptuous and long, For me, the

Barbaresco is a poem to the earth… to the scents of fallen leaves, tobacco, worn leather, and summer as it descends

into the decay of fall. For all the gentility of the fruit flavors, the wine’s severe and majestic structure is classic

nebbiolo. The grapes for this Barbaresco come in part from the Pio Cesare family’s Il Bricco vineyard, in the

village of Treiso.

LUCIANO SANDRONE

BAROLO | CANNUBI BOSCHIS

100% nebbiolo

Luciano Sandrone makes some of the most texturally rich Barolos in Piedmont. Indeed, texture is so important to

Sandrone that he heats his cellars during the harvest so that the just-picked nebbiolo grapes can immediately begin

to ferment (yeasts work more quickly in a warm environment), rather than sit for an extended period in contact with

the highly tannic nebbiolo skins. The effect is amazing, especially with Sandrone’s Barolo from the famous

Cannubi Boschis section of the Cannubi vineyard. Suppleness—a word not often used with Barolo—is the right

word here. Plus the flavors—tar, incense, dark plums—soar, giving one the uncanny sense that the wine is

somehow flying across one’s palate.

CERETTO

BAROLO | BRICCO ROCCHE BRICCO ROCCHE

100% nebbiolo

Bricco Rocche Bricco Rocche (the name of the wine and the name of the tiny, 3.7-acre/1.5-hectare vineyard are the

same) is above all a graceful wine of intense concentration, with a flawless, suede-like texture. The irresistible

aromas of earth, sea salt, dried leaves, incense, and something evocative of the human body are mesmerizing. This

is the most expensive and refined of the three Ceretto single-vineyard Barolos, and it is from extremely steep

vineyards at the crest of a hill. Ceretto produces Bricco Rocche Bricco Rocche only four or five times a decade.

GIACOMO CONTERNO

BAROLO | CASCINA FRANCIA

100% nebbiolo

One of the most traditional wine estates of Piedmont, Giacomo Conterno still makes some of the greatest Barolos.

No modern hand with oak or fermentation temperatures here, just a very fine sense of how to coax finesse out of

nebbiolo. The effect is dazzling. In great vintages, the Giacomo Conterno wines from the family’s 35-acre (14-

hectare) Cascina Francia estate in Serralunga are beautiful, lingering wines evocative of roses, tar, licorice, sage,

rosemary, and salt. These are Barolos for laying away until, on some dark, cold night, with a roast in the oven, you

can’t bear it any longer.

V enice’ s strategic position has afforded it both protection and power . From the 9th to the 12th centuries, it was a key

center of trade between western Europe and the Byzantine Empire.

THE VENETO

The leading wine-producing region of the north in terms of volume, the V eneto is, in some

years, the most prolific region in all of Italy. Unfortunately, oceans of V eneto wine are

entirely forgettable, obscuring the fact that the region is also home to some great classics,

such as amarone, considered by many Italian wine experts to be the greatest traditional red

wine of northern Italy.

Both the V eneto and its beloved city of V enice take their names from the V eneti, the

tribe that settled in the area around 1000 B.C. As one of the leading ports and commercial

centers of the medieval world, V enice was a link between the Byzantine Empire in the

East and the emerging countries of northern Europe. Its trade in wines, spices, and food, as

well as its wealth and accomplishments in art, architecture, and glass production, laid the

groundwork for V enice to become one of the most sophisticated cities in all of Italy.

From V enice and the Adriatic coast, the plains of the V eneto stretch inland through

fairly flat farmland until they come to the lower foothills of the Alps and the border with

Trentino-Alto Adige in the northwest. Much of this land is fertile and extremely

productive, which helped set the scene for the ambitious scale of viticulture that has

ensued.

The V eneto’s big-business stance began in the 1960s and 1970s when the region geared

up to produce industrial amounts of the whites Soave and pinot grigio and the reds

V alpolicella and Bardolino. Much of this was intended for the United States and Great

Britain, where undemanding, inexpensive, innocuous Italian wines had begun to sell like

hotcakes.

Just-harvested black-purple corvina grapes at Bertani Winery. Corvina is the leading variety in many of the V eneto’ s

best-known red wines, including amarone and V alpolicella.

THE QUICK SIP ON THE VENETO

TWO OF ITALY’S most well-known and widely exported wines come from the Veneto:

Soave, a white, and Valpolicella, a red. Both are available as low- and high-quality

wines.

SOME VENETO WINES, both dry and sweet, are made by a special process known as

appassimento, which concentrates the sugars in the grapes. The two best known of

these are the dry red amarone and the sweet red recioto di Valpolicella.

ONE OF THE VENETO’S MOST POPULAR wines is Prosecco, a very chic, casual

Italian spumante, and the sparkling wine behind the legendary cocktail, the Bellini.

It’s tempting, of course, to dismiss the wines just mentioned, for the commercial

version of each can be truly awful. But nothing Italian is ever that simple. Take Soave.

While most of it is a mass-produced liquid with only slightly more flavor than water, there

are a number of quite extraordinary Soaves—wines you’d never guess were Soave if you

didn’t know. Thus, for many V eneto wines, two versions exist: the casual cheap version,

and a giant step up in quality (and price), the really terrific version.

The V eneto also produces several wines made by a method called appassimento, in

which grapes are spread on mats or left to hang in cool lofts, in order to raisinate and

concentrate them. The dry wine amarone is made this way, as are sweet wines labeled

recioto (as in recioto di V alpolicella). The word recioto derives from recie, dialect for

“ears,

” in this case referring to the protruding lobes, or ears of a bunch of grapes. Since

they are the part of the bunch that is most exposed to the sun, the ears often have the ripest

grapes. To make a recioto wine, either the ears or, if they are ripe enough, entire bunches

of grapes are dried until the sugar is very concentrated. When the grapes are fermented, a

percentage of the natural residual grape sugar is allowed to remain in the wine. The wine

that results can be rich indeed. Opulent yet elegant sweet versions of both Soave and

V alpolicella are made in this way.

Against the backdrop of such extremely well-known wines as Soave and V alpolicella,

you’ll find several V eneto wines with almost cultlike followings. Among them are those of

the producer Maculan, made near the village of Breganze. Maculan was one of the first to

approach chardonnay and cabernet sauvignon with quality (and higher prices) in mind.

But Maculan’s most renowned wine is Torcolato, the most famous dessert wine of the

V eneto. Torcolato is made primarily from native vespaiolo grapes that have been lightly

affected by botrytis and then, after picking, put into special drying lofts and allowed to

shrivel and raisinate (the appassimento method). The wine is gorgeously balanced, with

striking raisin, orange, vanilla, green tea, and roasted nut flavors. The name Torcolato

(“twisted” in Italian) refers to the special way the winery’s workers tie bunches of grapes

with twine, twisting them so that each bunch hangs freely, completely surrounded by air,

ensuring perfect drying.

Lastly, the V eneto is home to Prosecco, an easy-drinking sparkling wine and the bubbly

that’s traditionally blended with the juice of fresh white peaches to make V enice’s most

famous cocktail, the Bellini.

THE LAND, THE GRAPES, AND THE VINEYARDS

Though the northern and western parts of the V eneto can be quite mountainous, the region

is less influenced by the Alps than either of its neighbors, Trentino-Alto Adige or Friuli-

V enezia Giulia. Both the Adige and Po rivers, on their way to the Adriatic Sea, flow across

the broad plains of the V eneto, creating large expanses of rich, sun-drenched farmland

where vegetables and fruits, including grapes, grow profusely. Since great wines in

general come not from fertile soil but from the opposite, the V eneto’s best vines tend to be

planted near hills, on well-drained volcanic soil interspersed with sand, clay, and gravel.

THE MOST IMPORTANT VENETO WINES

LEADING WINES

AMARONE red

PINOT GRIGIO white

PROSECCO white (sparkling)

SOAVE white

VALPOLICELLA red

WINES OF NOTE

BARDOLINO red

BIANCO DI CUSTOZA white

CABERNET SAUVIGNON red

CHARDONNAY white

MERLOT red

RECIOTO DELLA VALPOLICELLA red (sweet)

RECIOTO DI SOAVE white (sweet)

The V eneto can be divided into three zones. In the far west, near Lake Garda and the

volcanic mountain range of Monte Lessini, the traditional wines Soave, V alpolicella,

Bardolino, and amarone are produced, as well as Bianco di Custoza, one of those simple

sorts of white wines that taste best when drunk in a bar (the wine, not you) in the region

where they’re made. V erona, the major city, is one of Italy’s wine capitals; each year, the

country’s largest wine fair, Vinitaly, is held here. (Spread over five or more coliseum-size

buildings, the fair includes so many thousands of Italian wines that tasting them all could

take weeks.) In the V eneto’s northern hills above Treviso (held to be the radicchio capital

of Italy), Prosecco is made. What is considered more or less the center of the V eneto, from

V enice to Vicenza, is the source of several different types of wine, ranging from simple

merlots, cabernet sauvignons, chardonnays, and pinot grigios of no particular distinction

(Santa Margherita pinot grigio comes from here) to more exciting wines, especially from

around Breganze, Colli Berici, and Colli Euganei.

THE GRAPES OF THE VENETO

WHITES

CHARDONNAY: Can make some attractive New World–style wines, but more often they are merely

decent.

GARGANEGA: Leading grape grown in the Veneto since the Rennaissance. The dominant grape in

Soave, where it is blended with so-called trebbiano di Soave (verdicchio bianco).

GLERA: Probably originally native to the Istrian peninsula (now part of Croatia) near Friuli-Venezia

Giulia’s far eastern border. T oday grown almost exclusively in the Veneto. The principal grape in the

popular sparkling wine Prosecco.

PINOT BIANCO: A minor grape in terms of production, but when pinot bianco (pinot blanc) is used, as it

often is, as part of a blend, it contributes good body and character.

PINOT GRIGIO: Also known as pinot gris, pinot grigio makes volumes of decent light wine (with a few

exceptions, most are usually not as good as the pinot grigios of Friuli or the Alto Adige).

TREBBIANO DI SOAVE: Despite its local name, not actually a trebbiano, but rather, the grape

verdicchio bianco. Good-quality grape blended with garganega to make Soave and bianco di Custoza.

TREBBIANO TOSCANO: A neutral-tasting grape used in cheaper versions of Soave and other Veneto

whites.

VESPAIOLA: Native grape. The source of some interesting dry white wines, and more-famous sweet

ones.

REDS

CABERNET SAUVIGNON: With a few notable exceptions, made into relatively insubstantial wines.

CORVINA VERONESE: Leading native red grape. Thanks to its good structure, it’s the lion’s share of the

blend in amarone, Valpolicella, and most Bardolinos. The name may be derived from corvo (“crow,

” a

reference to the black color of the grapes).

MERLOT : Mostly made into simple, serviceable, but uninspired wines.

MOLINARA: A minor blending component in the wines amarone, Valpolicella, and Bardolino. Considered

generally lower in quality than corvina and rondinella.

NEGRARA: A minor blending component in the wines amarone, Valpolicella, and Bardolino.

OSELETA: Rare blending grape thought to be extinct but rescued and revived in the 1990s and now

used in very small amounts by some producers in their amarones and Valpolicellas.

RONDINELLA: The second most important grape, after corvina (which is one of its parents), in amarone,

Valpolicella, and Bardolino.

The fortresslike medieval castle of Soave, built in the 10th century in the western V eneto. The countryside around the

castle is well known for garganega and trebbiano di Soave grapes and the simple, easy-drinking white wine made from

them.

As with Friuli and Trentino-Alto Adige, the V eneto was once home to dozens of grape

varieties and many of them are still grown today, though in smaller amounts. In addition to

the international varieties already mentioned, several native grapes are key. The leading

native red grape by far is corvina, more accurately corvina V eronese, the major grape in

amarone, V alpolicella, and Bardolino. Corvina is usually blended with smaller amounts of

rondinella (its progeny), molinara, and sometimes negrara.

The leading white grape for the traditional wine Soave is an old V eneto variety—

garganega, almost always blended with what is locally called trebbiano di Soave. (While it

may be called a trebbiano, this old V eronese grape has been shown by DNA typing to be

the grape verdicchio bianco.) Then there is vespaiola, a far more rare grape than garganega

or trebbiano, that makes some fascinating wines, especially sweet wines. The grape owes

its name to the word vespa (Italian for “wasp”), because when ripe, the grapes attract large

numbers of these insects.

A HISTORY OF WINEGLASSES: ITALY’S MAJOR ROLE

From the beginning of time, drinking vessels have taken their inspiration from natural forms: hands

cupped together, the conical horn of an animal, a gourd split into two bowls, a flower and its stem. Such

simple images as these have given rise to an incredible number of objects used throughout history from

which to drink wine. These range from the animal skins of the ancient world to the plastic tumblers of

today.

But if any one substance was meant to carry wine, it is glass. Wineglasses are not a modern

invention. In the first century B.C., mouth-blown goblets, beakers, and bottles were being made in the

Mediterranean and Near East. These early vessels were extremely precious and rare.

Remarkably, modern glasses are made in essentially the same way ancient ones were. Basically,

common sand—which contains silica—is combined with ashes from trees—potash. The mixture is then

fired at intense heat—up to 2,500°F (1,371°C)—causing the substances to melt together. After firing, the

molten blob is blown by mouth (or machine) and shaped.

Glassmaking reached its zenith in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries on the island of Murano,

near Venice, Italy. There, glassmakers were held as virtual captives of their guild. Any glassblower

caught trying to escape from the island or revealing the secret of Venetian glassmaking was punished by

death. (Murano glass is still considered among the finest in Europe.)

A glassblower in Murano, where, in the 16th century, glassmaking was raised to a high art.

Meanwhile, in England, perhaps the single greatest innovation in glassmaking had been stumbled

upon. In 1674, a glassblower named George Ravenscroft discovered that adding a small amount of lead

oxide to molten glass made it more malleable. Elaborate designs could now be etched and cut into the

lead crystal. Moreover, after being formed, lead crystal was more brilliant and durable than simple glass.

In propitious, yin-yang fashion, more beautiful glasses became an incentive to create better wines and

beverages. These, in turn, inspired ever more beautiful glasses. One of the best examples of this is

Champagne. First made in the late 1600s, Champagne was hazy with sediment, viscous, and sweet.

When advances in glassmaking led to glasses with a transparent brilliance and elegance never before

thought possible, the new, graceful glasses inspired improvements in Champagne making. In turn,

improvements in the clarity of Champagne inspired ever more stunning glasses into which beautiful

Champagne could be poured.

From their invention until the beginning of the nineteenth century, glasses were used mainly by royalty,

and principally on special occasions. The purchase of a single wineglass was considered a serious

investment, and at the most prestigious banquets, one glass might be shared by several dinner guests. If

the host was especially wealthy, the banquet glasses might include some intentionally designed with a

rounded bottom and no stem. Such glasses made the party livelier, since only cups that had been

drained of their contents could be put down, lest the liquid spill out. These glass cups were the

forerunners of our tumblers.

In the nineteenth century, glass production soared as blowing techniques improved. Glass houses

capable of large-scale manufacturing began to emerge. The process of making glasses in molds was

invented. Glassmaking quickly achieved a scale of production that allowed sets to become affordable.

Glasses became status symbols. At all of the best dinner parties, each guest’s place would be set with

numerous goblets: one for Champagne, one for red wine, one for white, one for Sherry, and so on.

Modern molds and techniques also allowed greater variation in bottle shapes and colors. Glass

houses throughout Europe began producing signature bottles meant to be identified with certain wines.

Bottles with sloping shoulders were used for Burgundy; extremely tapered bottles held German wines.

High-shouldered bottles (helpful in blocking sediment while decanting) were used for Bordeaux.

As the twentieth century drew to a close, a renewed sense of creativity gripped the world of

glassmaking. Wineglass design ranged from dramatically whimsical to almost exaggeratedly classic. And

for the first time in decades, wine bottles again became a vehicle for avant-garde design. Witness the

utterly fragile, delicately curved modern shapes of grappa bottles. As much as the liquid inside, the

beauty of these bottles has inspired a whole new generation at least to buy (if not to drink) Italian grappa.

SOAVE

One of Italy’s best-known, exported white wines, Soave comes from the castle-topped

hillside town of the same name, just east of V erona, in the western part of the V eneto.

Traditionally, Soaves—made from garganega and “trebbiano” (verdicchio bianco)—were

light, fresh, and at their best, smooth and soave (“suave” or “smooth” in Italian). Since the

early 1970s, however, a lot of the Soave produced has been commercial, bland, cheap jug

wine based on a neutral-tasting grape—an actual trebbiano variety—called trebbiano

Toscano and produced from vineyards that have enormous yields.

Basic, featherweight Soave is never aged and can come from anywhere in the Soave

denomination, which was greatly expanded in the 1970s. A step up in quality is Soave

Classico, wine that comes from the original, smaller Soave zone on the steep hills above

the towns of Soave and Monteforte d’Alpone. An even greater step up in quality is Soave

Classico Superiore, which cannot be released until a year after the harvest.

Finally, each year a tiny amount of sweet Soave is made from garganega grapes, using

the appassimento method. Like amarone and recioto della V alpolicella, recioto di Soave is

made from very ripe grapes that have been put in special drying rooms, allowing the

grapes to dry out and their sugars to concentrate. Since fermentation is halted before all of

the sugar is converted into alcohol, recioto di Soave is sweet. Although made in small

amounts, it is one of the true specialties of the V eneto and can be a stunningly delicious

wine. (Try the recioto di Soave from Pieropan.)

The three absolute champions when it comes to Soave are the producers Anselmi

(which actually renounced the designation Soave years ago to protest the commercial

versions, and now labels its wines with proprietary names such as Capitel Croce), Gini,

and Pieropan (whose La Rocca is a terrific Soave). Other top producers to look for include

Bertani and Guerrieri Rizzardi.

PROSECCO

The V eneto’s ubiquitous spumante (“sparkling wine”), Prosecco is made principally from

glera grapes, sometimes with small amounts of pinot bianco, pinot grigio, or an

indigenous grape such as verdiso added. The grape glera used to be referred to as Prosecco

(so, historically, Prosecco the wine was made from prosecco grapes), but in 2009, when

Prosecco di Conegliano-V aldobbiadene was elevated to DOCG status, producers changed

the name to avoid confusion between the name of the grape and the name of the wine.

Basic, inexpensive Prosecco is made from grapes grown at fairly high yields over a

very large area. A step up in quality are Proseccos made from the best glera grapes grown

in the original Prosecco Superiore zone, just north of V enice, in the rambling hills between

the villages of Conegliano and V aldobbiadene.

Originally, Prosecco was only slightly fizzy. Today, most examples are fully sparkling

and dry (brut), with a simple fruity flavor and an appealing bitter edge. (Hence the

Bellini’s brilliance—sweet white peach juice as a counterpoint to glera’s bitterness.)

Prosecco, however, does not get its bubbles via the traditional (Champagne) method.

Rather, Prosecco is made by the Charmat process, in which the wine undergoes a second

fermentation in pressurized tanks rather than bottles. Most versions are not vintage dated.

That said, a new very high level of Prosecco has recently come to be. This level, called

rive (local dialect for “hillside”), is made up of small-production Proseccos that are

vintage dated and based on grapes grown in a single town.

In the late afternoon, virtually every bar in V enice pours glass after glass of Prosecco,

which the civilized, chic V enetians consider revitalizing after working all day. (In the

2010s, with Prosecco sales soaring, it seemed like New Y orkers felt the same way.) Top

producers include Adriano Adami, Bisol Jeio, Bellenda, Carpenè Malvolti, Nino Franco,

Col V etoraz, Sorelle Bronca, Mionetto, and Ruggeri.

AMARONE: SAY CHEESE

Despite the common assumption that all red wines taste good with cheese, many cheeses can make red

wines taste flat and hollow. One exception is amarone—which stands up to even dramatic cheeses. At 15

to 16 percent alcohol and with a Portlike body and deep bitter chocolate, mocha, dried fig, and earthy

flavors, amarone is a powerhouse. In his authoritative books on Italian wine, the Italian wine expert

Victor Hazan (husband of the late, famed cookbook author Marcella Hazan) suggests that amarone is the

perfect wine to drink with a roast, being careful to save the last glasses to sip during the finale: a plate of

walnuts and bite-size chunks of Parmigiano-Reggiano.

AMARONE

Big, dense red wines the world over are unquestionably the product of very ripe grapes,

and very ripe grapes in turn are the product of warm, sunny places. Historically, this

simple fact meant that most relatively cool regions, and the V eneto is one, learned to be

satisfied making lighter reds or settling for whites. How, then, did the V eneto get to be

famous for amarone, an intense wine with a syrupy thickness? By the special style of

winemaking called appassimento. Here’s what happens.

Amarone (the name means “great bitter one”) is made in the V alpolicella region, near

V erona, from the same grapes as V alpolicella: mainly corvina, with rondinella, molinara,

and sometimes negrara. But while the grapes for V alpolicella are picked during the regular

harvest, a small percentage of grapes (historically about 40 percent) are left to hang on the

vine a little longer, achieving extra ripeness before they are picked. These are the grapes

that can become amarone. Next, the best whole bunches of these ripe grapes are spread on

bamboo shelving or left hanging in the air in cool drying lofts for three to four months,

although the exact amount of time varies from producer to producer. This causes the

grapes to shrivel, further concentrating their sugar and flavors. As they dry and raisinate,

the grapes lose up to a third of their weight, mostly water. When the grapes are finally

crushed and fermented, the resulting wine is opulent, full-bodied, and, at 15 to 16 percent

alcohol, higher in alcohol than a regular V alpolicella, which averages around 12 percent.

Amarones are then aged for two years or more (four years for the riserva) before release.

Today, some of that aging may take place in small, new oak barrels, giving the wine even

broader and more powerful flavors.

Corvina and rondinella grapes lose 30 percent of their weight as they dry on wooden or bamboo slats. Once

concentrated in this way, the grapes will be used to make lush, full-bodied amarone.

The labor-intensive method of concentrating grape sugar not only adds to the wine’s

cost, but the process itself is also fairly risky. Even a small amount of wet autumn weather

can cause the bunches to rot rather than dry out. As a result, producers who are less than

scrupulously careful and clean in their winemaking can end up with amarones with flavors

that seem to hint of mold and a certain dankness. But when the winemaking is above

reproach and the grapes selected for drying are only of the highest level and come from a

good vineyard, an amarone can be spellbinding—powerful almost to the point of Portlike

concentration, and packed with mocha and earthy flavors at the same time.

V enice is spread over 118 small islands connected by bridges and canals.

Lake Garda, the largest lake in Italy, was formed by glaciers at the end of the last Ice Age. The lake water is known for

its intense hues of blue. Around the lake, corvina, rondinella, molinara, and negrara vines thrive and are used to make

the light red Bardolino.

SOME OF THE BEST PRODUCERS OF AMARONE

Allegrini • Bertani • Corte Sant’Alda • Le Ragose • Le Salette • Masi • Quintarelli • Romano dal Forno •

Serègo Alighieri • Speri • T edeschi • T ommasi • T ommaso Bussola • Zenato

VALPOLICELLA AND BARDOLINO

Like amarone, V alpolicella is made from corvina, along with rondinella, molinara, and

sometimes negrara grapes. Five distinct styles of V alpolicella (the name means “valley of

many wine cellars”) are made. First is the basic, lightweight, grapey stuff, which is usually

not aged and can come from anywhere in the V alpolicella denomination. Like Soave, this

area was greatly expanded in the 1970s to meet increasing demand for inexpensive wine.

Better quality is V alpolicella Classico, which refers to wines that come from the original,

smaller V alpolicella zone. Better still is V alpolicella Classico Superiore, which must be

aged a year before release and, in practice, commands better grapes. In the hands of a

great producer like Allegrini, V alpolicella Classico Superiore can be a sensational wine,

with rich, minerally, dried cherry and licorice flavors.

But there’s an even higher-quality, more intensely flavored, and thicker-textured kind

of V alpolicella yet. Called V alpolicella ripasso, it is made by taking the newly fermented

V alpolicella wine and adding it to amarone pomace, which is the pulpy mass of seeds and

skins leftover after the amarone has fermented. The V alpolicella is left in contact with the

powerfully flavorful amarone pomace for a couple of weeks, during which time the wine

picks up extra color, tannin, flavor, and structure from the pomace. In the end, the wine

can possess an almost zinfandel-like jamminess. The word ripasso comes from the verb

ripassare—

“to pass over” or “do something again.

” In particular, the producer Masi has

been at the forefront of making V alpolicella ripasso. Theirs, which was the first, is called

Campo Fiorin.

Finally, there’s the fifth kind of V alpolicella, recioto della V alpolicella. Like amarone,

recioto della V alpolicella is made from the ripest grapes, which have been put in special

drying rooms, allowing the grapes to raisinate and their sugar to concentrate. But while, in

the case of amarone, all that sugar is converted into alcohol, thereby making the wine dry,

fermentation is halted for recioto della V alpolicella before all of the sugar is converted into

alcohol, so the wine is sweet. Only a tiny amount of recioto della V alpolicella is made, and

it can be utterly sensational—a rich, sweet, but not saccharine red wine that is supple and

complex and just waiting for an oozingly creamy Italian cheese, like a ripe Taleggio.

THE BELLINI

Italy’s legendary summertime cocktail, the Bellini, is a combination of icy-cold sparkling Prosecco and

fresh white peach juice. The drink was invented in the 1930s at Harry’s Bar, in V enice, which employed

one man each summer—when peaches were ripe—to do nothing but cut and pit small, fragile Italian

white peaches (never the yellow variety) and then squeeze them by hand to extract the juice. Today, many

Bellinis are made with frozen white peach juice exported from France and any sort of sparkling wine, but

in the V eneto, every Bellini is the real thing.

The top producers of V alpolicella, in addition to Allegrini and Masi, are Bertani,

Tedeschi, Quintarelli, and Tommasi.

Though often thought of as a stand-in for V alpolicella, Bardolino is quite different,

although it’s made from the same grapes. Named after the town of Bardolino, on Lake

Garda, the wine—more pink than red—is very light-bodied, with faint cherry flavors and

sometimes an edge of spiciness. (It is drunk by the carafe with pizza in the modest

trattorias along the lake.) Bardolino Classico, from the original district surrounding the

town, is a more interesting wine than simple Bardolino. When turned into an inexpensive

rosé sparkling wine, Bardolino is called chiaretto, which is a popular summertime quaff.

In the fall, basic Bardolino is also made as a novello wine, a takeoff on commercial-tasting

Beaujolais Nouveau. All types of Bardolino are best drunk slightly chilled. The top

producer of Bardolino is Guerrieri-Rizzardi.

WHEN YOU VISIT… THE VENETO

Start out in the magical city of Venice, and make day trips to the Veneto’s vine-covered

hills, which stretch from the Austrian border through Prosecco country to the eastern

shores of Lake Garda. The landscape is beautiful; the food stellar. Lovers of sparkling

wine should not miss the Strada del Vino Prosecco (Prosecco wine route) that winds

through the Treviso hills. For most wineries, appointments are necessary, and it helps

to have a working knowledge of Italian.

The Veneto Wines to Know

SPARKLING

ADRIANO ADAMI

PROSECCO | GARBÈL | BRUT

100% glera

This is one of the freshest, loveliest Proseccos around, despite being the Adami family’s “basic” Prosecco. (Its big

sister, called Vigneto Giardino, is masterful.) The Garbèl’s beautiful tinge of briochelike yeastiness gives it a flavor

that’s deeper and a little more sophisticated than that of most other Proseccos. And while many moderately priced

Proseccos are rather thin and slightly bitter (making them cry out for a Bellini-Band-Aid of peach juice), the

Adriano Adami Garbèl is gingery and creamy on the palate. The word garbèl, in the old V enetian dialect, means

“crisp and dry.

”

REDS

ALLEGRINI

LA GROLA

80% corvina, 10% syrah, 10% oseleta

This is my favorite “V alpolicella,

” although, since it is made outside the specific requirements for the V alpolicella

DOC, it’s designated an IGT. La Grola comes from the high-elevation, chalky-clay vineyard La Grola, and a richer,

more lively, flavor-packed V eronese red does not exist (apart, of course, from amarone). The wine’s silky texture

and heady aromatics are immediately seductive, but the whirlwind of racy flavors—spices, tobacco, tar, raspberries,

graphite, minerals, and licorice—is unbeatable. Best of all, La Grola always possesses a distinctive character that’s

not unlike the sweet-bitter quality of Italian bitters, making it a very sophisticated wine at the table.

ALLEGRINI

AMARONE DELLA VALPOLICELLA CLASSICO

80% corvina, 15% rondinella, 5% oseleta

If you could only ever drink one superb amarone, this should be the one. Indeed, Allegrini’s amarone reaches

heights of complexity that few others do. It’s hard to say exactly what the wine is like. The intense aromas and

flavors are equal parts fruity, salty, savory, acidic, and bitter. Tasting this not long ago, my mind flashed through:

cherry-filled chocolate truffles; the saline taste of blood; the umami of a chunk of Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese; the

high soprano notes of a great balsamic vinegar; the complex bitters of, say, Fernet-Branca. Not surprisingly, the

way the wine feels is also irresistible. Ribbons of cashmere richness seem to weave through the center of the wine.

And the finish appears never ready to surrender. In the end, I am stunned—but not stunned, for just about

everything the Allegrini family touches turns to vinous magic. Their sweet recioto is a masterpiece (fewer and

fewer producers today attempt to make this complex red dessert wine) and their single-vineyard wines, like La

Grola, show just how rich and delicious great V eneto wine can be.

ZENATO

AMARONE DELLA VALPOLICELLA

70% corvina, 20% rondinella, 10% molinara

No wine is more perfect during the long, raw, cold winters in northern Italy (or anywhere, for that matter) than

amarone. Big, lustful, and earthy, amarone is warming and satisfying. Zenato’s amarone fits this bill exactly, but in

great years it’s also among the softest and most hedonistic of amarones, with deep, luscious, earthy, chocolate,

balsamic, and fruit flavors. The complexity of Zenato’s amarones always reminds me of V enetian cooking, where

sweet, sour, and savory flavors are used with exquisite balance.

MASI

AMARONE DELLA VALPOLICELLA | CLASSICO RISERVA | COSTASERA

Approximately 70% corvina, with rondinella, molinara, and a tiny amount of oseleta

If you don’t know amarone, Masi is a good place to begin for its lush, ripe, almost Portlike texture. Costasera is one

of the winery’s top amarones and comes from vineyards that the winery says “face the sunset.

” The riserva version

contains the rare native V enetian grape oseleta, once thought to be extinct, but rescued, due in large part to the

efforts of Masi. This is a muscular amarone, and one that is utterly fascinating, with flavors and aromas suggestive

of leather, grenadine, plums, violets, exotic spices, and black licorice. In the small restaurants of northern Italy,

amarones like Masi’s are drunk with hearty slabs of roasted meat.

SWEET WINE

MACULAN

TORCOLATO

100% vespaiola

Italian desserts and sweet wines are generally not as sweet as their French counterparts. Torcolato is a great

example of this. Devastatingly intense in flavor, it’s only faintly sweet, and it’s certainly not syrupy. Instead, this

forceful neon-yellow/orange wine is bursting with flavors (exotic oranges, bitter walnut skin, dried citrus peel,

apricot, bergamot-infused tea, cardamom, honey) that, mingled together, taste strangely beautiful and refined. In

Italy, Torcolato is called a wine for meditation. Its hypnotic persuasion is certainly undeniable.

Friuli-V enezia Giulia, on the cusp of the Alps, is renowned for fresh, lively wines that possess almost Teutonic precision.

FRIULI-VENEZIA GIULIA

Sticking out like a small ear from the northeastern corner of Italy, Friuli-V enezia Giulia

(usually just called Friuli) is culturally and historically rich. For centuries, northern

European and Near Eastern tribes moved through the region on their way to the

Mediterranean. The overland spice routes ran through Friuli from the markets of the

Byzantine Empire to V enice. Much later—before it became part of the newly formed

country of Italy in 1866—Friuli was the strategic Mediterranean port province of the

Austro-Hungarian Empire. Even today, the region seems psychologically much closer to

Austria than, say, to Rome. And you can almost taste the proximity in the wines. More

than any other wines in Italy, they have Teutonic precision, focus, and grip.

After so many centuries of exposure to eclectic ethnic influences, cultural diversity,

political jockeying, and mercantile bustle, the Friulians have been left with a sense of

dynamism, a can-do spirit, and a healthy attitude when it comes to change. Y ou can taste

this, too, in the wines. As a group, Friulian wines are spirited, creative, highly varied, and

wholly individualistic.

THE QUICK SIP ON FRIULI-VENEZIA GIULIA

MANY OF ITALY’S MOST VIBRANT , racy white wines are produced here.

FRIULI-VENEZIA GIULIA’S TOP whites are sometimes 100% varietal wines, made

entirely from such varieties as Friulano and ribolla gialla, and sometimes they are

blends made from those varieties plus international varieties like pinot grigio (pinot gris),

sauvignon blanc, and chardonnay.

DESPITE THE RENOWN ACCORDED the region’s whites, red wines account for

almost half of the total production in Friuli. The most prestigious red grapes are merlot,

cabernet sauvignon, and cabernet franc, as well as the native grape schioppettino, all

of which are turned into stunning wines.

In a country where “real” wine generally means red wine, Friuli is acclaimed as one of

the top places in the world for racy whites. In particular, Friuli’s pinot grigios, sauvignon

blancs, and ribolla giallas can be stunning, as can its chardonnays. But if any white wine

has captured the Friulian heart, it is one that is theirs alone: Friulano. (Before legislation in

2007 shortened its name, Friulano was called tocai Friulano, a term that confusingly

implied a connection—where none exists—with Hungarian Tokaji.) Each of the grape

varieties above is made into single-varietal wines and is used in the region’s numerous

white blends, such as Vintage Tunina, a blend of sauvignon blanc, chardonnay, ribolla

gialla, malvasia, and picolit (the percentage of each grape variety in the composition is a

secret) by the producer Jermann.

Trieste, a vibrant port city on Friuli’ s Adriatic Coast, is a city that understands how to eat and drink.

Notwithstanding the popularity and success of Friuli’s white wines, the region makes

some stunning reds. Indeed, more than 40 percent of the region’s wines are red. Most of

this is merlot, which, grown in Friuli’s warmer pockets, can be fantastic. But three other

local grape varieties can also be stellar: schioppettino, tazzelenghe, and pignolo. (In the

local dialect, scoppiettio means “to pop” or “crackle;” tazzelenghe translates as “cuts the

tongue”; and pignolo means “fussy.

”)

THE NAME FRIULI-VENEZIA GIULIA

Friuli and V enezia Giulia were once two separate provinces. The “Giulia” of V enezia Giulia refers to

Julius Caesar. So does Friuli, which is derived from the Latin Forum Julii, now the city of Cividale, in

the renowned eastern wine district of Colli Orientali.

Then there are sweet wines. As any knowledgeable Italian wine lover probably knows,

two of Italy’s most exquisite dessert wines, verduzzo di Ramandolo and picolit, are both

made in Friuli (although admittedly in tiny quantities).

Finally, Friuli is one of the most ambitious and successful winemaking regions of Italy.

Premium wines (those with DOC or DOCG status) constitute more than 50 percent of its

total production. Moreover, in less than three decades Friuli’s white wines have gained an

international following. No other region of Italy has moved so quickly from near obscurity

to distinction.

THE TRE VENEZIE

Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Trentino-Alto Adige, and the Veneto, the three northeastern regions of Italy, are

known collectively as the Tre Venezie—

“Three Venices”

—because of their historical relationship to the

Republic of Venice. T oday, they are united by more than history alone. With only a handful of exceptions,

Italy’s most stylish, highest-quality white wines come from this area. Bordered on the north by the

majestic Alps, the regions share a northern climate and a way of doing things that doesn’t quite seem

Mediterranean in spirit. Germanic, Austrian, Swiss, Croatian, and Slovenian influences go back

centuries. The cultural ties crop up in local dialects, local dishes, and even in the precise and decisive

way winemakers go about making their wines. Not surprisingly, two of the best wine schools in Italy are

located in the Tre Venezie, and one of Europe’s largest vine nurseries is in Friuli-Venezia Giulia. More

than half the vines planted in Italy originated there.

SOME OF THE BEST PRODUCERS OF FRIULIAN PINOT GRIGIO

Jermann • Marco Felluga • Pierpaolo Pecorari • Renato Keber • Ronco dei T assi • Ronco del Gnemiz •

Schiopetto • Števerjan • Villa Russiz

THE LAND, THE GRAPES, AND THE VINEYARDS

Friuli-V enezia Giulia is a small place—some 3,000 square miles (7,780 square kilometers)

—considerably smaller than the metropolitan area of Los Angeles (about 4,800 square

miles/12,430 square kilometers), for example. Despite its small size, the region is known

for more than a dozen grape varieties. (While a lot, this is far fewer than in the past.

Before phylloxera arrived in Friuli at the end of the nineteenth century, more than 350

varieties were grown here!)

The Alps form Friuli’s northern border, and the northern half of the region is extremely

mountainous. As a result, nearly all of the vineyards—about 49,000 acres (19,800

hectares)—are located in the southern half. The best are situated on sloping Alpine

foothills, but the vast majority of Friulian vineyards are on the plains that stretch inland

from the Adriatic Sea. It is this juxtaposition of mountains and sea that creates the cool

nights and warm days that contribute to the exhilaratingly taut structure and pinpoint

balance of Friuli’s best wines. It is important that the vineyards lie across hillsides and

plains on the sunny south side of the Alps. Here, exposed to the heat and light of the sun,

the grapes have time to ripen fully. As a result, Friuli can grow both white and red

varieties well, and the whites are not fragile; they are whites with body and a determined

grip.

THE GRAPES OF FRIULI-VENEZIA GIULIA

WHITES

CHARDONNAY: An important grape. Can make monodimensional wines or lush, highly complex ones,

depending on the producer and the site.

FRIULANO: A very important local favorite. The same as the grape sauvignon vert (which is distinctly

different from sauvignon blanc). The wines made from it can be stunningly complex and creamy.

PICOLIT : A native grape used to make interesting, rare dessert wines. Only a tiny amount is produced

due to the vines’ genetic predisposition to abort their berries for no good reason.

PINOT BIANCO: Also known as pinot blanc. Wines from it are usually good, not great. Often blended

with chardonnay.

PINOT GRIGIO: Also known as pinot gris. A popular variety. Makes light- to medium-bodied wines that

range from decent to delicious.

RIBOLLA GIALLA: An important variety. In Friuli, makes very attractive, aromatic wines with delicious,

exotic, citrusy, peachy flavors.

SAUVIGNON BLANC: A popular variety. Turned into zesty, wild, dramatic wines, the best of which could

be confused with the zesty, wild sauvignon blancs of South Africa.

VERDUZZO FRIULANO: A special native grape that is used to make Friuli’s most stunning dessert wine,

verduzzo di Ramandolo.

VITOVSKA: Grown near the border with Slovenia, in the Isonzo and Carso region of Friuli-Venezia

Giulia. Makes fascinating, fleshy, dry white wines with elegant, rich, floral, herbal, and fruit flavors.

REDS

CABERNET FRANC: The second most popular red variety. First planted in Friuli in the late nineteenth

century. Often high in acidity and lean in body, but can make good cranberry-flavored wines.

CABERNET SAUVIGNON: While less widespread than cabernet franc, cabernet sauvignon was planted

in Friuli even earlier. The wines are usually lean and tight.

MERLOT : The most widely planted red. Makes wines that range in quality from lean and austere to rich

and silky.

PIGNOLO: A rare, indigenous variety making distinctive wines especially near the towns of Buttrio and

Rosazzo.

REFOSCO: The collective name for a handful of different varieties, the main one of which is refosco dal

peduncolo rosso, which makes a popular, zesty, inky, easy-drinking red in Friuli.

SCHIOPPETTINO: The most sophisticated local red variety. Wines made from it are sharp and

concentrated, with multiple fruit and spice flavors.

TAZZELENGHE: Translates literally as “cuts the tongue.

” Makes unusually bold, high-acid wines. Native

to the larger region encompassing Friuli-Venezia Giulia and western Slovenia.

THE MOST IMPORTANT FRIULIAN WINES

LEADING WINES

CABERNET FRANC red

CABERNET SAUVIGNON red

CHARDONNAY white

FRIULANO white

MERLOT red

PINOT BIANCO white

PINOT GRIGIO white

REFOSCO red

RIBOLLA GIALLA white

SAUVIGNON BLANC white

SCHIOPPETTINO red

WINES OF NOTE

PICOLIT white (sweet)

PIGNOLO red

TAZZELENGHE red

VERDUZZO DI RAMANDOLO white (sweet)

Cividale, a Friulian town in the foothills of the Alps, was founded by Julius Caesar as a municipality of Rome.

The two most prestigious wine districts in Friuli are Colli Orientali del Friuli and Collio

(technically known as Collio Goriziano). Both are in the far east, just short of the

Slovenian border. Here, the best hilly vineyards are located on terraces, where the well-

drained, crumbly, calcium-rich marl and sandstone soil is known as flysch. The soil in the

valleys tends more toward clay, sand, and gravel.

In the local Friulian dialect, the tops of the terraced hillsides are called ronchi. The

word ronchi—or the singular, ronco—is often the first word of the name of a vineyard or

wine estate, such as Ronco dei Tassi (hilltop of the badgers). As for the word colli, it

means “small hills” in Friulian dialect. Colli Orientali refers to eastern hills.

Sophisticated white wine was Friuli’s toe up in the world, but characteristically, the

Friulians took their own approach to making it. During the 1970s and 1980s, while almost

every up-and-coming wine region in the world was focused on creating unctuous, barrel-

fermented, oak-aged wines, especially chardonnays, Friulian producers (especially

Schiopetto and Livio Felluga) were committed to making the opposite—taut, kinetic

whites with a spring-loaded urgency of acidity, and flavors devoted to the purity of the

grapes. Among the other places that share this philosophy of purity are Alsace and the

Loire V alley in France, and the wine regions of Germany and Austria, New Zealand, and

Friuli’s eastern neighbor, Slovenia.

WHERE DREAMS CAN HAPPEN

Among the most legendary Friulian wines are those of the artistic winemaker Silvio Jermann. In 1977, at

the age of twenty-one, Jermann created Italy’s first cult white wine—Vintage Tunina, a then secret blend

made up of sauvignon blanc, chardonnay, ribolla gialla, malvasia, and picolit, among other grapes.

Vintage Tunina was so voluptuous and nuanced (many Italian wine pros consider it the perfect white with

truffles), it set off the modern trend for sophisticated Friulian white blends. (Tunina was the name of the

old woman who originally owned the vineyard from which the grapes came… as well as the name of one

of Casanova’s lovers.) Jermann’s genius is the ability to pull deep facets of personality from each grape.

Every Jermann wine, from sauvignon blanc and ribolla gialla to Friulano and chardonnay, is clearly

focused, powerfully flavored, and impeccably balanced. Until 1987, no Jermann wine was made or aged

in new oak. In that year, Jermann created a barrel-fermented chardonnay originally called “Where the

Dreams Have No End.

” The name, a takeoff on the song “Where the Streets Have No Name” by the Irish

rock group U2, was later changed to just “W… Dreams.

” T o Jermann (who says that his dreams help

inform his winemaking), the “W dot dot dot” means “where dreams can happen.

”

Silvio Jermann, one of the innovative Friulian winemakers who revolutionized white winemaking in Italy in the 1980s.

Above all, Friulian whites have presence. Rarely plain-Jane or frail, these are

concentrated, complex whites with enticing aromas and pronounced fruity-spicy-earthy

flavors. And while many pinot grigios are about as exciting as tap water, the top Friulian

pinot grigios can soar with delicate peach, almond, and green apple flavors (Števerjan’s,

for example) or be so voluptuous and rich they seem to be descended from ice cream

(Jermann’s).

Friulano, the local favorite, is probably the hardest Friulian wine to describe. It ranges

from smoky, resinous, and white peppery to lush and vanilla-y to spiked with minerals,

exotic spices, and something like honey cake (or in some cases, it combines all of these

sensations, as does the extraordinary Friulano called “Plus,

” from the producer

Bastianich). Because of its intensity, many Friulian winemakers refer to it as the most

masculine of the white grapes.

Wines made from ribolla gialla can be so pretty, so exuberantly fresh, so delightfully

peachy, floral, and citrusy, and so simply satisfying that it’s amazing this grape is not

grown anywhere else in any significant amounts except in Slovenia, next door. Villa

Russiz and Josko Gravner make especially appealing ones.

The hilly Collio region of Friuli-V enezia Guilia. The Collio and the Colli Orientali del Friuli are the province’ s two most

important wine districts. Both lie near Italy’ s eastern border with Slovenia.

The sauvignon blancs (the name is usually shortened to just sauvignon) are usually

terrific wines—lean, zesty, peppery, and smoky, with a green, resiny end reminiscent of

capers. As for Friulian chardonnays, their quality and style vary greatly, but from a master

like Jermann, chardonnay—even in a voluptuous style—is utter elegance.

It would seem counterintuitive that a relatively cool region known for vivacious white

wines would also produce a significant number of delicious reds. Y et, as noted, a

significant amount of Friulian wine is red, and much of that is structured, concentrated

merlot. Other dynamic reds here are made from grape varieties thought to have originated

in Friuli, or in Slovenia, next door. Schioppettino, one of the best, nearly disappeared from

Friuli in the wake of phylloxera, but was rescued in the 1970s when Paolo Rapuzzi, owner

of Ronchi di Cialla winery, collected one hundred extant vines and clandestinely had them

grafted to make them available for propagation (schioppettino was not an officially

allowed variety in Friuli at the time). Wines made from schioppettino can be startling—

hauntingly dry with sharp peppery, spicy, black cherry flavors and a tight, angular body.

The word schioppettino comes from scoppiettio, to “crackle” or “pop,

” a possible

reference to the grape’s or wine’s texture. Like schioppettino, pignolo, too, was almost

extinct until a few vines discovered in the 1970s were painstakingly nurtured and the

variety was recultivated. The name pignolo means “fussy”

—a reference to its low yields

and the difficulty of growing it. Refosco is actually the collective name for a handful of

different local varieties, the most widespread of which is refosco dal peduncolo rosso

(literally,

“refosco with the red stem”). In Friuli it makes a great everyday drinking wine,

with dense blueberry and blackberry flavors and vivid acidity. As for tazzelenghe (“cuts

the tongue”), it is dagger sharp. The grape is native to the area encompassing Friuli as well

as western Slovenia, and is also known as refosco del botton (not the same variety as

refosco dal peduncolo rosso).

Merlot and cabernet have been made in Friuli for more than a century. In the past, these

were sometimes austere, light, and lean wines. Not so today. As winemakers have better

understood the nuances of making red wines in fairly cool climates, Friuli’s merlots and

cabernets have become far more flavorful and concentrated. There are a score of great

merlots made here, including those from Moschioni, Miani, Meroi, Schiopetto, Damijan,

Vie de Romans, and La Castellada. And, as is true of the white wines, the reds of Friuli are

often unpredictably intriguing blends. Le Vigne di Zamo’s Ronco dei Roseti, for example,

takes on a sharply spicy, forest-floor character, thanks to the tazzelenghe and refosco that

are added to the blend of cabernet sauvignon, merlot, and cabernet franc.

SOME OF THE BEST PRODUCERS OF FRIULANO

Abbazia di Rosazzo • Bastianich • EnoFriulia • Francesco Pecorari • Jermann • Livio Felluga • Marco

Felluga • Miani • Pierpaolo Pecorari • Ronco dei T assi • Števerjan • Villa Russiz • Le Vigne di Zamò

THE FAMOUS PROSCIUTTO OF FRIULI

Prosciutto is so much a part of the culinary landscape, it’s hard to believe that certain countries, including

the United States, once banned the importation of the famous ham. In the U.S., that changed on

September 6, 1989, when six thousand haunches of prosciutto were cradled aboard jets and flown to

New York.

Prosciutto is made all over Italy, but the best comes from just one type of pig: the massive (350-

pound/160-kilogram) Lambrea pig, raised either in Friuli, near the town of San Daniele (for prosciutto di

San Daniele), or in Emilia-Romagna, near the town of Parma (for prosciutto di Parma). The pigs are fed

natural grains and the rich whey from such famous cheeses as Parmigiano-Reggiano.

Only 999 left to massage. A worker rubs, pats, and pounds haunches of prosciutto di San Daniele, made from

Lambrea pigs raised in Friuli. The meat is rubbed with salt and naturally cured over 400 days.

The raw ham is cured without smoke or heat over the course of four hundred days. (By contrast, some

American hams are processed in one day.) First, the meat is thickly salted, then the hams are massaged,

pounded, rubbed, and eventually washed with water and a stiff wire brush. The haunches are hung to air

cure slowly in specially designed buildings with long vertical windows. In Friuli, it is said that the warm,

salty sea air mixed with the cold Alpine air is a perfect combination—the result is a coral-pink ham with a

silky texture and a sweet, meaty taste that is exceedingly complex. In Friuli, prosciutto combined with

melon or figs is served with a fruity, floral white wine, often a glass of Friulano or ribolla gialla.

FRIULI’S SWEET WINES

Italy makes more diverse, fascinating dessert wines than any other country in the world,

and two of the most intriguing are Friulian—verduzzo di Ramandolo, made from verduzzo

Friulano grapes, and picolit, made from picolit grapes. Both grape varieties are grown on

the Alpine hillsides of the Colli Orientali.

V erduzzo di Ramandolo is made near the tiny village of Ramandolo. This is one of the

lightest-bodied, most exquisite dessert wines made anywhere. Often it has a beautiful

coppery sheen and touches of herbal flavors. The best producers are Giovanni Dri, Ronchi

di Manzano, Livon, and Ronchi di Cialla.

Picolit (from piccolo,

“small” in Italian, a reference to the tiny size of the clusters)

probably shouldn’t even exist. The grape variety has a genetic mutation that causes it to

spontaneously abort the flowers on its newly formed clusters (the flowers that ultimately

would become grapes). Even in good years, less than half of picolit’s flowers survive to

become pollinated and evolve into grapes. The wine, as a result, is very expensive. The

best picolits are gossamer, with a delicate honeyed flavor (try the picolits from Livio

Felluga, Ronchi di Cialla, and Dorigo). Indeed, picolit was one of Friuli’s first

internationally successful wines and—bottled in handmade Murano glass—was sought

after by European nobility in the eighteenth century.

WHEN YOU VISIT… FRIULI-VENEZIA GIULIA

Most wineries in the Collio and Colli Orientali districts are an easy drive from the

ancient port city of Trieste. (Coffee lovers take note: This is where the espresso maker

Illy has its headquarters; thus, the coffee around town is magnificent.) Farther inland,

the wine town of Udine, with its Venetian Renaissance-style piazza, serves as an

unofficial headquarters for traveling wine lovers who want to make day trips in all

directions. Appointments are necessary.

The Friulian Wines to Know

WHITES

SCHIOPETTO

PINOT GRIGIO

100% pinot grigio

This is not your standard pinot grigio. In fact, Schiopetto’s pinot grigio towers above most other Italian versions.

For one thing, the wine is complex (not usually true) and for another, it has a sophisticated weight and presence on

the palate (very rare for pinot grigio). But above all, this wine has fascinating choreography; it moves with energy.

From a core of dense fruit, sparks of flavor fly out in all directions. It’s like tasting a sunburst.

BASTIANICH

PLUS | VENEZIA GIULIA

100% Friulano

It’s safe to say the Bastianich family understands flavor. The mother, Lidia, is one of the foremost experts on Italian

food in the United States and is an author and television host. The son, Joe, is a wine expert and a business partner

with his mother and with United States super chef Mario Batali. Together they are the primary owners of a slew of

famous restaurants, including New Y ork’s Del Posto. The family’s ties to Friuli-V enezia Giulia go back generations,

so it’s no surprise that their wine ventures are based there. And what wine they make! In a lineup of Bastianich

wines, the taster simply runs out of superlatives, if not adjectives. But the wine that I find most stunning is their

Friulano called Plus. The grapes come from a single vineyard of sixty-year-old vines. Ten percent of the wine is

made appassimento, that is, by drying the grapes over a period of months to raisinate and shrivel them, thereby

concentrating their sugars. (This is the process used to make amarone in the V eneto.) The intense richness of the

wine is matched only by its impeccable elegance. The core of fruit has near atomic density. And the flavors are

sweet, savory, and minerally all at once. As oxymoronic as it may sound, Plus explodes slowly on the palate.

JERMANN

VINTAGE TUNINA

Chardonnay and sauvignon blanc with small amounts of ribolla gialla, malvasia, and sometimes picolit;

percentages not disclosed

One of the greatest Italian white wines from one of the greatest Friulian winemakers, Vintage Tunina proved early

on that the sky was the limit for Friulian whites. The wine—a blend of multiple grapes—is a huge, voluptuous riot

of juicy flavors, the equivalent of an Impressionist painting.

VILLA RUSSIZ

RIBOLLA GIALLA

100% ribolla gialla

Not as patently aromatic as, say, muscat or riesling, ribolla gialla has a smell that’s delicately intoxicating. Did

someone just walk into the room holding a vase of jasmine? A pear tart just whisked from the oven? But aroma is

only one of this grape’s strong suits. When made impeccably, as is this Villa Russiz, the wine sweeps across the

palate with waves of fruit, minerals, exotic spices, and delicious zestlike bitters. Ribolla gialla, one of Italy’s most

underrated, fantastic whites, is thought to have come to Friuli from Slovenia, next door. Also highly notable is Villa

Russiz’s fantastic sauvignon—Sauvignon de la Tour—which also possesses flavors that sweep over the palate in

rushes of intensity.

REDS

BASTIANICH

CALABRONE ROSSO

70% refosco, 10% schioppettino, 10% pignolo, 10% merlot

Made like amarone (harvested grapes are hung or laid on mats in special rooms to dry and concentrate their sugars),

Calabrone Rosso is a knockout of a wine. Its get-outta-my-way force and driving power would make it ideal for,

say, Wall Street. Every aspect of the wine—from the aroma to the texture to the finish—is massive and masculine,

and built to age well. Naturally somewhat tannic, the refosco here takes on an almost syrahlike, delicious

corruptness, tasting of earth, peat, cigars, espresso, and Scotch.

VIE DI ROMANS

VOOS DAI CIAMPS

100% merlot

The proprietor of Vie di Romans, Gianfranco Gallo, makes some of the lushest, ripest reds in Friuli—wines of great

power and exactitude that burst from the glass in a flurry of dense chocolate flavors, minerals, wild berries, and a

lacy note of vanilla given their considerable time in oak. This is no casual sipper of a merlot, but rather an intense,

structured wine that commands a few years of aging and then a great meal.

MOSCHIONI

SCHIOPPETTINO

100% schioppettino

This is the real deal… a stunning, opulent schioppettino that shows how sensational the indigenous reds of northern

Italy can be. Generally, the Moschioni family allows the grapes to dry for several weeks (amarone style) before

fermenting them. The result is a spicy, earthy, minerally red with a core of dense cherry preserve flavors, and a

vibrancy on the palate that is worthy of an electric current. One of Friuli’s most lip-smacking reds, like all good

schioppettinos, it begs for food.

TUSCANY

Toscana to the Italians, Tuscany is the quintessential Italian wine region. Here, where the

Renaissance was born and where the church has reigned with near omnipotent power,

wine has strong ties to both art and religion. Y et at the same time, wine has always been

the most humble of Tuscan comforts—on the table at every meal (breakfast excepted);

sometimes, with a piece of bread, a meal in itself.

Tuscany is also the birthplace of four of Italy’s most important red wines: Chianti,

Chianti Classico, brunello di Montalcino, and vino nobile di Montepulciano. Though all

are made from the variety sangiovese, the wines taste quite different. One reason is that

Tuscany is a plethora of distinct mesoclimates. These are created by an endless succession

of twisting, turning, undulating hills and low mountains. Another reason is that

sangiovese, a finicky and demanding grape, has begotten hundreds of clones or genetic

variations of itself. Over time, these variations have adapted to their local environments

and taken on distinct flavor characteristics. In addition, it’s fascinating to know that while

sangiovese is today inextricably linked to Tuscany, the variety appears to have originated

in southern Italy. Surprising DNA research in 2004 revealed one of sangiovese’s parents to

be Calabrese di Montenuovo (from Calabria), and the other parent to be ciliegiolo (Italian

for “small cherry”), now cultivated all over Italy.

“Sangiovese, to be a great wine, needs a good connection with God.

”

— LAMBERTO FRESCOBALDI,

Marc hesi de’Frescobaldi

THE QUICK SIP ON TUSCANY

TUSCANY IS THE HOME of four of Italy’s most important, well-known red wines:

Chianti, Chianti Classico, brunello di Montalcino, and vino nobile di Montepulciano.

THE LEADING RED GRAPE, used in every major traditional wine, is sangiovese,

considered one of the greatest red grapes of Italy.

A WINE REVOLUTION in the 1970s and 1980s led to wines of an immensely higher

quality, as well as the creation of the so-called Super Tuscans, a group of avant-garde,

expensive wines made in an untraditional manner.

For English-speaking wine drinkers and food lovers in the 1960s, Tuscany seemed to

symbolize a kind of cultural chic. Chianti wines, in particular, were romantic, earthy,

“European,

” and fit the bohemian esthetic (and budget). But the old Chianti of red

checkered tablecloths and amorous evenings was, for the most part, not very good wine.

By the 1970s the market for Chianti—and the wine’s international reputation—had

reached an all-time low. As the full impact of this realization began to sink in, Tuscans

were shocked into action. With the help of new wine laws (see the Appendix on Wine

Laws, page 924), the Tuscan wine industry bounced back with what is considered one of

the most dramatic revolutions in the world of modern wine. The result was vastly superior,

exciting wines, including a slew of internationally acclaimed, expensive Super Tuscans.

Many Tuscan vineyards are lined with the region’ s stunning, tall cypress trees.

All of this said, from a 35,000-foot (10,700-meter) view, there’s a flavor and feel to

Tuscan wine—red wine in particular—that, to me, is dramatically different from wines

made almost anywhere else. There’s a firmness and espressolike bitterness to the wines—

the result of acidity coupled with tannin. Sangiovese is, like pinot noir, a grape relatively

high in acidity. At the same time, modern winemaking methods have coaxed more color,

power, and tannin from the grape. Significant acidity and tannin, when found together in

the same wine, is not always easy to take. The best wines pull off the marriage. For lower

quality wines, the combination can be a train wreck. (Top Tuscan wines never taste better

than they do in Tuscany itself because one’s palate is usually coated in olive oil—a

countermeasure against the firm, bitter bite of the wine.)

So much red wine has always been made in Tuscany that, with the exception of the

famous dessert wine vin santo, white wine has been mostly an afterthought. Y et some

high-quality, dry white Tuscan wine is made—mostly modern-style sauvignon blancs and

chardonnays. As for Tuscany’s standby traditional dry white, vernaccia di San Gimignano,

there now exist many more high-quality examples than in the past.

The interior courtyard of the Palazzo Chigi-Saracini in central Siena. Built in the Gothic style in the 12th century as a

private urban palace, its curved exterior façade traces the ancient, narrow, curving streets of the city.

THE LAND, THE GRAPES, AND THE VINEYARDS

As visitors to Tuscany quickly discover, there doesn’t seem to be a straight line in the

entire region. Winding back and forth and up and down along Tuscany’s rural roads, it’s

impossible not to fall in love with the patchwork of vineyards that cover a landscape

undulating so magically. To any driver, it comes as no surprise that the region is roughly

68 percent hills. The paucity of flat land means that nearly every vineyard is on a slope of

some kind, gentle or steep, and that even two vineyards that are only a stone’s throw apart

often produce wines of very different character.

Tuscany stretches from the Tyrrhenian Sea in the west to the low mountains that

separate the region from Emilia-Romagna, the Marche, and Umbria, its neighbors to the

east. At nearly 9,000 square miles (23,300 square kilometers), it is the fifth largest region

in Italy. Y et most of the important wine zones are more or less in the middle of the region,

from Florence in the north to Siena in the center and then south to the tiny hill town of

Montalcino (famous for brunello). The climate in this central zone is warm, although not

as warm or humid as along the Tyrrhenian coast. Nights are cool, helping to preserve the

natural acidity of the grapes, particularly in sangiovese. Soil varies considerably, but the

well-drained slopes of the central hills tend to be sandy or stony, calcareous, and

interspersed with schist and galestro (a crumbly, stony marl).

THE MOST IMPORTANT TUSCAN WINES

LEADING WINES

BRUNELLO DI MONTALCINO red

CARMIGNANO red

CHIANTI red

CHIANTI CLASSICO red

MORELLINO DI SCANSANO red

SUPER TUSCANS red

VINO NOBILE DI MONTEPULCIANO red

WINES OF NOTE

CHARDONNAY white

ROSSO DI MONTALCINO red

ROSSO DI MONTEPULCIANO red

SAUVIGNON BLANC white

VERNACCIA DI SAN GIMIGNANO white

VIN SANTO white (sweet)

Like many Italian wine regions, Tuscany was once home to dozens of grape varieties

(in the mid-eighteenth century, more than two hundred were officially recognized). But in

modern times, the region has been identified almost exclusively with two grapes:

sangiovese, for centuries Tuscany’s single greatest grape, and cabernet sauvignon,

responsible for making up, in whole or as part of the blend, numerous famous Super

Tuscan wines.

THE GRAPES OF TUSCANY

WHITES

CHARDONNAY: A minor grape accounting for a small production of expensive white wines.

MALVASIA BIANCA LUNGA: One of the many different varieties in the world that have malvasia as part

of the name. In the past, it was the white grape blended into Chianti in small amounts to lighten it. Now it

is the grape best known for vin santo, the famous Tuscan dessert wine.

SAUVIGNON BLANC: Limited amounts are grown, but wines made from this grape show promise.

TREBBIANO: T echnically, trebbiano T oscano. Formerly used with malvasia in Chianti, and now used for

vin santo as well as for dry white wines generally of neutral character.

VERNACCIA: Makes Tuscany’s most traditional, simple white wine; grown around the hill town of San

Gimignano.

REDS

CABERNET SAUVIGNON: Often a significant part of the blend in Carmignano, and sometimes blended

in very tiny amounts with sangiovese to make contemporary Chianti and Chianti Classico. It is the sole

grape variety or a component in some Super Tuscan wines.

CANAIOLO: Historically the second red grape, besides sangiovese, in the traditional Chianti blend.

COLORINO: One of the historic blending grapes in the traditional Chianti blend. Contributes structure

and a deep color (much as petit verdot does in a Bordeaux blend).

MERLOT : Sometimes blended in small amounts with sangiovese to make contemporary Chianti and

Chianti Classico. Also used in a limited number of Super Tuscans.

SANGIOVESE: The major Tuscan grape used for all the important traditional red wines of the region—

Chianti, Chianti Classico, brunello di Montalcino, and vino nobile di Montepulciano.

Sangiovese is, like pinot noir, an exacting, troublesome grape. It doesn’t ripen easily or

uniformly. In sites that are not consistently sunny, or in rainy, overcast years, it’s common

around harvest time to see bunches with soft, purple, ripe grapes as well as slightly green,

underripe ones. Unevenly ripe bunches can lead to thin, unbalanced wines that taste like

sweet-and-sour sauce if the grower doesn’t pick out (often by hand) all of the green,

unripe berries.

There’s another vexing issue: Italy is literally strewn with multiple clones of

sangiovese. Although no one knows precisely how many different clones there are,

winemakers are convinced that the main ones vary enormously in flavor, and that the

future of Tuscan wine lies in clonal research. The world’s most ambitious study of grape

clones was begun in Chianti Classico in 1987. Known as the Chianti Classico 2000

project, it was financed by the European Union and took sixteen years to complete. In just

the small Chianti Classico region alone, 239 clones of sangiovese were identified and

studied, along with other viticultural factors (rootstock, trellising methods, and so on).

From this research, seven clones of sangiovese were selected, officially registered, and

named “Chianti Classico 2000” clones for their superior quality and viral resistance.

Hand sorting sangiovese grapes at Castello di Fonterutoli. The estate, owned by the Mazzei family since 1435, includes

a villa, a small church, and 1,600 acres (650 hectares) of forest, vineyards, and olive groves.

As for cabernet sauvignon, although it was brought to Tuscany in the eighteenth

century, reportedly by Grand Duke Cosimo de’ Medici III, the variety was largely

unimportant for centuries except as a component in Carmignano (see page 392). In the late

1970s and 1980s, however, cabernet achieved greater prominence as one of the varieties

of grapes used in the Super Tuscans.

White grapes have never been very important in Tuscany, although, in the past, an

enormous number of neutral trebbiano Toscano and somewhat more interesting malvasia

(malvasia bianca lunga, specifically) vines were planted. The best of these grapes were

(and still are) used to make vin santo, while the remainder were mostly used in red wines

—in particular, Chianti and vino nobile di Montepulciano. Even vernaccia, the grape of

vernaccia di San Gimignano and the only white grape of any character, still makes what

most Italian experts consider a serviceable, occasionally charming white at best.

As for chardonnay and other international whites, there are far fewer examples in

Tuscany than there are in Friuli-V enezia Giulia or Trentino-Alto Adige. That said, unlike

in those regions, chardonnay is relatively new in Tuscany. Beginning in the 1980s, several

Tuscan winemakers decided to make what they called “serious” white wines, which turned

out to mean big-bodied, oaky, buttery chardonnays and fruit-packed sauvignon blancs.

These wines are not made on a large scale. The most impressive of them include the rich

Capannelle chardonnay, as well as Poggio alle Gazze (hill of the magpies), the sauvignon

blanc from Ornellaia (where magpies do live in the vineyard).

The word sangiovese is thought to derive from the Latin sanguis Jovis—

“the

blood of Jupiter.

” The name is said to have been given to the wine by monks

residing near Monte Giove (Mount Jupiter), in Emilia-Romagna.

A FIASCO BY ANY OTHER NAME…

If you were of a certain age in the U.S. in the 1960s, you remember Woodstock, the early Beatles, and

putting candles into the round, straw-covered bottle nearly every Chianti used to come in—called,

technically, a fiasco. The word, probably of medieval Italian origin, described a glass bottle or flask with a

long neck and a bulbous body, usually covered in wicker or straw for protection. Historically, both wine

and olive oil came in fiaschi. According to The Oxford English Dictionary, the word fiasco—meaning “a

failure or complete breakdown”

—comes from the Italian expression fare fiasco, to make a bottle. How

this Italian expression came to mean a foul-up is unknown. Some wine experts have speculated that the

poor quality of past Chianti may be the reason. T oday in Tuscany one still finds old trattorias called

fiaschetterias—working men’s taverns known initially for cheap, hearty Tuscan wines and later for the

homey Tuscan specialties that went with them.

CHIANTI, CHIANTI CLASSICO, AND THE SUPER

TUSCANS

What is called the Chianti zone (including all of the subdistricts of Chianti and Chianti

Classico) covers a vast territory encompassing most of central Tuscany—more than

38,000 acres (15,400 hectares). Wines were made here as far back as the thirteenth

century, when records document “Chianti wine” being made in the “Chianti Mountains”

around Florence. Interestingly, some records suggest that this first Chianti wine may have

been white.

This is a place of inspiring beauty. Vineyards share the hillsides with olive groves,

cypresses, umbrella pines, castles, and centuries-old stone farmhouses. Since ancient

times, artists and poets have been captivated by the lucid softness of the daylight, which

seems as though it has been brushed onto the sky with a feather.

Old-style Chianti fiaschi—memories of a former time.

In this section, we will look at Chianti and its subdistricts, as well as Chianti Classico. I

know that it might seem as if Chianti Classico is simply the “top level” of Chianti, but the

two wines are distinctly different. Indeed, each has its own DOCG and thus its own set of

stringent rules. This means that you can’t make Chianti in Chianti Classico, and you can’t

make Chianti Classico in Chianti.

SOME OF THE TOP SUPER TUSCANS

Many of what are considered Italy’s superstar wines were first made in Tuscany in the 1970s and 1980s.

Generally flamboyant, powerful, highly structured, and wrapped in the vanilla robe of flavor that new oak

imparts, they are wines that try to be international, yet evoke Italianness at the same time. The collective

name for these wines, the Super Tuscans, is a consumer term, not an official designation. Each wine

listed below has its own proprietary name; the words Super Tuscan never appear on the label. Note that

some producers make more than one Super Tuscan wine.

PROPRIETARY NAME PRODUCER MAIN GRAPE

Cepparello Isole e Olena sangiovese

Coltassala Castello di Volpaia sangiovese

Excelsus Castello Banfi merlot

Flaccianello della Pieve Fontodi sangiovese

Fontalloro Fèlsina sangiovese

Grosso Sanese Il Palazzino sangiovese

I Sodi di San Niccolò Castellare sangiovese

Il Sodaccio Montevertine sangiovese

Le Pergole T orte Montevertine sangiovese

Masseto Ornellaia merlot

Monte Antico Monte Antico sangiovese

Olmaia Col d’Orcia cabernet sauvignon

Ornellaia Ornellaia cabernet sauvignon

Percarlo San Giusto sangiovese

Sammarco Castello dei Rampolla cabernet sauvignon

Sassicaia

Marchesi Incisa della

Rocchetta

cabernet sauvignon

Solaia Antinori cabernet sauvignon

Summus Castello Banfi cabernet sauvignon

T errine Castello della Paneretta canaiolo

Tignanello Antinori sangiovese

Tinscvil Monsanto sangiovese

Vigna d’Alceo Castello dei Rampolla cabernet sauvignon

BOLGHERI: BIRTHPLACE OF SASSICAIA

In 1944, a nobleman named Mario Incisa della Rocchetta planted Tuscany’s first cabernet sauvignon

vineyard on a stony/sandy hill (1,200 feet/366 meters in altitude) in a sunny commune called

Castiglioncello. It was, in every way, unusual. First, there was the fact that the vines were cabernet

(reportedly from Chateau Lafite Rothschild) not sangiovese. Second, the wine was aged in small, new

French oak barrels. Third, the vineyard wasn’t anywhere near the Chianti zone, nor near the brunello

town of Montalcino, nor the vino nobile town of Montepulciano.

The vineyard was in the far west of Tuscany, along the coast of the Tyrrhenian Sea in an area known

as the Maremma, in a district then known for peach orchards—Bolgheri. (Tuscan viticultural wisdom at

the time held that no great red wine could be made from vineyards close to the sea.) Incisa della

Rochetta called the wine Sassicaia—from Tuscan dialect, sasso for rock, and aia, used like the letter y is,

in English, to make the word an adjective—that is, rocky. Thus, Sassicaia—rocky place. For twenty

years, it was a wine produced only for the family’s use. Finally, in 1968, Sassicaia was released

commercially, bearing the blue-and-white label we know today. Quiet Bolgheri achieved considerable

notoriety, but it was just the beginning. T oday, several top producers in the region make remarkable wine.

The top estates include Ornellaia, Guado al T asso, Grattamacco, Macchiole, and Michele Satta.

Cabernet sauvignon remains the leading red grape, with merlot and cabernet franc following. Several

Bolgheri estates also make simple but fantastic vermentinos for every-night drinking.

CHIANTI AND THE SUPER TUSCANS

A modern memoir of basic Chianti would probably begin with its role as the companion to

spaghetti and (if you were well-to-do) meatballs. Not that this association is necessarily

pejorative. After World War II, especially, being cheap and gulpable was pretty ideal. But

as the mid decades of the twentieth century went on, Chianti grew increasingly

disappointing. Part of the problem was the historic so-called Chianti formula.

Traditionally Chianti was a blend of grapes: red—sangiovese, canaiolo, and colorino—

and white—malvasia and/or trebbiano. The formula was formalized in the mid-1800s by

Baron Bettino Ricasoli (second prime minister of the united Italy), whose family had been

making Tuscan wine since the twelfth century. Ricasoli posited that adding a small amount

of white malvasia bianca lunga (known simply as malvasia in Tuscany) to Chianti would

heighten its vivacity, boost its flavor, and make it more drinkable when young. Embedded

in this notion were the beginnings of disaster.

The more popular Chianti became, the more it was lightened with white grapes—and

not just malvasia, as Ricasoli had intended, but also the fairly dull type of trebbiano

known as trebbiano Toscano (which, in France, was and still is used as neutral distilling

material for Cognac). Far from adding character to Chianti, trebbiano turned it into an

anorexic red. Y et, by World War II, trebbiano made up more than 30 percent of some

Chiantis. In 1967, the Italian government used the “Ricasoli formula” of a sangiovese-

based blend with 10 percent to 30 percent malvasia and trebbiano as the legal foundation

for the Chianti DOC (it wasn’t until 1984, after numerous changes in the regulations, that

Chianti was given the higher designation of DOCG).

The moody sky over a villa in Bolgheri, near the western coast of Tuscany.

Meanwhile, trouble was brewing in the vineyards. In the economic aftermath of the

war, winegrowers were given agricultural development funds by the government, and the

Chianti area was enlarged. And, to quickly meet the demand for affordable Chianti,

winegrowers (often unknowingly) planted easily accessible, different types of sangiovese,

clones collectively known as sangiovese di Romagna brought in from the nearby region of

Emilia-Romagna (which is not, for the most part, known for excellent red wine). Given

overproduction, poorly situated vineyards, ill-suited clonal types, and dilution with weak-

flavored white grapes, the quality of Chianti collapsed. By the 1970s, Italian romance

notwithstanding, Chianti was bought as much for its straw-covered bottle (the candle-

holder of the era) as for the liquid inside.

Faced with the possibility of the industry’s demise, a handful of innovative,

iconoclastic producers in the mid-1970s began taking the first steps toward making wines

that would be the polar opposites of “spaghetti Chianti.

” Their inspiration was Sassicaia

(dialect for “rocky place”), made by Marchese Mario Incisa della Rocchetta at his estate,

Tenuta San Guido, near the Tuscan coast, in Bolgheri (see box, facing page).

The first Sassicaias—a tiny production made in the late 1940s—were awkward, even

coarse wines. But by the late 1960s, Incisa della Rocchetta had refined his techniques

considerably and the wine, defying expectation, turned out to be very impressive. Among

the wine’s admirers was Piero Antinori; the Incisa della Rocchettas were his cousins.

Antinori himself was the head of a centuries-old Tuscan winemaking family. Thus,

Sassicaia became the catalyst for Antinori’s Tignanello—the first well-known non-Chianti

Chianti.

THE ETRUSCANS

From 800 to 300 B.C. the Etruscans, an ancient civilization of highly cultured people, lived in what is now

Tuscany. Many of the hilltops where they built their flourishing villages are now blanketed by a pastoral

carpet of vines. Some historians believe the Etruscans were the first purely indigenous Italian race. But

their almond-shaped eyes and slanting eyebrows led others to suggest that they may have migrated from

Asia Minor. Elaborate Etruscan tombs, funerary drawings, and grave artifacts depict a vibrant society of

aristocrats and slaves that formed a culture that was both obsessed with ceremony and superstitious.

Divination, for example, was performed by “reading” the entrails of freshly slaughtered animals, the flight

of birds, or flashes of lightning during thunderstorms. T omb murals portray sybaritic banquets, full of wine

drinking, dancing, and athletic contests. Later, this hedonism, along with Etruscan military pageantry,

would profoundly affect the Romans who, by the end of the third century B.C., defeated and dissolved

the Etruscan world.

Barrels in the old cellars of Castello di V olpaia. More than an estate, Castello di V olpaia was built in the 11th century as

a fortified village on the border between Florence and Siena. Part of the original protective walls and two of the

village’ s six medieval towers are still standing.

Made in 1971, Tignanello contained no white grapes, was based almost entirely on

sangiovese (later, cabernet sauvignon and cabernet franc were added), and was aged in

small, new French oak barrels. Tignanello was like a flashlight in the dark. Other top

producers immediately followed suit, making expensive proprietary wines of their own,

sometimes from sangiovese blended with cabernet sauvignon, sometimes from either

grape alone. What unified these wines was what they were not: They were not made

according to the traditional Chianti formula specified at that time in the DOC laws (see the

Appendix on Wine Laws, page 924). As a result, the government considered them mere

vini da tavola (“table wines”); the press nicknamed them the Super Tuscans.

The eclectic group of Super Tuscans motivated winemakers to further improve the

quality of Chianti. In 1984, Chianti was elevated from DOC to DOCG status, paving the

way for additional improvements and many subsequent changes. Still, basic Chianti—

especially when it’s moderately priced—is often a lean, old-fashioned wine, tasting less of

fruit than of earth, dried leaves, wet rocks, and damp bark, and possessing a characteristic,

appealing bitterness. No longer are white grapes a mandatory part of the Chianti formula.

Indeed, basic modern Chianti can be anywhere from 75 percent to up to 100 percent

sangiovese, should the winemaker choose. Canaiolo can comprise no more than 10

percent of the blend, and so-called “other authorized reds” (like cabernet sauvignon and

merlot) can make up no more than 15 percent of the blend. The white grapes malvasia and

trebbiano can still be used (although they rarely are) for up to 10 percent of the blend.

Thus far we’ve been talking about basic Chianti, but within the large Chianti zone are

eight subzones. One of these—Chianti Classico—is so distinct, it has its own DOCG, and

we’ll explore it in a moment. But the other seven are very much worth knowing, for the

wines are usually a big step up in quality from basic Chianti, and many of the top wines

from these regions have a delicious, Old World Italian flavor—what might be called a

traditional high-quality Chianti flavor. This is, in part, a result of the fact that many

producers in these zones still use the traditional barrels used in Chianti—large Slavonian

oak casks rather than small French oak barrels. The percentages in the blend for Chianti

with a named subzone are slightly different than for basic Chianti. These wines can be up

to 20 percent of “other authorized reds,

” not 15 percent.

VIRGINAL VALUE

For centuries around the Mediterranean, vines and olive trees have grown side by side (sometimes

literally entwined), often in soil so arid little else will grow there. The bond between the two crops is

especially strong in Tuscany, where many wine estates double as top olive oil producers, and where the

extra virgin olive oil is considered among the best in the world. The three varieties of olives used—

frantoio, maraiolo, and lecciono—are known respectively for their fruitiness, spiciness, and richness.

Because Tuscany is cold in the fall, the olives are harvested early, before potential frosts—so early that

Tuscan olives are picked green, before they are fully ripe (most other olives worldwide are harvested

after they ripen, when they are black). Olives that are not fully ripe give Tuscan oil its classic lime green

color, an almost herbal freshness, an explosive fruitiness, and a kind of peppery bite. Among the finest

producers of Tuscan extra virgin olive oil are the wine producers Antinori, Avignonesi, Caparzo,

Castellare, Castello di Ama, Castello di Fonterutoli, Castello di Volpaia, and Fattoria di Fèlsina.

Also, you’ll see the names of the subzone on the wine’s label. The subzones are

(clockwise from the north): Colli Fiorentini, south of the city of Florence; Montespertoli,

located within Colli Fiorentini around the commune of Montespertoli; Chianti Rufina, in

the northeastern part of the zone around the commune of Rufina; Colli Aretini, in the

Arezzo province to the east; Colli Senesi, in the Siena hills; Colline Pisane, the

westernmost subzone in the province of Pisa; and Montalbano, in the northwest part of the

zone.

The best wines from these zones are very fine, and in particular, wines from Chianti

Rufina can be stunning. Among the best Rufinas are those produced by Castello di

Nipozzano, the estate owned by the Frescobaldi family (one such Frescobaldi wine,

Montesodi, is renowned), as well as those produced by Selvapiana. Finally, by definition,

Chianti today is always a red wine. There is no such thing as white Chianti.

Filippo and Francesco Mazzei, the 24th generation of the Mazzei family to own Castello di Fonterutoli, one of the top

estates in Chianti Classico.

CHIANTI CLASSICO

Historically, the area that yielded the richest, fullest Chianti was the original, small, hilly

central region known as Chianti Classico. In 1984, the uniqueness of Chianti Classico was

underscored when it was given a DOCG of its own.

THE LAW OF MEZZADRIA

As late as 1960, the relationship of landowners to land workers in Italy was feudal in nature and

governed by the law of mezzadria. For centuries, much of the Italian countryside had been divided into

many fattorie (“large farms”) owned by wealthy, aristocratic, often absent landowners. Each fattoria was

made up of ten to twelve poderi (“small farms”). Each podere covered about 20 acres and was worked by

one peasant family (the mezzadri). The agriculture of the podere was promiscuo—a mixture of olives,

corn, wheat, wine grapes, vegetables, fruit trees, sheep, and chickens—virtually everything the literally

penniless working family needed to survive. Of the total production, 51 percent went to the landowner;

the mezzadri (from mezza, meaning “half”) kept 49 percent as payment for their labor. The system—

essentially sharecropping—kept the mezzadri in a constant state of poverty, and ensured an

incapacitating status quo among landowners who relied on unpaid labor to keep agriculture afloat.

In the 1950s and 1960s the system of mezzadria slowly dissolved, but not without a huge impact on

Italian farms (many of which were abandoned), agriculture (which subsequently became far more

industrialized), and social structure (farmers moved to better-paying jobs in cities). In Tuscany, where

many deserted properties were later bought and restored as second homes for upper-middle-class city

dwellers, wine estates are often still known as either fattorie or poderi (Fattoria di Fèlsina, Fattoria di

Montevertine, Podere Il Palazzino). And some small Tuscan vineyards remain as they have been for

decades, planted not only with several varieties of grapes but also with fruit and olive trees scattered

among the vines.

The mesoclimates of Chianti Classico are multiple and diverse, thanks to the

undulating hills and the variations in geology. The ancient communes of Panzano, Radda,

Gaiole, and Castellina, for example, slope toward the basin of Siena—once a prehistoric

lake. The Tyrrhenian Sea is close enough to bring cooling, dry breezes that help minimize

the humidity. The grapes, the best of which are planted on south- and southwest-facing

slopes, mature gradually over a long summer of warm Mediterranean days and cool

nights.

If the mesoclimates are diverse, so are the soils. Many of what are considered the best

sites are on well-drained, fractured rock and stone, including the schist locally known as

galestro. These give the most structured wines. But there are also sites interspersed with

limestone, which tend to yield wines higher in acidity, and sites with more clay, which is

less well drained and tends to lead to gentler, softer wines.

By law, Chianti Classico can be composed of 80 to 100 percent sangiovese, and up to

20 percent canaiolo, colorino, cabernet sauvignon, and/or merlot. Riservas—Chianti

Classicos that have been aged for an extra period of time (see facing page)—must abide

by these percentages as well.

A word about cabernet sauvignon, which sometimes figures in small amounts in the

Chianti Classico blend. Unlike sangiovese, cabernet is relatively easy to grow and make

into wine, and it’s a known commodity in the international wine marketplace. But from a

flavor standpoint, the two grapes are odd bedfellows. Sangiovese, after all, tends to be

delicate and high in acidity; cabernet is dense, bold, and high in tannin. It’s easy for even

small amounts of cabernet to take over a wine’s flavor, leaving the delicate nuances of

sangiovese far behind. Tuscan winemakers have been well aware of this challenge for a

good three decades. In every wine where cabernet is part of the blend, the goal is to allow

the flavors of sangiovese to shine through, and indeed, some of the most balanced and

nuanced Chianti Classicos are now being made.

The best basic Chianti Classicos have plum and dried cherry flavors and sometimes a

touch of salt and spice. The more structured, complex, and elegant wines from this region

are the Chianti Classico Riservas—aged, by law, at least two years in wood and three

months in bottle. Many are aged longer and most are aged, at least partially, in small, new

French oak barrels. Riservas are generally made only in the best vintage years, from

grapes that come from selected vineyard sites. Produced in these great years, riservas can

develop mesmerizing waves of refined, savory aromas and flavors: fig, chocolate, cedar,

dried orange, earth, smoke, saddle leather, prune, minerals, salt, and exotic spices.

Paradoxically, these flavors can seem both supple and explosive at the same time. They

are flavors that linger long after you’ve swallowed.

And finally, in 2013, the Chianti Classico producers created an even higher category of

quality than riserva. Called Gran Selezione, it is only for wines made from estate-grown

grapes, and the wine must be aged thirty months (including three months in bottle) before

it is sold.

SOME OF THE BEST PRODUCERS OF CHIANTI CLASSICO RISERVA

Antinori • Badia a Coltibuono • Castellare • Castello dei Rampolla • Castello della Paneretta • Castello di

Ama • Castello di Volpaia • Fattoria di Fèlsina • Fattoria Selvapiana • Fonterutoli • Fontodi • Il Molino di

Grace • Monsanto • Rocca di Castagnoli • Ruffino • San Felice • Villa Cafaggio

Franco Biondi Santi, whose family discovered the highly flavorful brunello clone of sangiovese. This and other efforts by

the family helped establish brunello di Montalcino as one of Italy’ s great wines.

BRUNELLO DI MONTALCINO

Brunello (dialect for “the nice dark one”) is Tuscany’s most revered wine. It is also

Tuscany’s rarest, most expensive, and longest lived. It is made around Montalcino, a

walled medieval village clinging to a rocky hilltop, about an hour’s drive south of Chianti

Classico. (Montalcino is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.) This southern region is warmer

and, as a result, the wines have historically been fuller-bodied, more powerful, and

sometimes more dramatic than Chiantis. They have always been based on sangiovese

alone, which in these hilltop vineyards seems to possess all the nuance of aroma and

flavor needed to make a layered, complex, lavish, decadent wine, even without the help of

other varieties.

The vineyards of brunello di Montalcino cover a modest area of approximately 5,200

acres (2,100 hectares). (The total Chianti zone, including Chianti Classico, by comparison,

covers more than 38,000 acres/15,400 hectares.) The best vineyards, as well as the village,

are some 1,800 feet (550 meters) above sea level, where they are blanketed by a luminous

swatch of sunshine. In the spring, the light in Montalcino is unlike any in the rest of

Tuscany. There is more limestone in the soil than there is in Chianti, and there are strips of

clay, schist, volcanic soil, and plots of the crumbly marl called galestro. The best

vineyards are planted on slopes facing south and southwest. Like a giant rock curtain, the

Monte Amiata range to the southeast helps to protect the vineyards from sudden rain and

hail.

Brunello di Montalcino is not made from the clones of sangiovese that are typically the

source of Chianti but, instead, from a series of special clones collectively called brunello.

(Historically, brunello was thought to be a single clone, but is now considered to be a

collection of related clones.) In good years, the brunello clones yield a lavish wine,

fleshier in texture than Chianti, with complex,

“dark” aromas and flavors of blackberry,

black cherry, and black raspberry fruit, and chocolate, violet, tar, cinnamon, and leather.

By law, brunello di Montalcino must be aged longer than most other Italian wines.

Regular brunello can be released only after five years of aging; riserva brunello, only after

six. How the wine is aged is also dictated. For regular brunello, at least two of the five

years must be in oak and the wine must spend four months in the bottle. For riserva

brunello, two of the six years must be in oak, and the wine must spend at least six months

in bottle.

The kinds of barrels used for aging vary, resulting in two extremely different styles of

wine. Traditional producers still use large, old Slavonian oak casks, which allow the wine

to age and evolve but which do not impart significant character themselves. More modern

producers use small, new French oak barrels, which give the wine more structure and an

unmistakable note of sweet vanilla. And many producers, creating a third style, use a

combination of both, so that oak flavors are present but more subtle.

In great vintages, brunello can take on stunning elegance, suppleness, and

concentration. The flavors seem almost animate as they somersault over themselves and

out of the glass. The combination of unctuous textures and deep, savory aromas and

flavors is, needless to say, captivating.

Brunello di Montalcino has a reputation for longevity, and indeed many brunello di

Montalcino producers feel the wine attains its full potential for complexity and a velvety

texture only after significant aging. One of the most legendary wines in this regard—not

just in Tuscany, but in Italy—is the Biondi-Santi brunello di Montalcino. After a hundred

years of aging, it can still be remarkable, with fragile but complex flavors that almost

tremble in the mouth. Brunello di Montalcino was initially the vision and creation of

Ferruccio Biondi Santi who, in the 1870s, isolated a brunello clone of sangiovese and

planted it throughout the vineyards at his estate, Il Greppo, some 1,790 feet (550 meters)

above sea level. Biondi Santi’s brunello could not have been more unconventional. At the

time, most of the wine made in Montalcino was sweet and white. Those who preferred red

drank Chianti, much of which was light in style and not very ageworthy. Biondi Santi’s

brunello di Montalcino was the exact opposite: ample in body, packed with flavor,

intensely colored, and capable of being cellared for decades. Having isolated the clone he

wanted, Biondi Santi went on to limit the yields of his vines and then, during

fermentation, to let the grape skins sit with the juice for maximum color extraction. He

aged the resulting wines for years before releasing them. Although common today, each of

these practices was virtually unheard of in the mid-nineteenth century, especially in a rural

village in agrarian central Italy. (The first paved road to Montalcino was completed in

1960!) In 1980, brunello di Montalcino was awarded DOCG status; it was one of the first

Italian reds to be given the designation.

No road in Tuscany follows a straight line. All the twisting and turning helps demarcate subtle shifts in terroir . Here,

rolling fields of grain in the countryside between Montalcino and Montepulciano.

Today, slightly more than two hundred producers continue to improve what has been

considered a venerable wine for the past hundred years. Most of these producers are small.

However, one producer—the American-owned firm of Banfi—is colossal. The estate,

spread over more than 7,000 acres (2,800 hectares), includes a state-of-the-art winery that

makes several wines, including a good brunello.

The Casottino Vineyard of Conti Costanti, one of the top “old guard” producers of brunello di Montalcino. In the late

19th century, the Costanti family, along with the Biondi Santi family, were early proponents of a clone of sangiovese they

called brunello (“nice dark one”).

SOME OF THE BEST PRODUCERS OF BRUNELLO DI MONTALCINO

Altesino • Antinori • Argiano • Biondi-Santi • Casanova di Neri • Casanuovo della Cerbaie • Case Basse •

Cerbaiona di Diego Molinari • Ciacci Piccolomini d’Aragona • Col d’Orcia • Conti Costanti • Fattoria dei

Barbi • Ferro di Burroni Carlo • Fornacina • Gaja • Gorelli • I Due Cipressi • La Fortuna • La Serena • Pieve

di Santa Restituta • Pinino • Poggio Antico • Poggio di Sotto • Uccelliera

ROSSO DI MONTALCINO

Sometimes thought of as brunello di Montalcino’s younger sibling, rosso di Montalcino is

a lighter, fruitier, less complex wine than brunello di Montalcino; it’s also a lot less

expensive. Rosso di Montalcino is usually made from grapes from the younger and/or less

ideal vineyards in Montalcino; the older and better ones are reserved for brunello di

Montalcino. The yields of rosso are not as limited as those for brunello di Montalcino.

And, by law, rosso di Montalcino must be aged one year, compared to brunello di

Montalcino’s four. In poor vintages, however, rosso di Montalcino can be a smart choice,

since many brunello di Montalcino producers declassify their brunello grapes and make

rosso di Montalcino with them instead. Only a few producers consistently make truly

exciting rosso di Montalcino. In many cases, these producers give near brunello-like

treatment to their rosso, leaving the juice in contact with the skins for a longer period than

usual and aging the wine in small oak barrels. Among the best producers of rosso di

Montalcino are Argiano, Case Basse, Conti Costanti, I Due Cipressi, and Poggio Antico.

VINO NOBILE DI MONTEPULCIANO

Wine has been made in and around the Tuscan town of Montepulciano since Etruscan

times. It was not until the eighteenth century, however, that the wine was given the name

vino nobile, a reference not literally to the nobleness of the wine, but rather to the

noblemen, poets, and popes who regularly drank it. Today vino nobile sometimes lives up

to the quality suggested by its name—but not always. When at their best, vino nobiles

have a spicy concentration and wonderful savory bitterness, underscored by fresh acidity.

But too many are just plain thin and tart, without sufficient structure, fruit, or flavor. In all

fairness, proponents contend that a golden period for vino nobile may dawn once

producers get a firmer grasp on clones and begin to understand better how to tame vino

nobile’s difficult combination of acidity and tannin.

Like brunello di Montalcino and Chianti, vino nobile is made primarily from its own

set of clones of sangiovese. These are collectively called prugnolo (the word means “little

prune,

” a reference to the prunelike shape, color, and aroma of the grapes). Often the

grapes are, as they are in Chianti, blended with a small amount of canaiolo, malvasia,

and/or trebbiano.

Chianina—a breed of white cattle—is the secret behind Tuscany’ s phenomenally delicious T-bone steaks.

The vineyards of Montepulciano ring the city of Siena, near the southern end of the

V alley of Chiana. Curiously enough, Chiana may partly explain vino nobile’s prestige. The

valley is famous for a special breed of white cattle, Chianina, which is the source of

Tuscany’s renowned specialty: mammoth T-bone steaks called bistecca alla fiorentina.

Perhaps the utter perfection of these steaks led people to assume that the accompanying

wine had to be pretty incredible, too.

Montepulciano’s vineyards are planted on broad, open slopes. At about 600 feet (180

meters) above sea level, they stand at less than half the altitude of the brunello di

Montalcino vineyards. The soil is mostly sandy clay. By law, the wines must be aged for

two years; riservas must be aged for three years. Vino nobile di Montepulciano was

granted DOCG status in 1980. Avignonesi, Poliziano, and Poderi Boscarelli are among the

best producers.

Finally, don’t confuse vino nobile di Montepulciano, a Tuscan wine made principally

from the prugnolo clones of sangiovese, with the grape montepulciano, which is planted

throughout central and southern Italy and is a specialty of the region of Abruzzi. (Italy—

profusion of confusion!) Indeed, because these are easily mixed up, vino nobile di

Montepulciano producers are considering renaming their wine simply vino nobile.

ROSSO DI MONTEPULCIANO

As rosso di Montalcino is to brunello di Montalcino, so rosso di Montepulciano is to vino

nobile di Montepulciano, which is to say, the less expensive “younger sister.

” Rosso di

Montepulciano is made from prugnolo clones of sangiovese, but the vineyards are usually

younger than the vineyards dedicated to vino nobile. The yields of rosso are not as limited

as those for vino nobile, and rosso di Montepulciano is generally aged for a shorter period

of time. All of this would seem to make rosso di Montepulciano pale in comparison to

vino nobile, but the quality is entirely dependent on the producer. The immediate splash of

fruit in some rossos can be very appealing. A bottle of Gattavecchi’s rosso di

Montepulciano served with a juicy bistecca alla fiorentina will prove the point.

CARMIGNANO

It may lack the prestige of brunello di Montalcino, the popularity of Chianti, and the lucky

name of vino nobile, but Carmignano nonetheless has an important claim to fame:

cabernet sauvignon. In this tiny wine region just west of Florence, cabernet sauvignon has

been part of the Carmignano blend since the eighteenth century. Today, by law,

Carmignano must be composed of a minimum of 50 percent sangiovese, plus 10 percent to

20 percent cabernet sauvignon and cabernet franc (up to 20 percent canaiolo, 10 percent

white grapes, and 10 percent “other reds” are also allowed).

In a sea of Tuscan sangiovese, it’ s surprising to come upon vineyards planted with cabernet sauvignon and cabernet

franc. Yet both grapes have been part of the Carmignano blend since the 18th century.

THE BEST WINE BARS IN FLORENCE

Florence has a number of extremely casual wine bars, often just marble counters, which are perfect for a

glass of Chianti plus a snack of focaccia, some pecorino cheese, or finocchiona (“fennel sausage”)

heaped on Tuscan bread. Prices are reasonable. A few to experience: L’Antico Noè, Cantinetta da

V errazzano, Fuori Porta, and Le V olpi e l’Uva.

At La Taverna di San Guiseppe in Siena, a wine tasting means multiple glasses.

Carmignano, which has a reputation for finesse and structure, comes from a tiny area.

There are fewer than twenty producers, most of them minuscule. In fact, the wine drinker

is likely to encounter only one or two producers, and most probably the first will be the

famous estate of Villa de Cappezzana, which makes what many Italian wine lovers

consider the very best Carmignano. The estate was originally a de’ Medici villa.

VERNACCIA DI SAN GIMIGNANO

Although everything about Tuscany seems to put a person in the mood to drink red wine,

there is a historic white wine to consider: vernaccia di San Gimignano, traditionally

referred to as the wine that kisses, licks, bites, and stings. Actually, only the best vernaccia

di San Gimignanos do that; plenty of others—which are utterly neutral—just don’t appear

to be good at romance.

As its name suggests, vernaccia di San Gimignano is made from vernaccia grapes

grown on the slopes surrounding the storybook medieval hill town of San Gimignano,

roughly an hour’s drive southwest of Florence. Although historically vernaccia di San

Gimignano was made and aged in large, old wood casks, the best modern versions are

young and fresh, and owe their charm to temperature-controlled stainless-steel tanks.

There are about sixty relatively small producers. The best of these include Il Cipressino,

Riccardo Falchini, Montenidoli, Pietrafitta, La Quercia di Racciano, San Quirico, and

Teruzzi & Puthod.

VIN SANTO

Of the hundreds of different sweet wines produced in Italy, the best known may be vin

santo,

“holy wine,

” so named because priests have drunk it during Mass for centuries.

Unlike many sweet wines, however, vin santo is not served solely on ceremonious

occasions. It is the customary finale to even the humblest Tuscan meal, served after

espresso, almost always with a plate of small biscotti called cantucci, stubby, twice-baked

cookies meant for dunking.

Most vin santo does not taste as sweet as, say, Sauternes. The wine has a delicate,

creamy, honey-roasted flavor, and the color can be unreal, from radiant amber to neon

orange. The sweetness level, however, is entirely up to the producer, and there are even

some rare vin santos that are bone-dry.

True vin santo is expensive because the ancient process of making it remains artisanal

and labor intensive. First the grapes (generally malvasia bianca lunga or trebbiano) are

partially dried for three to six months. Although there are several ways this can be

accomplished, the preferred method is to hang them from rafters in an airy, dry attic or

room. During the drying period, nearly half of the liquid (mostly water) in the grapes

evaporates, concentrating the remaining sugar. The grapes are crushed, combined with a

madre, or “mother” (a small remnant of the thick residue from a former batch), and then

the must is left to ferment slowly for three to five years in small, sealed barrels placed in a

warm attic or loft called a vinsantaia. The barrels are commonly oak, but some producers

give the wine greater complexity by using juniper, cherry, and chestnut as well, then

blending the final lots. (This idea of using several different types of wood to contribute to

the complexity of flavor is also used in neighboring Emilia-Romagna to make the best

balsamic vinegars, and indeed, if everything does not go right, a Tuscan winemaker can

end up with some very delicious vinegar rather than vin santo.)

The vineyards of Marchesi de Frescobaldi, with the estate’ s renowned Castello di Nippozano in the background. The

Frescobaldi family, one of the original banking families of medieval Florence, has made wine for seven hundred years.

STEAK ITALIAN STYLE

If the wine list in most steak houses is any evidence, cabernet sauvignon is a steak’s best friend. Tuscany

begs to differ. The region’s specialty, bistecca alla fiorentina—a huge, three-inch-thick slab of grilled

Chianina beef—is always served with a wine made principally from sangiovese—especially a top Chianti

Classico Riserva, brunello di Montalcino, or vino nobile di Montepulciano. Sangiovese, with its

underlying bright acidity and hint of saltiness, is stunning as a counterpoint to the richness and fat of the

beef.

Typically families make their own vin santo for home use and as a proud offering to

guests. In addition, there are several dozen small commercial producers. Of them, these

seven make the most stunning vin santos: Avignonesi, Badia a Coltibuono, Fontodi, Isole

e Olena, San Giusto a Rentennano, Selvapiana, and I Selvatici.

In addition, the larger producers Antinori, Barone Ricasoli, Frescobaldi, and Lungarotti

make very excellent vin santos that are not as limited in production and thus more easily

found.

THE FOODS OF TUSCANY

Perhaps because it was the birthplace of the Renaissance, Tuscany is often associated with

refinement, wealth, even ostentation. We assume that Tuscan cooking will exhibit these

characteristics as well, and that the cuisine will be both sumptuous and elaborate.

Sumptuous it can be. Elaborate, almost never. Tuscan cooking is some of the humblest

in Italy. It is quite definitively poor people’s cuisine. In contrast to special-occasion dishes,

such as bistecca alla fiorentina (mammoth slabs of grilled Chianina beef), everyday meals

are more likely to be dominated by beans and bread. When other Italians want to be

derogatory, they call the Tuscans by their age-old nickname: mangiafagioli,

“bean eaters.

”

But if beans are commonplace in the region’s culinary repertoire, bread is even more

so. The entire cucina of Tuscany is said to revolve around this one essential food, and in

no other region of Italy does bread seem more intimately tied to everyday life. The

Tuscans may have been among the first people to regularly use forks, but bread is a

Tuscan’s oldest and most treasured utensil. At every meal, it is enlisted to help transport

one thing or another to the mouth.

Tuscany revolves around olives and grapes.

Tuscan bread, pane toscano, tastes like no other bread in Italy, mostly because it is

made without salt. In restaurants and trattorias this bread is the first thing whisked to the

table, even though great examples are, sadly enough, increasingly hard to find. (Many

trattorias now serve a cardboardlike commercial version that discriminating pigeons

would reject.) Traditionally, butter is never served alongside, nor is olive oil for dipping.

Generally, and without regard for its quality, a small cover charge for pane toscano

appears on the bill.

Tuscan children walking to school often munch on schiacciata, a piece of flat bread

baked with olive oil and sometimes sweetened with sugar or wine grapes. Before lunch or

dinner there are always crostini, thin slices of Tuscan bread traditionally spread with an

earthy paste of chopped liver, but sometimes, in more creative cases, covered with grilled

wild mushrooms or a puree of olives and garlic. Crostini are not the same as bruschetta—

which, in any case, is not a Tuscan term but the Roman one for peasant bread that has

been grilled over a fire, brushed with olive oil, rubbed with garlic, and then possibly

topped with chopped fresh tomatoes.

But perhaps the most glorious way to serve bread is as fettunta, a piece of toasted pane

toscano swathed with just-pressed, ripe, green, unfiltered Tuscan extra virgin olive oil.

Technically you can only eat fettunta in late fall, right after the olives have been harvested,

when the oil is at its apex. The name fettunta comes from fetta, the name workers used to

describe the hunk of bread that they anointed with intensely flavorful extra virgin olive oil

as it ran fresh from the press.

Bread—the lifeblood of Tuscany and, along with wine, an indispensable part of the Tuscan table. Dozens of Tuscan

specialties from panzella to crostini to ribollita depend on it when the bread is fresh, and even when it’ s stale.

In Tuscany, bread is also constantly used in cooking, especially good bread gone stale.

The homiest Tuscan soup is ribollita, made with stale bread, black Tuscan cabbage, and

beans. Panzanella, the humble and irresistibly delicious Tuscan salad, is made of stale

bread moistened with a little water and then tossed with fresh tomatoes, chopped basil,

onions, celery, and olive oil. A classic Tuscan cookbook, Con Poco o Nulla (“With Little

or Nothing”), opens with ten suggestions for using day-old bread.

Bread made without salt has a muted, almost bland flavor. That Tuscan bakers would

intentionally choose to make their bread this way seems surprising, until you consider that

bread alone is not the issue. In the Tuscan triumvirate of bread, olive oil, and wine, the

plain pane toscano is the perfect backdrop for the pepperiness of Tuscan olive oil, and

both are delicious juxtaposed with the slight perception of saltiness in many wines made

from sangiovese grapes. Salt and pepper. Wine and bread. Liquid and solid. What more

could be asked for? Then again, perhaps this small but admirable bit of culinary

compatibility was the result of more mundane considerations. Culinary historians point

out that salt was always a precious, expensive commodity in Tuscany, and that often it was

heavily taxed. Pane toscano, it seems, could also have been a simple method of tax-

avoidance.

WHEN YOU VISIT… TUSCANY

IT WAS IN FLORENCE that the Renaissance was born, and Tuscany is still a haven for

every sort of artisan—cabinetmakers, sculptors, silversmiths, gilders, and of course,

winemakers.

TUSCANY’S SMALL VILLAGES and hill towns seem untouched by time. Here, no road

even remotely resembles a straight line. One of the most beautiful is the Chiantigiana,

the country road that twists and turns, rises and falls through the vineyards and

woodlands that connect Florence with Siena.

WINE ESTATES IN TUSCANY vary tremendously in size, from small farms that have

been converted into working wine villas to large wineries. Many of these offer a full

palette of gastronomical possibilities, so in addition to tasting the estate’s wines, you

might be able to taste its olive oils and honey, or take a cooking class, or sample the

local cheeses.

TUSCAN WINE ESTATES are almost always a challenge to find. There are rarely any

signs or street addresses on the properties themselves, and you can forget the GPS.

The best bet is to meander around the nearest village and ask for specific directions

from a waiter in a local bar or café. Of course, it’s hard to get truly lost in Tuscany: Dirt

paths off the main road almost always end at some wine estate.

MOST WINE TOWNS have a local consorzio, or governing body, for that wine region.

The consorzio can give you an overview of winemaking in the region, provide you with

maps, and suggest producers to visit.

ABOVE ALL, NO WINE TRIP to Tuscany would be complete without a visit to the

enoteca in Siena, a former de’Medici fortress. Hundreds of wines from all over the

country are available there for tasting.

The Tuscan Wines to Know

While white wines are made in Tuscany, the wines of most importance, including the ones below, are all red.

FATTORIA DI FÈLSINA BERARDENGA

CHIANTI CLASSICO RISERVA | RANCIA

100% sangiovese

The Fèlsina estate is in the southeast corner of Chianti Classico, in the district of Castelnuovo Berardenga, where

the soils are marine sediments and alberese, a type of marl limestone with a high concentration of calcium

carbonate. Indeed, all of the wines have amazing aromas that suggest prehistoric sea beds, iodine, and minerals.

They are sophisticated wines that start out subtle and then zoom forward on the palate, with bitter cherries steeped

in liqueur, damp bark, spices, and dried rose petals. The winery’s basic Chianti Classicos always have classic

flavors and flair, but I especially like their riserva wine, called Rancia, the grapes for which come from a single

parcel that used to be part of a Benedictine monastery.

BADIA A COLTIBUONO

CHIANTI CLASSICO RISERVA

90% sangiovese, 10% canaiolo

Badia a Coltibuono (“Abbey of the Good Harvest”) dates from the eleventh century and was founded by the

V allombrosan order of reformed Benedictine monks. In the mid-1800s, the estate was acquired by the Giuntini

family and eventually was passed down to an heir, Piero Stucchi Prinetti, who, with his family, set about

transforming the estate into a superb modern property devoted to wine and food. (Lorenza de’Medici, the wife of

the late Piero Stucchi Prinetti, and as close to a Renaissance woman as it gets, is a famous cookbook author and the

founder of the estate’s acclaimed cooking school.) The wines, of course, are the heart of the estate, and they are

delicious—especially the Chianti Classico Riserva, with its autumnlike flavors of woods, mushrooms, withered

leaves, wet bark, truffles, damp soil, and small wild berries. I have always loved the leathery grip of this wine, and

the way it incites hunger for a richly sauced pasta.

FONTODI

FLACCIANELLO DELLA PIEVE

100% sangiovese

Flaccianello della Pieve is named for a Christian cross in the village of Pieve, but this wine comes from the village

of Panzano, and specifically the impressive amphitheater of steep hillside vineyards outside the town. This is a wine

you can drink once and remember forever. Precise in its delineated flavors, distinctive in character, and exuding

finesse, it’s one of the most exotic sangioveses made—syrupy-rich in texture, exceptionally complex, and dappled

with uncommon flavors, such as incense, ginger, black licorice, and persimmon. Most impressive of all is the way

the wine explodes on the palate with sappy juiciness. Fontodi, a small estate owned by Giovanni Manetti, also

makes astounding Chianti Classico Riserva.

MONTEVERTINE

LE PERGOLE TORTE

100% sangiovese

From the small estate of Montevertine, in the commune of Radda—one of the coolest spots in Chianti Classico—

comes Le Pergole Torte (“the twisted stake” in Italian, a reference to the old vine training method used in 1968,

when the vineyards were planted). One of the first 100 percent sangioveses in Chianti Classico, Le Pergole Torte is

a wine that incites sheer emotion in its drinkers. It is a selection of the estate’s best lots, and is richly textured yet

vividly precise. Its dramatic flavors—black cherry, black fig, vanilla, violets, and orange peel—flash across the

palate like slashing knives. Like the stylized woman on its label, the wine seems powerful and yet mysteriously

feminine at the same time.

ANTINORI

TIGNANELLO

Approximately 80% sangiovese, plus cabernet sauvignon and cabernet franc

Tignanello, the first well-known Super Tuscan, is the red wine that carved out a radically new direction for Tuscan

winemaking and, in the process, galvanized the creative spirit of winemakers throughout Italy. When it was first

made in 1971, Tignanello contained no cabernet, but from the beginning it was aged in small, French-oak barrels.

By the early 1990s, after a few slight changes in the blend and the winemaking method, some of the best

Tignanellos ever were being made. In the finest vintages, Tignanello possesses a fantastic aroma of bitter cherries

and exotic spices. These open up into a wine that is primordial and dark (I always think of Joseph Conrad’s Heart

of Darkness). The savory, salty flavors have a deep deliciousness about them—like long-simmered meat juices. But

best of all, Tignanello has vibrancy and energy, as if its concentration can’t wait to be unleashed.

POLIZIANO

VINO NOBILE DI MONTEPULCIANO

85% sangiovese (prugnolo clones), plus colorino, canaiolo, and merlot

Poliziano’s vino nobile is noble indeed. The wine’s blast of savory, briny black olive and espresso flavors is

delicious and just waiting for the traditional accompaniment to vino nobile—bistecca alla fiorentina, a huge, three-

inch-thick slab of grilled Chianina beef. Like so many top Tuscan wines, Poliziano’s vino nobile is beautifully

structured and sophisticated. It is not about fruit, but rather, belongs to the sensory world of expensive Italian

leather, fine espresso, and gourmet chocolate. The name Poliziano is an homage to humanist poet Angelo

Ambrogini (1454–1494), known as Il Poliziano, who was born in Montepulciano.

CONTI COSTANTI

BRUNELLO DI MONTALCINO

100% sangiovese (brunello clones)

Andrea Costanti makes some of the richest, yet most elegant and completely fascinating, brunellos in Montalcino.

The wine—as all great wines do—takes you on a taste journey. This one goes from savory grilled herbs and sea salt

to violets and black licorice, to cranberries and blueberries. The explosive finish leaves you with echoes of rich

fruits, espresso, and minerals. Costanti’s wines always have a fineness, a pedigree, a beauty. They are sumptuous

and sophisticated, and never overdone.

GAJA

BRUNELLO DI MONTALCINO | PIEVE SANTA RESTITUTA | RENNINA

100% sangiovese (brunello clones)

Angelo Gaja made his name in Piedmont working with (high-tannin) nebbiolo grapes, but in 1994 he acquired the

Pieve Santa Restituta estate, and he has a deft hand with (high-acid) sangiovese as well. The Rennina, broad on the

palate, shows a side of sangiovese that almost doesn’t exist: sumptuousness. The wine is smooth and rich, but

sangiovese’s classic saline, spice, and forest floor flavors are there, too. The combination makes for a fascinating

brunello. The estate itself is behind the seventh-century church Santa Restituta, which the Gaja family is restoring.

The name of the wine—Rennina—is what the estate was called in the late Middle Ages.

BIONDI-SANTI

BRUNELLO DI MONTALCINO | RISERVA

100% sangiovese (brunello clones)

The brunello clone was first isolated and propagated by the Biondi Santi family around 1870. They were the only

estate to produce brunello di Montalcino until after the Second World War, when several other producers joined the

ranks. This is the most legendary estate in Montalcino and also the most traditional. Wines here (both the riserva

and the regular Brunello) have been made in essentially the same manner for nearly a century, and the grapes come

from a perfect, high-altitude vineyard. The Biondi-Santi wines age in large, old Slavonian oak casks, where they

evolve painstakingly slowly. When they emerge, however, they are fascinating, complex wines with stunning

elegance and balance.

Mountain huts used by shepherds and farmers are scattered throughout the narrow alpine valleys of Trentino-Alto Adige

with the majestic Dolomites towering above.

OTHER IMPORTANT

WINE REGIONS

TRENTINO-ALTO ADIGE | LOMBARDY | LIGURIA | EMILIA-ROMAGNA

UMBRIA | ABRUZZI | THE SOUTHERN PENINSULA: CAMPANIA, APULIA,

BASILICATA, AND CALABRIA | SICILY AND SARDINIA

Italy is a treasure trove of vineyards, from Trentino-Alto Adige on the border of the Alps

to the island of Sicily off the North African coast. No province here is without vines. I’ve

covered the “big four” (Piedmont, V eneto, Friuli-V enezia Giulia, and Tuscany). Following

are what I consider the next most important Italian regions to know, each of which has

delicious wine specialties.

TRENTINO-ALTO ADIGE

No Italian wine region extends farther north than Trentino-Alto Adige, where pristine

vineyards carpet narrow Alpine valleys as high as 3,600 feet (1,100 meters) in elevation.

The sheer rock faces of the forebodingly beautiful Dolomites (part of the Alps) rise up

majestically and virtually perpendicularly behind the vines. These are some of the most

breathtaking vineyards in the world (and the Alto Adige part of the region, in particular,

gets my vote as one of the most gorgeous wine regions in all of Europe).

This is the sunny, south-facing side of the Alps and so, despite Trentino-Alto Adige’s

northern latitude, the vineyard-covered valleys are warm enough during summer to ripen

grapes. The soil is also ideal. Well drained and laced with limestone, it was created by

glacial and alluvial deposits of gravel, sand, and clay.

Trentino-Alto Adige, despite its hyphen, is really two distinct provinces. Trentino, in

the south, is primarily Italian-speaking. But in Alto Adige, nestled beneath Austria in the

north, German, not Italian, is the primary language (and both languages can appear on

wine labels). The district takes its modern name from the river Adige, the second longest

in Italy, which runs through its middle. But the area’s historic name is the Südtirol (South

Tyrol), a reference to its Austrian past. (Alto Adige was ceded to Italy by Austria after

World War I.) Politics, however, don’t always amend the ideology of a place, and for

many residents of Alto Adige, the Südtirol is still the name of the place where they live,

and goulash is a more familiar dish than polenta.

While cultural differences between Trentino and Alto Adige can run deep, the best

producers in the two provinces share a common ideology when it comes to wine. Like

Friuli-V enezia Giulia, Trentino-Alto Adige brings a northern, even Teutonic sensibility to

winemaking. This is especially true of Alto Adige, where the top producers—such

wineries as Alois Lageder, J. Hofstätter, Pojer e Sandri, Tiefenbrunner, Casòn

Hirschprunn, Cantina Tramin, and Zeni, to name a few—make wines of ravishing beauty.

Trentino-Alto Adige is home to a vast range of local and international grape varieties.

Among the most important white grapes are pinot grigio, traminer aromatico,

gewürztraminer, sylvaner, Müller-Thurgau, pinot blanc, and chardonnay, the last having

been grown in the region since the mid-nineteenth century. (Cantina Terlano’s Nova

Domus—a blend of pinot blanc and chardonnay—is one of the top white wines of the

region.)

Interestingly, thanks to the chardonnay grown, a small ocean of spumante is made here.

Indeed, sparkling wines were pioneered in the region in the early twentieth century by

Giulio Ferrari (not of car fame), and Ferrari is still one of Trentino-Alto Adige’s, indeed

one of Italy’s, top sparkling wine houses and the best known from the region.

THE QUICK SIP ON TRENTINO-ALTO ADIGE

THE TOP TRENTINO-ALTO ADIGE white wines, including pinot grigios, kerners,

traminers, Müller-Thurgaus, gewürztraminers, chardonnays, and sparkling wines, have

precision, grip, and focus. The reds, including teroldego, lagrein, schiava, and cabernet

sauvignon, are cool-climate, sleek reds with pure fruit flavors.

ONE OF THE MOST STUNNINGLY beautiful wine regions in Europe, Trentino-Alto

Adige, is bordered by the Swiss and Austrian Alps in the north; to the southeast is the

Veneto, and to the southwest, Lombardy.

THE REGION IS MADE UP of two distinctly different provinces. Trentino, to the south,

is Italian in character, while Alto Adige, in the north, was once an area of Austria known

as the Südtirol (South Tyrol). It is in Alto Adige that the very best wines are made.

Terraced vineyards near Trentino, the more southern, less mountainous, Italian-speaking part of the province Trentino-

Alto Adige. The more northern, mountainous part, Alto Adige, once belonged to Austria, and German is still commonly

spoken.

The grape variety called traminer (or more accurately, traminer aromatico) is a

specialty here—especially in Alto Adige. (This is a clone of the ancient variety savagnin,

one of the “founder varieties”; see Drinking DNA, page 55.) Gorgeously floral, flavorful,

and yet light as a feather in body, traminer is a sister of the better-known grape

gewürztraminer (a rose-colored clone of savagnin). In the hands of a producer like Pojer e

Sandri, traminer is irresistible for its purity, liveliness, and brilliance. And speaking of

gewürztraminer—Alto Adige has brilliant, vibrant, decadent, and yet elegant

gewürztraminers that are as concentrated and vivid as the gewürztraminers of Alsace, only

zestier and sleeker. If you want to be blown away by a gewürztraminer (not from Alsace),

try the gewürztraminer called Nussbaumer, from the producer Cantina Tramin. And if

Müller-Thurgau has always seemed a little drab (which it generally is in Germany), you

must again taste Pojer e Sandri’s sensationally spicy, minerally version, as well as the

most famous Müller-Thurgau—Tiefenbrunner’s Feldmarschall von Fenner zu Fennberg

Müller-Thurgau, named after a disciple of Kaiser Wilhelm II. It comes from the vineyard

thought to have the highest elevation in Italy and tastes as fresh as water from an icy

mountain stream.

But the northern Italian white grape that everyone seems to know—the grape that can

make wines that hit remarkable depths of mediocrity—is pinot grigio. Here in Trentino-

Alto Adige, pinot grigio saves its reputation. Somehow, in the glacial valleys of Alto

Adige in particular, the wine finds its groove as a delicate, exquisite white of impeccable

purity. The best example is Tenutae Lageder’s Porer pinot grigio, an intense, cold-weather,

utterly precise white wine made from biodynamically farmed grapes.

If you drink adventurously, you’ll find Trentino-Alto Adige’s indigenous reds to be

captivating. One of the specialties of Trentino, in particular, is the brooding, super-spicy,

tannic wine teroldego, a grape that grows best in the gravelly, glacial soil of the Rotaliano

plain. Another Trentino specialty, schiava—from schiavo,

“slave”

—is turned into light,

spicy wines with a slight bitter-almond character. In Alto Adige, schiava is often called

vernatsch. Then there’s lagrein—dark, sharp, bitter, robust. These grapes, along with

Friuli’s tazzelenghe and schioppettino, make up a group of lean, sleek, bitter-edged, crisp,

cold-climate Italian reds that have no parallel anywhere else in the world.

Enthusiasm is a must. Bubbles hit the ceiling of the cellar at Ferrari in Trentino-Alto Adige.

Finally, Trentino-Alto Adige is known for a luscious, amber-colored, silky dessert wine

—vino santo (“holy wine;” probably a reference to its historic use as part of the Mass).

Not the same as Tuscany’s vin santo, which is generally made from trebbiano Toscano

and/or malvasia bianca lunga grapes, Trentino-Alto Adige’s vino santo is a specialty of the

V alle dei Laghi, near the northern end of Lake Garda, and also of the hills west of Trento,

where it is made by leaving native nosiola grapes on trays to dry for several months,

before fermenting them and aging them in barrels for two to three years. The name nosiola

most likely derives from nocciola, Italian for “hazelnut,

” and a reference to the slightly

nutty aroma and flavor of the wine.

LOMBARDY

The north-central region of Lombardy—Lombardia in Italian—is Italy’s most populous

region and the country’s leading industrial zone. Nowhere is the region’s commercial flair

more evident than in Milan, Lombardy’s most important city and Italy’s fast-paced capital

of fashion and finance. With business so preeminent, there hardly seems room for a wine

industry. But there is one; this is Italy, after all.

Unlike Piedmont or Tuscany, Lombardy is not associated with a single grape variety,

but rather with dozens of them, as well as with several styles of wine, including the well-

known sparkling wine Franciacorta. Wines in this region, including a number of DOCGs,

are made in three principal areas located along the region’s borders. In the north, just a

short drive from Switzerland, is V altellina; in the southwest corner, near Emilia-Romagna,

is Oltrepò Pavese; and in the far east, near the V eneto, is the most important and famous of

all three areas: the aforementioned Franciacorta, a DOCG. The name Franciacorta is said

to derive from the region’s towns—curtes in dialect—which were exempt—francae—

from taxes during the Middle Ages.

Although sparkling wine is made in virtually every region of northern Italy,

Lombardy’s Franciacorta is the country’s leading area for sophisticated, dry sparkling

wines made by the traditional (Champagne) method. At their best, these are austerely

elegant sparklers with a fine, creamy mousse of bubbles.

Historically a fairly bucolic place, and home to many convents and monasteries,

Franciacorta became Italy’s premier sparkling wine zone in the 1970s largely because of

the pioneering success of the producer Berlucchi. Today, a number of prestigious sparkling

wine firms are located there, including Bellavista (try their elegant Gran Cuvée Pas

Operé), Ca’ del Bosco, and Cavalleri. As is true in Champagne, Franciacorta’s sparkling

wines are made from chardonnay and pinot noir (called pinot nero locally), although pinot

blanc (pinot bianco) is also allowed. To distinguish them from spumantes that are made by

the Charmat method (such as Asti), Franciacorta sparklers are labeled metodo tradizionale

or metodo classico—synonyms for the traditional (Champagne) method (although, of

course, their higher price automatically puts them in a different league).

THE QUICK SIP ON LOMBARDY

LOMBARDY (and its capital, Milan) are best known for industry and fashion, although

some serious wines—especially sparklers—are made.

FRANCIACORTA—Italy’s most prestigious traditional-method sparkling wine—is made

here.

THE STILL WINES OF THE REGION—both white and red—are made from a great

diversity of grape varieties.

VIN BRULÉ AND PANETTONE

On cold December mornings, there is nothing better than butter-slathered, toasted panettone, the large,

cylindrical, Italian bread that is studded with candied fruits and raisins. With its church-dome-like,

rounded top, panettone is traditional at Christmastime (and, come December, can be found in gourmet

stores globally). Panettone is thought to have been created in Milan, in Lombardy, in the sixteenth

century. The renowned bread is, in fact, now protected by a DOC for traditional Italian food products.

Next door, in the Piedmont region of Italy, the bread is served in the late afternoon (or on Christmas

Eve) with vin brulè (local dialect for “burnt wine”). Akin to English mulled wine, vin brulè is spiced and

lightly sweetened wine, served steaming hot. T o make it, the Italians combine a bottle of barbera or

nebbiolo d’Alba with ¼ cup sugar, 2 cinnamon sticks, 4 pieces star anise, 2 cloves, several white

peppercorns, and a couple of bay leaves. The mixture is heated almost to boiling, then put on very low

heat and allowed to simmer for 30 minutes—whereupon it is drunk from mugs, with toasted panettone on

the side.

Franciacortas are made as nonvintage wines as well as vintage-dated (known as

Franciacorta millesimato). Rosé Franciacortas are also made, as well as a special category

called Satèn (the word was chosen for its similarity to the English word satin). Satèn are

sparklers with less carbon dioxide, and thus are slightly softer and less bubbly than

traditional sparkling wines. Finally, like Champagne, Franciacorta sparklers spend quite a

long time on the yeast lees—from 18 months for Franciacorta non-vintage to 60 months

for Franciacorta Riserva.

In the same general area as Franciacorta, but farther east, near Lake Garda, is the small

region of Lugana, where the dry white wine based on trebbiano di Lugana, considered one

of the most tasty, aromatic types of trebbiano, is made. Although most trebbiano-based

wines are innocuous, Lugana—especially Lugana Superiore—can be nicely refreshing.

Some of its appeal may be related to the fact that it’s the wine usually served with the

region’s other specialty: fresh trout from the impressive Lake Garda.

The Oltrepò Pavese, known as the land of castles for the thirty-eight medieval

fortresses that still stand imposingly across the landscape, is just a half hour’s drive from

Milan, but this is where the major share of Lombardian wine is made. The large (33,000

acres/13,400 hectares), hilly area is south of northern Italy’s important Po River, hence the

word Oltrepò (“on the other side of the Po”). Most of the wine here is of quaffing quality

or just slightly better, based on a huge number of grape varieties. The reds, for example,

are usually the product of barbera, cabernet sauvignon, pinot noir, and/or Croatina, a

simple, indigenous red. The humble whites are based on riesling italico (also known as

welschriesling, a grape also grown in Austria and eastern Europe and not the same as true

riesling), cortese, chardonnay, moscato, malvasia, and/or pinot grigio. Quite a bit of easy-

drinking, well-priced spumante also comes from here, as well as a relatively new, higher-

priced category of sparklers called Cruasé. A Cruasé is always a rosé made by the

traditional method (secondary fermentation in the bottle) predominantly (85 percent) from

pinot noir. Like Franciacorta, Cruasé is a DOCG. The name comes from crua—a worthy

piece of ground—and rosé.

The town of Cinqueterre in Liguria, the coast of which is known as the Italian Riviera. The vineyards of Cinqueterre

(literally “Five Lands”) are located alongside five fishing villages.

Lombardy’s third wine-producing area is the V altellina, in the far north, on the

precipitous, cold yet sunny foothills of the Alps. Vineyards here are on slopes so steep

they must be terraced, and in some cases, as in Germany’s Mosel region, harvested grapes

are relayed down the mountainside in buckets attached to cables. This is the most northern

wine-growing region in the world for nebbiolo. Regular V altellina is a simple, rough-

edged, lean red made principally from that grape. A notch higher in quality is V altellina

Superiore, made from 90 percent nebbiolo and aged at least two years (compared to

regular V altellina’s one). There are five sub-districts where V altellina Superiore can be

made: Grumello, Sassella, Inferno, Maroggia, and V algella. Of the five, Inferno is where

the tastiest and the biggest-bodied wines are made. The name Inferno,

“hell” in Italian,

refers to the summer sun, which beats down on the terraced mountainside vineyards,

ripening the grapes.

And finally, there is V altellina Sforzato, Lombardy’s version of amarone. To make it,

the best clusters of nebbiolo are harvested, then hung to dry for approximately four

months in well-ventilated cellars. By the end of January, the grapes have lost 40 percent of

their weight and the juices inside have become quite concentrated. After the grapes are

fermented, the wine, inky and intense, is aged for two years before release.

LIGURIA

Known as the Italian Riviera, Liguria is the crescent-shaped region arcing from the French

border down to Tuscany. Virtually in the center is Genoa, Liguria’s capital and one of

Italy’s most historic and busiest ports. The steeply terraced vineyards, perched on the

ridges of the Apennine mountain range, descend right to the Ligurian Sea. (Astoundingly,

some of the vineyards can be reached only by boat.) So little land is available for these

mountain-clinging vineyards that the production of Ligurian wine is necessarily

minuscule. And the steep incline means that vineyards can be farmed only slowly and

painstakingly by hand. Traditionally, much of the wine here was little more than a basic

commodity, meant for washing down the local cuisine. (Pesto and olive oil, both Ligurian

specialties, are especially famous.) But today, a new commitment to quality has taken

hold.

Among Liguria’s numerous DOCs are several types of easy-drinking wines that are

important in the region. To Genoa’s east is the wine known as Cinqueterre, which

translates as “five lands” (so-called because the wine is made near five fishing villages).

Cinqueterre, often a simple, somewhat neutral-tasting but nonetheless popular white, is

made from bosco and albarola, two fairly innocuous varieties, plus vermentino, which has

more character. Indeed, the best producers use as much vermentino as possible, making a

wine that’s crisp, lively, and great with the fresh fish caught in the villages where the

grapes are grown. A sweet version—Cinqueterre Sciacchetrà—is made from grapes left in

the sun to dry and concentrate. Delicious but nearly impossible to find on the export

market, it’s a must-try if you are in Liguria.

Here, east of Genoa, in the DOC known as Riviera Ligure di Ponente, you’ll also find

another rare local specialty—the white grape pigato (the name means “spotted,

” from the

mottled appearance of the berries). At its best, pigato can make a lithe, minerally, bold

white that’s terrific with pesto.

West of Genoa, ormeasco, vermentino, and Dolceacqua are made. Ormeasco is

Liguria’s name for dolcetto; it is turned into fruity, quaffing reds. V ermentino grapes were

probably brought to Italy from Spain, via Corsica, in the fourteenth century. The variety is

the source of the dry, floral, somewhat resinous white wine also known as vermentino, a

classic with Ligurian fish soups. Dolceacqua, sometimes known by its more formal name,

rossese di Dolceacqua, comes from rossese, the best red grape of the Italian Riviera.

Reportedly a favorite of Napoléon, this wine is commonly used as an ingredient in one of

the specialties of the region, rabbit braised with olives.

THE QUICK SIP ON LIGURIA

A MOUNTAINOUS REGION cantilevered over the Ligurian Sea, in the Mediterranean,

Liguria is better known for dramatic landscapes than stellar wine.

AMONG THE TOP WINES in the region, the best known is Cinqueterre, a light-bodied,

fresh wine from grapes grown on terraced hillsides overlooking the sea.

THE TWO MAIN GRAPE VARIETIES in the region are the white grape vermentino and

the red rossese.

Estates in Liguria are small, many of them just local family operations, and often the

smaller the property, the more interesting the wine. It’s impossible to recommend

producers under these circumstances and, in any case, the number of Ligurian wines

exported is, as already mentioned, tiny. When in Liguria, the best strategy is an old

European one: Find a good chef and ask what he or she drinks.

EMILIA-ROMAGNA

“Ask an Italian where to eat only one meal in Italy and, after recommending his mother’s

house, it is more than likely he will send you to the region of Emilia-Romagna.

” With this

declaration, Lynne Rosetto Kasper opens her authoritative cookbook The Splendid Table,

and Kasper is right. Emilia-Romagna is Italy’s ultimate food region and a place so

consumed by its passion for gastronomy that even the name of its capital, Bologna, is

telling: Bologna means “the fat one.

” Here in the land that gives the world such serious

delicacies as Parmigiano-Reggiano, balsamic vinegar, and prosciutto di Parma, wine is,

well, playful might be the best word. There are no wines of renown, nothing on a par with

Chianti Classico, brunello di Montalcino, Barolo, or Barbaresco. What there is, however,

is a seemingly endless sea of fizzy lambrusco. In many countries, in fact, lambrusco is

among the top five imported Italian wines.

BALSAMIC VINEGAR

Wine’s “other self” is vinegar. And one of the best vinegars in the world is Italy’s balsamic vinegar. (Its

only competitor is Spain’s Gran Reserva Sherry vinegar.) Both are unlike everything else called vinegar.

Standard vinegar (the word comes from the French vin aigre, sour wine) is created when bacteria

convert the alcohol in a fermented liquid into acetic acid. The process is quick; the final liquid is blunt and

sharp. Traditional balsamic vinegar, on the other hand, is an exquisitely mellow, deeply concentrated,

syruplike liquid, sweet enough to drink on its own. In Italy it’s often sipped from a small glass like a

dessert wine. The adjective traditional is critical. There are countless inexpensive supermarket “balsamic

vinegars” that are just ordinary red wine vinegar that has been sweetened and colored with caramel.

They could come from Kansas.

Real balsamic vinegar is made only in Emilia-Romagna, just north of Tuscany, around the towns of

Modena and Reggio. It’s labeled aceto balsamico tradizionale di Modena or di Reggio, and recognizing

its unique origin and authenticity, the EU and the Italian government grant it a DOP , Denomination of

Protected Origin, equivalent to DOC status for wines. Price is always a tip-off: A small, 3-ounce (90-

milliliter) vial of balsamico tradizionale can be three to five times the cost of a moderately expensive

bottle of wine. The price reflects the painstaking, artisanal process by which traditional balsamic vinegar

is made. First, the unfermented must of crushed grapes (usually trebbiano Modenese, but three others

are also allowed) is boiled down to a sweet syrup, which then ferments and turns to vinegar. T o

condense the vinegar even more, the rich liquid is then aged a minimum of twelve years (it may be even

decades) in a series of progressively smaller barrels made from different woods—oak, chestnut, cherry,

linden, mulberry, juniper, ash, and so forth. As the water component of the liquid evaporates through the

grain in the wood, the remaining liquid grows ever more dense and lush. Meanwhile, each wood imparts

a different nuance to the final flavor of the vinegar. Although handcrafted, long-aged vinegars have been

revered in Italian homes for centuries, the name balsamic was first used in the eighteenth century to refer

to the “balmy” wood odors that would emanate from country farmhouses where the vinegar was patiently

being made, usually in the attic.

Traditional balsamic vinegar is used very selectively in Italy. It is dribbled (it’s too expensive to be poured) into

a small amount of olive oil or butter and drizzled over cooked vegetables or fish. In the summer, it is dripped over

fresh strawberries; in the fall, over fresh, thinly shaved, raw porcini mushrooms. For many Italians, however, the

most godly of all culinary combinations is Parmigiano-Reggiano moistened with a few drops of an old, traditional

balsamic vinegar.

THE QUICK SIP ON EMILIA-ROMAGNA

IN A COUNTRY WHERE EVERY REGION is known for its food, Emilia-Romagna is

considered the culinary apex. Food comes first here; wine’s sole purpose is to enhance

whatever’s on the plate.

SIMPLE, FROTHY (frizzante) lambrusco is what the region is known for, although more

complex, artisanal versions of this wine are also now making their way onto the

international scene.

THE REGION, WHICH SPANS almost the entire width of Italy, is made up of two

distinctly separate provinces. Emilia focuses mostly on frizzante wines, while Romagna

focuses on still table wines.

What makes Emilia-Romagna so culinarily rich is also what makes much of the wine

so comparatively poor. Running across the width of the region is the fertile Po River basin.

Readily available water and nutrients may be great for food crops, but for grapes it’s a

worrisome equation that usually results in high yields and thin, simple wines (although

there are some fantastic examples from small producers working with top grapes from the

best sites). The citizenry of Emilia-Romagna doesn’t seem to mind. Go into any good

restaurant, and rivers of lambrusco are being gulped down with pride.

As its name suggests, Emilia-Romagna is actually two regions. Emilia, to the west of

Bologna, is the definitive home of lambrusco, and today also makes still wines, many of

which are based on international varieties like sauvignon blanc, chardonnay, and cabernet

sauvignon. In Romagna, to the east, most red wines are still, dry, and based on sangiovese.

Romagna’s leading white wine, albana di Romagna, is a fairly characterless white,

although it does have the major claim to fame of being (illogically) the first Italian white

wine granted DOCG status.

But above all, this is the land of lambrusco. Not surprisingly, the fizzy, slightly bitter,

very fresh, and definitively purple wine tastes quite good with the region’s hearty

sausages, cured meats, and rich, meat-sauced pastas. Moreover, the people of Emilia-

Romagna insist that the light, frothy, fairly high-acid wine is the perfect aid to digestion in

a region that lives for its stomach.

Sadly, the only lambrusco most wine drinkers know is the highly commercial, slightly

sweet stuff made by co-ops (and sometimes doctored into white and pink versions).

Indeed, Riunite Lambrusco, made by the giant Riunite Co-op and introduced to America

in 1967 was a huge success. By 1976, Riunite became America’s number-one selling

imported wine brand—a position it held, remarkably enough, for the next twenty-six

years.

The top versions of lambrusco, however, are not sweet, but rather, dry and savory.

Either way, all lambrusco wines are made from the grape variety also known as

lambrusco. But here the going gets rough. There are at least thirteen different varieties

(plus dozens of clones) with the word lambrusco (or lambrusca) in the name. In Emilia-

Romagna, these different lambrusco varieties exist in close proximity—sometimes in the

next village. The main three lambrusco varieties are lambrusco di Sorbara (with floral

fresh flavors), lambrusco grasparossa (more intense wines with tannic grip), and

lambrusco salamino (so named because the long, cylindrical clusters look like small

salamis).

As noted, lambrusco is usually what the Italians call frizzante, slightly fizzy, not quite

sparkling enough to be considered spumante. Generally speaking, most lambrusco gets its

bubbles by being fermented in pressurized tanks, not by the traditional (Champagne)

method. Top examples, however, do use the traditional method of second fermentation in

each bottle. Because of its frothy exuberance, lambrusco definitely tastes best when it is

young, soon after its release.

Hard work is evident everywhere in Emilia-Romagna, as the hands of a winemaker attest. In addition to wine, the region

is famous for many artisanal food products, including aceto balsamico di Modena, prosciutto di Parma, and Parmigiano-

Reggiano cheese.

There was a time, not long ago, when the zesty, artisanal lambruscos that any wine

lover would prefer were available only in Emilia itself, and even then only in the four

distinct zones that specialized in it. But today the picture has changed. A number of

fantastic small-production versions are easy to find, including Cleto Chiarli, Fattoria

Moretto, Fiorini, Francesco V ezzelli, Lini, and Tenuta Pederzana.

As for the wines of Romagna, albana di Romagna can be a soft and pleasant, if

unremarkable, white. Most versions are dry, but in Romagna you will come across slightly

sweet versions as well as spumantes made from the albana grape. The most popular red

wine is sangiovese di Romagna, based on a clone of sangiovese, and usually considered

simple at best. With some searching, it is possible to find more compelling versions made

by small producers, including Fattoria Paradiso, Ferrucci, and Tenuta Zerbina.

UMBRIA

Compared to its neighbor Tuscany, the small region of Umbria is a serene, bucolic,

understated sort of place. Here, smack in the center of Italy, the landscape is gentle and

rolling, and the sunlight is almost as arrestingly gossamer as it is in Tuscany. It seems

fitting that Saint Francis of Assisi, Umbria’s most beloved son (and the patron saint of

animals), lived here. Indeed, one of the most striking cathedrals in the region is the

Basilica di San Francesco d’Assisi.

Umbria’s best-known wine is Orvieto which, today, can be a white or red wine.

Historically, however, Orvieto was a stylish, crisp, slightly peachy white wine produced

around the medieval hill town of the same name, in the southern part of the region.

Orvieto, the best versions of which can have real character, is made from trebbiano

(specifically the local clones of trebbiano known as procanico), along with grechetto,

verdello, drupeggio, and sometimes malvasia. A step up in quality from basic Orvietos are

the Orvieto Classicos, wines that come from the original, small, central Orvieto zone.

Although most Orvietos encountered today are dry, the wine was originally slightly sweet.

While production is now limited, some of the most fascinating Orvietos are semisweet

versions known as amabile or even sweeter still, dolce. Several large, important Tuscan

firms, such as Antinori, Ruffino, and Barone Ricasoli, make dry Orvieto, and there are a

number of very good, smaller Umbrian producers, including Barberani and Decugnano dei

Barbi.

While the traditional white grapes of Umbria make delicious, every-night wines like

Orvieto, there are also several more ambitious white wines coming from the region. The

best known is Antinori’s Cervaro della Sala, a rich, almost Burgundy-like blend of

chardonnay and grechetto made at the family’s breathtakingly beautiful, old Umbrian

estate, Castello della Sala.

As for red wine, the relatively new red Orvieto (the DOC is known as Orvietano Rosso)

takes the concept of blending to new heights, since some thirteen red varieties can be

included, notably aleatico, cabernet franc, cabernet sauvignon, canaiolo, ciliegiolo, merlot,

montepulciano, pinot noir, sangiovese, and several others, which can come from anywhere

in the entire Orvieto zone. And just so that all bases are covered, the wine can also be

made up entirely of any one of these (except montepulciano), as a single-varietal version.

Umbria’s historic top red wines, however, are mostly made in the hills that surround

Perugia. Two types in particular are considered among Umbria’s best: Torgiano rosso

riserva and sagrantino di Montefalco, both of which have DOCG status. Torgiano (from

Torre di Giano,

“tower of Janus,

” the Roman god of gates and the namesake of January) is

a tiny village where the wine Torgiano is primarily made from sangiovese and canaiolo (as

Chianti historically was). Three additional grapes are optional: trebbiano, montepulciano,

and ciliegiolo.

The village and surrounding area are dominated by the family-run winery Lungarotti,

founded by Giorgio Lungarotti in the 1960s. Lungarotti, a stately man, was instrumental in

helping various wines in Umbria receive DOC and DOCG status, and the quality of his

wines served as an inspiration to other Umbrian winemakers. Lungarotti’s museo del vino

(“wine museum”), known as “MUVIT” in the village of Torgiano, houses one of the most

impressive personal collections of wine artifacts in Italy, and should not be missed by any

traveler. Equally impressive is Lungarotti’s Olive and Oil Museum, known as “MOO,

”

also in the village. Lungarotti’s wines, especially the Torgiano rosso riserva called

Rubesco, can be stunning and long-lived.

THE QUICK SIP ON UMBRIA

UMBRIA IS A LANDLOCKED REGION centrally located on the knee joint of the boot-

shaped country.

WHILE PRODUCTION IS LIMITED compared to that of its neighbor Tuscany, Umbria

produces the well-known, crisp white wine Orvieto, as well as two DOCGs: T orgiano

rosso riserva and sagrantino di Montefalco.

THE MOST IMPORTANT GRAPES are the white grechetto, trebbiano, and verdello,

and the red sangiovese and sagrantino.

A basket of priceless, freshly harvested black truffles in Umbria.

THE EMPEROR’S WINE

Falernian was the Château Pétrus of ancient Rome—so sought after that you practically had to be the

emperor of Rome to get a taste. Made from grapes grown in just three vineyards on Monte Massico,

north of Naples, falernian symbolized the height of luxury and sophistication (so much so that

counterfeits sprung up everywhere). It is not clear what variety of grapes were used to make the now-

extinct wine. Indeed, scientists are not sure whether falernian was a white or red wine, although some

writings by Pliny the Elder, and Petronius’s play Satyricon, point to it being a white wine. The 121 B.C.

vintage was so legendary that it was still being written about two hundred years after its release.

Sagrantino di Montefalco wines are quite the opposite of Torgiano wines. While most

Torgiano reds have the medium weight and relative delicacy of Chianti Classicos,

sagrantino di Montefalcos are inky-purple powerhouses—big, bold, gripping wines that

have been compared to amarones. The wines are made from the indigenous sagrantino

grape, and although the majority of examples today are dry, sweet versions made from

dried grapes were far more common in the past. There aren’t many producers of

sagrantino di Montefalco; the top one is Adanti.

ABRUZZI

With its ample sunshine, dry climate, hilly terrain, coastal breezes off the Adriatic Sea,

and high altitude (three-fourths of the vineyards are more than 2,000 feet/610 meters

above sea level), Abruzzi appears to be tailor-made for vineyards. Indeed, this region in

central Italy, with its nearly 80,000 acres (32,000 hectares) of vineyards, is one of the most

productive in the country.

Alas, more than three-fourths of all the wine in the Abruzzi region is produced by large

cooperative wineries, and a majority of that is made by the four co-ops that dominate

production: Cantina Tollo, Casal Thaulero, Casal Bordino, and Citra. These co-ops make

oceans of wine labeled Abruzzi, but they also make oceans of bulk wine, some of it

blended into wines from more famous neighboring regions.

THE QUICK SIP ON ABRUZZI

LOCATED IN CENTRAL ITALY , Abruzzi is a somewhat isolated region along the

Adriatic Sea. T o the west, it is cut off from Lazio (Latium) and its capital, Rome, by the

Apennine Mountains.

DESPITE VERY GOOD VITICULTURAL conditions, Abruzzi is best known for

inexpensive wine, the vast majority of which is made by large cooperative wineries.

THE MOST NOTABLE WINE OF ABRUZZI is the rustic red montepulciano d’Abruzzo,

made from the montepulciano grape. An often overlooked, easy-drinking, light-red style

of montepulciano d’Abruzzo—cerasuolo d’Abruzzo—can also be delicious (it looks like

a rosé but has a bit more oomph).

In Abruzzi, a grandmother picks grapes.

The top wine here is montepulciano d’Abruzzo, made, as the name implies, from

montepulciano grapes. (Note that the name of these grapes is very easily confused with the

wine vino nobile de Montepulciano, which is made in Tuscany from sangiovese grapes.)

Montepulciano d’Abruzzo, which is made all over the region, is usually an appealingly

rustic wine, solidly built, with a soft texture and good, thick fruit flavors in the middle.

Among the best wines are those labeled montepulciano d’Abruzzo Colline Teramane, a

DOCG. Unfortunately, there’s also a lot of characterless red made when montepulciano is

grown at high yields. Let price be your guide.

A specialty here—especially suited to summer—is montepulciano d’Abruzzo cerasuolo

(meaning “cherry red”). This fresh, tasty light red of montepulciano is best consumed cold

and young, when its fruitiness is highlighted.

The best-known white wine of Abruzzi is trebbiano d’Abruzzo, which—with a handful

of notable exceptions—usually makes a bland, dry, inexpensive quaffer meant to

accompany the region’s many fish dishes. The grapes behind most trebbiano d’Abruzzo

were once thought to be poor-quality cousins of trebbiano Toscana, but it appears the

Abruzzi trebbiano is a separate grape variety entirely. These grapes were also once

thought to be the same as the neutral-tasting variety bombino bianco, but bombino, too, is

now thought to be its own variety. In many cases, both varieties are part of the field blend

that makes up the wine, so, in the end, the story behind trebbiano d’Abruzzo is not entirely

clear.

What is clear, though, is that a tiny handful of small, artisanal producers in Abruzzi

tower above all others and make extraordinary examples of these often uneventful wines.

Working with small yields, and often in innovative ways, such producers have developed a

cult following among Italian wine connoisseurs. Chief among them is the wine estate

V alentini. The late Edoardo V alentini has been called the Angelo Gaja of Abruzzi.

THE SOUTHERN PENINSULA:

CAMPANIA, APULIA, BASILICATA, AND CALABRIA

When the ancient Greeks admiringly called Italy Oenotria,

“the land of wine,

” they were

referring specifically to the southern peninsula—the toe, heel, and ankle of the Italian

boot. In this rugged, sunny, mountainous land, they found scores of fascinating grape

varieties. To these they contributed some of their own, establishing an even richer

foundation of viticulture. By the time of the ancient Romans, the south was a treasure

trove of wines, including the wine the Romans esteemed most: falernian, a wine (reports

differ on whether it was white or red) produced on the slopes of Monte Massico, in

Campania.

As in Greece itself, however, this auspicious beginning never evolved into the kind of

future it seemed to promise. Today, the four regions of the southern peninsula—Campania,

Apulia, Basilicata, and Calabria—make many easy-drinking wines, but comparatively few

high-quality, famous wines. Admittedly, these regions have historically been among Italy’s

poorest and most rural. The combination of poverty and a hot climate conducive to high

yields has meant that quantity rather than quality has been the driving force behind the

wines. Until recently, a lot of the wine here was not even bottled, but sold directly from

the cask to local customers toting their own jugs.

A statue of the Roman emperor Augustus stands on the limestone cliffs of Capri off the coast of Naples in Campania.

Enthralled by the island’ s beauty, Augustus built temples, aqueducts, and private villas on the island.

THE QUICK SIP ON THE SOUTHERN PENINSULA

CAMPANIA, APULIA, BASILICATA, and Calabria, on Italy’s southern peninsula, form

the toe, heel, and ankle of the Italian boot.

THESE SUNNY , LAID-BACK southern regions boast stunning coasts and imposing

volcanic mountain ranges, although they remain some of the poorest and most rural

regions of Italy.

MUCH OF THE WINE IN THESE REGIONS is simple and rustic, but there are also

delicious and surprising wines from local varieties, including the white grapes fiano and

greco di Tufo, and the red grapes aglianico and negroamaro.

Still, the southern peninsula can’t be dismissed. Revolutions in quality have happened

elsewhere, and there’s at least some reason to believe one may happen here. Already,

stirrings in that direction have begun, and more and more delicious southern Italian wines,

especially from Campania and Apulia—many of them great values—are being exported.

CAMPANIA

Campania is certainly better known for the appealing cacophony of Naples, the beauty of

the Amalfi Coast, and the cerulean blue waters of Capri than it is for wine, even though

this is, along with Apulia, one of the two most exciting southern regions. While there were

only three main wineries in Campania in 1970, today more than a hundred exist.

Moreover, the number of grape varieties also tops one hundred, including three of the

south’s most impressive ancient grapes: the red aglianico and two whites—fiano and

greco. All three of these important varieties thrive in the volcanic soils of Avellino,

northeast of Mount V esuvius, a still-active volcano that erupted violently in A.D. 79,

destroying the nearby city of Pompeii (the remains of the city are perfectly preserved).

Preserving the three main grape varieties—often called the archaeological varieties—

has been the mission of one of the south’s most famous and important producers:

Mastroberardino, founded in 1878 and still family run. In the late 1990s, the family,

working with Italian archaeologists, developed a project to analyze the DNA from grape

seeds buried in the volcanic ash and then replant the slopes of Mount V esuvius with

vineyards devoted to these ancient grape varieties, much as such vineyards might have

existed in antiquity.

Aglianico, a red variety, is the basis for the south’s most famous red wine, the DOCG

known as Taurasi. Almost blackish in color and with fascinating bitter chocolate, leather,

and tar aromas and flavors, Taurasi is also one of the only wines in the south noted for its

capacity to age. Mastroberardino’s sensational Taurasi, called Historia, is a dark,

foreboding wine with delicious severity.

Aglianico aside, some of the most fascinating of Campania’s top wines today are white.

Their distinctiveness and quality result not only from the region’s volcanic soils, but also

from its hilly geography, which allows white varieties to be planted at higher, cooler

elevations, preserving acidity in the grapes. For example, the greco di Tufos made by both

Feudi di San Gregorio and Mastroberardino are bursting with freshness and are as cooling

as homemade limeade. Mastroberardino’s in particular (called Nova Serra) is a ballet

dancer of a white—poised to spring into action, with lots of energy wrapped around a taut

core.

Besides greco and the somewhat softer, less dramatic fiano, Campania is known for

falanghina and coda di volpe. A mellow white wine with a hint of spice and bitter orange

peel, falanghina is traditionally paired with seafood or buffalo mozzarella pizza, both local

dishes. Coda di volpe (literally,

“tail of the fox,

” a reference to the variety’s elongated

grape clusters, which can look like the bushy tails of foxes) was once used primarily as a

blending grape, but today is also used alone to make a fruity, spicy wine.

LACRYMA CHRISTI

Made primarily from the white grapes coda di volpe and verdeca and the red grapes piedirosso and

aglianico, grown on the slopes of Mount Vesuvius, Lacryma Christi—

“T ears of Christ”

—is one of

Campania’s most recognized, simple, easy-drinking wines (red, white, and sparkling versions are all

made). There are several stories behind the name. One says that as Jesus Christ ascended to heaven,

he looked down and saw the Bay of Naples, and it was so beautiful that he cried. His tears landed on the

slopes of Mount Vesuvius, where vines miraculously sprang up. Another story suggests that when Lucifer

fell from heaven, Christ was sad and cried tears that landed on the slopes of Mount Vesuvius, again

producing the miraculous vines. A third, far less miraculous, more pragmatic story recounts that local

monks, lacking modern filtering equipment, passed the wine through canvas, causing it to fall in drops,

like tears.

APULIA

A long, flat, sun-drenched, fertile strip of land across the Adriatic Sea from Greece, Apulia

stretches from the spur of the Italian boot to its heel. For the past half decade, this region

has produced more Italian wine than any other. Indeed, Apulia is so well suited to

agriculture that it also produces more olive oil than any other region (almost half of Italy’s

total production), and some of those olive trees are more than one thousand years old.

Much of the wine, alas, is basic, cheap table wine. Nonetheless, there are some very

good, everyday red wines, the sort that would make perfect bargain-priced house reds.

(With recent outside investments by well-known Italian producers, such as Tuscany’s

Antinori family, the quality of the basic table wines is rising.)

The leading grape varieties are negroamaro (based on the Latin name for black, negro,

and probably on the Italian word for bitter, amaro, although some historians think amaro

is derived from another reference to black, the Greek maru), malvasia nera di Brindisi,

nero di Troia, and primitivo. All can be rustic and tasty. Negroamaro is the primary grape

in Apulia’s hot, arid, and most famous wine district, the Salento peninsula. Here it is made

into the wine Salice Salentino, often one of the most popular low-priced wines on Italian

restaurant wine lists, especially the dependably tasty Salice Salentino made by Taurino.

Uva di Troia (also known as nero di Troia) is the source of the robust red DOCG wine

Castel del Monte Nero di Troia Riserva. (It is indigenous to Apulia, to the areas near the

village of Troia, and has nothing to do with the Greek city of Troy.)

As for primitivo, it is (along with California’s zinfandel) the same as the Croatian grape

crljenak kaštelanski—historically known as tribidrag—and was brought from its home on

the Dalmatian coast of Croatia to southern Italy. In Apulia, primitivo is made into dry and

sweet wines. The dry is not unlike a light-bodied American zinfandel. The sweet primitivo

is the DOCG known as primitivo di Manduria dolce naturale, a rare, sweet red (8 percent

residual sugar) that can be made only in the best vintages and must be made entirely from

primitivo grapes allowed to raisinate on the vine.

Finally, as a fascinating aside, because of Apulia’s fertility and strategic location,

dozens of groups and empires have ruled it over the past two thousand years. But the lack

of ground water has been a constant limiting factor to the region’s growth. That said, as of

the seventeenth century, ingenious dwellings called trulli were constructed. Mortarless

limestone huts with conical roofs, the trulli were usually built directly atop cisterns dug

into the bedrock. They are still found today near the vineyards of the Itria V alley.

Trulli, the typical, conical-topped dwellings of Apulia. Made from limestone bricks stacked without mortar , the trulli

were sometimes built over cisterns dug into the bedrock below. They were sometimes used as storehouses, but they also

served as shelters for field and vineyard workers.

BASILICATA

Basilicata is the most mountainous region of southern Italy—almost half of the region is

made up of the foothills and mountain peaks of the Apennines, one of the largest mountain

ranges in Italy. Although the region has small coasts on the Ionian and Tyrrhenian Seas, it

is, for the most part, landlocked and isolated. Overall, the region is extremely poor (it was

completely deforested by the Romans two thousand years ago). Less than 5 percent of the

wine here is DOC or DOCG. There is but one very important wine, the red DOCG known

as aglianico del Vulture, named after Mount Vulture, an extinct local volcano on whose

slopes the best grapes grow.

The aglianico grape variety is indigenous to southern Italy (there is no DNA evidence

suggesting it is related to any Greek grape brought from Greece). The most highly

regarded producers of aglianico del Vulture are Donato d’Angelo, Terre Degli Svevi, and

Bisceglia (whose aglianico del Vulture, called Gudarrà, is an amazingly distinctive wine

with the earthiness of dried porcinis).

HOW OLD IS YOUR HOUSE?

In Basilicata, in the ancient city of Matera, the streets stacked against the hillsides are lined with cave

dwellings, called sassi, that were part of a prehistoric troglodyte settlement, created by some of the first

people to settle in Italy nine thousand years ago. The original cave dwellers ingeniously designed the

caves to capture and direct the natural water channels in the rock, as water is scarce on the

mountainside. These cave homes have been inhabited since they were constructed, although many

people were forced out of these homes and into more modern houses by the Italian government in the

1950s (the caves were once rife with malaria). T oday, you can have a drink at a café or rent a room for a

night at a high-end hotel in a nine-thousand-year-old sasso.

CALABRIA

The toe of Italy’s boot, Calabria, was a favorite place among ancient Greek adventurers.

The arid, mountainous terrain has meant that Calabria has remained an impoverished

region. While olive trees and orange orchards do well here, grape growing is a challenge.

Nonetheless, some good wines are made. The most important of these is Cirò, a medium-

bodied, grapey, spicy red made from the ancient variety gaglioppo. The top producer is

Librandi. (Legend has it that Cirò was offered to the winners of the ancient Greek

Olympics.)

Just east of Calabria’s, and the country’s, southernmost point is the remote seaside town

of Bianco. This is the source of Calabria’s other notable wine, the white wine greco di

Bianco. A dessert wine made from partially dried greco grapes, it has a fascinating herbal,

citrus flavor.

SICILY AND SARDINIA

The Mediterranean’s two largest islands, Sicily and Sardinia, have been the prized

acquisitions of virtually every Mediterranean power in antiquity, from the Phoenicians,

Byzantines, and Arabs to the Romans and Catalans. The two islands epitomize the sunny

Mediterranean climate and share a long history of producing wines that range from simple

and delicious to stunning.

SICILY

In terms of volume of wine produced, Sicily is one of the top regions in Italy, and it’s also

Italy’s largest region—at 10,000 square miles (26,000 square kilometers), it is larger than

Tuscany, itself a fairly large region. Viticulture flourished here under the Greeks, and the

island’s wines soon became some of the most famous of the ancient world. By the time of

the Roman Empire, the sweet Sicilian wine known as mamertine was highly admired by

the ruling class and is said to have been the favorite wine of Julius Caesar.

In no place is the Santa Trinità Mediterranea —

“Mediterranean Holy Trinity”

—of

wine, olive oil, and bread more evident than in Sicily. The island’s hilly terrain, poor soil,

and unfaltering sunlight are tailor-made for the production of all three Italian necessities.

Moreover, Sicily’s strategically located port cities have made the trading of all three

relatively easy, both today and in the past.

For much of the twentieth century, Sicily suffered from the same wine mentality that

handicapped Apulia, Campania, Basilicata, and Calabria—namely that quantity mattered

more than quality. As in those regions, the yields in Sicilian vineyards were pushed to the

limit and winemaking was haphazard at best; Sicilian wine grew predictably worse.

Ironically, the island so famous for its wines in antiquity became, in the twentieth century,

infamous for ultra-cheap vino da tavola. In the 1970s and 1980s, the decline of the

reputation of Sicilian wines caused the top producers to launch a mini-revolution oriented

toward quality. Today, more fascinating wines—white as well as red—are coming out of

Sicily than ever before. The local grape variety grillo, for example, is made by top

producers like Tenuta Rapitalà into dry, racy whites that detonate on the palate with spicy,

peppery, exotic orange and herbal notes. Although, like grillo, the best of these local

Sicilian varieties are still not widely known, many of them may eventually rank with the

most distinctive and delicious wines produced in the entire country.

The old, narrow streets of Sicily.

THE QUICK SIP ON SICILY AND SARDINIA

THROUGHOUT THEIR HISTORY , Italy’s two largest islands have been conquered and

claimed by numerous Mediterranean nations. Each of those countries left their stamp,

creating what is today a richly diverse palette of foods and wines on each island.

MULTIPLE STYLES OF white and red wine are made on the islands, from such varied

grapes as riesling, carricante, and nero d’Avola (Sicily) to cannanou, girò, and

vernaccia di Oristano (Sardinia).

TWO OF THE MOST HAUNTINGLY delicious dessert wines in the world come from the

tiny islands off Sicily’s coast—moscato passito di Pantelleria and malvasia delle Lipari.

One of the areas generating excitement in Sicily today is Mt. Etna, a raging volcano

that continues to erupt regularly. (The last series of massive eruptions, in 2012, resulted in

spewing fountains of lava, some taller than the Eiffel Tower.) As improbable as it seems,

in the past two decades, dozens of winemakers—Italian and foreign—have planted

vineyards here, in the black lava soil on slopes that broach an astounding 45 degrees. (The

vintners acknowledge the danger from eruptions, but so far the lava flows have descended

on a side of the mountain not covered in vineyards.) Some of those vineyards lie at

elevations greater than 3,300 feet (1,000 meters) above sea level. The sun here—as you

might expect in Sicily—is bright. But what seem decidedly un-Sicilian are the cold

temperatures. Indeed, Mt. Etna’s chilly air and resulting late harvest (often as late as

November) make the area ideal for snappy whites such as riesling and carricante, a local

white grape that yields minerally, racy wines with resiny notes of fennel and citrusy notes

of bergamot. In this extreme terroir, many vineyards are planted alberello (“little tree” or

“bush”) style, which is to say, without expensive trellising which, in any case, would be

difficult to construct given the terrain. Graci’s Etna Bianco, primarily carricante, is a

fantastic example of a wine made from the variety. And the Mt. Etna white that must be

tasted for sheer exotic outrageousness is Frank Cornelissen’s MunJebel Bianco, a bold,

almost orange-colored wine that smells like orange-spiced tea and tastes of mangoes,

spices, ash, and minerals.

The Piazza IX Aprile in the ancient coastal town of Taormina on Sicily’ s east coast. The square was named after April 9,

1860, when Mass in the nearby Taormina cathedral was interrupted to announce that Garibaldi had landed at Marsala

(on the far side of the island) to begin a conquest that would ultimately make Sicily a part of Italy.

Mt. Etna’s reds are not for the faint of heart. They are generally based on two grapes—

nerello Mascalese (which geneticists believe is a progency of sangiovese) and nerello

cappuccio (parentage unknown; the name means “black hood”).

Mt. Etna reds are often very delicately colored (lighter even than pinot noir). But

beware; what awaits your palate is a massive onslaught of chalky, dusty dryness and the

sort of bitterness that oversteeped tea possesses. (I always feel as if someone has just

stuffed wet clay in my mouth.) As the Italians might say: Y ou really need to drink them

with food.

The coastal village of Naxos, the most ancient of the Greek colonies on Sicily. It was founded in 735 B.C., by a group of

colonists from Chalcis (also spelled Chalkida) on Greece’ s Euripus Strait.

But Mt. Etna aside, Sicily generally makes good, concentrated reds based primarily on

the grape variety nero d’Avola (also called Calabrese), a high-quality variety that can

produce intensely black-colored wines of real depth, juiciness, and charm. Dozens of

estates now focus on this variety, and some produce wines of surprising complexity and

richness. Among the top producers: Feudo Principe di Butera, Tenuta Rapitalà, Abbazia

Santa Anastasia, Duca di Salaparuta, Planeta, Fatascià, and the large firm Regaleali, for

their nero d’Avola called Rosso del Conte.

But as good as all of these dry wines are, I have to say that two of the most wickedly

delicious dessert wines in the world come from Sicily (actually, from two tiny islands off

its coast)—moscato passito di Pantelleria and malvasia delle Lipari.

Moscato passito di Pantelleria is made just 37 miles (60 kilometers) off the coast of

Tunisia, on the tiny (9 miles/14 kilometers long), active volcanic island of Pantelleria, a

satellite island of Sicily and part of the same volcanic chain. (Pantelleria is currently

sinking slightly, as the cooling magma under it deflates and degasses itself.) The Arabs,

who ruled Pantelleria for four centuries (700 to 1123) and were the first to bring

grapevines here, called it Bint al-Riyāh (“the daughter of the winds”), a reference to the

fierce, hot north African winds that rage over the island. The grapes the Arabs brought

were zibibbo (from zabib, Arabic for “raisins”). Zibibbo is the local name for muscat of

Alexandria.

Because of the ferocious winds, zibibbo on Pantelleria is trained low to the ground,

small and bonsai-like, in shallow basins dug into the volcanic soil so that the vines are not

ripped apart by the direct force of the winds. (A similar system is used on the windy Greek

island of Santorini.)

In the sun-drenched vineyards of Pantelleria, zibibbo grapes have no trouble growing

fat with sugar and being turned into ripe, effusively aromatic moscato wine. This is known

simply as moscato di Pantelleria. Its more famous and complex sister—the syrupy,

sensational moscato passito di Pantelleria—requires more involved winemaking and is

made in minuscule quantities.

To produce it, part of the moscato is harvested when ripe, pressed, and the juice set

aside, much like the grapes for the regular moscato di Pantelleria just mentioned. The

remaining moscato grapes are handled as they would be for a passito wine; that is, the

grapes are laid on mats and dried al fresco, in the sun for several weeks, until they’ve

shriveled into supersweet raisins. Next, the sugary juice from the raisins is blended into

the fresh moscato juice that was set aside, and the two are fermented together. Drinking

the exquisite, neon-orange, langorous wine that results—moscato passito di Pantelleria—

is tantamount to being on a roller coaster of luscious sensations. (Interestingly, Hungarian

Tokaji aszú is made in a similar manner, whereby hyperconcentrated grapes—in the case

of Hungary, the grapes are botrytized, not dried—are added to the juice of fresh grapes,

then the whole is fermented into a sweet wine.)

The best moscatos passito di Pantelleria—both masterpieces of beauty—are Marco de

Bartoli’s Bukkuram (the name means “father of the vine”) and Donnafugata’s Ben Ryé

(the name means “son of the wind”).

And then there is Lipari, a chain of volcanic islands off Sicily’s northeastern coast.

Lipari forms part of the volcanic archipelago that straddles the gap between two other

famous volcanoes—Mt. V esuvius in Campania and Mt. Etna in Sicily. (The islands are

famous for being covered in obsidian, a hard, black, volcanic glass.) This is where

malvasia delle Lipari, Sicily’s other stunning passito dessert wine, is made from malvasia

di Lipari grapes (in the grape name, di replaces delle). Quantities of malvasia delle Lipari

are minuscule. There are only a few small producers—notably Carlo Hauner and Lantieri.

Both of their hauntingly orange-amber malvasia delle Lipari are so good, your mind hurts

from tasting them.

Historically, one of Sicily’s most famous wines was Marsala, a sweet fortified wine

that, despite numerous cheap supermarket examples, can be extremely delicious when

made by a first-rate producer. Marsala is made principally from grillo, catarratto bianco,

and inzolia grapes, along with an occasional small amount of perricone, nero d’Avola,

and/or nerello Mascalese. The wine takes its name from the ancient port city of Marsala,

from which vineyards spread out on the plains and low hills of Sicily’s Trapani province,

in the far western part of the island.

Although well-regarded wines have been made in this region from classical times,

Marsala as we know it today was “invented” in the 1770s by an Englishman, John

Woodhouse, who predicted that the sweet and fortified wine would be an immediate hit in

cold, rainy Britain, where the market for such warming wines as Port, cream Sherry, and

Madeira had already proven gargantuan. Woodhouse was right; almost immediately,

several large Marsala firms sprang up, and the fortunes of the city escalated. Over most of

the subsequent two centuries, however, the quality of Marsala dropped to the point where

it was relegated more to cooking than to collecting. In the 1980s, Marsala production

experienced a small but significant turnaround, and today, high-quality Marsalas are again

being made, though in minuscule amounts.

Marsala comes in three colors—oro (“golden”), ambra (“amber’), and rubino (“ruby”).

Rubino is extremely rare. Each type can be made at three levels of sweetness: fairly dry

(secco, 4 percent residual sugar), noticeably sweet (semisecco, 4 to 10 percent residual

sugar), and very sweet (dolce, over 10 percent residual sugar). Each is fortified to 17 or 18

percent alcohol. Within each category, there is a hierarchy based on how long the wine is

aged in oak (and sometimes in cherry wood). Fine Marsala is aged one year; superiore is

aged two years; superiore riserva is aged four years; vergine is aged five years; and the

oldest, vergine stravecchio, is aged ten years.

The multiple and intricate ways in which Marsala is made could easily take up a book

in itself, since different production techniques are used depending on the type of Marsala

being made. That said, many of the best versions are made by a method similar to the

solera process of fractional blending used for Sherry (see page 458). In that process,

younger wines are progressively blended with older wines, using a complex hierarchy of

barrels. The least aged (and least expensive) Marsalas are those that sell the best, but the

most stunning Marsalas are the vergines and vergine stravecchios, which in finesse and

richness equal the best tawny Ports and oloroso Sherries. The single producer widely

recognized for making a Marsala in a league of its own is Marco de Bartoli, whose

Marsala is called V ecchio Samperi.

SARDINIA

Compared to the friendly, welcoming aura of Sicily’s vineyards, vegetable markets, cities,

hill towns, and fishing villages, Sardinia (Sardegna in Italian) is more remote. At 125

miles (200 kilometers) from the Italian mainland, the island is far more isolated, and its

people more insular. Sardo, the local language, is a curious mix of Italian, Spanish,

Basque, and Arabic. And despite the island’s extensive coastline, the local inhabitants are

far more likely to be descended from a long line of shepherds than from fishermen.

Grazing animals is still a dominant activity on this rugged, sparse, mountainous island.

Sardinians are known for their healthful lifestyle and Mediterranean diet. Indeed,

Sardinia’s Nuoro province is thought to have more people over the age of one hundred

than anywhere else in the world.

Carignano grapes, undergoing veraison, at Agricola Punica in Sardinia.

Like Sicily, Sardinia was ruled by a succession of Mediterranean peoples, although the

Spanish had more influence here than they did in Sicily. As a result, several of the grape

varieties grown in Sardinia today are thought to be Spanish in origin, including cannonau

(the same as Spain’s garnacha), carignano (cariñena or carignan), and the ancient variety

girò. Planted all over the island, cannonau is Sardinia’s most important red grape.

Modern cannonau is a bold, dry, spicy red that has chaparral and dried herb flavors

suggested by the parched island itself. Terrific on its own, it’s also sometimes blended.

Sella & Mosca’s Tanca Farra—a blend of 50 percent cannonau and 50 percent cabernet

sauvignon, is stellar. (The name Tanca Farra means “iron earth” in Sardinian dialect.) As

for girò, it is planted mostly near Sardinia’s major city Cagliari, and makes an interesting

Portlike wine, though not a lot is produced. And carignano, grown in what was once

known as Sulcis, in the far south of the island, makes a decent red that often has an

appealing dirty, earthy flavor.

Two white wines are very much worth knowing about. First is the unusual vernaccia di

Oristano, a fascinating, bone-dry, bitter-almond-like white, made in a way that allows the

wine to partially oxidize so that it tastes rather like a simple Sherry. (Confusingly,

Sardinia’s vernaccia is not the same grape as the vernaccia of Tuscany’s vernaccia di San

Gimignano.) The other white is vermentino—a terrific dry white that could be any Italian

wine lover’s nightly house wine. No other dry white wine has a flavor that quite compares

to vermentino. It’s a simple wine to be sure. But the aromas and flavors mirror the dry,

windswept island itself, and are evocative of wind-whipped dry brush and resinous herbs

like wild rosemary, sage, and dried lavender. Add a platter of grilled Mediterranean fish

dressed in pungent, fresh, extra virgin olive oil, and you’re all set. V ermentino is often

labeled simply vermentino di Sardegna (try the excellent one from the producer Argiolas),

although those made in the area known as Gallura, in the far northern part of the island,

near the neighboring island of Corsica, are labeled vermentino di Gallura.

SLOVENIA

SLOVENIA RANKS 27TH AMONG WINE PRODUCING COUNTRIES WORLDWIDE. THE SLOVENIANS

DRINK AN AVERAGE OF 11 GALLONS (43 LITERS) OF WINE PER PERSON PER YEAR.

While not as well known as its neighbors—Austria, Hungary, Croatia, and the Italian

province of Friuli-V enezia Giulia—Slovenia has much in common with all of them,

including similarities of climate, geography, and history and, importantly, the ability to

produce phenomenal wines. This small country (half the size of Switzerland) currently

ranks twenty-seventh in wine production volume worldwide, yet it’s on track to become

one of those old wine regions that emerges brilliantly new again.

Like many former Communist countries in Central Europe, Slovenia suffered under the

political upheaval of the twentieth century. The country’s fine wine industry—once

centered around carefully cultivated vineyards and prestigious, historic wineries—was

dismantled and neglected until little was left except cooperatives that produced cheap,

low-quality wine in bulk. But like Hungary, Croatia, and the Republic of Georgia,

Slovenia emerged from Communist rule with a fierce rededication to making the

renowned wines of its past.

Northern Slovenian villages border Austria and the Alps. The country, at the same latitude as Piedmont, has a mixture of

climates—from an alpine climate in the north to a more Mediterranean climate in the south near Slovenia’ s border with

Italy.

The first accounts of winemaking in Slovenia date from 500 B.C. to 400 B.C., when

Celtic and Illyrian tribes here began growing grapes and making wine. From the fall of the

Roman Empire, around A.D. 600, until the end of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (1918),

Slovenian vineyards were mainly cultivated by monks and, as was true in Burgundy, much

of the best vineyard land was under the control of monasteries. But the twentieth century

brought vast changes. When the Austro-Hungarian Empire was dissolved in the aftermath

of World War I, Slovenia declared independence and eventually became part of

Y ugoslavia. After World War II, Y ugoslavia became a socialist state, and was folded into

the so-called Eastern Bloc of the Soviet Union. Wine quality, which had taken a drastic dip

after World War I, never recovered as Communist regulations kept production inexpensive

and quality low. Revolutionary stirrings started in the 1980s, and in 1991 Slovenia gained

independence through the Ten Day War with Y ugoslavia. It joined the European Union in

2004, and has been on a mission to improve wine quality ever since.

Sometimes called “The Green Treasure of Europe” for its dense forests, Slovenia is the

third-most-forested country in Europe, with over half of the country covered in trees. The

country’s climate is similar to its neighbors’

, with a Mediterranean influence near its

border with Italy, an alpine climate on the border with Austria, and a continental zone in

the middle of the country. Slovenia occupies the same band of latitude (40 to 46 degrees

North) as many top winegrowing regions around the world, including Piedmont,

Bordeaux, and Napa V alley, and faces similar weather challenges: spring frosts, summer

drought, and, as happens occasionally in Bordeaux, devastating hail. A complex network

of rivers runs across the plains and valleys of the country, supporting the vast forests and

ubiquitous fruit orchards. Grapevines here grow best on steep slopes above the rich and

arable soil created by these river networks.

Vineyards on the limestone plateau of Kras, which extends over southwestern Slovenia and northeastern Italy.

HOW SLOVENIAN WINES ARE CLASSIFIED

Slovenian wines are classified by the ZGP (Zašćiteno Geografsko Poreklo), a government organization

that has adopted a system similar to the European Union’s. Basic table wine is labeled as Namizno, and

the next step up, country wine, is called Deželno PGO. Fine wine dominates production in Slovenia—70

percent of all wine produced is classified as either Kakovostno ZGP (quality wine) or the highest quality

designation, Vrhunsko ZGP (premium quality). Over Slovenia’s long history of winemaking, however,

unique traditional styles of wine have also developed within towns and communities. These are given the

designation Posebno Tradicionalno Poimenovanje (PTP), and include the red wine known as teran

(made from the grape refosco) from the Kras district of Primorska, and the pale red wine called cviček

(made from red and white grapes including žametovka, blaufränkisch, and riesling) from the Dolenjska

region of Posavje.

Slovenia has just over 25,000 growers, each of whom cultivates, on average, less than 2

acres (0.8 hectares) of vineyard land. (There are no current statistics on the number of

brick-and-mortar wineries.) The country makes more white wine than red, and the range

of grape varieties is astounding. Dozens of varieties are grown, from furmint and

sauvignon blanc to cabernet sauvignon and blaufränkisch. Most of Slovenia’s 40,000 acres

(16,200 hectares) of vineyards fall into one of three regions: Primorska, Posavje, or

Podravje.

Hugging the Italian border and the Adriatic coastline, Primorska has made the most

progress in the past two decades. Forty percent of all Slovenian wine is now made here

from a mix of native and international varieties, the most common of which are

chardonnay, sauvignon blanc, sivi pinot (pinot gris), rebula (ribolla gialla), merlot,

cabernet sauvignon, modri pinot (pinot noir), and refošk, also spelled refosko (refosco).

Primorska consists of four districts, each marked by distinct geography: the Vipava V alley,

Koper, Kras, and Goriška Brda. A few words on each follow.

The stunningly beautiful Vipava V alley acts as a corridor between northern Italy and

Central Europe, and makes mostly white wines from the local varieties pinela and zelen.

The family-owned winery Batič is located here, and the wines they make are nothing short

of amazing. The family has strong philosophical and spiritual beliefs. They don’t make

wine when it is overcast because God can’t see the wine. No one in the family has gone to

viticultural or winemaking school, in order to keep their intuitions and actions “pure” and

profoundly connected to their natural environment. It may sound a bit out-there, but

Batič’s cloudy, orange-colored, bitter-fruity-salty wine called Zaria (a blend of pinela,

zelen, and rebula) is one of the most distinctive and unusual wines of Central Europe—a

profound commingling of orange zest, honeycomb, peach pits, sea salt, darjeeling tea,

minerals, earth, and marmalade.

Harvest in Goriška Brda, in the region of Primorska.

THE QUICK SIP ON SLOVENIA

SLOVENIA is one of the most exciting “new” wine regions of the Old World.

SLOVENIAN WINE (and culture) has been highly influenced by its neighbors—Italy,

Austria, Hungary, and Croatia—and by its position as a gateway between Central

Europe and the ports of Italy.

SLOVENIA GROWS a huge variety of grapes: from furmint, sivi pinot (pinot gris), and

rebula (ribolla gialla) to cabernet sauvignon, blaufränkisch, and refosko.

Koper, part of which hugs the Adriatic coast, is the warmest wine region in Slovenia,

and produces white wines from refošk and malvazija (malvasia). The latter can be a real

beauty—with spicy, peachy aromas and a wonderful minerality (try the malvazija from

Vinakoper). The Kras region (also known as the Karst, or Carso in Italian), is a limestone

plateau extending across the border of southwestern Slovenia and northeastern Italy. Here,

the traditional wine is called teran, a dense, tannic, and acidic red wine made from refosco

grapes (the grapes are known as refošk or refosko in Slovenia). Local tradition calls for

teran makers to produce prosciutto (pršut), which is made by hanging it over the

fermenting vat of teran until it, too, takes on a deep red color.

The fourth region, Goriška Brda (sometimes known simply as Brda, which means

hills), is Slovenia’s most acclaimed wine region. Essentially an extension of Italy’s Collio

DOC in Friuli-V enezia Giulia, Goriška Brda is best known for the white wine rebula, as

well as for cabernet sauvignon–merlot blends. The rebula is sometimes fermented and

aged on its skins in kvevri—large amphorae sealed closed for many months and buried

underground—creating a dark, almost neon orange wine not unlike the orange wines of

Georgia made in qvevri (spelled in that country with a q). The rebula-based orange wine

called Amphora from the Kabaj winery is a great example. Brda is successful with

numerous other grapes, too, including sauvignon blanc, sivi pinot, modri pinot, refošk, and

zeleni sauvignon (Friulano). Some of the best producers in Brda include Kabaj, Movia,

Edi Simčič, Marjan Simčič, and Kocijančič Zanut.

Family dinner in Podravje. Slovenians, like their neighbors the Italians and Austrians, live for flavor.

To the south and east of Primorska lies Posavje, the smallest of Slovenia’s winegrowing

regions. It is the only region in this white wine–dominated country to produce more red

wine than white. Alas, much of this is inexpensive bulk wine. Y et the district known as

Bela Krajina makes good modra frankinja (blaufränkisch) that is worth seeking out; and

Dolenjska is known for a popular style of crisp, pale red wine called cviček, a blend of

blaufränkisch and the local red žametovka with white grape varieties like riesling.

The largest wine region in Slovenia is Podravje, located in the northeast corner of the

country and divided into seven districts. Simple white wines are produced here from laški

rizling (welschriesling) and šipon (furmint), and a small amount of high-quality wine is

made from renski rizling (riesling), chardonnay, sauvignon blanc, and sivi pinot. The best

regions are Radgona-Kapela, Ljutomer-Ormož, and Maribor. As an aside, Maribor is

home to the oldest living grapevine in the world. The vine (which was certified by

Guinness World Records in 2004) is the native red variety žametovka, and is more than

four hundred years old. Today, the vine produces less than a gallon of wine per year,

which is bottled in one hundred tiny bottles and given to important figures around the

world. Pope John Paul II and former United States President Bill Clinton both received

tiny bottles of Maribor’s miracle wine. Some of the best producers in Podravje are Marof,

Pullus, and Črnko.

A winegrower in Kras.

Finally, Slovenia’s rich cultural heritage has been influenced by its neighbors—Italy,

Austria, Hungary, and Croatia—and by its strategic position as a gateway between Central

Europe and the ports of Italy. Feasts and festivals take place throughout the year, the apex

being the Feasts of St. Martin, a week in November of eating, drinking, parades, and

dances throughout all of Slovenia to celebrate St. Martin, the patron saint who turned

water into wine.

SPAIN

RIOJA | RIBERA DEL DUERO | JEREZ: THE SHERRY REGION | PENEDÈS |

RÍAS BAIXAS | PRIORAT

THE BASQUE REGION | BIERZO | CALATAYUD AND CAMPO DE BORJA | CASTILLA-LA MANCHA |

JUMILLA | RUEDA | TORO

SPAIN RANKS THIRD AMONG WINE PRODUCING COUNTRIES WORLDWIDE. THE SPANISH DRINK

AN AVERAGE OF 6 GALLONS (24 LITERS) OF WINE PER PERSON PER YEAR.

When I began my career in wine, the first European country I explored was Spain (this

was in the early 1970s and most of my colleagues had headed straight for Bordeaux). Like

its wines, Spain itself, back then, was an enigma. Fiercely masculine, prideful, insular. As

far away from the happy ciao-ness of Italy and the joie de vivre of France as any country

could get. I remember going to my first bullfight, and at the end, when the bull was dead,

the matador sliced off the animal’s ear and threw it, bloody, into my lap. Spain was never

about emotional weakness. To this day, a sense of savagery and strength are the through-

lines in many Spanish red wines.

Spain is a country of enormous history and tradition. Its former prowess is palpable.

“In Spain, no matter if you make screwdrivers, at some point after you have

saved a little money, the first thing you want to do is own a winery. It is very

important to the Spanish soul.

”

— YOLANDA GARCÍA VIADERO,

winemaker, Bodegas V alduero

When talking about making wine, Spaniards use the verb elaborar, to elaborate, not

fabricar, to produce or manufacture. To elaborate something, Spain’s winemakers say,

implies consciousness, time, and the labor of creation and nurturance. It is different from

mere production. More than at any other time in recent history, Spanish wines truly are

being elaborated, and Spanish vintners have catapulted themselves to a far higher level of

quality. Indeed, Spain has regained its position as one of the most exciting and vibrant

gastronomic capitals of Europe. For Spanish wine (and food) a new golden age has begun.

Along the banks of the Duero River lie the vineyards of Toro in the Castilla y León area of Spain. Winemaking began

here at the end of the 1st century B.C. In the 15th century, cuttings from Toro vines were some of the first brought to the

Americas from Spain.

Spain is a country in love with its bittersweet past; the land itself seems to quicken with

the collective spirit of Cervantes, Ferdinand and Isabella, Goya, Franco, Picasso, El Cid,

Dalí, and Saint Teresa. And so, to understand Spain you must consider history and

tradition.

Spain (indeed the whole Iberian Peninsula) is thought to be one of the important early

domestication sites for vines in Europe (Spanish grape varieties are genetically distinct

from French and Italian varieties, leading scientists away from the theory that Spain

acquired vines directly from either of those countries). Spain’s first wine regions were

probably established by proto-Celtic tribes who traveled out of North Africa around 2500

B.C. When the Phoenicians (seafaring groups of people—probably descended from

Canaanite tribes—who occupied the coastal cities of what is today modern Lebanon)

settled what would become the important southern Spanish trading port city of Cádiz in

1100 B.C., for example, they found grapevines already growing. But it was the ancient

Romans who amped up the Spanish wine industry, introducing the stone lagar (large

trough) so that significant amounts of grapes could be crushed (by foot) at the same time,

yielding generous batches of wine. After the disintegration of the Roman Empire in the

early fifth century, the entire Iberian Peninsula was overrun by successive tribes,

especially the Visigoths. The chaos finally ended in the critical year A.D. 711, when the

Moors (Muslims and Berbers of northwest Africa) advanced from the south and rapidly

took over most of the peninsula. Muslim domination lasted more than seven centuries. The

final defeat of the Moors at the southern village of Granada in 1492 (the same year

Christopher Columbus sailed, ultimately encountering the New World) marked the

beginning of Christian Spain under a single crown.

For many Spanish vintners making wine with shiny, high-tech equipment, it seems as if

it was just yesterday that they were stripping down to shorts, hopping into the vats, and

crushing the grapes by foot. For all of the modernization the country has experienced,

Spanish winemakers continue to respect the wisdom of old ways—and the flavors that

result from them.

Perhaps the biggest testament to this is the reverence accorded to indigenous varieties.

While winemakers in other countries are often quick to cast off their idiosyncratic native

grapes in favor of cabernet sauvignon, char-donnay, and other “global” varieties, Spanish

vintners have ambitiously pursued mencía, godello, hondarrabi zuri, cariñena, verdejo, and

a host of others. Spanish vintners are, quite simply, adamant about preserving their ancient

lineage of grape varieties.

Another “flavor of tradition” is that imparted by long aging in barrels. Historically,

Spanish reds and whites were aged in barrels longer than any other wines in the world.

That could mean up to twenty-five years—a remarkable period of time. Modern tastes

have changed, and Spanish wines are no longer kept nearly as long in barrels—but the

flavor of, say, a Rioja gran reserva that has been aged in barrel for five years is still

considered a thing of beauty in Spain, and indeed, around the world.

The massive bodegas in Jerez often house hundreds of thousands of barrels in which Sherry matures.

The singular image of Spain as a blisteringly hot country has given rise to the

assumption that its wines must be big, coarse, and ponderous. This is patently not true in

the top wine regions, where the best wines can be breathtaking in their complexity. The

misunderstanding surely stems from Spain’s latitude, which is farther south than much of

Europe. But what many fail to realize is that the great Spanish vineyards are often at

altitudes well surpassing 1,000 feet (300 meters) above sea level, where weather

conditions are generally cooler. Geologically speaking, Spain is a giant rock lifted up out

of the Atlantic. It is—to provide a mind-blowing vision—the second most mountainous

country in Europe, after Switzerland.

According to European Economic Community statistics, Spain has more land planted

with grapes than any other nation in the world—some 2.5 million acres (1 million

hectares). It does not, however, produce the most wine. For more than a decade, Spain has

ranked third in production, after Italy and France, due to the large number of old, low-

yielding vines planted on extremely dry, infertile land. There are approximately 5,500

bodegas (as wineries are known) and cooperatives.

Spain has more land planted to vineyards than any other country in the world, and many of those vineyards are

comprised of old “head trained” bush vines (not grown along a trellis). Here, the tempranillo vines of Bodega

Numanthia.

Eighty-seven different varieties of grapes exist in Spain. Surprisingly, in a country

associated with red wine, the most widely planted grape by far is the white airén. Grown

on the central high plains of Don Quixote’s La Mancha, airén makes a snappy, crisp white

that is Spain’s answer to Italian pinot grigio. In contrast to simple airén, Spain’s top grape

varieties have even more personality. Such grapes as albariño and parellada (the white

grapes of Rías Baixas and the Penedès, respectively) are revered for their regional

character. But the country’s best-loved and most-prized grape is decidedly tempranillo—

the red grape that is the source of the legendary wines of Rioja and Ribera del Duero, plus

numerous other wines made throughout the country. Tempranillo is to Spain what cabernet

sauvignon is to Bordeaux or sangiovese is to Italy.

The six most important wine regions are Rioja, Ribera del Duero, Jerez (the region that

produces Sherry), the Penedès, Rías Baixas, and Priorat. Following are sections on each of

these regions. But there are also dozens of other smaller, fascinating wine regions, most of

which are extremely old and now in the process of being revitalized. I’ve placed the most

important of these at the end of this chapter. For an explanation of Spanish wine law, see

the Appendix on Wine Laws, page 925.

RIOJA

For more than a century, Rioja has been considered Spain’s preeminent wine region. The

vineyards, running for 75 miles (120 kilometers) along both banks of the Ebro River,

cover more than 157,000 acres (63,500 hectares) in the remote interior of northern Spain.

Behind them, craggy mountains stand in desolation. While white and rosé wines are made

here, the region’s fabled reputation is built almost exclusively on reds, all of which are

based primarily on tempranillo grapes. Rioja is often referred to as Spain’s Bordeaux, and

the region’s ties to France are multiple. They begin in the Middle Ages with the camino

Francés, the French road, a route through Rioja named for French pilgrims who, with

millions of other devout Europeans, walked across northern Spain to the shrine of the

apostle James in Santiago de Compostela, in the far western province of Galicia.

The signature of Rioja wines—long aging in oak barrels—was also inspired by French

practice. In 1780, a Rioja winemaker named Manuel Quintano adopted the Bordelaise

method of aging wine and began successfully maturing his wine in large French oak casks.

Although much more expensive than stone lagares, oak casks transformed his wines in a

way Quintano had never anticipated. By the 1850s, the Marqués de Murrieta and the

Marqués de Riscal (founders of two bodegas that are still considered among the region’s

best producers) were both using French oak—this time, small barrels—to age their wines.

Quickly, however, both Spaniards realized that the new “technology” of small oak barrels

would prove more economical if they brought in oak trees from North America (a place

toward which they felt a historical affinity) and coopered the wood themselves rather than

importing French barrels.

THE NAME RIOJA

The region of Rioja, so-called since the eleventh century, probably derived its name from the tiny Rio Oja,

one of the seven tributaries of the Ebro River. A famous monastery, Santo Domingo de la Calzada, was

located where the Rio Oja crossed the famous pilgrim’s route, the Camino Francés. The importance of

this monastery meant that countless pilgrims congregated there before continuing their walk across all of

northern Spain. Thus did the area Rioja—near the Rio Oja—become one of the early destinations in

Spain.

The 1850s and 1860s were difficult times for French vintners, and the winemakers of

both Rioja and the Penedès profited from the distress of their French counterparts. First

oidium, a parasitic fungus, attacked French vineyards. In its wake came the fatal

infestation of the insect phylloxera. To satisfy the demand for wine, French

merchant/négociants, called comisionados in Spanish, traveled to Rioja. Wine sales there

boomed. Within a single generation, the vineyard area in Rioja grew by 40,000 acres

(16,200 hectares).

Some of the French who came to buy wine stayed and began bodegas of their own. By

buying grapes (rather than wine) from small, local vineyard owners, then vinifying the

grapes and aging the wine in traditional small oak barrels, the newcomers were able to

create wines that tasted as close as possible to the French wines they were used to.

In 1880, with the first railroad link between the rural Rioja village of Haro and the

village of Bilbao on the northern coast, Rioja wines became far easier to ship into France.

Two years later, Haro got its first telephone; eight years later, its first electric light. Haro

became the nerve center of the wine community (which it remains), and Rioja wine

became essential to the French market. Commerce flourished.

The party ended as the twentieth century dawned. Phylloxera crept into Rioja in 1901

and destroyed 70 percent of the vineyards. Meanwhile, the antidote—grafting native

European vines onto tolerant American root-stock—had been discovered. French vintners

quickly went about reestablishing their vineyards. Many of the French in Rioja returned

home, and the booming market for Rioja wine collapsed.

The times ahead were Rioja’s darkest. Left without a major market, the industry

stagnated. A number of growers, financially destitute, simply sold their vineyards and left.

World War I, and later the Spanish Civil War, the Great Depression, and World War II

further impeded progress. Widespread hunger in Spain caused the government to decree

that vines be torn out and vineyard land be replanted with wheat. It was not until the 1970s

that Rioja began to regain its footing. Indeed, 1970, heralded as a major vintage of the

century, was a turning point for the region’s wine industry. Wines such as the 1970 R.

López de Heredia Viña Tondonia Gran Reserva, the 1970 Faustino Gran Reserva, and the

1970 La Rioja Alta Viña Ardanza are still considered national treasures.

THE QUICK SIP ON RIOJA

RIOJA, historically considered Spain’s greatest wine region, is especially renowned for

red wines made from the tempranillo grape.

IN GENERAL, Rioja’s red wines are aged longer before release than most other wines

in the world.

TWO STYLES OF RIOJA EXIST—so-called traditional wines aged for especially long

periods, usually in used American oak barrels, and modern alta expresión (high

expression) wines, made from riper grapes and aged for shorter periods in new French

oak barrels.

Marques de Riscal, one of the oldest Rioja bodegas, was rebuilt in 2000 by world-famous architect Frank Gehry.

With the return of Spain’s financial stability in the 1980s, investors turned their sights

on the extraordinary wines coming out of Rioja. In half a decade, the region had more than

a dozen new, well-capitalized bodegas. Many of the old bodegas modernized and

expanded. By this time, the technique of aging wine for long periods of time in small oak

barrels had been used for more than a century. The technique was not only ubiquitous, it

had become the region’s trademark.

Today in Rioja, there are two philosophies about oak, and they exist side by side. The

traditionalists (whose numbers are dwindling) tend to use American oak and to cooper that

oak in Spain in the traditional manner. Interestingly, traditionalists often use old barrels to

mature their best wines, noting that older barrels impart a softer, gentler, less aggressive

flavor. And then they leave the wine in the barrels—potentially for a very long time, as

you’ll see. Modernists do the opposite—they tend to use high-impact brand-new French

oak, then mature the wine in it for far shorter periods. The issue is important, for oak has

an almost magical ability to transform wine, to lift it out of simple berryness and give it

depth, length, complexity, and intensity (see What Oak Does, page 48). The care taken is

key, since a wine kept in poor conditions for too long does not become mellow and

complex but, instead, becomes dried out and thin—a shadow of its former self.

THE OLD MAN AND THE WINE

No American expatriot has loved Spain more than the novelist Ernest Hemingway (1899–1961).

Although a legendary hard spirits drinker, Hemingway visited the famous old Rioja bodega Paternina

every year for twenty-five years, generally with a bullfighter in tow. During his last visit, in 1959, the

novelist was accompanied by the legendary bullfighter Antonio Ordóñez, who became the inspiration for

Death in the Afternoon. In one of his best-loved works, A Moveable Feast, Hemingway wrote,

“In Europe

then we thought of wine as something as healthy and normal as food and also as a great giver of

happiness and well being and delight. Drinking wine was not a snobbism nor a sign of sophistication nor

a cult; it was as natural as eating and to me as necessary.

”

Thus, for wine drinkers today, two Riojas exist: an old world of well-aged, mellowed,

earthy wines laced with faint notes of vanilla, and a new world of fruit-driven, more

dramatically oaky wines in what might be called an extroverted style.

The old cellars of R. López de Heredia, one of the oldest bodegas in Rioja. Thanks in part to their long aging, the wines

from the estate—both red and white—are considered quintessential examples of traditionally styled Rioja.

While the ranks of the modernists are growing, it is unlikely that Rioja’s winemakers

will ever fully abandon the practice of significant wood aging. Maturing a wine is almost a

moral imperative for Spaniards. The sheer number of barrels in Rioja is a testimony to

this; many bodegas have ten thousand or more, and the region as a whole is reported to

possess just over 1.3 million barrels. And no matter the shift toward modernity, as a group,

Riojas are still aged longer before release than almost any other wines in the world. While

most Bordeaux and California reds are aged two years or less in oak, in Rioja, three to six

years is common. As long as this is, by modern standards, it is far shorter than in the past,

when the top Rioja reds were often aged at the bodega for fifteen to twenty years or more

before they were sold to consumers. In an example that is almost unbelievable today but

was quite common in Rioja not so many years ago, the renowned estate of Marqués de

Murrieta released their 1942 gran reserva in 1983—forty-one years after it was made!

A word about price. Rioja’s long-aged gran reservas remain among the best deals in the

world. A supple, complex red Rioja with ten years of aging often costs no more than a

New World chardonnay made (and priced) by someone with a healthy ego. Nowhere else

in the world can you drink so well, so reasonably. On the other hand, in recent years, what

I’d call radically inexpensive Rioja has flowed onto the market. Most of these are crianzas

at rock-bottom prices. Don’t be tempted. The majority of these very low-end wines smell

bad and taste murky. They are, I promise, not what you had in mind.

Finally, Rioja was the first region in Spain to carry the designation DOCa

(Denominación de Origen Calificada), a status awarded it in 1991. To be granted DOCa

status, a wine region must meet the highest standards in its winemaking and viticultural

practices.

THE LAND, THE GRAPES, AND THE VINEYARDS

Although it is only 60 miles (97 kilometers) south of the Bay of Biscay and the northern

coastal cities of San Sebastián and Bilbao, Rioja does not have a maritime climate. Several

small mountain ranges and the outlying ridges of the Cantabrian Mountains—a spur of the

Pyrenees—isolate the region from the moderating effects of the Atlantic Ocean, and they

also help act as a shield, shutting out the harshest northern winds.

THE GRAPES OF RIOJA

WHITES

CHARDONNAY: Permissible as a blending component in white Rioja since 2007, but may not dominate

the blend or constitute the entire wine. Contributes finesse.

GARNACHA BLANCA: Minor blending grape added for body.

MALVASIA: Minor blending grape added for aroma.

MATURANA BLANCA AND TURRUNTÉS: Minor grapes permitted by law but, in practice, yet to be

widely used.

SAUVIGNON BLANC AND VERDEJO: Like chardonnay, these grapes are now allowed in white Rioja,

but only in amounts less than 50 percent. Considered to have excellent potential as blending grapes with

viura.

TEMPRANILLO BLANCO: A white mutation of tempranillo discovered in the late 1980s in the Baja

district of Rioja. It shows promise in the making of snappy, lightly aromatic whites. Currently planted only

in tiny amounts.

VIURA: A major grape in all Rioja white wines. It contributes aroma, mild fruit flavors, and good acidity.

The same grape as macabeo in the Penedès.

REDS

GARNACHA: Important Spanish grape used to contribute juiciness and body. Known in France as

grenache.

GRACIANO: An important grape for its intense color, flavor, and ability to retain acidity. Despite its

qualities, it has fallen out of favor with some growers because it ripens very late. Represents less than 1

percent in most Rioja blends.

MATURANA TINTA AND MATURANO: Ancient native varieties allowed to be used in a blend. In

practice, only tiny amounts are grown and available.

MAZUELO: Robust grape used in some red Riojas. Known in Priorat as cariñena and in France as

carignan.

TEMPRANILLO: Major indigenous grape used in the vast majority of red Riojas. Contributes aroma,

flavor, and aging potential.

Although Spanish vineyards are often imagined to be at about sea level, Rioja rests on a

vast plateau at an elevation of more than 1,500 feet (460 meters). The region is divided

into three subregions: Rioja Alta, Rioja Alavesa, and Rioja Baja. The finest grapes come

from Rioja Alta and Rioja Alavesa, which, being higher and farther north and west,

toward the Atlantic, experience a cooler climate. The land then slopes downward to the

warmer, lower, drier Rioja Baja, in the southeast—the only part of Rioja that experiences a

more Mediterranean climate. Grapes there make wines that tend to be higher in alcohol

and lower in acidity.

Three types of soil dominate: clay mixed with limestone and sandstone, iron-rich clay,

and loamy soil with alluvial silt from the Ebro. The best vineyards are planted in

clay/limestone/sandstone soils found mostly in Rioja Alavesa and Rioja Alta. Many of

these vineyards are forty years old or more. Though not very productive, old vines are

treasured because their grapes usually have more concentrated flavors.

AGING REQUIREMENTS FOR RIOJA

While the law dictates the minimum length of time a Rioja must be aged, in practice many are aged for

much longer.

CRIANZAS

WHITES: Must be aged for six months in oak barrels.

REDS: Must be aged for at least two years, one of which must be in oak barrels.

RESERVAS

WHITES: Must be aged for two years, six months of which must be in oak barrels.

REDS: Must be aged for at least three years, one of which must be in oak barrels.

GRAN RESERVAS

WHITES: Must be aged for four years, one year of which must be in oak barrels.

REDS: Must be aged for at least five years, two of which must be in oak barrels and the remaining three

of which must be in bottles.

The old vines of Marques de Caceres are spaced far apart in the parched, infertile soil.

Like Bordeaux, after which they were modeled, Rioja wines have traditionally been

blends of grapes. For reds, the finest grape, and the one that accounted for a lion’s share of

the blend, was tempranillo, a variety that originated somewhere in the province of Rioja,

or in Navarra, next door. (Only one of tempranillo’s parents has been identified—albillo

mayor, a white grape from Ribera del Duero.)

In Rioja, three other grapes could be added to tempranillo: the native Spanish varieties

garnacha (which the French call grenache), mazuelo (which the French call carignan), and

graciano (the name means “graceful,

” but despite the quality of this grape, only minuscule

amounts are now available because the grape is difficult to grow and ripens late). Today,

while many Riojas continue to be blends, a growing number are made up entirely of

tempranillo.

A word on tempranillo. The name of this early-ripening variety comes from temprano

(Spanish for early). Depending on whether a modern style or traditional style wine is

being made, tempranillo grown in Rioja can either be powerfully structured, dark, and

earthy, with notes of leather and a certain peatiness (the modern style), or elegant and very

earthy—with an attractive dirtlike aroma—closer to pinot noir than to cabernet sauvignon

(the traditional style).

THE WORLD’S BEST ROSÉS

French rosés may be more famous, but the best Spanish rosés (rosados) are usually better—lighter,

fresher, less weighty, more elegant. Full of wild strawberry, ripe watermelon, and juniper berry flavors,

they are like a cool shower on a hot day. Spanish rosés can be made from a number of different grapes,

but most are made from either garnacha or tempranillo. Often they are made by saignée—sangrado in

Spanish—the process of “bleeding” pink juice off a red wine-to-be. With the possible exception of the

coastal northwest, they are made all over Spain, although many of the best known come from Rioja and

Navarra. Garlicky seafood dishes and paella are especially good partners, but the wine is so delicious, all

it really needs is a summer evening.

Rioja is not known for its white wines (90 percent of the wine produced is red),

although good basic white wines are made. These are simple, crisp, fresh wines, almost

always made mainly from the grape variety viura (known as macabeo in other regions of

Spain). The New York Times wine reporter and critic Eric Asimov may have captured

white Rioja wines best when he called them “pinot grigios with a brain.

” Although it is

rare now, one can also still occasionally come across the traditional style of white Rioja—

viura that has been made in oak then aged in oak for years until it takes on a resiny,

honied, waxy, oxidized character. These old-style white Riojas—today made principally

by the two firms Marqués de Murietta and R. López de Heredia—can be spellbinding

wines, though they are nothing if not an acquired taste.

In the past, most of Rioja’s 375 or so bodegas owned no land at all, but instead bought

grapes and/or wine from the region’s 17,000 small growers, most of whom owned fewer

than 10 acres (4 hectares) of land. Today, while the majority of bodegas still buy some

grapes and wine from growers, there is a strong movement toward ownership of

vineyards.

SOME OF THE BEST PRODUCERS OF RIOJA

Baron de Ley Finca Monasterio • Bodegas Artadi • Bodegas Breton • Bodegas Fernando Remirez de

Ganuza • Compañía de Vinos T elmo Rodriguez • Contino • Coto de Imaz • CUNE • Finca Allende • Finca

Valpiedra • La Granja Nuestra Señora de Remelluri • La Rioja Alta • Marqués de Cáceres • Marqués de

Riscal • Martinez Bujanda • Muga • R. López de Heredia • Roda • Sierra Cantabria • Ysios

CRIANZA, RESERV A, AND GRAN RESERV A

While bodegas in Rioja are not legally obliged to use it, a hierarchy exists whereby wines

are classified according to how long the wines are aged (see box page 438). The hierarchy

includes crianza (the youngest; in Spanish the word refers to something that is raised or

nursed), reserva, and gran reserva. When visiting Rioja, you might also encounter very

basic, very young wines known as vinos jovenes or sin crianzas. They are usually not

exported.

The foods of Rioja are simple and simply prepared, reflecting the region’ s rural roots. Mushrooms sizzling on a grill will

become a feast once bottles of earthy, complex Rioja reserva are opened and poured.

WET AND WILD

Although wild mushrooms (setas) are more abundant and varied in Catalonia, they somehow seem more

decadent in Rioja, where they are often each the size of a DVD, and where a glass of red wine and a huge

plate of them sizzling in hot, garlicky, extra virgin olive oil is often the way a meal begins. The

combination, straightforward as it is, can be magic. No wine accentuates the rich earthiness of wild

mushrooms better than red Rioja, which is among the world’s most beautifully earthy wines.

Red crianzas are easy-drinking wines full of earth, spice, cherry, and vanilla. The

bread-and-butter wines of every bodega, crianzas are generally made with grapes from

good but not exceptional vineyards.

Made from superior grapes from prime sites, reservas are more than just simple, fruity

wines, and although they are far more concentrated than crianzas, they are not necessarily

powerhouses. In fact, just the opposite can be true. Reservas can be subtle, supple wines

with quiet but intense echoes of earth, old saddle leather, and dried leaves. Reservas are

made only in exceptional years.

Gran reservas, also made only in exceptional years, come from the very best vineyards

of all and are extremely rare. In most years, gran reservas represent just 1 to 10 percent of

the wines produced. In particular, white gran reservas are very uncommon and are now

made only by a handful of bodegas. Red gran reservas are elegant, silky, and refined.

They are aged the longest in the oldest, most neutral barrels. In fact, although five years of

aging is required by law, in practice gran reservas may be aged far longer.

THE FOODS OF RIOJA

If you are not vigilant, you can find yourself craving—and eating—roasted baby lamb

and, if it’s spring, fresh white asparagus every day in Rioja, a testimony to just how

addictive these two specialties can be. Lamb and white asparagus, however, are just the

beginning.

Rioja is a region of basic foodstuffs, straightforward cooking techniques, and hearty

dishes. The success of any given dish is based solely on the integrity and freshness of the

ingredients. Herbs and spices are rarely used. The simple homeyness of the food is

beautifully in tune with the elegant, sweetly ripe flavors and silky textures of Rioja wines.

The fertile Ebro River valley is planted with a panoply of vegetables and fruits; the

surrounding hills and mountains are home to goats, lambs, rabbits, quail, and large wild

game. Rioja’s goat cheeses are renowned. The cabrito (baby goat) roasted in a brick oven

is to die for. And, as is true in many inland regions of Spain, the local embutido

(charcuterie) is irresistible.

The names of many dishes include the words a la riojana—in the Rioja style.

Generally, this means that tomatoes and fresh or dried sweet red peppers are part of the

preparation. Rioja’s classics include:

Chuletas al sarmiento: Lamb chops grilled over an open fire of vine shoots.

Menestra de verduras: A vegetable casserole that, depending on the season, includes

artichokes, asparagus, Swiss chard, peas, carrots, leeks, or green beans tossed together

with diced, cured ham and sautéed in olive oil.

Patatas a la riojana: Potatoes cooked in meat stock with spicy chorizo sausage.

Pochas a la riojana: A stew of young white beans, chorizo, peppers, and tomatoes,

sometimes with roasted quail added.

Pimientos rellenos: Small, sweet local red peppers stuffed with minced meat or shrimp

or puréed vegetables, then dipped in batter, fried, and cooked in a wine and tomato sauce.

Sometimes cod, hake, or pig’s feet are added to the stuffing.

WHEN YOU VISIT… RIOJA

Some of the most impressive Rioja bodegas are a trip back in time. A century or more

old, they have dark, damp cellars covered with mold and cobwebs and filled with bottles

of decades-old Rioja. R. López de Heredia and Federico Paternina are good examples.

IF YOU LOVE ART or architecture, a must-visit is Marqués de Riscal. The bodega was

rebuilt starting in 2000 by world-famous architect Frank Gehry (who also designed the

Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain) and the bodega’s soaring, rippled roof looks

like giant curls of white chocolate on top of a layer cake.

IN THE CITY OF BRIONES, the bodega Dinastía Vivanco houses an impressive wine

museum with permanent exhibits on the history, culture, and technology of winemaking,

as well as rotating hands-on activities.

The Rioja Wines to Know

Riojas are among the most sophisticated wines of the Old World. They have a special place in my heart, for these

were the wines that, at the beginning of my career, spoke to me about the meaning of wine. After being in and

tasting Rioja, I understood that wine was the voice of a place and a culture.

WHITES

R. LÓPEZ DE HEREDIA

VIÑA TONDONIA | RESERVA

Approximately 90% viura, 10% malvasia

R. López de Heredia is one of the pillars of traditional winemaking in Rioja, and their reputation for quality is rock

solid. The bodega makes both red and white Viña Tondonia (reserva and gran reserva), all of which are great

classics. But I write about the white reserva here for, with just a few exceptions, it now stands alone as testament to

a time long ago when aged white Riojas were considered jewels in the region’s crown. Everything about this

bonedry wine, from the color (like wildflower honey) to the finish (extremely long), is mesmerizing. In top years,

the aroma evokes fresh butter, roasted hazelnuts, candle wax, chamomile, sea salt, and sweet earth; the flavor adds a

sense of exotic citrus and something at once nutty and honeyed, like baklava. And the texture, not to be dismissed,

feels like ribbons of cream.

LA GRANJA NUESTRA SEÑORA DE REMELLURI

BLANCO

Approximately 25% garnacha blanca, 25% roussanne and marsanne, with 10% each of viognier,

chardonnay, sauvignon blanc, and moscatel; plus small amounts petit courbut

While Remelluri’s red Rioja is delicious and impeccable, the bodega’s white Rioja is a contender for the most

complex white wine of Spain. Made from an intriguing lineup of grapes, it’s a wine of rare beauty and grace,

which, when I have it, always reminds me of one of the most exquisite aged white Bordeaux (although the

Remelluri costs a good deal less). The wine’s aromas surge forward on wafts of candle wax, Danish pastry, sweet

pineapple, dried herbs, and a resiny chaparral that smells like the Riojan countryside. The flavors follow the same

complex trajectory, ending with something minerally that makes one crave a grilled fish. The estate’s origins date

back to the fourteenth century, when monks from the Toloño monastery founded a sanctuary and farm at the site.

The modern winery was established in 1967, when Jaime Rodríguez Salís purchased the vineyards at the heart of

the monastery’s lands.

REDS

CUNE

IMPERIAL | RESERVA

Approximately 85% tempranillo, 10% graciano, 5% mazuelo

Founded in 1879, CUNE (the abbreviation for Compañía Vinicola del Norte de España; for ease of pronounciation,

the V of Vinicola appears as a U on the label; pronounced COON-ay) makes reservas that perfectly demonstrate

aged Rioja’s delicacy. Subtle aromas and flavors of truffles, dried leaves, spices, cassis, rose petals, and old saddle

leather seem to peek out from the wine. CUNE’s Imperial Gran Reservas are also stunners—as complex in flavor as

the best dark chocolates, with an equally hedonistic and elegant texture.

LA RIOJA ALTA

VIÑA ARDANZA | RESERVA ESPECIAL

Approximately 80% tempranillo, 20% garnacha

Viña Ardanza Reserva Especial is made only in the very greatest vintages—sometimes no more than once every ten

years. The wine’s refinement and superb quality are immediately apparent; indeed, the first sip of this wine is so

comforting, it’s akin to being wrapped up in a warm cashmere blanket. The aromas are rich and earthy—saddle

leather, black truffles, and damp forest. They open up onto elegant flavors reminiscent of vanilla, plums, dark

chocolate, and spiced tea, and the texture is lanolin soft.

MUGA

PRADO ENEA | GRAN RESERVA

Approximately 80% tempranillo, with 20% garnacha, mazuelo, and graciano

Dating from 1932, Muga is a highly respected family-owned bodega making some of the top traditional-style wines

in Rioja. Like the best red Burgundies, these are Riojas with magnificent and complex aromas and a long finish. In

the middle are sublime, if subtle, layers of earthy flavor. Prado Enea is the name of the winery’s refined gran

reserva, made only in great years and generally aged eight years, four of them in barrels that the Muga family

makes themselves. The grapes for this wine come from vineyards that are among the highest in altitude in the

region. In the 1990s, Muga also began making small quantities of what is now a highly sought-after modernist

wine, Torre Muga. Big, muscular, concentrated, and oaky (it’s aged in both American and French oak), Torre Muga

is New World in style and very much the opposite of Prado Enea.

RODA

RODA I | RESERVA

100% tempranillo

The Roda bodega makes three modernist wines from among the largest selections of tempranillo clones in

existence. Roda I has lovely, saturated, dramatic flavors reminiscent of dried cranberries, violets, exotic spices,

licorice, and vanilla. Y et the underlying sexy earthiness of Rioja is also evident as aromas of bark, peat, cedar, and

forest come alive in the glass. I especially love the blanket of cocoalike dustiness that Roda I leaves on one’s palate

—as if the wine were perfectly poised for the crusty, fatty edge of a grilled lamb chop. Roda I’s big sister is Roda II,

an even more concentrated (and more expensive) wine, and it’s big big sister is called Cirsion, one of the most

expensive and complex Riojas made.

R. LÓPEZ DE HEREDIA

VIÑA TONDONIA | GRAN RESERVA

Approximately 75% tempranillo, 15% garnacha, 10% mazuelo and graciano

The red Viña Tondonia gran reservas are nothing if not mind-blowing for their elegance and finesse. In great

vintages, drinking them is like being in that state before waking up when all sensations seem dreamlike. Both the

aromas and flavors are exceedingly supple and complex, with hints of exotic spices, forests, damp mushrooms, and

earth. Viña Tondonia is a quiet, refined, long-aged wine, not a powerhouse (the wine is commonly aged nine to ten

years in barrel, then at least another eight years in bottle before release). It’s considered one of the great classic

Riojas, and is renowned in Spain. The name of the wine—Tondonia—refers to a meander, or bend, along the banks

of the Ebro near the bodega. Through this meander, known as Tondon (from the Latin retondo), ran the old

medieval road that led from Rioja to the Basque country.

Counting sheep. In Ribera del Duero, it’ s a mule’ s lot in life.

RIBERA DEL DUERO

A two-hour drive north of Madrid, Ribera del Duero is in the province of Castilla y León,

a severe, dramatic land of rough mesas and rocky plateaus that stretch as far as the eye can

see. Massive stone castles stand as fortresses atop the highest ridges. The masculine power

and glory of medieval Spain is palpable.

On these high, dry, sunny plains, the vineyards, too, have a severity. Old vines, gnarled

as if in agony, protrude from the rough ground. If the ground holds vines in place

everywhere else in the world, in Ribera del Duero the opposite seems true. Earth herself

clings to the muscular vines.

Ribera del Duero is almost exclusively a red wine region, although simple rosés are

made for local consumption. The best reds are bold, concentrated, ripe, mouthfilling,

structured, and packed with dark flavors reminiscent of roasted coffee, cocoa, peat, and

black licorice. Y et the very best of them are also lusciously refined. Indeed, three Ribera

del Duero wines—Unico (made by V ega-Sicilia), Pingus, and Pesquera—are among the

most outstanding red wines anywhere in the world.

There are more than 250 wine estates in Ribera del Duero. The major grape variety,

tinto fino (also known as tinta del país), is another name for the variety tempranillo. But,

according to research by the Instituto Tecnológico Agrario de Castilla y León, there are, of

course, clonal differences. After centuries of adaptation, the tempranillo clones that exist

in Ribera del Duero are quite different from those in Rioja. Thanks to Ribera del Duero’s

harsh, dramatic climate, tinto fino’s smaller berries and tougher skins make wines that are

often more powerful (but occasionally less polished) than Rioja.

THE QUICK SIP ON RIBERA DEL DUERO

RIBERA DEL DUERO is the poster image of conquistador Spain, a land of rugged

ocher mesas. All of its top wines are red and based on the grape tinto fino, the name of

a group of clones of tempranillo.

THE MOST LEGENDARY and expensive red wine in Spain, Vega-Sicilia’s Unico, is

made here.

RIBERA DEL DUERO’S TOP WINES are concentrated, richly textured, and among the

longest lived of all Spanish red wines.

Ribera del Duero is named for the river Duero, the third largest river on the Iberian

Peninsula. The river crosses the great meseta (high plateau) of north central Spain,

ultimately plunging down into Portugal, where it becomes the Douro (linked famously to

Port wine) and finally empties into the Atlantic Ocean.

In Ribera del Duero, the river forms a 22-mile-wide (35-kilometer) valley with

flattopped mountains on either side. Vineyards, interspersed among fields of grain and

sugar beets, are scattered along a 71-mile-long (115-kilometer) strip on the north and

south sides of the valley. According to the region’s official Denominación de Origen

(DO), Ribera del Duero spans four districts within Castilla y León: Burgos, in the center

of the DO, with the vast majority of vineyard land; V alladolid, to the west; and Segovia

and Soria to the south and east, respectively.

OUNCE FOR OUNCE, MORE EXPENSIVE THAN WINE

Wine aside, perhaps the most prized agricultural product of the high plains of central Spain—especially

in Castilla y León—is saffron, widely considered the most expensive spice in the world (Princesa de

Minaya, considered one of the best brands of the highest grade of saffron, retails for more than $4,000

per pound). Indeed, saffron is one of Spain’s most ancient crops—an indispensable seasoning (and

source of vibrant color) in many classic dishes, including paella. The stigmas of the flowers of Crocus

sativus, saffron is harvested each fall by hand—usually by women whose fingers fly as they quickly pick

the fields of delicate purple flowers and then, equally quickly (and gently), remove the three single, bright

red threads that, once dried, become saffron. Between fifty thousand and seventy thousand flowers are

required for one pound of saffron; amazingly, the fastest pickers harvest up to thirty thousand flowers in a

day.

Besides Spain, the saffron crocus is also cultivated in Italy, Greece, Morocco, India, and Iran; the latter

country now produces an estimated 90 percent of the world’s saffron.

THE BODEGAS THAT SPARKED A REVOLUTION

Made in a remote and rocky part of the Duero, Vega-Sicilia is Spain’s most legendary and expensive

wine. Even Spanish schoolchildren know its name. While most other bodegas in Ribera del Duero were

making innocuous wine throughout the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, Vega-Sicilia had long before embarked

on making superb wine. This early commitment to quality in a region that was untested at the time—at

least for fine wine—established Vega-Sicilia as an extremely serious estate. The fact that the wines were

stunning only cemented the winery’s reputation further. Vega-Sicilia wines would have been exceptional

in most contexts, but against the backdrop of what was happening (or not happening) in Ribera del

Duero for decades, they were otherworldly.

Then, in the 1970s, a second bodega, Pesquera, also began to build a reputation for remarkable

wines. Pesquera is owned by Alejandro Fernández, an energetic maverick who is convinced that Ribera

del Duero is potentially one of the world’s best wine regions. After a full career making agricultural

equipment, Fernández built Pesquera, planted vineyards, and started making what he called “masculine”

wines. Tiny lot by tiny lot, he pressed the grapes in an old wooden press (used until 1982). The wines

were put into barrels immediately after pressing and left to ferment and age. They were never filtered.

Filtering a wine, Fernández said, was like “pushing a fat man through a keyhole.

” The body invariably got

damaged.

Like Vega-Sicilia, Pesquera turned out to be a profoundly rich and complex wine. After both bodegas

began to receive worldwide attention in the 1980s, new capital—and new talent—flooded into Ribera del

Duero. Among the most influential winemakers to come in was the Danish-born, Bordeaux-trained

winemaker Peter Sisseck. Hired first as a consultant in Ribera del Duero, Sisseck was so impressed by

the region and its potential that he founded his own winery—Dominio de Pingus—in 1995. Pingus has

gone on to be one of the stars of Spain, and a wine that, along with its “little” sister, Flor de Pingus, is

frequently named as one of the most extraordinary wines in the world.

A new era for Ribera del Duero was born.

During much of the Middle Ages, Castilla was the battleground on which the Catholic

kings fought the Moors, the Islamic conquerors who invaded Spain in 711. The stark,

ponderous fortresses and castles along the Duero date from this time. Although grapes

were grown throughout the upheavals, it was not until Spain was completely reconquered

by the Catholic monarchs in the fifteenth century that Ribera del Duero, free of political

conflict, could come into its own as a wine region. The city of V alladolid became the

capital of Spain; Ferdinand and Isabella were married there in the late fifteenth century.

From the beginning of the twentieth century until the 1980s, Ribera del Duero was a

wine region known primarily for cheap, gruff reds churned out by cooperatives that had

been built with government subsidies after the 1950s. Mediocrity reigned. Most wines,

even as late as 1970, were made in unclean barrels and left unattended to ferment at will.

The wines were seldom racked off their lees, never filtered, and rarely bottled

commercially. Customers simply arrived at the bodega with reusable containers and

bought what they needed directly from the barrel.

Ribera del Duero reservas are made only in exceptional years and are aged at least three years before release.

An enormous turnaround came in the 1980s. The success of two exceptional wineries,

V ega-Sicilia and Pesquera, inspired an influx of capital and technical skill, plus a new

passion for quality. By the mid-1990s, the wines coming out of the region were so

shockingly good that some Spanish wine lovers suggested Ribera del Duero—rather than

Rioja—might just be the finest wine region in Spain.

Today, the region contains some of Spain’s most successful wineries—from the historic

V ega-Sicilia, to lauded avant-garde estates such as Pingus, Abadía Retuerta, Alion, and

Mauro. Indeed, these five estates, all lined up along Castilla’s N22 highway, form Spanish

wine country’s so-called milla de oro, golden mile.

THE LAND, THE GRAPES, AND THE VINEYARDS

Despite its gentle-sounding name, Ribera del Duero is a region of harsh intensity; bodega

owners call it the land of extremes. Sunlight—2,400 hours of it per year—is intense;

rainfall is modest. Summers are blistering, with temperatures often exceeding 100°F

(38°C). Winters are fiercely cold, sometimes reaching –20°F (–29°C). On any given day

during the grapes’ ripening cycle, the diurnal temperature fluctuation is dramatic—from

scorchingly hot in the afternoon to cold at night. Grapes love this, for hot daytime

temperatures allow the grapes to ripen at full speed, while cold nights temporarily shut

down photosynthesis, letting the vine rest and preserving acidity.

YOU SAY TINTO; I SAY TINTA

As many drinkers of Ribera del Duero wines know, the main grape variety is, somewhat confusingly,

called both tinta del país and tinto fino. Why? Historically, locals referred to these simple wines (and the

grapes they were made from) as tinta del país—

“red [wine] of the land.

” As time went on and higher-

quality wines were made in Ribera del Duero, the term tinto fino—

“fine red”

—was increasingly used to

describe both the wines and the grapes.

Except for the bodegas built since the late 1980s, the landscape here seems unchanged

by passing centuries. For much of the year Ribera del Duero is a brown, almost desolate

place. Above ground, dirt fields stretch endlessly, hiding crops of sugar beets below.

Villages appear subdued and turned inward, away from travelers. In some parts of the

region, the only signs of life come from the omnipresent flocks of long-legged, black-

eared Churra sheep crossing the road, bringing drivers to a dead halt no matter how late

that driver might be for a winery appointment.

There are approximately 52,000 acres (21,000 hectares) of vines in Ribera del Duero—

a modest amount compared, say, to Rioja, which has just over 157,000 acres (63,500

hectares). And thanks to the number of old vines, yields tend to be very low (about 1.6

tons to the acre).

THE GRAPES OF RIBERA DEL DUERO

Ribera del Duero is planted almost exclusively with red grape varieties. The lone white variety, albillo

mayor, is planted in tiny amounts and is not commercially significant. That said, albillo mayor does have

a claim to fame: It is known to be one of the parents of tempranillo.

CABERNET SAUVIGNON: Makes up just 1 percent of the grapes planted in Ribera del Duero—and

virtually all of that by the bodega Vega-Sicilia. The bodega also has minuscule plantings of merlot and

malbec.

GARNACHA: A minor grape in this region, made into locally consumed, inexpensive rosés.

TINTO FINO: A major grape variety used almost exclusively in virtually all red wines. Also known locally

as tinta del país. While the variety is the same as tempranillo, the clones that make up tinto fino are

different from the clones of tempranillo that grow in Rioja and elsewhere in Spain.

Ribera del Duero is called a land of extremes. Old gnarled vines endure freezing cold winters and blistering summers.

Then there are the vines themselves, which seem imbued with a life force all their own.

Planted on Spain’s grand high plateau, known as the meseta, 2,500 to 2,800 feet (760 to

850 meters) above sea level, the vines look like small, stunted arms protruding no more

than a foot or two out of the earth. Most are still planted in the traditional manner, without

posts, wires, or trellising of any sort. Many vines are thirty to fifty years old or more and

thus produce grapes with concentrated flavor.

There are two general types of soil. Nearest the Duero River and its small tributaries,

the soils are composed of sandy sediments, marl, and ancient riverbed stones. The higher

vineyards—which are considered some of the best—are on slopes (known as laderas)

above the riverbeds and contain more limestone and clay.

As for the Duero River itself, although it is neither wide nor deep nor particularly grand

(at least as it flows through Ribera del Duero), it does help temper the region’s dry, harsh

climate. The river adds moisture to the air, and in summer the riverbanks buffer the hot,

dry winds that sweep through the valley. In fall and spring the river’s stabilizing warmth

helps protect against frost.

In Ribera del Duero, tinto fino accounts for the lion’s share of all plantings, and all the

top wines are made almost entirely from it.

Ribera del Duero is a vast agricultural area which, besides producing wine, is devoted to raising sheep. Spanish sheep

have a particular talent for torpidly crossing the road when you’re trying to get someplace fast.

SOME OF THE BEST PRODUCERS OF RIBERA DEL DUERO

Aalto • Abadía Retuerta • Alejandro Fernández/Pesquera • Alion • Alonso del Yerro • Arzuaga • Astrales •

Condado de Haza • Dominio de Pingus • Emilio Moro • Ismael Arroyo • Legaris • Mauro • O. Fournier •

Penalba Herraiz/Carravid • Pérez Pascuas/Viña Pedrosa • Protos • Reyes • Valdubón • Vega-Sicilia

CRIANZA, RESERV A, AND GRAN RESERV A

As is true in Rioja, Ribera del Duero wines can be classified according to the quality of

the grapes and how long the wines are aged. I say “can be” because some modern

producers choose not to use the designations. For those that do, wines fall into the

categories crianza, reserva, and gran reserva. (In Ribera del Duero itself, you might also

come across simple, grapey wines known as tintos joven—young reds—but these are

almost never exported.)

VEGA-SICILIA

T oday, Vega-Sicilia, Ribera del Duero’s most legendary estate is owned by the Alvarez family. (The name

is a mystery. Vega is the word for the green part of a riverbank. Sicilia evolved from St. Cecilia and is not,

as is commonly thought, a reference to the Italian island of Sicily.)

Vega-Sicilia’s vineyards were first planted in 1864 by Don Eloy Lecanda, a winemaker who had

studied in Bordeaux and returned to Castilla bringing eighteen thousand vine cuttings of cabernet

sauvignon, merlot, malbec, and pinot noir with him. These grapes were combined with tinto fino to

become the first Vega-Sicilia wines. T oday, about 80 percent of Vega-Sicilia’s 617 acres (250 hectares) of

vineyards are planted with tinto fino, and the remainder with cabernet sauvignon, merlot, and malbec.

Many of the vines are more than a century old.

Vega-Sicilia makes three wines: Valbuena 5, so named because it is sold after five years of aging; the

very prestigious Reserva Especial (a blend of vintages); and the utterly rare Unico (Spanish for unique).

Unico is aged in a succession of large and small oak barrels until the winemaker feels it is perfectly ready

to drink, which, as it happens, is rarely in less than ten years and not according to any regular marketing

schedule. Amazingly, the bodega released both its 1982 and 1968 Unicos in the same year—1991.

That’s after nine and twenty-three years of aging, respectively. This practice makes Unico one of the

world’s longest-aged reds before release. Among Unico’s best customers are King Juan Carlos of Spain

and England’s Prince Charles, along with collectors around the world.

Crianzas are good, easy-drinking wines with cherry pie, spice, earth, and vanilla

flavors and aromas. These wines generally come from good but not exceptional vineyards.

Made from superior grapes grown at better sites, reservas have a fuller, fleshier texture

and greater overall depth, concentration, and intensity. Coming from the very best

vineyards, gran reservas are the most polished and refined wines of all. Reservas and gran

reservas are usually made only in above-average years. They represent just a small

percentage of all the wine made in the region.

In Ribera del Duero, old vines, gnarled as if in agony, protrude from the rough

ground. If the ground holds vines in place everywhere else in the world, here,

the opposite seems true. The earth herself clings to the muscular vines.

Here’s what the categories mean:

CRIANZA: Aged a minimum of two years, at least one of which must be in oak barrels; the

year starts October 1.

RESERVA: Aged a minimum of three years, at least one of which must be in oak barrels; the

year starts December 1.

GRAN RESERVA: Wines of outstanding quality, made in select vintage years only. Aged a

minimum of five years, at least two of which must be in oak barrels; the year starts

December 1.

Lechazo—baby lamb cooked slowly in a wood-fired oven until the tender meat falls off the bone—is the quintessential

meal in Ribera del Duero. An exercise in carnivorousness, the meat is accompanied by nothing but a little salad and a

lot of tinto fino.

THE FOODS OF RIBERA DEL DUERO

The legendary dish of Ribera del Duero is lechazo, a baby lamb fed only mother’s milk

and weighing less than 15 pounds (7 kilograms). In fact, lechazo is sometimes the only

dish served in the best asadores—simple, tavernlike roast houses—which can be found

throughout the region. The heavenly aroma of roast baby lamb can be smelled several

blocks away from an asador, and it is hard to pass up.

The chef of each asador, who is usually also the owner, buys his lamb directly from

shepherds, and butchers it himself. He seasons it with only a sprinkle of salt and pepper,

then slowly roasts it in a cuenco (a ceramic roasting dish) over a hardwood fire in an old

brick oven until the meat is seared crackling crisp on the outside and so meltingly tender

on the inside that it falls off the bone.

Eating lechazo is an experience in pure carnivorousness. In rustic asadores, nothing is

served with the central attraction except a sharp knife and a fork, a bottle or carafe of

Ribera del Duero, and a small salad of lettuce and tomatoes. At slightly more upscale

asadores, you might begin with a plate of garlicky grilled setas (wild mushrooms) or

grilled morcilla (blood sausage stuffed with rice). Finally, there will be páramo de

Guzmán, an artisanal cheese made from the milk of a special breed of Churra sheep, and

cuajada, creamy, tangy sheep’s milk yogurt served in an earthenware jar. Into the yogurt,

you spoon the local honey.

WHEN YOU VISIT… RIBERA DEL DUERO

MOST TOURS OF BODEGAS in Ribera del Duero are in Spanish; to tour in English,

it’s important to make an appointment in advance. (Note that it’s difficult to arrange a

tour of Vega-Sicilia or Pesquera unless you have business with those bodegas; both

are closed to the public.)

ALL OVER RIBERA DEL DUERO are little asadores—simple, tavernlike roast houses

where roast baby lamb and roast suckling pig are not only specialties but are often the

only things (besides a country salad) on the menu. You can’t make reservations at such

places… you just walk in. Any bodega will have a list of their favorites, so ask for

recommendations.

The Ribera del Duero Wines to Know

Ribera del Duero is old, masculine Spain. If you close your eyes for a moment when you are there, you could be

back in the sixteenth century: conquistadores; fortresses; walled cities. Today the wines bring us back, for the

region’s intense climate means that only earthy, powerful reds are made.

ALEJANDRO FERNÁNDEZ PESQUERA

RESERVA

100% tinto fino

Alejandro Fernández likes bold, masculine wines with lots of personality—a sure description of Pesquera Reserva.

The wine explodes onto the palate with incredible blueberry and violet flavors, only to be replaced seconds later by

a surge of bitter chocolate and espresso. As with all of the top Ribera del Dueros, there’s a sexy sense of dirt and

darkness here, and a long mineral-streaked finish.

O. FOURNIER

ALFA SPIGA

100% tinto fino

Alfa Spiga is a powerhouse—a rugged, meaty, dark wine that seems to embody Ribera del Duero’s massive,

gnarled vines themselves. The first to pull you in are the anything-but-dainty aromas—peat bog, coffee grounds,

Scotch, wet bark. From there, the wine swallows you in a wave of intense black fruit flavor. It is massively

structured, with a huge thrust of tannin—all the more reminder that Ribera del Duero wines can seem unyielding

until you bring out the roast lamb.

DOMINIO DE PINGUS

100% tinto fino

Few wines broach the sheer power of this one. Pingus is, in a word, monolithic. When it’s young, a curtain of

tannin and oak often shroud the wine’s beautiful core of complex, deep, cherry-laced fruit. But with time, the power

and heaviness lift and notes of tobacco, leather, and minerals begin to emerge, giving the wine a more nuanced

character, and allowing it to achieve a sense of harmony. Pingus is not for the faint of heart. Nor for those who

require immediate gratification. That wine would be Flor de Pingus, theoretically Pingus’s baby sister, but a wild

tempest of a wine with amazing purity and vividness, a deep, concentrated core of fruit, and the hedonic texture of

crushed velvet.

PÉREZ PASCUAS

VIÑA PEDROSA | RESERVA

100% tinto fino

Viña Pedrosa has always been a signature wine of Ribera del Duero. It’s not as thick and Portlike as many of its

brothers here, but it is a wonderfully sensual, harmonious wine packed with all those aromas and flavors that sound

bad, yet taste really good (animal fur, manure, sweat, worn leather, gaminess). The first time I had this wine in

Spain, I was eating a long-simmered, savory meat stew, and the two will always be entwined in my memory.

ABADIA RETUERTA

SARDÓN DE DUERO | PAGO NEGRALADA

100% tempranillo

Although technically just outside the region, Abadía Retuerta is nonetheless usually thought of as a bodega in

Ribera del Duero—and not just any bodega, but one of the largest, most elaborate and expensive. The 500-acre

(200-hectare) estate includes the twelfth century abadía (abbey) Santa Maria de Retuerta and now holds a luxury

hotel plus a state-of-the-art winery. Famous Bordeaux winemaker Pascal Delbeck, who also makes the wines at

Château Ausone, is the winemaker. Pago Negralada, the bodega’s top wine, is utterly hedonistic and silky, packed

with the aromas and flavors of cocoa, licorice, strawberries, dried figs, leather, and sweet pipe tobacco.

VEGA-SICILIA

UNICO

Mostly tinto fino with a small amount of cabernet sauvignon

It has been said of Unico that the more masculine vintages have the structure and depth of great Bordeaux and the

more feminine vintages have the elegance and perfume of great Burgundy. Indeed, year after year, V ega-Sicilia

produces exquisite wines with immaculate balance—wines that possess both finesse and raw power. Among the

bodega’s wines, Unico, from the estate’s oldest vines, has a special appeal. A few years ago, in a vertical tasting

going back to 1948, I was so stunned by the aliveness of the wines that I had the rather strange, out-of-body feeling

that I was not drinking the wine—it was drinking me.

JEREZ

THE SHERRY REGION

The three words Jerez, Xérès, and Sherry that appear on every bottle of Sherry are a

reflection of the diverse names for Spain’s most spellbinding and fascinating fortified

wine. Sherry is the English word, and Xérès the original Phoenician one, for the wines

made in the Spanish wine region of Jerez. But no matter what you call it, if there were

justice in the wine cosmos, Sherry would be one of the world’s best-loved and oft-sipped

wines. As it stands, Sherry—the unsung hero of five great wine classics (Sherry, Port,

Madeira, Champagne, and Tokaji)—is largely misunderstood and underappreciated (at

least in our time). That it is sometimes cast as the libation of little old ladies is nothing if

not amusing. Sherry, after all, is the daily drink of southern Spanish men—known for their

machismo, love of bullfights, and prowess at horse racing, not to mention their

predilection for bars and cigars.

As a fortified wine, Sherry’s alcoholic strength has been raised to between 15 and 22

percent. (A standard table wine is usually 12 to 15 percent alcohol.) In addition to being

fortified, Sherries are also given slow, careful, and systematic exposure to oxygen—the

degree of which varies depending on the style of Sherry being made. But fortification and

controlled oxidation do not begin to tell the whole hauntingly delicious and complex story

of Sherry. No other wine in the world lights up the senses and the brain in the same way.

Indeed, nowhere else in the world are so many radically different styles of wine made

from the same grape variety. Much more on this to come.

Drying Pedro Ximénez grapes in the brilliant sunlight of Sherry country.

Although vineyards and beaches would seem to make strange bedfellows, Sherry

comes from a small wedge of land along the sea in southwest Spain, in the province of

Andalusia. This is the Spain of a 1960s movie—a land of gypsies and heel-pounding

flamenco dancers, guitars and prized horses, whitewashed villages, and perhaps the

world’s most mouthwatering array of shellfish. It was from these stark, chalky-white

shores that Columbus began his westward sail. If he brought wine with him (and history

suggests he did), Sherry was the first European wine drunk in America.

THE LAND, THE GRAPES, AND THE VINEYARDS

Sherry comes from an eerie, barren moonscape of blinding whiteness along Spain’s

southwestern Andalusian coast. The vineyards spread in triangular fashion from an inland

point north of the charming town of Jerez de la Frontera to the small maritime towns of

Puerto de Santa María, on the Bay of Cádiz, and Sanlúcar de Barrameda, on the Atlantic

shore at the mouth of the Guadalquivir River.

The best vineyards lie in the heart of this triangle, a region designated as Jerez Superior

by Sherry’s Consejo Regulador, or governing body. Sherry’s Consejo—legally constituted

in 1935—was the first in Spain, and Sherry was the first DO, awarded that designation

two years earlier, in 1933, by the national government. Within the Jerez Superior region,

the vineyards of highest regard roll like waves over gentle hillocks. Looking at them, I am

always reminded of the rippling landscape of the ocean floor. On these beautifully smooth

and curved hills, the verdant vines glisten like emeralds in the glaring summer sun.

Millennia ago, the Sherry region was covered by a vast sea. Thus, not surprisingly

today, the best soil type—usually found on the tops of the hillocks—is composed of the

remnants of marine sediments mixed with chalky calcium carbonates (including

limestone) and prehistoric sea fossils. Called albariza, the soil is stark white, crumbly,

light as cake mix, and has very good water-holding capacity. The latter helps the vines

endure southern Spain’s long, often drought-ridden summers. In addition, since albariza

soils tend to be the highest in elevation, vines planted in albariza tend to catch sea breezes

—a boon for preserving acidity in the grapes. Less prized than albariza is arena, sand,

often right beside the coast, and barro, a low-lying, brownish, more fertile clay where,

today, mostly sugar beets and corn are planted.

THE QUICK SIP ON SHERRY

AS CHAMPAGNE is in France or Port is in Portugal, Sherry is Spain’s most complex

and labor-intensive wine. The immense difficulty of producing this handcrafted wine has

earned it its reputation as one of the world’s most spellbinding wines.

SHERRY IS MADE in multiple styles. These range from hauntingly bonedry to

gorgeously sweet.

SHERRY COUNTRY is also one of Spain’s most thrilling food regions and the place

where the small dishes known as tapas were first created. Sherry is their quintessential

accompaniment.

THE GRAPES OF SHERRY

Jerez is planted exclusively with white grape varieties.

MOSCATEL: T oday, a relatively rare grape made into a wine on its own and used as a sweet blending

wine.

PALOMINO: More correctly known as Palomino fino. Major grape for all styles of Sherry.

PEDRO XIMÉNEZ: A rare grape, picked and dried on mats in the sun to make the sensational dessert

Sherry also called Pedro Ximénez.

The most widely planted grape in Jerez is Palomino fino (known simply as Palomino);

95 percent of Sherry is made from it. The name Palomino refers not to horses (as might be

expected) but to Fernán Yáñez Palomino, a thirteenth-century knight to King Alfonso X.

One of the least acidic grapes in the world, Palomino is also extremely high-yielding.

Growers can easily reap the legal limit of 8,476 pounds per acre (9,500 kilos per hectare).

Even the bunches themselves are huge; a cluster of Palomino is equal in size to four or

five bunches of Napa V alley cabernet sauvignon.

In terms of aroma, flavor, and character, Palomino won’t turn any heads. As it happens,

however, that very neutrality is sought. With a relatively simple grape as a blank canvas, a

Sherry’s individuality comes from the albariza soil in which its grapes are grown and the

solera in which it is made. (More on the solera concept in a moment.)

Finally, completing the grape list, there are two other grapes—both white—found in

Jerez. Both account for less and less acreage as time goes on, but both can make stunning

wines. The first, moscatel bianco (muscat of Alexandria), is used to make a sweet wine for

blending and, occasionally, a fantastic dessert wine on its own. Second, Pedro Ximénez

(PEY -dro he-MEN-ez), or “PX,

” as it is known, is a local Andalusian variety used to make

the style of sweet Sherry called Pedro Ximénez. This is a wine that any card-carrying wine

lover must try, for it is one of the most sensual wine experiences to be had. A glass of PX

looks, for all the world, like a glass of molasses, and the wine—dense, syrupy, and dark

mahogany in color—is the very epitome of artisanal creativity, opulence, and refined

sweetness (at 44 percent, 440 grams per liter, residual sugar!).

HOW SHERRY GOT ITS NAME

The name Sherry has a long pedigree. The Greeks called the region Xera, the Romans, Ceret. By the

early Middle Ages the Arabs called the region Sekeris, and northern Spanish Castilians called it Xérès,

and later Xérèz. By the late nineteenth century, Xérèz had become Jerez, and the town that marked the

frontier between the Arabs and the northern Spanish was called Jerez de la Frontera. The Spanish

pronunciation of Jerez (hare-ETH) was corrupted by British importers of the wine, who pronounced it

JER-rez, then JER-ee, and finally Sherry.

TAPAS

No food is more associated with Sherry—and with southern Spain—than tapas. The little nibbles are

thought to have originated in Andalusian bars in the late nineteenth century. Originally complimentary,

they were served in the late morning, after breakfast coffee, but before lunch. Each nibble would be

served on a small saucer, which would be placed atop one’s mid-morning glass of Sherry, conveniently

keeping the flies out. As the custom evolved, bar owners found tapas were a way to entice their patrons

to stay longer and eat and drink more. And so they would; lunch after all, at least in this part of Spain,

isn’t usually served until 3:00 P .M.

—a long time to wait for sustenance. The word tapas is derived from

the verb tapar, which translates as “to cover.

” T oday, tapas are rarely on the house, and the thousands of

types range from simple to elaborate, with each small southern Spanish village claiming its own tapas

specialty.

HOW SHERRY IS MADE

Before I go into the specific winemaking processes by which Sherry is made and aged, it’s

important to know that Sherry is not a single entity, but rather seven distinct styles of

wine, each of which is extremely individual. At one end of the spectrum are the

manzanillas and finos, with their tangy, crisp, green earthiness; in the middle are the

amontillados, palo cortados, and olorosos, with their lusty, roasted, nutty flavors; and

finally come the creams, with their sweet, lush toffee, and fig flavors. None of these

Sherry flavors, textures, and aromas ever quite falls into what we might think of as the

galaxy of white or red wine. The flavor of Sherry is a world unto itself.

This is because of the unique way in which Sherry is progressively blended and aged in

a complex network of old barrels, called a solera. Depending on how and the rate at which

the wine moves through the solera, the different styles of Sherry can be made.

HOW THE SOLERA WORKS

The first important fact to know is that each style of Sherry has its own separate solera.

What is a solera and how does the solera system work? The process, at its most simplistic,

goes like this: Palomino grapes are picked early (often in August) when the grapes are just

ripe (about 12 percent alcohol, potentially), but not overripe. They are then crushed, and

the juice is fermented—usually in stainless-steel tanks—very much the way any other

white wine might be made. At this point the wine is lightly fortified with grape spirits

(fino will be fortified just a little; the fuller styles, like oloroso, will be fortified slightly

more).

The fortified wine is then poured into barrels and set aside for six months to a year to

develop a bit of initial complexity. This initial period in the wine’s life is called the

sobretable. When it is finished, the wine will enter the solera, where it will be

progressively blended and aged until it eventually emerges as Sherry.

To form the solera, multiple rows of old 600-liter (160-gallon) American oak barrels,

called botas, are lined up. Often these rows are stacked one row on top of the other, like

children’s building blocks. Generally the stack will be four or five rows of barrels high,

but the solera may contain as many as fourteen rows of barrels. (In the case of fourteen

rows, the barrels would not all be stacked one on top of the other, or the bottom barrels

would burst from the weight.) Even at five barrels high, a solera is an impressive sight.

The barrels on the bottom row contain the oldest Sherry; from these barrels small

amounts (known as the saca) will be drawn off and bottled when the Sherry is deemed

ready—and usually only when an order is placed. This row is also called the solera row

(from suelo, Spanish for “floor”). Each time Sherry is drawn off from the bottom row,

bottled, and sent to market, the barrel is replenished with an equal quantity of wine from a

barrel in the row above it. That row, second from the bottom, is called criadera #1, or the

first nursery. It contains the second-oldest wine. When wine from criadera #1 is drawn

off, it, in turn, is replenished with wine from a barrel in the row above it, called criadera

#2. Criadera #2 will be replenished with wine from the row above it, criadera #3, and so

on. Thus, a tiny amount of wine is slowly, constantly being drawn off and added to older

wine, moving progressively down through lower and lower barrels. (Some styles of Sherry

are moved more slowly through the solera than others—a key factor in their final flavors.)

At the very top, the solera is fed with the wine of the current year after it has undergone

the initial sobretable period. The process of moving the wines from one criadera to the

next has a lovely name—rocios. The word means “morning dew” and is a reflection of

how gently the wine must be handled when it is moved between criaderas.

Each bottle of Sherry is thus a complex molecular kaleidoscope of what can only be an

estimated age. As a result of this constant fractional blending of younger wines into older

wines, Sherry is not the product of any one year. By law, it never carries a vintage date,

although it is not uncommon for a Sherry label to designate the year the solera was

formed. Also by law, only 30 percent of a solera can be drawn off for bottling each year.

MONTILLA-MORILES

East and north of Jerez is the wine region Montilla-Moriles, near the old Moorish capital, Córdoba. Here,

under the blazing summer sun, Pedro Ximénez grapes achieve such sugar-loaded ripeness that they

easily result in wines that are 15.5 percent alcohol naturally, before (optional) fortification. Montillas are

not technically Sherries, but like them, they develop flor, are aged in a solera, and are made in such

similar styles as fino, amontillado, and so forth. Unlike Sherry, however, the naturally higher alcohol

means that Montilla wines often do not have to be fortified with grape spirits. Even today, some Montillas

are still fermented in tall clay vessels called tinajas.

The best producers of Montilla are the legendary bodegas Alvear, established in 1729, and T oro

Albalá, founded in 1844. In particular, Alvear’s fino seems to embody the intense and vibrant pulse of

southern Spain, with its bursting flavors of lemon, chalk, olives, pepper, spices, almond cake, and

roasted nuts. As for T oro Albalá’s Pedro Ximénez, the English language does not possess sufficient

descriptors. The black, oozy wine is one of the most surreal, luscious experiences any taster could ever

have.

BARRELS—BLACK AND BROODING

Walking out of the crack-lingly bright outdoor sunlight of southern Spain into the shadowy, dark interior of

a Sherry bodega is an awesome experience. Often called cathedrals because of their unreal stillness

and impressive size, Sherry bodegas are filled with large, imposing black barrels that sit like silent bulls

in the dim light. A typical bodega might have a hundred thousand such casks (known as botas, or butts).

Made from American oak, each is about three times the size of a standard Bordeaux barrel, and holds

about 160 gallons (600 liters) of wine.

The barrels are always painted with a water-based, jet-black matte paint, giving them a powerful,

dramatic appearance. And why black? The answers most commonly given in Jerez are that: 1) the black

paint discourages insects from nibbling on the wood, 2) the black paint keeps the sun from penetrating

the wood and spoiling the wine, 3) because barrels are never thrown away in Jerez (many of those

currently in use are 150 to 200 years old), they often look ragtag from years of being repaired; painting

hides imperfections and makes the barrels look neat and uniform, and 4) any leakage could be easily

detected because it would appear shiny against the matte black paint.

The labyrinthine solera process is especially remarkable because it is impossible to

determine just how old a Sherry is when it finally emerges from the bottom row. The

reason is twofold. First, once the solera is set up, the barrels are never completely emptied.

Currently, Sherry barrels are, on average, one hundred years old, and many bodegas have

barrels that average two hundred years old. Second, the small amount of wine drawn off

and added to the wine in the barrel below is not stirred into that wine. The wine is

therefore not fully homogenized. Each barrel will contain molecules of wine that were

never drawn off, and thus date from when the solera was begun, as much as two centuries

earlier.

For Sherry to become Sherry requires more than simply the physical movement of wine

through a solera, however. Why does fino become fino and oloroso become oloroso? That

metamorphosis is fairly well understood today. For most of history, however, Sherry was

inexplicably supernatural.

MAKING FINO AND MANZANILLA—THE MAGIC OF FLOR

Each style of Sherry is ineluctably tied to the presence or absence of flor—a foamy, waxy

film of yellow-white yeasts that appears on the surface of some styles of Sherry. (The

word flor means “flower”

—a reference to its ability to bloom.) To understand flor, let’s

imagine the winemaker is making a fino. First, he crushes, but does not press, the

Palomino grapes. The free-run juice is then fermented and, after fermentation, fortified

only slightly with spirits. The wine is transferred into a Sherry bota, but instead of being

filled to the top, the bota is filled only three-fourths full. Sherry makers call this space dos

puntos—two fists (of air).

Next, a remarkable occurrence takes place. A film of flor appears on the surface of the

wine. As they accumulate and grow, the yeasts form small curds. In a month’s time, the

flor will blanket the wine.

A century ago, horrified by the foul-looking flor, Sherry makers believed that certain

barrels of wine simply got “sick.

” Slowly, opinion changed. The flor-covered wines, they

noticed, emerged from the solera light, fresh, and very dry. This came to be seen as a

blessing, for such a wine was, in fact, well suited to the sultry local climate. Enologists

now know that flor is a family of four complex, wild strains of Saccharomyces yeasts (the

leading one of which is called Saccharomyces beticus) that bloom spontaneously in Jerez’s

humid air.

Flor—specific strains of wild yeasts that thrive in Jerez—float on the surface of wine, ultimately contributing to Sherry’ s

unique flavor.

Importantly, these yeasts have the metabolic capacity to consume alcohol and oxygen

(rather than sugar). Indeed, the need for oxygen is in part why these strains of yeast

evolved to float; by floating on the surface of a wine, they’d be closer to the air in the

barrel. (The yeasts’ need for oxygen is also why Sherry bodegas have famously large

windows that are always open, and why most bodegas are situated facing the ocean to

maximize sea breezes.) As they proliferate, the strains of flor yeasts also give off

acetaldehyde, the aroma of which is a signature scent in certain styles of Sherry. Although

it sounds awful, the smell of acetaldehyde is often compared to nail polish remover.

Somehow, however, that aroma—when it emanates from Sherry—comes across in a

singularly appealing way.

Interestingly, flor taken from Jerez to other parts of the world quickly mutates or dies,

conveniently ensuring that true Sherry will never be made in California, Chile, Italy, or

even anywhere else in Spain.

Flor is critical to a fino-to-be. Floating on the wine thanks to their waxy cells, the flor

yeasts protect the developing fino from oxidizing by consuming the surrounding oxygen

(remember, the barrel contents are one-quarter air). With fino, the flor ebbs and flows

cyclically with the seasons. Thus, flor’s shield is not absolutely impermeable. A small

amount of oxidation will occur with fino—just enough to impart further complexity.

Flor is also critical to manzanilla. In the especially humid conditions under which

manzanilla is made, flor will blanket the developing wine throughout the year. The result

is a wine of finely etched delicacy that has the least possible exposure to oxidation. How is

it that manzanilla is made in a significantly more humid environment than other Sherries

when the entire Jerez region is humid? Manzanilla is, by law, only made by bodegas

situated along the beach in the seaside town of Sanlúcar de Barrameda, where the salty air

and average 78 percent humidity create a unique mesoclimate. So dependent is manzanilla

on this oceanic mesoclimate that developing manzanillas taken to another bodega in the

Sherry region (or even a bodega too far from the wet breezes off the beach) will turn into

finos!

As for amontillados, they are made by taking fino Sherries, fortifying them a bit more

to a higher alcohol content, and then putting them through another solera where they will

not be protected by flor. The amontillado that results is darker in color (thanks to the air

exposure), aged, nutty, and rich—and it has more alcohol than a fino.

MAKING OLOROSO, CREAM SHERRY , AND PEDRO XIMÉNEZ

Until quite recently, the mystical and unpredictable appearance of flor told Sherry makers

whether they had emerging finos or manzanillas on their hands. If flor did not form in the

botas, the Sherry makers knew the wines were destined to become olorosos and they

would care for and age them accordingly.

Today an oloroso is usually made intentionally. Instead of using free-run juice and

fortifying it only slightly, Sherry makers lightly press some of the juice from the grapes

and fortify it enough so that flor is not able to form. (Flor yeasts, like all yeasts, die in an

environment that is greater than about 16.4 percent alcohol.) The extra bit of alcohol and

tannin from the grape skins means that an oloroso will always have a rounder, fuller

texture than the lighter, more elegant fino or manzanilla.

THE SEVEN STYLES OF SHERRY

Sherry falls along a spectrum of styles—from those (such as manzanilla and fino) that look like white

wine and are light, dry, and crisp; to Sherries (such as palo cortado and oloroso) that are topaz to

mahogany in color, fuller-bodied, and outrageously nutty. There are seven major styles.

MANZANILLA

A highly revered, light, elegant style of Sherry, manzanilla, by law, comes only from the tiny seaside town

of Sanlúcar de Barrameda. There, the wet ocean air gives manzanilla a dry, salty tang as well as an

iodine-like sea spray aroma, similar to the aroma of a freshly shucked oyster. Manzanilla has a delicate,

crisp edge, and its flavors are often said to suggest chamomile, a plant that grows around Sanlúcar in the

seaside marshes. (The name manzanilla translates as “chamomile.

”) Manzanilla is entirely dependent on

the bloom of flor, the yellow foam of yeasts that forms on the surface of the wine as it develops. It is the

presence of and exposure to flor (rather than long exposure to oxygen) that gives manzanilla its

character. Because manzanillas are ultra-fragile, most bodegas bottle and ship them to order. They must

be drunk chilled and fresh; opened bottles last no more than one or two days. Manzanillas are between

15 and 17 percent alcohol.

FINO

Fino is Sherry at the apex of refinement and complexity. Fino is pale in color and low in alcohol (for

Sherry). Its unforgettable dry tang and aroma, reminiscent of a mossy garden after a rain, plus its

pungent yeasty/almondy aroma, make it one of the world’s great seafood wines. Like manzanillas, finos

take their character from the presence of flor, not from extended oxidative aging. And although they are

not quite as delicate as manzanillas, finos are still fragile and must be served well-chilled and at peak

freshness. An open bottle should be drunk, like most white wines, within two to three days. Finos fall

between 15 and 17 percent alcohol.

AMONTILLADO

Whereas mazanillas and finos take their character from flor and not from extended aging in the presence

of oxygen, amontillados are the result of both flor and extended oxidative aging. They are a beautiful

topaz/amber color. An amontillado starts out more or less as a fino. Then, after four to six years moving

through its fino solera, the wine is fortified so that its alcohol content is slightly higher than that of

manzanilla or fino. At this point, it is put into another solera where it will no longer be protected by flor. As

a result, it will oxidize, taking on its classic topaz/amber color as well as rich, complex roasted hazelnut,

fresh black tobacco, dried fruit, and spicy flavors, and a smooth, almost satiny texture—all in addition to

the pungent character it already possessed by virtue of starting out in the presence of flor. For many

people, this makes amontillado the perfect Sherry style. Some producers make bone-dry amontillados;

others blend in a small percentage of sweet Pedro Ximénez to make a medium-dry wine. The label may

or may not indicate the level of sweetness. Amontillados tend to fall between 16 and 22 percent alcohol.

PALO CORTADO

A rare, eccentric, and exceptionally profound and complex type of Sherry, palo cortado has a burnished

mahogany color, sometimes with an unreal green glint at the edge of the wine. It is still something of a

mystery, and even bodega owners don’t always define palo cortados exactly the same way. The

consensus, however, is this: Sometimes, what at first appears to be an oloroso develops in a manner

that is more elegant and complex than oloroso typically is. Known henceforth as a palo cortado, the wine

soars with aromas and flavors suggestive of roasted walnuts, dried leaves, fresh tobacco, animal fur, and

exotic spices, and an almost primordially lush texture. The latter is the result of the wine’s high level of

glycerin, which gives it a sappy, silky, oozy texture. At the same time, palo cortados manifest the dry,

slightly pungent aroma of amontillados and show a lactic (buttery) character (the possible result of a

small amount of malolactic fermentation). This duplicitous curiosity, with the fragrance and finesse of a

dry amontillado and a voluptuousness reminiscent of a dry oloroso, is quite simply an otherworldly

experience to drink. Among Sherry connoisseurs, palo cortado is considered the apex of sophisticated

drinking. The alcohol level of this style falls between 17 percent and 22 percent.

OLOROSO

The word oloroso means “intensely aromatic” in Spanish, and this style is indeed that. Olorosos are long-

aged Sherries that have not been protected or influenced by flor. More than any other type of dry Sherry,

olorosos are exposed to oxygen. This darkens the wine to a rich, deep mahogany and imparts a flavor

ten orders of magnitude more nutty than nuts themselves. Olorosos are potent and full-bodied and have

an unctuous feel on the palate—the result of their high level of glycerin. The initial raw material for an

oloroso is usually pressed juice, which is slightly bolder than the free-run juice used to make fino. The

wine is also more heavily fortified with grape spirits (18 to 20 percent) before it enters the oloroso solera

and is moved more slowly through it. As a result, olorosos are meatier, denser Sherries. Classically,

olorosos are hauntingly dry wines, but some producers today mellow the dry finish by blending in tiny

amounts of Pedro Ximénez.

CREAM

Originally created for the British export market, mahogany-colored cream Sherries are made by

sweetening oloroso—generally to at least 11 percent residual sugar (some cream Sherries are

considerably sweeter). Cream Sherries range all over the board in quality—from inexpensive, mud-thick,

saccharine quaffs to elegant, almost racy wines redolent of chocolate, licorice, figs, dried fruits, and

roasted nuts. A vibrant and delicious Spanish cocktail calls for mixing good cream Sherry with Campari

and red vermouth and then serving it over ice with a twist of lemon. Cream Sherries range from 15.5 to

22 percent alcohol. There’s also a “white” version of cream Sherry. Known as a pale cream, it’s a simple,

sweet Sherry with less alcohol than regular cream Sherry.

PEDRO XIMÉNEZ

An ebony-colored sweet Sherry, Pedro Ximénez is often as dark and syrupy as blackstrap molasses.

Unlike the vast majority of other Sherries, which are made from the Palomino grape, Pedro Ximénez is

made from white Pedro Ximénez grapes (it continues to astound me that so black a wine can be made

from white grapes!). The grapes achieve their sugary concentration by being dried on straw mats in the

intense Spanish sun for about a week. (The mats are covered at night, so the grapes are spared from the

morning dew.) Once made and aged in a solera, the wine will be 40 to 50 percent residual sugar—more

than three times the sweetness of Sauternes, for example. Pedro Ximénez is served on its own as

dessert, or with hard cheeses and membrillo (quince paste). As mentioned, small amounts of it are also

used to sweeten other styles of Sherry. However, for a thorough dive into the deep end of hedonism, you

can also do what the Spaniards do and employ it as an adult sundae topping, by pouring it over vanilla or

rum raisin ice cream.

A Sherry maker moves the developing oloroso through its solera more slowly than fino

or manzanilla go through theirs. By holding the oloroso longer in the solera, the Sherry

maker allows it to take on a deep, carameltoffee richness.

When the oloroso is removed from the solera, it is ready to be bottled as a dry wine. Or

it may be lightly sweetened with a bit of ultra-sweet juice from Pedro Ximénez grapes,

making it an off-dry oloroso. If the oloroso is sweetened to the extent that Pedro Ximénez

makes up about 15 percent of the final blend, the oloroso becomes a cream Sherry.

The first cream Sherries were made at the turn of the twentieth century for the British

export market. They were lush, warming wines perfectly suited to bitter, raw English

winters. Such was the popularity of cream Sherries that shortcuts were sometimes taken to

meet the demand for them and to make cheap versions. Today, the cheap cream Sherries

on the market are little more than dull base wines that have been quickly passed through a

few barrels, and then so heavily sweetened that they have virtually no character or

complexity. But the best cream Sherries—like Lustau’s East India Cream Sherry—are

phenomenally hedonistic wines of profound richness and complexity.

THE THRILL OF THE CHILL

Sherry tastes best when it’s drunk the way it is in Spanish bodegas—cold for certain styles; chilled for others.

Manzanilla and fino, for example, should be served very cold (like Champagne). Nutty amontillado should be

served well chilled. And even the deepest-colored Sherries—palo cortado, oloroso, cream, and Pedro Ximénez—

taste best served at cool room temperature. Ice cubes aren’t out of the question. In the south of Spain, one of the

most refreshing and ubiquitous cocktails is cream Sherry served over ice with a twist of orange.

Black botas of Pedro Ximénez at Bodegas Tradicion. The bodega focuses exclusively on rare, old Sherries designated

VOS or VORS.

As we’ve seen in The Seven Styles of Sherry (page 462), Pedro Ximénez is made into a

rare Sherry of its own. Most Pedro Ximénez wines are nearly black in color and have a

texture thicker than maple syrup. A thimbleful is more than dessert wine, it’s dessert. To

achieve this degree of sweetness and intensity, the grapes are picked and then laid out

under the scorching sun for two to three weeks to dry and shrivel. Only when the sugar in

them becomes very concentrated are the grapes slowly fermented into wine that will

possess more than 40 percent (400 grams per liter) residual sugar.

SOME OF THE BEST SHERRY PRODUCERS

Barbadillo • Bodegas Tradición • Emilio Lustau • González Byass • Hidalgo • Osborne • Pedro Domecq •

Sandeman • Valdespino • Williams & Humbert

THE ARABIC THREADS OF SHERRY HISTORY

For almost eight hundred years during the Middle Ages, while the rest of Europe was shrouded in cultural

and intellectual darkness, the Moors controlled most of Spain. Progressive, powerful, and enlightened,

they were not one people but a group of Middle Eastern and North African Muslim tribes that entered

Europe through Andalusia. Their capital became the white-walled village of Córdoba, which under their

caliphate became the most important city in Western Europe. By the tenth century, Córdoba had half a

million people and was the first city in Europe with street lighting, a sewage system, and public fountains.

There were fifty hospitals, three hundred public baths, sixty schools, twenty libraries, and more than a

thousand mosques. Despite brief waves of religious fanaticism, the caliphate of Córdoba was remarkably

secular. For centuries, Muslims, Christians, and Jews lived in harmony under its rule. Such was the

atmosphere of liberalness, openmindedness, and tolerance, in fact, that the Muslims largely ignored the

Koranic prohibition against drinking. By the end of Arabic hegemony, Sherry was a well-established

beverage—one that scholars believe was decidedly present at the caliph’s table.

OLD AND RARE SHERRIES

As I’ve explained, traditionally, no style of Sherry has ever been vintage dated. That’s

because Sherry becomes Sherry by virtue of its slow movement through a solera (and

some styles, as I’ve said, move more slowly than others). Since there’s no way to know

how long any molecule spends in any one barrel within the solera, the exact age of a

Sherry remains a mystery. However, in 2000, Jerez’s Consejo Regulador instituted legal

age designations for four styles of Sherry—amontillado, oloroso, palo cortado, and Pedro

Ximénez. (The regulations don’t apply to manzanilla or fino because those styles move

comparatively quickly through their soleras.) The designations are VOS and VORS. To

achieve either of these designations, the wine must go through extensive sensory analysis

and be carbon-14 dated!

VOS—Latin for Vinum Optimum Signatum, or V ery Old Sherry—can be used on the

label of a Sherry that went through a solera that’s at least twenty years old, so the youngest

possible molecule in the resulting Sherry is also at least twenty years old.

VORS—Latin for Vinum Optimum Rare Signatum, or V ery Old Rare Sherry—can be

used on the label of a Sherry that went through a solera that’s at least thirty years old and

thus the wine itself is at least thirty years old. In fact, many prized Sherries are far older

than these designations suggest because they date from the time the individual solera for

that wine was set up—sometimes as much as one hundred years ago.

THE IMPORTANCE OF FRESHNESS

For manzanilla and fino—the two light-colored styles of Sherry that experience flor—

freshness is critical. Alas, in some restaurants and bars outside of Spain, it is not

uncommon to be served from a bottle that has been open for months, and as a result has an

almost rancid flavor.

In Jerez, an opened bottle of fino or manzanilla is served well chilled and kept no

longer than a single day. More typically, the bottle is finished with the meal, which is why

in Spain both types of Sherry are most often sold in half-bottles. By comparison,

amontillados, olorosos, palo cortados, and creams (all served at cool room temperature)

will last several months after the bottle has been opened, with only a slight diminution of

flavor. Immediate consumption is not as critical with these Sherries because they are less

fragile and slightly more oxidized to begin with. If they contain some Pedro Ximénez,

their sugar content will also act as a preservative.

Freshness is not, however, solely a question of how long you keep an open bottle. Both

fino and manzanilla begin to lose their zesty character six months after they leave the

solera. Clearly, this presents a problem. Since Sherry, by law, cannot carry a bottled-on or

drink-by date, there is no way of knowing whether any given bottle has been on the wine

shop shelf ten weeks or ten months. The solution is to buy only top Sherries and only from

the wine shops that are known to do a fairly good trade in Sherry and thus turn over their

stock often.

SERRANO OR SHRIMP?

In Jerez, there is not a more traditional pairing than a glass of bone-dry fino along with a small plate of

thinly sliced serrano ham or, better yet, jamón de Jabugo. It’s an unbeatable match. Until you consider

gambas al ajillo (garlic shrimp) and a glass of manzanilla, which together just might constitute the single

most satisfying appetizer/aperitif combination in the world. The salty, briny, olive-scented tang of a great

manzanilla is the perfect dramatic counterpoint to fresh shrimp that have been quickly sautéed in a pool

of ripe olive oil with a sprinkle of dried red chile and more garlic than you want to know.

THE FOODS OF SHERRY

Andalusia’s pulsating drama of bullfights and flamenco, of cathedrals and mosques, of

fino and fiestas, whispers the promise of good things to eat. This is, first and foremost, the

home of a huge, sensual, movable feast of seafood. Not the sort that is neat and tidy,

either. No, this is the roll-up-your-sleeves, peel-crack-and-pull-apart, eat-the-heads, eat-

the-tails, slurp-the-juice, lick-your-fingers sort of seafood eating.

The love affair with gutsy seafood occurs throughout the region, but it is especially

poignant in the seaside towns of Sanlúcar de Barrameda and Puerto de Santa María, where

the heady aroma of the ocean air puts everyone in the mood to eat fish. Sanlúcar is best

experienced first around twilight, when the approach of evening brings cool air and the

light over the sea fades to silver. The thing to do is eat platters of langoustines and drink

Sanlúcar’s famous manzanilla at a bar, such as Casa Bigote on the Bajo de Guía beach.

ONE AWFUL; THE OTHER, AWESOME—COOKING

“SHERRY” AND SHERRY VINEGAR

So-called cooking “sherry”

—the kind found in every supermarket in the United States—is not true Sherry

but rather cheap base wine that has been salted and then doctored to give it a baked, caramel flavor.

Wretched stuff, it does nothing for the flavor of a dish but it does, sadly, tarnish the image of Sherry.

Sherry vinegar is a whole other story. Expensive and exquisite, the best Sherry vinegars (like the best

balsamic vinegars) possess a complex, nutty, spicy, sweet flavor. With Sherry vinegar, this is the result of

having been made from Sherries painstakingly aged and concentrated in old soleras. Sherry vinegar

even has its own Spanish Denominación de Origen (DO) and must be made in the Jerez region of Spain.

Really good Sherry vinegar is labeled Reserva and must be aged at least two years. But the elixir to

absolutely get your hands on is called Gran Reserva Pedro Ximénez Sherry Vinegar. Aged at least ten

years and dark mahogany in color, these gran reserva vinegars have such an otherworldly taste and

velvety texture, they themselves are like drinking great old wine.

Later, go to Puerto de Santa María, where fishermen’s bars, open-air cafés/markets, and

tascas (taverns) are strung together as tightly as pearls along the waterfront roads of

Ribera del Marisco and Ribero del Río. The idea is to stroll from place to place, drinking

icy, fresh fino and eating a different assortment of fish at each: langostinos, gambas, and

cigalas (spiny lobsters, prawns, and crayfish, respectively); then boquerones (fried fresh

baby anchovies) and percebes (grotesque-looking gooseneck barnacles that are

remarkably delicious and virtually worshipped by Spanish seafood lovers); next, merluza

(ocean-sweet hake that is dipped in semolina flour and fried) and baby salmonetes (red

mullet); then calamares rellenos (stuffed squid with fresh mayonnaise); and, if you are

lucky, angulas (baby white eels, no longer than a matchstick, sautéed for mere seconds in

sizzling, garlic-strewn olive oil).

Between bites of seafood and sips of Sherry, you nibble spicy green olives that have

been gently cracked and then marinated in freshly pressed olive oil, garlic, and Sherry

vinegar.

Jerezanos begin their nightly culinary pilgrimage through the taverns around 10:00 P .M.,

and by midnight the seafood-and-Sherry feast is in full swing. Before 10:00 P .M. the streets

are as quiet as a convent. If bars and cafés offer such compelling food, you might imagine

the restaurants to be thrilling. Not exactly. Over centuries, the hot climate, the proximity to

the beach, the southern spirit of sensuality, and the open, relaxed lifestyle of the Jerezanos

all came together in a way that was more suited to the vitality and conviviality of cafés

and bars than to the formality of restaurants. Sherry country is its bars.

Eating in bars is different from eating in restaurants. Small dishes of many different

simple foods (tapas)—most of which can be picked up with the fingers and eaten standing

up—make more sense than full plates requiring correct utensils. Food historians suggest

that the custom of eating tapas, which can be found throughout Spain today, began in

Jerez.

BRANDY DE JEREZ

Spain makes more brandy than any other country in the world, and most of it is made in Jerez. Every

Jerez bodega that makes Sherry also makes brandy. All brandies, including Cognac, which is the type of

brandy made in the region of the same name in France, are spirits distilled from grapes. This

distinguishes them from, say, Scotch or vodka, which are distillates of grain.

Alembics, or pot stills, necessary for the process of distillation, were brought to Jerez in the early

Middle Ages by Muslim tribes as they began their conquest of the Iberian Peninsula. The Arabs used

alembics to distill fruit and plant essences for the making of medicines and perfumes. The Christians

soon adopted the Arabic technique, applying it to grapes in particular. The result was a white distillate

used first to fortify the local wine (the precursor of Sherry) and later to make a stronger beverage on its

own. From southern Spain, stills and the technique for making brandy spread northward to France and

ultimately to the rest of western Europe.

Like Sherry, top Jerez brandies are handcrafted, complex, and made in a solera (which is not true of

Cognac, Armagnac, or brandies made elsewhere in the world). Since the solera is made up of oak casks

that once held Sherry, brandy de Jerez takes on unique flavors that tend to be deep, rich, mellow, and

less acidic than other brandies. Moreover, brandy makers in Jerez use different types of used Sherry

barrels to steer the flavor of their brandies in different directions. The top brandy of González Byass,

Lepanto, is matured in fino and dry oloroso barrels, resulting in a subtly nuanced, dry brandy. Cardenal

Mendoza, from the bodega Sánchez Romate, uses sweet oloroso barrels, and the brandy that they

produce is correspondingly more honeyed and vanilla-like.

Brandy de Jerez must be aged a minimum of one and a half years in a solera. The top brandies,

however, far exceed this minimum and are aged in a solera ten to fifteen years. They are designated on

the bottle as Brandy de Jerez Solera Gran Reserva. As a group, Solera Gran Reserva brandies are

considerably less expensive than their cousins, the top Cognacs.

Among the most renowned gran reservas, in addition to the González Byass Lepanto and the

Sánchez Romate Cardenal Mendoza, are Carlos I by Pedro Domecq, Conde de Osborne by Osborne,

and Gran Duque d’Alba by Díez-Mérito.

As for restaurants, some of the best are ventas—casual places that began as inns for

travelers. In ventas and restaurants you can sometimes find special Andalusian dishes that

emerged from the mingling of Christian and Arab culinary traditions. Local roasted game,

such as duck, partridge, and quail, for example, might first be marinated in Sherry, then

seasoned and/or combined with spices and foods introduced by the Arabs: saffron, cumin,

coriander, almonds, honey, figs, dates, and raisins.

The precursor to gazpacho, one of the most famous Andalusian dishes, was most

probably the humble, Arabic-influenced cold soup ajo blanco (white garlic). For ajo

blanco, almonds (brought to Spain from Jordan by the Arabs) are pounded and puréed

together with garlic plus vinegar, bread, water, and olive oil. Centuries later, after

Columbus brought tomatoes back to Spain from the Americas, gazpacho would be made

using the same technique, with tomatoes in place of almonds.

Paper-thin slices of silky Jabugo ham, from black-hoofed Ibérico pigs, are Sherry’ s soul mate.

Soups, in general, are an important part of the cooking of southwest Spain, and they are

always accompanied by a glass of Sherry. Some of the most traditional include sopa de

almejas y piñones (soup made with black clams, garlic, and pine nuts), caldo de perro

gaditano (Cádiz-style fish soup with the juice of bitter oranges), and sopa de mariscos

(shellfish soup).

In Andalusia overall, and Jerez in particular, no eating establishment is without its

haunch of jamón. The finest Spanish jamón, like fine Italian prosciutto, is the result of a

long, painstaking process, during which the ham is rubbed with sea salt, then hung up to

“sweat,

” first in rooms with long vertical windows that allow mountain breezes to mature

and cure the ham, and later in underground cellars. Eventually the salt is washed off,

resulting in a ham that is sweet and almost silky smooth in the mouth. No chemicals are

involved. The entire, natural aging process can take up to eighteen months.

BULL’S MEAT

Toro, the meat of a bull raised for bullfighting, is an Andalusian culinary specialty. In particular, the

tenderloin, the tail, and the testicles are prized. Historically, the poor and uneducated believed that eating

the meat of an especially powerful bullfighting bull would imbue the eater with the bull’s strength,

courage, and virility.

Small slaughterhouses were built just outside bullrings where you could (and still can) buy such meat.

Toro is also sold in Andalusian markets, although this is usually the meat of bulls deemed too passive to

fight well. While the meat of a bull that has fought is more expensive, the meat of a nonfighter is

considered more tender, since the animal did not die under stress.

Spanish jamón comes from two different strains of pig—Ibérico and Landrace (the

white pig that generally provides the ham known as serrano). The black-hoofed Ibéricos,

thought to be related to a particular type of wild boar that once roamed the Iberian

Peninsula, have a somewhat more complex, sweet, nutty, and profound flavor than the

Landrace, thanks to their diet of wild roots, bulbs, corn, wheat, and especially acorns, on

which the animals gorge themselves. The most prized Ibéricos come from the village of

Jabugo, in the province of Huelva, just north of Sherry country. Many European

connoisseurs consider jamón de Jabugo the world’s ultimate cured ham, surpassing even

the finest prosciutto. In the best restaurants, taverns, and bars of Jerez, jamón de Jabugo is

sliced paper thin, fanned out on a plate, and eaten at room temperature. Purists accompany

it with one thing only: a glass of Sherry.

WHEN YOU VISIT… JEREZ

THE DARK, cathedral-like ambiance and the deep, incense-like smell of a Sherry

bodega must be experienced to be believed. Plus the majestic sight of thousands of

huge black barrels stacked up into soleras is nothing short of awe-inspiring. Be sure to

bring sunglasses. Emerging from the dark bodegas into the white-bright Sherry

sunshine is blinding.

SHERRY COUNTRY is full of great seafood bars—especially in the seaside cities of

Puerto de Santa María and Sanlúcar de Barrameda. Bring your appetite!

The Sherries to Know

The styles of Sherry are so varied that I’m convinced no one can not like at least one them. Speaking for myself, I

could spend days, weeks, months, in the cathedral-like bodegas of Jerez, just smelling what is one of the most

complex wines of the world. The Sherries below are listed from the driest and lightest to the sweetest and fullest.

HIDALGO

MANZANILLA | LA GITANA

100% Palomino fino

Hidalgo’s Manzanilla La Gitana (the gypsy) possesses a gossamerlike complexity that is evident every second you

drink it—from the layered aroma of green moss, green olives, bitter almonds, and vanilla to the crisp, sea-fresh

snap of minerally flavor to the wine’s shimmering, nutty, minty finish. Manzanillas simply do not get more

inspiring.

V ALDESPINO

FINO | INOCENTE

100% Palomino fino

A ballet dancer of a fino—twirling on the palate with effortless grace. The wine starts out with a mossy, almondy

aroma that draws you in with its elegance and complexity. Then the flavors emerge—waves of vanilla, almonds,

minerals, crisp apples, and something that seems uncannily like honey dipped in cream. There’s not a trace of the

bitterness sometimes apparent in other finos. Before it is moved through the solera, the base wine is fermented in

wood to give the flavors additional nuance. The V aldespino bodega is one of the oldest in Jerez and is still family

owned and operated. This is a single-vineyard fino, a rarity in Spain.

BARBADILLO

AMONTILLADO | VERY OLD RARE SHERRY

100% Palomino fino

This amontillado started its life as a manzanilla, and as a result, it’s an extremely elegant, pure, and aromatic

amontillado. The wine surges with sublime flavors of bitter orange, black pepper, cocoa, toasted hazelnuts, brioche,

and sea salt—indeed, it is so expressive and lively, it’s almost kinetic on the palate. Despite their light body and

refinement, amontillados have a dramatic character that comes from flor, and this Barbadillo is no exception. A

fantastic aperitif, it’s superbly long on the palate, and begging for some thin slices of sweet-salty jamón.

GONZÁLEZ BYASS

PALO CORTADO | APÓSTOLES | MUY VIEJO | VERY OLD RARE SHERRY

87% Palomino fino, 13% Pedro Ximénez

In 1862, with grapes specially pressed in honor of Spain’s Queen Isabel II, González Byass founded a solera known

as the Apóstoles. A century later, the solera was found among the more than 100,000 barrels in the bodega’s

cavernous cellars. And from that solera emerged a glorious elixir the color of burnt oranges, with a neon green tinge

at the edge. Only very small amounts of Apóstoles are bottled (in half-bottles) every year and the wine is wildly

seductive. Its flavors of roasted nuts, tangerine rind, brown butter, sea salt, crème brûlée, and caramel are so vivid

and concentrated, they have an almost gravitational pull on the taster. The texture is pure satin. Sherries such as

Apóstoles are primordial in their appeal, and no wine lover should miss them.

EMILIO LUSTAU

OLOROSO | EMPERATRIZ EUGENIA | SOLERA GRAN RESERVA |

VERY OLD RARE SHERRY

100% Palomino fino

The best olorosos are a tsunami of profoundly lush flavors, and the Emperatriz Eugenia is the perfect example.

Bone-dry and more nutty than any nut, the wine’s complex, elegant flavors range over the whole sensory landscape

of Sherry—from toffee and dates to dark chocolate, dark tobacco, and sea salt. The sheer depth of these flavors is

mesmerizing. There are, in fact, many stupendous olorosos made in Jerez, but I consistently find Emperatriz

Eugenia to be the most mind-blowing. The long, slow arc of sensation on the palate is not to be believed.

OSBORNE

PEDRO XIMÉNEZ | VENERABLE | VERY OLD RARE SHERRY

100% Pedro Ximénez

Here it is—the apotheosis of the PX style—as soft and hedonistic as velvet, with powerfully explosive flavors.

Drinking this super-charged wine is an otherworldly experience. Y ou almost feel as if the wine is consuming you,

rather than the other way around. The flavors of dark chocolate, raisins, café au lait, fig jam, and licorice swirl

around with abandon. In Jerez, it’s not unusual to find men smoking cigars and eating ice cream over which a great

Pedro Ximénez like this one has been (sacrilegiously) poured.

BODEGAS TORO ALBALÁ

PEDRO XIMÉNEZ | GRAN RESERVA

100% Pedro Ximénez

This wine, usually thought of as a Sherry, is actually from Montilla-Moriles, next door to Jerez and the source of

most of the great Pedro Ximénez wines. Drinking it can only be described as a surreal experience. Black-mahogany

in color, with greenish glints, it flows against the side of the glass like molasses or some wicked version of

Christmas pudding. The flavors are as savory as they are sweet—black figs, miso, café au lait, tobacco, and dark fat

raisins. Some Toro Albalá wines carry a vintage date (not allowed for Sherries, per se). Two Toro Albalás on the

market currently are the 1910 and the 1982 Toro Albalá PX called Ginés Liébana.

The Penèdes, on the outskirts of Barcelona, is where Spanish sparkling wine—cava—is born.

PENEDÈS

The Penedès wine region is in Catalonia, arguably the most dynamic province in Spain

and the epicenter of Spanish art, literature, philosophy, gastronomy, finance, and culture.

Catalonia is a province fervent about politics and religion; a province where everyone

speaks Catalan first, Spanish second; a province that cultivates creativity and genius. The

painters Joan Miró, Salvador Dalí, and Pablo Picasso were all Catalan—as was the

astoundingly avant-garde architect Antonio Gaudí, and the cellist Pablo Casals. The opera

singers Montserrat Caballé and José Carreras, who still enchant live audiences, are also

both Catalan. Catalonian artistry and exuberance is evident in the region’s wines as well.

The region is anchored by one of the most spirited cities of the Mediterranean—

Barcelona. Indeed, the vibrant gastronomy, culture, and nightlife of Barcelona spill over

into the Penedès, giving it an edge that many sleepy rural wine regions lack. Driving

southwest out of the city, you pass through several miles of ugly industrial sprawl, but

soon the sway of pine- and orchard-covered hills takes hold. Farther along, a patchwork

quilt of vineyards unfolds across the rolling landscape. From the warm coastal land, the

vineyards progress upward to higher and cooler elevations inland. Although relatively

modest in surface area, the Penedès spans two mountain chains and a valley, and thus has

a wide variety of climatic conditions and soil types.

The Penedès is only one of several Denominaciones de Origen within Catalonia, but it

continues to be, along with Priorat, one of the most important.

THE QUICK SIP ON THE PENEDÈS

THE PENEDÈS is best known for cava—Spanish sparkling wine made by the

traditional (Champagne) method. Cava has been produced here since the 1870s.

IN ADDITION TO CAVA, a wide variety of still wines are made in the Penedès; many

are simple wines made in a modern style.

THE PENEDÈS is a patchwork quilt of tradition and modernity. International grape

varieties such as cabernet sauvignon are grown side by side with native Spanish

varieties like macabeo and cariñena.

Winemaking in the Penedès has deep roots. Amphorae and Egyptian wine jars

uncovered at archaeological sites suggest that wine was introduced to Penedès by the

Phoenicians some seven centuries before Christ. For the past two and a half millennia, the

production of these still wines continued.

But when the very first cava (sparkling wine made in the same traditional manner as

Champagne) was produced here in 1872, the course of Penedès winemaking changed

forever. By the early part of the twentieth century, a handful of family bodegas had begun

to specialize in it. Today, cava is Penedès’s best-loved specialty, and there are just over

250 cava producers, including the two largest sparkling wine firms in the world, Freixenet

and Codorníu, both of which are known today for their well-priced, commercial versions.

During harvest each of these bodegas presses more than a thousand tons of grapes every

day. There are a handful of smaller producers as well, and the most distinctive, highest

quality cavas come from these. Among them—Gramona, Recaredo, Castellroig, Raventós

i Blanc, Mestres, and Bohigas. Ironically, the period during which cava was born was also

a golden age for Catalonian still wines. Between 1868 and 1886, Catalonia produced

nearly half of all the simple table wine in Spain. The best still wines were exported

throughout Europe and as far away as Latin America. But it was French misfortune that

catapulted Catalonian wines to their greatest recognition. As the vineyards of France were

ravaged by oidium, a parasitic fungus, and phylloxera, an insect that destroys vines by

attacking their roots, the production of Penedès and Rioja wines surged to accommodate

French thirst.

Codorniu, one of the large cava firms, was also the first to use chardonnay as part of the blend for its cavas.

The Penedès bodegas that specialize in still wines today are generally small and

focused on making inexpensive wines from both indigenous and international varieties.

The leading still wine firm, however, is not small at all—Torres, a family-owned company,

is one of the largest and most innovative in Spain. (More on Torres can be found under

Penedès Still Wines, page 482).

THE LAND, THE GRAPES, AND THE VINEYARDS

The Penedès region is set off by striking natural boundaries. To the north is the Montserrat

Massif, an awe-inspiring geological formation of mountains that, from a distance,

resemble the teeth of a saw. To the east and south is the Mediterranean Sea. The terrain

rises in a rugged, steplike fashion from warm coastal land (the Low Penedès) to cooler

high plateaus more than 2,600 feet (790 meters) above sea level (the High Penedès). A

great many different mesoclimates are wedged into this modestly sized area of some

64,000 acres (25,900 hectares).

THE GRAPES OF THE PENEDÈS

WHITES

CHARDONNAY: Increasingly used for cava, along with the native grapes listed below. Contributes

finesse and aroma. Also used for still wines.

MACABEO: Spelled macabeu in Catalan. Major grape for cava and still wines; contributes fruity flavors

and acidity. This is the grape known as viura in Rioja.

MUSCAT : Grown in small amounts and used for dry white wines that can be lovely and light, with

amazing fruity aromas. The leading type of muscat in the area is muscat blanc à petits grains.

PARELLADA: Major grape for cava and still wines; contributes delicacy and aroma. Considered to be

the key variety that contributes a sense of finesse to cava.

SUBIRAT PARENT : The Catalan name for the variety alarije, which originated in Extremadura, in

southwest Spain. Used in the DO Penedès and sometimes used in cava.

XAREL-LO: Major grape for cava and still wines; xarel-lo contributes body and acidity. Xarel-lo has a

resiny, citrus character that can be especially attractive in still wines.

REDS

CABERNET SAUVIGNON: Used alone and in blending to add depth, structure, complexity, and aging

potential.

CARIÑENA: Major grape of Spanish origin; in blends, contributes alcohol, body, and tannin. Known as

mazuelo in Rioja and as carignan in France.

GARNACHA: Spanish grape with minor importance in the Penedès. Contributes body and spiciness to

still wines and rosé cava. Known as grenache in France.

MERLOT : Minor grape generally used in blending to add depth, complexity, and aging potential.

MONASTRELL: Spanish grape of minor importance in the Penedès. Adds substantial body to still wines

and rosé cava. Known as mourvèdre in France.

PINOT NOIR: An important variety used in some cavas, although only a small amount is grown.

TREPAT : Indigenous red variety grown in small amounts to be used primarily in rosé cava.

ULL DE LLEBRE: Catalan for “eye of the hare,

” and the local name for tempranillo. A major grape, it

contributes finesse, acidity, and aging potential.

The Montserrat mountain range acts as an umbrella against harsh northern winds, and

the Mediterranean Sea warms and tempers the climate. The diverse geology means the soil

varies considerably. Much of it is sedimentary in nature, with considerable sand and clay.

Small deposits of limestone are scattered throughout the region.

The production of white wines far outweighs the production of red wines in the

Penedès, and sparkling wines greatly outnumber still wines. As a result, the three leading

grapes are the native white grapes parellada, macabeo, and xarel-lo. Increasingly,

chardonnay is also used for cava, either on its own or blended with the native varieties.

These four grape varieties are also blended together or used on their own to make white

still wines.

As for grapes used to make red and rosé wines, ull de llebre (the local Catalan name for

tempranillo, it translates as “eye of the hare”) and cariñena are the most important

traditional varieties—ull de llebre for its balance, good acidity, and aging potential;

cariñena for its alcohol, body, and tannin. Among international varieties, cabernet

sauvignon leads in importance. Again, all of these varieties are used together in blends as

well as on their own. Other red varieties used mostly for blending include the native

grapes garnacha (which the French call grenache) and monastrell (mourvèdre to the

French), and the international variety merlot.

CA V A

Cava was the brainchild of Don José Raventós, head of the bodega Codorníu, who

traveled throughout Europe during the 1860s selling red and white still wines, which the

firm had been making since 1551. On one such mission, Raventós found himself in

Champagne, where he was fascinated by the local sparkling wine. He returned to the

Penedès keen to attempt his own sparkler. Using imported Champagne equipment and the

three local white grapes still used in most cava today, Raventós produced Spain’s first

traditional method sparkler in 1872. The new wine was considered an intriguing triumph.

BILLIONS OF BUBBLES

More than 245 million bottles of cava are sold each year. While small bodegas may make fewer than

5,000 bottles a year, the two largest firms, Freixenet (FRESH-en-ette) and Codorníu (co-door-KNEW),

make far more—96 million bottles a year and 48 million bottles a year, respectively—and most of that is

every-night, inexpensive bubbly. This makes Freixenet and Codorníu the two largest sparkling wine

producers in the world. In addition to being rivals in Spain, the firms also compete in California.

Freixenet (the name derives from La Freixenada—

“grove of ash trees,

” the name of the family’s

thirteenth-century home estate) owns the sparkling wine maker Gloria Ferrer; Codorníu owns Artesa

Winery. Both California wineries are in the Carneros district, at the southern end of Napa and Sonoma.

Around this time, a small group of successful, forward-thinking winemaking families,

including the Raventós family, began meeting every Sunday after the ten o’clock Mass to

discuss wine and share information. From these gatherings, an ambitious notion began to

take shape. Why not convert all of the local still wines to sparkling and establish Penedès

as Spain’s Champagne region?

When cava was first produced, it was called champán or xampany. Penedès

winemakers, however, later decided that the sparkler was different enough from

Champagne to deserve its own name. They agreed on cava, Catalan for “cave” or “cellar.

”

The nascent Penedès sparkling wine industry had barely begun, however, before it was

ravaged by phylloxera in 1887. Luckily, several cava firms were able to survive until the

antidote to phylloxera—replanting European vines on American rootstock that can tolerate

the insect—was discovered. Today, by law, cava can be made in any of six wine regions;

however, 95 percent of all cava—and the best of it—is made in Penedès. Indeed, the heart

and soul of its production is the sleepy town of Sant Sadurní d’Anoia (in Catalan, or San

Sadurní de Noya in Spanish) about 27 miles (43 kilometers) southwest of Barcelona.

To be called cava, a Spanish sparkling wine must be made by the same process

employed in making Champagne, in which the secondary fermentation (which creates the

bubbles) takes place in each individual bottle (see page 181). (Lower-quality Spanish

sparkling wines are made by the tank or bulk process method and cannot be called cava.)

On each bottle of cava, you’ll find the term Método Tradicional, indicating that the wine

was made by the traditional (Champagne) method.

Less than 3 percent of all cava is rosé, but those rosés are exported and they can be

delicious. Rosé cava tends to be fuller-bodied than the white. The pink tinge may come

from the addition of pinot noir, garnacha, monastrell, or the local variety trepat.

Like Champagne, cava ranges in sweetness, and the residual sugar that defines each

category (brut nature, brut, extra dry, and so on) is the same as in Champagne (see How

Dry Is That Champagne?, page 182). With cava, the driest categories (especially brut

nature and brut) are the most popular styles.

Also like Champagne, a cava can be either a nonvintage or a vintage wine. In

nonvintage cava, the wines that constitute the blend may come from several different

years. In vintage cava, all of the wines in the blend come from the same year. Finally, the

terms reserva and gran reserva can be used on cava. Reserva indicates that the cava has

been aged on its yeast lees at least fifteen months. Gran Reserva means the wine spent at

least thirty months on the yeast lees.

Most cava today is riddled by gyropalette, though some small firms, such as Can Quetu, still use wooden racks and turn

the bottles by hand.

THE GYROPALETTE

In the early 1970s, Freixenet invented the gyropalette, sometimes called a girasol, Spanish for

“sunflower”

—a spherical steel frame that mimics rémuage, the process of gradually moving the sediment

down into the downturned neck of the wine bottle. For more than two centuries in the Champagne region,

rémuage was done by hand, bottle by bottle, a process that is extremely time-consuming and costly. A

typical gyropalette, by comparison, holds hundreds of bottles of sparkling wine, and the entire frame is

tilted and rotated incrementally by computer. Many studies have shown that gyropalettes are as effective

at moving the spent yeasts down into the neck as traditional rémuage. Gyropalettes are now widely used

throughout Spain, and in California and France.

Cava must, by law, be made from one or more of seven grape varieties: parellada,

xarello, macabeo, and chardonnay (the four most important); plus pinot noir; subirat, a

white variety that belongs to the ancient malvasia family of grapes; and the native variety

trepat, a high-acid red. The first three are the most common and are used in widely

varying proportions depending on the bodega, but rarely is one included to the exclusion

of the others. Xarel-lo contributes a generous, round body and good acidity and is

considered by many cava producers to be the grape that contributes the most personality to

cava. Macabeo is fruity and aromatic and also has good acidity. Parellada is the most

delicate of the three Spanish grapes, and is grown in the higher, cooler vineyards. When

chardonnay is added to these three varieties, the resulting cava often has more finesse. The

first cava to include chardonnay was Codorníu’s Anna de Codorníu, in 1981. Today, many

cavas include chardonnay, and several are made entirely from it.

PAN CON COMFORT

Nothing could be more different than the behavior of the Spanish drinking cava and the behavior of the

French drinking Champagne. Champagne is clearly a luxury sometimes accompanied by comparable

indulgences, like caviar. Cava, on the other hand, is comfort wine, the perfect way to begin a summer

evening, especially when the cava is accompanied by a humble appetizer like pan con tomate, the

Catalonian specialty of thick slices of warm grilled country bread, rubbed on both sides with the cut side

of a juicy, ripe tomato and then drizzled with extra virgin olive oil. Cava and pan con tomate is any-night

fare—no special occasion required. Price, of course, has something to do with this, but then cava is

nothing if not a steal.

Lastly, even though Champagne was the inspiration for cava, there is an important line

to be drawn between them. Cava does not hold the same “social standing” in Spain as

Champagne does in France. An everyman’s every-night beverage, cava is not necessarily a

celebratory wine, as Champagne has remained—at least for some wine drinkers (this

author excepted). I have been in restaurants in Barcelona where the waiter, without our

realizing it, brought bottle after bottle of cava and poured it freely, for no other reason than

we “looked thirsty.

”

WHO WOULDN’T W ANT TO BE THE BABY?

Since its beginnings at the turn of the twentieth century, cava has been readily consumed by the middle

classes. Barcelona has dozens of xampanyeria, wine bars specializing in Spanish sparklers. It is a

Catalonian family tradition to drive to Sant Sadurní on Saturdays for a picnic of cava and grilled lamb.

Bodegas sell locally raised lamb and rent outdoor stone fireplaces. Of course, the sparkler is also sipped

ceremoniously. At a baptism, everyone drinks cava, even the baby, whose pacifier is dipped in the bubbly.

Not to be left out (cava is a wine for everyone, after all), and possibly more important, other babies may be

given the same treat as a way of keeping them quiet in church.

It’ s hard to imagine a more simple but more satisfying appetizer than the Catalan specialty pan con tomate. Thick slices

of warm, grilled country bread are rubbed with fresh tomato (and sometimes garlic), then drizzled with Spanish extra

virgin olive oil. All kinds of wine work brilliantly with this humble dish, but I vote for cava.

In addition, there’s a vast difference in grapes used. The three main cava grapes have

unique flavors and aromas that are different from those of chardonnay and pinot noir.

Cava, moreover, is more often than not the product of all-white grapes, unlike most

Champagne, which is a marriage of white and red grapes. The number of separate still

wines blended to create cava is far smaller than the number of still wines in a Champagne

blend (which includes dozens, sometimes hundreds of base wines). Most nonvintage cava

is aged in contact with the yeasts for nine months, the legal minimum, while many

nonvintage Champagnes are aged at least fifteen months and usually far longer. Finally,

there is the critical issue of terroir. Climatically and geologically, Penedès and Champagne

have almost nothing in common. How conceivable is it that the two wines could mirror

each other in flavor?

All of this comes down to the fact that most cava tends to be fairly simple. Lemony,

earthy, and somewhat mushroomy, it’s fruitier and has less frothy foam than Champagne

or sparkling wine from California. But, like California sparklers, the best cavas have a

bright, citrusy streak of acidity running through them and are refreshing on the palate.

SOME OF THE BEST PRODUCERS OF CAVA

1 + 1 = 3 • Agustí T orelló Mata • Castellblanch • Cavas Hill • Chatel • Codorníu • D’Abbatis • Freixenet •

Huguet • Jaume Serra • Maria Casanovas • Miro • Mont Marçal • Paul Cheneau • Segura Viudas • Vilarnau

The Cavas to Know

Bubbles for a steal. Is there anything better? I love the way the Spanish view cava—as a weekly necessity; no big

deal. Here are some of my favorite cavas, all of them satisfyingly delicious.

WHITES

1 + 1 = 3

NONVINTAGE BRUT

Approximately 45% xarel-lo, 30% parellada, 25% macabeo

Like water bursting against a rock in a mountain stream, this cava has a vivacity and freshness that’s immediately

appealing. The wine is crisp and clean, with little of the earthy, mushroomy flavor that many traditional cavas

possess. Instead, the wine is creamy and appley—the wine version of fresh, homemade applesauce.

PAUL CHENEAU

LADY OF SPAIN | NONVINTAGE BRUT

Approximately 45% macabeo, 40% xarel-lo, 15% parellada

The bold yellow and red graphics on Lady of Spain evoke the kind of passionate patriotism Spaniards are known

for. The cava inside the bottle is equally bold—a refreshing splash of a wine that has the same kind of thirst-

quenching attack as cold ginger ale. I love the light pear and apple notes that give the wine a touch more dimension.

And don’t miss the Paul Cheneau Blanc de Blancs Reserva Brut, with its appley/yeasty character that is reminiscent

of a delicious Danish pastry.

HUGUET

GRAN RESERVA | VINTAGE BRUT NATURE

Approximately 56% parellada, 23% macabeo, 21% pinot noir

Complex is a word not often heard in relation to cava, but the Huguet cannot be described any other way. It

manages to be both breathtakingly dry, taut, and focused, and at the same time, creamy, generous, and supple. The

wine comes from parellada grapes grown in select vineyards above 1,200 feet (370 meters), and only when an

importer or wine shop orders the wine is it riddled to remove the yeasts and disgorged, thereby giving the wine as

much aging time in contact with the yeasts as possible.

AGUSTÍ TORELLÓ MATA

RESERVA | BRUT

Approximately 39% macabeo, 38% parellada, 23% xarel-lo

This is always one of my favorite cavas. Its strong citrus, ginger, and bitter notes are edgy and cleansing on the

palate—almost in the way a Campari cocktail would be. Two other Agustí Torelló Mata wines are also worth

seeking out: the Brut Rosat Trepat, a rosé cava made from the indigenous trepat grape (shimmering with strawberry

flavor), and the creamy, complex Kripta, one of the most remarkable cavas around, made from very old macabeo,

xarel-lo, and parellada vines.

SEGURA VIUDAS

ARIA | NONVINTAGE BRUT

Approximately 50% macabeo, 40% parellada, 10% xarel-lo

Made by the well known cava producer Segura Viudas, Aria is as alive, vibrant, and distinct as a saxophone solo.

The usual earthiness and sometimes heavy fruitiness of cava is nowhere in evidence. Instead, there’s a shower of

lemon, and the tart snap at the end could challenge a Granny Smith apple.

SEGURA VIUDAS

HEREDAD | RESERVA | NONVINTAGE BRUT

Approximately 67% macabeo, 33% parellada

The Earth Mother of cavas, the Segura Viudas Heredad (Spanish for “estate”) is the most satisfying example of the

creamy/earthy/spicy/almondy style of cava. The wine’s copious flavors reverberate in your mouth. Its texture is

both effervescent and silky. Heredad comes in what is surely the most expensive custom-made bottle in the

Penedès. Labeled with a pewter crest, it is anchored by a carved pewter base that acts as the bottle’s coaster.

PENEDÈS STILL WINES

As the cava industry began to take serious form, Penedès still wines continued to evolve.

The leading winery, Torres, was established in 1870. More than ever, this large (producing

3 million cases each year), family-owned dynasty epitomizes the maverick streak for

which Catalans are known.

Torres has experimental plantings of over 250 different non-Penedès varieties,

including roussanne, syrah, and chenin blanc from France; riesling and Müller-Thurgau

from Germany; nebbiolo from Italy; and zinfandel from the United States. In addition to

these, the winery has begun cultivating nearly extinct, ancient Catalan varieties that were

common pre-phylloxera. In 1970, when virtually all other Spanish whites were flat, soft,

and even partially oxidized from being made and aged in wood, Torres produced Viña Sol,

a snappy, aromatic, fresh white, made from 100 percent parellada, and the first white wine

in the country to be fermented in temperature-controlled, stainless-steel tanks. The winery

is also environmentally conscious. Having shunned pesticides nearly two decades ago,

they are today committed to reducing the winery’s CO2 emissions by 30 percent by 2020.

Torres went on to a number of other firsts, but their greatest achievement has always

been the bodega’s most prestigious wine, formerly called Gran Coronas Black Label (now

known as Mas La Plana), made from 100 percent cabernet sauvignon. In 1979, when that

wine (then a cabernet/tempranillo/monastrell blend) was slipped into a French blind

tasting and came out on top, over a field of renowned classified Bordeaux, Torres’s

reputation for quality was sealed. Today, under the leadership of the hard-driving Miguel

A. Torres, the family also owns wineries in Ribera del Duero and Rioja, as well as in

Chile, where they were one of the early European investors in the modern era. In 1997, the

ever-visionary bodega even established a joint venture in China, called Great Wall Torres.

And, of course, Torres has a California operation—Marimar Estate, a prominent small

winery in Sonoma, California, run by Marimar Torres, Miguel’s sister. Indeed, the

influential British magazine Decanter named Miguel the most influential Spanish

winegrower of all, and placed him second on the “Power List” of vintners worldwide.

The impulse to be avant-garde and the penchant for experimentation is not, however,

limited to such a large bodega as Torres. The far smaller bodega Jean León was the first to

plant and then produce chardonnay and cabernet sauvignon in the late 1960s. Cuttings for

the chardonnay came from the Corton-Charlemagne holdings of Louis Jadot, and the

cabernet came from Château Lafite-Rothschild. I pulled a bottle of 1977 Jean León

cabernet sauvignon from my cellar recently. It was thirty-five years old, and its aroma was

as sensual as an old Bordeaux; the rich cassis fruit was mesmerizing. The Penedès may be

best known for its every-night wines, but in the hands of a great producer, these still wines

can be almost shockingly good. Besides Torres and Jean León, there are many other

excellent small producers of still wines, including the single-estate (pago) Can Rafòls dels

Caus. The cava producer Segura Viudas also makes a very fine still Penedès wine called

Creu de Lavit.

Zarzuela (Spanish seafood stew) in a bar in Barcelona is pretty unbeatable.

THE FOODS OF THE PENEDÈS

Catalonian cuisine is the most complex and richly seasoned in Spain. The province’s

proximity to France, as well as Barcelona’s longstanding role as a pivotal Mediterranean

port, have given Catalonian food a depth, dimension, and sophistication not found in the

other, more provincial regions of Spain. Although it is sometimes suggested that

Catalonian cooking is similar to the cooking of Provence and various regions of Italy,

something closer to the reverse is true. During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, before

Spain financed the exploration of the Americas, the kingdom of Aragon, including what is

now Catalonia, ruled part of France as well as the kingdoms of Sicily and Naples. The

cuisine that flourished within these regions was a fertile mingling of Mediterranean ideas.

Early on, Catalonian cooking was infused with a certain worldliness.

If cooking can be thought of as the voice of a given land, then traditional Catalonian

cooking tells the story of sea coast, farmland, and mountains. The larder includes shellfish,

fish, lamb, wild game, veal, and pork, plus olive oil, garlic, tomatoes, onions, peppers,

saffron, herbs, almonds, hazelnuts, fruits, and wine. Intriguingly, seafood is often

combined with meat (spiny lobster and chicken in hazelnut sauce; baby squid stuffed with

pork in chocolate sauce) as is meat with fruit (baby goose baked with pears; rabbit with

quince and honey).

Four all-important sauces act as ties binding individual foods together. They are: alioli,

sofrito, picada, and romesco. These are not truly sauces in the classic sense, however, but

bold seasonings, unmasked by butter or cream. Alioli (or allioli in the Catalan spelling) is

a mayonnaise-like emulsion of garlic and olive oil used as a condiment; sofrito (sofregit in

Catalan), which is tomatoes and onion cooked in olive oil, is used as a flavor base; picada,

a paste of garlic, almonds, olive oil, and possibly parsley, chocolate, saffron, and

hazelnuts, is used as a seasoning and thickener; and romesco (samfaina in Catalan) is

made from finely chopped almonds or hazelnuts combined with dried sweet peppers and

tomatoes, and is used both as a base and as a sauce.

Though it is often dramatic, Catalonian food is never fussy. The best-loved traditional

dish of all is pan con tomate, called in Catalan pa amb tomàquet—bread with tomato—

grilled country bread rubbed with ripe tomato, then drizzled with olive oil and sprinkled

with salt. Pan con tomate, along with a few grilled fresh anchovies or slices of mountain

ham, often begins a meal.

Other Catalonian classics include: canalones, the Catalonian version of Italian

cannelloni, which are stuffed with ground pork, ground duck, spinach, veal, game, or fish;

zarzuela (sarsuela in Catalan), a full-blown stew of shellfish and seafood, rather like

bouillabaisse; bacalao (bacalla), dried salt cod that is made into many dishes, including

brandade (brandada), for which it is desalted and whipped with potatoes, olive oil, and

lots of garlic into a dish resembling mashed potatoes; and mar i mutanya, Catalan for “sea

and mountain,

” a homey ragout of fish and meat—sometimes chicken and prawns,

sometimes rabbit, monkfish, and snails.

A MUST VISIT: THE MONASTERY OF MONTSERRAT

Built into the jagged peaks of one of the most awesome mountain ranges in the world is the monastery of

Montserrat, poised like a guardian angel over the vineyards of the Penedès. Some say the mountains,

which are shaped more like cylinders than pyramids, resemble contorted human forms; others, the

ragged teeth of a saw. In fact, the words mont serrat in Catalan mean “sawtooth mountain.

” The monks

say the range was sawn by God.

The large Benedictine order living at Montserrat is devoted to preserving Catalonian culture—a

mission that endears them to the Catalans. (So much so that in tribute, thousands of Catalonian girls are

named Montserrat—Montse for short.)

In the past, Montserrat served as a political refuge. Under Franco’s rule, scholars, artists, politicians,

and students went there to meet in rooms that the monks rented out for a small fee. It was not unusual

for the military police to be waiting a few miles down the mountainside. The monks still rent rooms,

mostly now to poets in need of solitude or artists who want to paint.

The monastery includes a museum of Catalonian art and a 200,000-volume library of rare manuscripts

and engravings. There is also Montserrat’s music school, Escolania, which dates from the thirteenth

century, making it one of the oldest music schools in Europe. The fifty choir boys, who live and study with

the monks, sing daily for visitors.

It is said that no Catalonian couple is ever truly married until they have come together to Montserrat,

so the monastery is always full of wedding parties. On Sundays, these parties often break into the

sardana, a gentle, rhythmic Catalonian round dance thought to be of Greek origin. Although it starts off

as a small group of people holding hands, within minutes, the sardana is being danced by hundreds of

people as everyone around joins in.

The monastery is dedicated to La Moreneta,

“the little dark one”

—a sculpted black Virgin dating from

the twelfth century.

And for dessert, there is crema catalana, the Catalonian version of the French dessert

crème brûlée, a rich, creamy custard with a sheet of caramelized sugar on top. Catalans

would wince to hear crema catalana thus described. The French dessert, they say, was

inspired by theirs, not the other way around. Several food historians agree.

Lastly, and this may be the biggest statement of all regarding Catalonian gastronomy:

Catalonia is where the modern world’s most famous restaurant, El Bulli, was once to be

found. A small, seaside restaurant on a bay on Catalonia’s Costa Brava, El Bulli advanced

the art and science of gastronomy perhaps more than any other restaurant in the past half

century. Its founder, chef Ferran Adrià, has been described in the New York Times as “the

most imaginative generator of haute cuisine on the planet.

” Although El Bulli closed in

2011, food lovers the world over are holding their collective breath, awaiting Adrià’s next

step behind a restaurant stove.

The fishing village of San Gregorio de Raxó in Rías Baixas. The region’ s thriving coastal towns (and their taverns, cafés,

and restaurants) underlie the question: Which came first—food or wine? Chicken or egg?

WHEN YOU VISIT… THE PENEDÈS

THE CAVA GIANTS, Freixenet and Codorníu, offer sophisticated educational tours in

several languages, and Codorníu also has a striking wine museum. By comparison, at

a small cava bodega, visitors are generally taken around by the owner/winemaker, and

appointments must be made in advance. At small bodegas, it helps to speak Spanish.

BARCELONA is less than an hour’s drive from the Penedès wine region, and boasts

some fantastic wine bars. Three of the best are Monvínic, Vila Viniteca, and La Vinya

del Senyor.

RÍAS BAIXAS

When the small white wine region of Rías Baixas (RE-ez BUY -shez), in far northwestern

Spain, came to prominence in the 1990s, a new era in Spanish white wine history was

born. With the exception of Sherry, which is fortified, and cava, which is sparkling, the

Spanish wines that have commanded world attention have almost exclusively been red—

not white.

By the late 1980s and early 1990s, however, modern technology, including the use of

temperature-controlled stainless-steel tanks, could be found in virtually all of the top

wineries making white wine in Spain. Quality skyrocketed. Leading the way were the

wines of Rías Baixas, a remote wine region poised on the Atlantic just above Portugal, in

the southern part of the province of Galicia. Here, white grapes had been grown for

centuries. But it wasn’t until the technological revolution that the wines of Rías Baixas

began to be considered among the best white wines in Spain.

Rías Baixas takes its name from the Galician rías, which are sharp, fjordlike estuaries

that slice like cobalt swords into the baixas, or lower part of southern Galicia. This is one

of the world’s most breathtaking wine regions, and definitely one of the most unusual

looking in Spain. It would be easy to think you were in Ireland or Wales—until you take

note of the eucalyptus forests that cover the steep hills and deep ravines. Wild scarlet roses

grow out of ancient Roman stone walls. Orange trees dance in the breeze. The

mountainous air is pristine; the sun is like a scoop of lemon sorbet moving in and out of

the thick, coastal clouds. To find vineyards in the middle of this feels as though you’ve

just uncovered a secret no one else knows.

The best Rías Baixas wines are made principally from the white albariño grape. In fact,

albariño, not Rías Baixas, is the name by which the wines are commonly known and

labeled. This is in complete contrast to other Spanish wine regions, where wines are

typically referred to by region (Rioja), not according to the grape planted (tempranillo).

Albariño has a unique flavor profile. Not as zaftig as chardonnay, nor as minerally as

riesling, nor as wild and herbal as sauvignon blanc, its flavors range from zingy citrus-

peach to almond-honeysuckle. In texture, albariños are beautifully poised between light

creaminess and crisp zestiness. Indeed, because most albariños are neither fermented nor

aged in wood, the best of them are as light as gossamer on the palate.

Albariño grapes ripen in the beautiful sunlight of Rías Baixas. Albariño is among Spain’ s top grapes.

THE QUICK SIP ON RÍAS BAIXAS

MANY OF SPAIN’S most exciting whites are produced in this tiny northwest wine

region.

THE BEST RÍAS BAIXAS WHITES are made from the albariño grape. The word

albariño appears on every bottle. By comparison, most other Spanish wines are

referred to by their geographic region rather than by grape variety.

ALBARIÑO IS A RACY , refreshing wine considered one of the best matches in the

world for seafood. It’s meant to be drunk young.

An ancient grape, albariño originated in northeastern Portugal and subsequently moved

over the border to Galicia. (It is still grown in Portugal, where it is one of the grapes that is

made into the Portuguese wine known as vinho verde.) Perhaps because it is so highly

thought of, albariño inspired many folkloric tales before DNA-typing established it as

having originated in Portugal. In one of these, it was brought from the Rhine, in Germany,

in the twelfth century by Cistercian monks on their long pilgrimages to the tomb of the

apostle James in the holy city of Santiago de Compostela, in far western Spain. (During

the Middle Ages, it was thought that that was where the world ended.)

Galicia’s ancient Celtic heritage is apparent in its music. The traditional local

instrument is a gaita, similar in appearance and sound to a Scottish bagpipe.

Interestingly, although albariño and its local cousins were planted in Galicia for

centuries (and some two-hundred-year-old albariño vines still exist there), the wines made

from albariño were never more than humble quaffs. The Galegos—provincial, poor

fishermen that they were—spent very little money on making their wine. Because they

drank every drop, there was never any commercial impetus to improve it. At the bodega

Santiago Ruiz, for example, the old wooden presses and primitive winemaking tools now

displayed in the bodega’s museum look as though they were used more than a century ago.

They were. And they were still being used up until the 1980s.

THE GRAPES OF RÍAS BAIXAS

Rías Baixas is known exclusively for white wines.

ALBARIÑO: Major grape. Aromatic and flavorful, with a crisp/creamy texture.

LOUREIRA: Minor grape. Sometimes blended with albariño to add aroma.

TREIXADURA: Minor grape. Sometimes blended with albariño to add palate weight and aroma.

Other modern winemaking techniques also came late here, long after such practices had

been established for decades in parts of Europe and in the United States. It was not until

the late 1970s that self-taught Galego winemakers employed processes as fundamental as

settling and racking (allowing microscopic solids like yeasts and bits of grape skin to

settle to the bottom of barrels, then pouring the clear wine on top into fresh, clean barrels).

Statistics portray the radical turnaround best of all. When I first went to Rías Baixas in

1986, there were five commercial wineries. Just two years later, there were eighty-eight.

And by 2011, there were just over 180 bodegas, and more than 6,500 grape growers (each

of whom farms, on average, less than half an acre of vines).

THE GALEGOS

Rías Baixas is in the province of Galicia, which in numerous ways seems a world apart from Spain. The

Galegos, as the people of Galicia are called, drink more wine and eat more seafood than any other

Spaniards. They are hardworking, rural people of Celtic origin who, until the recent building of modern

transportation routes, were geographically isolated from the rest of the country.

Like the Basques and the Catalans, the Galegos reinforced their separation and individuality by

speaking their own distinct language, Galician. A Celtic-sounding quasi-marriage of Spanish and

Portuguese, Galician is an officially recognized language in the province and is taught, along with

Spanish, in the schools.

The exhilarating boom has been driven by an emerging class of wealthy, well-educated

Galegos with a profound sense of regional pride. Throughout the past two decades, small

consortiums of lawyers, doctors, and businessmen have formed, buying and replanting

family vineyards, building small state-of-the-art wineries, investing in modern equipment,

and most important, hiring young, well-trained enologists from Europe’s enology schools.

THE BEST SEASIDE TA VERN IN SPAIN

After countless pilgrimages (what else can they be called?) to the world’s wine regions, I keep coming

back to a final, ineluctable truth: The most blissful experiences with food and wine are utterly simple.

They are experiences so pure they leave you helpless, speechless, and nearly mindless with joy—

capable only of licking your fingers.

Restaurante Xeito, a humble tavern across the road from the sea in the village of Pontevedra, in the

southernmost corner of Galicia, may be the best seaside tavern in Spain. The word xeito refers to the

local art of fishing for sardines. And, as could only be true in a place where fish are revered, the word

also means beauty or charm.

You walk through the bar to a small back room with no-nonsense red tablecloths, heavy wooden

chairs, and Spanish ceramics on the walls. Nothing about the place prepares you for the fact that this is

unquestionably one of the greatest seafood restaurants in Spain.

Over the years, the chefs here have been mostly women. And they have all followed a similar routine,

each morning walking across the street to the sea and buying the day’s fish directly off boats that have

just returned with their catch.

If you like (and most people do), the chef will ask how hungry you are and then proceed to cook for

you as though you were sitting at her kitchen table. She might begin by making miniature croquetas de

bueyes de mar (sweet, creamy crab croquettes) or pimientos del piquillo rellenos (peppers stuffed with

wild mushrooms, prawns, and salmon). Next might come a huge langosta—spiny lobster—with sweet,

juicy, snow-white meat, followed by lenguado a la plancha, a pristine fresh sole broiled with a touch of

ripe olive oil. Each fish is simply cooked and served. There are no adornments, no garnishes, and no

sauces—just waves of oceanic flavor, so pure you could faint.

THE LAND, THE GRAPES, AND THE VINEYARDS

The western coast of Galicia is a wet place. Rainfall is heavy, some 45 to 65 inches (114 to

165 centimeters) each year. Y et, critically, the rains usually occur in winter, when the vines

are dormant, not during early fall, around harvest. Still, moisture is a problem that can lead

to mildew, mold, and fungal diseases. Luckily, albariño, with its small, thick-skinned

berries, is not highly susceptible to moisture-induced disease. Additionally, many of the

older vineyards are still trained high up on parras. These are canopies of support wires

attached to 8- to 10-foot-high (2.4- to 3-meter high) granite columns. At harvest, tractors

run under the parras, and pickers, working from stepladders, pick grapes that are over

their heads. Lifted far above the land in this manner, not only are the grapes less affected

by ground moisture but the increased air circulation also helps keep them dry. Dew and

moisture notwithstanding, the presence of the ocean nearby is a positive force (as it is in

Bordeaux), mitigating wide swings in temperature and otherwise extreme climatic

conditions.

A man plays the gaita, the traditional Galician guitar , outside the majestic cathedral of Santiago de Compostela.

Although it is a tiny Denominación de Origen, comprising just over 9,000 acres (3,600

hectares), Rías Baixas is spread over five noncontiguous areas. The northernmost zones

are Ribeira de Ulla and V al do Salnés; the most inland and more mountainous zone is

Condado de Tea; Soutomaior is the tiniest; and O Rosal, named for the roses that grow

everywhere, is just over the border from Portugal. Each zone has its share of very good

wines and top producers. The best vineyards have well-draining sandy/granitic soil, some

of which has clay and limestone mixed in. They are planted on southwest-facing slopes to

ensure the maximum number of hours of sun for ripening.

A promontory of coastline at A Coruña, Galicia, on the Atlantic Ocean, right before a storm. Many vineyard owners in

Galicia come from families of fishermen.

Because it is a difficult grape to grow and is naturally low-yielding, albariño is one of

the most expensive white grapes in Spain. As a result, the wines are never outright steals,

but neither are they as pricey as, say, most well-known French whites. As for personality,

albariño has a lot. Beautifully aromatic, it’s a potpourri of citrus, lime, vanilla, peach,

honey, and kiwi smells. (Interestingly, there are many kiwi orchards in Rías Baixas;

indeed, kiwi was a major crop here until orchards were supplanted by vineyards.) The

irresistible flavors range from almond and citrus to spice and quince. To underscore the

freshness of these flavors, winemakers handle the grapes as little as possible. And

because, historically, albariños were rarely barrel fermented, the flavors were dependably

pure and vibrant. That said, several producers are now experimenting with barrel

fermentation, hoping to make a fuller-bodied, oaky style. The results—literally and

philosophically—have been mixed. Once, while visiting a tiny bodega in Rías Baixas, I

noticed a life-size statue of the Virgin Mary in the corner. The statue was blindfolded.

“What’s with the Virgin?” I asked the winemaker.

“Ah,

” she said, gesturing to some

brand-new barrels on the other side of the room.

“I’m sure the Holy Mother would not

approve of those.

”

Virtually all Rías Baixas bodegas make only one albariño. Such categories as reserva

or gran reserva do not exist. There are a few plantings of red grapes in Rías Baixas, but no

superior red wines have been made.

SOME OF THE BEST PRODUCERS OF ALBARIÑO

Adegas Gran Vinum • As Laxas • Fillaboa • Lagar de Cervera • Lusco do Miño • Mar de Frades • Morgadío

• Pazo de Señorans • Pazo San Mauro • Pazo Serantellos • Salnesur • Salneval • Santiago Ruiz • T erras

Gauda • Vilariño-Cambados • Vionta

THE FOODS OF RÍAS BAIXAS

Seafood lovers go mad in Rías Baixas—in fact, anywhere in Galicia—for this is the single

greatest seafood region in a country legendary for its fish. In the north, along the

Cantabrian coast, and in the west, along the Atlantic coast, Galicia is splintered by deep

estuaries (the Rías Altas and Rías Baixas, respectively). These fjordlike channels act as

enormous funnels for fish. The seafood catch in Galicia is one of the largest in Europe.

Shellfish is pristine and dizzying in its variety: scallops, mussels, prawns, shrimp,

lobster, crayfish, crabs, clams, spiny lobster, sea snails, oysters, cockles, barnacles, and

more. Galicia is also famous for one of the ugliest and most delicious seafoods

imaginable: percebes. Gooseneck gray barnacles the size of a man’s thumb, percebes are

harvested by divers who, wearing protective helmets, lower themselves into the crashing

waves off the treacherous cliffs of Costa de la Muerte,

“Death’s Coast.

” Each year several

divers die in their pursuit of percebes. The barnacle is, needless to say, expensive.

Grilled pulpo (octopus), sweet and tender, is another Galician specialty. On Sundays

after church, the bars and tavernas are full of families eating pulpo drizzled with emerald

olive oil and served with wondrously crusty country bread. Glasses of chilled albariño are

found on every table.

For centuries, the Galegos have been renowned as particularly fearless fishermen who

not only fish the rías but also venture far out into the ocean. Thus, the seafood

kaleidoscope here also includes deep-sea fish, such as cod, hake, sardines, turbot, sole, and

angler.

A BLESSED MARRIAGE

It hardly seems coincidental that Galicia, renowned in all of Europe for the abundance and variety of its

seafood, would specialize in a wine considered one of the most compatible in the world with seafood, as

albariño is. The wine’s capacity to seem both crisp and creamy at the same time, plus its pure, clean

flavors reminiscent of quince, almonds, ginger, and lemons make it a stunning partner for all sorts of

simply prepared seafood dishes. But if there’s one type of seafood made just for albariño, it’s scallops.

The sweet purity of scallops, often overwhelmed by other whites, is perfectly underscored by Spain’s

most famous white wine. In Galicia itself, scallops have been treasured for centuries. For more than a

thousand years, the travelers who have walked across northern Spain on religious pilgrimages to the

tomb of the apostle James in Galicia’s Santiago de Compostela have taken the scallop shell as their

religious symbol. The stone walls of Santiago’s stunning cathedral are covered with carved scallop

shells, and during the Middle Ages, the millions who made the pilgrimage each year decorated their

cloaks and hats with badges in the shape of scallop shells.

Rías Baixas has some of the best and freshest seafood in Europe. Every fishing village boasts seaside taverns where

platters of seafood and bottles of albariño are on every table, no exception.

Fresh seafood lends itself to utterly simple cooking techniques. Over time, the

simplicity afforded seafood came to define virtually every aspect of Galician cooking. The

most complex Galician specialty, empanadas, is not particularly complicated at all.

Empanadas are double-crusted pies usually filled with scallops, eel, potatoes, sardines,

tuna, or pork. The filling is sautéed in olive oil with peppers, tomatoes, onions, and garlic.

The crust is made from wheat flour or cornmeal. Empanadas are served in the humblest

bars as well as in Galicia’s best restaurants.

Finally, Galician cookery is also influenced by the region’s Celtic roots. The potato is

revered. In caldo gallego, the region’s most famous peasant stew, potatoes are combined

with kale, beans, pieces of pork (ear and tail), spicy sausage, and sometimes veal and

chicken. Every Galician loves his or her mother’s caldo gallego.

WHEN YOU VISIT… RÍAS BAIXAS

FOR ANYONE WHO LOVES history or architecture, it would be a big mistake to visit

Rías Baixas without spending time in the cathedral of Santiago de Compostela, one of

the most majestic cathedrals of Europe.

AS FOR THE BODEGAS, most are small, and it’s possible to visit several in a day, but

appointments are necessary. Chances are you will be shown around by the owner or

winemaker. It helps to speak some Spanish.

The Rías Baixas Wines to Know

The cool maritime region of Rías Baixas along Spain’s green, northwestern coastline specializes in just one wine.

And it happens to be one of Europe’s best wines for fresh seafood: albariño. The albariños below are all crisp, pure,

bold wines that evoke the intensity of the Atlantic Ocean.

PAZO SERANTELLOS

ALBARIÑO

100% albariño

This estate (the term pazo, in Galician, designates a manor house, usually with a chapel, a granary, and a dovecote)

makes albariños with an exotic flair. Lively tangerine and peach aromas waft out of the glass along with scents of

tropical flowers. The flavors evoke mangoes and all sorts of citrus. The freshness here is unmistakable, and just the

ticket for seafood dishes.

SALNEV AL

ALBARIÑO

100% albariño

Counterintuitively, albariño can be creamy and crisp at the same time (this is one of its assets in pairing with food).

Salneval’s albariño demonstrates this delicious textural duplicity. In addition, the fruit flavors here soar across the

palate as if on a beam of light. And the hint of marmalade bitterness on the end gives the wine a terrific edginess.

LUSCO DO MINO

ALBARIÑO

100% albariño

With albariño, purity and intensity of flavor is everything. Lusco (the word means “twilight” in Galician) possesses

both. The wine’s gorgeously concentrated quince, ginger, Asian pear, almond, and orange marmalade flavors are

light but bold at the same time. And bright, focused acidity helps make Lusco irresistible. Best of all, there’s an

elegance and creaminess here that elevate this albariño to top rank.

AS LAXAS

ALBARIÑO | LAXAS

100% albariño

Lightly etched and yet deeply profound in flavor, the Laxas albariño is often one of the most full-bodied in Rías

Baixas. The wine smells intriguingly of cream laced with lemon, and the feel on the palate is very much like the

folds of whipped cream. Y et Laxas always has a definitive spiciness and minerally/saline snappiness (perhaps the

result of the bodega’s location near the Miño River). It’s this final jolt that makes the wine such a great counterpoint

to shellfish cooked in garlic and olive oil, as well as Galicia’s other culinary treasures.

PAZO SAN MAURO

ALBARIÑO

100% albariño

In an almost Dolly Parton–like fashion, the Pazo San Mauro is tight and fleshy at the same time. In good years, the

wine virtually bursts forward with seductive, lush vanilla-ness, yet it is so refreshing, crisp, and focused that the

flavors seem magnified. The vineyard, which dates from 1591, rests on small, rolling hills along a tiny tributary of

the Miño River. On the other side of the river is Portugal. For centuries, the Portuguese and Galegos have fought

over the vineyard.

ADEGAS GRAN VINUM

ALBARIÑO | ESENCIA DIVIÑA

100% albariño

The best citrus marmalade never tasted as much like citrus marmalade as Esencia Diviña (Divine Essence) does.

Highly aromatic (tangerines, peaches, mangoes), the wine has marmalade’s snappy bittersweetness, and yet it’s

completely dry. At the same time, there’s a light, creamy, lemon-meringue-pie texture here that’s awesome.

FILLABOA

ALBARIÑO

100% albariño

Everything about Fillaboa (“good daughter” in Galician) has energy, from the zesty aromas of lime and fresh apples

to the tight, high-strung minerally flavors. Lots of wines are crisp, of course, but Fillaboa has a piercing sort of

crispness that’s underscored by notes of ginger ale, grapefruit, quince, and citrus.

The Carthusian monastery Scala Dei (“God’ s Stairway”) built in Priorat in 1163 on the spot of a miraculous vision.

PRIORAT

Usually known by its Catalan name, Priorat (rather than the Spanish Priorato), Priorat is a

tiny, isolated wine region just inland from Tarragona in Catalonia, on the Mediterranean

coast. Barely heard of in the early part of the 1990s, the region emerged on the

international scene in the latter part of that decade with a handful of exciting and highly

sought-after wines, some of which upstaged even the most prestigious Riojas by costing

four times as much. Priorat boasts the top classification: DOCa (Denominación de Origen

Calificada, or “Qualified Denomination of Origin”).

Priorat is what I like to call a “new old” wine region. Vines grew here for centuries

before the ancient Romans arrived to mine lead and silver. But in the 1800s, the region

was progressively abandoned. In the wake of phylloxera, it barely recovered. By the

1970s, the population had dwindled so much that the inhabitants in many villages were

mostly the elderly. However, now Priorat has been reborn.

The region acquired its name during the Middle Ages when, as the story goes, a

villager had a vision of angels ascending and descending a stairway to heaven. (So much

for Led Zeppelin…) As a result, in 1163, Alfonso II of Aragón founded a Carthusian

monastery on the spot. The monastery became known as Scala Dei (“God’s stairway”),

and given the important presence of the monks, the region was called Priorato, from the

Spanish word for priory. Today, although the monastery has been long abandoned, the

little hamlet nearby is still known as Scala Dei, and one of the region’s bodegas, Cellers de

Scala Dei, operates in some of the old buildings that once belonged to the monastery. The

wines from Cellers de Scala Dei have improved greatly in the past decade, and their wine

called Cartoixa (the word means “charterhouse” in Catalan and is another name for a

Carthusian monastery) is now one of the best in the region.

THE QUICK SIP ON PRIORAT

THE BEST WINES OF PRIORAT are all red. Low-yielding old vines produce dense,

inky wines that are some of the most powerful in Spain.

PRIORAT’S TWO NATIVE red grapes, garnacha and cariñena (known in France as

grenache and carignan, respectively), are the region’s main grapes and make intense,

ageworthy wines.

PRIORAT’S RUGGED, mountainous terrain includes a distinctive stony, black slate soil.

The region’s most famous wines are all red and, when they are top notch, they are some

of the most intense, inky, and powerful red wines in Spain. Massively structured, with

considerable tannin that makes them ageworthy, they have thick, soft textures and are

loaded with ripe blackberry fruit, dense chocolate, lively licorice, and mineral/rock

flavors. The wines’ concentration is a result of painfully low-yielding old vines

(sometimes more than a century old), which protrude, gnarled and contorted, from the

poor, stony, slate-laced soil called llicorella (“licorice”) because of its blackish color. Days

here are intensely hot; nights, very cool. In this dry, infertile, unforgiving landscape, few

crops other than grapevines and olive trees have ever survived.

And perhaps for that reason, site and vintage are very important in Priorat. From a poor

site or in an extremely hot vintage (or just when poor winemaking is at work), the wines

can be aggressive and severe, with bite-your-head-off tannin and volatile acidity.

Like many vines in Priorat, those of Mas Doix are 75 to 100 years old.

The 4,700 acres (1,900 hectares) of vineyards are scattered over a valley and up slopes

more than 3,000 feet (900 meters) in elevation. Since much of the terrain is mountainous,

many of these old vineyards are planted on terraces built centuries ago. Although the slate

slopes are slippery and the heat in summer can be blistering, the vineyards are still worked

by hand, with only mules and horses for assistance. Tractors haven’t been invented that

could negotiate such vineyards as these.

Priorat’s wines are based primarily on two native red grapes, garnacha and cariñena

(known in France as grenache and carignan, respectively). With the notable exceptions of

Châteauneuf-du-Pape and the rest of the southern Rhône in the Old World, and Australia

in the New World, garnacha and cariñena achieve their greatest heights in their homeland,

Spain. Not surprisingly, in Priorat they have excelled for more than a century. Garnacha

from the best vineyards here makes complex, luscious wines. For their part, the best

cariñena vineyards result in wines with a sexy, sweaty, earthy quality that is undeniably

appealing. In addition to these two varieties, some wines also contain smaller amounts of

cabernet sauvignon, merlot, syrah, and tempranillo.

The ancient village of Vilella Baixa is perched on cliffs above the point where the Montsant River meets the stream of

Scala Dei. The houses in the village are 7 or 8 stories high, with the main door on the 4th or 5th floor . All around the

town are old hillside vineyards.

Unlike the wines of Rioja or Ribera del Duero, the wines of Priorat are not categorized

according to the hierarchy of crianza, reserva, and gran reserva. Nor, with few

exceptions, are they ever aged in American oak (French oak is preferred). France has also

inspired many of the wines’ names. Clos Mogador, Clos de l’Obac, Clos Erasmus, and

Clos Martinet all borrow the French concept of a clos, or a small, defined vineyard where,

by inference, special high-quality wines are made. Most, but not all of the wine is dry;

several Priorat bodegas also make sweet, fortified red wines called vis dolçes (Catalan for

“sweet wines”). These sweet bombs, with their syrupy texture and flavors of chocolate-

covered cherries, can be simply extraordinary and are priced accordingly.

Until the 1990s there were very few independent bodegas in Priorat. Because the

vineyards were difficult to work and the region was isolated and poor, most vineyards

were just small plots tended by farmers who worked the difficult ground by hand, usually

with the sole help of a donkey. The farmers sold their grapes to the local cooperatives, and

the cooperatives, in turn, made high-octane, rustic reds that were short on finesse.

Then, quietly, beginning in the early 1990s, a few ambitious growers as well as

visionary winemakers decided that the region’s potential for producing truly fine wine was

just too great to ignore. Among the first pioneering bodegas to be founded were Costers

del Siurana, Clos Mogador, Clos Martinet, Clos Erasmus, and Alvaro Palacios, the latter

two of which, in particular, have built stellar global reputations for their complex,

ageworthy, expensive wines. Clos Erasmus (owned by self-taught winemaker Daphne

Glorian) makes profoundly spellbinding, rich wines that dance and move on the palate in

waves of flavor. The wine is one of the most extraordinary expressions of garnacha

anywhere. From Alvaro Palacios come two of the leading collector’s wines from Priorat:

the hugely concentrated and lush L’Ermita, made from 100 percent garnacha, and its

(theoretically) less powerful little brother, Finca Dofí, although Finca Dofí, a blend of

garnacha, cabernet sauvignon, syrah, and merlot, is massive and complex itself. The

arrival of these pioneers—with their skill, energy, and ambition—turned Priorat

completely around. One statistic sums up the story. According to the Priorat Consejo

Regulador, between the mid-1980s and the mid-1990s, the price of a donkey rose 10,000

percent.

THE GRAPES OF PRIORAT

Priorat is home to red grapes almost exclusively, although some garnacha blanca is grown.

CABERNET SAUVIGNON: Used as an important blending grape, although usually in small amounts, in

wines based primarily on cariñena and garnacha. Contributes structure.

CARIÑENA: A native Spanish grape and one of the two major grapes in Priorat, the other being

garnacha, with which cariñena is blended. From the best vineyards and the oldest vines, it contributes

intensity, depth, and concentrated fruit flavors. Known as mazuelo in Rioja, and as carignan in France.

GARNACHA: Along with cariñena, with which it is usually blended, one of the two major red grapes in

the region. Contributes richness, juiciness, body, and density. Although it is a native Spanish grape,

garnacha is better known in France, where it is called grenache. The white mutation of the grape,

garnacha blanca, makes some straightforward white wines that are produced in very small amounts.

MERLOT : A minor grape used as part of the blend in wines based on cariñena and garnacha. Adds

structure and roundness.

SYRAH: Like merlot, a minor grape used as part of the blend in wines based primarily on cariñena and

garnacha. Adds depth and earthiness.

TEMPRANILLO: A minor grape used for blending. Contributes aroma and acidity.

Today, Priorat boasts more than ninety small bodegas. In addition to the pioneering

bodegas mentioned above, the top Priorat producers include: Mas Doix, Mas Igneus, Nit

de Nin, Celler Cal Pla, Celler V all Llach, Clos Figueras, Mas Romani, Cellers Ripoll Sans,

and Ferrer Bobet.

Finally, Priorat is almost completely encircled by another wine region to know—

Montsant (the name means “holy mountain”). Montsant is a bit like Priorat’s younger

sibling. The vineyards of Montsant are generally lower in elevation than those of Priorat,

and the wines are often not quite as complex. But Montsant wines are grown on similar

granitic slate soils and, like Priorat, based on old-vine garnacha and cariñena grapes. No

surprise, then, that Montsant’s wines taste and feel a lot like the wines of Priorat, albeit

usually at lower prices. Monsant wines such as Capçanes or Joan d’Anguera, for example,

are terrific for their prices.

WHEN YOU VISIT… PRIORAT

PRIORAT IS AN EASY DAY TRIP from Barcelona or the city of Lleida, but to immerse

yourself in its rugged remoteness, book one of the few hotels in Priorat’s main town,

Gratallops. Most of Priorat’s other ten towns are very tiny (often with fewer than twenty-

five inhabitants), but each has small wineries.

DO NOT MISS SCALA DEI, the monastery that started it all.

The Priorat Wines to Know

The best Priorat wines, like those below, are not for the timid. These are full throttle, deep dives into intense flavor.

They are massively structured, complex reds that make it seems as though the earth herself has woken in a torrent

of rage.

CELLERS RIPOLL SANS

CLOSA BATLLET

60% cariñena, 20% garnacha, 10% cabernet sauvignon, plus merlot and syrah

Like many of the young vintners in Priorat today, Marc Ripoll left the region the first chance he got, but was

ultimately drawn back. In 2000, Ripoll returned to his family’s old vineyards near the village of Gratallops in order

to restore them, and in the process, he founded Cellers Ripoll Sans. His very first vintage was a rich, delicious wine

that, ten years later, had developed quite a seductive character. Indeed, wines such as Batllet (based on grapes from

vines nearly ninety years old and grown on slate hillsides) show the kind of stateliness, purity, and complexity that

fine Priorat achieves. (Before Ripoll returned to take over, his parents had sold the grapes for next to nothing to the

local co-op.)

ALV ARO PALACIOS

FINCA DOFÍ

Garnacha, cabernet sauvignon, merlot, and syrah, unspecified percentages

One of the young pioneers of Priorat when he arrived at the region’s largely abandoned vineyards in the early

1980s, Alvaro Palacios seemed to know intuitively which old plots would yield the most expressive, complex

wines. Palacios’s intense and precise L’Ermita ranks with the best wines in Spain. But L’Ermita’s little brother,

Finca Dofí, has also set the sommelier world on fire. The wine is contrapuntal in every way—rich yet with a rocky,

lean edge; refined yet muscular; spicy yet coalesced around a puddle of fruit. It’s the inherent sense of opposites

that makes the wine so intellectually intriguing.

SCALA DEI

CARTOIXA

40% garnacha, 25% cariñena, 25% cabernet sauvignon, 10% syrah

I love this wine’s peaty, rich, sweet, licoricey blackness, and the way its rocky firmness yields ever so gently to the

violet notes that dance through the flavors. The first sip of a Priorat wine is often so dramatic that it’s easy to forget

to pay attention to what comes next. With this wine, what comes next is a beautiful rush of flavors suggestive of tar

and soil, and a kind of crunchy sea-saltiness that calls out for grilled beef. The famous Scala Dei (“God’s stairway”)

monastery where this wine is made was founded in 1163 by Carthusian monks. The name of the wine, Cartoixa,

means “charterhouse,

” which is itself another name for a Carthusian monastery.

MAS IGNEUS

IGNEUS

60% garnacha, 30% cariñena, 10% cabernet sauvignon

When young, Mas Igneus, like most Priorat wines, is a ruggedly masculine behemoth—a wine that’s so dense it’s

like a black hole of dark figs, black licorice, and black slate flavors. But with time, the massiveness melts away and

the wine emerges as something superbly structured and majestic. All this said, Igneus—even when young—is a

fantastic experience, especially in winter, and especially between bites of slow-roasted meat. The estate itself was

the first organically certified estate in Priorat, and the vines for this wine are more than sixty years old.

CLOS ERASMUS

Approximately 70% garnacha, 30% syrah

Clos Erasmus is in a league by itself—the only wine that comes close is Alvaro Palacios’s L’Ermita. What I find so

extraordinary about the wine is its incredible freshness and liveliness, as if hard, black slate rock all of a sudden

went fluid and danced. Each time I’ve drunk it, I feel I can’t write fast enough, as chocolate, spices, licorice, fig,

cherry, citrus, jam, and earth swirl together in a huge, whirling vortex of flavor. Rather amazingly for all this

intensity, the wine has a minerally, slatey coolness that keeps it from being overwrought. And the thick, silky

texture is supple and sublime. Clos Erasmus was begun by self-taught winemaker Daphne Glorian, one of the

original five pioneers of modern Priorat in the 1980s.

In the Basque region, the txakoli vineyards of the Getaria district seem almost to hover over the Bay of Biscay in the

Atlantic Ocean.

OTHER IMPORTANT

WINE REGIONS

THE BASQUE REGION | BIERZO | CALATAYUD AND CAMPO DE BORJA |

CASTILLA-LA MANCHA | JUMILLA | RUEDA | TORO

THE BASQUE REGION

In terms of both food and wine, the Basque region, in northern Spain, is fantastically

idiosyncratic and highly celebrated. Here, just waiting for the adventurous eater/drinker,

are a wealth of delicious things found nowhere else in the country.

The region itself lies on the Bay of Biscay, on the Atlantic coast, extending to the

mountainous border with France. Vineyards spill down dark, rocky limestone cliffs, often

virtually cantilevered over the icy, slate-gray ocean below. It’s no surprise that the most

important wine here is white and crisp and made for seafood.

Brace yourself for the wine’s name: txakoli (sha-ko-LEE). Alas, it is also referred to in

Basque as txakolina (technically,

“place of txakoli”); and chacoli, as it is sometimes

written in Spanish and in French. The word comes from the Arabic chacalet, meaning

“thinness.

” (We’ll get to how sleek the wine is in a minute.)

Txakoli is made from the indigenous white grape called Hondurrabi zuri. Zuri means

“white” in Basque; Hondurrabi is a village near the French border. There’s also a red

variety called Hondurrabi—Hondurrabi beltza (beltza means “black”)—although this red

grape is not related to the white, but instead may be another son of cabernet franc.

Once I got used to pronouncing txakoli, I felt I could take on the three main types:

txakoli de Getaria, txakoli de Vizcaya, and txakoli Alava (from the small districts of

Getaria, Vizcaya, and Alava, respectively).

In the Basque region, tapas are called pinxtos and are speared with a toothpick. You pay at the end by counting your

toothpicks.

The wine itself has no parallel when it comes to bracing acidity. (Txakoli makes

Champagne seem soft.) Dry as a bone, and extremely sleek on the palate, txakoli is often

slightly carbonated and is served in a unique manner called “breaking.

” To break txakoli,

the wine is poured from a height of several feet/meters into a little tumbler glass

(splashing some on the floor seems to be standard operating procedure). The flight

through the air is said to open up the txakoli and make it smell and taste more vivid.

The most renowned txakoli is Txomin Etxaniz. And now I dare every sommelier out

there to say Txomin Etxaniz Txakolina de Getaria three times fast.

BIERZO

Bierzo is a remote, mountainous region in the province of León, within Castilla y León, in

northwestern Spain. To the west is the region of Galicia (and its primary wine

denomination, Rías Baixas). Indeed, the climate of Bierzo mingles some of the maritime

influences of Galicia with the dry, hot, continental climate of the high plains of Castilla.

Like many of the wine regions of northern Spain, Bierzo’s wine history dates to ancient

Roman times, when the area was the largest gold mining center on the Iberian Peninsula.

Ancient Roman mining sites are still visible in the area, one of the most spectacular being

Las Médulas, a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Soils in this mountainous region include mixtures of slate and quartz, which are

thought to contribute to the unique flavor of the wines produced here. The main variety is

mencía (men-THEE-a), a wildly spicy, gamey, minerally, dramatic red that, to me, often

seems poised somewhere between syrah and pinot noir. For several years this fascinating,

indigenous Spanish variety was said to have been brought from Bordeaux, where it was

probably related to cabernet franc. Recent DNA typing, however, shows this to be untrue,

although the exact parents of mencía are not known.

HIT BY A THOUSAND METEORITES?

In the arid, windy region of Geria on Lanzarote (one of the Canary Islands), the rocky volcanic soil traps moisture

in the desertlike climate. Some of the original vine cuttings brought from Spain to the Americas were from vines

growing on the Canary Islands.

On Lanzarote, the easternmost island of Spain’s Canary Islands, are more than ten thousand curious,

dark pits spaced closely together. From a distance, it looks as if the entire region has been hit by

thousands of meteorites. But in fact, these are some of the most bizarre vineyards in the world—

vineyards that are an ingenious response to the island itself.

Lanzarote, and its most important wine district, La Geria, lie just 78 miles (130 kilometers) off the coast

of Africa. Rainfall here is less than in some parts of the Sahara desert. In the 1700s, a volcanic eruption

covered the island, including the best farming land, with ash and lava. Instead of giving up, local farmers

invented a dry cultivation method called enarenado (literally,

“covered with sand”). As it turns out, the

island’s volcanic soil, called picón, is extremely good at absorbing and retaining moisture from the night

air. T o capture that moisture, each vine is individually planted in a hole about 13 feet (4 meters) wide and

6 feet (2 meters) deep. The pit is then filled with the hard granules of picón. These rocks are so

absorbent that they can even draw water from a cloud passing by overhead. The pits are surrounded by

2-foot-(half-meter-) tall semicircular stone walls called zocos. The pits and the walls help to protect the

vines (which, untrellised, spread along the ground laterally) from strong winds that blow in from the

Atlantic Ocean across the Canary Islands.

T oday, Lanzarote’s vineyards are planted primarily with malvasia grapes—an ancient, hardy variety.

Indeed, malvasia, along with listan prieto (known as mission in the United States) were the grapes

brought by Spanish explorers from the Canary Islands to Mexico in the 1500s. From Mexico, these

grapes became the foundation of the wine industries in Chile, Argentina, and the U.S.

Bierzo was launched on the modern Spanish wine scene in 1998, when famous Spanish

winemaker Alvaro Palacios (who helped reestablish the Priorat region) began buying

ancient vineyards near the village of Corullón. Palacios and his nephew Ricardo Pérez

eventually established a tiny jewel of an estate, Descendientes de José Palacios, today

considered among the best in the region. Another bodega to watch: the single estate (pago)

Luna Beberide.

CALATAYUD AND CAMPO DE BORJA

Southeast of Rioja lie the two small, neighboring denominations of Calatayud and Campo

de Borja. While they are separate DOs, I have chosen to address them together, for

together these are Spain’s equivalent of Châteauneuf-du-Pape—mini empires of

astoundingly great garnacha.

The landscape of each is forbidding—high-altitude (1,000 to 3,000 feet (300 to 900

meters above sea level), dry-brush-strewn hills that look like they could be in the U.S.

state of Nevada. The soils—a friable type of red and black slate—are interspersed with

limestone, iron, and clay. Wild thyme and rosemary cling to the hot slate and give the air a

refined, herbal, garigue-like aroma.

Fifty years ago, there was ten times as much vineyard acreage in Calatayud as there is

today, and considerably more in Campo de Borja as well. But in the 1980s, the European

Union provided generous grants to growers willing to grub up their vineyards here. Just

over 9,000 acres (3,600 hectares) still exist in Calatayud; 18,000 acres (7,200 hectares) in

Campo de Borja.

The grenaches of Calatayud and Campo de Borja are not delicate, restrained wines.

Black, dense, chewy, and lip-smacking, they have irresistible, big thrusts of kirsch-berry

fruit, minerals, and spice. (When is too much not enough?)

And although each is primarily a red wine region, some amazing whites are made,

including zesty, aromatic macabeos from Calatayud vines more than fifty years old.

Among the wineries to watch for are Baltasar and Las Rocas, in Calatayud, and Borsao

and Alto Moncayo, in Campo de Borja.

Windmills in Alcázar de San Juan, in Castilla-La Mancha, the setting for much of the famous novel Don Quixote.

CASTILLA-LA MANCHA

Forming a semicircle south of Madrid, on the spectacular, grand high plateau of central

Spain (the meseta), is the region known as Castilla-La Mancha. While enormous amounts

of Spanish wine are made here, the region is, alas, somewhat better known to foreigners

for its leading fictional character—Don Quixote.

Castilla-La Mancha is one of the largest wine regions in the world (one hundred times

larger than Napa V alley, for example). Historically, it has been to Spain what the

Languedoc-Roussillon has been to France—the comforting, dependable spigot for oceans

of tasty, inexpensive wine. Today, the region is undergoing a transformation, as dozens of

high-quality-oriented family wineries step up their game. Indeed, it is here, on these vast

plains, that most of Spain’s pagos—exemplary small estates devoted to top-notch wine—

are to be found. But even the region’s numerous cooperatives are making better wines than

ever before.

Castilla-La Mancha has many natural assets as a wine region. The region is high in

altitude—up to 3,500 feet (1,100 meters) above sea level. The nights are cool, thanks to

huge diurnal temperature fluctuations. The days are sunny and dry. The soils are

permeated by limestone (a somewhat shocking fact for those who associate limestone

solely with Burgundy and Champagne). Many of the vines are old—sixty to eighty years

is not uncommon. And to cap it all off, the wines remain steals in terms of their prices.

Thanks to what are more or less ideal viti-cultural conditions, more than forty grape

varieties are grown—from indigenous varieties such as the white airén and the reds bobal

and monastrell, to well-known Spanish varieties such as tempranillo, to global varieties

like viognier, syrah, and cabernet sauvignon. (Speaking of global tendencies, one of the

most surprising white wines from here is a blend of viognier, chardonnay, and riesling,

which, as blends go, sounds like a train wreck, but is surprisingly delicious given the

elegance of the local viognier and chardonnay.)

While I’ve had many delicious wines from this region recently (including some of

Europe’s best 100 percent petit verdots), I’d like to say a final word about airén, one of the

leading grape varieties in the entire world in terms of production. For most of the

twentieth century, airén was a wine you’d find in Spain’s grittiest bars, and in places like

truck stops. Lots of it was distilled into cheap brandy, and much of it is still sent to other

countries in the European Union to be blended into sparkling wine. But today, dozens of

producers in Castilla-La Mancha, convinced that airén can be more, are making it

carefully, with an eye toward top quality. The result is a slew of new, fresh, racy, fruity,

minerally airéns (still, not sparkling) that are terrific as every-night dinner whites. In a

blind tasting, one of these airéns compared to, say, a typical, easily affordable pinot grigio,

is no contest. The airén will win every time.

In Castilla-La Mancha, houses cling to the cliffs of the mesata, the vast, rocky plateau of central Spain.

JUMILLA

Many of Spain’s exciting emerging wine regions are in the north. But Jumilla (pronounced

who-ME-ah), south of Madrid and 50 miles (80 kilometers) inland from the Mediterranean

coast, is a high-altitude, arid valley flanked by the southern towns Alicante, Albacete, and

Murcia. Although they are scorchingly hot during the day, the vineyards benefit from cool

nights, thanks to their location some 1,000 to 3,000 feet (300 to 900 meters) above sea

level.

The main grape here is the red variety monastrell, a late-ripening variety that needs

considerable heat. While monastrell is indigenous to Spain, it was brought to southern

France, Australia, and California more than a century ago and rechristened mourvèdre or

mataró. (French mourvèdre continues to be better known than Spanish monastrell.) The

wines produced from it are usually rustic, easy-drinking, fruity, ripe, and lively, although

occasionally you find a very serious, complex example that can be stunning. They are

widely exported—often at bargain prices. Interestingly, in many of Jumilla’s vineyards,

these monastrell vines remain ungrafted (that is, on their own roots), phylloxera having

never penetrated the arid soils here. Small amounts of syrah, tempranillo, merlot, and

cabernet sauvignon are also grown—often for the purpose of blending with monastrell.

RUEDA

Poised between the regions Ribera del Duero to the northeast and Toro to the west, Rueda

is one of the important, if small, white wine regions of Spain. Indeed, verdejo, the leading

white wine of the region is, in terms of the volume produced, Spain’s leading fine white

wine.

Like Ribera del Duero, Rueda is spread over dramatic plateaus slashed by the Duero

River before it flows into Portugal. This is a region of extremely cold winters and

scorchingly hot summers. For centuries the principal grape was palomino, the heat-

tolerant grape of Sherry. The ponderous, high-alcohol Rueda wines that resulted were

turned into rather innocuous fortified wines that, sadly, never approached Sherry in

quality.

Harvesting viura grapes in Rueda, one of the best white wine regions of Spain.

Then, in the early 1970s, the historic Rioja firm Marqués de Riscal consulted with the

legendary French enologist Émile Peynaud and came to the startling conclusion that

Rueda (more than Rioja) had the potential to make lively white wines (Peynaud likened

them to white Bordeaux). By using verdejo, a native Rueda grape; making the wine in

temperature-controlled stainless-steel tanks; and bottling it young without wood aging,

Riscal produced a fresh, vibrant, minerally wine that had splashes of bitter almond and

herbal flavors, not unlike sauvignon blanc. V erdejo put Rueda on the map as an important

Spanish white wine region.

Unusually for Europe, most Rueda wines are known primarily by their varietal name—

verdejo—rather than their place (Rueda). Wines labeled verdejo must contain at least 85

percent verdejo. Wines labeled Rueda (and there are some) are generally only 50 percent

verdejo, with viura, the white grape of Rioja, or sometimes sauvignon blanc or Palomino

making up the rest of the blend. In addition to Marqués de Riscal, other top producers

include Compañía de Vinos Telmo Rodríguez, Buil and Giné, Marqués de Griñon, Oro de

Castilla, and Viñedos de Nieva.

The church of Santa María la Mayor in Toro is one of the most classic examples of transitional Romanesque architecture

in Spain. Constructed of limestone and later sandstone, it was begun in 1170 and finished in the mid-13th century.

Among the artistic works inside is an unusual sculpture depicting a pregnant Virgin Mary.

TORO

High on Spain’s central plateau, on the banks of the Duero River in the province of

Zamora, the small wine region of Toro encompasses slightly more than a dozen villages,

the leading one of which is also named Toro. As is true in nearby Ribera del Duero, the

climate here is dry and sunny, with very hot days and cold nights. Similarly, the soils here

are sandy and mixed with ancient riverbed stones.

Toro is known for massively powerful, dense red wines based on tinta del Toro, locally

adapted clones of tempranillo. (Some garnacha is also grown, as is a small amount of the

white grape verdejo.) Often black in color, with a syrupy texture and flavors reminiscent

of bitter chocolate, tobacco, dried spices, and dirt (sounds awful; tastes good), the best

Toro wines come from old vineyards with vines that date back more than a century. But be

warned, poor-quality, inexpensive wines from this region can tear your head off with their

harsh tannin and high alcohol content.

Among Toro’s most famous wineries are Campo Eliseo, a joint venture between the

international wine consultant Michel Rolland and the Lurton family of France; as well as

the grand winery Numanthia, today owned by the luxury group Moët Hennessey Louis

Vuitton (LVMH). Of the bodega’s 121 acres (49 hectares) of vineyards, half are composed

of vines planted seventy to two hundred years ago. Numanthia makes two of the greatest

cult wines in Spain: Numanthia Termanthia (which I call the “Burning Man” of red wine,

it’s so masculine) and the effortless-to-remember Numanthia Numanthia.

PORTUGAL

PORT | MADEIRA | PORTUGUESE TABLE WINES

PORTUGAL RANKS TENTH AMONG WINE PRODUCING COUNTRIES WORLDWIDE. THE

PORTUGUESE DRINK AN AVERAGE OF 13 GALLONS (48 LITERS) OF WINE PER PERSON PER YEAR.

More than any other western European country, Portugal has remained steeped in tradition

even as it has modernized. Grapes for certain wines are still painstakingly trodden by foot

in ancient stone lagares, and in the mountainous wine regions of the northeast, vineyards

are still worked entirely by hand. Dirt paths that were used for oxcarts a decade ago are

now, in some cases, sleek new highways (thanks to European Union membership and

billions of euros worth of infrastructure). But adjacent to those highways, the vineyards

remain almost exactly as they were centuries ago. The taste of Portugal’s wines is, in

many ways, the taste of a place where time has stopped.

The persistence of tradition in Portugal is due in large part to the importance of Port,

Portugal’s most famous wine and a wine that, like Spanish Sherry and French Champagne,

is still meticulously handcrafted using ancient, artisanal methods. Port is a sweet,

powerfully fortified wine, the drinking of which can only be described as a turbocharged

experience. Since its evolution from the 1700s onward, it has been considered one of the

most remarkable wines in the world. Because it is indeed Portugal’s most extraordinary

wine, Port leads off the chapter, followed by Madeira, an equally spellbinding Portuguese

treasure. Finally, Portugal’s emerging class of good table wines should not be ignored.

While I won’t examine every one of Portugal’s eleven wine regions in this chapter, I will

look at the revolution in quality that is beginning to take place in the most important

regions, such as the Douro, Dão, Bairrada, and Alentejo.

Harvesting grapes in the Douro V alley of Portugal. The steep, terraced vineyards make the work hard and slow.

Portugal, like its Iberian neighbor, Spain, is carpeted with vineyards—almost 600,000

acres (242,800 hectares) of them. In fact, although the country is just 370 miles (595

kilometers) long, 125 miles (200 kilometers) wide, and smaller than the state of Kentucky,

it nonetheless ranks tenth in world wine production. Seventy-nine different grape varieties

grow here, many of which can be found in the Douro alone. Many of these varieties are

quite ancient and were probably brought to Portugal from Phoenicia (modern-day

Lebanon) or Anatolia (Turkey), which were among the primary domestication sites for

vines in the Old World. (As is true for Spanish grape varieties, Portuguese varieties are

thought to be genetically distinct from varieties in France and Italy.) Since those early

times, Portuguese vines have had to struggle formidably to survive. The varieties that exist

today, for example, have, through natural genetic mutation, adapted to the dry, severely

hot climate and impoverished landscape, and are surprisingly capable of producing well-

balanced, elegant wines despite the climate challenges. For an explanation of Portuguese

wine law, see the Appendix on Wine Laws, page 925.

The Douro V alley, with its ancient hand-built rock terraces, is one of the most magnificently beautiful wine regions in the

world.

An aerial view of the twisting Douro River and on its banks, Croft’ s Quinta do Roeda, one of the great Port vineyards.

Founded in 1588, Croft is the oldest Port shipper still operating in the Douro today.

PORT

If Portugal is the mother of Port, Britain is certainly its father. The famous Port firms

were, for the most part, begun by men with such properly British names as Sandeman,

Croft, Graham, Cockburn, Dow, and Warre. British men, in fact, were not only Port’s

founders but also its most ardent, if exclusionist, advocates. In fact, until recently Port

might have been described as a rather sexist beverage. The quintessential man’s drink, it

was historically brought out (with great celebration and obligatory cigars) only after the

women had left the room. Needless to say, women don’t leave the room anymore (in fact,

in some countries, including the United Kingdom, most Port today is purchased by

women).

Although the ancient Romans prized the juicy red wines from the steep banks of the

Douro River, in northeastern Portugal, centuries passed before the ingenious British

transformed these wines from simple, tasty quaffs into Port, Britain’s early version of

central heating. There is a fable about Port’s birth, even though in reality the wine’s

“invention” was more like a series of discoveries than a single creative act. As the

apocryphal story goes, two young English wine merchants were traveling through

Portugal in the late 1670s, looking for wines that would be saleable in the British market.

(At the time, escalating political rivalry between Britain and France meant that, in Britain,

French wines were increasingly met with great disfavor.) The two merchants supposedly

found themselves at a monastery outside the town of Lamego, near the Douro River. The

abbot there served them a wine that was smoother, sweeter, and more interesting than any

they’d tasted. When pressed to explain, the abbot confided that he’d added brandy to the

wine as it had fermented.

The name Port is derived from the city of Oporto, a major port on the Atlantic

at the mouth of the Douro River—the golden river. Oporto is the second

largest city in Portugal, after Lisbon.

Historically, barrels of Port were transported from the inland vineyards of the Upper Douro to Oporto on the coast in

narrow, shallow-bottomed boats known as barcos rabelos.

What actually happened was far less fanciful. By the seventeenth century, wine was

regularly being fortified with grape spirits simply to make it more stable during the

voyage to England. At first the amount of spirits was small, about 3 percent. But then an

incredible vintage in the year of 1820 caused Port shippers to rethink their product. That

year the wine was remarkably rich, ripe, and naturally sweet. Sales soared. The next year,

hoping to recreate their success, Port shippers added more brandy and added it sooner, in

order to arrest fermentation earlier and leave more sweetness in the wine. The idea

worked. Gradually, over the course of many decades, the amount of grape spirits was

incrementally increased, producing a sweet wine that is substantially fortified at the same

time.

THE QUICK SIP ON PORT

THE SWEET FORTIFIED WINE known as Port is one of the most complex and

ageworthy wines in the world.

TRUE PORT IS MADE only in the Douro River valley of Portugal, an ancient, forbidding

wine region where vineyards cling to steep slopes and where the summer heat is

intense.

PORT IS MADE in numerous styles, each of which is an extraordinarily different wine

drinking experience.

THE LAND, THE GRAPES, AND THE VINEYARDS

Port comes from only one place in the world, the 70-mile-long demarcated Port region, in

the Douro River V alley, a region that is classified as a World Heritage site by UNESCO.

The Rio Douro begins near Madrid, in Spain (where it’s known as the Duero River), then

carves a westward path through the rugged high plains until it finally forges its way across

the border. In Portugal, the fjordlike river cuts a deep gorge through the arid, rocky,

unforgiving land, ultimately crossing the entire country and washing into the Atlantic at

the town of Oporto. The river is so massive that today, it supplies more than 30 percent of

all the hydroelectric power in Portugal.

That vineyards are planted in the Douro is a testament to human will, for this is one of

the most unmerciful environments in which grapes manage to grow. From a distance, the

panoramic river valley appears as terraced amphitheaters of vines, stretched out as far as

one can see. The terraces—tall, narrow, and all handmade—are cut into the extremely

steep banks of schist that is occasionally interspliced by granite. These hardened rock

slopes originally contained so little soil that more had to be created by men who, almost

inconceivably, over generations and by hand, chipped at the rock with hammers and

pointed iron poles to break it down into small particles. (Later, blasting with dynamite

became the common method.)

The forbiddingly steep hillsides of the Douro V alley range from 35 to 70

degrees in inclination. Terrace walls can be 15 feet (4.6 meters) high. These

are some of the cruelest vineyards to work in Portugal’s furnacelike summers.

The presence of schist and granite is extremely important. Both drain water well, so the

vines’ roots must tunnel deeply (as far as 65 feet/20 meters down) within the rocky

crevices for water. Roots that burrow deep into the earth find a stable environment there

and thus become more stable themselves. This is critical in the Douro, where the vines

must be hardy and supplied with enough water to survive the blazingly hot daytime

temperatures.

The Douro’s summers (“three months of hell,

” as they are locally referred to) are

infamous. The temperatures can rise so high during the day—often to the hundred-teens

Fahrenheit (mid-forties Celsius) for weeks at a time—that the vines temporarily shut down

and wait until night to transport nutrients from the leaves to the grapes. The heat, luckily,

is dry, thanks to the Serra do Marão mountain range, which separates the Douro from

western Portugal’s cooler, more humid Atlantic climate.

Vineyards planted with touriga nacional, one of the leading varieties in the Douro, and a variety that contributes

considerable power to wine.

THE MOST IMPORTANT PORTUGUESE WINES

LEADING WINES

ALENTEJO red and white

BAIRRADA red DÃO red

DOURO red

MADEIRA white (fortified; dry and sweet)

PORT red (fortified; sweet)

WINES OF NOTE

SETÚBAL white (fortified; sweet)

VINHO VERDE white

The hot climate, difficult terrain, and lack of paved roads also meant that, in the past—

in fact, until the 1950s—young wines (Ports-to-be) were made in the Douro by the

growers but then quickly transported down the river on colorful Phoenician-style boats

(barcos rabelos) to Oporto and its sister city, Vila Nova de Gaia (villa nova de GUY -a).

There, in a warren of warehouses known as lodges, the wines would be blended and

matured by the shippers. Today, most Port is still blended, aged, and bottled in the

shippers’ warehouses, although the wine itself is brought down from the Douro by tanker

trucks, a feat that hardly seems possible given the extremely narrow roads, hairpin turns,

and general absence of shoulders on roads that, in some places, barely cling to the cliffs.

THE GRAPES OF PORT

WHITES

CÓDEGA, GOUVEIO, MALVASIA FINA, RABIGATO, AND VIOSINHO: Obscure grapes used for only

one style of Port—white. Also used for table wines.

REDS

SOUSÃO: Also known as vinhão. A darkly colored grape that retains its acidity well and is therefore used

in small amounts to contribute a sense of freshness to the Port blend. (This is also the grape behind the

best red vinho verdes.)

TINTA BARROCA: The name means “black baroque.

” Contributes alcohol, body, and an aroma and

flavor reminiscent of chocolate. Like all of the Port grapes, it is also used for table wines.

TINTO CÃO: The name, inexplicably, means red dog. The grape has a delicate character and

sometimes contributes spiciness. Like all of the Port grapes, it is also used for table wines.

TINTA RORIZ: Native to Spain, where it is known as tempranillo, it contributes body and red berry flavors

and aroma. Like all of the Port grapes, it is also used for table wines.

TOURIGA FRANCA: Contributes floral, violety aromas and a sense of richness on the mid-palate (in the

same way that merlot is said to do in the making of Bordeaux wines). Also used for table wines.

TOURIGA NACIONAL: Contributes color, tannin, structure, flavor, and aroma. Considered the cabernet

sauvignon of Port grapes for its impressive structure. It is often used for its impact at the back of the

palate. Also used for table wines throughout the country.

Until the mid-1980s, maturing wines in the lodges was not just standard practice, it was

the law. In 1986, new regulations allowed Port to be aged, bottled, and shipped directly

from the farm estate (the quinta). As a result, several growers who had formerly sold to

large shippers—Quinta do Infantado, for example—began marketing their own Ports.

There are more than 135,000 vineyard properties in the Douro. These are owned by the

shippers themselves, as well as the region’s roughly forty thousand growers, each of

whom owns, on average, no more than a scant acre of grapes. The region is divided into

three subzones, and vineyards are planted in all three. From the Atlantic heading inland, or

west to east, they are Baixo Corgo (Lower Corgo), Cima Corgo (Upper Corgo), and Douro

Superior. (The name Corgo is a general designation for the area around the Corgo River, a

main tributary of the Douro.)

The Lower Corgo, about 60 miles (100 kilometers) upriver from Oporto, is where

basic-quality Ports are made. Better-quality Ports, including all vintage Ports, come from

either the Upper Corgo or Douro Superior. The latter extends east to the Spanish border.

Despite these generalizations, the Douro remains difficult to categorize. Countless

mesoclimates, each independent from the next, are created by the twisting and turning of

the river, the changes in orientation to the sun, the variations in elevation (between 1,200

and 1,700 feet/370 and 520 meters), and numerous other factors. Vineyards may be close

as the crow flies but vastly different in terms of the quality of grapes they produce.

Port is generally aged in large oak casks. Depending on the style of Port being made, the wine might spend as little as

two years or as long as thirty years in barrels.

THE TERM TOURIGA

Grown in every wine region in Portugal, the grape touriga nacional is known by more than twenty

different names, including simply touriga or tourigo. Unlike tinta which means red, the etymology of the

word touriga is not clear, although it could be a reference to the small village Tourigo in the heart of the

Dão, where the variety may have originated. Touriga nacional and its son, touriga franca, are now major

grapes in the Douro, where they are used for Port production.

In the early 1930s, in an attempt to make sense of all this and to figure out which

vineyards were superior (thereby determining which grapes should be used for Port

instead of table wine), a government commission rated the vineyards on a scale of A to F.

Today, these vineyards remain the most intricately appraised in the world. Each is given

points based on myriad factors, including altitude, type of soil, shelter from the wind,

orientation to the sun, climate, age of vines, varieties planted, density of planting, and

yield.

As for grapes, Port is virtually always a blend of different varieties. Blending, in fact, is

what gives Port part of its complexity. While there are multiple dozens of both white and

red grape varieties grown in the Douro, five—all red—are considered the most important

for making Port. They are touriga franca, touriga nacional, tinta barroca, tinto cão, and

tinta roriz. Of these, touriga franca and touriga nacional are preeminent, the first because

of its finesse, richness, softness, and violet aroma; the latter because of its intense color,

tannin, and boldness.

Y et, franca and nacional’s special attributes aside, all five varieties have one

characteristic in common. All are small-berried and thick-skinned, and are therefore able

to withstand the Douro’s heat spells and droughts. The small berries, of course, also mean

very little juice. At painfully low yields, such grapes make concentrated wines indeed.

THE TOP PORT SHIPPERS

A. A. FERREIRA

COCKBURN’S

CROFT

DOW’S

FONSECA GUIMARAENS (aka Fonseca)

GRAHAM’S

NIEPOORT

QUINTA DO INFANTADO

QUINTA DO NOVAL

QUINTA DO VESUVIO

RAMOS PINTO

SANDEMAN

SMITH WOODHOUSE

TAYLOR, FLADGATE & YEATMAN (aka T aylor’s)

WARRE’S

To make Port, the top five Douro reds may be blended together in any combination,

using any proportions. In most old vineyards, the blend is still “made” in the field—that is,

the different vines themselves are interplanted. Only in modern vineyards are varieties

kept separate.

MAKING PORT

The condensed version would go like this: Add one part grape spirits to four parts

fermenting red wine. In truth, however, making Port is quite a bit more involved—and

fascinating.

First, the red Port grapes are crushed. (Usually, this part of any winemaking story is

pretty ho-hum. Not with Port.) Historically, crushing was done exclusively by hand—or

rather, by feet—in lagares, shallow stone or cement troughs (about 2 feet/0.6 meters high)

large enough to hold about a day’s worth of picked grapes. After that exhausting day of

picking, male vineyard workers would don shorts, hop into the lagar (yes, they washed

their feet first), and tread the soupy, hot, purple mass of grapes for several hours. In the

early part of the evening the workers would link arms and march with great solemnity and

difficulty (the mass of grapes is very slippery) back and forth in military-style lines, to the

clapping beat of a foreman (the capataz), who called out a rhythm. But as the night wore

on, the time would come for the liberdade. This was the moment when the women—and

musicians—arrived. As the women jumped into the lagar, men chose partners and

everyone began to waltz, polka, or folk dance (depending on the music).

Amazingly, in the Douro, some grapes are still trodden by human feet—indeed many

vintage Ports, in particular. I have fond memories (and pictures I’ll never reveal) of

dancing recently in the lagar at Quinta do V esuvio until 2:00 a.m. Here’s what no one tells

you: Y our legs are bright violet-colored for a month afterward.

As it happens, the human foot is ideally suited to crushing grapes. Treading breaks the

grapes, crushes the skins, and then mixes the skins with the juice for good flavor and color

extraction—all without smashing the pips (the seeds), which contain bitter-tasting tannin.

“Port wine cannot be produced in flat, easy vineyards. Here we engage in a

fierce battle with the elements to produce top-quality wine with no help from

God.

”

— ARMONDO ALMEIDA,

grape grower for Sandeman

But when electricity finally came to the Douro (in the 1970s!), the stage was set for a

revolutionary invention: the mechanical, or “robotic,

” lagar. Invented by the Symington

family and first used for the 2000 harvest, the robotic treader is a large stainless-steel

trough with mechanical “feet” that plunge up and down through the grape skins, gently

crushing them. The mechanical feet are heated to 98.6°F (37°C), which is the natural

temperature of the human leg. These robotic lagares have profound advantages. Not only

can they run all night, but they can be tipped up and quickly emptied so the grape juice

and skins can be run off into a tank precisely when the treading is complete. Historically, it

took hours to do this by hand, and all that time the alcohol and tannin in the wine were

building. In Portugal recently, I blind tasted the same exact Port, a portion of which had

been foot trodden and the other portion trodden by mechanical lagar. Both were excellent,

but if I had to vote, I’d say the latter may have had a bit more richness, softness, and

density.

Crushing grapes by foot. The workers initially march through the mush, but as the night wears on everyone breaks out

into dancing.

“PORTS” AROUND THE WORLD

For decades, fortified wines made in the United States, Australia, and South Africa used the word Port on

their labels, infuriating producers of authentic Port from the Douro River V alley of Portugal. As of the

first decade of the twenty-first century, however, both Australia and South Africa have finally

discontinued this practice out of respect for the original appellation. The United States remains the only

major producer of “Port” not from Portugal.

After the grapes have been trodden, the soupy mass is poured off into a tank so that

fermentation can begin to turn the grapes’ sugar into alcohol. At the same time, flavor,

color, and aroma are being extracted from the skins. Thirty-six hours into the process, at

the point when about half the natural sugar has been converted to alcohol, fermentation

must be stopped. Thus, compared to most red table wines, Port is given about half the

amount of time to ferment.

To stop fermentation, the wine is poured off into a vat containing neutral grape spirits

(clear brandy) with an alcoholic strength of 77 percent (about 150 proof). The alcohol in

the spirits causes the yeasts in the wine to die, and fermentation subsides. The result is a

sweet wine with about 7 percent (70 grams per liter) residual sugar, fortified to about 20

percent alcohol.

THE BIRTH PRESENT

It is an old tradition among the wealthy British upper classes to give a newborn child a pipe (about sixty-

one cases, clearly a lifetime’s supply) of Port from the newborn’s birth year (or from the nearest great

vintage year). In the past, only vintage Port and single-quinta vintage Port would be given. These would

be shipped in cask to a British wine merchant, who would bottle the Port, after which it would be stored in

the parents’ cellar. By the time the child was old enough to drink, the Port would be matured and ready.

T oday the Port is bottled in Portugal, not Britain, but the tradition remains essentially the same.

Aging bottles of Port at the Graham’ s lodge in Vila Nova de Gaia.

Although this is the initial process by which all Port is made, it is only phase one.

Phase two—maturing and aging the Port—is just as critical, if not more so. Each lot of

Port is classified early, allowing each of the separate styles of Port to be matured and aged

differently.

THE STYLES OF PORT

Depending on how you count them and whether you include the rarest types, there are as

many as ten different styles of Port. While each is unique, their similar-sounding names

can make it frustrating to tell them apart and remember them all. So in this next section,

we’ll examine just the top five Port styles; these are the ones I think any wine lover would

want (or need) to know.

To begin, I want to share with you a tip that Port expert Paul Mugnier taught me. All

Ports, he said, fall into one of two major categories: those that are more like crème brûlée

and those that are more like chocolate cake. (It’s kind of like dividing all meats into those

that are more like chicken and those that are more like beef.)

The “crème brûlée” Ports are the ones that have been aged in wood a long time and

thus have had exposure to air through the staves of the barrel. These Ports have brown

sugar, almost crème brûléelike flavors. Tawny Port is the best example. (And, indeed, it

tastes delicious with crème brûlée.)

The “chocolate” Ports have been aged a long time in bottle, with very little exposure to

air. They are darker and denser in flavor and color, retain their red berry characteristics,

and have an almost cocoalike or chocolaty flavor. Vintage Port is a perfect example of a

bottle-aged Port. (Not surprisingly, it tastes phenomenal with chocolate.)

Given the above as a simple metaphor for thinking about the styles of Port in the

broadest terms, let’s now telescope down to the top five most important specific styles:

aged tawny Port, reserve Port, late-bottled vintage Port (aka LBV), vintage Port, and

single-quinta vintage Port.

IS PORT EVER WHITE?

Y es—although white Port represents only a small fraction of the total production of Port. White Port is

not expensive and it’s not very complex. But it’s absolutely delicious drunk in the Portuguese way: mixed

with tonic water and a twist of lime, on the rocks. In the Douro in summer, you can count on this

refresher appearing every night around five, when everyone needs the Portuguese equivalent of a gin and

tonic. White Port is made from the Douro grapes códega, gouveio, malvasia fina, rabigato, and viosinho.

AGED TAWNY PORT

Aged tawny Port gets my vote for the most sublime style of Port. Its flavors—toasted nuts,

brown sugar, and vanilla—are the adult version of cookie dough. And the texture of an

aged tawny is pure silk.

Aged tawnies are blends of Ports from several years that are then kept for long periods

in barrel. They are labeled as either ten, twenty, thirty, or more than forty years old,

depending on the average age of the wines by flavor. In other words, a twenty-year-old

tawny Port tastes, to an experienced Port maker, like it is made up of wines that are about

twenty years old, but in fact aren’t necessarily that old.

1963—a fine year for current drinking. Most Vintage Port is consumed after decades of aging.

The wines used in the blend for an aged tawny are usually wines of the highest quality.

In fact, these wines often go into vintage Port in years when a vintage Port is declared (see

page 522). However, aged tawny Port and vintage Port taste nothing alike, since aged

tawny Ports are generally kept a minimum of ten years in barrel (until they become

tawny/auburn in color) and vintage Port spends only two years in barrel. Thus, aged tawny

Ports are often about finesse, while vintage Port is about power.

PORT’S FLAVOR PARADOX

From a flavor standpoint, Port is one of the most paradoxical wines in the world. You would think that a

wine made from very ripe grapes that have been grown in a severely hot climate (a wine that is then

fortified with more alcohol!) would have thick, somewhat dull, raisiny flavors, and that the wine would be

anything but fresh and lively. But great Ports are exactly that—fresh and vivid, often with “cool” blueberry

and menthol flavors. Port winemakers attribute Port’s paradoxical freshness to the centuries of

adaptation the local grapes have undergone. Even in blistering heat, these varieties have “learned” to

hold on to their acidity. In addition, Port’s flavors are often given a tactile lift from a sense of minerality

that Port winemakers say is evident in great years and may be in part related to the region’s schist soils.

Aged tawny Ports are among the best-loved Ports in Portugal, France, and Britain,

where they are often drunk both as an aperitif and at the close of a meal.

A quick word about a sister style called young tawny Port (as opposed to aged tawny

Port, described above). Basic and uncomplicated, young tawny is less than three years old

(which is almost oxymoronic, since the word tawny implies the wine has been aged long

enough for the color to brown). In the case of a young tawny, the grapes yield a lighter-

colored wine. The wine may then be made even lighter by minimizing the time the juice

stays on the skins during fermentation. Y oung tawnies, as a result, have a pale, onionskin

color. In Europe, they are often drunk straight up, or on the rocks as an aperitif, although

we don’t see them much in the New World.

RESERVE PORT

Reserve Port is an easily affordable, good-quality,

“every-night” Port. (Up until 2002, this

was called “vintage character,

” but the term was subsequently determined to be

confusing.) Reserve Ports have bold, red berry flavors that make them popular in the

United States and Britain. Many have proprietary names. For example: Dow’s AJS,

Fonseca’s Bin 27, Graham’s Six Grapes, Sandeman’s Founder’s Reserve, and Warre’s

Warrior, are all reserve Ports. Reserve Ports are blends of good—but not great—quality

wines that, on average, have spent four to six years aging in barrels before they are bottled

and released.

Stacked barrels of Port in the old cellars of Warre’ s. Established in 1670, the firm was initially known as Burgoyne &

Jackson. Besides wines, it exported Portuguese olive oil and fruit to England, while importing dried cod and English

woolen goods to Portugal.

THREE SPECIALTY STYLES

There are three other, rather rare styles of Port that you may occasionally encounter. Each is a

fascinating and rare drinking experience.

COLHEITA PORT

A tawny Port from a single vintage is called a colheita (col-YATE-ah) Port. It must be aged a minimum of

seven years. In practice, many shippers release colheitas after they are ten, twenty, or even fifty years

old. Colheitas are the rarest among rare Ports.

CRUSTED PORT

First made by British merchants who mixed together the leftover dregs from barrels of vintage Port and

then aged it, crusted Port is designated as such because it leaves a heavy crust, or sediment, in the

bottle. This is simply a gutsy, full-bodied, working man’s Port, made from a blend of several different

years (the average age of the wines in the blend is three to four years) that has been bottled unfiltered.

As a result, it throws a sediment and must be decanted.

GARRAFEIRA PORT

Garrafeira (garra-FAY-ra) Ports come from a single exceptional year and are aged briefly in wood and

then a long time—as many as twenty to forty years—in large glass bottles called bonbonnes. After aging,

the garrafeira is decanted and transferred into standard 750-milliliter bottles and sold. This type of Port

has the richness of a vintage Port yet the suppleness of an aged tawny. The word garrafeira means “wine

cellar” or “bottle cellar” (from the Portuguese garrafa—

“bottle”). The term garrafeira is also used to

designate nonfortified Portuguese table wines of especially high quality.

LATE-BOTTLED VINTAGE PORT

Late-bottled vintage Ports—often called LBVs—are moderately priced Ports that are

made every year and, yes, come from a single vintage. But the grapes don’t come from the

crème de la crème of grapes (in great years, those grapes go into vintage Port, the sine qua

non). LBVs have been aged in the barrel for four to six years and then bottled. (So, they

spend more time in barrel than vintage Port, but less time in bottle; see Vintage Port,

below.) LBVs, importantly, are what most good restaurants serve. They are ready to drink

when the shipper releases them, and require no decanting.

LBVs are satisfying, luscious wines, to be sure, but tasted side by side with a vintage

Port, it would be clear to anyone that vintage possesses more richness, complexity, and

sophistication. A small subset of LBV is called “traditional late-bottled vintage Port” or

“bottle-matured late-bottled vintage Port.

” (I know; it can seem confusing to have so many

names.) Unlike regular LBVs, these are not filtered and will therefore throw a sediment

and need to be decanted.

VINTAGE PORT

Here it is: the style of Port that every wine lover hopes to experience (more than once!).

No Port is more sought after—or expensive. Vintage Port represents only about 3 percent

of the total production of Port. It is made only in exceptional years when Port shippers

“declare” a vintage. All of the grapes in the blend will come only from that vintage, and

only from the very top vineyards.

DECLARING A VINTAGE

The process of making a vintage Port begins with a judgment. How good were the grapes from this year?

If they were excellent, if they possessed just the right structural balance, richness, power, and finesse,

then a shipper will decide to “declare” the vintage. Each shipper makes this decision independently.

However, the truly stunning years for vintage Port are usually those declared by 50 percent or more of all

shippers. In the past hundred years, a vintage year for Port has been declared just twenty-five times.

Once a shipper declares a vintage, a formal procedure ensues. Before the wine can be bottled, the

shipper must submit its intention and samples of the wine to the Port Wine Institute for tasting and

approval.

The great vintage Port years from the second half of the twentieth century through the first decade of

the twenty-first have been: 1955, 1958, 1960, 1963, 1966, 1970, 1975, 1977, 1980, 1983, 1985, 1991,

1992, 1994, 1995, 1997, 2000, 2003, 2007, and 2011.

Vintage Ports are first aged just two years in barrel, to round off their powerful edges.

Then—and this is the key—they are aged reductively (without oxygen) for a long time in

the bottle. During bottle aging, the vintage Port matures slowly, becoming progressively

more refined and integrated. A decade’s worth of aging is standard, and several decades

used to be fairly common. Indeed, Ports from the 1950s are still amazingly lively on the

palate (the 1955 Cockburn’s is one of the most hauntingly luscious wines I have ever

tasted or felt… it was sheer silk).

But the concept of aging vintage Port is also changing. Thanks to highly improved

viticultural and winemaking practices in the Douro, even very bold, young vintage Ports

can be lip-smackingly delicious. In recent trips to the Douro, I have been astounded by the

elegance of young vintage Port—its exuberance and power being, of course, givens.

To maintain the intensity, balance, and richness of vintage Port, it is neither fined nor

filtered. This, coupled with the fact that Port grapes have thick skins and a lot of tannin,

means that vintage Port throws a great deal of sediment, and always needs to be decanted

(see Sediment and Tartrates, page 114). Finally, in the years a shipper chooses not to

declare as vintage quality, they take the grapes they might have used for vintage Port and,

if they came from a great single quinta (vineyard estate), bottle them under the name of

that quinta.

Astonishment awaits. Older vintages of Graham’ s, Dow’ s, Warre’ s, and other Ports are ready to be tasted in the

Symington family lodges.

SINGLE-QUINTA VINTAGE PORT

The word quinta means farm, but in the Douro most quintas would be more accurately

described as renowned vineyard estates. They range in size from a dozen to several

hundred acres and usually include a house and sometimes gardens, in the manner of a

French château. The grapes for a single-quinta vintage Port come, as the name implies,

from a given quinta in a single year. The idea behind these Ports is that the very best

vineyard estates are often located in special mesoclimates that allow exceptional wines to

be made even in years when the vintage as a whole may not be declared.

Single quintas may be owned by small shipper-firms, such as Quinta do Infantado,

which makes a single-quinta vintage Port by the same name. Or the quinta might be

owned by a large shipper. The famous Quinta do V esuvio, for example, is owned by the

Symington family, which also owns the firms Graham’s, Warre’s, and Dow’s. But in all

cases, a single-quinta vintage Port will always be made exclusively from the grapes grown

at that quinta. (Remember that, by contrast, a vintage Port may come from grapes from

several quintas, as well as grapes grown by dozens of small, individual grape growers.)

It’s important to note that shippers may decide not to make a single-quinta vintage Port in

the same year they make a vintage Port. In years declared for vintage Port, the quinta’s

grapes may be blended into the vintage Port and thus cannot be made into a wine of their

own.

PORT’S CLASSIC PARTNERS

Port has several classic companions, all of which are, like Port itself, profoundly

flavorful: blue cheese, chocolate, roasted nuts, and crème brûlée. Vintage Port, for

example, is stellar with blue cheese—especially Stilton or Gorgonzola—although

mountain cheeses from Portugal (most of which have the word serra in the name) are

also extraordinary. Hedonists also pair vintage Ports (as well as LBVs) with anything

made from bittersweet chocolate. Indeed, fine chocolate is such a complex flavor that

Port is virtually the only wine that stands up to it. As for tawnies, these Ports are

explosively scrumptious when paired with almond or walnut cakes or with crème brûlée.

But my favorite pairing with tawny is the orange tea cake served every afternoon at the

Symington family’s Malvedos Estate.

Apart from blending, single-quinta vintage Ports are made in the same manner as

vintage Ports. They are not filtered, require significant bottle aging, and throw a sediment,

so that the wine must eventually be decanted. Single-quinta vintage Ports are usually

released after two years, just like vintage Ports. The wines are then aged a decade or more

by the buyer. Single-quinta vintage Ports are generally slightly less expensive than vintage

Ports.

Port—served from a decanter—was a fixture in upper-class life in Britain in the 19th and early 20th centuries. The

lower classes made do without the decanter.

BLOODY HELL, COLLEGE WAS BRUTAL

Alas, it wasn’t this way for me (or you either, probably), but in England historically, wine—and especially

Port—played a notable part in college life. According to the Rare Wine Company (an importer/retailer

specializing in Port and Madeira), in the early part of the nineteenth century, colleges had breathtakingly

enormous wine cellars, and there was ten times as much Port in those cellars as any other wine. Far

from being a mere hedonistic indulgence, Port was “currency”

—often used by students to pay off wages,

bets, and fines. Even after World War II, Port was still abundant in the cellars of universities like

Cambridge, which bought the wine by the pipe (a traditional Port barrel holding the equivalent of about

sixty-one cases), directly upon release, and then aged it for decades. Below is an excerpt from a

student’s letter, quoted in the 1949 edition of The Custom of the Room: Early Wine Books of Christ’s

College Cambridge.

“On Friday we dined in the hall of Trinity College. Everything on a grand scale… After partaking of a

sumptuous dinner, which began at three, we retired with the fellows to the Combination Room, where we

sat soaking Port til eight or nine. Cards were then introduced, and the entertainment concluded with a

magnificent supper.

”

DECANTING, DRINKING, AGING, AND STORING

PORT

The only Ports that need decanting are those that throw a sediment. These include vintage

Port, single-quinta vintage Port, traditional late-bottled vintage Port, and crusted Port.

None of the other styles throw a sufficient sediment.

Decanting Port is very easy. Since Port sediment is heavy relative to the sediment

thrown by other wines (see page 134 for more information on sediment), it tends to stick

to the sides of a bottle lying on its side in a cellar. So, all you need to do is handle the

bottle gently and pour slowly into the carafe or glasses, taking care not to shake up the

contents of the bottle. If possible, it’s helpful to stand the bottle of Port up for a day ahead

so that much of the sediment sinks to the bottom of the bottle.

The mind-blowing richness of Port starts with its hedonistic aromas.

Depending on how old and delicate the wine is, it could be decanted many hours before

it is to be served—or just before. This is a judgment call to be sure, but it is better to err on

the side of less oxygen exposure, because the wine will get another big dose of oxygen

when it’s poured into the glasses.

As for serving, one of the oldest and most curious Port traditions concerns the direction

in which a bottle is passed around the table. By custom, Port is always supposed to be

passed from the right to the left, in a clockwise direction. Although the origins of the

custom are obscure, research by the house of Sandeman suggests the practice is based on

the old Celtic belief that all circular motions should be deiseal, that is, turning in a way

such that a person moving in a circle would have his right hand toward the center. The

word deiseal is derived from the Celtic deas, meaning “right hand,

” and iul, meaning

“direction.

”

THE FACTORY HOUSE

Built from 1786 to 1790, the majestic Factory House in Oporto is one of the last “factories” of its kind in

Europe. In its original sense, a factory was a trading association made up of merchants called factors.

From the early 1500s onward, the British built impressive, fortresslike factory houses all along their trade

routes, from London to Africa, India, and China. The factories served as members-only meeting places,

where British merchants conducted business in wine, gold, ivory, and spices. Importantly, the factory

house was also the center of British social life, and many factory houses, like the one in Oporto, have

lavish dining rooms, dessert rooms, libraries, drawing rooms, map rooms, writing rooms, and ballrooms.

Interestingly, until 1843, women were forbidden from dining at the Factory House (and therefore not

allowed to enjoy the copious amounts of Port—plus Bordeaux and Champagne—that flowed during and

after the members’ lengthy lunches and dinners). They were, however, always permitted to attend the

balls, their presence there being somewhat more necessary. T oday, thanks to consolidation within the

Port industry, the Factory House in Oporto belongs to just a few Port shippers. T o be a member, an

individual must be British, and a director of a Port company. Members pay annual “dues” of twenty cases

of vintage Port each year. And while the Factory House is not open to the public, the shippers who own it

entertain frequently, allowing a considerable number of guest visitors to experience its history and

splendor each year.

Drinking Port is the easiest part. Any good-size wineglass will do. (The glass should be

large enough to allow the Port to be swirled.) Generally about 2¹ to 3¹ ounces (74 to 104

milliliters) of Port is poured in the glass—a slightly smaller amount, in other words, than

you would pour of a table wine.

As for aging, some Ports are made so that they can be drunk right away; others will

mature and improve if stored well. The two main styles of Port that improve with age are

vintage Port and single-quinta vintage Port. These can be cellared a long time—as much

as three decades or more.

HOW LONG WILL AN OPENED BOTTLE OF PORT LAST?

Because Port is both fortified and sweet, an opened bottle lasts longer than an opened bottle of regular

table wine. Precisely how long is dependent on a variety of factors including how old and fragile it is and

whether or not it was exposed to considerable oxygen during its production. Here are some guidelines

for the three leading styles:

TYPE OF PORT WILL LAST

Aged T awny Late-Bottled Vintage Vintage, Single-Quinta

Vintage

1 month to 6 months

1 week to 1 month

From 1 day for an old, delicate vintage Port to 2 weeks or more for a

younger, robust one

Sandeman was founded in 1790 by George Sandeman, the son of a Scottish cabinetmaker . With a £30 loan from his

father and the goal of making a “modest fortune,

” the younger Sandeman set up shop, ultimately establishing Sandeman

as a leading producer of both Port and Sherry.

PORTUGAL’S NATIONAL DISH

Dried salted cod—bacalhau—is Portugal’s national dish. Although the fish is also

popular in Spain and the south of France, no place is more passionate about bacalhau

than Portugal, where, it is said, there are at least a year’s worth of different recipes for

it.

By the time Columbus journeyed to America, the Portuguese were fishing for cod as

far away as the Grand Banks of Newfoundland. The best bacalhau was salted at sea

with sea salt from the area south of Lisbon, called Setúbal (an area also famous for its

dessert wine), after which the salted cod would be dried onshore. The large, white,

almost mummified fish can be seen hanging in bacalerias, shops that specialize in the

fish. T o prepare it, the fish is soaked for one to two days in several changes of water.

This removes the salt and rehydrates the flesh. The fish is then cooked in any of a

number of ways. In a very popular version, it’s flaked, then whipped and cooked with

extra virgin olive oil, potatoes, fried onions, and cream, until it has a thick, creamy

texture somewhere between that of scrambled eggs and mashed potatoes. In my own

experience, the bacalhau occasionally served to guests who visit Quinta do Vesuvio

comes as close to perfection as any cod dish in the world.

THE BOTTLE’S BEGINNINGS

We have grown so used to bottled wine that we perhaps forget that wine bottles are a relatively recent

invention. For most of wine’s history, it was sold (and often consumed) directly from the barrel. The first

wine in the world to be successfully sold in cylindrical bottles was Port, sometime around 1775. Indeed,

the advent of the cylindrical bottle permitted the style of vintage Port to be born, since the wine could now

be laid down in bins for long periods of maturing and aging in the bottle.

All other Ports—tawny, reserve, and late-bottled vintage—are ready to drink when

released, although they can also be stored for about two years (or sometimes more)

without loss of quality. And here’s a visual cue to aging: Ports that can be drunk right

away generally have a stopper-type cork (a cork with a cap on top of it). This will be

immediately obvious upon removing the foil. Ports that improve with age, such as vintage

Port, are sealed with a regular cork (the kind that requires a corkscrew). These should be

stored lying down. Notice that Port bottles themselves are generally black, to prevent

oxidation and help preserve the freshness of the Port should it be kept for significantly

long periods of time.

WHEN YOU VISIT… PORTUGAL

VIRTUALL Y all of the Port shippers have lodges in Vila Nova de Gaia, across the river from

Oporto. Most offer fascinating tours in English, plus tastings.

VISITING THE QUINTAS, far inland where the grapes are grown, is more difficult. Generally

only members of the wine industry are allowed to do so. Plus, there aren’t many hotels—

although, for anyone who loves wine, the Douro’s elegant vineyard estate and hotel known as

Quinta da Romaneira is one of the most luxurious hotels in the whole country and worth the

long drive on the nightmarishly narrow, steep roads of the inner Douro.

The Ports to Know

All of the wines below are blends of any combination of touriga nacional, touriga franca (these are usually the two

leading varieties), plus tinta barroca, tinta roriz, tinta amarela, tinto cão, and other traditional grapes that are

sometimes still interplanted in the vineyard. Often, the exact varietal breakdown of a wine is not available, and thus

it is not listed below. (Instead, many shippers provide statistics on the percentage of a variety planted, as opposed to

the percentage of that variety used in the wine.) In any case, the percentage of each grape variety used varies each

year.

Note that the labels on Port bottles always refer to Porto, the Portuguese word for Port.

TAYLOR FLADGATE

10-Y ear-Old Tawny Port

A scrumptious tawny, full of walnut, brown sugar, and vanilla flavors, yet still young enough to have hints of spicy

berry flavors as well. Ten-year-old tawnies are generally less complex than twenty-year-olds, but they can make up

for it, as this one does, with zesty flavors. Taylor is also renowned for its rich, powerful vintage Ports and the

stunningly delicious single-quinta Port, Quinta de V argellas.

W. & J. GRAHAM’S

20-Y ear-Old Tawny Port

The wines of Graham’s always evoke velvet and voluptuousness. Of all of the Port shippers, none is more

dependable for making wines that always possess a hedonistic, mind-blowing richness. This hauntingly good

twenty-year-old tawny is an example. Y ou could tease apart the aromas and flavors (butter-roasted nuts, brown

sugar, exotic spices, and crème brûlée) or you could just feel and sense the luxuriousness and be transported by the

complexity.

RAMOS PINTO

Late-Bottled Vintage Port

One of the top Port shippers to be founded by a Portuguese family, Ramos Pinto makes some of the richest, raciest

LBVs in the Douro. A typical Ramos Pinto LBV is very elegant, yet has remarkable tensile strength and torrents of

plum, spice, and mocha flavors. The firm’s vintage Ports are getting more stellar by the vintage. Adriano Ramos

Pinto founded the house in 1880, when he was just twenty-one years old. Owned today by the French Champagne

house of Louis Roederer, the firm is still run on a daily basis by the Ramos Pinto family, and houses a museum

showcasing the art collection that the family has been building for over 130 years.

W. & J. GRAHAM’S

Vintage Port

Graham’s is usually among the most sensuous of all vintage Ports. Typically, blueberry fruit soars in your mouth

and then explodes over and over again—like a brilliant rush of fireworks. In great vintages, the combination of

ultra-rich fruit, lots of chocolate and black tea flavors, plus supple, powerful tannin and the wine’s impeccable

balance is unbeatable. All of Graham’s vintage Ports are trodden by foot.

NIEPOORT

Vintage Port

Niepoort is a small, family-owned firm producing what are usually thrilling vintage Ports since 1842. Rich and

beautifully balanced, they are full of sweet, powerful fruit. The firm is known as well for its legendary colheita

Ports, reserve aged tawnies with absolutely mesmerizing syrupy brown sugar and vanilla flavors.

QUINTA DO INFANTADO

Single-Quinta Vintage Port

The vintage Ports from the tiny firm Quinta do Infantado (“Quinta of the Prince”) are chocolaty/spicy Ports with

briary anise and nutmeg flavors. The fruit is lush, nuanced, almost feminine in its elegance. For years the wine

made at Quinta do Infantado was sold to larger Port shippers such as Taylor Fladgate and Graham’s. That changed

in 1979, when the Roseira family, which has owned the estate for over one hundred years, led the region in fighting

for changes in the law to allow small producers to bottle and sell their own wine. Today, all of the firm’s production

is estate bottled. Every grape used at the quinta is handpicked and trodden by foot.

DOW’S

SENHORA DA RIBEIRA

Single-Quinta Vintage Port

Owned by the important Port shipper Dow, the small Senhora da Ribeira (Lady of the River) estate makes

extraordinary single-quinta Ports (in especially great years, the grapes go into Dow’s vintage Port). These are Ports

with a softness and smoothness that are so profound, one might imagine the touch of a baby’s cheek. The flavors,

however, are anything but subdued—a mad dance of bursting blueberries, violets, licorice, minerals, and the exotic

taste of the menthol-like resinous shrub that grows wild over the mountains (esteva). The old estate includes a

chapel right by the river, a place where travelers could be blessed (and pray) before they crossed the turbulent

waters.

TAYLOR FLADGATE

Vintage Port

Highly sought after, Taylor’s vintage Ports are always among the most expensive. They’re also among the most

difficult to drink young. Unlike many vintage Ports, Taylor’s are initially secretive and cloaked by a dense curtain

of tannin. But with fifteen or so years of maturation, the top Taylor vintage Ports undergo a transformation that

defies prediction. Elegant and sophisticated, they exude finesse and richness. Taylor’s history is filled with firsts:

first Port shipper to purchase vineyards in the Douro V alley (in 1744), first to produce single-quinta vintage Port,

and the inventor of late-bottled vintage Port. The estate is also the only Port company to have remained 100 percent

family owned in its considerable—it was founded in 1692—history.

QUINTA DO VESUVIO

Vintage Port

Considered by many to be the most magnificent traditional estate in the Douro V alley, the remote Quinta do

V esuvio was founded in the mid-1500s on a brilliantly sunlit, south-facing bank, virtually cantilevered over the

river’s edge, with jaw-dropping views in all directions. For centuries, the hand-built terraced vineyards (which took

hundreds of men decades to hew out of the schist and rock) were considered jewels of the Douro. Today, the

vineyards (many of them old) and neo-Baroque manor house and chapel are owned by the Symington family. Only

vintage Port is produced on the estate, and the grapes are entirely trodden by foot. The wine is immaculate. When

young, it is explosive with blueberry, violet, cocoa powder, black fig, and mineral notes; when aged, it is

langorously supple and silky, yet still vivid and pure.

Old casks of verdelho aging in Blandy’ s lodge. Between the long heating process (which for the very best Madeiras takes

place in barrels), then the subsequent long barrel aging process, the finest Madeiras may age a total of forty years or

more.

MADEIRA

Fortified, oxidized, maderized, and aged for as long as two hundred years, Madeira has no

equal in the wine world. In fact, Madeira is unique and so hard to make, it’s remarkable

that the wine is still around today (a testament, surely, to its utter deliciousness). Here is

Madeira’s story.

The wine Madeira comes from a small cluster of volcanic islands, the largest and most

important of which is also called Madeira—from ilha da madeira,

“island of the woods.

”

Although Madeira and its tiny sister islands are geographically part of Africa (about 310

miles/500 kilometers west of the Moroccan coast), they are nonetheless a province of

Portugal, some 620 miles (1,000 kilometers) to the northeast. In fact, the islands were

discovered in 1419 or 1420 (accounts differ), when the Portuguese explorer Prince Henry

the Navigator instructed the sea captain João Gonçalves Zarco to explore the coast of

Africa and establish a port of call that could be used as a provisions stop by ships bound

for the East Indies or the Americas.

Ultimately, no wine would become more a part of the United States’ beginnings. Drunk

by the founding fathers during the signing of the Declaration of Independence, Madeira

was also what Francis Scott Key sipped as he composed “The Star-Spangled Banner.

”

George Washington (who reportedly drank a pint every night with dinner), Thomas

Jefferson, and Benjamin Franklin all adored it, as did John Adams (who wrote to his wife,

Abigail, about the copious amounts they consumed during the Continental Congress). By

the end of the eighteenth century, nearly a fourth of all the Madeira produced was being

exported to the American colonies. Among the colonial well-to-do, Madeira parties—

forerunners of the American cocktail party—became commonplace.

The unbridled American passion for Madeira was certainly a testament to its

compelling flavor. But Madeira’s popularity was equally based on something far more

mundane: taxes. As of 1665, British governing authorities in the colonies had banned the

importation of European goods, unless they were shipped on British ships that had sailed

from British ports (and paid British taxes). Merchandise shipped from Madeira was

exempted. Merchants in Madeira took full advantage of the loophole, establishing close

trading relationships with merchants in Baltimore, Boston, New Y ork, Savannah,

Charleston, and Philadelphia. As American corn and cotton flowed out of the colonies,

Madeira wine flowed in.

THE LAND AND THE VINEYARDS

As is true in most of Portugal, growing grapes in Madeira is a herculean undertaking. The

island’s formidable terrain and maritime climate are significant obstacles to success, but

then almost everything about Madeira is rather miraculous, including the intricate and

painstaking manner by which the wine is made (more on this in a moment).

The main island and its minuscule sisters are the tops of a vast mountain range under

the Atlantic Ocean (thought by some to be the lost continent of Atlantis). V olcanic in

origin, these summits are deeply fissured peaks of basalt (cooled lava), stacked

accordionlike one next to the other and separated by narrow ravines.

The main island (where all of the vineyards are located) possesses just over 1,000 acres

(400 hectares) of grapevines. While bananas and sugarcane are grown extensively near the

coasts, grapes tend to be grown higher up in the mountains, nearer the tops of the peaks—

at altitudes from 600 to 1,300 feet (180 to 400 meters). Because the sheer cliff faces are

difficult to cultivate, terraces were built by hand centuries ago (much as they were in the

Douro). Necessarily, the vineyards themselves are often just tiny plots (locally referred to

as jardim—gardens). Even today, they are tended and harvested by hand (at considerable

expense), for machinery has proven virtually impossible to use in this landscape.

THE FLAVOR OF HISTORY

If you want to taste something really old, Madeira is the answer. While finding a bottle of Bordeaux from,

say, the 1960s can be daunting (not to mention fiscally dangerous), Madeiras that are a century old or

more can easily be found in specialty wine shops. Indeed, vintage Madeiras that go back to the founding

of the United States, in 1776, are known to exist. (For my part, I have tasted Blandy’s Madeiras back to

the awesome, luscious 1811, which redefined my notion of exquisite.) What makes these centurions

especially outstanding is, of course, their spellbinding complexity and aliveness. Properly sealed, a bottle

of Madeira will easily outlive its owner, and remain in excellent condition throughout its life. Importantly,

because it’s already been oxidized and maderized, Madeira is nearly indestructable. During colonial

times (pre-refrigeration), this fact made Madeira especially appealing in the American South, where

bottles could survive over decades of hot summers without any ill effects.

Although the islands are on the same parallel as Los Angeles and Jerusalem, they get a

lot of rain—more, in fact, than London. But luckily, most of it falls in winter—between

October and April, when the vines are mostly dormant. Nonetheless, mold and mildew are

threats, and some vineyards are planted up on high trellises so that they are lifted way

above the ground and dew. A potentially more serious danger is the leste, an intense heat

wave blowing off the Sahara desert, which can cover the vines in sand and dust and raise

the temperature to more than 100°F (38°C) for weeks at a time.

HOW MADEIRA IS MADE

Like Port, Madeira is a fortified wine (17 to 20 percent alcohol by volume) that started out

unfortified. During the Age of Exploration (from the late fifteenth century into the

sixteenth) unfortified Madeira was part of the provisions picked up by merchant ships

traveling to Africa, the East Indies, and the New World. Baked in a sweltering hold, the

unfortified wine spoiled quickly. Soon, small amounts of distilled alcohol (made from

sugarcane) were being added to stabilize the wine. Later, by the late seventeenth century,

brandy (rather than simple distilled alcohol) was added, which not only helped preserve

the wine, but added a new dimension to its flavor.

Madeira fortified with brandy turned out to be a remarkable product. Aged over years

on a rolling ship in the equatorial heat, this Madeira became a deliciously rich, velvety

wine. In time, the most prized Madeiras of all were the so-called vinhos da roda, Madeiras

that had taken a round-trip tropical cruise from Portugal to India and back again. As

sensational as they were, they were also exorbitantly expensive to produce. Eventually,

Madeira’s winemakers thought of ways to replicate the effects of a trip halfway around the

globe—without actually having to leave home.

To make Madeira, a winemaker starts out as he would with any wine. Grapes are

harvested, crushed, pressed, and fermented in barrels or tanks.

In the case of Madeira, the grapes include the white grapes—sercial, verdelho,

terrantez, bual (also known as boal and malvasia fina), and malmsey (technically the same

as malvasia branca de São Jorge)—plus the red grape tinta negra mole (also known as

negramoll). Historians believe that most of these grapes were brought to the island in the

fifteenth century from northern Portugal. As we’ll see, all but tinta negra mole are used

independently to create a separate style of Madeira. (See The Grapes and Styles of

Madeira, page 534.)

As with Port, brandy is added to the fermenting grapes at a very specific point. The

brandy kills the yeasts, halts the fermentation, and leaves a fortified wine that has some of

the sweetness of the original grapes. How much sweetness depends on when the brandy is

added. If the brandy is added early in the fermentation, a lot of sweetness will be left. If

the brandy is added at the tail end of fermentation, the Madeira will be almost dry.

But Madeira’s toffee-caramel-butterscotch-cocoa-curry-like character comes not only

as a result of the grapes used and the sweetness left in the wine. Next, the Madeira-to-be

will be maderized and oxidized.

During maderization, the Madeira is heated—either slowly and naturally in hot attics

(simulating months and sometimes years of heat in the hold of a ship sailing through the

tropics), or by a process known as estufagem (esh-too-FAH-jaym) in specially designed

tanks that can be heated. Indeed, the term for heating wine—maderization—originates

from the word Madeira itself.

Several methods can be employed to maderize the wine, depending on the quality of

the Madeira being made. For basic, inexpensive Madeira, the fortified base wine is placed

in large vats fitted with serpentine stainless-steel heating coils. The wine is then slowly

heated to a maximum temperature of 131°F (55°C) for three to six months—a method of

estufagem called cuba de calor. Importantly, the wine is heated very, very slowly, for

heated too quickly, the wine takes on a slightly burnt flavor and ages prematurely.

Another method—armazém de calor—involves storing large casks of the fortified wine

in specially designed rooms that can be heated like a sauna. This slightly more gentle

process can last for six months to a year.

STENCILED BOTTLES

Just as they were hundreds of years ago, bottles of vintage Madeira continue to be stenciled, rather than

labeled with a paper label. The process, done by hand by older women in the producers’ lodges, dates

from a time when the island was so poor and isolated that shipments of paper from the mainland could

not be depended upon.

However, for the very finest Madeiras (a minuscule 3 percent of all Madeiras made) the

heating is carried out naturally, more or less as it was done centuries ago. By this method

(called canteiro), casks of the best wines are placed in rooms in the producers’ lodges

(warehouses), which, sitting under the hot Madeiran sun, eventually build up tremendous

heat. There the casks remain undisturbed, usually for about twenty years, although

sometimes as long as one hundred years or more.

Importantly, the casks are not filled to the brim, nor are they topped up. The

combination of time, heat, and oxygen has a superb mellowing effect on the wine, creating

an inimitable texture and flavor.

But the Madeira isn’t quite done yet. After the heating process is complete, the wine is

carefully and slowly cooled and allowed to rest (sometimes for a year or more, to recover

from the sustained heat). When the wine is deemed well rested, it is aged even further.

For the finest Madeiras, this aging process is also lengthy and involved. The wines are

put into casks made from various woods—usually American oak, but sometimes chestnut,

Brazilian satinwood, or even mahogany. Again, the casks are not filled to the top; instead,

a head space is deliberately left so that the wine continues to slowly oxidize, mellowing

the flavors even more.

Unbelievable as it may be, a fine Madeira is usually aged twenty years or more after

the twenty-year heating process but before blending and bottling (and this doesn’t count

the time that it might be aged further in bottle in someone’s cellar). Thus, many great

Madeiras are at least forty years in the making!

THE GRAPES AND STYLES OF MADEIRA

The very best Madeiras—and the ones you should taste—are made from one of five white

grapes designated as “noble” by the Madeira Wine Institute. These are sercial, verdelho,

terrantez, bual, and malmsey. Conveniently, the names of these grapes are also used to

designate the styles of Madeira (so I have not included a separate box on the grapes of this

region). I’ll start with the driest style (sercial) and move to the sweetest (malmsey).

But before I get to the big five styles, know that there are also inexpensive, basic

Madeiras that have little of the refinement or complexity of sercial, verdelho, terrantez,

bual (boal), or malmsey. Most of these basic-quality Madeiras are made from the red

grape tinta negra mole (the name means “black soft”), and come designated as either dry,

medium dry, medium sweet, or sweet. Among these basic Madeiras, the light style known

as Rainwater (said to be the accidental result of casks left out in the rain) is fairly popular.

But all of these basic Madeiras are, in my opinion, better for cooking than drinking, and in

fact, because the wine is already maderized and oxidized, you can leave a bottle handy

right beside the stove.

SERCIAL: The driest style (see The Sweetness Level of Each Madeira Style, page 535).

Sercial grapes are grown in the coolest vineyards. The difficulties they encounter in

ripening make for tart base wines. These in turn lead to tangy, elegant Madeiras with a

bracing, almost salty grip and a dry, nutty flavor that I always imagine to be like caramel

minus any sweetness.

VERDELHO: The medium-dry style. V erdelho grapes, grown in slightly warmer vineyards,

ripen more easily, making for Madeiras that are exquisitely balanced and somewhat more

full-bodied than sercials.

TERRANTEZ: A rare style based on a rare grape that is difficult to grow. It typically falls

between verdelho and bual in sweetness and body.

BUAL: Another rare style; this one, medium-rich. Bual grapes (or boal, as it is sometimes

spelled) are grown in warm vineyards, producing concentrated Madeiras with sweet

richness. Bual was a great favorite in English officers’ clubs in India because it was a

lighter wine than either malmsey or Port. Bual/boal is the same as the grape variety

malvasia fina.

MALMSEY: The richest, sweetest style. Also known as malvasia (once again, in this case,

the malvasia is malvasia branca de São Jorge), these grapes are grown in the warmest

locations, usually on the south side of the island, producing superripe grapes and

ultimately, Madeiras of astonishing richness.

THE QUALITY LEVELS OF MADEIRA

In addition to styles of Madeira, there are also quality levels. In ascending order, they are

three-year-old, five-year-old, ten-year-old, fifteen-year-old, solera, colheita, and vintage

Madeiras, known as frasqueira.

THREE-YEAR-OLD MADEIRA: These are Madeiras made from tinta negra mole grapes that

undergo a quick heating process and are then aged at least three years, usually in tanks, not

casks. These are sometimes labeled “finest,

” and are totally fine… for cooking.

THE SWEETNESS LEVEL OF EACH MADEIRA

STYLE

Here are the sweetness levels of the top Madeiras. Keep in mind that the generally high

level of acidity in fine Madeira means that even at, say, 6 percent residual sugar, a

Madeira can taste quite dry.

SERCIAL: 0 to 6 percent residual sugar VERDELHO: 6 to 7.5 percent residual sugar

TERRANTEZ: 7 to 8 percent residual sugar

BUAL: 7.5 to 10 percent residual sugar MALMSEY: 10 percent or more residual sugar

FIVE-YEAR-OLD RESERVE MADEIRA: This is the minimum quality level for a Madeira

labeled with one of the noble varieties, sercial, verdelho, terrantez, bual, or malmsey. A

five-year-old reserve is a blended Madeira in which the youngest component in the blend

is aged at least five years in casks.

TEN-YEAR-OLD SPECIAL RESERVE MADEIRA: Higher still in quality are Madeiras, often made

from the noble grapes, where the youngest component in the blend is aged at least ten

years in casks. These special reserve Madeiras must go through the heating process

naturally in casks, not tanks.

FIFTEEN-YEAR-OLD EXTRA RESERVE MADEIRA: Even better yet. The youngest component

must be aged at least fifteen years. These wines are also maderized in casks (not in tanks)

and are usually made from noble grapes.

SOLERA MADEIRA: While they can still be found on the market, these wines are very rare,

and can no longer be produced, according to European Union law. Like Sherry, solera

Madeiras are made by an intricate process of fractional blending (see How the Solera

Works, page 458).

COLHEITA MADEIRA: Sometimes called “harvest” Madeiras, colheitas are a relatively new

type of Madeira. They are made from grapes grown in a single year, then bottled after

spending at least five years aging. The first colheita Madeira was a Blandy’s 1994

Malmsey released in 2000. These are, in effect, early-bottled frasqueira wines. They must

be made from the five noble varieties.

FRASQUEIRA OR VINTAGE MADEIRA: This is the ultimate quality level, and the wines can be

ravishing in their complexity. Vintage Madeiras are wines of a single year. Remarkably,

vintage Madeira must be aged at least twenty years in cask after the heating period, and

then an additional two years in the bottle. Vintage Madeira must be made from one of the

five noble grapes.

MADEIRA PRODUCERS

Although there were more than two dozen producers exporting Madeira at the time of the American

Revolution, by the second decade of the twenty-first century, fewer than ten remained. T oday, the largest

distinguished firm is the Madeira Wine Company, which owns most of the top brands, including Blandy’s,

Cossart Gordon, Leacock’s, and Miles. The Madeira Wine Company is partly owned by the Symington

family, which also owns many top Port firms, including Warre’s, Dow’s, Graham’s, Quinta do Vesuvio,

and Smith Woodhouse. In addition, the Rare Wine Company, based in Sonoma, California, in association

with the Madeira firm Vinhos Barbeito, produces a historic series of Madeiras based on the top fine

Madeiras once sold in Boston, New York, Savannah, and New Orleans.

SERVING MADEIRA

Madeira is best served in a good-size white wine glass, so that there’s enough room to

swirl the wine. Sercials and verdelhos—the drier styles—are usually served cool; the

sweeter styles—buals and malmseys—are served at coolish room temperature.

All styles of Madeira have a gripping backbone of natural acidity, making them

refreshing to drink on their own but also exquisite counterpoints to food. Sercial and

verdelho are dramatic aperitifs and delicious with first-course salads or soups. Bual and

luscious malmsey can be desserts in themselves, but their racy acidity also means they are

among the world’s best juxtapositions to the richness of desserts made with cream or

chocolate. One of my most favorite combinations in the world is chocolate chip cookies

with Malmsey Madeira.

Finally, an opened bottle of Madeira lasts nearly forever. After everything it’s been

through—fortification, extreme heat, long aging in the presence of oxygen—Madeira is

pretty indestructible.

The Ponte de Lima, a bridge in the Minho region of northern Portugal, leads to the church of San António. During the

Middle Ages, the Minho was governed by Benedictine monks.

PORTUGUESE TABLE WINES

THE MINHO | THE DOURO | DÃO | BAIRRADA | ALENTEJO

Historically, there have been two Portugals—the famous Portugal that made Port and the

obscure Portugal that made dry table wines. The two worlds rarely overlapped, and the

vast majority of producers made either one style of wine or the other, not both. Port was

renowned but, with one or two exceptions, the country’s table wines were less than

inspired. Most were the cheap products of cooperatives.

But in the years following Portugal’s entry into the European Economic Community in

1986, the picture slowly began to change. By the last decade of the twentieth century,

some of the most underrated dry red and white table wines in Europe were coming from

Portugal. Bold, distinctive reds and fresh, flavorful whites, they were delicious and often

good values. And they still are. But for the first time, Portugal’s top wine firms are now

also taking higher aim and making phenomenal dry wines—reds in particular—priced like

top cabernet sauvignons from Napa V alley or Bordeaux.

THE GRAPES OF PORTUGAL–TABLE WINES

Portugal has more than 250 grape varieties, and most table wines are blends of several of them. Below

are the major grapes, most of them native to the Iberian Peninsula.

WHITES

ALVARINHO: Portuguese grape, well known for being one of the main grapes used to make many vinho

verdes, although more than twenty other white grapes are also permitted. It is known as albariño in

Galicia, Spain, next door.

ARINTO: Used throughout Portugal in dozens of blended wines. Commonly used in vinho verde (where

it is known as pederña) for its good balance of freshness and fruitiness.

AVESSO: A full-bodied white used in blends in the Minho region to produce white table wines and vinho

verdes.

ENCRUZADO: A leading grape in the simple white wines of the Dão.

GOUVEIO AND VIOSINHO: Commonly blended together—sometimes along with malvasia fina—to

make white table wines in the Douro. Also used for white Port.

LOUREIRO AND TRAJADURA: Along with pederña (arinto) frequently used in making vinho verde,

usually blended with each other.

MALVASIA FINA: Portuguese grape native to either the Douro or the Dão and today a leading grape in

the white wines of the Dão.

REDS

ALFROCHEIRO PRETO, BASTARDO, AND JAÉN: Important grapes in the Dão, where they contribute

spice and acidity.

ARAGONEZ: One of the Portuguese names for the Spanish grape tempranillo. A leading grape used to

make wines in the Alentejo region.

AZAL TINTO (AKA AMARAL) AND VINHÃO: Two of the leading grapes commonly blended together to

make the sharp but fresh-tasting red vinho verde.

BAGA: The word means “berry” in Portuguese. Grown in almost all regions, but especially important in

Bairrada. T annic and acidic.

PERIQUITA: The word means “parakeet” in Portuguese. One of the leading grapes used to make wines

in the Alentejo, and grown in other regions as well.

TINTA BARROCA, TOURIGA FRANCA, TINTA RORIZ, TINTO CÃO, AND TOURIGA TINTA RORIZ,

TINTO CÃO, AND TOURIGA NACIONAL: Well-established Portuguese grapes, often blended together

to make table wines in the Douro and sometimes the Dão. Most are also used in the making of Port.

TRINCADEIRA PRETA: One of the leading grapes used to make wines in the Alentejo. Also known as

tinta amarela.

Portuguese table wines are almost always blends of many grape varieties rarely found

elsewhere. Most of these are thought to be Phoenician in origin, or varieties that are

thought to have originated on the Iberian Peninsula. Indeed, some Portuguese table wines

are still based on centuries-old field blends, with potentially a dozen or more varieties

interplanted in the vineyard. For red wines (a majority of the table wines made are red),

the most common varieties are also the major varieties used for Port (see page 514), but

other varieties also show up, including jaén, alfrocheiro preto, periquita, and baga, among

others.

As is true almost everywhere in Europe, Portuguese wines are named not by grape

variety, but by region. Here are the top five wine regions, going from north to south.

Historically, with the exception of the Minho, all of the regions were better known for red

wines than white, although Portuguese table whites are now making great strides in

quality and are thus attracting a following.

Quinta de Covela in the Minho. The 16th-century estate, which was recently restored, specializes in unique blends that

combine Portuguese and French varieties.

THE MINHO

In the far northwest, just below the Spanish border, the fertile, rolling green hills are

crammed with orchards and farm crops (corn, potatoes, and beans). This is the Minho, one

of the most agriculturally productive regions of the country, and the region where many

bold, fresh-tasting white table wines are made. Among these is one of Portugal’s most

popular white wines—vinho verde.

Vinho verde (literally,

“green wine”) used to be a light, low-alcohol, inexpensive white

with a touch of spritz meant for washing down humble fish dishes. Today, however, more

serious vinho verdes are being made—wines with greater flavor intensity and no fizz. The

word verde (green), by the way, refers not to the wine’s color but to the fact that

historically vinho verde was a young wine meant to be drunk soon after it was made. In

days past, so immediate was the consumption of vinho verde that many producers didn’t

even bother to put a vintage date on the bottle.

Vinho verde can be made from any of twenty-five white grapes, or a combination of

them. The best wines, however, come from alvarinho, trajadura, and loureiro (known as

albariño, treixadura, and loureira in Rías Baixas, the Spanish wine region next door), as

well as with the grape arinto, one of Portugal’s fascinatingly fresh, citrusy whites. Indeed,

in the past few years, the top vinho verdes have improved so much in quality that they

seem very much like their Rías Baixas sisters—the vinho verde from Quinta das Arcas, for

example. One of the most serious producers to watch here is Anselmo Mendes.

YO, NEW YORKAS… WHO’S THE QUEEN IN QUEENS?

The borough of Queens, part of New Y ork City, was named after the Princess of Portugal, Catherine of

Braganza, who became Queen of England in 1662. It was during the reign of her husband, King Charles

II, that the colony of New Amsterdam became New Y ork, and Queens was named to honor Catherine.

A large percentage of vinho verde is not white but red. Red “green” wine is usually not

exported, but when you’re in Portugal, don’t pass up a chance to try it. A shocking

magenta in color, red vinho verde can be fascinating, but it can also be as bitingly acidic

as red wine gets. This is considered a plus, given the region’s rustic bean, pork, and oily

codfish dishes.

All of this said, know that vinho verde is only one of the DOs (denominations) in the

Minho. For as good as the best vinho verdes are, some of the most avant-garde, intriguing

whites are simply labeled Minho and are based on varieties not used for vinho verde. A

good example is Quinta de Covela’s terrific dry white that is a blend of avesso,

chardonnay, viognier, and gewürztraminer.

THE DOURO

While the Douro is famous for Port (see page 511), it’s also the up-and-coming region for

Portugal’s top dry red table wines—and there are many: Quinta do V esuvio’s Pombal do

V esuvio, Chryseia, Wine & Soul Pintas, Quinta do Malhô, Grande Escolha Piheiros,

Quinta da Gricha, Quinta do V allado, and Conceito among them. These are structured,

powerful wines with dark, peaty flavors and a juicy black fig character (imagine Port if it

wasn’t fortified or sweet). They are aged in new French oak barrels and often possess a

unique, resinous chaparral aroma not unlike the smell of esteva, a rock rose that grows

along the terrace walls in the vineyards.

The vineyards for Douro table wines are, like the vineyards for Port, on rocky hillsides

of schist. Of the nearly forty grapes allowed, some of the principal red grapes are the same

as those used for Port: touriga franca, touriga nacional, tinta roriz, tinta barroca, tinto cão,

sousão, and the spicy grape tinta da barca.

THE W AY WE WERE: LANCERS AND MATEUS

For any American in the baby boomer generation who began drinking wine in college,

the two big date-night wines were Lancers and Mateus. Both wines are slightly

sparkling, slightly sweet Portuguese rosés, and both played a phenomenally important

role in the culture of wine in the U.S. in the 1950s,

’60s, and ’70s (both wines are still

available today).

Lancers, produced by the historic Portuguese firm J. M. da Fonseca, was the 1944

brainchild of an American wine merchant named Henry Behar, who was looking for a

rosé that would suit post-World War II American tastes. Behar named the wine after Las

Lanzas (The Lancers), his favorite painting by the Spanish master Velázquez. From the

beginning, it was bottled in the dark red crockery bottle that became its signature.

Mateus had been created two years earlier, in 1942, by Fernando van Zeller

Guedes, founder of the Portuguese firm Sogrape. A blend of several grapes, including

baga, tinta barroca, and touriga franca, Mateus came in squat, flaskshaped bottles,

modeled on the water canteens soldiers carried during World War I. More than a billion

bottles have been sold since the brand began. Finally, while it is said that Queen

Elizabeth II regularly ordered Mateus as an accompaniment to her dinners at the Savoy

Hotel, Mateus’s most legendary customer may well have been Jimi Hendrix, who didn’t

bother with a glass, but drank it straight from the flask instead.

Harvesting touriga nacional grapes in the Dão. Portugal’ s red table wines are loaded with personality.

DÃO

Another one of Portugal’s most promising regions for red table wines, the Dão began to

produce markedly better wines in the late 1980s, after the government rescinded the law

requiring that all grapes grown in the region be sold to cooperatives. The region lies about

30 miles (48 kilometers) south of the Douro River. It is enclosed on three sides by

mountains, which shelter the region from the chill and moisture of the Atlantic and give it

a Mediterranean climate.

Nearly fifty grapes are authorized for use in the region. The best of them is the red

touriga nacional, one of the major Port grapes. Other good-quality red grapes include

alfrocheiro preto, jaén, and bastardo.

SETÚBAL

According to legend, Setúbal was settled by one of Noah’s sons, Tubal, hence the region’s name. The

small peninsula, about 20 miles (32 kilometers) south of Lisbon, is known for only one wine, the famous

dessert wine also known as Setúbal. A sweet fortified wine, like Port, Setúbal is made principally from

two types of muscat grapes: moscatel de Setúbal (muscat of Alexandria) and moscatel roxo (purple

muscat). Up to 30 percent of five other indigenous grapes may be blended in.

The best Setúbals are almost hauntingly aromatic, thanks to the extraordinarily long time the grape

skins are left macerating in the wine—up to six months. The wine’s flavor is outrageously irresistible, a

rich, exotic mingling of mandarin oranges, caramel, molasses, and wild herbs. And the color can be

mesmerizing, from vivid orange-red to rich chestnut. Setúbal is usually drunk with cakes made with nuts,

such as walnut cake.

Setúbal may be vintage dated or may be a blend of wines of different ages. A Setúbal labeled twenty

years old, for example, will be a blend of several wines, the youngest of which is twenty years old. Only a

handful of companies make Setúbal, including the well-respected firm J. M. da Fonseca.

Among the leading Dão wines are Alvaro Castro Quinta da Pellada, Quinta dos

Roques, and Quinta das Marias.

BAIRRADA

Bairrada derives its name from barro, the Portuguese word for clay, which constitutes a

large percentage of the soil in the region. Bairrada is just west of the Dão, in central

Portugal, and is not far from the Atlantic Ocean. The leading grape is the juicy, acidic

baga, which by law must make up 50 percent of the blend of any red wine made there.

Some fifteen other grapes are grown.

About 60 percent of Portugal’s sparkling wines are made here, including rustic, grapey,

red sparkling wines that are often paired with the region’s specialty, roast suckling pig.

Among the top Bairrada wines are those made by Luís Pato, Caves São João, and

Campolargo.

ALENTEJO

The biggest wine region in Portugal, the Alentejo covers virtually all of the southeastern

part of the country. The hot, dry, rolling plains produce, in addition to wine, olive oil, and

cereal grains, more than half of the world’s supply of cork.

The soil here is mostly volcanic in origin and includes granite, quartz, schist, and chalk.

As in most of Portugal’s other top regions, the finest wines are red (although, increasingly,

a number of surprisingly refreshing whites are made). Among the popular red grapes are

periquita, aragonez, and trincadeira preta. The Alentejo has historically been a poor

region. Since ancient Roman times, the lack of forests here meant that wines were made in

huge earthenware amphorae. A handful of producers continue to make wine this way

today.

The top Alentejo red wines have a plummy/spicy/peppery character and come from

near the Spanish border. Among the best are Herdade do Esporão, Herdade do Sobroso,

and Herdade do Peso.

The Portuguese Table Wines to Know

WHITES

QUINTA DAS ARCAS

VINHO VERDE | MINHO

Loureiro, trajadura, and arinto

Fresh, limey, lively, and almost gingery in the way it refreshes the palate, Quinta das Arcas is among a group of

estates moving away from the vinho verdes of the past and making more dramatically flavorful wines not unlike

those of their next-door neighbor, the albariños of Rías Baixas, in Spain. The estate, founded in 1985, is one of four

small estates in Minho and Alentejo owned by the Monteiro family. The family also produces handmade cheeses on

the property.

QUINTA DE COVELA

COVELA BRANCO | MINHO

Avesso, chardonnay, viognier, and gewürztraminer

This very unusual regional blend of indigenous, modern, and aromatic grapes is phenomenally successful and has a

unique flavor that’s not quite like any single one of the grapes used to make it. Concentrated and lush (but not

heavy), the wine has floral, tropical, and citrus notes that are pure and delicious. The Covela estate is in the area of

the Minho where vinho verde is made, but the winery specializes in atypical white and red blends, some of which

incorporate French grapes such as chardonnay, viognier, and cabernet sauvignon. The estate has passed through

many hands over the years and most recently lay fallow, until it was purchased in the 2010s by a Brazilian

businessman and British journalist who have restored it to its former glory. Parts of the main building date to the

1500s, when the stone Renaissance manor, Casa de Covela, ruled over the hillside.

HERDADE DO ESPORÃO

RESERV A | ALENTEJO

Antão vaz, arinto, roupeiro, and sémillon in varying proportions

The very warm-climate Alentejo region of southern Portugal does not seem like a place where crisp, racy whites

could be made. But they are. Over thousands of years, grape varieties on the Iberian Peninsula have adapted to the

severe climate, and the wines that result can often mimic wines from regions much farther north. This white reserva

from Herdade do Esporão is a great example. Bone-dry, bracing, and full of personality, it has a spicy, citrusy

tangerine and piquant green herb character that’s cool and refreshing. Herdade do Esporão is one of the most

stunning estates of southern Portugal and includes an important archaeological site and museum, as well as olive

groves that yield some of Portugal’s most renowned and sought-after olive oils.

REDS

PRATS & SYMINGTON

CHRYSEIA | DOURO

Tinta franca, touriga nacional, tinta roriz, tinto cão in varying proportions

A 1998 joint venture by Portugal’s Symington family and Bordeaux’s Bruno Prats (former owner of Cos

d’Estournel), Chryseia is widely regarded as a marriage of Portuguese tradition with modern Bordeaux

winemaking. The wine is broodingly dark, sophisticated, structured, and evocative of bitter chocolate, cocoa, earth,

and gamey meats. Y et for all its intensity, Chryseia has an elegance that comes across in its minerality and floral

notes. The Symingtons and Prats are firm believers that the best grapes for Portuguese table wines are the intense,

highly adapted great grapes that make Port. (Indeed, this table wine comes from blocks that are also used for

vintage Port.) The name Chryseia means “golden” in Greek.

QUINTA DO VESUVIO

POMBAL DO VESUVIO | DOURO

Touriga franca, plus touriga nacional and tinta amarela

Despite their richness, Portuguese table wines have a wonderful freshness to them. Their freshness and precision

remind me of cranberries, which are more fresh than, say, cherries. Quinta do V esuvio’s Pombal do V esuvio (the

name refers to the dovecote—pombal—in the middle of these vineyards) is a vivid wine with terrific, lightly bitter

espresso flavors, plus notes of spice and peat, but also vanilla and chocolate. Quinta do V esuvio, one of the most

impressive estates of the Douro V alley, is famous for its Port. This is the second wine of the estate.

QUINTA DO V ALLADO

RESERV A | DOURO

A field blend of more than twenty grape varieties

Duoro red table wines have a flavor evocative of the landscape—a wild chaparral, raspy scrub brush character—

which tastes fantastic given the soft, dense core of black fig and tobacco flavors in these wines. Quinta do V allado,

which is also the home of the Port shipper Ferreira, is a perfect example of this, and a wine that de facto tastes more

of its place than of a certain variety or varieties. Indeed, the wine is a field blend of old vines with more than twenty

indigenous varieties interplanted, including tinta roriz, tinta amarela, and touriga franca. (Many such field blends of

old vines remain in Portugal, and the often extraordinary wines that come from them are usually expensive.)

Established in 1716, Quinta do V allado is one of the oldest and most famous quintas in the Douro V alley, and today

includes a stunning small hotel. It once belonged to Dona Antónia Adelaide Ferreira, a legendary businesswoman

in the Port trade (historically completely dominated by men), and still belongs to her descendants.

GERMANY

MOSEL | RHEINGAU | PFALZ

AHR | BADEN | FRANKEN | MITTELRHEIN | NAHE | RHEINHESSEN

GERMANY RANKS NINTH AMONG WINE-PRODUCING COUNTRIES WORLDWIDE. THE GERMANS

DRINK AN AVERAGE OF 10 GALLONS (38 LITERS) OF WINE PER PERSON PER YEAR.

Until the twentieth century there were only two great wine-producing countries: France

and Germany. While outstanding wines could occasionally be found elsewhere, no other

country came close to these two for the supremacy of their wines. Indeed, in nineteenth-

century London wine-auction and retail catalogs, German rieslings sold for more than

First Growth Bordeaux and Grand Cru Burgundy.

Germany’s vineyards lie at the northernmost extreme of where grapes can ripen

dependably. At latitudes of 49 to 51 degrees, these vineyards are as far north as Mongolia

and Newfoundland. Y et it is precisely this northern climate (along with many other factors

I’ll discuss) that gives German wines—especially rieslings—their shimmering beauty. The

best German wines are, in many ways, what all wine aspires to be: an expression of fruit

so vivid and pure that it is lifted up out of the ponderous, corporeal world of humanity and

becomes a spiritual experience.

Of course, generic wines of no particular distinction are made in Germany, just as they

are everywhere else. Cheap and sweetish, these wines (sadly) constitute many wine

drinkers’ entire experience with German wines, and give rise to the gross misconception

that German wine is categorically sweet. In fact, the top wines are just the opposite—they

are dry. I’ll address the confusion over dryness and sweetness momentarily, but for now,

know that this chapter leaves generic wines aside and focuses on Germany’s majestic

wines—wines that should not be missed by anyone who loves flavor. For an explanation

of German wine law, see the Appendix on Wine Laws, page 926.

The best German wines are, in many ways, what all wine aspires to be: an

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corporeal world of humanity and becomes a spiritual experience.

THE TERRORS (AND THRILL) OF TERROIR

At northern extremes every nuance of terroir is magnified. Something as simple as being

in the shadow of a ridge can ruin all hopes for ripeness, and hence all hopes of producing a

wine of depth and intensity. As a result, Germany’s vineyards—252,000 acres(102,000

hectares) in 2012—are the most precisely sited of any in the world. The best are always

planted on south-

, west-

, or east-facing slopes to catch the light and warmth of every

available sunbeam. (Northfacing slopes are easy to identify; they’re always vineless.)

Most of the vineyards are planted in the river valleys of the Rhine and Mosel or their

tributaries, since bodies of water act to moderate the severe climate.

Soil, too, must do its share. All of Germany’s good vineyards are planted in places with

heat-retaining soil and rocks, such as slate and basalt. When each critical puzzle piece is

fit together to form the whole picture, the wines will have just crested into ripeness, yet

still be brimming—if not glistening—with acidity.

The German word for vineyard is weinberg, literally,

“wine hill.

” Many of the

country’s best vineyards are in fact on slopes, some of them as steep as 70

percent.

THE QUICK SIP ON GERMANY

GERMANY is considered one of the world’s top producers of elegant white wines. The

country’s best rieslings, for example, have ravishing purity and concentration.

GERMAN VINEYARDS are at the northernmost extreme of where grapes can

dependably ripen.

THE MAJORITY OF FINE German wines are dry or just a touch off-dry. The exceptions

are the expensive late-harvest dessert wines beerenauslesen (BAs),

trockenbeerenauslesen trockenbeerenauslesen (TBAs), and eisweins, all of which are

crafted to be sweet.

A word on ripeness. More than any other country in the world, Germany has benefited

from climate change. For example, for most German wine regions in the 1960s and 1970s,

only two or three vintages in a decade yielded ripe grapes and were considered a success.

Today, virtually every vintage results in ripe grapes and is considered successful. To be

sure, ripeness in Germany usually proceeds incrementally (there are few heat waves), but

this is an advantage because grapes that ripen slowly have a better chance of developing

complex flavors than grapes that get ripe fast. In short, Germany’s changed climate has

had a profound impact on the wines that are now made, and how those wines are

categorized. I’ll get to that later in this chapter.

If anything has been a German constant, however, it’s acidity, and the levels are indeed

high. For example, most Champagnes clock in at 5 or 6 grams of acidity per liter and are

considered very fresh and crisp. German wines usually possess 6 to 8 grams per liter.

FROM ROME TO BURGUNDY: GERMANY’S ROOTS

Curved wine pruning knives dating back to A.D. 100 have been found near the ruins of Roman garrisons

along the Rhine River, suggesting that early wine-making in Germany was heavily influenced by Italy. But

the first documentation of winegrowing in Germany comes from the Bordeaux writer Ausonius, whose

poem “Mosella,

” written around A.D. 370, describes the meandering Rhine River and the vineyards

clinging to the steep hills along it. By the time of the Middle Ages, monks were painstakingly planting and

cultivating what are today considered the most famous vineyards. This ecclesiastical period was

Germany’s viticultural heyday, and the country is thought to have had four times as many acres of

vineyard land then than exist there today. Around the 1500s, Germany’s golden period waned due to a

changing (colder) climate, greater wine imports, and perhaps the most persuasive reason of all: Better

beer was being brewed. The final major change came in 1803, when Napoléon conquered the Rhine

region and church ownership of the vineyards ended. As happened in Burgundy, vast sweeps of vineyard

land were divided up, often into tiny parcels, and auctioned off to thousands of individuals. Indeed, today,

the structure of the German wine industry resembles that of Burgundy more than any other place.

Because of their naturally high acidity, the top German wines often appear to be

weightless on the palate. Indeed, instead of weight, most wines have tension, a dynamic

energy coursing between the wine’s acidity and fruit. Indeed, acidity is so important that

German winemakers think of it qualitatively, not just quantitatively. When acidity is at its

best, for example, it’s often described as “round acidity” or “fine acidity”

—a kind of

harmonious crispness that comes across as tiny pinpoints of energy. But acidity can also

be sour, garish, or hard—the sensory equivalent of shattering glass. My friend the vintner

Johannes Selbach, of Selbach-Oster in the Mosel region, calls this loud acidity

“Hollywood acidity.

”

Because of the wines’ naturally high levels of acidity, it’s impossible to think about (or

evaluate) a German wine in the same way you would, say, a California wine. Big and

powerful may be desirable adjectives when applied to wines from California, but German

wine-makers’ mindsets are different. What they hope to achieve are precision, finesse, and

a sense of transparency, meaning that the wine becomes a sheer reflection of the potential

flavors bound up in a vineyard.

Transparency and tension are discernible in fine German wine only because the best

wine-makers are adamant purists. They do nothing that would alter or mold the inherent

flavor of the grapes. They do not use commercial yeasts, adjust the acidity in the grapes,

chaptalize, or ferment or age the wine in new oak. And many do not even fine the wines to

clarify them.

THE LAND, THE GRAPES, AND THE VINEYARDS

Let’s have a look at grapes first. Germany is mainly a producer of white wines, although

red wines account for a surprising 40 percent of production and rosés (called weissherbst)

are also made.

THE GRAPES OF GERMANY

WHITES

GEWÜRZTRAMINER: A very good quality grape, although not widely planted. It can make excellent

wines, especially in the Pfalz.

GRAUBURGUNDER: The same as pinot gris. Makes fairly big, popular wines with good flavor,

especially in Germany’s more southern districts.

GUTEDEL: The same as chasselas in Switzerland. A minor grape made into simple wines. Mostly found

in Baden.

HUXELREBE: A relatively new cross of gutedel and courtillier musqué. A very minor grape sometimes

added to blends.

KERNER: A cross of riesling and the red grape trollinger. Although it can make delicious, simple wines,

plantings in Germany are now in decline.

MÜLLER-THURGAU: One of the most widely planted grapes. DNA typing has established it as a cross

between riesling and Madeleine royale, a table grape of unknown parentage. The vines produce larger

yields than riesling, and the quality of the wine comes nowhere close.

MUSKATELLER: Sometimes called gelber muskateller (yellow muscat), this grape is actually the

beautifully aromatic, fruity muscat blanc à petits grains. Germany’s dry muskatellers, though not made in

large quantities, rival the exquisite dry muscats of Alsace, France.

RIESLANER: A cross of riesling and silvaner, it can make good, zesty wines, especially in the Pfalz and

Franken regions.

RIESLING: Considered Germany’s greatest grape, it has remarkable finesse, elegance, and aging

potential. Grown on all the best sites.

SCHEUREBE: A cross made in 1916 of riesling and an unknown grape, specifically for use in the

Rheinhessen and Pfalz. Wines made from it have grapefruit overtones and racy acidity.

SILVANER: A major grape native to Austria, it is the same as sylvaner in the Alsace region of France. A

source of dependably good but rarely great wines. In production, it is the leading grape of Franken.

WEISSBURGUNDER: The same as pinot blanc. A minor grape, it makes neutral to good, likable wines.

The best are often from Baden, the Pfalz, and the Nahe.

REDS

BLAUER PORTUGIESER: Among reds, this grape is second in importance after spätburgunder. Makes

light, acidic red wines.

DORNFELDER: Makes popular wines that are fruity and grapey. Germany’s Beaujolais.

SPÄTBURGUNDER: The same as pinot noir. Germany’s leading and best quality red grape in terms of

production, it makes light, spicy, expensive wines.

SYRAH: Only a tiny amount is currently produced, but the potential is high.

THE MOST IMPORTANT GERMAN WINES

LEADING WINE

RIESLING white (dry and sweet)

WINES OF NOTE

GRAUBURGUNDER white

MÜLLER-THURGAU white

RIESLANER white (dry and sweet)

SCHEUREBE white (dry and sweet)

SEKT white (sparkling)

SILVANER white

SPÄTBURGUNDER red

WEISSBURGUNDER white

Of the nearly sixty grapes grown, riesling is the most prestigious. Nearly 60 percent of

all the riesling in the world is grown in Germany, and virtually all of Germany’s best

wines are made from it. (This comes as no surprise, since the grape is thought to have

originated in Germany’s Rheingau region.) For the finest wines, riesling is never blended

with another grape. Like the top pinot noirs in Burgundy, fine rieslings need to stand

alone, for the grape’s flavors are only diffused by blending.

After riesling, Germany’s next most important white grape is Müller-Thurgau, which

usually makes soft, decent, but rarely memorable wines. Müller-Thurgau was invented by

Swiss vine breeder Hermann Müller at the famous Geisenheim viticultural station in 1882.

It is a cross of riesling and Madeleine royale. Müller-Thurgau is not the only cross in

Germany. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, plant scientists there

developed a slew of them. The goal was to come up with a new variety that would be less

fragile than riesling, ripen earlier, give higher yields, and at the same time have riesling’s

complexity and flavor. Today such crosses as Scheurebe and rieslaner make good and

sometimes excellent wines, but they are rarely matches for riesling.

Germany’s red wines are well loved—especially by the Germans. It is such a triumph

to make red wines this far north that the best German reds are expensive and are

immediately snapped up on the home turf. More than 35 percent of all German vineyard

land is devoted to red grapes, the most important and widespread of which is

spätburgunder (pinot noir), which, in Germany, makes a spicy/earthy, sleek red. (One of

the most impressive and beautiful pinot noirs I have ever experienced was the 1943 pinot

noir from Kloster Eberbach, a majestic monastery and wine estate in the Rheingau.

Although it was thirty years old at the time, and the grapes were harvested—by women

and children—in the extremely difficult years before the end of World War II, the pinot

noir was as lively and vivid as a pinot noir one-fifth its age.) Dornfelder, blauer

portugieser (a variety that has nothing to do with Portugal), and trollinger (the same as the

Italian/Austrian Tyrolian variety schiava grossa) are also popular red grapes. But most

surprising of all is syrah, which, while very new in Germany, has been made into some

surprisingly delicious reds evocative of wild herbs and game.

Throughout the later Middle Ages, the impressive monolithic Kloster Eberbach, founded in 1136 in Eltville in the

Rheingau, was one of the most economically successful Cistercian monasteries in Europe thanks to its remarkable wines.

W ALL OF THE VIRGINS

Although Germany would seem like the last country to give its vineyards whimsical

names, there are dozens of them. Here are the names of a few well-known vineyards.

ESELSHAUT : Donkey hide

GOLDTRÖPFCHEN: Little raindrops of gold

HIMMELREICH: Kingdom of heaven

HONIGSÄCKEL: Honey pot, with a sexual connotation

JESUITENGARTEN: Garden of the Jesuits

JUFFERMAUER: Wall of the virgins

KALB: Veal

KATZENBEISSER: The biter of cats

LUMP: Dope; idiot

NONNENGARTEN: Nun’s garden

SAUMAGEN: Pig’s stomach

SCHNECKENHOF: Home of the snails

SIEBEN JUNGFRAUEN: Seven virgins

UNGEHEUER: Monster

WÜRZHÖLLE: Spice hell

ZWEIFELBERG: Place of doubt

The steep-terraced vineyards of Herzöglicher Weinberg in Saale-Unstrut in far northern Germany. Vineyards here are

often interspersed among stunning medieval castles.

As for the land and the vineyards, while Germany’s entire wine production amounts to

well under 5 percent of the world’s total, there are more than twenty thousand grape

growers. The best estates are often minuscule. A top Bordeaux château produces more

wine in a vintage than a top German estate produces in a decade. And yet, despite its small

size, a first-rate German winery will produce ten or more wines, and thirty to forty wines

is not uncommon. As we’ll see, this is because most vintners are working with a number

of different vineyard sites, different grape varieties, different ripeness levels, and different

sweetness levels—and keeping every single one of those wines separate. Such exacting

detail makes for dozens of different wines, and of course such exacting detail is what

makes German wine, well… German.

Wineries are usually located in small villages at the edge of the vineyards. Indeed,

German wine labels often give not only the winery name, but also the town and vineyard

names. In the past, knowledgeable German wine drinkers (like Burgundy drinkers) bought

wines based first on the reputation of the vineyard, then on the producer’s name. But

consider: Until 1971, there were more than thirty thousand individual vineyard names a

wine drinker might encounter! These were reorganized by sweeping wine laws in 1971

and pared down to about 2,600 vineyards—still a mind-boggling number.

Germany is divided into thirteen wine regions. Two of these, Saale Unstrut and

Sachsen, formerly in East Germany, were added after reunification in 1989. Of the

thirteen, three are the most important—the Mosel, the Rheingau, and the Pfalz. These

three are the main regions we will examine in the pages to come, followed by shorter

briefs on six other regions. Lastly, just so you know these terms, Germany’s thirteen wine

regions are divided into thirty-nine districts called bereiche, which themselves are divided

into 167 so-called collections of vineyards, each called a grosslage. Every grosslage, in

turn, is made up of individual vineyard sites, each called an einzellage. As of 2013, there

were 2,658 einzellagen.

UNDERSTANDING HOW GERMAN WINE IS

ORGANIZED AND CATEGORIZED

Understanding how German wines are organized and categorized is not difficult, but it’s

not self-evident either. So, in my experience, it’s helpful to have someone take you

through, step by step in a logical manner. I’ll do my best in the pages that follow. First, let

me set the context, because in this case, context is critical.

In Germany, with vineyards so far north, ripeness has always been the fulcrum around

which everything else revolves. As mentioned, however, climate change has thrown a

wrench (a good one) into the old system. Over the past decade, contemporary German

winemakers have been ecstatic to find themselves benefiting from a climate of which their

fathers could have only dreamed. But the dramatic shift in climate has also turned

Germany’s fine wine industry upside down and, for some vintners, created a whole new

way of thinking about and categorizing wines. Here lies the rub: Not all Germans have

adopted the new thinking. And almost worse, some Germans have adopted it only

partially.

So for now, there are two main independent systems that exist more or less side by side.

I’ll call them the traditional system and the modern system. The traditional system has

been in place for many decades. The modern system was begun relatively recently by an

organization of some two hundred prestigious estates called the VDP (V erband Deutscher

Prädikatsweingüter, or Association of German Prädikat Wine Estates). Alas, to

understand German wine, you have to know both systems. And most important of all,

know that some wine estates are adopting the modern system bit by bit, creating a hybrid

world of their own between the two systems.

One final point: In addition to the two main systems at work in Germany, some regions

—the Rheingau is one—have associations of members who have set up their own internal

regional systems, and their own classifications. While we won’t telescope down to these

small regional systems (many of which are currently in flux), I will address classification

terms you might see on wine labels that could prove confusing.

Grapes being crushed during the harvest in Germany.

THE RIPENESS LEVELS

In the traditional system, fine German wine can be made at six levels of ascending ripeness. The

ripeness levels are:

KABINETT : A wine made from grapes picked during the normal harvest; typically a light-bodied wine, low

in alcohol, and usually dry or off-dry. Kabinetts are easy to drink and food friendly. German wine lovers

typically drink them as casual dinner wines.

SPÄTLESE: Spät means “late.

” So spätlese wines are based on grapes harvested later than grapes for

kabinett. They are fully ripened and make wines with greater fruit intensity and a slightly fuller body than

kabinett wines. A spätlese may be dry or, like kabinett, may be off-dry. Even those with some sweetness,

however, usually do not taste sweet because of the high level of acidity in the grapes, which offsets any

impression of sweetness.

AUSLESE: Aus means “select.

” Auslesen are made from very ripe grapes harvested in select bunches—

another step upward in richness and intensity. Generally, auslesen can be made only in the best years,

which have been sufficiently warm. Picking individual bunches means that the wines are expensive. Most

auslesen are lush, and today, they are often fairly sweet. But even two decades ago, most auslesen were

made in a lighter, more elegant style. Back then, most were intensely flavored (and thus, a treat), but

they weren’t syrupy sweet. T oday, both styles can be found, and the Germans sometimes drink them on

Sunday afternoons as an aperitif with hard cheeses.

BEERENAUSLESE: Literally,

“berry” (beeren) selected harvest. Beerenauslesen are rare and costly

wines made from very ripe individual grapes selected by hand. Usually beerenauslese (called,

conveniently, BA for short) grapes have been affected by noble rot, Botrytis cinerea, giving them a deep,

honeyed richness. BAs are always sweet.

TROCKENBEERENAUSLESE: Literally,

“dry berry” (trocken beeren) selected harvest,

trockenbeerenauslesen (TBAs) are the richest, sweetest, rarest, and most expensive of all German

wines. TBAs, produced only in exceptional years, are made from individual grapes shriveled to raisins by

botrytis. It takes one person a full day to select and pick enough grapes for just one bottle. Because of

the enormously concentrated sugar, the grapes have difficulty fermenting. As a result, many TBA wines

are no more than 6 percent alcohol (less than half the alcohol of, say, Sauternes). TBAs are absolutely

mesmerizing in their intensity and exquisite balance, and are rightfully pricey.

EISWEIN: Literally,

“ice wine,

” so called because it is made from very ripe, frozen grapes that have been

picked, often at daybreak, by workers wearing gloves so their hands don’t freeze. As the frozen grapes

are pressed, the sweet, high-acid, concentrated juice is separated from the ice (the water in the grapes).

The wine, made solely from the concentrated juice (the ice is thrown away), is miraculously high in both

sweetness and acidity, making drinking it an ethereal sensation.

Eiswein grapes must be frozen naturally on the vine. (Austria and Canada, two other countries famous

for eiswein, also make it in this manner. In other countries, what is called “eiswein” is sometimes

produced by freezing grapes in a commercial freezer. As far as purists are concerned, the freezer

method is definitely cheating.) Interestingly, the climate change that has benefited German winemakers

in so many ways may eventually prove detrimental to the production of eiswein because, under slightly

warmer conditions, botrytis may occur first before temperatures turn cold enough for the eiswein to be

made. In addition, under warmer conditions, the botrytis mold eventually consumes most of the water in

the grapes, leaving little left to freeze!

THE TRADITIONAL SYSTEM

Historically, because ripeness was not a given and because the climate was so marginal,

fine German wines were categorized along two dimensions—ripeness and sweetness. This

system is still in place for many German wines, so it’s important to know the terms used to

indicate ripeness as well as the terms used for sweetness. In the traditional system, these

terms are usually indicated on the label.

THE RIPENESS CATEGORIES (in ascending ripeness):

KABINETT: (CAB-i-net)

SPÄTLESE: (SCHPA TE-lay-zeh)

AUSLESE: (OWSCH-lay-zeh)

BEERENAUSLESE (BA): (Bear-en-OWSCH-lay-zeh)

TROCKENBEERENAUSLESE (TBA): (TRAUK-en-bear-en-OWSCH-lay-zeh)

EISWEIN: (ICE-vine)

THE SWEETNESS CATEGORIES (from dry to sweet):

TROCKEN: (bone dry; less than 0.9 percent residual sugar)

HALBTROCKEN; SOMETIMES CALLED FEINHERB: (half dry; less than 1.8 percent residual

sugar)

LIEBLICH OR MILD: (some sweetness; up to 4.5 percent residual sugar)

Thus, any given ripeness level could potentially come at three levels of sweetness. A

kabinett, say, could be kabinett trocken (bone dry), kabinett halbtrocken (half dry), or

kabinett lieblich (slightly sweet). The same would be true for spätlese, and so on.

When you understand how this two dimensional approach to flavor works, you can

easily imagine the sensory difference between a kabinett halbtrocken and an auslese

trocken. The first is not very ripe, but there’s some residual sugar in the wine. The second

is quite ripe, but it’s dry. The first wine, in other words, is like an unripe cantaloupe on

which you’ve sprinkled a touch of sugar; the second, a very ripe cantaloupe with no sugar.

Ripeness and sweetness are clearly different.

As a quick aside, sweetness is measured by the grams of residual sugar in the final

wine. As for ripeness, it is measured in Germany by Oechsle (ERKS-leh)—the weight of

the must, which is the thick, pulpy liquid of crushed grapes. Oechsle was named after the

physicist Ferdinand Oechsle, who invented the scale in the 1830s. Interestingly, the

Oechsle requirements for the ripeness categories change based on the region. So, for

example, to make, say, a Rheingau spätlese, Rheingau producers must attain a higher

Oechsle reading from the grapes than Mosel producers need to attain to make a Mosel

spätlese. This is because in the Mosel, farther north and colder, it’s harder to reach greater

ripeness (which would result in a high Oechsle reading). So the system attempts to level

the playing field.

Remember, the ripeness categories are based on the ripeness of the grapes when they

were picked (not the final sugar content of the wine). What happens, for a top vineyard, is

generally this: Come fall, the grower picks a percentage of the grapes early, well before

snow and cold weather set in. These are somewhat unripe, resulting in a very light wine (a

kabinett). Despite the risk of worsening weather, certain bunches of grapes are allowed to

continue to hang on the vine. Days or weeks later, the owner goes through the vineyard

again and, if bad weather has not spoiled the bunches, he picks some percentage of them

and uses those to make a separate, second wine (a spätlese), which will be riper and fuller-

bodied than the first. During this second go-through, the owner again leaves some bunches

to hang even longer. If freezing rain or snow doesn’t get those, the bunches will be made

into a third wine (an auslese), which will be fuller, richer, and riper than the second. And

so the process goes. There are six degrees of ripeness, and a grower in a good year may

make wines at all six levels from the same vineyard. Importantly, these categories of

ripeness often appear on the labels, allowing you to anticipate how lean or full the wine

will be.

READING A GERMAN WINE LABEL

Germany is in the process (anticipated to take several years) of changing how many of

its wines are categorized and labeled. For now, to the right is an example of a

traditional German label. (By contrast, modern VDP labels are usually simpler and often

omit the village and/or vineyard name.) As you can see, traditional labels indicate the

producer, village, vineyard, variety of grape, ripeness level, sweetness level, and

vintage. In the wine Selbach-Oster Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese Trocken

2012, for example, Selbach-Oster is the producer; Zelting is the village (the er means

“of”); Sonnenuhr is the vineyard; riesling is the grape variety; spätlese is the ripeness

level; trocken is the dryness/sweetness level (trocken means “dry”); and 2012 is the

vintage.

As for dryness/sweetness, traditional German winemakers fine-tune the balance of

certain wines by leaving a little bit of sweetness in the wines or adding a touch of

süssreserve—juice from the harvested grapes that has been held back, clarified, and left

unfermented, so it’s naturally sweet.

THE MODERN (VDP) SYSTEM

With the turning of the twenty-first century, many growers, including more than two

hundred of the best and most prestigious estates of Germany, abandoned the traditional

way of thinking about, organizing, and categorizing German wines. In its place they

devised a modern system that, they believe, better reflects Germany’s new climatic reality.

Most of these wineries belong to a group called the VDP (V erband Deutscher

Prädikatsweingüter). All VDP members display the VDP logo (a stylized eagle bearing a

cluster of grapes) prominently on the bottle so it’s easy to tell who they are.

WHAT IS PETROL, EXACTLY?

One of the characteristics displayed by some rieslings —especially some aged rieslings—is called petrol

—a potent, distinctive aroma that some wine drinkers love and others find unpleasant. Petrol aroma is

caused by trimethyldihydronaphthalene—TDN for short—and several scientific research studies have

found that the molecule is up to six times more likely to occur in riesling than in other varieties. While

several factors may be responsible for TDN formation, one of the leading ones is too much sun exposure

on riesling grapes as they grow. (T op riesling growers are always careful to allow leaves to slightly shade

riesling clusters.) With bottle age, concentrations of TDN in the wine increase, especially if the wine is

high in acidity. Interestingly, cork can absorb as much as 50 percent of any TDN formed, and thus

rieslings stoppered with a screw cap potentially show more TDN than wines stoppered with cork. Finally,

aged riesling has wonderfully complex aromas that can be hard to describe. Many riesling winemakers

point out that “that unusual aroma” in an old riesling is often not TDN at all, but a fascinating nexus of

smells including sage, lemongrass, lime marmalade, honey, consommé, and toast.

The VDP’s premise is that, thanks to climate change, all of Germany’s best-sited, top

vineyards can now achieve full (spätlese- to auslese-level) ripeness every year. Therefore,

most wines will have a good measure of flavor intensity even when made in a dry style.

So, under the modern VDP system, most wines are bone dry, that is, trocken (which,

again, means less than .9 percent (9 grams per liter)—residual sugar).

Old bottles of riesling await their moment of opening. Thanks to its high natural acidity, riesling ages longer than any

other white varietal in the world.

What happens, then, to terms like spätlese, auslese, and so on? Under the modern VDP

system, these terms (kabinett, spätlese, auslese, beerenauslese, and trockenbeerenauslese)

are used only to refer to sweet styles of wines. Thus, in the modern system, fine German

wine is dry unless you see a term such as kabinett, spätlese, et cetera, in which case, the

wine has some sweetness. (English majors and wine lovers will be driven crazy by the fact

that what are ripeness terms in the traditional system have now become sweetness terms in

the modern system.)

The modern VDP system also includes a hierarchy of vineyards based on their terroirs.

The hierarchy is almost identical to the one in Burgundy, and has four levels. From the top

down, they are:

GROSSES LAGE = GRAND CRU

ERSTE LAGE = PREMIER CRU

ORTSWEIN = VILLAGE WINE

GUTSWEIN = BASIC WINE FROM A BASIC-QUALITY VINEYARD OWNED BY THE ESTATE

(The terms for the top two levels—Grosses Lage and Erstes Lage—will always appear on

either the label or the neck capsule. The terms Ortswein and Gutswein are optional

according to VDP regulations. Some wineries list them; others do not.)

At the top level (equal to a Burgundy Grand Cru) is VDP Grosses Lage (pronounced

grosses lah-geh). These are wines from vineyards that have consistently yielded the finest,

most ageworthy wines. (As far back as the mid-eighteenth century, authoritative vineyard

maps demarcate many of these vineyards, singling them out as being especially prized.) A

Grosses Lage wine that is dry will usually carry an additional term on the label—Grosses

Gewächs (literally,

“Great Growth”) or the initials GG. A Grosses Lage wine that is sweet

would carry one of the traditional terms: kabinett, spätlese, auslese, beerenauslese,

trockenbeerenauslese, or eiswein.

The next step down (equal to a Burgundy Premier Cru) is VDP Erste Lage (urst lah-

geh). Continuing down, come wines that would be equal to Burgundian “village wines.

”

These are called VDP Ortswein (orts vine). Finally, at the base of the quality pyramid are

VDP Gutswein (goots vine). These are good, entry-level wines made from grapes grown

in modest-quality vineyards owned by the estate.

STUNNING AGING POTENTIAL

One of the benefits of acidity is that it acts to preserve flavor. Thus, German wines, among the highest in

the world in acidity, are also among the longest-lived. If the wine in question also happens to be slightly

sweet (sugar, too, is a preservative), it will age even longer. Probably every wine drinker familiar with

German wine has been served a German wine and asked to guess its age. Say the wine in question has

irresistible freshness; the fruit flavors (apricots and peaches) seem lively and poised for action; the

minerality is vivid. Surely this wine cannot be more than a few years old. Then comes the reveal: It’s

twenty years old or more. No other wines come close to German wines in their ability to seem ageless.

While the changes are frustrating to learn, the new system adopted by these top VDP

estates is actually pretty easy. With it, German wine becomes like other high-quality wines

around the word—dry—unless a sweet style is being made, in which case there’s a term to

let you know that. Moreover, the system includes terms that alert you to the best terroirs.

Instead of having to know something about Kiedrich Gräfenberg (a village and vineyard)

on a label, if you see Grosses Lage, you know that you are about to drink Grand Cru–level

wine from one of Germany’s top sites.

Many German churches, like this one in Oberwesel, are named Liebfraukirche (“Church of Our Blessed Lady”). The

wine Liebfraumilch (“milk of our Blessed Lady”) originally came from vineyards surrounding such churches.

SEKT

Possibly the easiest word to say in the German language, sekt (pronounced zekt) is the

term for sparkling wine. Although all sparkling wine in Germany is called sekt, there are

two distinct types—the bargain stuff and fine sekt.

Bargain sekt—which is most of the sekt made—is light, clean, and uncomplicated.

Made with German grapes or with bulk wine from another European country, sekt’s

fizziness is the result of the bulk process (the second fermentation takes place in large

pressurized tanks, not in each individual bottle). Fine German sekt—a tiny portion of the

German sparkling wine market—is entirely different from the bargain stuff. These top-

notch sekte are made in small lots by the traditional (Champagne) method. The grapes

used are generally riesling, weissburgunder (pinot blanc), or blauburgunder (pinot gris),

and the village and vineyard the grapes come from will usually be listed on the label.

BLUE NUN

The first Liebfraumilch (literally,

“milk of Our Blessed Lady”) wines were produced several centuries ago,

probably from vineyards surrounding the Liebfraukirche (“Church of Our Blessed Lady”). The church was

founded by Capuchin monks in 1296, just outside the city of Worms. Liebfraumilch is a basic, slightly

sweetish, inexpensive wine made from a blend of any combination of Müller-Thurgau, riesling, silvaner,

kerner, plus “other grapes.

” For decades, the best-selling German wine in the English-speaking world

was Sichel Liebfraumilch. By 1925, the wine had become so popular that the Sichels decided to create a

more compelling label. It pictured a bunch of stern, no-nonsense, matronly German nuns in brown habits

against a blue sky. (Nuns were used because of the close association, in Germany, of the church with

wine.) Consumers began referring to the wine as the one with the blue label and the nuns. Slowly the

label began to change. First there were fewer nuns; then the nuns were thinner; then the nuns smiled. By

1958, the nuns were clothed in blue habits. T oday, the label of Blue Nun shows a coquettish blonde with

blue eyes wearing a pastel blue and white habit, holding a basket of grapes, and smiling in a way that

would make the Mona Lisa envious.

Tending to the vines in Germany usually means repeated (and exhausting) steep hikes up and down from the village

below.

These fine German sekte are sparklers with bite. Their crisp, streamlined flavors are

vividly clear. The goal in making them is not to achieve the custardy, creamy roundness of

Champagne but to make a wine that has the clarity and purity of flute music. Among the

top producers: Darting, Theo Minges, Pfeffingen, Reichsrat von Buhl, and Bürklin-Wolf,

from the Pfalz; Hubert Gänz, from the Rheinhessen; Künstler from the Rheingau;

Schlossgut Diel from the Nahe; and Freiherr von Schleinitz and Kerpen, from the Mosel.

THE FOODS OF GERMANY

Maybe it’s the proximity of France and Italy, maybe it’s the irresistible romanticism the

cuisines of both those countries possess, but somehow Germany has been overshadowed

and undervalued as one of the great food cultures of Europe. This is definitely a mistake,

for food is Germany’s best-kept secret.

There are really two culinary worlds there. First, there’s old-fashioned Germany, where

meals can resemble a medieval feast of wursts (sausages), pig’s knuckles, dumplings,

potato salad, spaetzle, sauerkraut, and black bread. This is solid, sturdy fare, a

straightforward response to the bodily needs imposed by a cold, damp northern climate.

But there’s also contemporary Germany, a land rich with game birds, wild mushrooms, a

huge repertoire of river fish (including delicate pike and trout), the sweetest cherries,

raspberries, and strawberries, plus bright green, tender garden cresses, mâche, and lettuces

that simply have no equal anywhere. Clearly, the German penchant for perfection doesn’t

stop with Porsches and Mercedes.

To travel in Germany is to experience how deliciously and often these two worlds

collide. Still, some things—German breads, for example—remain steadfastly traditional.

As they should, for with the exception of Austria, there is no better bread in Europe.

Before I tasted German brot (“bread”), I used to wonder how so many Europeans in

centuries past supposedly lived on bread alone. One bite of brot was evidence enough.

Dark, chewy, heavy, nutritious, and so packed with flavor that it’s easily a meal in itself,

German bread has muscle. The most well known is pumpernickel, which historically in

Germany is leaden in weight, spicy-sour in flavor, and nearly black in color, thanks to the

high percentage of dark rye flour used, plus a long, slow baking, during which the flour’s

starches caramelize. The bread most capable of inducing a nostalgia attack, however, is

undoubtedly stollen, German Christmas bread, a yeast bread lavishly strewn with nuts and

candied fruits and then generously topped after baking with butter and confectioners’

sugar. Every region of Germany has its own version of stollen, including the fabulous

mohnstollen, poppy seed stollen, a specialty of Bavaria.

IT TAKES A WHOLE LOTTA BEER TO MAKE GREAT

WINE

The German passion for wine is very strong, but beer has no peer. In recent years

Germans drank, per capita each year, about 28 gallons (106 liters) of beer; and just

over 5 gallons (19 liters) of wine. Interestingly, Americans also drink about 28 gallons

(106 liters) of beer per capita each year, and some states (hello, North Dakota—46

gallons/174 liters of beer per capita per year!) take their six-packs very seriously. In the

past, beer-making in Germany, like winemaking, was carried out by monks, who used

the revenue from both to support their monasteries. Indeed, German monks made

many of the most important discoveries in brewing, including the fact that hops could be

used to add zestiness to beer and preserve its freshness.

From bread to soup seems only a short distance (culinarily if not philosophically), and

Germany is a land of soups. There are the expected and sensational kartoff elsuppen

(“potato soups”) and many sturdy meat-and-vegetable-based soups (pheasant and lentil

soup, for example, or gulaschsuppe, Germany’s equivalent of Hungarian goulash), but

most surprising, perhaps, is the wealth of fish soups, including Hamburger aalsuppe (“eel

soup from Hamburg”) and Black Forest trout soup.

The first time I visited Germany, I imagined that my vegetarian friends would find the

so-called land of wursts to be their worst nightmare. Not true. Germany’s passion for

vegetables and fruits has the intensity that only a culture where sun is scarce can possess.

Among vegetables, cabbage (called kraut or kohl, depending on the region) and asparagus

(spargel) stand out in such classic dishes as sauerkraut, the laborious authentic version (as

in neighboring Alsace) for which cabbages are shredded, salted, and fermented until they

are sweetly sour; braised red cabbage with onions and apples in wine sauce; and asparagus

sautéed with morels, for which many Germans forage. Each May, at asparagus season

(and asparagus mania), many chefs around Germany temporarily give up their regular

menus to focus entirely on dozens of different asparagus dishes.

SOME OF THE MOST EXTRAORDINARY EISWEINS IN THE

WORLD

The magnetic juxtaposition of lush sweetness and almost crinkly acidity gives German eiswein an

electrified intensity. Made from frozen grapes picked in the dead of winter, eiswein tastes quite different

from beerenauslesen and trockenbeerenauslesen. And unlike BAs and TBAs, eiswein is not made from

grapes affected by Botrytis cinerea. Among the best German eisweins are those made by Darting, Eugen

Müller, and Müller-Catoir, from the Pfalz; Hermann Dönnhoff and Schlossgut Diel, from the Nahe; and

Joh. Jos. Prüm, Karlsmühle, Selbach-Oster, and Zilliken, from the Mosel.

A road sign you don’ t want to ignore—the Deutsche Weinstrasse (German Wine Route) in the Pflaz.

As for the humble potato (kartoffel), the number of compelling German potato dishes

could make an Irish person (including this one) genuflect. There are infinite versions of

kartoffelklössen,

“potato dumplings,

” the classic accompaniment to Germany’s national

dish—sauerbraten, a “sour” pot roast in which the beef marinates in wine for up to four

days before being slowly braised until meltingly tender. Other homey potato standbys

include kartoffelpuffern,

“potato pancakes,

” and kartoffelsalat,

“potato salad” (usually

served hot, often with bacon). When potatoes are not the accompaniment to a meal,

spätzle often is. Germany’s equivalent of gnocchi, these little squiggles of egg and flour

batter are pressed through a spätzle-maker (which looks like a potato ricer) and then, like

pasta, briefly boiled. Soft and rich, they are the perfect tool for sopping up sauces.

Throughout Germany, towns are located on flatland, while vineyards are planted on slopes, angled (like solar panels) to

catch the maximum amount of sun each day.

CALLING ALL DOCTORS

Many German estates are named Doctor Something (Dr. Loosen, Dr. Bürklin-Wolf, Dr. von Bassermann-

Jordan, and so on), as are many vineyards (the Doctor Vineyard in Bernkastel, owned by Dr. H.

Thanisch, for example). For the Germans, taking pride in one’s professional status is essential, and

having a PhD or titled degree—that is, being a doctor—has been extremely important for generations.

And those sauces often surround meat. It would be a bit of a shame not to indulge in

meat in Germany, for the pork and beef are sumptuous. In addition to sauerbrauten, there

are numerous hearty interpretations of beef stew, veal dishes simmered in riesling, and

Wiener schnitzel (an Austrian dish, very popular in Germany, of pounded, breaded, and

sautéed veal medallions). And wursts are so much a part of the German psyche that they

figure into everyday language. (When a difficult decision must be made, the Germans say

Es geht um die Wurst—

“the wurst is at stake.

”) German wurst is rather like French cheese,

a way of defining regions culinarily. There are reportedly more than 1,500 different kinds

of wursts in Germany, the most famous of which are frankfurters (authentic versions are

still made in the city of Frankfurt, entirely from pork leg meat, and are served with hearty

mustard), leberwurst (“liverwurst;” made from pork or beef with a texture that ranges

from coarse to as smooth and silky as pâté), and bratwurst (spicy, coarsely textured pork

sausages seasoned with caraway). Finally, there’s currywurst, Germany’s über-loved,

ubiquitous fast food. It’s as simple as steamed, then fried, pork sausage seasoned with

curry ketchup.

Germany, a country of immense forests, is known for the quality of its game as well,

and Germans use it to create venison with chestnuts, wild rabbit braised in wine, pheasant

with red currant gravy, and on and on.

Desserts would seem to be a German birthright, as the number and scope of bäckereien

and konditoreien (bakeries and pastry shops) attest. Many of the best desserts are based on

fruits, for stone fruits such as cherries, orchard fruits like apples, and all manner of berries

—himbeeren (wild raspberries), johannisbeeren (fresh currants), and preiselbeeren

(similar to cranberries), in particular—excel in Germany. Among the classic desserts are

apfelstrudel, apple strudel, often made more like a cobbler than rolled in the Hungarian

manner; apfelpfannkuchen, apple pancakes; and zwetschgenkuchen, a plum “cake” that

looks like an open-faced pie, oozing with ripe, purple plums. Quark, often served with

peaches or cherries, brings back childhood memories for virtually every German.

Something like a cross between cream cheese and ricotta, quark is thick and tart,

quintessential comfort food. Finally there are cherries—kirschen—har-vested from the

cherry orchards that flourish along the Rhine River. Distilled into a clear brandy, or eau-

de-vie, cherries become kirschwasser, a favorite after-dinner digestif as well as an integral

component in Germany’s hedonistic chocolate dessert Black Forest cake. But cherries and

kirschwasser know few limits. The Germans use them in everything from cherry tortes to

cherry puddings to cherry pancakes served warm with whipped cream infused with, what

else? Kirschwasser.

Above the village of Cochem, the Mosel River takes one of its breathtaking hairpin turns.

WHEN YOU VISIT… GERMANY

GERMANY IS FULL OF SMALL, family-owned wine estates that are welcoming and

charming to visit.

IN THE MOSEL there are impressive wine estates all along the Mosel Weinstrasse

(Mosel Wine Route), which runs the entire length of the winding river. The best of them,

and the most spectacular towering walls of vineyards, are concentrated in the middle

stretch.

BESIDES SPECTACULAR WINE ESTATES in the Rheingau, do not miss Kloster

Eberbach, in Eltville, a stunning, large monastery and wine estate founded in 1135 by

Cistercian monks. One of the earliest known properties to be devoted to pinot noir, it

was among the most successful, creative wine estates of the Middle Ages, a reputation

it held for the subsequent seven centuries. T oday, Kloster Eberbach is operated by the

local state government and very good wines continue to be produced there. Also worth

seeing are two very famous, beautiful old castle/wine estates, Schloss Johannisberg

and Schloss Vollrads.

IN THE PFALZ, there are top estates strung all along the Deutsche Weinstrasse

(German Wine Route), not to mention immaculate villages with cobbled streets and

charming old houses. Try the Weinkastell Zum Weissen Ross, a charming inn and

restaurant specializing in regional dishes. It’s next door to the wine estate Koehler-

Ruprecht and is owned by the same family.

THE MOSEL

The Mosel is where Germany’s most ravishingly elegant wines are made. The wine region

—some 21,700 acres (8,800 hectares)—is defined by the hauntingly beautiful and eerily

still Mosel River, which cuts a deep, snakelike gorge through the land. The river enters

Germany where the country converges with Luxembourg and France, and then winds back

and forth for about 145 miles (230 kilometers) northeast until it empties into the Rhine

near the town of Koblenz. The Saar and the Ruwer are small tributaries of the Mosel.

The Mosel’s greatest grape is riesling. But that states the case too simplistically, for

along the Mosel, riesling is turned into wines that have such crystalline clarity, they are

like glittering sunlight on a subzero day.

The reasons are several. The vineyards of the Mosel are the steepest in Germany and

among the steepest in the world. Indeed, the expanse of vineyards from the village of

Zelting to the village of Bernkastel is considered the longest stretch of near-vertical

vineyards anywhere on the globe. (As an aside, the severe inclines make these vineyards

the most treacherous, dangerous, and exhausting to work of vineyards anywhere. Picture

the typical vineyard worker, often a woman of about sixty years of age, who climbs these

perilously steep, icy slopes in the middle of frigid November.) The vineyards are also

among the most northern vineyards in Germany. Steepness in a cold, northern wine region

means that the sun is in contact with the vines for limited, precious hours each day. And,

of course, the total number of sunlight hours during the growing season is also modest (the

Mosel gets, in a good year, about a third of the sunlight hours that Provence does).

THE STEEPEST VINEYARD IN THE WORLD

The steepest vineyard in Germany—and in the world—is Calmont, located between the villages of

Bremm and Eller on the Mosel River. The vineyard, whose name roughly translates to rocky mountain,

was carved by the Mosel more than 400 million years ago, and has been planted with grapes for more

than 1,500 years. Calmont’s 60- to 70-degree incline makes it look like a vertical wall of vines, all

tenaciously gripping the slatey cliff.

T erraces are built into the hill and fortified with rock walls, but they are constantly crumbling into the

river and needing to be rebuilt. There are no roads through Calmont, only winding paths and one

miniature monorail for bringing fertilizer up and harvested grapes down—everything else must be carried

by the vineyard crew. In fact, because of the back-breaking labor required to harvest the vineyard, only

13 of its 20 acres (5 of its 8 hectares) are currently in production, and that number is decreasing every

year.

The famous grayish-blue slate of the Mosel holds heat well, helping riesling to ripen.

On the palate, riesling is meant to move—to shimmer, to surge, to burst, to

dance, to arc, to soar. Riesling has a rare trait—velocity. Of all varietals, it is

the most kinetic and alive.

If fine wine is to be made, then, vineyards must be nothing short of perfectly sited, so

that each ray of light and warmth is maximized. As a result, the Mosel’s vineyards hug

only south-facing slopes. At each turn of the river where the banks face north, the slopes

have no vines. In addition, the best vineyards are quite close to the river itself, for even the

reflection of light off the water becomes one more increment in the quest for ripeness.

Then there’s the issue of slate. The famous slate (sometimes blue-gray in color,

sometimes burnt orange-red) of the Mosel is highly porous and heat retaining. The soil’s

porosity is an advantage in downpours, when powerful rains might otherwise cause mass

erosion. (When some slate does wash down the slopes, the precious rocks, so necessary

for ripeness, are immediately carried back up the hill.)

The slate’s heat-retaining properties help advance ripeness. Indeed, in many of the best

vineyards, there appears to be no soil at all, just broken slate. But, in ways that remain

chemically and biologically mysterious, slate also appears to contribute to flavor. Wine

drinkers throughout history have cherished Mosel wines specifically for their slatey,

minerally, wet-rocks-in-a-cold-mountain-stream flavors. No other wines in Germany taste

quite the same.

The vineyard of Würzgarten (“Spice Garden”) in the village of Ürzig is among the most renowned vineyards of the

Mosel. Just hearing the words Ürziger Würzgarten is a promise of delicious things to come.

Many of the top Mosel producers are clustered together in the middle section, known as

the Mittelmosel (middle Mosel). Here is where the famous villages of Bernkastel,

Piesport, Brauneberg, and Wehlen are found. Wines such as Piesporter Goldtröpfchen and

Bernkasteler Doctor are just two of the renowned examples from this tiny stretch of the

Mosel.

The three renowned Sonnenuhr—Sundial—vineyards are also in the Mittelmosel. They

are the Wehlener Sonnenuhr, Brauneberger Juffer-Sonnenuhr, and Zeltinger Sonnenuhr.

The huge sundials that give them their names were built as far back as the early 1600s in

the sunniest part of three excellent slopes, so that vineyard workers would know when to

stop for lunch or for the day. Because the vines in the vicinity of the sundial also got the

most sun (and made the richest wine), the areas around the sundials soon came to be

considered separate vineyards. Today the Sonnenuhr vine-yards are among the best along

the Mosel. As in Burgundy, each of these vineyards has multiple owners who possess tiny

plots. Some two hundred wine estates own sections of the Wehlener Sonnenuhr, for

example.

VILLAGES AND VINEYARDS OF THE MOSEL

Wine labels for some top Mosel wines tell you where the grapes grew by listing the vineyard, or both the

village and the vineyard, from which they come. Here are some to look for; the village names are in

capital letters. More than one village may have a vineyard with the same name. For example, as this

chapter suggests, many villages have a vineyard known as Sonnenuhr (“Sundial”).

AYL: Kupp

BERNKASTEL: Bratenhöfchen, Doctor, Graben, Lay, and Matheisbildchen

BRAUNEBERG: Juffer and Juffer-Sonnenuhr

ERDEN: Prälat and Treppchen

GRAACH: Domprobst and Himmelreich

MERTESDORF: Abstberg and Herrenberg

OCKFEN: Bockstein and Herrenberg

PIESPORT : Goldtröpfchen

ÜRZIG: Würzgarten

WEHLEN: Sonnenuhr

WILTINGEN: Braune Kupp, Braunfels, and Gottesfuss

ZELTINGEN: Himmelreich, Scharzhofberg, Schlossberg, and Sonnenuhr

Because of the Mosel’s far northern latitude, and the spine-tingling acidity that results,

this is Germany’s best region for fully sweet wines. Y es, sweet wines. Indeed, the BAs,

TBAs, and eisweins from the Mosel never descend into gloppy sugar syrup. Instead, their

sweetness is taut, lifted, and vibrant. They almost prance with energy, thanks to the

counterpoint provided by acidity. This makes them unlike most other dessert wines in

Germany, and indeed in the world. Wine drinkers who generally don’t like dessert wines

usually go mad for these.

SOME OF THE BEST PRODUCERS OF THE MOSEL

Alfred Merkelbach • Carl Loewen • Clemens Busch • C. Von Schubert • Daniel Vollenweider • Dr. H.

Thanisch • Dr. Loosen • Egon Müller • Fritz Haag • Heymann Löwenstein • Joh. Jos. Christoffel • Joh. Jos.

Prüm • Karlsmühle • Karp-Schreiber • Markus Molitor • Max Ferd Richter • Milz-Laurentiushof • Reichsgraf

von Kesselstatt • Reinhard & Beate Knebel • Reinhold Haart • St. Urbans Hof • Schloss Lieser • Selbach-

Oster • von Hovel • Willi Schaefer • Zilliken

The sonnenuhr (“sundial”) in Zelting. In the Mosel, from medieval times onward, the vineyard around the sundial has

always been considered exemplary thanks to its perfect sun exposure.

The Mosel Wines to Know

The wines of the Mosel—where sheer exquisiteness meets profound intensity—have no parallel anywhere else in

the world. Some of the wines below are extremely bone dry; others are not quite as severely dry. But thanks to their

soaring acidity, all are meant to accompany a meal (unless, of course, a sweet wine is intentionally being made).

WHITES

SELBACH-OSTER

ZELTINGER SONNENUHR | RIESLING | SPÄTLESE | TROCKEN

100% riesling

I have known the Selbach family for some twenty years, and each time I taste their wines I am brought back to the

first, icy day, snow on the ground, that I walked (with their long-time U.S. importer, Terry Theise) into their parlor

to taste their rieslings. The wines were then, and remain still, classic, exquisite, slatey, minerally rieslings humming

with pinpoints of juicy acidity and imbued with mouthfuls of pristine fruit flavor. What I love most about them is

their back palate “center of gravity,

” so that the biggest rush of flavors floods onto your palate a few seconds after

you start to taste the wines. This taut, elegant dry riesling from the Sonnenuhr vineyard is a cool, fresh, beauty of a

wine. Johannes Selbach is one of the most thoughtful winemakers on the Mosel and a great interpreter of the purity

that is “Moselness.

”

REICHSGRAF VON KESSELSTATT

GRAACHER JOSEPHSHÖFER | RIESLING | KABINETT

100% riesling

The exquisite Josephshöfer riesling kabinett of Reichsgraf von Kesselstatt zooms in on a luscious kaleidoscope of

fresh ripe peach, apricot, nectarine, and citrus flavors and then holds that flavor (like holding a music note) over the

entire impact of the wine. This is a pure, filigreed, slatey, spicy, traditional kabinett from a jewel of a vineyard.

Indeed, the tiny, steep Josephshöfer (with a slope inclination of 60 to 70 degrees!) was first planted 1,100 years ago

and belonged to a local monastery until it was purchased by the Kesselstatt counts in 1858. Today, it is owned and

run by the energetic Annegret Reh-Gartner.

DR. LOOSEN

ÜRZIGER WÜRZGARTEN | RIESLING | SPÄTLESE

100% riesling

Every time I drink this wine, I wonder if there are enough superlatives in the world for it. So I’ll stop saying it is

great, exquisite, refined, and majestic (although it is all of those). Instead, here’s what it’s like: Melted crystals of

white light. Frozen peaches and apricots liquefied until they have no more weight than air. Minerals that have

turned deliciously crunchy. High soprano notes that reverberate long after the song is finished. The Würzgarten

(spice garden) vineyard in the village of Ürzig is, needless to say, renowned. Dr. Loosen is a two-hundred-year-old

estate now run by the indefatigable Ernst Loosen. In 1999, Ernst Loosen formed a joint venture with Washington

State’s Chateau Ste. Michelle, and together the two produce Eroica, the best riesling made on the West Coast of the

United States.

KARP-SCHREIBER

BRAUNEBERGER JUFFER SONNENUHR | RIESLING | SPÄTLESE

100% riesling

The dazzling acidity in Karp-Schreiber’s riesling from the great Juffer Sonnenuhr vineyard in Brauneberg is like an

arch held in perfect, seemingly weightless suspension, rendering everything around it graceful and light. Again, this

is Mosel riesling that can’t hold still. Flavors of nectarines and peaches splash around in the glass, giving the wine

kinetic excitement. The Juffer Sonnenuhr (Virgin Sundial) vineyard of the village of Brauneberg (Brown Hill) is

one of the three centuries-old sundials that still exist on the Mosel.

REUSCHER-HAART

PIESPORTER GOLDTRÖPFCHEN | RIESLING | SPÄTLESE

100% riesling

The name of this vineyard, Goldtröpfchen, means drops of gold, and that describes how you feel drinking it—as if

you’re drinking plump golden drops of pure sunlight. As a village, Piesport is known for its rather fleshy, fruity

rieslings, but the Schwang family, which owns Reuscher-Haart, must have a sixth sense of how to corset all that

richness, for this Goldtröpfchen is elegant and laced with spices (teeing it right up for something like a Vietnamese

pork, shrimp, and mint spring roll).

WILLI SCHAEFER

GRAACHER HIMMELREICH | RIESLING | AUSLESE

100% riesling

This mind-blowing wine is not as dry as the others listed in this section but it’s definitely not a dessert wine. I’ve

drunk it with everything from complex Shanghai seafood dishes to Southeast Asian appetizers to creamy French

cheeses, and the experience has been nothing short of sensational. Willi Schaefer and his son Christophe and

daughter-in-law Andrea date their winemaking ancestry back to 1121. Their wines have mesmerizing laser-like

focus, and end with an explosion of flavor that always reminds me of cymbals clashing. From the famous

Himmelreich (Kingdom of Heaven) vineyard in Graach, this auslese is a tight fist of minerals robed in apricot

glaze.

SWEET

The wines below are all definitely sweet and are generally served with or as dessert.

MILZ-LAURENTIUSHOF

TRITTENHEIMER FELSENKOPF | RIESLING | BEERENAUSLESE

100% riesling

The aroma of a great BA can be hypnotic—deep, rich, sweet fruits, of course, but also smells of the earth, like rain

sprinkling down on mushrooms and stones (an indication of botrytis). This one, from the Milz family of Milz-

Laurentiushof, is supercharged in every way. Indeed, the flavors of pears, tangerine, apricots, and minerals box their

way into every corner of your mouth. All the while, the wine’s dramatic, edgy acidity keeps unfolding and holding

the sweetness in a suspended state of dazzling balance.

JOH. JOS. CHRISTOFFEL

ÜRZIGER WÜRZGARTEN | RIESLING | EISWEIN

100% riesling

The tiny estate of Joh. Jos. Christoffel makes digitally precise Mosel rieslings with wonderful rushes of slate,

minerals, and restrained fruit that parcels itself out to you over many agonizingly delicious seconds. They are

exquisitely classical in their structure—which bodes well when it comes to eiswein. There’s nothing over-the-top

and overwrought here. Instead, Christoffel’s eisweins—especially this one from the fantastic Würzgarten vineyard

in Ürzig—taste as though long, satin ribbons of honey, spice, and exotic citrus have twisted together and entwined

themselves with crystalline acidity in an unnervingly luscious helix of sensation. Needless to say, these eisweins are

made in minuscule amounts, and only in very special years when the climatic conditions are just right.

FRITZ HAAG

BRAUNEBERGER JUFFER-SONNENUHR | RIESLING | TROCKENBEERENAUSLESE

100% riesling

This wine has moved German men to tears—which, in a way, says it all. The sheer beauty of it is like the beauty of

exquisite music that touches you so deeply that crying is the only rational response. Wines like Fritz Haag’s TBA

remind us that, at their pinnacle, the greatest wines of the world cannot be deconstructed into their component parts

or described by adjectives. (Apricot, after all, is not as apricot as this. Honey, not as honeyed. Minerals, not as

minerally.) Wines like this have what I’ll call high-alert emotional purity. They are electrifying to the senses, and

drinking them becomes an out-of-body experience.

THE RHEINGAU

Cermany’s reputation as the greatest white-wine producing nation in the world was

historically based largely on the Rheingau region. Today, the supremacy of this very small

region (7,744 acres/3,134 hectares) is challenged by many delicious wines coming out of

the Mosel and the Pfalz, yet the Rheingau has the longest history of quality winemaking of

any region in Germany. It’s also a hotbed for regional classification systems, more on

which in a moment.

The Rheingau is a serene, aristocratic wine region—one long, virtually continuous

horizontal slope, a rolling carpet of vines, with the densely forested Taunus Mountains

rising up behind. In a sense, the mountains created the wine region, for they abruptly

halted the Rhine’s northward flow and forced it to veer straight west for 20 miles (32

kilometers) until it could again proceed north. The result was a nearly ideal, immense,

south-facing bank backed by protective forests that block cold northern winds.

The leading grape of the Rheingau is riesling. Indeed, the first record of riesling being

planted in Germany dates from 1435 at the wine estate (and former Benedictine abbey)

Schloss Johannisberg in the village of Johannisberg near Geisenheim in the Rheingau.

Today, of all the German wine regions, the Rheingau has the highest percentage of riesling

—nearly 80 percent of its acreage. The rieslings here, however, are entirely different from

Mosel rieslings—richer, rounder, earthier, and more voluptuous. Absent are the Mosel’s

icicle-like sharpness and slate flavors, and in their place is a near perfect gripping

expression of lip-smacking fruit. The best Rheingau wines have amazing breadth; in a sip

they can suggest everything from violets and cassis to apricots and honey.

The castle of Ehrenfels in Rüdesheim on the Rhine. Rüdesheim, one of the main wine towns in the Rheingau, is home to a

number of legendary vineyards, including Berg Roseneck, Berg Rottland, Berg Schlossberg, and Bischofsberg. (The word

berg means “hill.

”)

Sun, soil, and latitude make the difference. To begin with, the Rheingau is farther south

than the Mosel. Its long, south-facing bank rises up gently from the river, which for its

part acts like a giant sunlight reflector. And the soil is not solely slate, but a vast mixture,

including loess, loam, limestone, marl, sand, and quartzite.

THE FIRST BOTRYTIZED WINES

Four countries—Germany, France, Austria, and Hungary—are famous for their botrytized wines, and of

the four, Hungary was the first to understand that grapes covered with the rather repulsive-looking mold

Botrytis cinerea could lead to sensationally delicious wine. As of the early 1600s, the T okaji Aszú wines

of Hungary’s T okaj-Hegyalja region were well-established luxuries. And, although it is not clear if Austria

adopted the technique from Hungary, the part of Austria famous for botrytized wines—Burgenland—

borders Hungary, and indeed was once part of the vast Austro-Hungarian Empire. In Germany, the first

botrytized wine, thought to have been a spätlese, was made in Rheingau at Schloss Johannisberg, in

1775. In Bordeaux, evidence is more sketchy, but the earliest accounts of botrytized wine are thought to

date from 1847 at the famous Sauternes estate Château d’Yquem.

VILLAGES AND VINEYARDS OF THE RHEINGAU

Wine labels for some top Rheingau wines tell you where the grapes grew by listing the vineyard, or both

the village and the vineyard, from which they come. Here are some to look for; the village names are in

capital letters. As in the Mosel, more than one village may have a vineyard with the same name. For

example, there’s a Hölle vineyard in Hochheim and one in Johannisberg. Speaking of Johannisberg

(named for Saint John the Baptist), such was the reputation of the village that, in the nineteenth century,

German immigrants to the United States renamed the riesling vine cuttings they brought with them

Johannisberg riesling.

ASSMANNSHAUSEN: Frankenthal, Hinterkirch, and Höllenberg

ELTVILLE: Langenstück, Rheinberg, and Sonnenberg

ERBACH: Marcobrunn, Schlossberg, and Siegelsberg

GEISENHEIM: Kläuserweg, Mönchspfad, and Rothenberg

HALLGARTEN: Jungfer and Schönhell

HATTENHEIM: Nussbrunnen, Pfaffenberg, and Wisselbrunnen

HOCHHEIM: Herrnberg, Hölle, and Königin Victoriaberg

JOHANNISBERG: Goldatzel, Hölle, Klaus, and Vogelsang

KIEDRICH: Gräfenberg and Wasseros

RAUENTHAL: Baiken, Gehrn, and Rothenberg

RÜDESHEIM: Berg Roseneck, Berg Rottland, Berg Schlossberg, and Bischofsberg

WINKEL: Hasensprung and Jesuitengarten

The slightly stronger sun, of course, leads to greater—or at least more reliable—

ripeness, which in turn gives Rheingau wines their slightly fuller body and pronounced

fruit. At the same time, high acidity in the grapes acts as a counterpoint, providing the

wines with a kind of arching elegance. The potential for greater ripeness here bodes well

for Rheingau spätlesen, auslesen, beerenauslesen, and trockenbeerenauslesen. These

wines are legendary—the sort that make you want to lick the glass after swallowing the

last drop.

The other important grape of the Rheingau is spätburgunder (pinot noir), which here

makes a pale but spicy red with a kind of bitter-almond flavor. The most famous come

from the village of Assmannshausen and are expensive.

Founded in 1234, the Kloster Marienthal convent in the village of Geisenheim in the Rheingau is the oldest Cistercian

nunnery in Germany.

The steep, 60-degree slopes of the Berg Schlossberg vineyard in Rüdesheim on the Rhine River . With its quartzite and

slate soils, this vineyard is famous for its powerful, racy, dry rieslings.

HOCK

The British name for Rhine wine, hock, is an Anglicized reference to the famous village of Hochheim

(pronounced HOE-hime) in the Rheingau. At first, hock implied a wine from Hochheim; later, it came to

mean any Rheingau wine; and later still, any Rhine wine. Queen Victoria is credited with the line,

“A

bottle of hock keeps off the doc.

”

Finally, the Rheingau is where the long road to German wine classification began. In

1984, for example, Rheingau producers founded an association called Charta, which

sought to classify the best vineyard sites in that region. After twenty-five years and many

evolutions, a Germany-wide system of classification is now under the auspices of the

VDP , V erband Deutscher Prädikatsweingüter, or Association of German Prädikat Wine

Estates, an association of more than two hundred top estates throughout the country. But

despite the VDP’s prominence and strength, smaller regional Rheingau associations still

exist. One such—the Rheingauer Weinbauverband (the Rheingau Winegrowers’

Association)—classifies wines using terms very much like those of the VDP . For example,

wineries that belong to the Rheingauer Weinbauverband, designate their top wines Erstes

Gewächs (“First Growth”), a term that, confusingly, resembles two VDP terms: Erstes

Lage (a First Class or “Premier Cru” vineyard) and Grosses Gewächs (a “Great Growth”

wine that is dry).

SOME OF THE BEST PRODUCERS OF THE RHEINGAU

August Kesseler • Fred Prinz • Georg Breuer • Josef Leitz • Kloster Eberbach Hessische Staatsweinguter •

Künstler • Peter Jakob Kühn • Robert Weil • Schloss Johannisberg • Schloss Schönborn • Spreitzer

The Rheingau Wines to Know

The Rheingau wines below are all vividly intense, humming with acidity, and all taste dry. Each has a profound

depth of flavor. Historically, the Rheingau was Germany’s first great wine region, and the wines have incomparable

gravitas.

KÜNSTLER

HOCHHEIMER KIRCHENSTÜCK | RIESLING | GROSSES GEWÄCHS

100% riesling

Künstler, one of the stars of the Rheingau, is making some of the most exciting, precise, and filigreed rieslings in

the region. From the Grosses Lage (“Grand Cru”) vineyard Kirchenstück (literally “church song”) in the famous

village of Hochheim comes this Grosses Gewächs (“Great Growth”) dry riesling. Suffused with peach, mirabelle,

and kumquat flavors that rush out of the glass, it also fairly bursts with sophisticated notes of chalk, minerals, salts,

and an ever-so-wonderful fruit-pit bitterness. The finish is a long beam of bright light. Künstler, a small, family-run

estate, is headed by Gunter Künstler, a driving force in the Rheingau wine industry.

SPREITZER

OESTRICHER LENCHEN | RIESLING | SPÄTLESE “303”

100% riesling

I always think of this just off-dry wine as one of the most aristocratic of traditional Rheingau rieslings. Ribbons of

ripe, sweet apricots and spice curl their way through pure minerals. The concentration of Spreitzer’s “303” spätlese

is always superb, and yet, for such concentration the wine reverberates with a sense of purity. The luxurious texture

feels like a spoonful of fresh honey, although, of course, this is not a dessert wine. The name “303” refers to a

subparcel of the Lenchen vineyard, called Eisenberg (“Iron Hill”). It was from this hill, in 1921, that the fruit for a

TBA with one of the then-highest levels of Oechsle ever recorded—303 degrees Oechsle—was picked.

ROBERT WEIL

KIEDERICH GRÄFENBERG | RIESLING | GROSSES GEWÄCHS

100% riesling

The best dry rieslings of Robert Weil have immense power and depth, yet at the same time they possess a

lusciousness and a vivid, crystalline sense of minerality. In particular, I love this riesling’s exotic flavors, as if

peaches were dipped in an especially bergamot-rich Earl Grey tea. And the way the opulent fruit wraps itself

around the central spine of acidity is fantastic. Not surprisingly, this wine is ranked a Grosses Gewächs (“Great

Growth”). The winery was founded in 1875 and is still run by the Weil family. Over the decades, the winery has

been an official purveyor of riesling to the royal families of Germany, Austria, and Russia.

JOSEPH LEITZ

RÜDESHEIMER BERG ROSENECK | RIESLING | SPÄTLESE

100% riesling

Leitz’s top rieslings are wines of razor-sharp precision, and this one from Berg Roseneck, in the village of

Rüdesheim, builds on that precision with a blast of a cool, exotic aroma—something gingery maybe?—before the

wine seems to drape itself like peach syrup over rocks. Leitz’s wines often have a tightness and edginess that I love.

Indeed, though this is just off-dry, it drinks like a dry wine. The Rüdesheimer berg, or “hill,

” is a south-facing,

mountainlike slope that soaks up the sun. On it are three famous vineyards, one of which, Roseneck, is marked by

quartzite with small shards of slate.

SCHLOSS REINHARTSHAUSEN

ERBACHER SCHLOSSBERG | RIESLING | ERSTES GEWÄCHS

100% riesling

Fresh. Lively. Slatey. Dry. A bullet train of intense fruit and rocky minerals that hurl themselves at you. I’m never

sure if I should duck or drink. The finish is a bold exclamation point… but then, a second later, the wine comes

whispering back. I’m not done with you yet, it seems to say. Schloss Reinhartshausen belongs to the Rheingauer

Weinbauverband (Rheingau Winegrowers’ Association), the members of which use the term Erstes Gewächs (“First

Growth”) for their top wines. The winery is one of the oldest in Rheingau, having been founded in the mid-

fourteenth century, and today it is the largest privately owned winery in the region. Princess Marianne of Prussia

founded Hotel Kempinski, the five-star hotel attached to the winery.

THE PFALZ

For two decades, the Pfalz has been among the most exciting, inventive wine regions in

Germany. Pfalz growers have an irrepressible spirit and their own irreverent way of doing

things. The buttoned-down image of German winemaking doesn’t hold here. Individuality

and creativity are prized above all. Not surprisingly, Pfalz winemakers make more great

wines from more different types of grapes than winemakers anyplace else in Germany.

Indeed, just 24 percent of Pfalz’s 58,041 acres (23,488 hectares) is planted with riesling,

although given this region’s large size, that’s still a considerable amount, as we’ll see. The

wide variability of soils here is another key to the diversity of wines and flavors. There is

little slate; instead, limestone, loess, gravel, and well-drained red sandstone dominate.

Although it is technically part of Germany’s Rhineland, the Pfalz does not take its

climatic cues from the Rhine River, as the other regions do. The river is a couple of miles

east; no important vineyards border it. The dominant influence instead is the Haardt

mountain range, the northern flank of France’s V osges mountains. Just as the V osges

create a sunny, dry climate for Alsace wines, so the forested mountains of the Haardt

create a protected environment for the vineyards of Pfalz.

Given its more southerly latitude and more generous sun, ripeness is more of a given.

Pfalz wines, as a result, are almost extroverted with fruit. Acidity, the soul of German

wine, comes across differently here, too. It’s not harsh or piercing; it doesn’t howl.

Instead, the best Pfalz wines have an almost creamy acidity and a tensile energy that’s

palpable. Finally, because of the slightly greater levels of ripeness and the softer

impression of acidity, the bone-dry (trocken) wines of the Pfalz are far less starched and

severe than the trocken wines of the Mosel.

Weingut Pfeffingen in the Pfalz. Winemaking here dates back to the Roman Empire.

Pfalz producers such as Müller-Catoir, Messmer, Darting, Lingenfelder, A. Christmann,

and Eugen Müller make some of Germany’s most sensational wines. In particular, words

do not describe how fiercely vivid Müller-Catoir wines can be. But it’s not vividness

alone. There’s a precision in every Müller-Catoir wine that is breathtaking. Like flashing

sushi knives. Like sunlight bouncing off icicles.

PFALZ

The name Pfalz derives from the Latin palatinus, meaning “palace.

” A palatine was a lord with royal

privileges and the palatinate was the area he ruled. Today in Britain, the Pfalz is often called the

Palatinate because it was once controlled by palatine counts.

In actual acres, the Pfalz has, after the Mosel, the most vineyard area planted with

riesling. But Pfalz riesling is different—perhaps more eccentric. Some of these wines

possess exotic citrus flavors; others taste so gingery-peppery you want to grab a bottle and

dash off to the nearest Thai restaurant.

VILLAGES AND VINEYARDS IN THE PFALZ

Wine labels for some top Pfalz wines tell you where the grapes grew by listing the vineyard, or both the

village and the vineyard, from which they come. Here are some to look for; the village names are in

capital letters. As in the Mosel and Rheingau, more than one village may have a vineyard with the same

name.

DEIDESHEIM: Grainhübel, Hohenmorgen, Kieselberg, and Leinhöhle

FORST : Freundstück, Jesuitengarten, Kirchenstück, Musenhang, and Ungeheuer

GIMMELDINGEN: Langenmorgen, Mandelgarten

KALLSTADT : Saumagen

KONIGSBACH: Indig

MUSSBACH: Eselshaut

RUPPERTSBERG: Hoheburg, Nussbien, and Reiterpfad

UNGSTEIN: Bettelhaus and Herrenberg

WACHENHEIM: Böhlig, Gerümpel, Goldbächel, and Rechbächel

Pfalzgrafenstein Castle on the Rhine River , opposite the town of Kaub, was built in 1327 to collect tolls from ships and

barges that used the river to transport and trade goods. Heavy chains from the castle walls to the shore helped force

compliance. Resisting paying the toll could land the ship’ s crew in the castle’ s “dungeon”

—wooden floats in a well.

SAUMAGEN

No visit to the Pfalz is complete without tasting the region’s specialty, saumagen, the belly of a pig stuffed

with pork, potatoes, and spices. Of course, saumagen should be accompanied by a riesling from the

Saumagen vineyard in Karlstadt, a famous—playfully named—Pfalz vineyard owned by the Koehler-

Ruprecht estate.

But riesling is only one of several successful grapes in the Pfalz. The top estates make

small lots of many others, including gewürztraminer, weissburgunder (pinot blanc),

grauburgunder (pinot gris), and spätburgunder (pinot noir). These can make very good to

remarkably delicious wines, depending on the vintage and the winemaker. Several crosses

—rieslaner and Scheurebe, notably—are grown in the Pfalz, too. Rieslaner (a cross of

riesling and silvaner) makes pretty wines with pear and citrus flavors; and with its zany

grapefruity-vanilla tang, Scheurebe (a cross of riesling and an unknown grape) has a cult

following. The best producers of the latter include Müller-Catoir, Lingenfelder, and

Pfeffingen.

SOME OF THE BEST PRODUCERS IN THE PFALZ

A. Christmann • Darting • Dr. Bürklin-Wolf • Dr. Deinhard • Dr. von Bassermann-Jordan • Dr. Wehrheim •

Eugen Müller • Gies-Duppel • Klaus Neckerauer • Koehler-Ruprecht • Lingenfelder • Messmer • Müller-

Catoir • Okonomierat Rebholz • Pfeffingen • Reichsrat von Buhl • Theo Minges

The Pfalz Wines to Know

As the stunning dry wines below demonstrate, the Pfalz is Germany at her most creative. Although I could

undoubtedly drink riesling every night of my life, the Pfalz has a few additional (delicious) ideas up her sleeve—in

the form of rieslaner, muskateller, gewürztraminer, and more.

SPARKLING

REICHSRAT VON BUHL

RIESLING | BRUT

100% riesling

Made by the traditional (Champagne) method, Reichsrat von Buhl’s sekt is a foamy, delicious burst of freshness.

With its fine mousse, the wine has a tingling elegance. And the aromas and flavors are more sophisticated than you

find with many sekte. Indeed, the delicate white flower aromas are pretty, and on the palate there’s a delicious,

creamy nuttiness that suggests long contact with the lees. But it’s the beautiful notes of fresh, cold nectarine (that’s

riesling speaking) that make you want to keep sipping.

WHITES

EUGEN MÜLLER

FORSTER KIRCHENSTÜCK | RIESLING | SPÄTLESE | TROCKEN

100% riesling

From the extraordinary Kirchenstück vineyard (full of limestone and basalt and considered one of the best, not just

in the Pfalz but in all Germany), Eugen Müller makes rieslings that are simply otherworldly. This spätlese, for

example, is mega-dry yet juicy, and as alive as an electrical current. The flavors are so tightly wound, they seem to

spring out at you as flashes of cool nectarine, salt-crusted minerals, and feathery herbs. The finish—with its touches

of spices and bitter marmalade made from exotic fruits—is extremely long.

MESSMER

BURRWEILER ALTENFORST | RIESLANER | SPÄTLESE

100% rieslaner

Rieslaner. The name suggests something rieslinglike, and indeed great rieslaner like this dry-ish one from Messmer

shares riesling’s sense of purity and freshness. But what happens next is all rieslaner. Namely, an onslaught of

luscious flavor. Rieslaner is richer and weightier than riesling, with mouthfilling flavors reminiscent of poached

pears, herbs, and wildflower honey if you remove most of the sweetness. And the texture—langorous right through

the long finish. The Messmer family (the name is spelled using the “long s” of, it is thought, the script known as

Fraktur; the letter β looks like a capital B but indicates a double s) specializes in a slew of delicious non-riesling

wines, including Scheurebe and gewürztraminer.

MÜLLER-CATOIR

HAARDTER BÜRGERGARTEN | MUSKA TELLER | KABINETT | TROCKEN

100% muskateller

Most fans of German wine would happily drink anything from Müller-Catoir; the wines are mind-blowing across

the board. But for sheer adventure, this ultra-dry muskateller (the name the Germans use for muscat blanc à petits

grains) is beautiful, dense, and very pure. First come exotic, fruity notes (star fruit, cherimoya, kumquat) and then

cool, herbal ones (spearmint and basil). A crunchy saltiness and a wild shiver of mineralty pierce through the whole

package. This is one of the best dry muscats in the world—its only competitors are the sensational dry muscats of

Alsace.

THEO MINGES

FROSCHKÖNIG | RIESLING | SPÄTLESE | TROCKEN

100% riesling

Great riesling is sheer; it is silk stockings—and in this case, the frog king (Froschkönig) is wearing them.

Froschkönig is the playful name the Minges family gives to its dry (trocken) riesling. I love the aromas of forests,

orchards, and rocks in this wine… as if many elements of nature had come together to sing in the glass. And while

dry, the wine does not vaporize your taste buds with starched severity. The Minges family (now in its sixth

generation as winegrowers) also makes beautiful, lightly sweet rieslings, especially the Flemingener Zechpeter, in

which apricots, minerals, ginger, earth, and cream all come together in a wild, perfect balance.

DR. VON BASSERMANN-JORDAN

FORSTER JESUITENGARTEN | RIESLING | TROCKEN | GROSSES GEWÄCHS

100% riesling

Dr. von Bassermann-Jordan’s riesling from the vineyard called Jesuitengarten (“Jesuit garden”) is riesling at warp

speed. The velocity behind the flavors in this wine is stunning. First, a hailstorm of spices and minerals. Then,

coming up bold and fast, surges of freshness like gusts of wet wind after it rains. Then, high soprano-like notes of

exotic citrus—kaffir lime, kumquat, and bergamot. Indeed, every element of the wine seems spring-loaded and

ready to burst onto the scene. It’s an enrapturing wine to drink because of its choreography. Also not to be missed:

Dr. von Bassermann-Jordan’s Deidesheimer Leinhöhle Riesling Auslese—an aria of apricots.

A. CHRISTMANN

IDIG | RIESLING | GROSSES GEWÄCHS

100% riesling

The vineyard Idig, in the village of Köngisbach, makes rich (almost Burgundian-style) dry rieslings with intense

flavors reminiscent of candied orange peel, tropical fruits, and roasted nuts. The wines from Idig are classified

Grosses Gewächs, which again, is the VDP designation for a dry wine from an exceptional Grosses Lage (“Grand

Cru”) site. The south-facing, basin-shaped vineyard catches and holds the warmth of the sun, contributing to the

ripeness of the grapes. Also, importantly, the vineyard is laced with limestone, and indeed this wine possesses a

minerally, starched, chalky character similar to one of the flavors of a great Champagne. The A. Christmann winery

is now run by the seventh generation of the Christmann family.

THEO MINGES

EDITION ROSENDUFT | GEWÜRZTRAMINER | SPÄTLESE

100% gewürztraminer

I could not resist writing about Theo Minges’s dry-ish gewürztraminer, as well as its riesling. Germany is not

known for gewürztraminer, especially since the French region of Alsace—where dry gewürztraminer reigns as

extraordinary—is virtually next door. But Theo Minges’s gewürztraminer, called Edition Rosenduft, is every bit the

equal of a top Alsace version. In fact, you might prefer it, since the high acidity in this wine lifts gewürztraminer up

and gives the flavor more energy. And what flavor—an intricate and mesmerizing exotic tropical/spicy boldness.

(Our whole office ordered out for Thai appetizers after we tasted this wine.) As is often true of the best German

wines, the crystalline purity is fantastic.

The Mittelrhein—the beautiful stretch of river from Bingen to Bonn—is full of medieval castles and fortresses. Many

vineyards here are so steep that workers must be transported up the slopes by cable. The difficulty and expense of

working these vineyards has caused some to be abandoned.

OTHER IMPORTANT

WINE REGIONS

AHR | BADEN | FRANKEN | MITTELRHEIN | NAHE | RHEINHESSEN

As some of the most historically significant white-wine regions in all of Europe, the

Mosel, Rheingau, and Pfalz are deservedly Germany’s best-known and most renowned

wine regions. But good—occasionally very good—wines are made in several neighboring

districts as well, including the Ahr, Baden, Franken, Mittelrhein, and especially the Nahe

and the Rheinhessen.

THE CASTLE IN THE RIVER

Among the most impressive sights along the Mittelrhein is Pfalzgrafenstein Castle, a

medieval castle smack in the middle of the narrow river. French novelist Victor Hugo

called it “a ship of stone, eternally afloat upon the Rhine.

” It was built on tiny Pfalz

Island in 1327, with the purpose of collecting tolls (which it did until 1866). Working with

fortified towns on either side of the river, the castle drew a giant chain across the Rhine

to prevent boats that hadn’t paid the toll from passing through. Captains who still

refused to pay were often thrown in the dungeon, a wooden plank afloat in a well.

Pfalzgrafenstein Castle played a role in the fall of Napoléon Bonaparte because

Prussian Field Marshall Blücher crossed the Rhine at this spot in 1813 and went on to

deal Napoléon’s army a crushing blow.

The old terraced vineyards of the Ahr . Each vine is bound to a separate pole.

AHR

One of Germany’s smallest wine regions, the Ahr is also the most northerly, after Sachsen

and Saale-Unstrut in the former East Germany. It is defined by the Ahr River, which flows

into the Rhine just south of Bonn, in the Mittelrhein. The rough, rocky, forested terrain is

beautiful. This region is a favorite wine country getaway for residents of Bonn.

Although counterintuitive, most of the wine made here is red. Specifically, it is pale,

light spätburgunder (pinot noir)—decent enough but not usually remarkable. The top

producers include Kreuzberg, J. J. Adeneuer, Meyer-Näkel, and Jean Stodden.

BADEN

The wines of Baden do not—and could not—have one single character, for this extremely

diverse region is made up of several large, noncontiguous chunks of land. One part of

Baden is in central Germany, not all that far from Würzburg; another is on the Bodensee

(Lake Constance) near Switzerland; and the biggest and most important part runs parallel

to the Rhine from Heidelberg all the way south to Basel.

The southern part of this stretch—roughly from Basel to the famous spa town Baden-

Baden—is where the very top wines are to be found. Immediately west of this district is

France’s Alsace region, and to the east, the Black Forest. In particular, wines from the area

around the Kaiserstuhl (literally “emperor’s throne”), an extinct volcano, are prized.

This is one of the warmest vineyard areas in Germany, and the wines taste like it. By

German wine standards, they’re very bosomy, big-bodied quaffs with considerable alcohol

and only modest acidity. They are galaxies away from the Mosel wines in spirit and style.

The leading grape in Baden is Müller-Thurgau, which makes wines for everyday

drinking. Y ou’ll also find grauburgunder (pinot gris), gutedel (chasselas), silvaner,

weissburgunder (pinot blanc), gewürztraminer, spätburgunder (pinot noir), and of course,

riesling. (V ery little of the latter is grown.)

The largest number of Baden wines are made by cooperatives (four out of every five

growers sell their grapes to co-ops). The leading co-op is Badischer Winzerkeller. Even by

cooperative standards, it is mammoth, making more than one-third of all of Baden’s wine.

Baden is more famous for its food than for its wine. The forests of Baden abound with

game, berries, and wild mushrooms. In particular, venison, country bacon, and ham from

the Black Forest are legendary, as are preiselbeeren (a kind of small, sweet-tart cranberry)

and heidelbeeren (huckleberries). Many Baden dishes combine kirsch, cream, and tart

cherries, including, of course, the sine qua non of Baden cooking: Black Forest chocolate

cake.

Among the top producers of Baden wine are Dr. Heger, Salwey, and Bercher.

The wide valley floor in Franken, on the northern edge of Bavaria. Wines here are sturdy, broad, and extremely crisp.

FRANKEN

Just about due east of Rheingau, beyond the city of Frankfurt, is the W-shaped wine region

known as Franken. Here, at the northern edge of Bavaria, the climate is severe, springtime

frosts are common, and the size of the harvest fluctuates widely according to the weather.

By law, only Franken wine is bottled in a squat, plump flagon called a bocksbeutel

(literally, a “goat scrotum”). Franken wines are broad, sharp, and sturdy, with little of the

elegance, transparency, or brilliant fruit of those of the Rhineland or Mosel. Nonetheless,

they are well loved by the Bavarians, who consume most of them. The top wines in

Franken are usually made from silvaner; little riesling is planted there. Common, everyday

wines tend to be made (often by cooperatives) from Müller-Thurgau or other crosses such

as Scheurebe, bacchus, kerner, or rieslaner. Most are made in a very dry style.

Trockenbeerenauslesen and beerenauslesen are very rare.

Among the best Franken producers are Staatlicher Hofkeller, Bürgerspital, Hans

Wirsching, and Juliusspital.

FOR ALL THE RIGHT RIESLINGS

The high acid in German rieslings, coupled with their clean, pure flavors and the absence of obfuscating

oak, makes this the most exciting and versatile white wine when it comes to pairing with food. And—

unusually for a white wine—the range of possibilities begins with meat. In Germany, riesling is drunk with

every dish imaginable, from grilled sausages to pork roast. T alk about brilliant combinations!

The wine’s penetrating, rapier-like acidity is a dramatic counterpoint to the fat in meat. But riesling is

also stunning with salads and simple vegetable dishes. Here, its light body and overall fresh character

work to echo the light, fresh flavors of the food. The most inspired pairing of all, however, is that of

riesling with complex Asian dishes, where soy sauce, garlic, and other bold and pungent seasonings

create vivid contrasting flavors, often within the same dish. Many wines simply shut down in such

company. But not riesling.

MITTELRHEIN

The vineyards of Mittelrhein (“middle Rhine”) lie, technically speaking, both north and

south of where the Mosel flows into the Rhine. On the northern end, the region stretches

almost to Bonn. But virtually all of the important vineyards are located along the southern

stretch, from Koblenz to Bingen. At Bingen, where the Rhine makes an abrupt turn,

Mittelrhein ends and Rheingau begins. Mittelrhein is a wine region right out of Hansel and

Gretel. Fairytale medieval castles are poised above the steep vineyards; there are

numerous quaint villages, such as Bacharach and Boppard; the half-timbered houses are

postcard perfect. (The opera Hänsel und Gretel, based on the Grimm fairy tale, was

actually composed in Boppard by Engelbert Humperdinck.)

Many Mittelrhein estates make wines geared to the tourist business. These simple,

inexpensive quaffs (mostly based on Müller-Thurgau) are happily drunk up in the region’s

bustling restaurants and cafés. There are, however, a handful of top estates that make

extremely good riesling and sekt. The best of these have a minerality and clarity

reminiscent of the Mosel wines. This is not by chance. Like the Mosel’s, the Mittelrhein’s

vineyards hover over the river on slate slopes that seem to soar skyward.

There are problems here. The vineyards, sadly, are diminishing in number and have

been doing so for decades. The terrain is difficult to work, and for a variety of complex

reasons, most Mittelrhein wines have never been able to command high enough prices to

justify the cost of caring for and working the vineyards and making good wine. Any

vineyard that is not absolutely stellar is eventually abandoned for lack of profit. (And it

may never be used as a vineyard again. By EU law, if a vineyard has been abandoned for

several years, it must revert to nature and can no longer be used for any commercial

purpose.)

All this said, the top wine estates produce some very good wines. In particular, the

rieslings that Jochen Ratzenberger makes are almost scary, they can be so intense,

minerally, and majestic. Adolf Weingart’s rieslings could blind you with their brilliant

clarity. And for pure, uncomplicated scrumptiousness, the rieslings of Toni Jost are

irresistible.

NAHE

The Nahe River, south of and parallel to the Mosel, flows into the Rhine near Bingen,

close to where the Rheingau region ends. The region named after the Nahe is fairly large,

but the top estates here make stunning wines, completely on par with the best of the

Mosel. The rieslings in particular can be exceptionally complex, with beautiful arcs of

stone-fruit flavors, as if peaches and apricots were riding atop a cresting wave of acidity.

Nahe wines have an essential vividness and gracefulness; they can be exquisitely intense

and nearly explosive—all at the same time. Theirs is a fiery and filigreed elegance, as one

sip of a great spätlese from Dönnhoff, Hexamer, or Schlossgut Diel will attest. (The

ravishing Dönnhoff rieslings have flavors so intricate and dense that they seem, like a

Japanese sword, to be the fusion of hammered layers folded back into themselves.)

Of all of the Nahe’s fine producers, I’d put the three just mentioned in a super-category

of their own, based on their excellence. But just a step lower are many other fantastic

producers, including Dr. Crusius, Hehner-Kiltz, Kruger-Rumpf, Schäfer-Fröhlich, Emrich-

Schönleber, and Jakob Schneider. And for good though not great wine, there’s also the

Nahe State Domaine, a state-owned enterprise created in the early part of the twentieth

century and called in German—get ready—Staatliche Weinbaudomäne Niederhausen-

Schlossböckelheim. (OK, go for it: Say it three times, fast.)

In spring, dandelions bloom in the vineyards above Nierstein in the Rheinhessen.

RHEINHESSEN

Germany’s largest wine area, Rheinhessen, spreads out over 65,000 acres (26,300

hectares) south of Rheingau. Most of it is rather flat, fertile farmland, good for asparagus,

orchards, corn, and sugar beets. As for wine, everything depends on precisely where you

are. Most parts of the region make wine that is merely okay, much of which is

Liebfraumilch, a mild, inexpensive, generic wine (see page 559). Also produced—mostly

by cooperatives—are buckets of bargain, bland, sweetish wines destined for European

supermarkets. But there are delicious exceptions. The Scheurebe spätlesen from Ch. W.

Bernhard, made near the village of Hackenheim, are exotic masterpieces. And the rieslings

can be fantastic—especially from vineyards in one concentrated area, from Bodenheim to

Mettenheim, along the steep west bank of the Rhine. Known as the Rheinterrasse (Rhine

terrace), this brief stretch includes the well-known wine villages of Nackenheim,

Oppenheim, and Nierstein. The soil here is unlike any in Germany—a reddish sandstone

mixed with slate. The rieslings that come from this soil are earthy and juicy, with the kind

of up-front fruit that catapults out of the glass. There are a handful of top producers,

including Gunderloch, Keller, J. & H. A. Strub, Wagner Stempel, Wittmann, and Freiherr

Heyl zu Herrnsheim.

AUSTRIA

LOWER AUSTRIA | BURGENLAND | STYRIA | VIENNA

AUSTRIA RANKS THIRTEENTH AMONG WINE PRODUCING COUNTRIES WORLDWIDE. THE

AUSTRIANS DRINK AN AVERAGE OF 8 GALLONS (30 LITERS) OF WINE PER PERSON PER YEAR.

Austria makes some of the raciest, most exciting wines in Europe. To taste them is to be

easily convinced. These are wines—whites in particular—with an absolutely uncanny

synergy (and energy) between power and elegance. Most of them are thoroughly dry, but

Austria is also known for luscious sweet wines intended to accompany (or be) dessert.

Austrian viticulture is quite old. The Celts, discoverers of what would eventually

become many of the top wine regions of central Europe, planted the first grapes here in the

fourth century B.C. Later, the vineyards fell within the vast arc of the Roman Empire. By

the Middle Ages, Austrian vineyards, like those of France, Germany, and Italy, were in the

painstaking care of monks. But more than any other historical period, the twentieth

century—and its tumultuous politics—shaped Austrian wine.

The modern country called Austria, about the size of Maine, dates from 1919, when the

sprawling Austro-Hungarian Empire was dissolved by the Treaty of Saint-Germain. In its

place, the post–World War I countries of Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Y ugoslavia, and (a far

smaller) Austria were formed.

The new Austria, economically unstable and enfeebled by war, could no longer afford

to make the sort of handcrafted wines that were a hallmark of the empire past. Something

serviceable and cheap was the order of the day. Austrian wine merchants began the mass

manufacture of rather insipid, slightly sweet, cheap quaffs that sufficed locally, satisfied

tourists, and could be exported easily to its main trading partner, Germany, which was also

financially strapped. The market for such wines, notwithstanding their lack of character,

grew. Austrian growers, paid peanuts for their grapes, increasingly planted the highest-

yielding, most innocuous varieties. Wine merchants and winemakers began taking every

production shortcut they could find.

WHAT’S FREUD GOT TO DO WITH IT?

Austria is often wrongly assumed to be a sociocultural subset of Germany. Although they share more or

less the same language, the two countries have national characters that are quite different. Austria,

farther south and east than Germany, was often along the trade route taken by early travelers between

Europe and Asia. As such, Austria has been influenced by both Western and Eastern thinking,

philosophy, and art. The combination has given rise to a complex culture and national spirit. Austrians

can seem more passionate, wilder, more spontaneous, and more melancholy than Germans. Austria is,

after all, the homeland of both Sigmund Freud and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart.

For their part, Austrian wines bear very little resemblance in flavor to German wines. Austria’s dry

whites are much fuller in body and bolder in character than Germany’s filigreed, dry whites. The same is

true with red wines. Austrian reds—juicy, lip-smacking, and often streaked with pepper and spice flavors

—have almost nothing in common with the gentle, light-bodied reds of Germany.

That said, Austria and Germany do share a few things. Both countries are known for handcrafting

some of the most decadent, small-production sweet wines in Europe, from mesmerizing eisweins to

ethereal trockenbeerenauslesen. And finally, both countries make delicious sekt, sparkling wine that is

happily popped open at the slightest provocation.

Then, in 1985, the downward spiral hit bottom. A small group of corrupt wine brokers

doctored a batch of cheap wine with diethylene glycol (a component of antifreeze) to

make it taste fuller and sweeter. Although the merchants were quickly caught and no one’s

health was compromised by the tainted wine, the news spread around the world.

In the end, the wine scandal proved to be what one winemaker called a cleansing

thunderstorm. The mass market for inferior wine collapsed, leaving the few remaining

quality producers—mostly small family estates—to build a new Austrian wine industry

from the ground up. The turnaround has been dramatic. For the impassioned,

knowledgeable winemakers of today’s Austria, top-quality wine is a virtual religion, and

respect for the land is paramount. (It’s interesting to note that Austria has the largest

percentage of land under certified organic production of any country in the European

Union.) For an explanation of Austrian wine law, see the Appendix on Wine Laws, page

926.

THE LAND, THE GRAPES, AND THE VINEYARDS

Austria, a landlocked country, is bordered by the Czech Republic, the Slovak Republic,

Germany, Hungary, Slovenia, Italy, and Switzerland. Although the western part of the

country, with its cities such as Salzburg and Innsbruck, is well known, the vineyards are

all in the distant, more exotic eastern half. There, like a backward C, some 108,000 acres

(43,700 hectares) of vineyards form a crescent along the country’s eastern border. Just

over 20,000 growers grow grapes here, and approximately 6,500 wineries make and bottle

wine.

The rocky, terraced vineyards of F . X. Pichler in the Wachau. The Pichler family makes some of Austria’ s most stunning

rieslings and grüner veltliners. Vines have been planted on these stark slopes since the 13th century.

There are four main wine regions, the two largest of which have several smaller regions

within them. The two largest regions are Lower Austria and Burgenland; Styria and

Vienna are the two smaller ones.

Lower Austria, the most important wine region in terms of size and reputation for high-

quality wine, is in the north, along the Slovakian border, and includes the top subregion

known as the Wachau. (The word lower in the name Lower Austria refers to the lower part

of the Danube River, which flows through the region.) Burgenland is the easternmost

Austrian wine region; much of it lies along the Hungarian border. Styria, the hilliest

region, is in the south, along the Slovenian border. And Vienna is the only major city in

the world that is considered a wine region.

THE QUICK SIP ON AUSTRIA

AUSTRIA MAKES some of the most purely riveting wines in Europe.

AUSTRIA IS DEVOTED primarily to dry white wines and magnificent sweet wines,

although a surprising amount of delicious, food-friendly red wine is made.

THE BEST WHITE WINES of Austria are based either on the snappy, peppery grape

grüner veltliner or on riesling; the best reds are Zweigelt and blaufränkisch.

Austria is mostly a white-wine producer; 60 percent of all its wine is white, although

absolutely delicious reds are made (more on which in a moment). In total, some thirty-five

grape varieties are planted. Grüner veltliner—still relatively unknown but capable of great

quality—is the leading white grape in terms of wine production. That said, many Austrian

wine experts consider riesling to be the country’s greatest grape, albeit one that is far less

planted. Austria can also excel with sauvignon blanc and pinot blanc, and the wonderfully

expressive reds Zweigelt and blaufränkisch should not be missed by any wine lover. For

the most part, all of the grapes I’ve just named stand alone in a wine; they are rarely

blended.

THE GRAPES OF AUSTRIA

WHITES

FURMINT : A minor grape, but a common component in ausbruch, the famous sweet wine of Burgenland.

GRÜNER VELTLINER: Austria’s most important grape in terms of both quality and the acreage devoted

to it. The wines’ unique flavor often begins with stone fruits and ends with a rush of white pepper.

MORILLON OR CHARDONNAY: Chardonnay is called by both names in Austria. A minor grape; the

best dry wines from it are elegant, almost taut in style. It is also made into some good sweet wines.

MUSKATELLER: Locally also known as gelber muskateller, this is the same as muscat blanc à petits

grains. Grown mainly in Styria, muskateller is extremely fragrant and lush.

NEUBURGER: Very simple workhorse grape; a source of pedestrian dry wine and some good sweet

wines.

RIESLING: A major grape even though it is not widely planted in Austria. It is the source of lively, vibrant,

often stunning wines, generally with more power than German rieslings.

SÄMLING: Minor grape; a cross between riesling and an unknown grape. Sometimes used for eiswein.

Known in Germany as Scheurebe.

SAUVIGNON BLANC: Not widely planted except in the region of Styria, but important because of the

quality of the exotically smoky and grassy wines made from it.

TRAMINER: Also known as savagnin. The aromatic ancestor of gewürztraminer; made into dry and

sweet wines.

WEISSBURGUNDER: Major grape; known elsewhere as pinot blanc. Makes well-focused, dry wines that

range from creamy to racy. In Burgenland, sweet wines are also made from the grape.

WELSCHRIESLING: Major grape; it is not a type of riesling, despite its name, but another name for the

Croatian grape graševina. It makes simple, straightforward dry wines, sometimes with the aroma of fresh

hay. In Burgenland, also used for late-harvest, botrytized wines.

REDS

BLAUBURGUNDER: Known elsewhere as pinot noir. Widely variable in quality; at best it produces light

wines with raspberry overtones.

BLAUFRÄNKISCH: Major grape. Known in Germany, British Columbia, and Washington State by its

other name—Lemberger. The source of bold, spicy, complex wines, often with commanding structures.

CABERNET SAUVIGNON: From great vineyards and winemakers it can make surprisingly rich,

structured wines with good balance and deep flavors.

ST . LAURENT : Produces simple, hearty, and fruity wines.

ZWEIGELT : A cross between blaufränkisch and St. Laurent. Its wines are reminiscent of California’s

zinfandel; inky, fruity, with a briary edge.

The Austrian philosophy of winemaking closely parallels that of top producers in

Germany and Alsace—namely, that greatness resides in purity. Austrian winemakers are

after the clearest possible expression of a given place and of a given grape’s inherent

flavors. Techniques that superimpose flavor (such as the barrel fermentation of white

wines) are used infrequently and cautiously. For all their sophistication, Austrian wine-

makers have a firm respect for tradition and accumulated knowledge. Many of the

extraordinary sweet wines, for example, are painstakingly made according to practices

established hundreds of years ago.

THE MOST IMPORTANT AUSTRIAN WINES

LEADING WINES

GRÜNER VELTLINER white (dry and sweet)

RIESLING white (dry and sweet)

SAUVIGNON BLANC white

WEISSBURGUNDER white (dry and sweet)

WELSCHRIESLING white (dry and sweet)

BLAUFRÄNKISCH red

ST . LAURENT red

ZWEIGELT red

WINES OF NOTE

GELBER MUSKATELLER white

TRAMINER white (dry and sweet)

The rolling vineyards of Burgenland are where most of the world’ s best blaufränkisch grapes are grown.

These dessert wines notwithstanding, virtually all Austrian wines are bone dry.

Technically and legally speaking, off-dry, half-dry, or semisweet wines could be made, but

in reality, they aren’t. Most Austrian winemakers are adamant about dryness. Of course,

given the high acidity of most Austrian wines, dryness itself comes across in different

ways that influence our perceptions of flavor. As the Austrian wine specialist Terry Theise

points out,

“[with Austrian wines] . . . there is soft creamy dry and there’s accommodating

dry and there’s very crisp dry and there’s fierce austere dry and there’s even this-could-

use-some-damn-sugar dry.

”

A few further words on the leading grape varieties themselves. As it does in Germany

and Alsace, riesling thrives here, although it accounts for just 4 percent of vineyard

plantings. Minerally, dramatic, and sheer, Austrian rieslings are unmasked. They show

little fruit in the conventional sense. They are sophisticated, delicious sheets of glass.

Distinctive and vivid, grüner veltliner has not yet gotten the attention it deserves. For

me, the flavors of grüner veltliner include a faint echo of something green, wonderful

exotic fruit, splashes of minerals, and a dramatic burst of white pepperiness. It is “cool,

” in

the cucumber sense of having cool, refreshing flavors. It is also an ancient grape—

according to DNA typing, it is a natural cross of savagnin and the nearly extinct German

variety St. Georgener. Going back even further in the family tree, grüner veltliner is

related to pinot noir (possibly as a grandchild), since pinot noir and savagnin are related.

THE ID OF COFFEE

Unlike cafés anywhere in the world, from Rome to Seattle, the Viennese coffeehouse is only tangentially

about drinking coffee. Here, in the city where psychoanalysis was born, a coffeehouse is home to a

complex ritual—more intimate than social, supremely private even within the public domain.

Traditionally, coffeehouses were more or less demarcated by profession or social ranking. There were

coffeehouses for politicians, coffeehouses for artists, coffeehouses for scholars, and so on. Every person

had a single place to which he or she went exclusively. At a minimum, you spent an hour at a

coffeehouse (no quickly-downed espressos), but more commonly, you would spend several hours and

possibly the entire day there. Coffee would be ordered by color—gold, light gold, blond, dark gold—

according to the amount of milk added, and would be served on a small tray with a few sugar cubes and

a glass of water. The main activity was, and still is, reading newspapers provided by the house, although

you could also write or work in complete solitude, using the café table as a private desk. Since the

waiters knew every customer and his or her preferred coffee, you never really had to utter a single word.

When people did go to the coffeehouse in pairs, it was either to read in mutual silence or to discuss

problems or personal intimacies. Still, private conversation, not social banter, was the custom.

Modern life has changed Viennese coffeehouses, but not by much. During the daytime, a respectful

solemnity still prevails. People just sit, think, read, and sip coffee. At night, coffeehouses become

somewhat more animated, serving goulash and then coffee and strudel to opera-and theatergoers.

In the late fall and winter, coffee can become more substantial, including a particularly fortifying

rendition called a fiaker. Made with liberal amounts of rum and whipped cream, fiakers are named after

the open horse-drawn carriages that once transported people through the streets of Vienna. Riding in a

fiaker on a cold Austrian night made you want to stop and sip a fiaker.

Among Vienna’s best coffeehouses: Café Hawelka, Café Landtmann, Café Sacher, Café Sperl, Demel

Konditorei, and Heiner Konditorei.

If grüner veltliner is Austria’s signature gift to the world of white wine, then

blaufränkisch is its red gift. Undoubtedly noble in origin and very old (though its

parentage isn’t completely clear), blaufränkisch combines the words blau, meaning

“blue;” and fränkisch, an old German designation for “a fine wine.

” Austrian

blaufränkisch is precise and sleek—spicy, herbal, and floral—and all of this plus the

flavors of delicious woodland berries and a sense of forestiness. Most of all, blaufränkisch

has grip and bite. It is exactly what one so often wants in order to splice through the

meatiness of meat. Despite its appeal, blaufränkisch is not the leading red grape of

Austria. That would be Zweigelt. A cross of blaufränkisch and a usually more simple

grape called St. Laurent, zweigelt makes a juicy, fruity, easy wine.

WHAT RIEDEL WROUGHT

If you’re over 45 years old, you remember a time when wineglasses were just wineglasses. They were

fairly small and sturdy and you didn’t care if you broke one because they were cheap. (The good glasses

—the Waterford crystal ones—were safely ensconced, still in their original boxes, up in the attic, where

they’d been since your wedding day when you got them.) Then came the 1990s and a new word entered

the wine vernacular—Riedel. Georg Riedel, the tenth-generation head of his family’s Austrian crystal

company, was a wine connoisseur. A man of strict and impeccable standards, Riedel had begun

designing crystal wine glasses that would enhance the aromas and flavors of various varietals and types

of wine. He soon became famous for his “Riedel Glass T asting,

” in which the same wine was tasted in

various glasses, and consumers and wine pros around the world were invited to judge the results.

Winemakers and restaurateurs were especially convinced of the efficacy of Riedel glasses, and within a

few years, no top winery or restaurant was without them. Riedel’s success caused dozens of other top

Austrian (Zalto) and German (Eisch, Schott Zwiesel) crystal companies to come out with competing lines

of high-quality wineglasses. T oday, no self-respecting wine lover thinks twice about having a cabinet full

of good wineglasses and using them daily.

Finally, Austria’s top wine districts possess infertile, eroded, well-drained soils. Sand,

gravel, slate, and loam are common, as are loess (fine sediment caused by wind-blown

silt) and gneiss (foliated metamorphic rock with coarse mineral grains arranged in bands).

SWEETNESS AND RIPENESS: THE AUSTRIAN

HIERARCHY

One of the obvious ways in which Austrian wine is different from German is its

designations of ripeness. In Germany it’s still common for some fine wines to be made at a

variety of ripeness levels, starting with kabinett and spätlese and going up to BA and

TBA. A very similar hierarchy of ripeness used to be used in Austria as well. No longer.

Austrian fine wine producers all make dry wines from ripe grapes, end of story. The one

exception where you will find designations of ripeness is sweet wine (that is, dessert

wine). Here they are:

BEERENAUSLESE (BA): must be made from overripe and/or botrytized grapes

EISWEIN: must be made from overripe grapes naturally frozen on the vine

AUSBRUCH: this category, unique to Austria, applies to wines that must be made

exclusively from botrytized and/or naturally dried grapes

TROCKENBEERENAUSLESE (TBA): produced only in exceptional years and must be made

from predominatly botrytized grape bunches and extremely dried, raisinlike grape berries

To be called by any of the names above, a wine must reach a certain ripeness level

measured in Austria by what is known as KMW, or the Klosterneuburger Mostwage scale.

The KMW compares the specific gravity of the must (based on its sugar content) to the

specific gravity of water. Austrian sweet wines make up just 1.8 percent of high-quality

wine production in Austria.

AUSTRIA’S CULINARY ICON

Pumpkinseed oil is to Austria what olive oil is to Italy—a culinary and cultural icon.

Pumpkinseed oil comes from the seeds of a small, green-and-yellow striped pumpkin

grown mainly in the southern Austrian province of Styria. The prized seeds are

removed and washed by hand, then roasted, mashed, and pressed. (Far less valued,

the pumpkin flesh becomes livestock feed.) Deep emerald green, the oil has an

unctuous texture and an almost hauntingly intense, nutty flavor. Austrians drizzle it over

lettuces, vegetables, and breads and pour small puddles into soups including, of

course, pumpkin soup. Thanks to its high vitamin content and unsaturated fatty acids,

pumpkinseed oil is considered very healthful. It’s also quite expensive, and many of the

best pumpkinseed oils are made by winegrowers.

In particular, Austrian sweet wines are a specialty of Burgenland, which is slightly

warmer and more humid than the other regions (the better for botrytis to develop). But

there may be something cultural at work, too, for Burgenland is nudged up against

Hungary, which is known for one of the most sensational dessert wines in existence—

Tokaji Aszú.

THE DAC

Ready for some controversy? In recent history, consumers of Austrian wine purchased it

based on the grape variety and the place. If you were in the mood for a pristine, dry

riesling and you knew the Wachau as one of the best places in the world for riesling, you

were all set. It was pretty simple. But as of the 1990s, Austria sought to align itself more

closely with many parts of western Europe and introduce an appellation system (like

France’s) that encourages wines to be chosen based on the place where the grapes grew.

(Y ou, the wine drinker, would simply have to memorize the permissible grape varieties in

that place, as for example, French Côte-Rôtie = syrah). Some have argued that Austria has

taken a step backward by adopting an appellation system that restricts creativity among

winemakers and forces memorization among wine consumers. Others have argued that an

appellation system is the “grown-up” approach to wine, since it underscores the message

of terroir.

Winemaker Fred Loimer of Weingut Loimer , in his biodynamic vineyards in the renowned Langenlois area of the

Kamptal. Loimer makes some of Austria’ s most ravishing and concentrated grüner veltliners.

In 2001, the Ministry of Agriculture adopted the latter thinking and instituted a new

system called DAC (Districtus Austriae Controllatus, or “protected Austrian declaration

of origin”). The first DAC was the Weinviertel, in Lower Austria (for grüner veltliner), in

2003. To date there are nine DACS, with more potentially to follow. For wines that use the

DAC system, the appellation and the letters DAC are listed on the label, but usually not

the grape variety. And therein lies the rub. When a DAC is known for just one variety,

you’re compelled to memorize which variety it is, but at least the situation is not

completely confusing. On the other hand, several DACs are known for multiple varieties,

causing nothing if not consumer angst. Here are the nine, followed in parentheses by the

grape that’s allowed to be in the bottle.

In Lower Austria

WEINVIERTEL DAC: (grüner veltliner)

TRAISENTAL DAC: (grüner veltliner or riesling)

KREMSTAL DAC: (grüner veltliner or riesling)

KAMPTAL DAC: (grüner veltliner or riesling)

In Vienna

WIENER GEMISCHTER SATZ DAC: (At least three high-quality white wine grapes must be

used, the leading one of which cannot constitute more than 50 percent of the blend.

Among the twenty permissible grapes are grüner veltliner, riesling, pinot blanc, pinot gris,

chardonnay, neuberger, and gewürztraminer.)

In Burgenland

EISENBERG DAC: (blaufränkisch)

MITTELBURGENLAND DAC: (blaufränkisch)

NEUSIEDLERSEE DAC: (Zweigelt or Zweigelt with other indigenous reds if the wine is

reserve)

LEITHABERG DAC: (pinot blanc, chardonnay, neuburger, and grüner veltliner for white;

blaufränkisch blended with up to 15 percent St. Laurent, Zweigelt, or pinot noir for red)

Grüner veltliner grapes—the source of many of the best wines of Austria.

THE FOODS OF AUSTRIA

Austria’s culinary traditions, along with Hungary’s, are the most sophisticated and

compelling in central Europe. Essays could be written on the soups alone. The gem of that

genre is pumpkin soup. Every top restaurant, every great home cook, has a personalized

recipe, including decadent versions in which whipped cream is folded in and roasted

pumpkinseed oil is drizzled on top. But there are also extraordinary potato soups that

prove just how majestic that tuber can be. In wine country, one must also try a frothy

weinsuppe (“wine soup”), usually made with riesling or grüner veltliner, beef stock,

paprika, and cream.

HEURIGE: THE WINEMAKER AS COOK

The best places in Austria in which to taste homestyle food, drink local wines, and immerse yourself in

everyday Austrian life are not cafés or restaurants. They are heurigen (HOY-rig-en)—rustic eating and

drinking rooms (it would be erroneous to call them dining rooms), which are often attached to

winemakers’ homes. Heurigen date from 1784, when a royal decree allowed every Austrian to “serve and

sell their own produce including wine.

”

Traditionally, all of the food at a heurige, including the breads, soups, salads, strudels, and even the

sausages, is made from scratch by the winemaker and his family. Similarly, the wine offered must be only

the winemaker’s. The word heurige, in fact, refers both to the wine of the latest vintage and the place

where it’s drunk. In other words, you drink heurige at a heurige. By law, a winemaker may only keep his

heurige open for business as long as his supply of heurige lasts.

Most heurigen are utterly modest gathering spots, with communal tables and often a small playground

for the children of their patrons. People go as much to socialize as to eat or drink. Although wine is

available by the bottle, lots of it is ordered and drunk by the glass, or is made into a spritzer and served in

a mug. (Interestingly, no coffee or beer is allowed to be sold.) In the countryside outside Vienna, heurigen

are often called buschenschenken, named after the swags of fir branches tied to the doors.

Strudels are ubiquitous in Austria, as often savory (made with wild mushrooms, root

vegetables, ham, shellfish, herbs, cheese, and so on) as sweet (made with apples, plums,

nuts, cherries, apricots). Strudel dough, similar to phyllo dough, is rolled into ultra-thin

sheets and brushed lightly with butter before it is filled and rolled up. At the Heurige

Schandl, in the village of Rust, in the wine region of Burgenland, the juicy baked red

cabbage and caraway strudel comes with a pool of dill and sour cream sauce. (Peter

Schandl, the owner, is also a winemaker, who makes an irresistible pinot blanc.) Strudel is

a venue for offal as well. Austrians are quite fond of wrapping the thin dough around lamb

and veal tongues, hearts, sweetbreads, and brains.

The breads in Austria, like those in Germany, make bread in western Europe seem

about as nutritious as Styrofoam. Austrian breads are usually multigrain and often include

herbs, spices, and nuts; you’ll find roasted onion and walnut bread, pumpkinseed bread,

and anise and black pepper bread. The best bread I have ever had—anywhere in the world

—is made by the Austrian baker Hubert Auer in the city of Graz, in Styria. The Auer

breads are often made with ancient types of grain, custom cultivated for the company. The

breads are available in Auer’s shops in Graz as well as in Vienna.

When Austrians themselves are asked to name the quintessential Austrian dish, a

majority answer Wiener schnitzel, pounded veal medallions that are coated in coarse

whole-grain bread crumbs—to make the schnitzel crunchy—then fried.

Bread—in Austria, it’ s plentiful and irresistible. Even in a simple stall in the Naschtmarkt—Vienna’ s pulsing outdoor

market—sweet and savory breads can be found in abundance.

The other well-loved meat specialties are venison, game birds, wild boar, all manner of

pork, and tafelspitz (boiled beef), which tastes much better than it sounds and is usually

served with apfelkren, fresh horseradish pureed with cooked apples, and roasted potatoes.

Meat and potatoes. Bread and soup. If these do not seem the stuff of culinary dreams, it

is because we consider them common, too fundamental to be inspirational. But Austria’s

position as an Old World crossroads between East and West has meant that the cooking is

anything but plebeian. The exotic and the familiar have been intriguingly mingled here for

centuries. Y ou can smell it. The aroma wafting out of any kitchen window is not just

vegetables or meat, but a mesmerizing collective scent of those plus ginger, paprika,

cumin, caraway, dill, garlic, poppy seed, nutmeg, cinnamon, and juniper.

The Austro-Hungarian monarchy left numerous culinary remnants, including the two

most famous: dumplings (knödel) and goulash (gulasch). Dumplings can be made simply

from potato flour or from crumbled bread rolls. But more intriguing is the invention of

bread mixed with meat, herbs, and/or cheese or, for sweet dumplings, fruit, jam, and/or

sugar. Knödel are masterful and irresistible in Austria, and are often served with soup,

meats, or dessert. As for goulash, it is still traditional in Vienna for friends to go out for

this paprika-rich beef ragout after the opera or theater.

ABOUT THOSE “FRENCH” CROISSANTS

For centuries, imperialistic Turkish tribes hoping to invade western Europe considered Austria a militarily

strategic foot in the door. Austria usually managed to defend itself against these periodic sieges, but

occasionally the Turks prevailed. A brief occupation in the late 1600s had two redeeming results—both

culinary. Coffee beans were brought to Vienna, instigating a revolutionary change in Austrian drinking

habits, and Viennese bakers created the croissant to commemorate the end of the Turkish siege. The

rich dough’s shape was modeled after the crescent moon emblem on Turkish banners.

Viennese desserts—both simple and elaborate—are culinary high art and an inspiration for pastry chefs around the

world. Here, a traditional Gugelhupf cake, just waiting to be accompanied by a cup of rich, dark Viennese coffee.

Another Austrian custom is wurst snacking. All over Vienna and other major cities,

small kiosks sell dozens of different grilled sausages served with hot or sweet mustard,

crisp pickles, and hot peppers.

Save room. Austrian desserts are so good that Austrians often have them for breakfast

or with coffee at 10:00 A.M. or at 4:00 P .M. There are the classics: apfelstrudel (apple

strudel) and topfenstrudel (strudel made with sweetened fresh cheese and raisins and

served with a vanilla custard sauce), Linzertorte (a raspberry and nut torte named after the

city of Linz), Sachertorte (a dense chocolate torte, after which the Hotel Sacher in Vienna

is named), plus countless poppy seed puddings.

In Vienna, the most sumptuous spot for dessert—indeed, one of the premier café/pastry

shops in the world—is Demel. It bakes some ninety-five types of cakes and tortes alone,

plus perfect strudels bursting with fruit, and dark chocolate desserts that beg you to order

them. These are all grandly showcased along antique wooden sideboards and will be

served to you by perfectly mannered Viennese waitresses. The accompaniment of choice

is rich Viennese coffee served with whipped cream. Demel is on the elegant shopping

street called (counterintuitively) Kohlmarkt—cabbage market—at number 14.

As for actual cabbages, the place to see them is Vienna’s bustling outdoor market, the

Naschmarkt, with its purple figs the size of apples, its wooden barrels of fresh sauerkraut,

and the dizzying array of fragrant Turkish breads, olives, and cheeses. First-time visitors

can be taken aback by finding Austrian apfelstrudel and Turkish baklava sold side by side,

especially since the countries don’t actually border one another. But the Naschmarkt

clearly reflects the symbiosis that has existed for centuries (sometimes happily, most times

not) between the two historic rivals. Today, Turkish immigrants make up a large part of

the Austrian population, and their rich culinary traditions continue to be woven into the

Austrian gastronomic mainstream with delicious results. One of the most magnificent

examples: the croissant.

LOWER AUSTRIA

Lower Austria (known locally as Niederosterriech) is made up of eight separate wine

districts that loop in a grand arc around the city of Vienna. (Vienna is not included in these

districts; it’s a separate wine region of its own.) These are: the Wachau, Kremstal,

Kamptal, Traisental, Wagram, Weinviertel, Carnuntum, and Thermenregion. Lower

Austria is the most important wine region in Austria. More than 50 percent (67,000

acres/27,100 hectares) of Austria’s vineyards are located here. The region is not in the

south, as the name would seem to suggest, but rather is tucked into the northeastern corner

of the country, along the lower part of the Danube River.

The Wachau (va-COW)—a UNESCO World Heritage site and the tiniest of the districts

(just 3,334 acres/1,349 hectares)—is the most important. The whites here are unmatched

in their sheer clarity of flavor, elegance, and balance (the vinous equivalent of perfect

pitch). Through the middle of the Wachau, the Danube flows slowly and silently. Over

millennia, it has gorged its way through granite gneiss (metamorphosed igneous rocks that

are folated into layers) rich with quartz and feldspar, grinding them into drifting silt (loess)

that settled on the east-facing terraces at the end of the last Ice Age. This is riesling and

grüner veltliner territory at its best and wine country at its most serene, with storybook

villages and country restaurants all along the riverbanks. The climate, tempered by the

river, is nonetheless cool, with strong variations in temperature between day and night.

Both the soil and the climate give good structure and acidity to the grapes.

In the cool cellars of Austria’ s best wineries, fermentation tanks are generally small, reflecting the fact that most top

wineries make different wines from different vineyard sites.

THE BLUE MONASTERY OF DÜRNSTEIN

The medieval village of Dürnstein is one of the prettiest in the Wachau. Along cobblestone streets sit

houses outlined in flower boxes. The village itself can be seen from quite far away, thanks to the

strikingly beautiful blue spire of the monastery’s church, said to be the color of the Virgin Mary’s robe.

The Wachau is the only place in all of Austria where you’ll find the three words

steinfeder , federspiel, and smaragd. These terms were created by the Vinea Wachau, an

association of the top Wachau producers, whose goal was to set their dry white wines

apart. The categories (which must be listed on the wine labels) are defined as follows:

STEINFEDER: Natural unchaptalized wines with no more than 11.5 percent alcohol.

(Steinfeder is the name of a local strain of feathery grass, and the association poetically

describes these wines as “dainty.

”)

FEDERSPIEL: Natural unchaptalized wines with at least 11.5 but no more than 12.5 percent

alcohol. The name federspiel derives from the local sport of falconry.

SMARAGD: The word smaragd (meaning “emerald”) is also the name of a bright green

lizard that suns itself in the vineyards here. Smaragd wines are the most physiologically

ripe and are therefore considered the best. The wines must have a minimum of 12.5

percent alcohol; most are higher.

The vineyards of Domaine Wachau in the Wachau region, along the Danube River.

The other traditional white grapes in Lower Austria include welschriesling (not a

riesling, despite its name, but the Croatian grape graševina), weissburgunder (pinot blanc),

a small amount of chardonnay, and the slightly fat, somewhat neutral neuburger.

Just below Vienna, in the Thermenregion (named for the many hot springs there), two

rare whites can be found: rotgipfler and zierfandler. Usually blended together to create the

specialty wine of the region, the two make a massively fruity and rather heavy white with

spicy orange overtones.

Although red wine is not Lower Austria’s strong suit, there are some good ones,

including a number of simple, spicy spätburgunders (pinot noirs) and Zweigelts. One of

the most lip-smacking Zweigelts is that of Jamek, an excellent family-run winery,

restaurant, and inn right on the banks of the Danube near the Old World village of

Dürnstein (where, in 1192, the English king Richard the Lion-Hearted was imprisoned by

Leopold V , Duke of Austria).

SOME OF THE BEST PRODUCERS OF GRÜNER VELTLINER

Bründlmayer • Emmerich Knoll • Franz Hirtzberger • F . X. Pichler • Hiedler • Hirsch • Holzapfel • Leo

Alzinger • Loimer • Nigl • Prager • Schloss Gobelsburg

The Lower Austrian Wines to Know

WHITES

SCHLOSS GOBELSBURG

RIESLING | TRADITION | RESERVE | KAMPTAL

100% riesling

One of the top producers in the Kamptal region, Schloss Gobelsburg makes exquisitely intense, shockingly pure

rieslings and grüner veltliners. One of their rieslings—called Tradition—is a tightly wound molecule of energy

waiting to explode into minerals, stone fruits, and waves of amazing freshness on your palate. But of course, there’s

more—a fragile whiff of flowers and an echo of exotic citrus peel savoriness, rather like preserved lemons. The

wine comes from older vines on the slopes of the famous Gaisberg vineyard. Schloss Gobelsburg is the oldest

winery in the Danube region, with a documented history back to 1171. The schloss (castle) itself is owned by the

monks of the nearby Stift Zwettl monastery, and the winery is managed by the Moosbrugger family.

“Tradition” is

the name Michael Moosbrugger gives to bottlings he makes that honor a time before technology, and indeed this

wine was made as it might have been at the turn of the twentieth century.

HIRSCH

GRÜNER VELTLINER | LAMM | RESERVE | KAMPTAL

100% grüner veltliner

Hirsch makes almost Baroque-style grüner veltliners—wines with curves of softness, fleshy peachiness, and gentle

acidity that seem to lull you into a trance, until the end, when the wine hails with white pepper. I can think of a

dozen things I’d like to eat with them right this moment. This is a small, family estate exclusively devoted to

riesling and grüner veltliner, and this wine, from the famous Kamptal vineyard known as Lamm, is astonishing.

BRÜNDLMAYER

GRÜNER VELTLINER | LAMM | RESERVE | KAMPTAL

100% grüner veltliner

Willi Bründlmayer typifies the quality-obsessed New Wave generation of Austrian winemakers now at the helm of

Austria’s best estates. His rieslings, with their bright, powerful aromas and crystal-clear flavors, are like climbing

into a lemon tree. But I love especially this grüner veltliner, from the same vineyard—Lamm—as the Hirsch. Once

again, the vineyard offers up a shiatsu massage of white pepper, but Bründlmayer’s wine also has a creamy core

around which that pepper, plus minerals, circle like bees around the honey-rich hive. A simply fantastic grüner

veltliner.

NIGL

GRÜNER VELTLINER | ALTE REBEN | LOWER AUSTRIA

100% grüner veltliner

The four letters N, I, G, L stand alone on the bare, white front label. Absolutely no adornment. It’s as if everything

is stripped away and you are left with one final essential. That idea also describes the Nigl wines. Crystalline,

filigreed, precise, drenched in minerals, and possessing an atomic density of flavor, they are wines without an ounce

of baby fat. Every molecule is lined up along a single trajectory of profound flavor. I would drink any Nigl wine

anytime with pleasure, but I especially love this grüner veltliner from old vines (alte reben) for its operatic opener

(minerals dipped in peach syrup) and its flourishing finale (cymbals of thundering white pepper).

LOIMER

GRÜNER VELTLINER | LANGENLOIS SPIEGEL | RESERVE | KAMPTAL

100% grüner veltliner

The Loimer family makes powerhouse grüner veltliners, racy wines with a sense of urgency to them. They are

always vivid, but best of all is their tension of opposites—they are salty and peppery, light and dense, minerally and

fruity, all at the same time. This wine is from the small Spiegel vineyard, near the town of Langenlois in the

Kamptal (Kamp V alley), where the Kamp River has carved deep gorges (now covered in loess) in the bedrock. The

Loimer family are ardent practitioners of biodynamics (see Biodynamic Viticulture, page 34).

DOMÄNE W ACHAU

GRÜNER VELTLINER | TERRASSEN | SMARAGD | LOWER AUSTRIA

100% grüner veltliner

The massive wines of Domäne Wachau are known for their gravitas, and the sheer density and weight of this grüner

veltliner is an astounding example. I once wrote,

“It’s like tasting howling sounds from the depths of the ocean; it

makes you feel as if the entire earth welled up and gently put preserved lemons, spices, and rocks in your mouth.

”

Domäne Wachau is a cooperative (certainly one of the top cooperatives in the world) that makes wines from dozens

of small growers, who produce more than 30 percent of all the grapes in the Wachau. Terrassen (“terraces”) refers

to the fact that all of the grapes for this wine were grown on rocky, dry terraces where the elevation, orientation to

the sun, and attenuated soils all lead to high-quality grapes.

RED

SCHLOSS GOBELSBURG

PINOT NOIR | ALTE HAIDE | LOWER AUSTRIA

100% pinot noir

Before I first tasted this wine, I would have said that Austrian and German pinot noir had a long way to go before

they’d be put in the same company with Burgundy. This wine opened my eyes. It’s as delicate, layered, precise, and

filigreed as pinot noir can be, with long ribbons of spiciness and earthiness and a core of rich raspberry/cranberry

fruit. The silky/creamy texture is sublime (for Burgundy lovers, it will seem like a page out of the Chambolle-

Musigny playbook). I am not surprised that this wine comes from Schloss Gobelsburg, one of the great wine estates

of the world, and an estate from which I’ve never had anything less than a stunning wine. As I noted in the

description of its riesling, the castle of Schloss Gobelsburg is owned by the Cistercian monks of the adjoining Stift

Zwettl monastery. It was these monks who brought pinot noir to the Langenlois region of Lower Austria from their

homeland, Burgundy. In old German, alte haide means “old heath,

” a reference to land that was considered too dry

or stony to grow things, and thus was left fallow or used for sheep.

BURGENLAND

Austria’s second-largest wine region after Lower Austria, Burgenland (13,840 acres/5,600

hectares) huddles against Hungary on the far eastern border (Budapest is only some 130

miles/210 kilometers away). The vineyards here, along with those in Hungary, formed a

vast, uninterrupted sea of vines during the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. Burgenland is

known primarily for its opulent sweet wines, as well as some remarkable reds.

Sweet wines have been the glory of this part of central Europe for eons. The most

celebrated type—ausbruch—is made mostly from grapes infected by Botrytis cinerea,

although some of the grapes can simply be dried and shriveled. For ausbruch, these grapes

are then mixed with freshly pressed must from grapes that are only partially botrytized.

(Reflecting Burgenland’s proximity to Hungary, this process is similar to the manner in

which Hungary’s famous sweet wine, Tokaji Aszú, is made; see page 632.) Both the fully

and partially botrytized grapes for ausbruch must come from the same vineyard. The

grapes are sometimes foot-trodden, and the wine is aged in casks. Ausbruch is more

baroque, outrageous, bruléed, and honeyed than beerenauslese, but has less residual sugar

and more alcohol than trockenbeerenauslese.

The most famous ausbrüche, as well as BAs and TBAs, are made possible by a

hauntingly beautiful natural entity: an almost supernatural lake poised between northern

Burgenland and Hungary named Neusiedl (the Austrians call this the Neusiedlersee).

More than 186 square miles (482 square kilometers) in size, it is only 2 to 7 feet (0.6 to 2

meters) deep. The shallow lake gives up so much humidity that it is threatened by constant

evaporation. In fact, twice during the past century it dried up completely. Reeds and

grasses love the lake. So many of them grow around it that thatching material developed

into a local industry. Birds also love the lake. Indeed, the vast bird population has resulted

in the area becoming one of Europe’s largest wildlife preserves. And thanks to the

thousands of storks that nest and feed here, the lake has been called a stork smorgasbord.

But as much as the reeds or the birds, grapes love the lake. It’s where they love to rot.

Silvia Heinrich, who now runs her family’ s winery, J. Heinrich, in southern Burgenland. Her delicious blaufränkisch

tastes as if it’ s poised halfway between the Old World and the New.

The wet air and the gentle climate make for a perfect macro petri dish in which botrytis

can grow quickly, at the expense of other forms of rot and mold. Thus, the best

Burgenland ausbrüche, BAs, and TBAs have luscious purity to them, and the echo of

botrytis flavor is vivid. The tempting, sweet grapes do not go unnoticed by the birds, of

course. Every last grape would be eaten by them were it not for the fact that growers here

have set up programmed recordings of gun blasts that thunder through the tranquil

vineyards every few minutes, keeping the flocks away (and shattering any romantic

moment one might be having, communing with the vines).

A number of different grape varieties are used for Burgenland’s sweet wines:

welschriesling, chardonnay, traminer, Scheurebe, and others, including occasionally the

principal grape used in Hungarian Tokaji Aszú, fur-mint. The vines are planted in

sandy/stony/chalky soil all around the shallow lake. The pools of warm lake water at the

edges of the vineyards are like natural humidifiers releasing their invisible mist, so critical

for botrytis. Pickers generally go into the vineyards three separate times, hand harvesting

only perfectly botrytized bunches each time.

The eastern shore of the Neusiedlersee is said to produce a more bountiful, fleshy,

earthy style of sweet wine than the slightly more austere style of the hillier western shore.

On the western side, called Neusiedlersee-Hügelland, is the charming village of Rust

(pronounced roost), which along with Tokaj in Hungary, has been one of central Europe’s

most eminent wine towns since the Middle Ages. In 1681, Rust bought its political

independence and religious freedom by paying Leopold I, who, at the time, was the

reigning Holy Roman Emperor, King of Hungary, King of Croatia, King of Bohemia, and

Archduke of Austria, 60,000 gold guilders and 30,000 liters (7,900 gallons) of ausbruch.

In years when botrytis doesn’t form as thoroughly, and thus when the production of

ausbruch, BA, and TBA is small, growers in Burgenland may make other types of sweet

wine—the rare strohwein (“straw wine”) from grapes dried on mats made from the reeds

of the lake; or, if the winter is especially cold, eiswein, the sweet outcome of grapes left on

the vine until frozen. The long hang-time—well into the dead of winter—concentrates the

grapes’ sugar and acid. In the best Austrian eisweins, voluptuous sweetness is wrapped

around an electrifying nucleus of acidity, making for an unparalleled taste sensation.

Then there are the reds. Specializing in ornate, sweet white wines and complex, dry

reds may seem counterintuitive at first (until one considers Bordeaux). In any case, many

Burgenland winemakers do both quite successfully.

As you move further south in Burgenland, away from Lake Neusiedl and toward

Mittelburgenland (Middle Burgenland) and Südburgenland (South Burgenland), red wines

take on greater prominence. Decent red wine has a long-established foundation here;

superb red wine is a far more recent phenomenon. But already, Mittelburgenland is a DAC

for blaufränkisch, as is the DAC Eisenberg within Südburgenland. In the latter, you find

iron-rich schist soils, and the blaufränkisch that is grown in them has a distinct minerally

spiciness all its own.

The foremost red grape is indeed blaufränkisch, and when it is good, it can become a

daring wine—bold, dark in color, suffused with the unusual flavor of raspberries,

blueberries, and sour cherries dusted with white pepper and minerals. The wine is usually

structured and sleek, yet it has crushed-velvet softness and juiciness—imagine good

cabernet franc crossed with good syrah crossed with malbec. In other words, blaufränkisch

is the complete opposite of northern European red wines. Lastly, as red wine plantings

have shot through the roof in recent years, so has the collective wisdom making the wines.

Extremely delicious, Austrian blaufränkisch deserves (and well may get) much more

serious attention from the world in years to come.

The two other well-loved local red grapes are Zweigelt and St. Laurent. Zweigelt, a

cross between blaufränkisch and St. Laurent, is grapey, full of black cherry flavors, and

uncomplicated. St. Laurent is usually also straightforward and satisfying—a combination

of earth, mushrooms, and spices, not unlike a simple pinot noir.

In Burgenland, some winemakers also make dry whites, including chardonnay. The

best are elegant, made entirely without wood, and brimming with creamy flavors balanced

by just the right flash of acidity. Look for the producers V elich and Paul Achs.

The ancient city of Rust in Burgenland on the western shore of Lake Neusiedl is celebrated for its ausbrüche.

SOME OF THE BEST PRODUCERS OF BLAUFRÄNKISCH

Ernst Triebaumer • Gesellmann • Hans Iby • Hans Igler • Hans Nittnaus • Krutzler • Prieler • Umathum •

Wallner

The Burgenland Wines to Know

WHITE

UMATHUM

GELBER & ROTER TRAMINER | BURGENLAND

Approximately 60% roter traminer, 30% gelber traminer

This fantastic and unusual wine is made from the rare yellow (gelber) traminer and red (roter) traminer, both of

which are versions of the grape savagnin. Beautifully aromatic, the wine has what can only be described as dazzling

citrus bitterness—as if the skins of perfect grapefruits, limes, kumquats, and oranges were transmuted into wine.

The effect is at once cool, sophisticated, refreshing, and begging for Southeast Asian appetizers. Umathum, which

also makes one of the most fantastic rosés in Europe, is most widely known for its red wines, which are aged in

bottle for three years before being released. The Umathum family has been growing grapes in Burgenland since the

end of the eighteenth century, and began making their own wine in the 1980s.

REDS

SATTLER

ST . LAURENT | RESERVE | BURGENLAND

100% St. Laurent

St. Laurent is something of a mystery. Not as complex or distinctive as blaufränkisch, it’s nonetheless a wine that,

when it’s good, is hugely satisfying. The kind of wine with a serious “yum” factor. Before you know it, you’re on

your third glass. Sattler, a small family winery that specializes in St. Laurent and Zweigelt, makes an explosively

spicy, richly fruited, satiny textured reserve St. Laurent. It always reminds me of some wondrous vinous rendition

of cranberries and Christmas spices. It’s absolutely delicious with duck, turkey, and roast chicken.

J. HEINRICH

BLAUFRÄNKISCH | GOLDBERG | BURGENLAND

100% blaufränkisch

The loamy Goldberg vineyard is one of the oldest sites in southern Burgenland, and the wine, based on sixty-year-

old vines, exudes a real purity of fresh fruit flavor. Great blaufränkisch like this tastes as if it’s poised half in the

Old World and half in the New World—on the one hand, there’s a delicious Campari-like bitterness, but on the

other, the core of the wine is vivid red cherry jam. This estate is run by the young Silvia Heinrich who, in 2002, left

her career in Vienna to come back to the three-hundred-year-old family winery and learn alongside her father, the

late Johann Heinrich.

PRIELER

BLAUFRÄNKISCH | LEITHABERG | BURGENLAND

100% blaufränkisch

Great blaufränkisch—and Prieler’s is one—has an element of the savage in it, a howling, wild, gamy, pepper-and-

salt character that you find in Northern Rhône syrahs. At the same time, the wine has a sleek structure and a blue-

fruit coolness that’s not unlike cabernet franc. Indeed, if someone told me blaufränkisch was a cross of syrah and

cabernet franc, I’d believe it. (It’s not.) Prieler’s blaufränkisch called Leithaberg is a serious, untamed, dramatic red

—tight, hard, and destined for a long life; as spicy as chai; as meaty as rare steak sitting in a pool of savory juices.

An absolutely phenomenal example of this stellar variety.

SWEET WINES

FEILER-ARTINGER

JONATHAN | RUSTER AUSBRUCH | ESSENZ | NEUSIEDLERSEE-HÜGELLAND

50% welschriesling, 50% chardonnay

Feiler-Artinger’s Ruster Ausbruch Essenz is a liquid caress, enveloping you and folding you into it. The wine quite

simply has awesome beauty. It’s unctuous, complex, and sweet but not saccharine. Dried fruits, nuts, and dried

citrus peel explode on the palate, and all the while a gentle acidity hums in the background. The sense of refinement

and exquisiteness (at just 6.5 percent alcohol) is crazy good. Feiler-Artinger is a family winery established in the

early 1900s. This wine is named Jonathan in honor of the birth of the current winemaker’s son. While all ausbruch

must be made from botrytized grapes and reach a KMW (using the Klosterneuberg Mostwage scale) of 27 degrees,

wines labeled Essenz are extremely concentrated and reach 35 degrees or more.

HEIDI SCHRÖCK

RUSTER AUSBRUCH | AUF DEN FLUGELN DER MORGENRÖTE | NEUSIEDLERSEE-HÜGELLAND

66% welschriesling, 34% weissburgunder

As beautiful as its name, Auf den Flugeln der Morgenröte, which means “on the wings of red dawn.

” Langorously

sweet but not syrupy, and evocative of quince, exotic oranges, marmalade, and spices, Heidi Schröck’s ausbrüche

are always utterly elegant and have the ability to put their drinkers in a happy, satisfied, Zenlike state. The woman

herself is a leading winemaker and innovator in Burgenland.

In a country full of exquisitely beautiful wine regions, Styria, in the southeastern corner of Austria, has a particular ,

pastoral charm. Sauvignon blanc is a specialty here as is artisanal pumpkinseed oil, Austria’ s equivalent of extra virgin

olive oil.

STYRIA

Styria, along Austria’s mountainous, southern Alpine border, is the second smallest wine

region in the country, with just 10,472 acres (4,238 hectares) of grapes. Y et this is

arguably one of the world’s top spots for sauvignon blanc, as well as Austria’s most

beautiful wine region. Behind the small houses with their lace curtains and flower boxes,

the vineyards stretch over kelly-green hills. Many vineyards have a klapotez—a wooden

windmill with hammers that make a loud clacking noise to scare off the birds (who,

unfooled, sometimes sit right on top of the contraption).

Everywhere in Styria there are pumpkin patches, for this is the home of Austria’s

famous specialty, pumpkinseed oil. Made from the roasted seeds of a special green-and-

yellow striped pumpkin, the dark green oil is mind-blowingly delicious (see page 598).

As for Styrian wines, the best (almost all of them white because of the alpine climate)

can be dazzling, with bright, focused flavors that have a keen, kinetic edge to them. Most

of the top wines are found along the wine route (weinstrasse) in the hilly province of south

Styria, Südersteiermark, where the lemon-yellow daylight is so vivid it almost seems

polished. Vineyards here are among the steepest in the country, and the soils are varied—

from slate, marl, and limestone, to gneiss, schist, basalt, sand, and loam.

Chardonnay (called morillon in Styria) has a long history here, the vines having been

brought from the Champagne region of France in the nineteenth century. For the most

part, Styrian chardonnay is made in the style of French Chablis—taut and linear rather

than fat and buttery. But the biggest surprise—and Austria’s best-kept secret—is Styrian

sauvignon blanc. These are racy, herbal, lemony wines, with a wild outdoorsy quality and

a tanginess not unlike a good French Sancerre. In addition to sauvignon blanc and

morillon, the varieties of note include welschriesling, weissburgunder, traminer, and

beautifully taut, dry, refreshing muskateller (aka gelber muskateller), the Austrian name

for muscat blanc à petits grains, the best of the extensive group of wines with muscat in

their names.

The Hannes brothers, who run the hotel and restaurant at Weingut Sattlerhof in Gamlitz in Styria, are known for making

excellent wines.

EAU-DE-AUSTRIA

In Austria, schnapps is said to be made from every fruit and berry you have heard of and every fruit and

berry you haven’t. Schnapps, like eau-de-vie in France and grappa in Italy, is a clear, unaged distillate

(about 40 proof) that is drunk after the meal. Often Austrian families proudly make their own schnapps

from fruit they (also proudly) grow themselves, and it’s frequently a delicious, relatively mild sweet

liqueur. In restaurants you’ll also find hundreds of handcrafted, limited-production, very expensive

versions made by individual winemakers and artisanal distillers. Plum is the most common flavor, but

more intriguing perhaps are schnapps made from elderberries, quince, juniper, apricots, cherries,

blueberries, blackberries, and rowanberries from the mountain ash tree.

Styria is also known for rosés—or rather, a single type of rosé called schilcher. Made

from the blauer wildbacher grape, which grows almost exclusively in west Styria,

schilcher is very high in acid. There is no better mate for the smoked, aged bacon that is

also a specialty of the region.

Styrian wine estates tend to be very small but often have an adjoining restaurant,

buschenschenk, or small inn. One not to be missed is Sattlerhof, a wine estate in Gamlitz,

known for its extremely delicious sauvignon blanc and chardonnay and its adjoining

restaurant, also called Sattlerhof, considered one of the best restaurants in Styria.

The Vienna State Opera on the Ringstrasse. Vienna, a stately but vividly passionate city, is the only major city in the

world that is also a wine region.

VIENNA

There is a vineyard of sorts in Paris. Someone in Rome must have a vine or two planted

next to the tomatoes. But Vienna is the only major city in the world that is a commercially

significant wine region unto itself. Within the city limits there are 1,512 acres (612

hectares) of grapes, all of which fall under a government protection program lest

developers be tempted to put such valuable real estate to more profitable uses.

The name Vienna, or as it’s spelled in Austria, Wien (pronounced veen), would seem to

derive from wein (“wine”), but it does not. The word is of Celtic origin and means “white

or wild river,

” a reference to the Danube. The city itself is romantic and exhilarating, the

kind of place that makes you want to abandon yourself to its beauty. As in Paris, the very

air seems to shimmer with the secrets of centuries past. Everywhere, stately buildings

glow in the white sunlight. There is an aura of mystery and passion. That this also happens

to be a wine region makes perfect sense to those for whom wine is mystery, beauty, and

romance.

From the Middle Ages on, Viennese vineyards were planted to slake the thirst of the

local citizenry. Many plots were in the care of either monks or nobles, who studied

viticulture and built cellars, some of which are still in use. Vineyards were planted with

different varieties of both white and red grapes side by side in the same plot. The grapes

would be picked and pressed together as a field blend. This traditional style of wine, called

gemischter satz—

“mixed planting”

—makes up about a third of all Viennese wine today,

and as of 2013, the style has DAC status. Such wines are rarely very good, but they are

always fascinating. Just try to imagine the flavor of a wine made from riesling, pinot

blanc, neuburger, grüner veltliner, and gewürztraminer. Today, Vienna’s better vineyards,

of course, are planted variety by variety in the modern way. In the western part of the city,

the mineral-rich limestone soils lead to very good riesling, chardonnay, and pinot blanc. In

the southern part of the city, darker, heavier soils lead to fuller-bodied whites and are also

planted with Zweigelt and other red varieties. Still, it can take you aback just a bit to see a

plot of Zweigelt squeezed between two skyscrapers.

A heurige is an Austrian institution, and Vienna is full of them. Part winery, part wine bar , part giant café, heurigen are

where Austrians go to talk, argue, eat, kiss, and have a great time.

Viennese viticulture has also laid the foundation for the heurigen. These wineries-cum-

cafés were where Austrian life was played out. People went to drink wine, eat, gossip,

argue, and hold hands—sometimes concomitantly. Heurigen now exist all over the

country, but some of the oldest and most infamous are in Vienna. The Heurige Franz

Mayer is a good example. The Mayer family makes wines from one of the best city plots,

the Alsegar vineyard, as well as from other, less distinguished urban vineyards. All of

these wines, noble and lackluster alike, are cheerfully consumed at the family’s boisterous,

cacophonous, eight-hundred-seat heurige, where it is said Beethoven wrote part of his

Ninth Symphony.

The tiny village of Aubonne surrounded by vineyards in the V aud, a French-speaking part of Switzerland near Lake

Geneva. Much of the wine produced in the V aud is white, though counterintuitively, most Swiss wine is red.

WHEN YOU VISIT… AUSTRIA

AUSTRIAN WINE COUNTRY is immaculate and movingly beautiful. (You won’t want to

go home.) The vineyards are dotted with lovely small villages and historic towns, and

the food everywhere is stunning. Many of the wineries have heurigen (restaurants)

attached. Although most Austrian wineries do not have organized tours, proprietors,

most of whom speak English, are accustomed to receiving guests by appointment.

IF YOU ARE IN LOWER AUSTRIA, don’t miss the extraordinary wine academy known

as Kloster Und, located just outside the historic city of Krems. A seventeenth-century

Capuchin monastery, Kloster Und is not only a school but also a wine library, wine

museum, and a luxury restaurant. In the vaulted stone cellar under the nave of the

church, 150 Austrian wines are available for tasting.

SWITZERLAND

SWITZERLAND RANKS SEVENTEENTH AMONG WINE-PRODUCING COUNTRIES WORLDWIDE. THE

SWISS DRINK AN AVERAGE OF 12 GALLONS (47 LITERS) OF WINE PER PERSON PER YEAR.

Switzerland is surrounded on all sides by some of Europe’s most prominent wine-

producing countries, and although its wines are not nearly as renowned (or numerous),

they are worthy of attention. To begin with, much of this small Alpine country (one-tenth

the size of California) is just simply too high, and therefore too cold, for grapevines to

grow successfully. Switzerland ranks seventeenth in the world in volume of wine

production, just after Hungary and Canada. Most of its wines come from the western,

predominantly French-speaking part of the country, and especially from the important

provinces, or cantons, as they are known in Switzerland, of V alais, V aud, Neuchâtel, and

Geneva. Wine is also made, however, in the southern, Italian-speaking area known as

Ticino, and in the more eastern, German-speaking Ostschweiz.

Switzerland (somewhat counterintuitively, given its climate) is mostly a red wine

producing country. The leading variety, in fact, is pinot noir, called blauburgunder, a light,

spicy, and often quite good wine, although rarely complex or nuanced in flavor. Some

tasty, light red wines are also made from pinot noir-gamay blends, which are called Dôle.

In the southern canton of Ticino, merlot has been growing since the early part of the

twentieth century, and again, the wines are light, sleek, fairly crisp, and sometimes spicy.

But perhaps the most intriguing red variety of all in Switzerland is the indigenous rouge

du pays (incorrectly called cornalin locally), which can be the source of super-juicy, spicy

wines redolent of black cherries and pomegranates.

With the Alps as a backdrop, a picnic with bottles of Swiss wine is just right for contemplation. Here, First Lake, which

can be reached only by cable car after a long hike. The lake, which is near Grindelwald, is 7,400 feet (2,260 meters) in

altitude.

The major white grape variety is chasselas (known in the V alais as fendant and known

in German as gutedel), which makes light-bodied wines that range from neutral quaffing

wines to crisp whites laced with citrus and almond flavors. Other Swiss white wines

include sylvaner (the same as silvaner in Germany), pinot blanc, and pinot gris, plus

numerous native varieties like amigne, humagne blanche, and petite arvine, an ancient

grape that makes refreshing, floral, and exotically fruity wines.

The 38,000 acres (15,400 hectares) of vineyards in Switzerland can be enormously

challenging to work because of their steepness. Along with the vineyards of Germany,

these are some of the steepest vineyards in the world, some of them—at 40 to 50 degree

slopes—appearing to be perilously close to vertical. As a result, terraces, called tablars,

are cut into the mountainsides, and grapes are often transported up and down the slopes on

monorails.

A tasting room near Lake Geneva specializes in wine from the terraced vineyards of Lavaux.

MILK’S HIGHER CALLING?

Some would say it’s cheese. But every kid in the world would insist it’s milk chocolate—a Swiss creation.

In 1875, milk chocolate was invented by Swiss candle maker Daniel Peter, who lived in the city of Vevey.

Thanks to increasing competition from oil-burning lamps in Europe, Peter gave up candle making to go

into his wife’s family business—chocolate. An astute entrepreneur, Peter hypothesized that the chocolate

market could be expanded by making chocolate more nourishing, especially for children. With the help of

his friend Henri Nestlé, then a baby food manufacturer, Peter invented a method for blending cocoa and

the milk from alpine cows without souring the milk in the process. Four years later, the two formed the

Nestlé Company.

THE QUICK SIP ON SWITZERLAND

A COLD, MOUNTAINOUS country nestled in the Alps, Switzerland has obvious

viticultural challenges. But despite these, the country boasts a small thriving wine

industry.

MOST SWISS WINE IS LIGHT , tasty and red; the leading variety in terms of volume is

pinot noir.

SWITZERLAND’S TOP WHITE is chasselas—a super-crisp wine, ideal for splicing

through the rich flavors of the country’s famous Alpine cheeses.

Harvesting fendant (chasselas) grapes on the steep slopes of the V alais.

Swiss wines are governed by an appellation system not unlike France’s, although the

wines are usually labeled by variety, making them fairly easy to understand. While Swiss

wines are not widely exported, here are a number of producers worth knowing on your

next Swiss hiking or skiing vacation: Domaine des Muses, Domaine E. de Montmollin &

Fils, Adrian Mathier, Rouvinez, and Angelo Delea.

HUNGARY

HUNGARY RANKS FIFTEENTH AMONG WINE-PRODUCING COUNTRIES WORLDWIDE. THE

HUNGARIANS DRINK AN AVERAGE OF 6 GALLONS (21 LITERS) OF WINE PER PERSON PER YEAR.

Of all the countries in the eastern part of Europe, none has had a more solid tradition of

producing great wines than Hungary. Its only possible rival is Austria, and although the

wines of Austria are certainly soaring in recognition today, the wines of Hungary were for

centuries the more esteemed of the two. In fact, from the seventeenth to the twentieth

century, Hungary possessed what was arguably the third most sophisticated wine culture

in Europe, after those of France and Germany. Among other distinctions, it was in the

1600s in Hungary’s famous Tokaj-Hegyalja (TOKE-eye hedge-AL-ya) region—not in

Bordeaux or Burgundy—that the first system for ranking wine on the basis of quality was

developed. By 1700, the best plots in Tokaj-Hegyalja were designated First, Second, or

Third Class, and strict royal decrees kept vineyard and winemaking practices at a very

high level.

Modern Hungary, sitting virtually in the middle of eastern Europe, is a small country

bordered on the north by Slovakia, on the northeast by the Ukraine, on the east by

Romania, on the south by Croatia, Serbia, and Slovenia, and on the west by Austria. But

it’s worth noting that, from 1867 to the end of World War I, as the leading entity in the

Austro-Hungarian Empire, Hungary was one of the most powerful forces on the globe and

the second largest country in Europe, after the Russian Empire. At the height of its glory,

the Austro-Hungarian Empire included not only every country that borders Hungary

today, but also Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Czech Republic, and small parts of Italy,

Montenegro, and Poland.

Vineyards have flourished in Hungary at least since Roman times. When the Magyars,

an ancient tribe in the Ural Mountains, from whom modern Hungarians are descended,

arrived in the region in the ninth century, they found vines growing everywhere and well-

established viticultural and winemaking practices in place. (The Magyars brought

something besides themselves to Hungary—namely their idiosyncratic language, which is

one of the few languages in Europe today that does not belong to the Indo-European

language family. As you’re about to experience, trying to pronounce Hungarian, which

belongs to the Uralic language family, can make you feel like you’ve got a mouth full of

marbles. Indeed, Hungarian, Turkish, and Greek are the only European languages that

have words for wine not derived from Latin; the Hungarian word for wine is bor. But in

the seventeenth century, it was the emergence in Tokaj-Hegyalja of the rare, extraordinary

wine Tokaji Aszú (TOKE-eye ah-SOO), commonly called simply Tokaji (spelled “Tokay”

in English), that put Hungary on the international wine map. Tokaji became and remains

not only the most stunning wine of eastern Europe, but one of the greatest dessert wines in

the world. Precious, rare, and a wine whose creation hinges on just the right weather

(more on this to follow), it represents just 4 to 6 percent of the country’s total wine

production each year. For an explanation of Hungarian wine law, see the Appendix on

Wine Laws, page 927.

THE LAND, THE GRAPES, AND THE VINEYARDS

Hungary is a landlocked country of grassy plains, orchards, forests, and vineyards. The

country is divided more or less in half by the Danube River, called the Duna in Hungarian,

which runs north to south through the entire country, much like the Mississippi River does

in the United States.

BULL’S BLOOD

One of the most popular, well-known dry reds of Hungary is Egri bikavér—

“bull’s blood of Eger.

” It is

made primarily from the kékfrankos and kadarka grapes, grown in Eger, which is about halfway between

Budapest and Tokaj. The legend behind the wine dates back to the mid-1500s, when the fortress of Eger,

which belonged to the Magyars (ancestors to modern Hungarians), was besieged by the Turks. The

Magyars (men, women, and reportedly even children) fought fiercely, drinking huge amounts of red wine

in the process. As the story goes, when the Turks encountered the Magyars’ ferocious fighting skills and

saw their red-stained faces, they retreated, fearing that the Magyars attained their prowess by drinking

the blood of bulls.

For a country just a bit larger than Scotland, Hungary grows a wide range of grape

varieties. This is possible partly because Hungary sits at a relatively northern latitude (on

par with Burgundy, France), so it is well suited to making crisp, light white wines from

fairly cool-climate varieties, but at the same time, much of the country possesses a

continental climate—warm to hot, sunny summers and very cold winters. This means that

Hungary can also ripen bold red varieties. Hungary’s top varieties include some that many

wine fans may not recognize, such as furmint (FUR-mint), hárslevelű (HARSH-leh-veh-

loo), juhfark (YOO-fark), kadarka (kah-DAR-kah), and kékoportó (KEK-oh-PORT-oh).

But Hungary is also home to many varieties such as olasz rizling (OH-lahs REEZ-ling),

kékfrankos (KEK-frank-osh), and Zweigelt (ZVEYE-gelt) that are common throughout

eastern Europe. Then there’s a whole brigade of well-known varieties—everything from

sauvignon blanc, gewürztraminer (known in Hungary as tramini), and pinot gris (known

as szürkebarát) to cabernet sauvignon, cabernet franc, and pinot noir. As for the types of

wine Hungary makes, more than 70 percent of total wine production is white. And finally,

most Hungarian wines are labeled varietally, with the wine region noted on the label. It

may also be helpful to know that many wine labels adhere to the Hungarian custom of

listing a surname first, so the wine brand Demeter Zoltán is owned by the wine-maker

Zoltán Demeter.

The Hungarian Parliament sits on the banks of the Danube River . Begun in 1885, it is Hungary’ s largest building and

remains one of the most impressive legislative buildings in Europe.

THE QUICK SIP ON HUNGARY

HUNGARY IS ONE OF THE MOST important wine regions in eastern Europe. For most

of the modern era, however, Hungarian wines were little known outside of the Soviet

Union and other Communist countries, thanks to forty years of Communist rule, from

1949 to 1989.

HUNGARY’S MOST IMPRESSIVE WINE is T okaji Aszú, considered one of the great

dessert wines of the world.

ALTHOUGH SMALL IN SIZE, Hungary boasts an enormous number of different grape

varieties, including indigenous grapes, such as furmint and kékfrankos, and

international varieties, such as chardonnay and cabernet sauvignon.

Of Hungary’s twenty-two wine regions, seven are considered the most important, based

on the historic quality of their wines. By far, the most prestigious of these is Tokaj-

Hegyalja, the region where Tokaji is produced, in the northeastern part of the country,

known as the Northern Massif, along the Slovakian border. The six other important wine

areas are Badacsony, Somló, Szekszárd, Villány-Siklós, Eger, and Mátra.

Badacsony and Somló are in the central, Transdanubia, region in the west, near Lake

Balaton, one of the largest lakes in Europe. Badacsony produces primarily white wines

from chardonnay, sauvignon blanc, szürkebarát (pinot gris), and olasz rizling (the same as

welschriesling in Austria and graševina in Croatia). Somló, one of the smallest, most

beautiful, and remote wine regions in Hungary (there are no paved roads and no

electricity), has volcanic soils and is the source of traditional wood-aged, partially

oxidized, powerful, dense white wines (from furmint, hárslevelű, juhfark, and others) that

can be a challenge to appreciate if your palate is accustomed to fresh, light, modern-style

whites. Nonetheless, Hungarians insist Somló whites are a specialty, and that they’re

especially perfect with heavy Hungarian dishes. The Hapsburgs believed that drinking the

rare Somló wine juhfark (the name means “sheep’s tail”) guaranteed a pregnant woman

that she would bear a boy.

THE GRAPES OF HUNGARY

WHITES

CHARDONNAY AND SAUVIGNON BLANC: Important international grapes increasingly grown

throughout Hungary.

CSERSZEGI FŰSZERES: Widely planted grape that makes crisp, citrusy whites for every-night drinking.

The word fűszeres is the flavor term Hungarians use to mean “spicy,

” and is also used with paprika to

differentiate spicy paprika from sweet or smoky.

FURMINT : The most important grape in T okaji Aszú, Hungary’s famous sweet wine. Also makes dry

wines. Very high in acid.

HÁRSLEVELŰ: The second most important grape in T okaji Aszú. Contributes a floral and fruity aroma.

IRSAI OLIVÉR: Important white grape for making soft, slightly aromatic every-night white wines.

JUHFARK: A rare but distinctive native grape that, blended with furmint and hárslevelű, is used to make

the intentionally oxidized, powerful, dense white wines of Somló.

KIRÁLYLEÁNYKA: A popular, light, fresh, grapey wine. The name means “little princess.

”

MUSCAT LUNEL: See Sárga muskotály.

OLASZ RIZLING: A specialty of Transdanubia, west of the Danube River. Despite its name, it is not a

true riesling, but rather another name for the Croatian grape graševina. In Austria, next door, olasz rizling

is called welschriesling.

OTTONEL MUSKOTÁLY: Also known as muscat Ottonel. Grown mostly in Mátra and Eger, where it

makes fine dry wines reminiscent of the muscat Ottonels made in Alsace, and serves as a blending

partner in sweet wines.

SÁRGA MUSKOTÁLY: Literally,

“yellow muscat.

” The Hungarian name for the grape muscat blanc à

petits grains; the third most important grape in T okaji Aszú. Often referred to as muscat lunel in the T okaji

region.

SZÜRKEBARÁT : Also known as pinot gris; makes well-regarded wines, especially when grown near

Lake Balaton.

TRAMINI: The same variety as gewürztraminer; imported from western Europe but now grown all over

Hungary.

ZÉTA, KÖVÉRSZŐLŐ, AND KABAR: Minor grapes used in T okaji Aszú thanks to their susceptibility to

botrytis and their capacity to reach high sugar levels. Zéta was previously called orémus, but the name

was changed because Oremus is also a brand of T okaji.

REDS

CABERNET SAUVIGNON, CABERNET FRANC, MERLOT , AND PINOT NOIR: Important international

grapes increasingly grown throughout Hungary.

KADARKA: Declining in importance in Hungary, although capable of making good, light-colored,

medium-bodied, slightly spicy reds. Probably of Balkan origin; in Hungary, it is a specialty of Szekszárd

and Eger.

KÉKFRANKOS: The same grape as blaufränkisch; sometimes blended with merlot and cabernet

sauvignon. Kékfrankos is the major grape in the famous Hungarian wine Egri bikavér—

“bull’s blood” of

Eger.

KÉKOPORTÓ: This red grape makes common, somewhat undistinguished wine, especially in Villány-

Siklós. It’s the same as Austria’s blauer Portugieser.

ZWEIGELT : Like kékoportó, a red grape in Villány-Siklós, where it makes quite good red wine, but

perhaps better known in Austria, where it’s generally made into even better red wine.

Anett and Attila Németh of Alana-Tokaj, a winery known for mind-blowingly delicious Tokaji.

In the southern part of Transdanubia are two more important wine regions, Szekszárd

and Villány-Siklós. These are the two most dynamic wine regions in Hungary and the

regions where you are most likely to find producers using modern equipment and new oak

barrels. Each of these regions produces some of the country’s best red wines. Kadarka, a

specialty of Szekszárd, is said to be the ideal red wine for paprika-based dishes. In the

warm area known as Villány-Siklós, several top small producers make what are, for

Hungary, fairly full-bodied reds from cabernet sauvignon, kékfrankos, merlot, and

Zweigelt.

Finally, there are Eger and Mátra, both of which are located, along with Tokaj-

Hegyalja, in the Northern Massif. Eger is noted for light-bodied reds as well as Hungary’s

popular dry red wine Egri bikavér (“bull’s blood”). Mátra, on the other hand, is white wine

territory. Here, very good-quality wines are made from olasz rizling and yellow muscat, as

well as chardonnay, sauvignon blanc, and sémillon. One of the best types of wine and a

local specialty, királyleányka (pronounced kir-ALL-ee-lee-AN-ka) is slightly aromatic and

tastes somewhat like gewürztraminer. Although it’s most often drunk by large Hungarian

men, királyleányka means “little princess.

”

None of Hungary’s most important wine regions are in the Great Alföld, the vast, hot,

flat plain south of Budapest, where nonetheless more than half of the country’s vineyards

are found. Most of the simple, inexpensive quaffing wines produced here are based on

international varieties, such as chardonnay and merlot, which were first planted in

Hungary after phylloxera swept the country in the 1870s, and then later planted even more

extensively in the 1970s and 1980s. In total, Hungary has about 158,000 acres (63,900

hectares) of vineyards, making it sixteenth in the world in terms of area under vine.

As for who makes Hungarian wines, for the forty years prior to the fall of Communism

in 1989, the Hungarian wine industry was controlled by the state. Grapes were grown on

enormous state-run farms, wines were made in large cooperatives, and all wine exports

were controlled by a single large state-owned trading organization. Wines not consumed in

Hungary were sold in bulk, by tanker truck, almost exclusively to the Soviet Union or East

Germany. Wine quality was dismal, almost without exception. The post-Communist

decade brought hope, but also confusion over vineyard ownership rights, foreign

investments, and newly devised governmental regulations. Today, Hungary’s wine

industry is still taking the economically demanding steps toward modernization, and better

wines are slowly claiming the spotlight. As of 2012, there were an estimated 515 wineries,

but many grape growers—especially those with less than 2 acres (0.8 hectare) of

vineyards—are still too economically disadvantaged to vinify and market their own wines.

Y et, if Tokaji is any model, the country’s wines might well undergo a significant

revolution in quality as the twenty-first century unfolds.

THE MOST IMPORTANT HUNGARIAN WINES

LEADING WINES

CABERNET SAUVIGNON red

CHARDONNAY white

EGRI BIKAVÉR red

FURMINT white (dry and sweet)

HÁRSLEVELŰ white (dry and sweet)

IRSAI OLIVÉR white

KÉKFRANKOS red

KÉKOPORTÓ red

KIRÁLYLEÁNYKA white

MERLOT red

MUSCAT white (dry and sweet)

OLASZ RIZLING white

OTTONEL MUSKOTÁLY white

PINOT NOIR red

SZÜRKEBARÁT white

TOKAJI ASZÚ white (sweet)

TOKAJI ASZÚ ESSZENCIA white (sweet)

TOKAJI ESSZENCIA white (sweet)

ZWEIGELT red

WINES OF NOTE

CSERSZEGI FŰSZERES white

JUHFARK white

SZAMORODNI white (dry and semisweet)

TOKAJI

Over the millennia of wine’s existence, there have been multiple occasions when politics,

war, and/or disease have combined to nearly destroy a wine region and its wines. No more

poignant example exists than the region Tokaj-Hegyalja (TOKE-eye hedge-AL-ya) and its

wine, known as Tokaji (TOKE-eye). Y et despite the historic difficulties that it has

endured, the wine that French King Louis XV offered to Madame de Pompadour, calling it

vinum regum, rex vinorum —

“the wine of kings and the king of wines”

—is the most

profound sweet wine in the world. To drink it means letting go of every assumption you

may have of sweet wine, for Tokaji is a flavor world unto itself.

Tokaji’s near demise began with the deadly pest phylloxera. As the twentieth century

dawned, the vineyards of Tokaji lay in ruin as a result of the insect. Over the next several

decades, vineyards were rebuilt only to be devastated again during World War I, the break

up of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and World War II. But the biggest upheaval was yet

to come. In 1949, as Hungary collapsed under Communist rule, wineries and vineyards

were confiscated and nationalized. The preciously refined and highly individual sweet

wines of Tokaj were blended en masse in big cooperative cellars run by the state. Over

subsequent years, vineyards were neglected, equipment deteriorated, the quality of grapes

declined drastically, old winemaking traditions were abolished in favor of cheaper, easier

shortcuts, and winemaking itself was degraded to the point where it was little more than

bureaucratic drudgery. By the mid-1980s, the innocuous wines called Tokaji bore no

resemblance to the wines once considered so extraordinarily delicious (not to mention

their purported therapeutic and aphrodisiacal properties) that a detachment of Russian

soldiers was regularly stationed in the region to procure sufficient supplies and then escort

them to the court of Czar Peter the Great.

HOW SWEET THEY ARE

T okaji Aszú is one of the most decadent but well-balanced sweet wines in the world, thanks to the natural

acidity in the grapes. The sweetness of T okaji is measured in puttonyos. The word is a derivation of

puttony, the name of the basket in which the aszú grapes were traditionally gathered. (See page 633 for

details.) Below are the legal requirements for the sugar content that wines of the various numbers of

puttonyos must have. (In 2014, the levels 3 puttonyos and 4 puttonyos were legally abolished, but given

the longevity of T okaji, wines with these designations will appear on the market well into the future, and

so I have included them below.) In practice, many wineries make T okaji Aszús that exceed the degree of

sweetness required for a particular number of puttonyos. So, a wine labeled 5 puttonyos may contain 20

percent residual sugar even though the law requires only between 12 and 15 percent. Note the residual

sugar of T okaji Esszencia—an off-the-charts 450 to 900 grams of sugar per liter (45 to 90 percent)! (For

comparison’s sake, the residual sugar in a French Sauternes is about 120 grams, or roughly equal to that

of a 4-puttonyos T okaji Aszú.)

3 PUTTONYOS

6 to 9 percent residual sugar (60 to 90 grams per liter residual sugar)

4 PUTTONYOS

9 to 12 percent residual sugar (90 to 120 grams per liter residual sugar)

5 PUTTONYOS

12 to 15 percent residual sugar (120 to 150 grams per liter residual sugar)

6 PUTTONYOS

15 to 18 percent residual sugar (150 to 180 grams per liter residual sugar)

TOKAJI ASZÚ ESSZENCIA

18 to 45 percent residual sugar (180 to 450 grams per liter residual sugar)

TOKAJI ESSZENCIA

45 to 90 percent residual sugar (450 to 900 grams per liter residual sugar)

Luckily Tokaji was not beyond redemption. When Hungary became a democratic

republic in 1989, the government invited prominent western European vintners to partner

with them to resurrect Tokaji. Foreign investment in the region swiftly followed. By the

fall of that year, a group of key investors, including Lord Jacob Rothschild, the British

wine authority Hugh Johnson, and the noted Bordeaux winemaker Peter Vinding-Diers,

formed the Royal Tokaji Wine Company in conjunction with sixty-three of the best

remaining winegrowers. Within three years, a slew of other foreign investors, consultants,

winemakers, and businessmen acquired estates and vineyards. These included the Laborde

family of Château Clinet in Pomerol, Bordeaux, who helped found Château Pajzos; the

Álvarez family, owners of Spain’s most famous wine estate, V ega-Sicilia, who founded

Oremus; and three French multinational insurance companies, one of which, AXA, also

owns Bordeaux’s Château Pichon-Longueville Baron and Château Suduiraut, as well as

the famous Port wine firm Quinta do Noval. AXA ’s Tokaji firm is called Disznókő. The

financial capital these companies brought was formidable. In less than half a decade,

Tokaji was reborn.

The ancient underground cellars of Royal Tokaji Wine Company, one of the first wine joint ventures in Hungary after the

fall of Communism.

SERVING AND DRINKING TOKAJI ASZÚ

T okaji Aszú is usually drunk in small amounts (a 2-ounce/60-milliliter serving is customary) and the wine

should always be lightly chilled, but not icy cold. Because T okaji is considered ready to drink upon

release, there is no need to age it. That said, you certainly can age it if you want to, since the wine’s high

concentrations of sugar and acid act as preservatives. (In a remarkable show of delayed gratification,

eastern European royal families would sometimes age the wine for close to a hundred years.) And,

because of its sweetness, an opened but unfinished bottle of T okaji will last for many months, especially

if you keep it in the refrigerator. While drinking T okaji Aszú by itself can be perfect (the wine doesn’t really

need food), T okaji’s richness and underlying acidity do make it a fascinating partner for many dishes. In

Hungary, it is traditionally served with celebratory desserts, such as crêpes (palacsinták, literally

“pancakes”) filled with thick chocolate cream, apricot cake, or else paired hedonistically with foie gras, or

a blue cheese like Roquefort or Stilton.

Tokay, as formerly noted, is the English spelling of Tokaji, (the i means “of,

” so Tokaji

means “from the place Tokaj”). The Tokaj region, known officially as Tokaj-Hegyalja

(“Tokaj Hill”), is about 120 miles (190 kilometers) northeast of Budapest, close to the

Slovakian border. It includes twenty-seven villages spread over sloping hills, the remnants

of ancient volcanoes. As of 2014, there were just under 15,000 acres (6,070 hectares) of

vines in the Tokaj region, making it about one-third the size of the tiny Napa V alley, for

example. The vineyards belong to about fifty leading producers of Tokaji, as well as

hundreds of family-run operations, many of which make very small amounts of wine for

their own and local consumption. Indeed, the average size of a vineyard here is just 1.4

acres (.57 hectares).

The Tokaj region produces both dry and sweet wines, but it is the lusciously honeyed

wine Tokaji Aszú for which it is world famous. Indeed, Tokaji Aszú has been called “the

Sauternes of eastern Europe,

” but perhaps the phrase should be reversed and Sauternes

should be called “the Tokaji Aszú of France,

” since it was in the Tokaj region, not

Sauternes, that the world’s first sweet, botrytized wines were made.

During the Middle Ages, wines from the region were highly regarded and many

vineyards were owned by members of the royalty. The style of those wines, and whether

they were sweet or dry, remains unknown. However, one of the first recorded mentions of

aszú grapes appeared in the Nomenklatura of Fabricius Balázs Szikszai, which was

completed in 1576. And a recently discovered inventory of aszú wines predates this

reference by five years. By the mid-1600s, a chaplain named Máté Szepsi Laczkó had also

begun experimenting with furmint grapes left to ripen to the point where they were

shriveled and had begun rotting, before picking them. Miraculously, the small amount of

liquid that oozed from them tasted like honey. When the chaplain blended this nectar with

the regular table wine from the previous year, the prototype of Tokaji Aszú was born.

MAKING TOKAJI ASZÚ

Like all wines made with the help of Botrytis cinerea, Tokaji Aszú is dependent on a

singular set of climatic conditions. For the botrytis fungus to take hold on healthy, ripe

grapes, the region must have just the right amount of humidity and warmth (too little or

too much can produce problems). Tokaj-Hegyalja is well situated. The Carpathian

mountains, which arc around the region, shelter it from cold winds from the east, north,

and west, creating prolonged, gently warm autumns. The region, shaped like a check

mark, lies along a range of volcanic hills topped with loess, fine-grained deposits of silt, as

well as volcanic tufa, both of which warm easily. Following the length of these hills is the

Bodrog River, which meets the Tisza River at the bottom point of the check mark, near the

village of Tokaj. Mists and humidity rising from these rivers are held in place by the warm

hills, creating the perfect environment for botrytis to form.

The three main white grapes used in Tokaji are ideally suited for this purpose. Furmint,

which makes up about 60 percent of all grapes planted in the region, is high in acid, late-

ripening, thin-skinned, and easily susceptible to botrytis. Hárslevelű—the name means

“linden leaf”

—is second in importance, and although slightly less susceptible to botrytis,

it, too, is high in acid as well as very aromatic and rich-tasting. Third in importance, sárga

muskotály, also known as muscat blanc à petits grains, is both highly aromatic and crisply

acidic. It is used as a seasoning grape. The fact that all three of these grapes naturally

possess a bracing level of acidity means that, even at its sweetest, Tokaji Aszú tastes

beautifully balanced, not saccharine or candied. Since the 1990s, three other grapes—all

of which are botrytis-prone and capable of attaining high sugar levels—are also allowed in

Tokaji and are sometimes included in minor amounts: zéta (formerly called orémus),

kövérszőlő, and kabar.

The beneficial botrytis mold punctures the grapes’ skins in search of water to germinate

its spores. This causes water in the grapes to evaporate, and the grapes begin to dehydrate.

Inside the shriveled grapes, the sugar and acid in the juice become progressively more

concentrated. It is a perfect system to foster sweetness, but it’s not without challenges.

Botrytis spreads erratically, affecting some grapes and not others, some bunches and not

others. It also moves through the vineyards sporadically; in some years, when little or no

botrytis takes hold, no Tokaji Aszú will be produced.

A PASSION FOR PAPRIKA

It’s hard to imagine that three centuries ago, one of the (now) defining ingredients of the Hungarian

kitchen—paprika—was not yet known in Hungary. But paprika, along with several other Hungarian

culinary essentials—tomatoes, sour cherries, coffee, and phyllo (which the Hungarians immortalized by

reinventing as strudel)—were all introduced by the Turks during their numerous occupations. Be that as it

may, in Hungary, paprika found its truest admirers and its raison d’être. Fiery and passionate themselves,

Hungarians like their dishes to have drama. Even something as simple as paprika chicken (paprikás

csirke) is a kind of lusty and luscious duel between the tangy richness of sour cream on the one hand

and the tantalizing bite of paprika on the other. Of course, in Hungary, paprika is not a single thing. The

Hungarians classify it into eight types, starting with the mildest and sweetest, Különleges, which is bright

red in color, and proceeding to Erős, a very spicy version that is light brown in color. The region of

Szeged is generally considered to produce the best paprika in Hungary. Interestingly, the peppers used

to make paprika have the highest vitamin C content of any vegetable. Indeed, paprika was used in

numerous experiments by Hungarian physiologist Albert Szent-Györgyi, who won the Nobel Prize in

Physiology and Medicine in 1937 for his discovery of vitamin C.

Botrytized grapes destined to become Hungary’ s elixir , Tokaji Aszú, one of the world’ s most sensational wines. Hungary

was the first country in the world to make wine from grapes affected by noble rot. Each perfectly shriveled berry will be

picked out of the cluster by hand.

Producers differ slightly in how they make Tokaji Aszú, but generally speaking the

process goes like this. First, throughout the fall, the shriveled aszú grapes are picked by

hand, berry by berry—not cluster by cluster—from botrytis-affected bunches. These aszú

grapes are then brought to the winery, where they are lightly crushed into a paste.

Meanwhile, the rest of the crop (all the grapes and bunches not affected by botrytis) is

picked separately and made into a base wine. The aszú paste is added in various

proportions to the base wine of the same year. (In the past, aszú was sometimes added to a

base wine held back from the previous year; this practice is now rare.)

The proportions of aszú added are measured in puttonyos. A puttony is a basket in

which the aszú grapes were traditionally gathered. It holds 44 to 55 pounds (20 to 25

kilograms) of grapes, equal to about 5.2 gallons (20 liters) of aszú paste. The ratio of

puttonyos to base wine in each barrel determined the sweetness of the wine. The

traditional barrels, called gönci (after the village of Gönc, known for its barrel makers),

hold about 140 liters of wine. Thus, based on 140 liters, and just for the sake of a simple

example, a wine labeled, say, Tokaji Aszú 2 Puttonyos would have 40 liters of aszú paste

and 100 liters of base wine. A wine labeled Tokaji Aszú 4 Puttonyos would be even richer

and sweeter, as it would have 80 liters of aszú paste and 60 liters of base wine. A 4- or 5-

puttonyos Tokaji would be about as sweet and concentrated as a German beerenauslese.

The sweetest Tokaji Aszús are 6 puttonyos and they are technically much sweeter than

Sauternes (but don’t taste like they are, because of Tokaji’s vibrant acidity). Today, Tokaji

Aszú is usually made in stainless-steel tanks rather than in barrels, and the number of

puttonyos assigned is now officially based on the amount of residual sugar the wine

contains (see page 629) rather than picking baskets.

Classified as Pro Mensa Ceasaris Primus, the Super First Class Mézes Mály vineyard is one of the two most renowned in

the Tokaj region.

Depending on the concentration of sweetness in the aszú grapes when they were

picked, the aszú paste will steep in the base wine for as little as eight hours or as long as

three days. At this point, the sweetened wine will be drawn off the aszú paste and allowed

to ferment again in Tokaj’s small, narrow cellars, dug centuries ago as places to hide

during Turkish invasions. In these single-vaulted, cold, damp, moldy cellars, the second

fermentation can take months, even years, since the cold temperatures coupled with the

high sugar content of the wine slow down the process. Under current law, Tokaji Aszú

must be aged for at least three years in oak barrels and in bottle before being sold. The

bottles are always the traditional, squat, 500-milliliter Tokaji Aszú bottles, three-quarters

the size of a standard wine bottle.

In the past, as the Tokaji wines aged, the barrels would not be topped up, leaving air

space in each. At the same time, a special strain of natural yeasts, which flourished in

Tokaj’s cool, dark cellars, would coat the surface of the wine with a fine film, rather like

flor in Sherry. The combination of the yeasts and the partial, controlled oxidation of the

wine would contribute yet another unique flavor to Tokaji Aszú. Today, most Tokaji Aszús

are intentionally made in completely full barrels and tanks so that they are protected from

oxygen and their fruity/floral character is preserved, although yeasts (omnipresent in these

cellars) still contribute to the flavor.

There are two other categories of rare, super-concentrated Tokaji Aszús: Tokaji Aszú

Esszencia and Tokaji Esszencia (the word Esszencia—

“essence”

—is also sometimes

spelled with one s—eszencia—and sometimes spelled essencia). Let me address Tokaji

Esszencia first, as it is the most luxurious, hedonistic Tokaji of all. Only a minuscule

amount is made, and only in exceptionally good years. The wine is, of course,

frighteningly expensive. To make it, aszú grapes are put in a cask and the juice that runs

free from these grapes, out of the bottom of the cask (traditionally through a goose quill

put in the bunghole of the cask), with no pressure other than the weight of the grapes on

top, is Tokaji Esszencia. At 45 percent to 90 percent sugar, this liquid is so syrupy and

sweet that the yeasts, slowed to a stupor, barely manage to do their work, and the luscious

liquid ferments unbelievably slowly—sometimes barely at all. A Château Pajzos Tokaji

Esszencia from the legendary vintage of 1993 took four years to ferment to 4.7 percent

alcohol, and a Royal Tokaji Company Tokaji Esszencia from the same 1993 vintage was

still fermenting in 1999! In the end most Tokaji Esszencias may only reach an alcohol

level of 2 to 5 percent. But simply to say the wine is sweet does not do it justice. The color

of honey, velvety rich, and tasting of molecularly dense apricots and peaches, Tokaji

Esszencia is one of the world’s most penetrating and profound taste sensations, rendering

wine lovers (including this one) speechless. It is said to be one of the longest lasting of all

wines, capable of aging for centuries. Historically it was reserved for royalty, who

sometimes drank it on their deathbeds, hoping to be revived by its mysterious medical

powers.

Tokaji Esszencia is so rare and precious that most of it is not bottled on its own but

instead is blended sparingly into 6-puttonyos Tokaji Aszú to make the highly revered

Tokaji Aszú Esszencia, itself a rare, super-expensive, extraordinary wine that is also made

only in exceptional years. Tokaji Aszú Esszencia must be aged five years, of which three

must be in the barrel.

THE TOKAJI CLASSIFICATION SYSTEM

The vineyards of Tokaj were the first in the world to be classified according to quality. In

1700, about a century and a half before Bordeaux’s 1855 Classification, Prince Rákóczi

issued a royal decree assigning the vineyards of Tokaj rankings of first, second, and third

class, using the Latin designations Primae Classis, Secunde Classis, and so on. In

addition, two vineyards, Csarfas and Mézes Mály, were given a special designation, a sort

of super-first-class status called Pro Mensa Caesaris Primus, or “chosen for the royal

table.

” In total, 173 vineyards were classified, and others that were not particularly well

sited were listed as unclassified. Throughout much of the forty-year Communist regime,

with vineyards in poor condition, the classification system was largely meaningless. But in

1995, the top producers of Tokaji formed an association called Tokaj Renaissance, with

the goal of reviving the significance of the old classification system. It is now common to

see vineyard names such as Betsek and Szt. Tamás on Tokaji labels, along with their

rankings; in this case, both are First Class.

OTHER WINES OF THE TOKAJ REGION

The enormous viticultural and winemaking improvements of the 1990s not only elevated

the quality of Tokaji Aszú, but they also vastly improved the region’s dry white wines.

Dry furmint bottled as a single variety makes a crisp, complex white wine that’s delicious

and often minerally. Try the fantastic dry furmints of Balassa, Barta, and Gróf Degenfeld

wineries. Hárslevelű is softer, slightly creamy, and has the added bonus of an appealingly

fruity aroma. And Ottonel muskotály (the other muscat, besides ságra muskotály, that is

grown in Tokaj) often has ripe peach, apricot, and quince flavors.

TOKAJI ALLURE

Perhaps more than any other wine in history, T okaji has been the wine of the famous, the powerful, the

pious, and the noble. Its description as “the king of wines and the wine of kings” comes from the early

eighteenth century, after Francis II Rákóczi, Prince of Transylvania, gave T okaji to King Louis XIV of

France as a gift, resulting in the wine becoming a regular favorite of the French court at Versailles. Next,

Louis XV made it a special gift for Madame de Pompadour. Later, Emperor Franz Josef (who was also

king of Hungary) developed a tradition of sending T okaji Aszú to England’s Queen Victoria as a yearly

birthday present—one bottle for every month she had lived. On her eighty-first, in 1900, she received 972

bottles (a significant present—and something of a shame, since this was her final birthday). Artists,

writers, and musicians loved T okaji—the wine was a favorite of Beethoven, Liszt, Schubert, Haydn,

Goethe, Heinrich Heine, Friedrich von Schiller, Johann Strauss, and Voltaire. Emperor Peter the Great of

Russia and Emperor Napoléon III of France both consumed T okaji heavily—Napoléon, for example,

bought thirty to forty full barrels of T okaji every year. Needless to say, T okaji was the near-religious elixir

preferred by many popes.

In addition to these dry wines, Tokaj is also now making late-harvest sweet wines that

are not Tokaji Aszú. Late-harvest Tokaji, rather like German beerenauslese, is a late-

harvest sweet wine that may have been made with the benefit of some botrytized bunches

of grapes. But that is different than Tokaji Aszú where, as noted above, a paste is made

from entirely botrytized berries, the paste is combined with wine, and then the whole is

refermented. Two late-harvest wines to try include Oremus Tokaji Furmint Noble Late

Harvest and Château Pajzos Muskotály.

Y et another type of wine made in the Tokaj region is szamorodni, which means “as it is

grown” or “as it comes.

” When vineyards are not sufficiently affected by botrytis to

produce enough aszú berries to make Tokaji Aszú, a blended wine from Tokaji’s three

main grapes is made. The szamorodni may be dry (száraz) or slightly sweet (édes).

Szamorodni must be aged two years in the barrel, and most often barrels are not topped up,

so the wine takes on a partially oxiydized, intriguing toasted-nut character similar to that

of Sherry.

SOME OF THE BEST PRODUCERS OF TOKAJI ASZÚ

Alana-T okaj • Château Pajzos • Disznókő • Dobogó • Hétszőlő • István Szepsy • Oremus • Royal T okaji

Wine Company

Early morning mists over the Bodrog River encourage the development of Botrytis cinerea in the surrounding vineyards

of Tokaj-Hegyalja. The noble rot, along with the land itself and the painstaking way in which Tokaji is made, all conspire

to make a wine that has unreal deliciousness and elegance.

WHEN YOU VISIT… HUNGARY

The most fascinating (and easiest) Hungarian wineries to visit are those of T okaj-

Hegyalja, in northeast Hungary, about 120 miles (190 kilometers) from Budapest. The

majority of T okaj’s leading wineries are located in or near the sleepy village of Mád

(easy to remember). With an advance appointment, tours can usually be conducted in

English.

IF , ON YOUR WAY TO OR FROM wine country, you stop overnight in Budapest, be

sure to dine at Gundel, the palatial nineteenth-century restaurant restored in 1992 by

international businessman Ronald Lauder (of Estée Lauder) and the late United States

restaurant consultant George Lang. The menu is devoted entirely to traditional

Hungarian classics, including legendary Hungarian pastries.

The Hungarian Wines to Know

Hungary’s dry white and red wines are not yet widely exported and thus are not always easy to find. So, while I

have included a few outstanding dry wines here, most of the wines below are sweet Tokaji wines—Hungary’s ultra-

famous specialty.

WHITES

SZŐKE MÁTYÁS

IRSAI OLIVÉR | MÁTRA

100% irsai olivér

I knew nothing about irsai olivér (a cross created in Hungary in the 1930s) or the dry white wines made from it

until late 2013, when I encountered this exploding bomb of fruit from the Szőke Mátyás winery. Although it’s

fantastically fruity and aromatic, with roselike notes, it also carefully skirts the problem of being too perfumed by

having flashes of lime-skin bitterness and a distinct minerality. Irsai olivér is not as weighty or viscous as many

other aromatic varieties can be, but it’s weighty enough to invite any spicy dish to play along. The Szőke family’s

vineyards are in the Mátra foothills, about an hour and a half northeast of Budapest, near Hungary’s highest extinct

volcano, Kékes, which is part of a long-dormant volcanic chain that extends all the way to Tokaj. Szőke means

“blond” in Hungarian, a reference to the proprietor Mátyás’s mane of hair when he was younger.

DEMETER ZOLTÁN

HÁRSLEVELŰ | SZERELMI | TOKAJ-HEGY ALJA

100% hárslevelű

Zoltán Demeter studied wine in France and the United States before returning to Hungary to be the assistant to the

country’s star winemaker, István Szepsy. It’s been said that this was the first modern, dry hárslevelű to show that

the grape is capable of greatness. The wine is based on sixty-year-old vines planted in the pure loess soils of the

Szerelmi vineyard in Tokaj-Hegyalja. And what a wine. Massive, opulent, and softly creamy on the one hand, it is

also spicy, sassy, and intense on the other. It’s as if crème caramel met Kaffir lime. Thoroughly delicious.

DOMAINE KIRÁLYUDV AR

FURMINT SEC | TOKAJ-HEGY ALJA

100% furmint

Domaine Királyudvar’s (kee-RYE-oohd-var) is one of the best dry furmints I’ve ever tasted. Its gingery, minerally

fresh aroma is pure and distinctive, and the wine’s flavors—an exotic marriage of preserved lemons, baked pears,

and brioche—are both lively and creamy at the same time. Although it’s rich and satisfying, the wine is also airy,

light, and ethereal. A stunning wine. Királyudvar (the name means “king’s court”) dates to the eleventh century,

when the estate supplied wines to the Imperial Court of the Hapsburgs. In the modern era, it was purchased in 1997

by Anthony Hwang (an owner of the renowned French estate Domaine Huët in the Loire), who restored the

vineyards and estate.

RED

GERE ATTILA

KOPÁR CUVÉE | VILLÁNY-SIKLÓS

Approximately 50% cabernet franc, 45% merlot, 5% cabernet sauvignon

From the Villány part of Villány-Siklós, where the soils are loess and red clay along with dolomite and limestone,

comes Kopár Cuvée, Attila Gere’s top wine. The fruit comes from vineyards on the extinct volcano Kopár, which

means “barren” (a reference to the poor soils). Of all of the regions in Hungary, Villány is known for the

commanding structure of its red wines, and for the ambitions of its winemakers, who closely follow the great wines

of Bordeaux, Napa V alley, and Tuscany. Indeed, Kopár Cuvée’s edgy, bitter grip, its wonderful tobacco notes, plus

its aromas and flavors of cassis and cedar, are all very much in the jet stream of a good Bordeaux.

SWEET WINES

OREMUS

LATE HARVEST | TOKAJI | TOKAJ-HEGYALJA

100% furmint

Oremus was the first producer to make late-harvest Tokaji, which is slightly less concentrated and complex than

Tokaji Aszú. Made from extremely ripe grapes (some clusters of which have botrytis), late-harvest Tokajis are not

made with aszú paste in the traditional manner of Tokaji Aszú. But there’s no lack of beauty here. Indeed, the

wine’s deep, honeyed-apricot richness has a crystalline purity and exquisite balance. Imagine the grown-up version

of highly concentrated dried apricots, liquefied into nectar. Oremus is owned by the Álvarez family, proprietor’s of

Spain’s most famous estate, V ega-Sicilia.

ALANA-TOKAJ

MUSCA T | BETSEK | TOKAJ-HEGY ALJA

100% muscat blanc à petits grains

During my immersion into Hungarian wine, this was one of the most exquisite late-harvest wines I drank. The

luscious flavors of lychee are so mesmerizing and intense that I’m convinced this wine tastes more like lychees

than lychees do. But, far from monochromatic, Alana-Tokaj’s sweet muscat (specifically muscat blanc à petit

grains) from the Betsek vineyard (one of the vineyards historically ranked Primae Classis, First Class) soars into

rushes of flowery meadows, wild lavender, orange marmalade, lemon curd, white pepper, and allspice. Fresh and

vibrant, the wine seems thoroughly animated and alive. Winemaker Attila Gábor Németh and his family acquired

the last Tokaji vineyard holdings of the royal Hapsburg family in 2005, all of which were ranked First Class. Attila

immediately got down to work by severely cutting back the yields (now below those of Bordeaux’s Château

d’Y quem) and pushing the harvest as late as possible (into December/January in most years) to maximize the

concentration of the grapes’ flavors. Also not to be missed: Alana-Tokaj’s Aszueszencia, a Tokaji Aszú Esszencia

that’s mind-blowingly silken in texture and hypnotically rich.

CHÂTEAU PAJZOS

TOKAJI ASZÚ | 5 PUTTONYOS | TOKAJ-HEGY ALJA

Approximately 38% furmint, 27% muscat, 19% zéta, 16% hárslevelű

It’s hard to imagine a 5-puttonyos Tokaji that is more sensual than that of Château Pajzos. In great vintages, the

wine positively drips with the aromas and flavors of honeycomb, lavender, lilies, dried apricots, lime marmalade,

saffron, white pepper, wild herbs, meadows (and such is the complexity of the wine, that one could go on with even

more descriptors). Tasting it, it seems clear that every single exquisite molecule is lined up along the same intense

trajectory of flavor. As for a finish, the wine simply refuses to stop emanating deliciousness. Château Pajzos’s

Tokaji may well have one of the longest finishes of any wine in the world. Château Pajzos is owned by the Laborde

family, which also owns Bordeaux’s Château Clinet, in Pomerol.

DOBOGÓ

TOKAJI ASZÚ | 6 PUTTONYOS | TOKAJ-HEGY ALJA

60% furmint, 30% hárslevelű, 10% muscat lunel

Dobogó’s Tokaji is sheer voluptuousness in a bottle. In the first split second of the first sip, you are drenched in the

aromas and flavors of fresh pineapple, fresh tangerines, lemon curd, chamomile tea, and ginger. The very next

second, waves of white pepper and exotic spices appear to lift the wine up into a vibrating freshness. Indeed, this

wine is so intricate and light that the sweetness is very sheer and exquisite tasting. Dobogó (the name means

“heartbeat”) is a family winery begun in 1995 by Izabella Zwack and Attila Domokos.

ROYAL TOKAJI WINE COMPANY

TOKAJI ASZÚ | SZT. TAMÁS | 6 PUTTONYOS | TOKAJ-HEGY ALJA

Approximately 70% furmint, 30% hárslevelű

From the Primae Classis (First Class) vineyard known as Szt. Tamás (St. Thomas) come distinctive Tokajis that

stop you in your tracks, they are so fascinating, delicious, and long. Indeed, Szt. Tamás Tokajis often display

aromas and flavors evocative of lemon verbena tea, roasted apricots, peach puree, minerals, sea salt, dried herbs,

and honeycomb. They never come across as sweet, exactly, but rather as something refined, richly delicious, and so

light that the flavors feel as if they are floating on a cloud. The Royal Tokaji Wine Company was founded in 1990

by a group of investors that included the prominent English wine expert Hugh Johnson.

REPUBLIC OF GEORGIA

It’s not every day you get a call from a holy man. But in the summer of 2011, sitting in my

office in the Napa V alley, I picked up the ringing phone and to my utter surprise, on the

other end of the line was a monk and the winemaker of the eleventh-century Alaverdi

Monastery in Kakheti, Republic of Georgia. He asked if he and his colleagues could meet

with me and bring their wines to taste. There is only one answer to that question, and so

the next day a bearded man clad in voluminous black robes with a large Orthodox

Christian cross hanging from his neck and a rosary in his hand walked into my office,

followed by ten other Georgian vintners. Before they sat down, they sang a folk song, for

an old Georgian tradition insists that men sing before they drink.

Qvevri waiting to be filled with wine, then buried underground.

Many of the wines they brought with them were so-called “orange wines”

—almost

neon orange in color—that had been made in qvevri (KEV-ree), large, egg-shaped clay

vessels, lined with beeswax and buried entirely underground. Drinking these wines was

like nothing I had ever experienced.

One of the oldest agricultural societies in the world, Georgia is nestled on the isthmus

between the Black and Caspian Seas, and lies just north of Turkey and south of Russia and

the great Caucasus Mountains. Wine has been made here for over eight thousand years,

and Georgia, along with Turkey, Iran, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, is considered one of the

world’s earliest sites of grapevine domestication and winemaking. For millennia, much of

that wine was renowned. But throughout the twentieth century, Georgia was caught in the

political turmoil of the Soviet Union (of which it was a part) and wine quality suffered.

Suppressed, the wine industry regressed. Then, in 1991, Georgia gained its political

independence and began the long, slow road back to reestablishing its fine wine industry.

The Georgians are very spiritual about the harvest and about wine, considering it a mystical beverage. Wine is always

part of the country’ s frequent feasting rituals that involve much sipping and elaborate, contemplative toasts.

There are wine districts in every part of this small country, and the vineyards—which

cover 112,000 acres (45,300 hectares)—are planted primarily with fascinating native

varieties, and sometimes with international varieties, like cabernet sauvignon. The most

important native grapes are the white grapes rkatsiteli (ARE-cats-i-tell-ee) and mtsvane

(metz-V AH-neh), and the red grape saperavi (sah-per-RA V-ee).

A Georgian wine cellar with sealed qvevri buried underneath the floor.

Rkatsiteli is a hardy grape with significant acidity and delicate green apple flavors,

while mtsvane is fruity and aromatic (the two are often blended). For its part, saperavi—

one of the few grapes in the world with red pulp—produces deeply colored, dramatic

wines with wild berry, peppery, and gamy flavors, not unlike syrah. The best examples of

both of these grapes are grown in the highly regarded Kakheti region, in the foothills of

the Caucasus, where the continental climate and well-drained slopes are ideal for wine-

growing. Interestingly, a large portion of the grapes grown and harvested by small farmers

each year is purchased by individual families who don’t grow grapes but who make their

own wine at home.

As mentioned, among the most famous Georgian wines—whites and reds—are those

made in clay vessels known as qvevri, the smallest of which are large enough that a grown

man can stand inside, and the largest of which can hold 10 tons (9 metric tons) of grapes.

Unlike their historic cousins, the amphorae, qvevri were not used for transportation and

were never moved. Instead, they were buried completely underground, where the stable,

cool temperatures were an asset to fermentation and maturation. Today qvevri are still

used to make and age Georgian wines, but not to transport them. The crushed grapes,

usually along with their stems, are added to the vessels without the addition of commercial

yeasts. (Fermentation takes place as a result of yeasts present on the grape skins and

clinging to the inside walls of the vessels.) Afterward, the qvevri are sealed with wooden

lids and clay or hot beeswax, then left undisturbed for up to six months. During the

enzymatic breakdowns that follow this long contact with skins and stems, juice that was

formerly white is turned into an orange-colored wine, and red juice becomes red wine shot

through with beautiful glints of orange. In 2013, the Ancient Georgian Traditional Qvevri

Wine-Making Method, as it is officially called, was added to the UNESCO Intangible

Cultural Heritage list. Needless to say, the flavor of a wine made in qvevri is amazing—an

attractive resiny-bittersweet amalgam, as if wild herbs, dried orange peel, and the skins of

walnuts were macerated together with a bit of fruit and honey.

In Georgia, tradition is everything. Here, girls in Tbilisi perform centuries-old dances.

Finally, a few fascinating facts: Georgians are considered one of the main groups of

native Caucasian peoples, but they do not fit into any of the main ethnic categories of

Europe or Asia. The Georgian language, which belongs to the Kartvelian family of

languages, is neither Indo-European, Turkic, nor Semitic. The present-day native

population traces their history back to autochthonous inhabitants and immigrants who

infiltrated into the South Caucasus from the direction of Anatolia, Turkey, in remote

antiquity.

Lastly, Georgia is considered to have some of the most exciting food and culinary

traditions in eastern Europe. Among the most prized and most often used foods are

walnuts, garlic, coriander, pomegranates, and marigold flowers. Georgian culinary

traditions center around the supra, or “feast,

” that is held on special occasions. The supra

is presided over by the tamada, a sort of spiritual leader and toastmaster, who leads many

emotional and philosophical toasts over large quantities of wine and food consumed over

many hours. The tamada’s role is essential to Georgian culture and it is said that a good

tamada must be eloquent, intelligent, smart, and quick-thinking, with a good sense of

humor in order to prevail when guests try to out-toast him. During most toasts, all men are

expected to stand up and drink wine in silence as they contemplate the ideas and lessons

embedded in the toast the tamada has given.

GREECE

GREECE RANKS ELEVENTH AMONG WINE-PRODUCING COUNTRIES WORLDWIDE. THE GREEKS

DRINK AN AVERAGE OF 7 GALLONS (25 LITERS) OF WINE PER PERSON PER YEAR.

The birthplace of western civilization, Greece is in many ways also the birthplace of our

modern wine culture. For the ancient Greeks, wine was a gift to man from the god

Dionysus, an offering of formidable importance since the recipient actually took it into his

own body. Dionysus’s gift established wine (not beer, the more common beverage of

antiquity) as a symbol of worthiness, a luxurious blessing, and the beverage that would

henceforth be inextricably woven into the very fabric of religious celebration. Homer,

Plato, Aristotle, and Hippocrates all wrote of wine’s virtues and its beneficial effects on

thought, health, and creativity. For the ancient Greek man, the intellectual discussions that

arose when drinking wine formed the central core of the symposia, animated get-togethers

from which sprang the beginnings of Western philosophy.

Bordered by Bulgaria, Macedonia, and Albania to the north and by Turkey to the east,

Greece nonetheless gives the impression of being a country made up as much of water as

of land. Three seas—the Aegean, the Mediterranean, and the Ionian—nudge into the

mountainous landmass, creating a tumble of islands, inlets, bays, and rugged peninsulas.

The dominance and beauty of all this water and the 2,500 miles (4,000 kilometers) of

coastline are inescapable. No part of Greece, except for a small portion in the northwest, is

more than 50 miles (80 kilometers) from the sea.

Precisely when winemaking began here is not entirely clear. We know this, however:

Grapevines were probably first domesticated around 8000 B.C. in the so-called Fertile

Triangle—an area that extends from the Taurus Mountains (eastern Turkey) to the

northern Zagros Mountains (western Iran) and the Caucasus Mountains (Republic of

Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan). From this triangle, grapevine cultivation spread to

Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, and Jordan. From Palestine, wine was exported to Eygpt,

which according to the world’s leading grapevine geneticist, Dr. José V ouillamoz, author,

with Jancis Robinson and Julia Harding, of Wine Grapes, developed its own extensive and

sophisticated wine industry from 3200 to 2500 B.C. Finally, thanks to Greece’s extensive

trade with Egypt, grape cultivation spread to southern Greece and to the Minoan

civilization on Crete by about 2200 to 2000 B.C. Eventually, of course, wine spread around

the Mediterranean. (The evidence for this migration includes carbonized grape seeds; the

residue of resinated wine found in jars and on stoppers; amphorae stamped with

hieroglyphic signs indicating where the grapes were grown to make the wine inside [the

first wine labels]; and drinking vessels painted with winemaking scenes found in tombs.)

Indeed, it was primarily through trading in wine, and the subsequent social relationships

wine encouraged, that ancient Greece’s influence on everything from ethics to politics

spread throughout the Mediterranean world.

Many of Greece’ s top wine regions border on (or are surrounded by) water . Here, the volcanic Aegean island of

Santorini (imagined by some to be the lost island of Atlantis), is known for crisp white wines that are delicious with the

local cuisine.

THE QUICK SIP ON GREECE

THE WINES OF GREECE were among the most important wines in antiquity. Thanks

to Greece’s extensive trade and colonization, wine became an integral part of the

cultures of western Europe from their earliest beginnings.

GREECE’S WINE REGIONS range from inland, cold-climate, mountainous regions in

northern Macedonia to beautiful Aegean islands, where vines are often mere miles from

the sea.

GREECE IS KNOWN for producing a range of wines and styles, from whites like

assyrtiko and moschofilero to robust reds made from xinomavro and agiorgitiko, to

lusciously sweet white and red wines made from muscat blanc à petits grains and

mavrodaphne, respectively.

The wines drunk in ancient Greece were sometimes flavored—intentionally and

unintentionally—by pine resin, which was used to coat the otherwise porous insides of the

amphorae, or jars, in which wines were stored and transported. Millennia later, the

resinated wine known as retsina is still immensely popular in Greece (see page 653).

During classical times, wines were also sometimes flavored with wildflowers and flower

oils, giving them what Plato considered to be even more positive aromas than they already

possessed. In the ancient Greek view, the proper aromas were necessary for restoring the

body to its natural harmony. The similarity between floral aromas and the aromas of

certain wines raised the reputation of those wines, for floral smells were thought to be

particularly beneficial to the brain and, in addition, were deemed capable of forestalling

intoxication.

THE MOST IMPORTANT GREEK WINES

LEADING WINES

AMYNDEON red, rosé, sparkling

ARCHARNES red

CEPHALONIA white

CRETE white and red

GOUMENISSA red

HALKIDIKI white and red

MANTINIA white and rosé

MAVRODAPHNE OF PATRAS red (sweet)

MUSCAT OF PATRAS white (sweet)

MUSCAT OF SAMOS white (sweet)

NAOUSSA red

NEMEA red

PATRAS white

RAPSANI red

RETSINA white

SANTORINI white

WINES OF NOTE

VINSÁNTO white (sweet)

On the extremely windy islands of Greece, vines are sometimes trained to grow close to the ground and in a basket shape

to protect the grapes.

Intoxication itself was something the Greeks denounced for its harmful effects.

Accordingly, wine was always diluted with water in proportions ranging from two parts

wine and three parts water to one part wine and three parts water. In the eyes of the

Greeks, only barbarians drank wine straight. Eubulus, the Greek poet of the fourth century

B.C. known for his mythological burlesques, summarized the Greek penchant for

moderation when he attributed these words to Dionysus:

Three kraters [bowls used for wine] do I mix for the temperate: one to health, which they

empty first, the second to love and pleasure, the third to sleep. When this bowl is drunk up,

wise guests go home. The fourth bowl is ours no longer , but belongs to hubris, the fifth to

uproar , the sixth to prancing about, the seventh to black eyes, the eighth brings the police,

the ninth belongs to vomiting, and the tenth to insanity and the hurling of furniture.

Reflecting on the Greek wisdom of taking no more than three drinks, Hugh Johnson,

the esteemed British wine expert, notes that throughout history three drinks have been

considered the model for moderation. Johnson goes on to suggest that from this historic

counsel is derived the wine bottle, which just happens to contain 750 milliliters, or about

three glasses each for two people.

For an explanation of Greek wine law, see the Appendix on Wine Laws, page 927.

THE MODERN GREEK WINE INDUSTRY

For all its hegemony as one of the most important wine producers of antiquity, Greece has

had an arduous climb into the modern world of fine wine. During the Middle Ages, the

country was part of the Byzantine Empire, and the best Greek wines were made by monks

following monastic traditions. But the fall of Byzantium and the subsequent occupation of

Greece by the Ottoman Turks effectively brought an end to Greece’s respected place

among wine producers. The Turks did not formally forbid winemaking for the Christian

population, but the strictures and taxes imposed during nearly four hundred years of

Ottoman domination were severe enough to prevent Greece from developing a significant

wine industry. Greek wine remained the work of peasants whose necessary goal was

subsistence, not sophistication.

Greece’s wine industry remained largely undeveloped until the twentieth century. As

was true in virtually every other European country, the devastating effects of the insect

phylloxera, which arrived in Greece in the late 1890s, lasted for several decades. This was

followed by two world wars, and then Greece’s own civil war, the combination of which

left the country’s wine industry in ruins. By the 1960s, most Greek wines were still being

sold in bulk, directly from barrels, to buyers who brought their own jugs to fill. It was not

until the mid-1980s, with Greece’s entry into the European Union, that the country’s wine

industry began to shift away from very inexpensive table wines intended for local

consumption, toward wines of finer quality. This meant lowering grape yields

substantially, improving viticultural techniques in the vineyards, employing more modern

equipment, and in many cases, using expensive, small oak barrels.

The Boutari Winery’ s modern tasting room on Crete, one of the most ancient centers of civilization in Europe, dating

from the Minoan period circa 2700 B.C.

Today there are some six hundred wineries in Greece, and the country’s wine industry

is composed of a handful of well-organized large firms, such as Boutari, D. Kourtakis, and

Tsantali, as well as scores of newer, smaller, quality-oriented, family-run estates. In a

country where land ownership is fragmented, most of these firms, large and small, both

own their own vineyard land and buy grapes from thousands of very small-scale growers.

All are more intent on making fine wine than they’ve been at any other time, and cheap

bulk wine is now left to cooperatives.

TRANSPORTING WINE IN THE ANCIENT WORLD

Other than goatskin bags, the earliest vessels for transporting wine in the ancient world were amphorae,

terra-cotta jars with two looped handles and, usually, a pointed base. Although the exact date and place

in the eastern Mediterranean where these distinctive jars originated has often been debated, their history

can be traced back to at least 2000 B.C. Around this time, the so-called Canaanite jars that were used to

ship a variety of goods, including wine, were used in Canaan’s extensive trade with pharaonic Egypt. By

the thirteenth century B.C., such vessels were being shipped as far afield as mainland Greece, where

they were found in the tombs of Mycenaean royalty. The hundreds of thousands of amphora fragments

that have been uncovered by anthropologists attest to the enormous volume of commerce in antiquity,

including trade in wine.

While some small amphorae held about 2½ gallons (10 liters), the jars used in transporting wine were

generally larger, holding 6½ gallons (25 liters) or more and weighing at least 22 pounds (10 kilograms)

when empty. Filled with wine, an amphora would have been heavy, hence the practicality of two handles,

allowing two people to carry the jar. Although the pointed base seems odd, it, too, was pragmatic,

offering a third “handle” when necessary. Such a design was also very functional on ships, where the

pointed bases could be buried deep in sand and the handles of the jars tied together for stability. When

they weren’t being carried, amphorae would be leaned against the wall of a room or placed in special

ring stands to hold them erect.

Since different Greek city-states produced their own distinctive styles of amphorae, archaeologists

theorize that the various jar shapes would have signaled different kinds of wine in the marketplace. In

addition, before they were fired, the handles of many jars were stamped with information about the type,

the origin, and often the date of the wine that the amphora contained.

In order to form an airtight seal and thereby prevent bacteria from turning the wine into vinegar, the

narrow necks of ancient wine amphorae were sealed using one of a number of methods. Most

commonly, the mouth of each amphora was filled with a clump of fibrous material, such as straw or

grass, that had been soaked in pine resin, and was then capped with clay. Likewise, because the jars

were porous, the insides of many amphorae were coated with resin in order to prevent or retard

evaporation and oxidation. Since the resinous coating would have been soluble in alcohol, early Greek

wines probably tasted as much of pine pitch as of the wine itself; in this way, they were the forerunners of

modern retsina, the resinated Greek wine that is nothing if not an acquired taste. Sometime later,

certainly by Roman times, lumps of pine pitch were also thrown into wine to help preserve it, or to

disguise the flavor of a wine gone bad.

From an amphora, wine would be poured into a bronze or pottery bowl called a krater. From the krater

the wine might then be scooped out with a ladle called a kythos into a shallow, two-handled, often

beautifully decorated cup known as a kylix.

The vineyards of Rapsani lie over the foothills of Mount Olympus. Here, bold, tannic, dramatic wines are made from one

of Greece’ s most important red grapes—xinomavro.

THE LAND, THE GRAPES, AND THE VINEYARDS

In square miles, Greece is only slightly larger than the island of Cuba, and of its total land

area, about 70 percent is mountains and 20 percent islands (making mechanical cultivation

all but impossible). Mountainous regions are used primarily for grazing sheep and goats,

although some vineyards are planted on the more moderate mountain slopes and high

plateaus. The relatively small amount of land that is available for agriculture—some

326,000 acres (131,900 hectares; an amount only modestly greater than the acreage

planted with grapes in Bordeaux)—is widely planted with grapevines and olive trees; both

do well in Greece’s mostly infertile, thin, dry soil.

Greece’s climate is well adapted for grape growing. Rains come mainly in the winter,

when the vines are dormant. There is bountiful sunlight, augmented by even more light

reflected off the sea, to ripen the grapes fully. If anything, too much sun and heat can be a

problem, for grapes that ripen too quickly often have simple, monochromatic flavors. For

this reason, some vineyards are planted on north-facing slopes to slow down the ripening

process.

The proximity of Greek vineyards to the sea and cooling maritime breezes is usually an

advantage. But strong sea winds can pose problems. To anyone accustomed to vines that

stand 5 feet (1.5 meters) tall or more (as vines do in California), it’s startling to see the

vineyards on some of the most windswept Greek islands. There, the vines are trained in

the circular kouloura method, close to the ground so that they form what look like wreaths

or shallow baskets. Trained this way, each vine is called a stefáni, or crown. In the center

of the stefáni, protected from the wind, lie the grapes.

Greece’s peculiar geographic configuration, with its four thousand plus islands, allowed

many different grape varieties to become established. As of this writing, seventy-seven

ancient indigenous varieties have been identified, although others may have gone extinct

over the past century due to the lack of a market for the wines made from them. (Several

Greek winemakers, however, are determined to protect those indigenous varieties that

currently exist from a similar fate.) At the same time, international varieties, such as

chardonnay and cabernet sauvignon, have also been planted in recent years.

THE GRAPES OF GREECE

Greece is home to seventy-seven known indigenous grape varieties. Here are the most important. (And

don’t forget, pronunciations can be found in the main grape glossary; see page 76.)

WHITE

ASSYRTIKO: A major grape native to Santorini, in the Aegean Islands. Makes dry wine in a crisp style

and in a riper, oak-aged style. Also blended into Santorini’s sweet wine, vinsánto.

MALAGOUSIA: An ancient grape that was saved from extinction in the 1980s. Makes aromatic, full-

bodied wines with bitter citrus and exotic fruit flavors and aromas.

MOSCHOFILERO: Despite this grape’s pinkish-red skin, only white wines and occasionally rosés are

made from it. Aromatic, with a spicy character, moschofilero is the source of the Peloponnesian wine

Mantinia.

MUSCAT BLANC Á PETITS GRAINS: Used in the famous, aromatic, sweet and often lightly fortified

wines muscat of Patras, from Peloponnese, and muscat of Samos, from Samos, an Aegean island.

ROBOLA: Native to Greece’s Ionian Islands or the Peloponnese, and not related to Italy’s ribolla gialla

despite the close spelling. Makes complex wines with lemon and mineral characteristics.

RODITIS: Makes the simple, dry white wine of Patras in Peloponnese.

SAVATIANO: A widely planted grape, including in the region of Attica, where Athens is located. Most

retsina is made from savatiano.

REDS

AGIORGITIKO: One of Greece’s two most important red varieties, also known as St. George. Makes the

spicy, dried-cherry-flavored wine Nemea.

KOTSIFALI: Unique to the island of Crete, this is the main grape of Acharnes, the wines of which are soft

and full-bodied.

LIMNIO: Ancient, unique variety mentioned by Aristotle. Spicy, earthy. Native to the island of Lemnos.

MANDILARIA: Unique to Crete and the Aegean Islands. Fairly tannic; blended in small amounts with

kotsifali to make the Cretan wine Acharnes, and into Santorini’s sweet wine, vinsánto.

MAVRODAPHNE: Major grape. The leading variety in mavrodaphne of Patras, a sweet, fortified, aged

wine made in the Peloponnese.

NEGOSKA: Soft, low-acid variety blended with xinomavro to make Goumenissa.

STAVROTO AND KRASSATO: Minor grapes grown on Mount Olympus. Used in Rapsani.

XINOMAVRO: One of Greece’s two most important red varieties. Makes the powerfully tannic,

sexy/earthy wine Naoussa and is the leading grape in Goumenissa.

The country’s most memorable and delicious wines are based about equally on white

and red grape varieties, although approximately 60 percent of Greece’s total wine

production is white. Among the top white grapes are assyrtiko, muscat blanc à petits

grains, robola (not related to the ribolla gialla grape of northern Italy, despite the close

spelling), roditis, savatiano (the grape usually used to make the rustic Greek specialty

retsina), and the popular, wonderfully aromatic grapes malagousia and moschofilero,

which are said to make the best aperitifs in all of Greece. The most important red varieties

include agiorgitiko (also known as St. George), kotsifali, mandelaria, limnio,

mavrodaphne, and the bold xinomavro, whose gastronomically challenged name means

“acid black.

”

Greece is made up of five broad winegrowing areas: northern Greece; mainland

Greece; the Peloponnese and Ionian Islands; the Aegean Islands; and Crete. Each of these

has been well known since antiquity, and each contains numerous important subregions.

(One side note before we explore these regions. Greek place names can have multiple

spellings, due to the lack of universal rules for converting from the phonetically based

Greek alphabet into English, with its Roman alphabet. I have used the most common

English spellings for the places mentioned below, but on a wine label, you might find a

different spelling, or even Greek itself, of course.)

In Greece, every aspect of viticulture is done by hand, as it has been for centuries. The country’ s steep, undulating

terrain and 2,500 miles (4,000 kilometers) of coastline effectively prohibit mechanization.

Northern Greece, along the northern coast of the Aegean Sea and far inland, comprises

the large regions known as Macedonia, Thrace, and Epirus. Within these are several

smaller wine regions, among them: Goumenissa, Naoussa, Amyndeon, Rapsani, and

Halkidiki; the latter is a stunning peninsula that thrusts out into the Aegean like three

fingers.

Among northern Greece’s white wines, the rare, exotic, and deliciously bitter-citrus-

tasting grape malagousia (which was rescued from extinction in the 1990s thanks to the

efforts of V angelis Gerovassiliou) thrives here, especially in Macedonia. Xinomavro, and

the dark, brooding, very tannic reds it often makes, are also a specialty of northern Greece,

especially in Naoussa, Goumenissa, Rapsani, and the far-inland, high-altitude region of

Amyndeon. I often think of xinomavro—one of the few grapes that is high in both acid

and tannin—as Greece’s Barolo, and like Barolo, wines made from xinomavro resist

oxidation and can take years to soften and come around. In Rapsani, xinomavro is blended

with two other minor red grapes, stavroto and krassato, grown on the foothills of Mount

Olympus, Greece’s highest mountain. Krassato means “wine colored,

” a description used

frequently in antiquity, including by Homer, who, in the Odyssey, describes Odysseus’s

journey on the “wine-dark sea.

” Finally, in Halkidiki, cabernet sauvignon and syrah have

been especially successful. The Carras family, of Domaine Porto Carras, helped pioneer

this region with the assistance of famous French enologist Émile Peynaud.

Mainland Greece encompasses two distinctly different areas—the northern,

mountainous part near Thessalia (Thessaly), and the flatter plains, where the main wine

region is Attiki (Attica). Most of the grapes here go into simple table wines, and this is the

leading home of the native grape savatiano, the most cultivated wine-producing variety in

Greece and the grape used for retsina.

RETSINA

Few visitors to Greece escape without either falling in love with or learning to abhor retsina, the pungent,

pine-resin-flavored wine, the drinking of which is virtually a baptismal right in Greek tavernas. T oday,

retsina (which has protected appellation status in Greece) accounts for an impressive 15 percent of

Greece’s total production of table wine. Resinated wines have a long history in Greece; traces of pine

resin have been found in Greek wine amphorae dating back to the thirteenth century B.C. Modern retsina

can be made anywhere in the country, although most of it is made in Attica, the region that surrounds

Athens. While many different white grape varieties can be used, and are, the most common variety is

savatiano, a relatively neutral white grape. Small amounts of resin from the Aleppo pine are added to

savatiano grape juice as it ferments, imparting retsina’s inimitable piney flavor and unmistakable

turpentine-like aroma. Among non-Greeks, retsina is often the subject of good-natured jokes. But a

number of Greeks take the unique wine quite seriously, suggesting that it is the perfect accompaniment

to many Greek meze (small dishes of appetizers served like Spanish tapas).

The southernmost region of the Greek mainland is the peninsula known as the

Peloponnese, which in fact is so completely surrounded by water that, save for the 4-mile-

wide (6.4-kilometer) and 20-mile-long (32-kilometer) Isthmus of Corinth, it would be a

large island. The vineyards of the Peloponnese and the Ionian Islands that surround it are

concentrated in the more mountainous areas, either on rugged plateaus or in valleys

wedged in between the mountain massifs. The three most important wine regions here are

Nemea, Mantinia, and Patras. The wines of Nemea, thought to have been the palace wines

of Agamemnon, are made from the highly regarded agiorgitiko, a red grape. Nemea, firm

and structured, can have a fascinating, spicy, and peppery flavor. The wine from Mantinia

is usually a fantastic, dry, spicy, aromatic white, made from the pink-skinned grape

moschofilero. And Patras is home to three different wines. In its most straightforward

version, Patras is just a simple, dry white wine made from the roditis grape. More unusual

and interesting is muscat of Patras, made from muscat blanc à petits grains, a viscous

dessert wine that is sometimes fortified, sometimes not. Most idiosyncratic of all is

mavrodaphne of Patras, made (in the best cases) 100 percent from mavrodaphne grapes

(the word mavrodaphne means “black laurel”). Cheaper versions of mavrodaphne of

Patras include black Corinth grapes, which are better known as the source of dried

currants. Amber to mahogany colored, sweet, thick, fortified, complex, and slightly

oxidized, mavrodaphne of Patras is aged for several years in barrels in a manner somewhat

like tawny Port. Traditionally, Greeks drink mavrodaphne of Patras in the afternoon with a

small plate of figs or oranges (although it is also stunning with chocolate). It is the wine

most often used in Greek Orthodox churches during Holy Communion.

HUNTING DOWN THE HOME OF EASTER EGGS

Devouring a handful of milk chocolate Easter eggs or hunting around the backyard for plastic ones are

two behaviors that are, well, all Greek to the Greeks. In Greece, where the practice of dyeing eggs for

Easter originated, the custom continues to be a deeply felt religious ritual. The eggs (real ones, needless

to say) are dyed on Holy Thursday (the Thursday preceding Easter Sunday) and are eaten after midnight

mass on Holy Saturday as a way of breaking the Lenten fast. In Greece, Easter eggs are always dyed a

deep red, symbolizing the blood of Christ, while the egg itself represents life and regeneration. In some

parts of northern Greece, the eggs are not just dyed, they are also hand painted with figures, often of

birds—a symbol of Christ’s resurrection from the dead.

The Aegean Islands are fascinating, small, enclavelike wine regions unto themselves.

Extremely windy, with barren soils and minimal water, the islands require specialized

forms of viticulture that have been used for millennia. In the northern Aegean, on islands

such as Lemnos and Samos, muscat varieties—especially muscat blanc à petits grains—

dominate. In particular, Samos, off the coast of Turkey, is well known for muscat of

Samos, which can be aromatic and dry or a sweet, apricotish, lightly fortified wine. In the

southern Aegean, on islands such as Rhodes and Santorini, the main varieties are the white

assyrtiko, athiri, and monemvasia and the red variety of mandilaria.

Of all of these islands, the one that, in the modern era, has remained famous for wine is

Santorini, considered by some Greeks to be the legendary Atlantis. A spectacular, almost

surreal volcanic island, Santorini is a giant blackened crater poised between the

shockingly blue sky and the equally blue sea, each of which can seem indistinguishable

from the other. The soil that makes up many vineyards on the island is little more than

eerie-looking, pockmarked, jet black lava rocks, the remnants of multiple ancient volcanic

eruptions. One of these, which occurred sometime between 1627 and 1600 B.C., was one of

the largest volcanic events on earth in recorded history, and was so catastrophic that it is

thought to have destroyed the Minoan civilization on the nearby island of Crete.

Santorini’s vineyards may be among the oldest under continuous cultivation in the

world. The age of the vines themselves is difficult to specify because of the way the vines

are grown and pruned. To protect the grapes from the sharp sun and the extreme winds,

the vines are trained low to the ground, forming what look like wreaths or baskets—a

method known as kouloura (meaning “coil”). After many years of such training, the

nutrients must pass through the roots and several yards/meters of vine to finally reach the

grapes, which greatly affects the yields of these old vines. Eventually the yields become so

low that the “basket” is cut completely off at the root of the plant, near the surface of the

soil. This is generally done when the vines approach seventy-five years of age. A new

plant eventually sprouts from a dormant eye on the old roots, and a new basket will be

formed that produces a harvest within two to three years. From historical records kept by

Greek vintners, it’s known that this procedure has been performed at least four or five

times over the past few centuries, making some of the original roots hundreds of years old.

So, how old are the vines? In Santorini it depends on whether you are speaking of the

scion (the above-ground part of the vine) or the roots themselves.

Assyrtiko and mandilaria grapes drying on mats in the sun. Once fermented, they will become Greek vinsánto.

Traditionally, most wines from Santorini were crisp, dry whites made from assyrtiko

grapes. Their simple purity and freshness were perfectly suited to the island’s simple,

seafood-based cooking. In recent years, however, more and more of these have been made

in a riper style and made or aged in oak. These wines have gained weight and broadness

on the palate, but some have lost what, to me, was their traditional appeal.

The island is also famous for vinsánto, a sweet dessert wine reminiscent of the Tuscan

dessert wine vin santo. (But while vin santo means “holy wine,

” vinsánto—without the

space—is a contraction of wine [vin] from Santorini.) Both are made from grapes that

have been dried to concentrate their sugar. In the case of Santorini vinsánto, assyrtiko and

mandilaria grapes are first spread out on mats to dry in the sun for one to two weeks.

When they achieve a state referred to as half-baked, the grapes are fermented. Afterward,

the wine is aged in barrel for a decade, giving it a mellow, rich flavor.

And, finally, the island of Crete, the largest of all the Greek islands, was one of the first

places in the world to develop a systematic approach to grape growing and winemaking,

and the varieties that grow there even today are unique to the island. Kotsifali (soft and

full-bodied) and mandilaria (more structured), for example, are the two rare grapes that are

blended together to make the famous red wines of Archarnes, the most important wine

region on the island.

On Crete, a restored entrance to Knossos, considered Europe’ s oldest city.

THE FOODS OF GREECE

If the French can’t wait to impress you with their cooking and the Italians want to romance

you with theirs, the Greeks have decided to keep their cuisine—the real stuff, that is—

mostly a secret. It’s a shame, for the country can legitimately boast one of the most

exciting (and healthful) cuisines in Europe. Greece’s mountainous, arid terrain has always

prohibited large-scale agriculture, and most good products—from cheeses and yogurts to

olives and vegetables—are still made largely on an artisanal basis. Even today, working

women and men who live in Greek cities often return to their families’ villages in the fall

to help with the olive and grape harvests and to put up fruits and vegetables.

Greek cuisine is also intrinsically tied to religion. In no other country that I know of is

fasting (especially during Lent and Advent) still so much a part of contemporary life. For

the typical Greek, fasting and feasting, frugality and wealth, are irrevocably interwoven.

Greek cuisine encompasses both utterly humble dishes based on little more than

vegetables and olive oil, and extravagant dishes served at Easter and Christmas, including

a whole repertoire of elaborate, rich breads baked for holidays.

A Greek meal is adamantly languorous. Greeks do not plunge straightaway into a main

course but rather begin with a deeply ingrained ritual known as the meze (the name refers

to both the concept and the foods that make it up). A meze is a nugget of food, smaller

than an American appetizer, more like a tapa in Spain. Typically many different mezedes

are offered for the express purpose of accompanying wine or ouzo, the well-loved local

anise-flavored liqueur. (The Greeks, who rarely drink without eating something, all seem

to have an opinion on which mezedes are krasomezedes,

“those that go better with

wine”

—krasi—and which are ouzomezedes,

“those that go better with ouzo.

”) There

might be bite-size golden triangles of crisp phyllo stuffed with cheese (tyropittakia) or

small, mint-and-anise-flavored lamb meatballs (keftedes). Always, there’s a rich dip like

tzatziki, a tangy jolt of thick yogurt, garlic, dill, and cucumbers; taramasalata, a creamy

swirl of carp roe, olive oil, and lemon; or my favorite, skordalia, a bracing puree of

potatoes, olive oil, wine vinegar, and, depending on the cook, enough garlic to beat aioli at

its own game. Dolmadakia, one of the most traditional mezedes (this should win over just

about every wine lover) is made from tender grape leaves, usually picked in the spring and

then rolled and stuffed with lemony, dill-scented rice.

There is a seemingly infinite number of mezedes, but the very simplest is one that no

Greek would omit: olives. Since the days when it was the cradle of Western civilization,

Greece has been renowned for the diversity and abundance of its olives, virtually all of

which are stronger in flavor and more pungent in aroma than French or Italian olives,

because of the low-tech, centuries-old ways in which they are still picked and cured.

The meze completed, Greeks may still not yet delve into the main meal, for next comes

pitta (assuming that tiny pittas weren’t served as mezedes). A pitta is not the same as the

flatish pocket bread we know as pita but rather is a savory pie with a phyllo crust. The best

known is spanakopita, stuffed with spinach, but there are also melitzanopitta—eggplant,

cheese, and walnuts flavored with ouzo and oregano and wrapped up in a phyllo crust—

and, perhaps closest to the Greek heart, hortopitta—a phyllo pie filled with wild greens,

for which women forage around their villages. Everything from dandelion greens and

sorrel to fennel and lemon balm might be included, making it difficult to put your finger

on a hortopitta’s flavor, although all Greeks instantly recognize their mother’s version.

The most sensational (and sensuous) pitta I ever had was made with homemade phyllo

dough stuffed with a creamy puree of a type of pumpkin that grows in the mountains of

northern Greece.

Phyllo, for its part, is inescapable. Today, the ultrathin dough that turns golden, crisp,

and flaky when baked is almost uniformly made commercially in Greece and sold in

supermarkets. But there are women—usually old women in remote villages—who

continue to make phyllo by hand, rolling the dough out to a seemingly impossible thinness

using broom-handle-thin rolling pins that are several feet/meters long.

The long stretches of poverty that Greeks have experienced throughout their history

make this a country where vegetables, salads, and legumes are prized, and where they

often constitute the main part of the meal. Markets are piled high with shiny eggplants,

tomatoes, cucumbers, zucchini, leeks, cauliflowers, fennel, and carrots, plus dozens of

types of wild and cultivated greens. V egetables like leeks and zucchini are often stuffed

with a lemony rice mixture emboldened by fresh mint and dill. But they are also cooked as

ragouts or baked and then laced with Greece’s one famous and nearly ubiquitous sauce,

avgolemono, a delicate, deep yellow sauce made with egg, lemon juice, and broth. When

the broth is chicken, the sauce can become the basis for kotosoupa avgolemono—chicken

soup.

Exciting and healthful, traditional Greek cuisine relies on artisanal products—mostly vegetables, fruits, and legumes.

But when meat is in order , lamb—spit-roasted—is a favorite.

As for salads, the custom of ending a meal with a refreshing green salad probably

originated in ancient Greece (sorry, France), but today, salads are more commonly served

first. None is better known than the classic Greek salad, a dish that ranges from awesome

to appalling. Done right, it has juicy, vine-ripened tomatoes, cucumber that is almost

crunchy it’s so crisp, tangy fresh feta cheese, rich briny kalamata olives, good anchovies,

snappy green peppers, pungent oregano, and a dressing of piquant, green-gold extra virgin

olive oil, with a splash of spunky red wine vinegar. Lettuce is optional.

Greece’s thousands of miles of coastline and numerous islands make it a logical haven

for seafood. Sitting in a no-frills harborfront taverna, you can grow faint smelling all the

immaculately fresh, delicious whole grilled fish being whisked out of the kitchen. Greece

has dozens upon dozens of different fish, and besides being grilled, they are baked in salt,

baked in grape leaves, baked with feta cheese, fried in olive oil, and simmered in countless

stews that recall bouillabaisse. But the seafood that truly epitomizes Greece is the world’s

most sumptuous cephalopods—octopus and squid (htapothi and kalamaria). In particular,

the delicate, oceanic flavor of salt-crusted octopus grilled over hot coals, then dressed with

lemon and olive oil, is incomparable.

The harbor and fortress on the island of Rhodes, where the rare red grape mandilaria is grown.

Asked to name the one food they most associate with Greece, many people would

name lamb, and lamb is indeed revered by the Greeks. The biggest testament to this is at

Easter, when all over Greece it is traditional to serve a whole, spit-roasted lamb. As it

cooks, the lamb is basted using rosemary branches dipped in olive oil. Not that Easter is

lamb’s fifteen minutes of fame. The meat is everywhere—in tavernas it shows up as

souvlaki, chunks of leg of lamb skewered and grilled until they’re black and crusty on the

outside and juicy within; or baked with preserved lemons in clay; in spicy stews with

mint, rice, raisins, and walnuts; and in casseroles with honey (the thyme-scented honey of

Crete is renowned), raisins, cinnamon, vinegar, and capers. But above all, there is

moussaka, ground lamb layered with eggplant, tomatoes, cinnamon, and feta, topped with

béchamel sauce, and baked in clay pots.

Finally there are sweets. Greeks may be able to give up meat for long periods of time,

but when it comes to sweets, forget it. The Greek passion for sweet things could give you

a toothache just thinking about it. When guests arrive unexpectedly, they are often served

syrupy preserves meant to be eaten with a spoon and made from quince, walnuts,

pistachios, bergamot (the citrus that flavors Earl Grey tea), figs, or oranges. There are all

manner of ultra-sweet phyllo-based pastries soaked with honey—baklava, for example—

plus thiples, fried pieces of dough dipped in honey and nuts, which are supposed to

appease any malicious spirits lingering around the household. Lest anyone feel unsatisfied,

most Greek homes also have an ample supply of cookies, tarts, and biscuits, often made

with sesame seeds, almonds, or walnuts and—what else?—honey.

WHEN YOU VISIT… GREECE

CONSISTENT WITH ITS REPUTATION as a generous and welcoming destination for

tourists, Greece offers many opportunities for visiting wine lovers. Among the best are

two programs, the Wine Roads of Northern Greece and the Wine Roads of

Peloponnese. Each of these outlines specific routes, with directions to wineries, plus

information on local food specialties, restaurants, archaeological sites, monasteries,

museums, and churches.

The Greek Wines to Know

SPARKLING

KARANIKA

BRUT | CUVÉE SPÉCIALE | AMYNDEON, MACEDONIA

100% xinomavro

Karanika, made by the husband-and-wife team of Laurens Hartman and Annette van Kampen, is not only the best

sparkling wine in Greece, but a stunning example of an artisanal sparkling wine made anywhere in the world from

grapes other than chardonnay and pinot noir. And while the red grape xinomavro may seem a very surprising choice

(it’s boldly tannic and acidic), the grape’s naturally high acidity is pitch perfect for a good sparkler. The wine—

made according to the traditional (Champagne) method—is distinctive and fresh, with a frothy, creamy mousse

that’s delicious. Amyndeon (named after the grandfather of Alexander the Great) is an area in the far northwest of

Greece, toward the border with Albania. Far inland and blocked off from the Aegean Sea by mountains, it has the

coolest climate in Greece.

WHITES

TSELEPOS

MOSCHOFILERO | MANTINIA, PELOPONNESE

100% moschofilero

Tselepos’s moschofilero has a bright, aromatic richness that seems evocative of the Peloponnese landscape itself.

With its wonderful, super-fruity lemon character and hints of spicy pepperiness, it’s a tight, refreshing wine ready to

spring open at the merest suggestion of an interesting food companion. (Grilled octopus salad? Pot stickers?)

Giannis Tselepos studied wine at the University of Dijon, in Burgundy, and worked for several Burgundian

domaines before starting his own winery in southern Greece with his wife, Amalia, in 1989.

DOMAINE GEROV ASSILIOU

MALAGOUSIA | MACEDONIA

100% malagousia

The best Greek whites carry you away with them to a sunny, wild-herb-scattered, windswept ancient landscape, and

no wine does that better than Gerovassiliou’s Malagousia, based on the ancient native grape malagousia, which was

saved from extinction in the 1980s, in part due to the efforts of V angelis Gerovassiliou. The wine opens with a rush

of exotic lemon, bergamot, pear, and mango aromas and flavors, and then takes on a delicious, resiny herb quality.

Tight, pristine, and focused, it’s mouthfilling and rich. Domaine Gerovassiliou, about 15 miles (24 kilometers)

southeast of the ancient city of Thessaloniki, in Macedonia, makes wines that span a huge creative range—from

malagousia to viognier and from syrah to limnio.

GENTILINI

ASPRO | CEPHALONIA, IONIAN ISLANDS

40% tsaoussi, 30% sauvignon blanc, 30% muscat

Aspro (the name means “white” in Greek) tastes like an island wine—it’s one big burst of freshness, as if the blue

ocean and fresh fruit were somehow melded together. With its beautiful notes of green fig (that’s the sauvignon

blanc talking) and the touches of exotic fruitiness (muscat), Aspro is the kind of wine you’d find in a seaside

taverna in Greece. As for tsaoussi, this Greek variety, with its light melon and peach flavors, is thought to have

originated on Cephalonia (Kefaloniá in Greek), the largest of the Ionian Islands. (Cephalonia was the island in the

bestselling novel Captain Corelli’ s Mandolin, by the English author Louis de Bernières.)

KTIMA BIBLIA CHORA

OVILOS | PANGEON, MACEDONIA

50% assyrtiko, 50% sémillon

Located on the slopes of Mount Pangeon, in Macedonia, the Ktima (which means “estate”) Biblia Chora was

founded by two famous Greek enologists, Claus Tsaktsarlis and V angelis Gerovassiliou. Their top wines are

stunningly creative. Ovilos, for example, combines the freshness of assyrtiko with the broad, honied character of

sémillon (who knew there was a single sémillon vine in Greece?), and the result is a sensational wine that seems

like the lost cousin of white Bordeaux. With its beautiful sweeping flavors of dried wild herbs, chamomile, roasted

nuts, sea salt, cardamom, and the classic candle wax character of sémillon, Ovilos is both rich and sophisticated.

The name Ovilos is a reference to the ancient people of the region and their refusal to pay a tax, or obulus (ancient

silver coin), in order to plant vineyards on the land. Over centuries, this refusal of an obulus came to be known as

ovilos.

HIGH PEAKS

DRY MUSCA T OF SAMOS | SAMOS, AEGEAN ISLANDS

100% muscat blanc à petits grains

For several centuries, the mountainous island of Samos, just a little over a mile (1.6 kilometers) off the coast of

Turkey, has been one of the most famous islands in the Aegean. The word samos is thought to come from the

Phoenician word for heights. Here, muscat grapes, planted in rocky, terraced vineyards rising to 2,500 feet (760

meters) in altitude, make wines that are stunningly aromatic and redolent of flowers and fruits. While some muscat

of Samos wines are sweet and fortified, High Peaks (Psilés Korfés in Greek) is a fascinating dry wine with edgy

marmalade-like bitterness plus exotic notes of lychee, ginger, and kumquat, as well as the dry, resiny shrub

character that adds a special “Mediterranean island” aroma and flavor. High Peaks is one of the top wines of the

Union of Viticultural Cooperatives of Samos.

ROSÉ

KIR-YIANNI

AKAKIES | DRY ROSÉ | AMYNDEON, MACEDONIA

100% xinomavro

The bright red/blue color of a cherry Popsicle, Kir-Yianni’s dry rosé is ravishingly fresh, with a sophisticated, slight

edge of bitterness. Think juicy strawberries splashed with Campari. Y ou can immediately imagine yourself on some

sun-drenched Greek island overlooking the cobalt blue Mediterranean and drinking this ice-cold. While Greece has

a way to go to challenge southern France as the European capital of dry rosé, this wine is poised for the mission,

and indeed, Amyndeon is the only Greek appellation approved for rosé wines. Akakies is made in part by skin

contact, and in part by the saignée or “bleeding” method, giving it a deep concentration. The name Akakies means

“acacia trees” in Greek and refers to the acacia trees with their bright pink flowers that line the road from the town

of Amyndeon to the small village of Agios Panteleimon, where the vineyards and the winery are located.

REDS

DOMAINE MERCOURI

LENTRINI, PELOPONNESE

85% refosco, 15% mavrodaphne

Domaine Mercouri’s simple but delicious red has a cocoa-y, dusty character that’s just right for a country wine.

Although refosco is rare in Greece, family-owned Domaine Mercouri is well known for pioneering the variety.

Indeed, after the estate was founded in 1864, Theodoros Mercouri brought back refosco cuttings from northern

Italy, where he had business dealings. Like refosco from the Friuli-V enezia Giulia region of Italy, this has a sleek

body and an attractive salty/spicy character. Here, it’s blended with mavrodaphne, which adds a bitter cherry lift.

KIR-YIANNI

RAMNISTA | NAOUSSA, MACEDONIA

100% xinomavro

Xinomavro is in full form in Ramnista, the Naoussa wine from Kir-Yianni. (In local dialect, ramnista means “down

there.

” It’s also the name of the area within Naoussa where the grapes for this wine were grown.) For starters,

there’s an onslaught of tannin and acid that lash around on the palate like leather straps. But with some air (actually,

a lot of air), Ramnista’s firmness begins to yield, and the wine reveals a sexy, earthy aroma and powerful flavors of

bitter cherries, dark chocolate, and espresso. Never for the faint of heart, xinomavro benefits from decanting to

open it up, and from roast lamb to mollify its impact. Yiannis Boutari, of the large Boutari wine company, founded

Kir-Yianni in 1997 as a small estate devoted to super-premium wines.

DRIOPI ESTATE

RESERVE | NEMEA, PELOPONNESE

100% agiorgitiko

If you have ever walked into an old men’s club, you know this smell: a comingling of old leather, old books, old

cigars, old coffee, even old men. It’s a very attractive aroma, and Domaine Driopi’s Nemea exudes it. But then

come the juicy, fruity, and bitter flavors—something like raspberries soaked in Campari—that give this wine its

delicious “center.

” Together, the two ideas combine to create a sophisticated red wine. Driopi is the brainchild of

Giannis Tselepos, founder of Tselopos Estate in Peloponnese. The winery was opened in 2004 and focuses solely

on agiorgitiko.

GAIA ESTATE

NEMEA, PELOPONNESE

100% agiorgitiko

GAIA Wines was founded in 1994 by Yiannis Paraskevopoulos, an agriculturalist and PhD in enology from the

University of Bordeaux, and Leon Karatsalos, also an agriculturalist. The two decided to work with indigenous

Greek varieties and establish two wineries, one to makes wines from Santorini, and the other to make Nemea wines

from agiorgitiko, in the Peloponnese. GAIA ’s agiorgitiko is more complex than most—a sleek, firm wine with

slightly spicy, wild chaparral aromas and then flavors of raspberries, violets, minerals, and sea salt that come

crashing onto the palate in a wonderful combination of severity and sensuality.

BOUTARI

GRANDE RESERVE NAOUSSA | NAOUSSA, MACEDONIA

100% xinomavro

As I’ve noted in this chapter, it isn’t easy to fall in love with xinomavro, but certain wines—such as Boutari’s

Grande Reserve Naoussa—are captivating for their sheer force and impact. (Wine drinkers who eschew the use of

the word masculine to describe wine should try this.) And there’s more than just power here. I love the wine’s

cherry/anise/salty character and the way it exudes numerous types of bitterness—from strong espresso to wild herbs

to something like the medicinal-tasting bitterness of Fernet Branca. At the table, carnivores will be happy.

THE UNITED STATES

CALIFORNIA | W ASHINGTON STATE | OREGON | NEW YORK STATE |

TEXAS | VIRGINIA

ARIZONA | MISSOURI | NEW MEXICO | PENNSYLVANIA | IDAHO | MICHIGAN | COLORADO | NEW

JERSEY

THE UNITED STATES RANKS FOURTH AMONG WINE-PRODUCING COUNTRIES WORLDWIDE.

AMERICANS DRINK AN AVERAGE OF 3 GALLONS (12 LITERS) OF WINE PER PERSON PER YEAR.

It’s often said that the United States possesses a pioneering spirit, a vestige of its

beginnings. Nowhere is that pioneering spirit more alive than in the world of wine. The

United States now ranks fourth worldwide in wine production; wine is made in every U.S.

state; and year after year, the number of new producers continues to climb—as of a recent

survey, there were nearly 8,400 wineries in the country.

Amazingly, the United States is now the world’s largest wine-consuming market,

having taken the title from France in 2010. More than 780 million gallons (29.5 million

hectoliters) of wine is drunk in the U.S. each year, but this impressive amount is, in fact,

the result of the country’s large population. By per capita consumption, the U.S. ranks not

first, but fifty-seventh. Indeed, more than 40 percent of all American adults don’t drink

alcohol in any form, principally for religious reasons. (Such abstinence has few parallels

in the western world. Germany, for example, has a 5 percent abstinence rate, France, a

little more than 6 percent, and the U.K., 12 percent.) Wine, alas, remains the passion of

only a small percentage of Americans. As of 2012, just 25 percent of adult Americans

consumed 93 percent of the wine sold in the United States.

But changes have begun to take place. Since the mid-1990s, shifting lifestyles and

mounting evidence of wine’s health benefits caused wine consumption to rise. The most

significant evidence of that shift: By 2011, for the first time in U.S. history, among people

who drank alcohol, wine slightly edged out beer as the preferred alcoholic beverage.

EXPLOSIVE GROWTH

The number of wineries in the United States has increased dramatically. This is very clear when, for the leading

wine-producing states, the number of wineries in 1960 is compared to that in 2012.

STATE 1960 2012

California 256 3,406

Washington State 15 786

Oregon 0 441

New York State 15 366

T exas 1 283

Virginia 0 250

Finally, for most wine drinkers, California is the driving force behind wine in the

United States (and indeed, more than 90 percent of all American wine is produced there).

But Oregon and Washington State now make wines of national renown, and New Y ork

State and Virginia are producing some of the best wines they ever have in their long

histories. Plus, some surprisingly good wines come from places as far-flung as Texas.

We’ll take a good look at all of these and glance at several even more unexpected

locations. For an explanation of the United States’ wine laws, see the Appendix on Wine

Laws, pages 927–928.

Gainey Vineyards’ “Evan’ s Ranch” is nestled in the cool western appellation known as the Sta. Rita Hills—a two-hour

drive along the Pacific Coast north of Los Angeles, and perfect for pinot noir and chardonnay.

THE UNITED STATES: AN OVERVIEW

The United States is a vast country—the fourth largest in the world, spread over more than

3.5 million square miles (9 million square kilometers). Given the country’s size, it comes

as little surprise that the history of viticulture in the United States is really two separate

histories, each independent of the other and centered on a separate coast.

On the East Coast, the first attempts at producing wine from European grapes occurred

in the early decades of the seventeenth century. Most ended in failure, including the

multiple efforts of third president Thomas Jefferson, who was convinced that Virginia

possessed the perfect environment for making fine wine. For Jefferson and others it was

especially frustrating to note that wild American vines grew in hearty profusion all around

the colonies. Unfortunately, the wine made from these native vines tasted pretty odd (at

least to those who had developed a European palate). And so wave after wave of

immigrants persisted in bringing European vines with them to the East Coast. And those

European vines, for their part, continued to die of various diseases and pests, including the

most virulent pest of all, and one the immigrants could not have known about—phylloxera

(see page 30).

Undeterred by such setbacks, settlers in New Y ork and Virginia soon began to

reexamine native grapes, hoping to come up with ways of making the wine from them

taste better. By crossing certain native grapes with others, they succeeded. Later these

crosses were joined by French-American hybrid grapes, created mostly by French

scientists and quickly adopted in the United States. By the time of the Civil War, the East

Coast had a well-established, if small, wine industry based primarily on native grape

varieties, crosses, and hybrids.

AMERICA THINKS BIG

The largest winery in the United States, Gallo, is also the largest winery in the world.

According to winemaker Gina Gallo, the family-owned company produces 75 million

cases a year—for comparison’s sake, this is somewhat more wine than the entire

country of Portugal produces.

The Gallo company beginnings, however, could not have been more humble. In

1933, in the aftermath of the Depression and Prohibition, Ernest and Julio Gallo, aged

twenty-four and twenty-three, respectively, decided to start a winery in the then dusty

farm town of Modesto, in California’s Central Valley. There were, they realized, a few

problems with their plan. The brothers had no experience with winemaking, no

equipment, no vineyards, no winemaker, and no money.

But by reading pamphlets on wine-making in the Modesto public library, by borrowing

equipment, and by taking out loans to buy grapes, Ernest and Julio managed to make

their first batch of wine. T oday, at any given moment, more people in the United States

are drinking a Gallo wine or one of its sixty sister brands, than any other brand. And

while most of those wines will be among Gallo’s numerous inexpensive wines, the

company also makes many fine wines, most of which come from grapes grown in

Sonoma County.

“Wine is one of the most civilized things in the world and one of the natural

things of the world that has been brought to the greatest perfection, and it

offers a greater range for enjoyment and appreciation than, possibly, any other

purely sensory thing.

”

— ERNEST HEMINGW AY,

Death in the Afternoon

VIRGINIA DARE

Thought to be the oldest branded wine in the United States (dating from circa 1835), Virginia Dare was

named after the first child born of English parents in America. The white Virginia Dare was originally

called Minnehaha; the red, Pocahontas. The wine was made from scuppernong, a variety of native grapes

that were found growing off the coast of Virginia and North Carolina. (The grapes are named after the

Scuppernong River). During Prohibition, the company that made Virginia Dare stopped making wine and

instead manufactured flavorings (which depend on alcohol during extraction). Today, Virginia Dare is a

Brooklyn, New Y ork–based flavor and extract company.

AMERICA’S WINE CULTURE—PROHIBITED

More than any other political event in the history of the United States, the nearly fourteen-year period

called Prohibition shaped America’s current drinking patterns. Prohibition quashed the budding wine

culture, and the U.S. became, almost overnight, a society that found pleasure and solace in hard liquor.

The Eighteenth Amendment’s constitutional ban on the manufacture, sale, and transport of all beverages

containing alcohol officially took effect January 16, 1920 (although various Prohibition laws were on the

books of individual states earlier), and ended December 5, 1933. It was enforced by a set of rules known

as the Volstead Act, which was named after its sponsoring Minnesota congressman, Andrew J. Volstead.

At the time the law was enacted, California had roughly the same number of wineries it would have

some seventy years later—slightly more than seven hundred. By the end of Prohibition, only 140

wineries remained. Most were destitute, having barely survived by making sacramental and kosher wine

for priests, ministers, and rabbis (a rash of new religious groups had also formed) as well as making

nonprescription medicinal wine “tonics” (blends of wine, salt, and beef broth) for the infirm and

convalescent (whose numbers had greatly increased).

The decades before Prohibition had been a golden age for wine in the United States. Founded by

ambitious German, Swiss, and Italian immigrants, the wine industry had grown rapidly, unfettered by

European laws and land rights. American wine had won awards in dozens of international competitions,

including the prestigious Paris Exhibition of 1900. A vibrant culture of wine with food—not unlike Europe’s

—was just beginning to take hold. But the Prohibitionists had been gaining power for a decade, led, in

many cases, by women empowered by their newfound right to vote. In the face of growing antagonism,

vintners remained surprisingly optimistic. Surely wine, the beverage of the Bible and Thomas Jefferson,

would be exempt, they rationalized. After all, weren’t immoral saloons and public drunkenness—and not

the moderate consumption of wine with meals—the Prohibitionists’ real targets? In what can only be

described as naïveté or denial, even after Prohibition was signed into law, many winemakers believed it

would be suspended so that the 1920 crop could be harvested. T o the architects of Prohibition, of course,

alcohol was alcohol.

Ironically, during this time grape production and home winemaking increased. A veiled provision in the

Volstead Act allowed citizens to make up to 200 gallons annually of nonintoxicating cider and fruit juices.

Nonintoxicating, however, was never actually defined. Brokers and wineries immediately began shipping

crates of grapes, grape concentrates (the most famous one, called Vine-Glo, came in eight varieties),

and even compressed grape “bricks” to home wine-makers around the country. Along with the bricks

came the convenient admonition: “Warning. Do not place this brick in a one gallon crock, add sugar and

water, cover, and let stand for seven days or else an illegal alcoholic beverage will result.

”

Meanwhile, the bootlegging of powerful high-proof spirits became a thriving industry, and the local

drinking establishment formed a new order for what and how people drank. Speakeasy was the name

given to the raucous illegal saloons that sprung up during Prohibition. The word derived from the English

underworld term “speak softly shop”

—a smuggler’s house where one could buy cheap liquor. By the end

of Prohibition, it was clear that the social experiment in forced abstinence had failed. New York at the

time had more than 32 thousand speakeasies—twice the number of saloons that had closed.

The hard drinking and notorious behavior inside speakeasies set a new tone for alcohol consumption

in the United States. A glass of cabernet with roast chicken it was not. At the same time, home

winemaking, however clandestine and resourceful, would ultimately prove detrimental to whatever

crippled wine industry was left. By the end of Prohibition, the best California vineyards had been torn out

and replanted mostly with inferior, tough-skinned varieties that would not rot in the boxcar during the long

haul back east. Over time, an affinity for fine wine was lost, supplanted by a taste for sweet, cheap,

fortified wine. Even after repeal, the desire for sweet, cheap, and strong remained. It was not until 1967

that fine table wine, rather than inexpensive sweet wine, once again led production in California.

By this time, most of the winemakers in America had no historical knowledge and no traditions to rely

on. Even Robert Mondavi and Ernest and Julio Gallo—three of the most successful vintners of the

second half of the twentieth century—had to teach themselves to make wine by reading books.

Meanwhile, out west, another wine-making culture was emerging. In 1629, two

Spanish clergymen—a Capuchin monk named Fray Antonio de Arteaga and a Franciscan

priest named Fray Garcia de San Francisco y Zúñiga—founded missions near present-day

San Antonio, Texas, and Albuquerque, New Mexico, and, in order to have wine to

celebrate the Eucharist, planted the grape listán prieto, which had been grown for a

century in Mexico as misión. Farther west, Franciscan fathers and Spanish soldiers,

moving north from the peninsula of Baja (“Lower”) California, Mexico, into Alta

(“Upper”) California in the mid-1700s, established a string of missions, each a day’s

horseback ride from the next. Each mission had its own vineyard, again based on the

Spanish grape listán prieto, rechristened as mission. These first California vines were the

descendants of vines brought to Mexico two centuries before by explorers including

Hernan Cortés. As the eighteenth century drew to a close, the Alta California missions and

their tiny vineyards stretched beyond San Francisco as far north as Sonoma. They were all

property of the Spanish crown (as was Alta California itself) until 1821, when Mexico

won its independence from Spain, and Alta California became part of Mexico. It wasn’t

until 1846 that Alta California—henceforth known simply as California—was ceded to the

United States, ultimately becoming a state in 1850.

Busted, circa 1930. A policeman uncovers a stash of liquor and wine in a New York hotel.

The next big push came with the discovery of gold, in 1849, in the Sierra Foothills. The

Gold Rush brought risk-taking, hardworking, poor, young European adventurers to

California. But when the mines dried up, thousands of European immigrants who did not

strike it rich turned to the occupations they knew: viticulture and agriculture. California at

the time was already home to a number of rugged individualists from all over the world,

who had come to America’s western frontier to seek their fortunes. Two of the most

successful were the Hungarian aristocrat Agoston Haraszthy and the Finnish sea captain

Gustave Niebaum. The dashing Haraszthy not only founded Sonoma’s Buena Vista winery

in 1857 (making it the oldest continually operating winery in the United States), but also

promoted winegrowing with such fervor that for years he was called the Father of

California Wine. In his first year at Buena Vista, Haraszthy is said to have imported 165

different varieties of grapes. And Niebaum, after founding a prosperous fur trading

company, went on, in 1879, to build one of Napa V alley’s most impressive château-style

wineries—Inglenook (today owned by film director Francis Ford Coppola).

WHERE THE VINEYARDS ARE

There are 1 million acres (404,700 hectares) of vineyards planted in the U.S.

State Approximate Acres (Hectares)

California 543,000 (219,744)

Washington State 43,800 (17,725)

New York State 37,000\* (14,973\*)

Oregon 20,400 (8,256)

T exas 3,500 (1,416)

Virginia 2,600 (1,052)

\*20,000 of these 37,000 acres (8,100 of 15,000 hectares) are planted with Concord grapes, most of

which are destined to become grape juice or jelly, not wine.

As a result of the efforts of such men as these, viticulture in northern California

experienced its first boom. By the 1880s, the West Coast had a thriving wine industry, and

the United States as a whole seemed poised to become a wine-drinking nation, much like

the countries of Europe. But it was not to be. Over the next half century, the United States

wine industry on both coasts crumbled under the cumulative devastation of phylloxera,

followed by Prohibition, followed by World War I, the Great Depression, and World War

II. Although a few wineries managed to hang on and a few others began operating, the

spirit of wine in America was substantially subdued. Wine production was modest at best.

Fairly large wineries controlled most of that production, and most of what they made—

huge blends of cheap, generic, sweet wines—tasted just about the same no matter whose

wine it was or what you bought.

But a new era was about to dawn, and it would begin in California. In the 1960s and

early 1970s, a wave of wealthy, well-educated, independent-minded men and women

came to northern California with the idealistic notion of starting wineries. In a number of

cases, these individuals—who typically knew little about grape growing—had other

lucrative careers in publishing, medicine, education, technology, banking, or law. Many

wanted a simpler life. Few knew just what kind of life they were in for.

As the newcomers—the Cakebreads, Shafers, Jordans, and Davieses (of Schramsberg)

—joined by the then established vintners, such as the Martinis, de Latours (of Beaulieu),

Mondavis, and Gallos, the California wine industry boomed for the second time.

Meanwhile, thanks to the financial support provided by an exciting newfound industry, the

enology and viticulture school of the University of California became one of the leading

institutions of its kind anywhere. The quality of California wine soared.

Older vintages of Simi are often still in exquisite condition. The winery was founded in 1876 in the town of Healdsburg

in Sonoma.

Then, in 1976, in Paris, an event occurred that would forever change the California

(and American) wine industry. In a blind tasting, renowned French judges were asked to

rank a group of the greatest Bordeaux and Burgundies, along with several unknown

California cabernet sauvignons and chardonnays. When the scores were tallied, the top-

ranked red and white were both California wines. The judges were stunned (and appalled).

The news spread around the world. The Judgment of Paris Tasting of 1976, as it became

known, proved to be a turning point for the culture of wine in the United States. By 1980,

most wine professionals around the world agreed that California wines should be

considered in the same company as the finest wines of Europe.

LABELS AND POLITICS

In 1989, the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, T obacco, and Firearms (BATF) issued a controversial regulation

requiring wine bottles to carry the warning: “(1) According to the Surgeon General, women should not

drink alcoholic beverages during pregnancy because of the risk of birth defects. (2) Consumption of

alcoholic beverages impairs your ability to drive a car or operate machinery and may cause health

problems.

” No other country except Mexico has ever mandated a warning label on wine, and the

Mexican label stipulates that abuse (as opposed to use) is not good for health.

Soon after the rule was enacted, a well-known California-based wine importer named Kermit Lynch

proposed balancing the warning with a statement about wine’s benefits. He suggested Louis Pasteur’s

declaration that wine was the most hygienic beverage known to man. The bureau ruled that the quote

was unacceptable. Lynch tried again, suggesting a biblical quote about wine’s healing properties. Again,

the bureau rejected the text.

Finally, Lynch proposed two quotes from Thomas Jefferson. The first was turned down because,

according to the BATF , Jefferson had implied that wine was healthy. The second read,

“Good wine is a

necessity of life for me.

” That quote was considered acceptable long enough for Lynch to print 50,000

labels. Upon reconsideration, however, the bureau rescinded its decision, and Lynch was out the printing

costs.

When Bill Clinton was elected president in 1992, Lynch decided to try one last time. He wrote to the

BATF arguing that the phrase “necessity of life” did not imply that wine was healthful, merely that it was

pleasurable. He also questioned whether it was the role of a governmental agency to censor Thomas

Jefferson. Lynch’s persistence paid off. Later that year the BATF finally approved Lynch’s request. All

bottles of wine imported by Kermit Lynch now carry Jefferson’s statement affirming that wine was, for

him, a “necessity of life.

”

AMERICAN VITICULTURAL AREAS

In the United States, the process of defining wine regions was begun in 1978, when the

then Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (today, the Tax and Trade Bureau) began

to draw up requirements for establishing the first American Viticultural Areas or A V As.

An A V A is defined as “a delimited grape growing region, distinguished by geographical

features, the boundaries of which have been recognized and defined.

” On United States

wine labels, such place-names as Napa V alley, Finger Lakes, Willamette V alley, and

Columbia V alley are all A V As. The first American Viticultural Area was, curiously

enough, Augusta, Missouri, approved in June 1980. The smallest A V A is Cole Ranch, in

Mendocino, California, which comprises just a quarter square mile. The largest A V A is the

Upper Mississippi River V alley. At 29,914 square miles (77,477 square kilometers; an area

larger than V ermont), it is located in parts of four states—Minnesota, Wisconsin, Illinois,

and Iowa. In total, there are now just over two hundred A V As in the United States.

At first, it might seem as though American Viticultural Areas and European appellation

systems are similar constructs. In fact, they are immensely different in critical ways. The

appellation rules in European countries do not simply define the boundaries of a region.

They also legally mandate a sweeping array of details, including which grape varieties can

be used in the wine and in what percentages; vineyard and farming practices; how long

and in what type of vessel the wine must be aged; the minimum and maximum alcohol of

the final wine; and so on. By comparison, winemakers in the United States are free to

plant whatever they want and to make wine in almost any way they want.

Such freedom has one drawback. The premise behind an A V A or an appellation is that

the wines of a given area will share certain characteristics of flavor. However, this has

been difficult to demonstrate in the U.S., where winemakers often treat wines in vastly

different ways. So in the U.S., it can be very hard to determine exactly what is

contributing to any given flavor: some characteristic of the place—or something the

winemaker did.

Many of the wine regions in the United States are beautifully rural places, where old farming families work the land

using traditional methods.

CALIFORNIA

NAPA VALLEY | SONOMA | MENDOCINO | SIERRA FOOTHILLS | NORTH

CENTRAL COAST | LIVERMORE VALLEY | PASO ROBLES AND YORK

MOUNTAIN | SOUTH CENTRAL COAST

California is wine’s Camelot—a place of awesome beauty and high ideals; a wine region

where the realm of possibility knows no bounds. The third largest state in the United

States and not quite three-fourths the size of France, California produces more than 90

percent of all wine made in the country. The state’s wine history goes back more than two

centuries to the Spanish explorers and Franciscan fathers who moved north from Mexico

and painstakingly built rustic missions, surrounding them with small vineyards. From

those tentative beginnings, the industry progressed, becoming one of the most successful

in the world.

Today, the conviction that anything is achievable is as irrepressible as ever in the

Golden State. Fine wines are being made from a steadily expanding range of grapes. At

the same time, better and better classics are being made, including—to name two strong

suits—sumptuous, elegant pinot noirs and gorgeously rich and powerful cabernet

sauvignons.

California’s nearly 3,500 wine producers range from extremely large (the family-

owned winery Gallo is the largest wine producer in the world) to tiny commercial wineries

that buy grapes and make a handful of barrels of wine in the garage. About 120 grape

varieties are grown in the state, but just 8 lead the production of fine wines. In order, they

are: chardonnay, cabernet sauvignon, zinfandel, merlot, pinot noir, pinot gris/pinot grigio,

syrah, and sauvignon blanc. The state’s wine regions cover more than 540,000 acres

(218,500 hectares), stretching more than 700 miles (1,100 kilometers) from the redwood

forests of Mendocino in the north to the sun-drenched hills of Temecula, south of Los

Angeles. The climate, soil, and geology over so vast a territory are markedly different.

Still, overall California is considered to be the New World’s Mediterranean, for the state’s

vineyards are blessed by such generous, bright sunlight that winemakers almost never

worry about whether grapes will ripen. Sunlight and ripeness mean that California wines

are all about cream, not about skim milk. The wines have a natural richness and core of

delicious fruit. They are, in the words of one vintner,

“Here-I-am wines.

”

Partimque figures rettulit antiquas, partim nova monstra creavit.

(Partly we recovered the old, familiar things, partly we created something

wondrous and new.)

— OVID,

Metamorphoses 436–7

THE QUICK SIP ON CALIFORNIA

MORE THAN 90 PERCENT of the wine made in the United States is made in

California.

THE STATE’S INCREDIBLY DIVERSE yet largely beneficent climate and geography

allow California wines to be made in a profusion of styles from dozens of different grape

varieties.

WHILE WINEMAKING in the state has spanned four centuries, California is one of the

most modern, technologically oriented wine regions in the world.

BEGINNING AND BEGINNING AGAIN

The California wine industry would seem to owe its beginnings to divine providence. As

noted previously, the Spanish explorers and missionaries who moved north from Mexico

in the mid-1700s secured their new territory—known as Alta (Upper) California—with a

string of missions, each a day’s journey from the next. Wine was needed for the Catholic

mass, not to mention for the friars and explorers themselves, who depended on it both for

nourishment (wine was an important source of calories) and as solace amid the harshness

of daily life. According to the historian Thomas Pinney, the Spanish clerical authorities

initially decided that the California missions would be perfectly well off with Mexican

wine, which could be shipped north. But accidents and difficulties along the supply route

ultimately led California’s Franciscan fathers to plant vineyards of their own.

The cuttings they brought from Mexico were of the Spanish grape listán prieto, and

were descended from those brought to Mexico some two centuries earlier by explorers

such as Hernán Cortés. In Mexico, listán prieto had become known simply as misión, and

later, in California, was spelled “mission,

” after the missions where it was planted.

As the nineteenth century dawned, California settlers began planting small vineyards of

their own, all initially based on the mission grape alone. By the 1830s, commercial

wineries had begun in Los Angeles, and a decade later, in Sonoma and Napa counties.

Expansive, 100-year-old oak trees and rolling dry hills frame many vineyards in California. Here, the syrah and viognier

vineyards of Fess Parker in the Santa Ynez V alley.

CHINESE CONTRIBUTIONS

With the Gold Rush of 1849, Chinese immigrants began to come to California in large numbers. Many

were poor laborers and farmers who, after working on the transcontinental railroad, immediately went to

work for the wealthy new winery owners in Sonoma and Napa. From the 1860s to the 1880s, Chinese

vineyard workers cleared fields, planted vineyards, built wineries, harvested grapes, and dug by hand

many of northern California’s most impressive underground cellars. What is now the golf course of Napa

Valley’s prestigious Meadowood resort was once a Chinese camp where several hundred Chinese

vineyard workers lived in barracks. A few miles away, at the grand old winery Inglenook, handwritten

payroll ledgers from the 1870s show Chinese winery workers were paid an hourly wage that was a

fraction of what their fellow Caucasian workers were paid. According to the historian Jack Chen, an

economic crisis in the late 1870s resulted in agitation against Chinese labor, and ultimately in the

Chinese Exclusion Act, passed by Congress in 1882. By 1890, hoping for better, safer conditions, most

of the Chinese in wine country had fled.

From the 1850s onward, California’s future looked bright. The Gold Rush of 1849

pumped up the local population (in the two years from 1848 to 1850, San Francisco alone

went from 800 inhabitants to 25,000) and created both a new demand for wine and a pool

of potential vintners. Better-tasting zinfandel began to supplant mission as the variety of

choice, and the wine industry shifted north, first to Sonoma and then to Napa, both valleys

being better suited to viticulture than Los Angeles. Some of the great wineries were

founded just after the Gold Rush, including Buena Vista (1857), Charles Krug (1861),

Schramsberg (1862), and Inglenook (1879). As if this boom was not enough, California’s

future soon took on international possibilities, for the mildew odium and the root-eating

insect phylloxera had already begun to destroy the vineyards of Europe.

CALIFORNIA’S BIGGEST WINE-PRODUCING REGION

The Central V alley, a vast, hot, fertile, 300-mile (480-kilometer)-long expanse extending from the

Sacramento V alley in the north to the San Joaquin V alley in the south, produces a full 60 percent of all

the agricultural products in California and crushes 75 percent of all the wine grapes. There are

numerous large growers here, wineries are huge; and the wines themselves are mostly super-inexpensive

generic blends. Such well-established firms as Gallo dominate the region.

Excitement over burgeoning markets notwithstanding, winemaking at the time was

tough business. The early California vintners had no schools, no technical help, little or no

knowledge of exactly what grape varieties they were planting (the identification of

imported grapevines was hit or miss), very little equipment (even bottles were scarce until

a bottle-making factory was founded in 1862), and few traditions on which to rely. Ever

willful, Californians forged full speed ahead until the mid-1880s, when phylloxera finally

made its way to California. By 1890, the insect had wrought havoc throughout the state,

for California’s vineyards were, at that time, planted with Vitis vinifera varieties grown on

their own roots.

But by the turn of the century, the solution—planting Vitis vinifera varieties on tolerant

American rootstock—was well known. The California industry rebuilt itself quickly.

Soon, some three hundred named grape varieties were being grown in California, and

there were nearly eight hundred wineries.

PHYLLOXERA—THE DEVASTATION RETURNS

The most painful and shocking event in the modern history of California winemaking happened in Napa

Valley in the mid-1980s. Phylloxera returned. This time around, the insect had mutated into so-called

Biotype B, and it destroyed grapevines planted on AxR1 rootstock at an astonishing clip. Vintners were

stunned and despondent. Over the next decade, every vineyard planted on AxR1 (the root-stock had

been especially prevalent in Napa Valley) had to be replanted from scratch, at a cost estimated, in the

1990s, to be $3 billion. However agonizing this was, there was a silver lining. With decades’ worth of

experience and scientific data behind them, California’s vintners changed the grape varieties they

planted (and the clones of those varieties) to be better suited to their vineyard sites. Napa Valley, in

particular, went from a region known for a score of white and red varieties to a place highly specialized in

(and internationally regarded for) superb cabernet sauvignon.

The name California was used officially in Spanish documents as early as

1542. It is believed to come from the description of a fabled island called

California in the sixteenth-century Spanish novel The Exploits of Esplandián.

To the vintners at that time, the idea that such hard-won success could vanish overnight

must have seemed unreal. But on the sixteenth day of January, in 1920, when the V olstead

Act took effect, Prohibition became the law. Almost fourteen years later, when Prohibition

finally ended, in December of 1933, only 140 wineries remained. Ironically, many had

managed to hang on by making what the very first California winemakers had—

sacramental wines.

California vintners were down but not out. It would take until the late 1960s and early

1970s for winemaking to build momentum again, but once it did, it soared ahead with

startling speed. Within a decade, California became one of the most advanced and

accomplished wine regions in the world. The enormity of the transformation is captured

by the juxtaposition of two facts. In 1966, the bestselling California wines were cheap,

sweet “Ports,

” often made primarily from carignane or Thompson seedless, both of which

were widely grown grapes at the time. Just ten years later, the state’s fine wines were so

good that French judges were left reeling when, in the now legendary Judgment of Paris

Tasting of 1976, two wines—Stag’s Leap Wine Cellars’ cabernet sauvignon and Chateau

Montelena’s chardonnay—took the first places for red and white wine, respectively,

beating out such exalted wines as Château Mouton-Rothschild, Château Haut-Brion, and

Domaine Roulot Meursault-Charmes. (Chateau Montelena, like a number of wineries in

the United States, spells château “New World” style—without the circumflex on the a.) In

the end, the French judges explained away California’s victory, saying that, for wines so

young, of course the California wines—so showy and full of fruit—would indeed be

expected to outshine their more restrained French counterparts; but the ultimate

superiority of the French wines would be clear, the judges argued—just give the French

wines time to age.

THE MOST IMPORTANT CALIFORNIA WINES

LEADING WINES

CABERNET FRANC red

CABERNET SAUVIGNON AND BORDEAUX-STYLE BLENDS red

CHARDONNAY white

MERLOT red

PINOT GRIS white

PINOT NOIR red

RHÔNE BLENDS red and white

SAUVIGNON BLANC white

SPARKLING WINES white and rosé

SYRAH red

ZINFANDEL red

WINES OF NOTE

ALBARIÑO white

BARBERA red

GRENACHE red

MUSCAT/MOSCATO white (dry and sweet)

PETITE SIRAH red

PETIT VERDOT red

PORT-STYLE WINES red (fortified; sweet)

RIESLING white (dry and sweet)

VIOGNIER white

The organizer of the original Paris tasting, British wine expert Steven Spurrier, did just

that. In 2006, thirty years after the Paris tasting, he held a reenactment of the tasting with

all the same wines, but that time, each wine was at least thirty years older. Two panels of

British, French, and American judges tasted the aged wines. This time, all of the top five

places were awarded to California wines. The 1971 Ridge Monte Bello Vineyard Cabernet

Sauvignon came in first, followed by (in second to fifth places, respectively) Stag’s Leap

Wine Cellars Cabernet Sauvignon 1973, Heitz Martha’s Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon

1970, Mayacamas Cabernet Sauvignon 1971 (a tie for third), and Clos du V al Cabernet

Sauvignon 1972.

“Age gives a wine a sense of beauty and satisfaction that it could never have

had before when it was young. In our minds, we intuit that beauty and

satisfaction as a feeling of completeness. Because so much of life is

incomplete, an old wine is remarkable and moving.

”

— W ARREN WINIARSKI,

founder of Stag’s Leap Wine Cellars

Mariah Vineyards’ zinfandel grapes, surrounded by giant redwoods, grow in Mendocino.

THE LAND, THE GRAPES, AND THE VINEYARDS

Millions of years ago, as large tectonic plates under the Pacific Ocean repeatedly grated

against and smashed into the continent of North America, California was formed. It

became a place of amazing geologic and climatic diversity. Almost every kind of climate,

land formation, vegetation, and animal life that can be found anywhere else in the United

States can be found in California. Much of the state, however, is either too bone-chillingly

cold or too torridly hot to be ideal for wine grapes. Close to the 840-mile-long (1,350-

kilometer) Pacific coastline, people often wear goose-down jackets in the summer. Eighty

miles (130 kilometers) inland, the immense, oval cradle of the Central V alley can be as

blistering as an oven. Most of the top wine regions are poised between these two extremes

—close enough to the ocean to benefit from its cooling effects, yet inland enough to

benefit from the warmth needed for ripening. Thus, the major wine regions are stacked,

one on top of the other, up and down the length of the state, from Santa Barbara County in

the south to Mendocino in the north.

THE WHITE GRAPES OF CALIFORNIA

ALBARIÑO: Plantings are small but growing. The grape makes fresh, lively whites evocative of the

famous albariños of northwest Spain.

CHARDONNAY: The most widely planted white grape; it is the source of wines that range from bland to

extraordinary. Most of the best come from cool areas and are made by winemakers who prize balance

over oak.

CHENIN BLANC: Historically used for jug wines; it is capable of making very tasty wines, although

plantings have been in decline for some time.

FRENCH COLOMBARD: Widely planted in less-than-ideal locations; it is grown at very high yields for jug

wines.

GEWÜRZTRAMINER: A very minor grape in terms of production, but some surprisingly delicious wines

come from it, causing fans to wonder why more isn’t planted.

MARSANNE: A minor grape in terms of production but it makes good, simple wines on its own and is a

leading component, with roussanne, in white Rhône-style blends.

MUSCAT CANELLI, BLACK MUSCAT , AND ORANGE MUSCAT : These are three different varieties, all of

which share the word muscat in their names, thanks to their pronounced aromas. All are used primarily to

make delightful semisweet and sweet wines. What is called muscat Canelli in California, the same as

muscat blanc à petits grains, is the most frequently used of the three and is made into dry wines as well

as sweet.

PINOT GRIS: A major grape, also known in California by its Italian name, pinot grigio. It is turned into

light quaffing wines, as well as more serious wines of substance.

RIESLING: California’s dry rieslings pale by comparison to those made in the Old World or even in New

World places like Australia and Washington State. But, more successfully, the grape is turned into a small

number of late-harvest dessert wines, some of which are very good.

ROUSSANNE: A minor grape in terms of production, but prized for its elegance and aroma; it is

sometimes blended with marsanne in white Rhône-style blends.

SAUVIGNON BLANC: A major grape; it makes simple dry wines that are snappy and citrusy, as well as

more complex wines modeled on dry white Bordeaux. It is also used to make botrytized dessert wines.

Sometimes blended with sémillon.

SÉMILLON: A very minor grape in terms of production, despite its high quality; it is used primarily for

blending with sauvignon blanc for white, Bordeaux-style dry wines and botrytized dessert wines.

VIOGNIER: The leading white Rhône variety, it makes opulent, rich, full-bodied whites, evocative of

honeysuckle and melons. Since the mid-1990s, plantings have increased.

THE RED GRAPES OF CALIFORNIA

BARBERA: Fairly widely planted for use primarily in jug wines; harvested at lower yields, it can make a

fine wine with appealing red cherry and red raspberry flavors.

CABERNET FRANC: Generally blended in small amounts with cabernet sauvignon or merlot in

California’s Bordeaux-style blends, although cabernet franc is sometimes found as a stellar wine on its

own.

CABERNET SAUVIGNON: The most important of all red grape varieties and the most widely planted, it

is capable of making powerful and complex wines that are also ageworthy. Wines made from cabernet

sauvignon were the first to put California on the international wine map.

CARIGNANE: The California spelling of the French grape carignan, it was historically used in jug wines

but is increasingly grown at lower yields to make wines that can contribute solidly to fine-wine blends.

Often blended with syrah, mourvèdre, and grenache to make Rhône-style blends.

GRENACHE: Historically planted for use primarily in jug wines, but increasingly, better clones have been

planted and grown at lower yields to make high-quality, spicy, juicy wines that are often blended with

syrah, mourvèdre, and carignane to make Rhône-style blends. Also the source of numerous delicious

rosés.

MALBEC: A minor grape currently, but it shows considerable promise and plantings are on the rise. It is

often blended with cabernet sauvignon, cabernet franc, and merlot to make Bordeaux-style blends.

MERLOT : A major grape; many solidly good red wines and occasionally some very expensive

sensational wines are made from merlot. It is used alone and blended with cabernet sauvignon.

MISSION: California’s historic grape and the one that dominated all plantings until the Gold Rush. It was

brought to California in the eighteenth century by Spanish explorers and friars via Mexico (where it was

called misión). According to DNA typing, it is the same as the Spanish grape listán prieto.

MOURVÈDRE: A minor grape in terms of production but an essential part of the blend in many top

Rhône-style wines.

PETITE SIRAH: Makes delicious, robust, highly tannic wines. DNA testing in the late 1990s confirmed

that what grape growers and wineries have traditionally called petite sirah could be one of (or even a

blend of) several different grapes, the most likely singular of which is Durif, a cross of the Rhône variety

peloursin and true syrah. Also spelled petite syrah.

PETIT VERDOT : A minor but increasingly important grape for its vivid “black/blue” flavor and impressive

structure. Like malbec, tiny amounts of petit verdot are often blended with cabernet sauvignon, cabernet

franc, and merlot to make Bordeaux-style blends.

PINOT NOIR: A major grape; it is capable of making complex, earthy, supple wines, especially when

grown in cool areas. Also used in sparkling wines.

SANGIOVESE: One of the leading Italian varieties in California, but making great wine from it remains a

challenge.

SYRAH: The most prestigious and most successful of the red Rhône varieties; it makes concentrated,

deeply colored, earthy wines that can be rich and complex. It is often blended with mourvèdre, grenache,

and carignane to make Rhône-style blends.

ZINFANDEL: The second most widely planted red grape variety, it is an enormously versatile grape, used

for everything from the sweetish pink wine known as white zinfandel to rich, jammy, robust wines that are

almost purple in color. DNA testing reveals it is Croatian in origin and the same as the grape tribidrag,

also known as crljenak kaštelanski.

But there’s more to the story. California’s fine wine regions exist only because of a

unique climatic phenomenon, itself the result of the state’s distinct topography. As the

days warm up and the heat in the interior intensifies and rises, cool winds and fog are

sucked in from the Pacific, either directly into wine valleys (as is the case in the Santa

Maria and Santa Ynez V alleys) or through gaps in the low coastal mountain ranges. The

big, yawning mouth of San Francisco Bay, for instance, acts like a funnel for cool winds

that are drawn in off the ocean and then pulled into Carneros and from there up into Napa

and Sonoma V alleys. All along the coast, a similar cycle of warming and cooling is at

work. Admittedly, this wondrous climatic yin-yang is more dramatic in some wine regions

than in others. Still, it is an essential and crucial aspect of California’s overall viticulture,

for without it the state would be full of areas too hot to produce fine wine.

Unlike most European winemakers, California winemakers have always been free to

plant whatever grape varieties they want. Accordingly, everything from albariño and

Friulano to petit verdot and carmenere is planted in California. But the top eight varieties

—in order of tons crushed: chardonnay, cabernet sauvignon, zinfandel, merlot, pinot noir,

pinot gris/pinot grigio, syrah, and sauvignon blanc—are still, by a wide margin, the

dominant grapes in the state. Y ou’ll find brief portraits of them (whites first, followed by

reds, in alphabetical order) and my recommendations for some of their best producers

starting on page 683.

Pride Winery at the top of Spring Mountain. The billowing fog in the distance sits like a blanket on the Napa V alley

2,000 feet (609 meters) below.

CHARDONNAY

With nearly 95,000 planted acres (38,400 hectares) as of 2013, chardonnay is the leading

variety in California. More than 758,000 tons (687,600 metric tons) are now harvested

every year (more than any other variety), and chardonnay alone accounts for over 16

percent of all the wine made in the state.

By all rights, chardonnay should be one of the state’s most exciting wines. Sadly, it

often isn’t. Many examples are simply clumsy wines that taste overwrought, overoaked,

and overdone. What about elegance?

HOW TO MARRY RICH

From Thanksgiving well into the winter, when much of America is dining on the sort of hearty roasts and

hot stews that could easily figure into a Dickens novel, Californians are feasting on a wholly West Coast

indulgence: huge Dungeness crabs. Accompanied by crusty loaves of sourdough bread and washed

down with glasses of cold chardonnay, Dungeness crab may well be the best use California chardonnay

is ever put to. Although there are more than four thousand species of crabs in the world (and more of

these live off the coasts of North America than anyplace else), there are only a few that serious eaters

need to know about, and the most delicious among these is arguably the Dungeness, 38 million pounds

(17 million kilograms) of which are landed, on average, every year. More than 20 percent meat by weight

and weighing about four pounds each, Dungeness crabs are prized for their pure, succulent, sweet

flavor. As a result, they’re often served cold, with nothing more than warm melted butter as a dipping

sauce plus fresh lemons. Which is where chardonnay comes in. Rich, sweet on its own, and even

sometimes a touch minerally, chardonnay’s flavors mirror a lump of butter-drenched crabmeat like no

other wine can.

Chateau Montelena, built in 1882, made one of the first California chardonnays to receive international acclaim.

In fairness, great chardonnay is not easy to make, and the sites where the grapes are

grown are critical. Generally, the best-balanced chardonnays in California come from cool

regions (the Santa Maria and Santa Ynez V alleys of the South Central Coast, for example)

or at least cool pockets within a given viticultural area, such as the coolest sites within the

Russian River V alley and the Sonoma Coast.

Style, of course, is exceedingly important with chardonnay, and California makes a

variety of styles—from full-bodied, ripe, low-acid, ultra-creamy styles evocative of crème

brûlée, to extremely buttery/toasty styles, to lean, racy, crisp styles that are made without

the influence of new oak or malolactic fermentation. The latter, now on the rise, are

commonly known as “unoaked” chardonnays, and there are stunning examples, such as

Williams Selyem’s unoaked chardonnay—a wine with flavors as pristine as a mountain

stream. The predecessor of these was Napa V alley’s iconic and highly sought after Stony

Hill, an almost Chablis-like chardonnay, sold by a private mailing list. When the first

vintage of Stony Hill chardonnay—vintage 1952—was released (at the then steep price of

$1.95), there were fewer than 200 acres (80 hectares) of chardonnay planted in the entire

state.

In the morning, looking down at the Napa V alley from Cakebread Cellars’ vineyards on Howell Mountain is like looking

down on the foam atop a cappuccino.

In terms of plant material, most of the chardonnay in California is known as clone 4,

derived from one of the original Wente selections that were brought to California from

France’s University of Montpellier by the Wente winemaking family in the early twentieth

century (see page 731). In addition, there are numerous chardonnay field selections

(groups of clones that are replicated when a new vineyard is established). Among the most

famous are the Hyde, Hudson, Robert Y oung, See, Rued, Mount Eden, and Spring

Mountain field selections. And finally, many new clones of chardonnay from Burgundy

(the so-called Dijon clones 76, 95, 96, and 548) have been planted in the past decade but

have met with mixed results in California, since such clones ripen early and lose acidity

(which is beneficial in a cool climate such as Burgundy’s, but not in warmer ones).

SOME OF THE BEST PRODUCERS OF CHARDONNAY

Au Bon Climat • Brewer-Clifton • Cakebread • Clendenen Family • Diatom • DuMOL • Edna Valley •

Fantesca • Far Niente • Franciscan • Hanzell • Heitz • J. Rochioli • Kistler • Kongsgaard • Liparita • Littorai •

Mayacamas • Melville • Mount Eden • Navarro • Newton • Paul Lato • Peay • Peter Michael • Ridge • Scribe

• Shafer • Stony Hill • Williams Selyem

PINOT GRIS

In California, the names pinot gris and pinot grigio are used interchangeably for easy-

drinking, dry white wines that fall into two camps. First are no-fuss, basic wines that are

fairly neutral in character, in the manner of most versions of Italian pinot grigio. (This is

not necessarily a bad thing; who doesn’t need the wine equivalent of a basic white T-shirt,

especially if it’s inexpensive?) And second are more flavorful versions that involve better

grapes from better sites and more-involved winemaking. So far, no one region in

California has emerged as the key location for pinot gris, and while the top examples are

tasty, the California wines made from pinot gris are rarely complex.

Sunset over the Pacific Ocean casts a feathery light over the coastal vineyards of Seaview Ranch in Sonoma County.

SOME OF THE BEST PRODUCERS OF PINOT GRIS/PINOT GRIGIO

Arbe Garbe • Chalk Hill • Etude • FEL • Gargiulo • Hahn • J Vineyards • Navarro • Palmina • Pavi • Robert

Sinskey • Swanson • Wind Gap

SAUVIGNON BLANC

Despite huge leaps in quality over the past decade, California sauvignon blancs are still

remarkably underappreciated. In the past few years, the very finest ones (Araujo, Rudd

Estate, Arietta, Illumination, Vineyard 29, and Merry Edwards, for example) have

broached the top whites of Bordeaux in sophistication and aging potential. As for the

good, well-priced, every-night sauvignon blancs, they’re racy, keen-edged, refreshing, and

arguably the best California whites for serving with food, thanks to their acidity and clean,

fresh flavors.

Why the recent quality shift in California sauvignon blanc? The answer lies in the

vineyards—and in economics. Historically, it is much more expensive to farm great

sauvignon blanc than chardonnay. Sauvignon blanc, a vigorous variety that has the

potential to grow out of control, must be carefully and continually trained, hedged, leafed,

and so on, requiring crews of workers to be sent into the vineyard scores of times to keep

the vines’ growth in balance. In the past, many growers simply weren’t willing to spend

the money it took to grow great sauvignon blanc, and as a result, many sauvignons tasted

weedy and cabbagelike. Today, that view has changed radically. All of the good and top

growers now commit far more financial resources to sauvignon blanc than at any other

time in California history. They do so because wineries will pay more for sauvignon blanc

grapes than they have in the past. And wineries are paying more because wine drinkers

have shown a new willingness to spend more on sauvignon blanc—if it’s good.

Most every-night sauvignon blancs in California are simply made in stainless-steel

tanks which, because they protect against oxygen exposure, help the sauvignon blanc

retain its beautiful, fresh green aromas. More complex, expensive sauvignon blancs are

often made by blending small lots of wine that have been made in a variety of containers

(new oak barrels, used oak barrels, concrete eggs, and stainless-steel drums, for example),

giving the final wine greater depth and character on the palate.

As for plant material, almost all of the sauvignon blanc grown in California is a single

clone (now named clone 1), thought to have been brought to California from Bordeaux.

Many of California’s top sauvignon blanc producers also grow a more aromatic clone of

sauvignon blanc called sauvignon musqué, as well as a tangy-tasting clone from the Loire

V alley called clone 530.

Finally, sauvignon blanc in California is sometimes called fumé blanc (a term coined in

the 1960s by Dry Creek Vineyard, in Sonoma’s Dry Creek V alley, and later adopted and

popularized by Robert Mondavi). As a group, California sauvignon blancs are not

stylistically different from wines labeled fumé blanc. Vintners simply use the name they

think you’ll like best and want to buy.

SOME OF THE BEST PRODUCERS OF SAUVIGNON BLANC AND WHITE

BORDEAUX-STYLE BLENDS

Araujo • Arietta • Cakebread • Crocker & Starr • Flora Springs • Frog’s Leap • Grassini • Groth • Illumination

• Kamen • Lail • Lambert Bridge • Margerum • Merry Edwards • Peter Michael • Robert Mondavi • Rochioli •

Rudd Estate • Spottswoode • Vineyard 29

CABERNET SAUVIGNON

The grape that put California on the international map as one of the world’s top wine

regions, cabernet sauvignon is arguably the state’s single most compelling variety, capable

of producing wines of enormous power and grace, as well as structure and concentration.

Since the late 1980s, the best California cabernets have gotten lusher, richer, and more

complex by the year as winemakers and viticulturists have continued to refine their

methods for growing the grape and making the wine. One of the key elements has been a

new understanding of ripeness and the necessity of letting grapes high in tannin, such as

cabernet sauvignon, hang on the vine long enough—not just for the sugar to mature, but

also for the tannin to mature. Tannin that is ripe feels softer on the palate. Thus, an ideal

California cabernet sauvignon has a significant amount of tannin so that the wine has a

majestic structure and longevity, but at the same time, the character of the tannin is ripe, so

that the wine avoids having a ragged, sandpaper-like texture, and an exceedingly drying

mouthfeel.

In California, cabernet sauvignon is often the leading component in Bordeaux-style

blends, joining merlot, cabernet franc, malbec, and/or petit verdot.

THE ORIGIN OF CALIFORNIA’S TOP CABERNETS

For more than a century, some of the most riveting and powerful cabernets throughout California have all

traced their parentage back to three clones (genetic subtypes), simply known as 07, 08, and 11. The

three were imported from Bordeaux (allegedly from Château Margaux) by Irish immigrant James

Concannon, who had founded Concannon Vineyard in the Livermore Valley, east of San Francisco, in

1883 (he was the first Irishman to own a California winery). Concannon’s agent in Bordeaux was the

legendary San Francisco lawyer-turned-grapevine-dealer Charles Wetmore, who himself had founded a

winery he called Cresta Blanca. While many grape clones died out during Prohibition, the

“Bordeaux/Concannon clones” survived the thirteen-year ban on wine thanks to Concannon’s reinvention

of itself as a supplier of altar wine to the Archbishop of San Francisco. In the 1960s, cuttings from the

three clones were brought from Concannon to the Foundation Plant Services department at the

University of California, Davis, where they were replicated as virus-free plants. A decade later, 07, 08,

and 11 vines were planted by now-famous wineries throughout the state, and subsequently became

legendary wines.

SOME OF THE BEST PRODUCERS OF CABERNET SAUVIGNON AND RED

BORDEAUX-STYLE BLENDS

ADAMVS • Araujo • Arkenstone • Baldacci BOND • Brand • Cardinale • Caymus • Chappellet • Chateau St.

Jean • Colgin • Continuum • Corison • Corra • Dalla Valle • Dana • Dancing Hares • Diamond Creek •

Dominus Estate • Dunn • Far Niente • Gandona • Gargiulo • Grace Family • Groth • Harlan • Heitz • Jordan •

Joseph Phelps • Kapcsandy • Kelly Fleming • La Jota • Lail • Laurel Glen • Lokoya • Long Meadow Ranch •

Louis Martini • Mayacamas • Melka • Mount Veeder Winery • Opus One • O’Shaughnessy • Outpost • Ovid •

Paradigm • Paul Hobbs • Peter Michael • PlumpJack • Quintessa • Reverie • Ridge • Robert Mondavi •

Rudd • Scarecrow • Schrader • Screaming Eagle • Shafer • Silverado • Silver Oak • Sloan • Spottswoode •

Spring Mountain Winery • Staglin Family • Stag’s Leap Wine Cellars • Turnbull • Venge • Vérité • Vineyard

29

In the Red Hills of Lake County, Beckstoffer Vineyards’ high-elevation cabernet sauvignon vines have a view of Snow

Mountain.

MERLOT

California merlot’s reputation has been on a seesaw for more than a decade. On the one

hand, there are serious, top-notch producers (Duckhorn, Chappellet, Shafer, and Gargiulo,

for example) who make intensely flavored, big-structured complex wines. On the other

side are oceans of innocuous, unstructured merlot that is little more than inexpensive red

wine marketed as “soft.

” These fairly bland merlots bear almost no resemblance to the top

versions.

Interestingly, in California the top merlots are almost never soft per se, many of them

having been produced from grapes grown in the mountains or on volcanic soils. These top

merlots can be, and often are, as magnificently structured and captivating as top cabernet

sauvignons.

SOME OF THE BEST PRODUCERS OF MERLOT

Beringer • Chappellet • Crocker & Starr • Duckhorn • Gargiulo • Happy Canyon • Lewis • Liparita • Markham

• Newton • Nickel & Nickel • Pahlmeyer • Paloma • Paradigm • Pride Mountain • Robert Foley • Robert

Sinskey • Shafer • Stags’ Leap Winery • Switchback Ridge • Twomey • Whitehall Lane

“When it’s good, pinot noir doesn’t knock your socks off. It slips them off—

slowly.

”

— ROBERT MONDA VI,

founder of Robert Mondavi Winery

PINOT NOIR

Pinot noir gets my vote for the California wine that has experienced the most immense and

remarkable increase in quality over the past decade. The sheer number of lusciously

textured pinots that are complex and deeply flavored but also refined and elegant is

frankly astounding, for the grape is notoriously difficult to grow and make into fine wine.

Best of all, the very top California pinot noirs possess a sense of beauty and precision—

their flavors are not muddled or diffuse, but rather, what I like to call the flavor equivalent

of the sound of a church bell in the mountains.

Amazingly, pinot noir is grown over a 500-mile (800-kilometer) coastal span in

California, from the Anderson V alley in Mendocino County, in the far north of the state, to

the Santa Ynez V alley, relatively near Los Angeles, in the south. In between are stunning

appellations for the grape—all of which are highly influenced by cold Pacific breezes and

fog. These include Sonoma Coast, Russian River V alley, Carneros, Santa Lucia Highlands,

Arroyo Grande V alley, Sta. Rita Hills, Santa Ynez V alley, and Santa Maria V alley.

With pinot noir, clones (different genetic variations) can have a huge impact on the

flavor of the wine, and within California’s top pinot noir growing areas, a vast array of

clonal material is now planted. This includes historic clones such as Pommard (sometimes

called UC Davis 4) and Wadenswil (which came to California and Oregon from Burgundy,

via Switzerland) plus an assortment of the so-called Dijon clones of pinot noir (113, 114,

115, 667, 777, and others), which were first brought to Oregon by Oregon State University

in 1987 and 1988, and planted there before being taken south to California.

SOME OF THE BEST PRODUCERS OF PINOT NOIR

Alma Rosa • Ancien • Aubert • Au Bon Climat • Belle Glos • Bien Nacido • Bonaccorsi • Brewer-Clifton •

Calera • Cambria • Capiaux • Ceja • Chamisal • Chanin • Davis Bynum • Dierberg • Domaine Carneros •

Dragonette • DuMOL • Etude • Failla • Fess Parker • Fiddlehead Cellars • Flowers • Foursight • Foxen •

Gainey • Hanzell • Hartley Ostini • Hirsch • Joseph Swan • J. Rochioli • Laetitia • Lafond • Kosta Browne •

Littorai • Marcassin • McIntyre • Melville • Patz & Hall • Paul Hobbs • Paul Lato • Peay • Pisoni • Presqu’ile •

Radio-Coteau • Rhys • ROAR • Saintsbury • Samsara • Sandhi • Sanford • Saxon Brown • Sea Smoke •

Scribe • Siduri • T alisman • T alley • Truchard • Williams Selyem • Wrath

SYRAH

The best French syrahs (from appellations like Côte-Rôtie and Hermitage) are distinctive

wines (gamy, minerally, white peppery, sometimes sweaty and bloody). Similarly, the best

Australian shirazes (from appellations like Barossa V alley and McLaren V ale) are quite

unique (peppery, eucalyptus-y, spicy, licoricey, with a rich core of fleshy fruit). But the

syrahs of California are not as easy to categorize. They can lean in either a French or an

Australian direction (and sometimes—intriguingly—in both at the same time).

Syrah is, for the most part, not a beginner’s wine. The wine is never shy or tame; it

howls out of the glass. The bloody-sweaty-gamy flavors can be something of an acquired

taste (but like all acquired tastes, once you’ve got it, you’re mad for it). And at least some

of the time, syrah shows a propensity to be what is called “reduced,

” that is, it initially

smells a little funky until you swirl the glass vigorously and work oxygen into the wine,

whereupon the wine emerges smelling just fine. Syrah lovers are used to this and it

presents no problem, but a novice can easily be caught off guard.

Syrah is often a component in California’s Rhône-style wines, where it is joined by

grenache, mourvèdre, carignane, and sometimes cinsault. Such wines are increasingly

popular in the state. Indeed, from next to nothing in the 1980s, the acreage of Rhône

varieties has grown to more than 30,000 acres (12,141 hectares) currently; and nearly two

hundred California producers belong to an organization called the Rhone Rangers.

SOME OF THE BEST PRODUCERS OF SYRAH AND RHÔNE-STYLE BLENDS

Alban • Alta Colina • Andrew Murray • Araujo • Arnot-Roberts • Bonny Doon • Calera • Colgin • Copain •

Edmunds St. John • Failla • Fess Parker • Jonata • Joseph Phelps • Kongsgaard • Landmark • Margerum •

Ojai • Paul Lato • Peay • Piedrasassi • Qupé • Radio-Coteau • Samsara • Sanguis • Sans Liege • Saxum •

Sean Thackrey • Shafer • Sine Qua Non • Stolpman • T ensley • Zaca Mesa

SYRAH IN CALIFORNIA: MYSTERIOUS BEGINNINGS

The story of how syrah came to grow in California illustrates just how labyrinthine and complex grape

introductions can be. Often records are lost (if they were kept in the first place), and memories fade. So

the history of syrah in California is spotty, but here’s what is known.

Syrah (the progeny of two fairly obscure French grapes—dureza and mondeuse blanche) emerged on

the California viticultural scene at least four main times. The first was in 1936, when University of

California at Davis professor Dr. Harold Olmo brought in cuttings from the University of Montpellier, in

southern France (there’s no record of the source of the Montpellier cuttings). This “Montpellier” syrah

remained at UC Davis until 1959, when Dr. Olmo convinced the Christian Brothers winery to plant some

in their vineyards in Napa Valley. Along with the syrah, Christian Brothers reportedly planted other

varieties in the same vineyard, including (probably) petite sirah and carignan. Although that vineyard has

long since been pulled out, Joseph Phelps Vineyards purchased some of the syrah grapes in 1974

(along with syrah cuttings). Since field blends were very common back then, it’s possible that what

Phelps purchased was not syrah alone, but a blend of several varieties. Nonetheless, Phelps

subsequently came out with the first varietally labeled syrah, vintage 1974, and using the cuttings,

planted 20 acres (8 hectares) of syrah in their vineyards.

Meanwhile, in 1970, cuttings of shiraz were brought to California from the Victoria Plant Research

Institute, in Victoria, Australia. This shiraz was what winemaker/nurseryman Doug Meador planted in his

Meador Estate within Ventana Vineyards, in Monterey County, in 1978. Some wineries subsequently got

their syrah (shiraz) cuttings from Meador. In 1973, three years after shiraz arrived from Australia, more

syrah was brought in from France, from the French national plant materials laboratory, L’Etablissement

National Technique pour l’Amélioration de la Viticulture, commonly known as ENTAV, situated at

Domaine de l’Espiguette. Thus, the “Espiguette clone” was added to the syrahs available in the state. But

a fourth clone was also available, thanks to Dr. Harold Olmo and Gary Eberle, who was then a doctoral

student at UC Davis. Olmo gave Eberle eighteen cuttings from vines growing at UC Davis, vines Olmo

had received years earlier from Max Chapoutier, part of the family that owned the famous Chapoutier

vineyards in Hermitage and Côte-Rôtie, in the northern Rhône. After enlisting Meador’s help to

propagate the cuttings, Eberle planted the “Chapoutier clone” at Estrella Vineyards (where he was the

winemaker), in Monterey. In subsequent years, Chapoutier cuttings were given to winemakers all over

the state. Finally, as you might imagine, with wine-makers driven to establish the best syrah possible in

California, there have also been many reports (always unconfirmed) that some of the state’s best syrah

can be traced back to—shhhhh—

“Samsonite clones” (something recently and illegally carried back in a

suitcase).

Old gnarly zinfandel vines—a precious part of California’ s viticultural heritage—appear especially poignant in spring

when all around them in the Napa V alley, the delicate yellow mustard flowers bloom.

ZINFANDEL

Until cabernet sauvignon superseded it in 1998, zinfandel was the most widely planted red

grape in California. Although a large percentage of these grapes are turned into slightly

sweet, mild tasting, inexpensive white zinfandels, the very best grapes are made into the

real stuff: jammy, briary, mouthwatering, bigfruited, dry red zinfandels that can be as

lovable and irresistible as puppies.

Some of the most prized vineyards in California are those planted with old zinfandel

vines. These gnarled, twisted vines have low productivity, but the grapes often make for

wines of richness and depth. Although the term old vines has no legal definition, if you see

it on a label, it generally signifies that the wine came from vineyards in continual

production for at least forty years, and occasionally more than a hundred.

The famous Bien Nacido Vineyards of Santa Maria V alley coated in morning fog.

While zinfandel still grows throughout the state (and is California’s third leading

variety, after chardonnay and cabernet sauvignon), the wine regions where it excels are

usually warm (notably the Dry Creek area of Sonoma County; the Gold Rush counties of

Amador and El Dorado; and the inland A V As within Mendocino County).

Zinfandel is both loved (by some) and criticized (by others) for its high alcohol content.

In fact, it’s hard to make zinfandel that doesn’t have a lot of alcohol. The variety is

notorious for uneven ripening on the same cluster. Thus, come late summer, while some

grapes on the cluster will be perfect, others could be raisins and still others could be hard

and unripe. If you press a cluster like this, you end up with something that tastes more like

sweet-and-sour sauce than wine. As a result, most wine-makers are forced to wait for the

unripe grapes to ripen, by which time many of the ripe grapes have begun to raisin. With a

high percentage of sugar in the bunches, the inevitable result is a wine of high alcohol.

Curiously, zinfandel is rarely blended, although starting in 1966, Ridge began making

some fantastic zinfandels that were blends of zinfandel, petite sirah, and carignane. Today,

the most monolithic and massively concentrated example of a zinfandel blend is The

Prisoner, in which zinfandel is blended with cabernet sauvignon, syrah, petite sirah, char-

bono, grenache, and others. Not for the faint of heart, The Prisoner has a cult following.

Although few people actually cellar them, the top zinfandels can age beautifully. I was

stunned by the almost Burgundy-like refinement of a 1988 Sutter Home zinfandel that I

took from my cellar and drank twenty-five years later, in 2013. And a 1995 Kunde

Century Vines zinfandel (made from vines planted in 1882!) taken from my cellar later

that same week was, at seventeen years old, achingly good.

Finally, while zinfandel is often called America’s grape (no place in Europe produces a

wine by that name), it is of European (Vitis vinifera) descent. In the late 1990s, DNA

typing revealed that zinfandel is the Croatian grape historically called tribidrag and now

called crljenak kaštelanski in Croatia. In Italy, it’s also known as primitivo, and is

traditionally grown in Apulia, the “heel” of the Italian boot. The grape found its way to the

United States in the mid-nineteenth century, when Croatia was part of the Austro-

Hungarian Empire. For reasons no one has discovered, it became known by variations of

the name zinfandel.

SOME OF THE BEST PRODUCERS OF ZINFANDEL

Alex Sotelo • A. Rafanelli • Bedrock • Brown • Carlisle • Dashe • Eberle • Green & Red • Joseph Swan •

Kunde • Martinelli • Miner Family • Outpost • Paraduxx • Ravenswood • Ridge • Rosenblum • Runquist •

Seghesio • Steele • St. Francis • Storybook Mountain • Sutter Home • T ed Bucklin • The T erraces • Turley •

Vineyard 29

NAME A GROWER

Most avid wine drinkers could name a famous California winery—maybe even a famous

California winemaker. But a grower? The men and women who grow grapes in most

U.S. states are virtually anonymous, even though their talents are the fulcrum on which

great wine hinges. Then there’s Andy Beckstoffer, without a doubt the best-known

grape grower in northern California, and a man whose farming company now owns over

5,000 acres (2,000 hectares) of prime vineyard land, from Mendocino County to Napa

Valley. Dozens of leading wineries, including Stag’s Leap Wine Cellars, Cain, Schrader,

and Paul Hobbs, use Beckstoffer grapes for their luxury wines. In 2010, to secure a

vineyard he considered exemplary, Beckstoffer paid one of the then-highest prices ever

for a vineyard in the United States—$300,000 per acre ($750,000 per hectare). By

comparison, the highest price then paid for a vineyard in Monterey County, just 150

miles (240 kilometers) south of Napa Valley, was about a tenth of the price.

SPARKLING WINES

In the 1970s and 1980s, a knowledgeable drinker easily could have distinguished

California sparkling wine from Champagne. Today, doing so would be a lot harder, for the

top California sparklers have complexity, richness, and length.

The wines, of course, do not taste like Champagne. For one thing, the soils in

California are rarely based on limestone, as are the soils in Champagne. But what the best

California sparkling wines do possess is what I call the contrapuntal tension of great

sparkling wine and Champagne—the fascinating sensory yin/yang between creaminess

and acidity that erupt on the palate simultaneously.

CALIFORNIA SPARKLERS AND FRENCH CHAMPAGNE:

COMPARISONS

The temptation to compare California sparkling wines and French Champagnes is inevitable. Here is a

look at the two types of wine, the styles in which they are produced, the aging on the yeasts each

undergoes, and a host of other factors that influence how each tastes. This chart considers only

California’s traditional (Champagne) method producers, not wines made by the Charmat (bulk) process.

LOCATION California France

WINEMAKING TECHNIQUE Champagne method GRAPES

Chardonnay, pinot noir, and

occasionally but rarely pinot

meunier

TYPES OF SPARKLING

Nonvintage, vintage, and

WINE

sometimes prestige cuvée

STYLES OF WINE DEGREES OF

SWEETNESS

Golden, blanc de blancs,

rosé, and blanc de noirs

Levels not regulated by law

but most top producers

follow the European

standards.

As many as 50 and as few

as 2 base wines

Méthode champenoise

Chardonnay, pinot noir, and pinot

meunier

Virtually all firms make nonvintage and,

in exceptional years, vintage and

prestige cuvée wines

Golden, blanc de blancs, and rosé

Extra brut: 0–6% sugar Brut: less than

1.2% sugar Extra-dry: 1.2–1.7% sugar

Sec: 1.7–3.2% sugar Demi-sec: 3.2–

5% sugar

Dozens—possibly hundreds—of base

wines

NUMBER OF WINES IN A

NONVINTAGE BLEND

NUMBER OF DIFFERENT

YEARS IN A NONVINTAGE

BLEND

Usually 1 to 4 years LENGTH OF AGING ON

YEASTS BEFORE

RELEASE

18 months to 3 years for

most nonvintage bruts; up to

10 years for prestige cuvées

YEARLY PRODUCTION Approximately 29 million

bottles

SOURCE OF GRAPES

Most firms grow a

substantial amount of their

grapes

Usually 3 to 6 years

15 months minimum for nonvintage; 3

years minimum for vintage; prestige

cuvées are aged for up to 10 years

Approximately 324 million bottles

Most firms buy the majority of their

grapes from the region’s 15,000

growers

VINEYARD CLIMATE Generally cool Extremely cool

SOILS Varies considerably,

depending on the vineyard Mainly chalky limestone and marl

The late Jack Davies, who, with his wife Jamie, began Schramsberg Vineyards in Napa V alley in 1965. In the process,

the Davieses ushered in a new era of fine sparkling wines in the U.S.

I’m talking here of California sparkling wines made by the traditional (Champagne)

method, in which the fermentation that causes the bubbles takes place inside each

individual bottle. (California does make oceans of cheap fizzies, such as André, Tott’s, and

Cook’s, which are made in large tanks by faster, cheaper methods such as the Charmat

process. These are definitely not in the same class.)

For the best California sparklers, the path to excellence was neither simple nor

straightforward. The story begins in Sonoma in the mid-1890s, when three brothers,

Czechoslovakian immigrants named Korbel, made California’s first sparkling wines. Old

ledgers indicate that the Korbels used several grapes, including chasselas, riesling,

traminer, and muscatel, and that they made their sparkling wine by the traditional

(Champagne) method.

Despite this promising beginning, the period from Prohibition to the 1960s was a kind

of Dark Ages for California sparkling wine. Most of the sparklers produced were cheap,

frothy, Charmat-method wines. Only Korbel and the Napa V alley winery Hanns Kornell

continued to make traditional-method sparklers. But with the founding of the then tiny

Schramsberg winery, in the mid-1960s, a new age for California sparkling wine dawned.

The first Schramsberg wines were made with chardonnay—a grape that was scarce in the

1960s.

Quickly outclassing every other California sparkling wine being made, Schramsberg’s

sparklers, and the emerging fine wines of California in general, did not go unnoticed by

the Champenois themselves. Not only were certain parts of California well suited to

growing chardonnay and pinot noir, but land in California—unlike land in Champagne—

was both available and, at that time, affordable. (Champagne is a delimited area. Virtually

all of the best land has already been planted.) In 1973, the famous Champagne house Moët

& Chandon purchased 200 acres (80 hectares) in Napa V alley and, with an initial $2.5-

million investment, established Domaine Chandon. Over the next fifteen years, some half

dozen of the top Champagne firms, plus the Spanish sparkling wine giants Freixenet and

Codorníu, would set up joint ventures or subsidiaries in California. Today, most of the

wineries in California that make traditional method sparkling wine also specialize in still

(non-bubbly) pinot noir and/or chardonnay.

Finally, a few other facts. California’s largely benevolent climate allows vintage

sparkling wines to be made every year (unlike in Champagne, where vintage wines are

made only three or four times per decade). However, as is true in Champagne, sparkling

wine producers in California make several styles of bubbly, including blanc de blancs

made entirely from chardonnay grapes, and/or blanc de noirs made entirely from the red

grape pinot noir. (Interestingly blanc de noirs are rarely, if ever, made in France, where, if

you want a wine with a fuller-bodied character, you drink rosé Champagne.) And lastly,

most California sparkling wine firms also make a top-of-the-line sparkling wine that

would be equivalent to a prestige cuvée in Champagne. These may be aged for up to ten

years on the yeast lees before being disgorged. Among the best are Roederer Estate’s

L’Ermitage, Schramsberg’s J. Schram, and Domaine Carneros’s Le Rêve.

SOME OF THE BEST CALIFORNIA SPARKLING WINE HOUSES

Domaine Carneros • Domaine Chandon • Gloria Ferrer • Iron Horse • J Vineyards • Mumm Napa Valley •

Roederer Estate • Schramsberg

DESSERT AND PORT-STYLE WINES

California’s dessert wines and Port-style wines are like gems kept hidden in the jewelry

box. Quietly, over the past few decades, while seemingly few people were taking notice,

some have become simply extraordinary.

Dessert wines in California generally fall into one of three broad groups:

BOTRYTIZED WINES made from sauvignon blanc and sémillon, and modeled on Sauternes

LATE-HARVEST WINES, usually made from riesling

WINES FROM THE MUSCAT FAMILY of grapes, modeled on southern French and Italian dessert

wines

Sauternes-style wines are rare and very difficult to make in California, since the state

tends to be either too dry and hot or too cool for the perfect formation of noble rot,

Botrytis cinerea. However, in 1957, Beringer’s famous winemaker Myron Nightingale

made California’s first botrytis-induced sweet wine by inoculating already harvested

grapes with botrytis spores in a laboratory. Because Beringer Vineyards’ “Nightingale” is

still handcrafted in much the way Nightingale himself made the first such wine, only sixty

to three hundred cases of half-bottles are made each year. Even so, that’s more than many

other botrytized dessert wines in California.

Then there’s Dolce, considered by many to be California’s most hedonistic wine, made

from sémillon and sauvignon blanc grapes botrytized as they grow in the vineyard (this

was once considered impossible in California—or at least not reliably possible). First

made in 1985 by the same owners as Far Niente, Dolce comes from a low-lying, sheltered

vineyard in Coombsville, in the southeastern corner of Napa V alley, where fog and

humidity collect each morning. The grapes are harvested some two months after most

Napa V alley grapes have been made into wine, and they are harvested painstakingly over

six weeks by specifically trained workers who go into the vineyard over and over again.

Using special shears, all berries that are not botrytized are cut away. Sometimes a cluster

will have just one single berry deemed worth keeping. Needless to say, the wine deserves

to be rather expensive—in 2013, the half-bottle cost $85.

As for riesling, California’s late-harvest versions are generally made by letting the

grapes hang for an extended period of time on the vine and then stopping the wine’s

fermentation early, thereby leaving some natural sweetness in the wine. Great late-harvest

rieslings are, like botrytized wines, rare in California and exceptionally hard to make

(many turn out to be dull, sweetish wines without verve, grip, lushness, or complexity).

One of the best has been a knockout for two decades—Chateau St. Jean’s Special Select

Late Harvest Riesling, from the renowned Belle Terre Vineyard, in Alexander V alley.

Sweet wines from southern France and Italy are the inspiration for many easy-to-love,

dazzlingly aromatic California dessert wines made from muscat grapes. A large, ancient

group of grape varieties (only some of which are genetically related), wines with the word

muscat in their names were spread throughout the Mediterranean by the Phoenicians (the

present-day Lebanese) and Greeks. In California, the leading muscat varieties are muscat

of Alexandria, muscat blanc à petits grains (also known as muscat blanc and muscat

Canelli), orange muscat (muscat fleur d’oranger), and black muscat (muscat of Hamburg).

Muscat wines are usually not as syrupy or voluptuous as other dessert wines, but instead

are riotously fresh and full of racy mandarin orange, melon, and apricot flavors. They are

some of the most charming (if underappreciated) sweet wines from the state. The leading

California wineries for world-class sweet muscats are Navarro (in Anderson V alley),

whose Cluster Select Late Harvest Muscat Blanc is sensational and refined; and Quady (in

the Central V alley), which specializes only in dessert wines. In 1980, Quady produced a

sweet orange muscat called Essensia, and then, in 1983, a black muscat called Elysium.

Each is an epiphany of pleasure.

California Port-style wines are a mixed bag. In the past, many were simply inexpensive

syrupy-sweet wines made from rather poor-quality, overripe grapes. While such “Ports”

still exist, the best California Port-style wines are made by a handful of wineries that

generally use traditional Portuguese grape varieties, such as touriga nacional, tinta cão,

and tinta roriz. There are also, however, some excellent examples made from zinfandel

and petite sirah. Again, Quady is a leader, with a magnificently rich, citrusy, mocha-y

Port-style wine called—playfully—Starboard. (In 2006, out of respect for European place

names, the U.S. signed an agreement with the European Community on the use of semi-

generic foreign geographic names on alcoholic beverages. The result is that any U.S. wine

created since 2006 cannot legally use the word Port on its label. However, U.S. wines that

were called Port before 2006 can still use the term, provided that their brand name has not

changed and the proprietary name of the wine has not changed. Thus, Prager Royal Escort

Port is legally compliant, since this wine predates 2006.)

“The simple physical act of opening a bottle of wine has brought more

happiness to the human race than all the collective governments in the history

of the earth. Even organized religions are mere spiritual mousetraps compared

to the ‘pop’ of a cork, the delicious squeak when you loosen it from the firm

grip of the corkscrew. And then the grandeur of the burble as we fill the glass,

the very same sound we hear at the source, the wombs of all the rivers on

earth.

”

— JIM HARRISON,

American poet and writer, from the essay “Wine”

THE VINEYARDS AND MAJOR WINE REGIONS

From a scientific standpoint, California’s vineyards are immensely varied, from computer-

enhanced vineyards that incorporate NASA technology to scraggly vineyards dotted with

hundred-year-old, untrellised zinfandel vines standing like solitary Rumpelstiltskins, their

thick trunks bent and long tresses of leaves sprouting from their heads.

What follows is a look at the major wine regions of California. (As of 2013, California

had 120 American Viticultural Areas, ranging from tiny to large.) First we’ll explore the

familiar regions of Napa V alley, Sonoma County, and Carneros, the region that straddles

them. Then we’ll travel more or less north to south, beginning with Mendocino and Lake

counties; followed by the Sierra Foothills; followed by the North Central Coast (composed

of the Santa Cruz Mountains, Monterey, Chalone, Mt. Harlan, Carmel V alley, and the

Santa Lucia Highlands). Then it’s on to Livermore V alley, Paso Robles, and Y ork

Mountain, as well as Edna V alley and Arroyo Grande. And, finally, there’s the magnificent

South Central Coast wine regions of Santa Barbara County, Santa Ynez V alley, Santa

Maria V alley, Sta. Rita Hills, Ballard Canyon, and the fittingly named Happy Canyon.

NAPA V ALLEY

About 48 miles (77 kilometers) north of San Francisco, Napa V alley is California’s best-

known and most renowned wine region, even though it is responsible for an astoundingly

small amount of all the wine produced in the state—just 4 percent. Its fame (and infamy)

is derived from an eventful commingling of history and humanity. For almost a century

and a half, the valley has attracted a majority of the most ambitious, talented, driven, and

outspoken vintners in the United States.

Where else but in the Napa V alley would a palatial wine estate (Inglenook) be built by

an adventurous Finnish sea captain and fur trader named Gustave Niebaum, then sold,

more than a hundred years later, to a superstar film director named Francis Ford Coppola?

Where else but in the Napa V alley would an Olympian monolith called Opus One be built

by two of history’s most iconic vintners, Robert Mondavi and Baron Philippe de

Rothschild? Where else but in the Napa V alley would the first California wine to cost

$100 a bottle be made (in 1989), not to mention the first to cost $200 (in 1994), not to

mention the first wine that cost more than $300 (in 2006)? The first two wines were

Diamond Creek Cabernet Sauvignon Lake Vineyard 1987 and 1992, respectively; the third

wine, the 2004 Harlan Estate.

Critics say Napa V alley has an ego. But what it really has is a gargantuan appetite for

life and success. Y ou can taste it in the wines. While Napa V alley is not the only California

region to make great wine, it consistently makes a good share of the most polished, classy,

and complex wines in the state—especially the cabernet sauvignons.

Named as California’s first A V A in 1981, the valley proper is small and neatly framed.

Stretching in a banana shape from northwest to southeast, it is 30 miles (48 kilometers)

long (similar to the length of Burgundy’s Côte d’Or) and ranges between just 1 and 5

miles (1.6 and 8 kilometers) wide. It begins at a bay (San Pablo) and ends at an extinct

volcano (Mount St. Helena). On each side, the valley is flanked by mountain ranges—the

V aca Mountains on the eastern side; the Mayacamas Mountains on the western side. The

general climate is quite Mediterranean, with dry, warm summers and wet, cool winters.

Four thousand years ago, Napa V alley was home to many thousands of Wappo

Indians, although there is almost no trace of a Native American population in

the valley today. The word napa comes from the Wappo dialect and means

“plenty.

”

Although, to the untrained eye, the valley looks geographically uniform, nothing could

be further from the truth. The volcanic eruptions that occurred here millions of years ago

—which caused the valley floor to rise and then collapse; plus the quashing together of the

North American and Pacific plates; plus the sedimentary soils that have been deposited

here, conveyer belt fashion, from what was once the Pacific Ocean floor; plus the cyclical

flooding and receding of the Napa River—have, taken together, left the valley with a huge

diversity of soils. Soil scientists categorize all of the world’s soils into twelve orders, for

example, and Napa V alley has six of them—an astounding array for such a small place.

Within those orders are almost three dozen different soil series and over a hundred soil

variations. The topography itself is also irregular, with numerous benches, canyons, and

what geologists call “toes” that have formed as a result of landslides off the mountains,

plus vast alluvial fans of soils conveyed by water flowing down from the tops of

mountains to the valley below. This geologic potpourri, coupled with highly independent

winemaking styles (there are more than four hundred wineries in Napa V alley, and most

are small and family owned), means that wine estates next door to one another often make

wines that taste totally different.

The valley’s geologic diversity is underscored by its variable climate. In summer, a

person standing at the cool southern end, which is open to San Pablo Bay, might be

pulling on a sweater at the very same minute someone in the north, near Calistoga, might

be stripping down to a bathing suit. In the early morning, the vineyards at 2,600 feet (800

meters), in the mountains, may be swathed in warm sunshine, while vineyards at 200 feet

(60 meters), near the valley floor, are sitting under a cold, gray layer of fog. In addition,

vineyards on the eastern hills, along the V aca mountain range, receive copious amounts of

late afternoon heat and light, as the sun sets beyond the Pacific. Thus, grapes on this side

of the valley (especially in Howell Mountain, the Stags Leap District, and the eastern sides

of Oakville and Rutherford) can get very ripe, and the wines can be very full-bodied. By

contrast, wineries on the western side of the valley, along the Mayacamas Mountains (Mt.

V eeder, Spring Mountain, St. Helena, and the western sides of Oakville and Rutherford),

get the cooler morning sun and generally make balanced wines that aren’t as mammoth.

North/south, east/west, high altitude/low altitude, the factors that effect a given vineyard’s

mesoclimate are almost holographic.

What virtually all of the valley shares (thanks to the nearby Pacific Ocean) is a huge

diurnal temperature fluctuation. Nighttime temperatures can be 30° or even 40°F (17° to

22°C) lower than daytime temperatures. This allows the vines to grow according to a

nearly ideal rhythm of nighttime rest and daytime photosynthesis. In the best vintages, the

result are grapes that are ripe, but contain the acidity needed for pure flavors and a sense

of elegance.

Napa V alley vineyard land is thought to be the most expensive agricultural land in the

United States. As of 2013, a planted vineyard in a prime location would cost in the

neighborhood of $350,000 or more per acre ($875,000 per hectare), making the valley the

most expensive agricultural land of any type in the United States. Vineyards cover just

over 43,500 acres (17,600 hectares) of the 485,000 acres (196,300 hectares) that constitute

the valley.

THE LEGENDARY ROBERT MONDA VI

Napa Valley’s reputation as the premier wine region in the United States is due not only to the quality of

its wines, but also to the relentless will of its vintners, including the late Robert Mondavi. Born in Virginia,

Minnesota, in 1913, Mondavi grew up with hardworking Italian immigrant parents and got into Stanford

University during the Great Depression. From owning a fruit packing business during Prohibition, the

family eventually went on to become winery owners by purchasing Napa Valley’s Charles Krug winery in

1943. Robert was in charge of the business and marketing; his older brother, Peter, was in charge of

winemaking. But after his brother fired him during a severe quarrel in 1965, Robert Mondavi moved six

miles south to the hamlet of Oakville and, at the age of fifty-three, started his own winery, naming the

venture after himself. Despite years of subsequent lawsuits with his brother, and what appeared to be

endless family infighting, Mondavi succeeded in making the Robert Mondavi Winery an international

emblem of a top California estate. Throughout, Mondavi was a tireless crusader for California’s place in

the wine empyrean. His credo—that California wines belonged in the company of the greatest wines of

the world—became a refrain he repeated endlessly to anyone who would listen. Countless did, and

Mondavi rose to international fame, eventually forming some of the wine world’s first global joint

ventures. (Mondavi reportedly struck the deal with Baron Philippe de Rothschild, of Château Mouton-

Rothschild, in the baron’s bedroom, with the baron still in his pajamas.) In his later years, Mondavi, with

his wife, Margrit, brought wine together with art, music, and cuisine as an exploration of culture and living

well. In 2004, amidst fractious disagreements among Mondavi’s children and among the winery’s

investors, Constellation Brands was able to launch a takeover, and eventually acquired the Robert

Mondavi Winery for $1.36 billion in cash, and assumed the winery’s debt.

Although Napa V alley is planted with numerous varieties, no grape captures the

success of the valley better than cabernet sauvignon. Chardonnay, sauvignon blanc,

merlot, and zinfandel can all become very good, and occasionally brilliant, wines in Napa

V alley, but the top cabernets are phenomenal. No other wine region in the country makes

as many stunningly rich and complex cabernets year after year.

Some of these top-notch cabernet sauvignons are made from 100 percent cabernet. But

others have small amounts of merlot, cabernet franc, petit verdot, and/or malbec—the so-

called Bordeaux varieties—blended in. Some of these wines are given a proprietary name

if the percentage of cabernet is less than 75 percent. (In 1974, Joseph Phelps was the first

to release a proprietarily named “Bordeaux blend”

—Insignia.) Today, even more

commonly, top estates in Napa V alley simply refer to the wine by the estate name. So, for

example, Harlan Estate’s cabernet sauvignon-based wine is labeled simply Harlan Estate;

Dalle V alle is just Dalla V alle, and so on. This, of course, truly mirrors Bordeaux, where

the top wine of Château Margaux is labeled simply Château Margaux.

NAPA VALLEY AVAS

In addition to the American Viticultural Area Napa V alley, there are sixteen smaller A V As

within the valley. Some of these A V As are in the mountains, others, on the valley floor and

lower hillsides. (A word about the so-called “valley floor.

” The term is useful because it

distinguishes these vineyards from mountain vineyards. Y et Napa’s “V alley floor” isn’t

really the floor of the valley, but rather undulating benches of land that, in a series of

steps, are a few hundred feet higher than the small Napa River that flows essentially

north/south through the valley.)

AFTER THE SIXTIES: NOTHING W AS EVER THE

SAME

1966. The Beatles had just released Yellow Submarine. The first episode of Star Trek

aired. Doctor Zhivago played in movie theaters. The most sought-after Napa Valley

wine was Inglenook Cask Cabernet Sauvignon; at $5 a bottle, it was the most

expensive wine in the state. There were one or two women winemakers in Napa Valley,

but they were self-taught; no viticultural school in the U.S. had yet enrolled women. And

it was the first year the Napa County Agricultural Commission reported the exact

acreage of grapes grown in the valley. Astoundingly, and even though Napa Valley had

only about a third as much vineyard acreage as it has today, eighty different varieties of

grapes were grown (forty-two reds and thirty-eight whites). In 1966, the valley’s most

planted reds (in order of prominence) were petite sirah, zinfandel, gamay, carignane,

and cabernet sauvignon. The most planted whites: French colombard, sauvignon vert,

sauvignon blanc, golden chasselas, and the unfortunately named white grape burger.

But as popular a crop as grapes were, the leading agricultural industry in Napa Valley in

1966 was livestock (especially cattle), and not far behind were prunes (public schools

started late so that Napa Valley children like Michael Mondavi could help pick prunes)

and dairy (more than 4.5 million dozen Napa Valley eggs were sold that year). It would

be six more years before Napa Valley’s main town, St. Helena, got its first stoplight.

In terms of the prestige of their wines, the most important of the mountain A V As are:

Howell Mountain, Diamond Mountain District, Spring Mountain District, and Mount

V eeder. The most important valley floor/lower hillside A V As are Stags Leap District,

Oakville, Rutherford, and St. Helena. The A V A Carneros, at the southern tip of the valley,

straddles both Napa and Sonoma counties, and is covered on page 705.

Napa’s mountain A V As, and the vineyards that comprise them, are highly prized, for

the wines from them can be superbly concentrated and structured, yet elegant at the same

time. At up to 2,400 feet (730 meters) in elevation, the mountains provide an environment

where grapes ripen slowly, yet because these vineyards are above the fog line, the grapes

are also drenched in luminosity for long hours each day. Additionally, mountain soils are

nearly always shallow and infertile, leading to smaller vines that produce tiny grapes. If

the grapes are red, their small size means there’s a larger skin-to-juice ratio, leading to

mountain wines with impressive tannic structures.

Examples of high-quality Napa mountain wines are numerous, and some wineries make

several different wines from the grapes of different mountains. Among those not to be

missed:

FROM HOWELL MOUNTAIN: the merlots from Beringer and the cabernet sauvignons from

Dunn, O’Shaughnessy, and Ladera, and Adam’s

FROM MOUNT VEEDER: the cabernets from Mayacamas, O’Shaughnessy, and Mount V eeder

Winery; the syrahs from Lagier Meredith; the sauvignon blanc from Rudd

FROM DIAMOND MOUNTAIN DISTRICT : the cabernets from Diamond Creek

FROM SPRING MOUNTAIN DISTRICT : the zinfandels from Ridge’s Y ork Creek; the cabernets

from Cain, Pride, Newton, Lokoya, and Spring Mountain Vineyard; and one of the most

legendary of all California chardonnays, Stony Hill’s

Napa’s valley floor and lower hillside A V As are some of the oldest A V As in the valley.

Perhaps the two best known are Oakville and Rutherford, which, geologically speaking,

are either primarily large alluvial fans (on the west side) or volcanic landslide slippages

(on the east side). The areas sit side by side and spread out north and south from the towns

of Rutherford and Oakville, smack in the heart of the valley. Some of the most famous and

historic of all Napa wineries are found here, including, in Oakville: Far Niente, Harlan,

Screaming Eagle, Rudd, Gargiulo, Groth, Dalle V alle, Opus One, Ovid, Silver Oak, and

Robert Mondavi Winery. And in Rutherford: Caymus, Dana Estate, Quintessa, Staglin,

Grgich Hills, Scarecrow, Cakebread Cellars, and the two old grande dames: Beaulieu

Vineyard (BV) and Inglenook.

Stags Leap District, a small pocket of land on the lower hillsides in the southeast corner

of the valley, is about the same size as New Y ork City’s Central Park. The district is

named for what looms above it—majestic, sun-dappled outcroppings of tortured rock,

over which, as fable has it, stags have leapt to escape hunters. The vineyards have a more

auspicious existence, sprawled as they are on the rocky foothills below. The district is

known mainly for cabernet sauvignons from such leading wineries as Shafer, Stag’s Leap

Wine Cellars, Stags’ Leap Winery, Silverado Vineyards, Chimney Rock, and Clos du V al.

Finally, among the valley floor/lower hillside appellations is St. Helena, ringing the

small town of St. Helena, the heartbeat of the valley proper. St. Helena is where the valley

constricts, like the center of an hourglass. Indeed, at the tightest spot, it’s no more than a

mile (1.6 kilometers) from the west side to the east side. The constriction traps warmth,

ensuring even and full ripeness. Most St. Helena vineyards hug the western foothills and

many are sited on alluvial fans. Again, cabernet sauvignon reigns here, especially from top

wineries such as Corison, Spotteswoode, Crocker & Starr, Newton, and Vineyard 29.

THE TOP NAPA VALLEY CABERNET SAUVIGNONS

The quality of Napa Valley cabernet sauvignon is very high across the board, but following are the estates

that I would put in the highest ranks.

Araujo • BOND\* • Colgin • Corison • Dalla Valle • Diamond Creek • Gargiulo • Grace Family • Groth • Harlan

Estate • Heitz • O’Shaughnessy • Ovid • Quintessa • Rudd Estate • Scarecrow • Screaming Eagle • Shafer

\* BOND is made up of five separate estates: St. Eden, Melbury, Quella, Vecina, and Pluribus

WHEN YOU VISIT… NAPA V ALLEY

NAPA VALLEY WINERIES love visitors, the tasting room staffs are well trained, and it’s

easy to get around, since there are just two main roads—Highway 29 and the Silverado

Trail. Make reservations well ahead.

CULTURAL EVENTS abound here; many tastings involve food pairings; and the usually

well-earned “detoxifying” massages at the many fantastic spas are obligatory.

RESTAURANTS ARE NUMEROUS and excellent, including the restaurant many

consider the single best in the United States: The French Laundry, in the little hamlet of

Yountville.

SUMMERTIME IN GENERAL, as well as harvest time in September and October,

mean traffic lines on these small roads. On the other hand, the valley is beautiful and a

joy to visit in the winter and spring, when the number of visitors is far smaller.

The Napa Valley Wines to Know

SPARKLING WINE

SCHRAMSBERG VINEYARDS

J. SCHRAM | PRESTIGE CUVÉE, VINTAGE BRUT | NORTH COAST

Approximately 80% chardonnay, 20% pinot noir

J. Schram is the prestige cuvée (top of the line) of Napa’s historic Schramsberg winery, credited with initiating, in

the mid-1960s, California’s modern era of sophisticated sparkling wines made by the traditional (Champagne)

method. While just under half of the grapes for this wine are sourced in Napa V alley, I’ve included Schramsberg

here because this is where the estate is, and because the wine is not to be missed. This is California’s answer to

Krug Champagne—a sparkler that is caramelly-rich, toasty, creamy, and nothing short of voluptuous on the palate.

The wine is named for Jacob Schram who, in 1862, established Schramsberg, then the first winery on the hillsides

of the Napa V alley.

WHITES

STONY HILL

CHARDONNAY | NAPA VALLEY

100% chardonnay

From Stony Hill’s volcanic hillside vineyards comes Napa V alley’s most historic chardonnay. When it was first

made, by novice wine-makers Fred and Eleanor McCrea in the mid-1940s, there were fewer than 200 acres (80

hectares) of chardonnay planted in the entire state. (The first vintage of Stony Hill chardonnay—the 1952—was

released at the then significant price of $1.95.) Their wine’s reputation rests on its absolutely amazing ability to age.

Stories abound of twenty-five-and thirty-year-old Stony Hill chardonnays that still tasted gorgeously bright thanks

to the wine’s exquisite acidity. Oblivious to fashion, Stony Hill continues to make its chardonnay not in an oaky,

buttery style, but rather in a leaner, purer one.

ROBERT MONDA VI

FUMÉ BLANC | RESERVE | TO KALON VINEYARD | NAPA VALLEY

100% sauvignon blanc

The To Kalon (the name means “the highest beauty” in Greek) vineyard sits right behind the Robert Mondavi

Winery, up on a bench of land at the foothills of the Mayacamas Mountains. Within the vineyard is one of the oldest

plots of sauvignon blanc in Napa V alley, the source of this unusually distinctive, exotic, exquisite wine. Unlike

most sauvignon blancs, it doesn’t taste vividly “green.

” Instead, it’s fresh and stony—like the air in a dry creek bed

after it rains. The late Robert Mondavi was one of the first vintners to use the name fumé blanc (now a synonym for

sauvignon blanc), which he felt sounded more sophisticated than sauvignon blanc and was reminiscent of the Loire

V alley village Pouilly-Fumé, where sauvignon blanc is the leading grape.

VINEYARD 29

SAUVIGNON BLANC | NAPA VALLEY

100% sauvignon blanc

Just a tiny amount of Vineyard 29’s sauvignon blanc is made, but it’s hugely significant, for it reveals a whole new

side of what is possible in the Napa V alley—namely, to make a complex, luxurious, age-worthy Napa white on par

with the great, famous white Bordeaux. The wine is a showstopper, with the faintest hints of meadows and

hedgerows, and a distinct earthiness and minerality. But more than anything, it’s the texture that gets you—a

yinyang between creaminess and spikiness… as if you were getting a Swedish and a shiatsu massage at the same

time. In California, fascinating sauvignon blancs like this don’t usually happen by themselves, and indeed, the

winery uses innovative, painstaking techniques like chilling the harvested whole clusters of grapes to just above

freezing for several days to soften the skins, and then fermenting the wine in three vessels—concrete eggs,

stainless-steel drums, and new French oak barrels that have been bent into shape by immersion in hot water rather

than by toasting, since toasting would leave too much of a toasty impact on the wine. As with Château Haut-Brion

Blanc, I could drink this wine all day (if only such were possible).

REDS

KONGSGAARD

SYRAH | HUDSON VINEYARD | NAPA VALLEY

100% syrah

John Kongsgaard is a legendary winemaker in Napa V alley—known for making incredibly distinctive wines packed

with personality (and for blasting classical music so loud that neighbors miles away can hear what he’s listening to).

Kongsgaard (formerly the wine-maker for Newton Vineyards) started his own winery in 1996, and among all of his

immaculate wines, I may love this one the best. For starters, it’s like smelling Christmas—pine boughs, mulling

spices, cranberries, a wood fire. But then come the flavors—layers and layers of fruit, black pepper, black olives,

and violet-like flowers, and a salty minerality that makes syrah so compelling. Needless to say perhaps, but roast

lamb is in order.

SHAFER

HILLSIDE SELECT | STAGS LEAP DISTRICT

100% cabernet sauvignon

Made from blueberry-sized grapes grown on hillside outcroppings of scrappy rock in the tiny Stags Leap District,

Shafer’s Hillside is one of the most powerful, lush cabernets in California. For all its gravitas and massiveness, the

wine is impeccably balanced and so sensual it’s impossible to resist. The texture is like cashmere; the flavors and

aromas a complex interplay of cassis, dark chocolate, worn leather, sweet tobacco, bitter espresso, and black

licorice. I have tasted every vintage of Hillside back to the first one, made in 1983, and remain thoroughly

impressed year by year.

OVID

NAPA V ALLEY

Approximately 60% cabernet sauvignon, 25% cabernet franc, plus merlot and petit verdot

Ovid (the name of both the winery and the wine) takes its name from the Roman poet Ovid (43 B.C. to C. A.D. 18),

who wrote about the enigma of metamorphosis (everything changes, yet everything stays the same… an apt way of

thinking about a vineyard). These vineyards sit high on a red volcanic rock promontory, a few hundred feet above

Oakville, on the warm, luminous eastern side of the valley. Y ou can taste the hardness of the rock and the energy of

the sun in the wine. Scrumptious and rich, this is a cabernet blend with vivid, rapier-like intensity, its concentrated

cranberry/chocolate/spice fruitiness pierced by a sense of minerals and licorice. Drinking this wine always reminds

me of hand developing a photograph in the old days, and watching with wonder as the picture radiates into focus.

O’SHAUGHNESSY

CABERNET SAUVIGNON | HOWELL MOUNTAIN

Approximately 85% cabernet sauvignon, 5% merlot, 5% St. Macaire, 3% malbec, and 2% petit verdot

O’Shaughnessy is a great example of dozens of tiny production cabernets made by family-owned wineries often

located high up in the mountains, a 30-minute drive, but a world away, from the valley’s main road—Highway 29.

(In the case of O’Shaughnessy, even a GPS won’t help you find it.) This is black bear, mountain lion, rattlesnake,

and hawk territory, and the wines often smell and taste of the rugged wild landscape that surrounds the small

vineyards. O’Shaughnessy makes two mountain cabernet sauvignons—one from Mount V eeder and one from

Howell Mountain, the latter on a site appropriately called El Rancho del Oso (“Ranch of the Bear”). And while I

have been astounded by the deliciousness of both, the Howell Mountain, with its deep exotic spiciness, almost furry

texture, and vivid black fig and cassis flavor, is the more hedonistic of the two. O’Shaughnessy may be the only

winery in the United States to have plantings of the rare ancient Bordeaux grape St. Macaire.

SCARECROW

RUTHERFORD

100% cabernet sauvignon

Named after the scarecrow in The Wizard of Oz, Scarecrow comes from the historic J. J. Cohn estate, next door to

Inglenook, tucked up against the hills of the Mayacamas Mountains in Rutherford. The land was bought out of

bankruptcy in the 1930s by Joe Cohn, an immigrant Russian Orthodox Jew who made his way from Harlem, New

Y ork, to Hollywood, eventually becoming the first head of MGM (the studio that produced the movie The Wizard of

Oz). The vines—planted in 1945—produced grapes that went into many of Napa V alley’s most prestigious wines

until 2003, when Cohn’s grandson, Bret Lopez, began making the first Scarecrow wines with the help of consulting

winemaker Celia Welch. From the first vintage, the wines have taken on near legendary status for their beauty (a

rare term in the world of powerful cabernet), immaculate purity, textural tenderness, and savory quality, not unlike

the wines of First Growth Château Haut-Brion.

HARLAN ESTATE

OAKVILLE

Cabernet sauvignon with small amounts of merlot, cabernet franc, and petit verdot sometimes added

Founded by Bill Harlan in 1984, Harlan Estate lies over the soft crests and slopes of a set of small hills edged up

against the Mayacamas Mountains, in the western part of Oakville. The hills form a silent promontory (with 360

degrees of exposition) poised above Napa V alley, 225 to 1,225 feet (69 to 373 meters) below. Standing in these

vineyards, you’re overtaken by the feeling that you have found yourself in an enchanting and spiritual place. The

wine is justifiably considered one of the greatest—if not the greatest—in the United States. Since it was first made,

it has garnered numerous 100-point scores by critics. It’s a subtle, immaculate wine of astounding beauty—a wine

that seems to insinuate itself into your senses so completely that you are left without words, but craving more.

Wines like this do not seem to be made as such, but rather, like Michelangelo’s Pietà, to emerge into the physical

world as everything nonessential is sculpted away.

SWEET WINE

DOLCE

NAPA V ALLEY

80% sémillon, 20% sauvignon blanc

When it was created in 1985, by the late Gil Nickel and his partners (Nickel also founded Far Niente), Dolce

became a Napa V alley sensation—first, because the wine was so mind-bendingly decadent, and second, because

creating a late-harvest, botrytized wine in the manner of a great Sauternes was considered virtually impossible in

the dry climate of California. Nickel was not only undeterred, he was galvanized by the challenge. Today, Dolce is

the only winery in Napa V alley devoted exclusively to a single dessert wine. Great sweet wines are defined not by

their sweetness (a given) but by their balance and acidity. Dolce’s impeccable balance means the wine rolls over

your palate in waves of lusciousness. The wine is exceedingly difficult to make. It starts with a vineyard tucked into

a sheltered corner, so that fog settles and huddles there for hours each day (moisture is necessary for botrytis to

form). At harvest, vineyard workers using special shears cut out all berries that are not infected with botrytis mold

(sometimes a cluster provides a mere single usable berry). Because of the high sugar content of the juice,

fermentation takes half a year. But Dolce, with its grand Art Nouveau–inspired label and 22-karat gold lettering, is

a wine worthy of the complexity required to usher it into existence.

CARNEROS

About 40 miles (64 kilometers) north of San Francisco, the AVA Carneros (also known as Los Carneros)

spans the southern ends of Napa and Sonoma counties, and includes just over thirty wineries and some

8,000 acres (3,200 hectares) of vineyards. It is a serene place. No towns, just softly loping, windswept

hills that, now vine-covered, were once the exclusive domain of sheep. (The word carneros is Spanish

for “rams.

”)

What makes Carneros special is its proximity to San Pablo Bay, which is the most northern part of San

Francisco Bay. It acts as a giant funnel for the cool ocean air and fog that surge through Carneros as

they are pulled up into the warmer Napa and Sonoma Valleys. The effect on the region’s vineyards is

profound. The grapes, while getting plenty of sun, rarely get too much warmth. Because of the constant

caress of cool air, the risk of flavors being baked out of the grapes is virtually nonexistent. As a result, the

wines—especially pinot noirs and chardonnays—often have gorgeous balance. While rich, the wines are

rarely fat, flaccid, or overwrought. One sip of Shafer’s Red Shoulder Ranch Chardonnay (from their

vineyard in Carneros) shows just how complex and lusciously refined the wines can be.

The greatest number of the grapes grown in Carneros are either chardonnay or pinot noir, although

merlot, syrah, and several other grapes also grow here in warmer pockets. There are also two very

famous large vineyards here—the Hyde Vineyard (owned by Larry Hyde and Aubert de Villaine, of

Burgundy’s famous Domaine de la Romanée Conti) and Hudson Vineyards (owned by Lee Hudson).

Among the top-rated California wineries that buy grapes from one of these two prestigious vineyards are:

Marcassin, Kistler, Aubert, Paul Hobbs, Ramey, DuMOL, and HdV (the Hyde/deVillaine partnership.

Not surprisingly for a cool region that specializes in chardonnay and pinot noir, some fantastic

sparkling wines are also made here, including several of the best in California. Among the sparkling wine

firms that are either located in or buy grapes from Carneros are Domaine Carneros, Mumm Napa Valley,

Gloria Ferrer, Domaine Chandon, and Schramsberg.

The top two Carneros sparklers I find most impressive are both the California equivalents of prestige

cuvées and have spent six or more years aging on their yeast lees. They are: Domaine Carneros Le

Rêve, (le rêve is French for “the dream”

—an apt name for this pristine and elegant bubbly) and the rich,

full-bodied Schramsberg J. Schram Reserve.

Finally, historically, the wineries and grape growers of Carneros have undertaken an ambitious amount

of research, including research on dozens of different clones of pinot noir. In fact, as early as 1986, an

investigation into Carneros pinot noirs revealed that they shared specific flavor characteristics, namely

those of cherries, berry jam, cherry cola, and spice.

My favorites among the top wineries in Carneros include: Acacia, Ancien, Ceja, Cuvaison Carneros

Estate, Domaine Carneros, Etude, Gloria Ferrer, HdV, Hudson Vineyards, Saintsbury, Schug, and

Truchard.

SONOMA COUNTY

Directly north of San Francisco and bordering the Pacific Ocean, Sonoma County has 1

million acres (404,700 hectares) of land, making it more than two times bigger than its

next-door neighbor, Napa V alley. Sonoma’s size means, among other things, that the

county is a geographical patchwork quilt of valleys, mountains, riverbeds, plains, and

slight uplifts in the terrain, known as benchlands. Within this shifting landscape are

sixteen viticultural areas that can be quite different in their nuances of climate and soil.

From a historical, psychosocial, and cultural standpoint, Sonoma County is rather

different from Napa. Vineyards were planted here as the nineteenth century dawned, well

before they were planted in Napa, and many vintners and winemakers are members of old,

established farming families. A kicked-back country style pervades much of the region.

People drive around in dusty pickups, no one puts on the ritz very much, and when

Sonomans do get together, the talk is as likely to be about tractors as about wine sales in

Tokyo. But be assured, among the top producers there’s as much cutting-edge wine stuff

happening in Sonoma as anywhere in California.

The county itself is beautifully pastoral, and is often called California’s Provence.

Vineyards alternate with apple orchards, vegetable farms, redwood forests, dairies (cheese

is a local specialty), sheep ranches, nurseries (including dozens of Christmas tree farms),

and even aquaculture fisheries along the rugged coast. Sonoma boasts one of the best

bakeries west of the Mississippi (the Downtown Bakery, in Healdsburg), the first

commercial shiitake mushroom farm in the United States, plus the Dry Creek General

Store, a funky, old-fashioned general store, but on Saturday night, if you’re single and in

the wine industry, count on it being the place to hang out (everyone sits on the front porch

and drinks beer).

Perhaps the nearest I come to gluttony is with wine. As often as possible,

when a really beautiful bottle is before me, I drink all of it I can, even when I

know that I have had more than I want physically. That is gluttonous.

But I think to myself, when again will I have this taste upon my tongue?

Where else in the world is there just such a wine as this, with just this

bouquet, at just this heat, in just this crystal cup? And when again will I be

alive to it as I am this very minute, sitting here on the green hillside above the

sea, or here in this dim, murmuring, richly odorous restaurant, or here in this

fisherman’s café on the wharf? More, more I think—all of it to the last

exquisite drop, for there is no satiety for me, nor ever has been in such

drinking.

— M.F.K. FISHER,

An Alphabet for Gourmets, 1949. Fisher lived in the Sonoma V alley for much

of her life.

A morning in Sonoma reveals why the region is special climatically. Soft white fog

rises in massive banks off the coast and drifts inland, wrapping itself around mountains,

filling the valleys and riverbeds with pillows of cool vapor. Sonoma is well known for the

daily ebb and flow—almost a yin and yang—of fog and sunshine. Of course, areas closer

to the coast (especially the A V As Sonoma Coast and parts of the Russian River V alley)

tend to be somewhat cooler, while areas farther inland are warmer. But overall, what

makes Sonoma Sonoma is its pendulum-like climate of warm days and cool nights, the

classic scenario for grapes with the potential to mature evenly and fully.

Northwestern face of Camp Meeting Ridge—a chardonnay vineyard at 1,200 feet (400 meters) in the appellation known

as the Sonoma Coast. The vineyard belongs to Flowers Vineyard and Winery, one of the early pioneers of the appellation

which, as the name implies, is strung out along Sonoma’ s Pacific coast.

THE NAME SONOMA

There are many legends concerning the origin of the name Sonoma. According to Arthur Dawson, in The

Stories Behind Sonoma Valley Place Names, the most frequent of these is that the word sonoma means

“valley of the moon.

” This was the translation given by General Mariano Vallejo, the Mexican commander

of the northern territories in the 1840s, when what is now California was taken over by the United States.

Vallejo reportedly said that sono meant “moon” in Suisan, the language of a Native American tribe that

lived not in Sonoma but in Napa Valley. It appears that Vallejo may have simply liked the idea of this

meaning, since the general wrote admiringly of how full moons seemed to rise and set several times over

Sonoma’s eastern hills. Then there’s the Pinocchio version: Sono supposedly also means “nose.

” As this

legend goes, a Native American servant in the Vallejo household told of a time long before the arrival of

Spaniards and Mexicans in California, when a baby with an especially large nose was born. The baby

grew up to be chief of the tribe, and thus sonoma came to mean “the land of Chief Big Nose.

” The most

likely interpretation, according to Dawson, is based on the work of early twentieth-century

anthropologists, who noted that sonoma is a common Wappo suffix appearing at the end of village

names. The Wappo tribe is thought to have occupied Sonoma before being pushed out by other tribes

and relocating in what became known as Napa Valley. According to Laura Somersal, the last fluent

speaker of Wappo, who died in 1990, sonoma meant “abandoned camping place.

”

A winemaker’ s hands tell the story of painstaking work. Here, Don V an Staaveren, who helped his wife, the winemaker

Margo V an Staaveren, create the famous Chateau St. Jean cabernet blend called Cinq Cépages.

Sonoma County is not known for one or two grape varieties in the way Napa is

renowned for cabernet sauvignon, or Amador County is noted for zinfandel. Instead,

Sonoma’s size and generally propitious climate, coupled with its highly variable

topography and changes in altitude, mean that many different varieties do well here—in

fact, fifty different grapes are grown in the region. Which place they are grown in, of

course, is the key. Over the past two decades, Sonoma’s viticultural areas—like

viticultural areas throughout much of California—have become increasingly specialized as

vintners understand the fine points of matching grape variety to site. Today, Alexander

V alley, a warm interior valley, is prized for its soft cabernet sauvignons; and the county’s

cooler coastal areas, such as Russian River V alley and Sonoma Coast, are known for what,

in great years, can be elegantly complex pinot noirs, as well as chardonnays; and no one

would dispute that Dry Creek V alley is one of California’s centers for zinfandel.

According to some historians, Sonoma’s first vineyards were not planted by Spaniards

but by Russian fishermen who, around the beginning of the nineteenth century, hunted

otters and seals and established a community on the coast near Fort Ross (said to be

derived from their name for their homeland—Rossiya).

By 1820, the Spanish were in on the act. Franciscan fathers planted vineyards

surrounding their northernmost mission, the Mission San Francisco Solano, which today

still stands in the town of Sonoma. The missions were eventually appropriated by the

Mexican government (Mexico won its independence and laid claim to California in the

Mexican War of Independence in 1821), but in just over two decades, in 1846, the whole

of California was annexed by the United States and made a state in 1850. During this time

of political instability, cuttings from Sonoma’s vines were planted throughout northern

California.

But Sonoma’s role as the cradle of northern viticulture was to be even more solidly

established once Agoston Haraszthy (HARASS-thee), the “Father of the California Wine

Industry,

” arrived on the scene. Haraszthy—a cross between Indiana Jones, James Bond,

and Thomas Jefferson—was a Hungarian wheeler-dealer who made and lost his fortune

multiple times. Haraszthy thought big, and in 1857 he established Buena Vista, which,

with 300 acres (120 hectares) of vineyards, was the largest winery in the state at the time.

One of Haraszthy’s other coups was to convince the nascent California legislature to send

him to Europe, where he studied viticulture, ultimately returning to Sonoma in 1861 with

100,000 French, German, Spanish, and Italian vine cuttings. Haraszthy considered

Sonoma a viticultural paradise, and his promotion of it was so effective that within a few

years, land prices jumped from $6 to $150 an acre as waves of French, German, and

Italian wine-makers moved into the region.

Among the Italians who ultimately moved into Sonoma were a couple of brothers who,

after reading a book on winemaking borrowed from the public library, went on to build

America’s best-known and largest wine brand—E. & J. Gallo. As poor, hardworking

young men coming of age at the end of Prohibition, Ernest and Julio Gallo began their

winery in the farm town of Modesto, in California’s hot Central V alley. Early on, however,

the brothers became convinced that Sonoma was where the state’s best wines would

eventually be made. Y ear by year, they bought increasing amounts of Sonoma grapes to

use as top-flight blending material in their regular wines. By the time the Gallos launched

their expensive, ultrapremium, small-production wines in 1993 (a $60 cabernet and a $30

chardonnay; extraordinary prices at the time), they owned 4,000 acres (1,600 hectares) in

Sonoma.

THE KNIGHT OF KNIGHTS VALLEY

Next door to Sonoma’s Alexander Valley is Knights Valley, which has its own knight, Sir Peter Michael.

One of England’s early tech entrepreneurs, Michael founded Micro Consultants Group and UEI Plc, as

well as Cosworth Engineering. In 1972, he opened shop in California’s Silicon Valley, founding Quantel, a

digital special effects company, whose product Paintbox revolutionized television and film graphics. While

in Silicon Valley, Michael fell in love with California, ultimately buying 600 acres of land in Knights Valley

in 1982 and establishing his namesake winery. In 1989, Michael was knighted by Queen Elizabeth II,

joining the ranks of former president George Bush, Hollywood director Steven Spielberg, and software

tycoon Bill Gates. The winery, tucked up into the steep, twisting, volcanic canyons on the western face of

Mount St. Helena, has developed a cult following for its six expensive but immaculately precise and

complex vineyard-designated chardonnays, all of which are considered among the most extraordinary in

California, and all of which have French names—Belle Côte (“Beautiful Slope”), Mon Plaisir (“My

Pleasure”), La Carrière (“The Quarry”), Ma Belle-Fille (“My Daughter-in-Law”), Cuvée Indigène

(“Indigenous Blend”), and Point Rouge (“Red Dot”). The winery’s main Bordeaux-style red blend, Les

Pavots (“The Poppies”), is often mistaken for a Napa Valley cabernet because of its depth, complexity,

and structure.

Sonoma County’s long history lives on today in the old vineyards to be found there.

Sonoma, along with the Sierra Foothills, is home to more old vineyards than any other

wine region in California. Such vineyards are extremely special and historically important,

for they were planted with clones of grapes—especially clones of zinfandel—that have, as

a result of more than a century of natural adaptation, developed their own personalities

and unique flavors.

SONOMA COUNTY AVAS

Of the sixteen A V As within Sonoma, the most important are Alexander V alley; Russian

River V alley (within which are the A V As Green V alley and Chalk Hill); Dry Creek V alley;

Sonoma Coast (inside of which is the A V A Fort Ross-Seaview); and Sonoma V alley (with

its smaller A V A Sonoma Mountain). Carneros (which straddles Sonoma and Napa

counties) is addressed on page 705.

Alexander V alley, at the northern end of Sonoma County, is a long, warm, inland

corridor of vines. If you arrived there for the first time around 3:00 p.m. on a summer

afternoon, you’d swear the valley was one of the hotter places in northern California. But

you’d be right only until twilight. As night approaches, the valley cools down

considerably, thanks to the Russian River (which runs through the valley) and the fog that

snakes its way up and down the river’s basin. Generally, the fog wallows along the river

until it is burned off by the strong morning sun. This is cabernet sauvignon territory,

although some powerful, full-bodied chardonnays are also made here, including

Stonestreet and Chateau St. Jean’s Belle Terre Vineyard chardonnay. Among the wineries

that make top cabernet sauvignons from Alexander V alley are Silver Oak (which also

makes cabernet sauvignon in Napa V alley), Lancaster Estate, Jordan, and for good value,

Geyser Peak.

After flowing down through Alexander V alley, the Russian River makes a few hairpin

turns and then starts flowing westward through the valley that takes its name. Most of

Russian River V alley and the smaller viticultural area inside it, Green V alley, is the

opposite of Alexander V alley. Generally speaking, these regions are quite cool (parts of

both are less than 10 miles/16 kilometers from the Pacific Ocean), and as a result, pinot

noir and chardonnay are the prominent grape varieties.

Pinot noir, of course, is difficult, moody, delicious. But despite the grape’s irascible

nature, the pinots from this part of Sonoma can have extraordinary balance and

complexity, as one sip of Williams Selyem, Kosta Browne, DuMol, or Rochioli—all

Russian River pinots to die for—will attest. As for chardonnay, very good versions abound

here, and those from Williams Selyem and Lewis can be spellbinding. Finally, while the

Russian River V alley isn’t famous for sauvignon blanc, two of the best sauvignon blancs

in the state come from here: Merry Edwards and Rochioli.

Pinot noir and chardonnay are king and queen in Russian River V alley, together making

up a whopping 70 percent of all plantings. The cool climate and coastal fog that travel

from the Pacific directly through the Petaluma wind gap provide an ideal climate for

making distinct, expressive wines. Indeed, once the evening fog rolls in, the air

temperature in Russian River V alley can drop 35° to 40°F (20° to 22°C). This natural air

conditioning slows ripening and lengthens the growing season by as much as 20 percent

compared to neighboring areas. The soils in Russian River V alley are varied, but the most

prized is Goldridge—a fine, sandy loam with excellent drainage and low soil fertility. The

central part of the region contains clay, and the river benchlands are alluvial soil.

Given so much high-quality pinot noir and chardonnay, plus the region’s cool

temperature, it comes as no surprise that some of Sonoma County’s finest sparkling wines,

including the two best, those from J Vineyards and Winery and Iron Horse, are also made

from Russian River or Green V alley grapes.

Among the top wineries making wines from the Russian River V alley and Green V alley

are Davis Bynum, Joseph Swan, Merry Edwards, Iron Horse, Lewis, Paul Hobbs,

Rochioli, Kistler, Kosta Browne, Marimar Estate, DeLoach, DuMOL, and Williams

Selyem.

Perhaps the most charming viticultural area of all in Sonoma County is Dry Creek

V alley. Time seems to have stood still here. The gently rolling, blond hills are dotted with

old, gnarled vines (there are many old vineyards) that lift their twisted black arms skyward

as though they were imploring heaven. Due west of Alexander V alley, Dry Creek V alley is

a zinfandel paradise. Other wines are made here—including some good cabernets and

Rhône blends—but zinfandel is the variety through which the earth speaks most

compellingly. Some Dry Creek zinfandels are big and meaty, others, soft and graceful.

What the best of them share is a sensual richness of flavor that can be irresistible. Among

the Dry Creek producers to look for: A. Rafanelli, Seghesio, Mauritson, and Ridge.

Sonoma’s largest appellation (750 square miles/1,940 square kilometers), but the one

least planted with vineyards, is Sonoma Coast, which stretches south from Mendocino all

the way to just north of San Francisco, and from the Pacific coastline inland for 40 miles

(64 kilometers) at its widest point. Importantly, several prominent, small vintners opposed

the boundaries of this A V A, saying that it was too large to be meaningful. They then

formed an association called West Sonoma Coast Vintners, made up of wineries within

what they call the “true” Sonoma Coast, an area west of local Highway 16, from the town

of Petaluma north to Annapolis. Here, on the edge of the Pacific Ocean, some of the

coolest (and best) vineyards have an ocean view, although many sit on rocky hillsides

above the fog line—a critical fact, for this close to the ocean, it’s important to catch every

possible ray of sun if grapes are to ripen. Even so, Sonoma Coast viticulture is risky. As a

result of the ocean’s proximity, there’s twice as much rainfall here as in other parts of

Sonoma.

Once grazing land buffeted by high winds, the western part of Sonoma Coast was

historically thought to be too cold for grapes. But in the 1990s and 2000s, several pioneers

in the region—Mike Bohan (Bohan Ranch), David Hirsch (Hirsch Vineyards), Ted Lemon

(Littorai), Burt Williams (Williams Selyem), Steve Kistler (Kistler Vineyards), Greg La

Follette (then at Flowers), Ehren Jordan (Failla), and Andy Peay (Peay Vineyards), among

others, began planting pinot noir and chardonnay, with beautiful results. Today, syrah is

also planted here, and those wines can be stunning and packed with spice.

Within Sonoma Coast is the especially prestigious, small A V A of Fort Ross-Seaview, a

high-altitude coastal area that’s home to some of Sonoma’s best wineries, including Peay,

Hirsch, and Flowers. In addition, the top wineries Failla, Marcassin, Peter Michael, and

Martinelli all have vineyards here.

Finally, the A V A Sonoma V alley and its smaller A V A Sonoma Mountain are in the

southern part of Sonoma County, edged up against the Mayacamas Mountains. This is

where viticulture in northern California began. Sonoma V alley is anything but your

conventional valley. The topography, much of it spread over the foothills of the

Mayacamas Mountains, rises and dips over knolls and glens with such fanciful names as

V alley of the Moon and Glen Ellen. Sonoma V alley is a wonderful mishmash, both

geographically and climatically. Given the total variability of the region, many different

varieties of grapes are grown here and made into a scrumptious grab bag of wines. Among

the best things to taste are the structured, complex cabernets from Laurel Glen, the

zinfandels from Ridge, the pinot noirs from Hanzell, and the chardonnays from Kistler.

WHEN YOU VISIT… SONOMA

BEFITTING ITS NICKNAME as California’s “Provence,

” Sonoma County is full of small

towns that sell local cheeses, olive oils, honey, fruits, and vegetables. In particular, don’t

miss both Healdsburg and Sonoma, wonderful historic towns built around charming

squares filled with boutiques and great small restaurants like The Girl & the Fig, a

Sonoma must.

THE WINERIES OF SONOMA are not neatly lined up along a single main road, but

instead are spread all over the county, so count on following lots of twisting country

roads. Reservations at wineries are suggested.

TO GET A GREAT understanding of the impact of viticulture on wine flavor, visit the

Benziger Family Winery, which has what is possibly the state’s best tour geared

specifically to biodynamic viticulture.

The Sonoma Wines to Know

WHITES

SCRIBE

RIESLING | SONOMA

100% riesling

The number of great rieslings in California could charitably be counted on two hands, leading many wine

professionals to conclude that the Golden State just isn’t very golden when it comes to riesling. That certainly was

my opinion, too. Until I tasted Scribe. Here is a bone-dry riesling of restraint, elegance, and purity, recalling the dry

rieslings of Australia. How the three young men who started Scribe packed this Sonoma wine with such Audrey

Hepburn–like grace is a mystery, but they did. (Don’t miss their elegant pinot noir, either.)

HANZELL

CHARDONNAY | SONOMA VALLEY

100% chardonnay

Founded in 1953 by Ambassador James Zellerbach (who helped craft the Marshall Plan for Europe after World War

II), Hanzell has been a Sonoma blue-chip estate for decades. The chardonnays have special renown—and

deservedly so. They are not modern in style—no obvious oak, heavy butter, or discernible sweetness. Instead, the

wine is one beautiful sweep of cream and minerals, seamlessly stitched together. The wine’s enticing choreography

starts quietly, then builds with luscious intensity. I can’t resist thinking of this as Sonoma’s version of a Puligny-

Montrachet.

PETER MICHAEL WINERY

CHARDONNAY | MON PLAISIR | KNIGHTS VALLEY

100% chardonnay

Peter Michael has a stellar reputation for its six separate chardonnays, each from a different vineyard, the most

lovely of which is often the Mon Plaisir (French for “my pleasure”). Although, I would never pass up a glass of La

Carrière or Belle Côte, its sisters. In top years Mon Plaisir is hauntingly elegant and seamless, with rich, high-

definition fruit. A chardonnay of exquisite style.

REDS

FAILLA

PINOT NOIR | HIRSCH VINEYARDS | SONOMA COAST

100% pinot noir

Business partners Ehren Jordan and Anne-Marie Failla (FAY -la), owners of Failla winery, make a handful of

exquisite pinot noirs from high-elevation, ocean-air-cooled vineyards along the “true” Sonoma Coast. These are

wines of purity and pinpoint elegance, with mouthwatering juiciness. (This graceful pinot noir from the Hirsch

Vineyards is a knockout, and a favorite.) Neither Jordan, whose degrees are in art history and classical architecture,

nor Failla, whose background is in banking, have formal credentials in winemaking. But they appear to have

something even better—a genius for their craft.

WILLIAMS SELYEM

PINOT NOIR | EASTSIDE ROAD NEIGHBORS | RUSSIAN RIVER VALLEY

100% pinot noir

I’ve followed Williams Selyem from its early days, when Burt Williams and Ed Selyem—down-home, seemingly

run-of-the-mill guys—were making a few hundred cases of decidedly not run-of-the-mill pinot noir (and

astounding the pinot noir universe in the process), to the winery’s purchase by John and Kathe Dyson in 1998. For a

while then, Williams Selyem lost its way. But for the past half decade the winery (now making fourteen pinot noirs)

is back in top form. Evidence: this Eastside Road Neighbors pinot, a long, structured, sensual, nicely sweaty red,

laced with spicy notes. When you drink this pinot, its flavors just keep coming at you like waves on the beach.

(“Eastside Road Neighbors” refers to the four vineyards along Eastside Road in the Russian River V alley, from

which the grapes are sourced.) The winery also makes a delicious chardonnay—the unoaked one—that’s as fresh as

a cold-moving mountain stream.

ROCHIOLI

PINOT NOIR | RESERVE | RUSSIAN RIVER VALLEY

100% pinot noir

Generally one of the most massive, saturated, and intense pinot noirs in Sonoma, Rochioli’s reserve, with its

opulent, dark, almost brooding berry flavors and utterly supple texture, can be a mind-blower. The Rochioli family

has been growing grapes in Sonoma since the 1930s, but it wasn’t until the 1980s that they began making their own

wines. The grapes for this wine come from the family’s West Block vineyard—about 500 yards (460 meters) from

the Russian River—as well as from their Sweetwater Vineyard, named for the many natural springs in the area.

RADIO-COTEAU

SYRAH | LAS COLINAS | SONOMA COAST

100% syrah

Every time I drink Radio-Coteau, I picture—what else?—an old-style radio, and indeed, with Las Colinas (“the

hill”), the volume dial is turned on very high. There’s a gorgeousness to this syrah, and its vivid, spiced and peppery

raspberry character is intense. Of course, the wine has richness and superb density, but it’s the way the flavor

appears to float, without weight, that’s magical. This is always one of the best syrahs in California. The name

Radio-Coteau, by the way, is an expression from the northern Rhône region of France that literally means

“broadcasting from the hillside,

” and when used colloquially, means “word of mouth.

”

A. RAFANELLI

INFANDEL | DRY CREEK VALLEY

Mostly zinfandel with a touch of petite sirah

The Rafanelli family’s zinfandels have a way, over time, of making you crave them. The best are deep, generous,

totally alive with flavor, and have a sensual softness that you could lose yourself in. Y et despite their obvious

textural appeal, these are zinfandels of structure and ageworthiness. The Rafanellis own zinfandel vineyards that

have been in existence for close to a century.

RIDGE

ZINFANDEL | PONZO | RUSSIAN RIVER VALLEY

Approximately 95% zinfandel, 5% petite sirah

Zinfandel is compelling for many reasons—but one of them is not elegance, not usually. But with Ponzo, Ridge (a

winery that makes twelve separate zinfandels) has achieved the nearly impossible—a wine of exquisite beauty,

dimension, and structure. This is a zinfandel that soars with vivid strawberry, cranberry, and spice flavors, a

zinfandel that has complex herb and savory notes. It’s a bit like drinking Thanksgiving. Ponzo is a reference to Bob

Ponzo, the owner of Ponzo Vineyard, who has proven that a so-called warm-climate grape like zinfandel can be

magically refined when grown in a slightly cooler place, like the Russian River V alley.

SILVER OAK

CABERNET SAUVIGNON | ALEXANDER VALLEY

100% cabernet sauvignon

Although the winery itself is located in Napa V alley, Silver Oak makes two different, famous cabernet sauvignons,

one from Napa V alley (the more structured) and the other from its vineyards in Sonoma’s Alexander V alley

(possibly a shade more plump and hedonistic). Immensely popular and stamped with lots of vanilla (thanks to its

aging in American oak), the Alexander V alley cabernet is captivating, full of energy, and easy to love. Y ear in and

year out, the texture of this cabernet is as irresistible as homemade jam that’s just been taken off the stove.

CHATEAU ST. JEAN

CINQ CÉPAGES | SONOMA COUNTY

Differing percentages each year of cabernet sauvignon, merlot, cabernet franc, petit verdot, and

malbec

Cinq Cépages (French for “five grape varieties”) is so big that I’m often tempted to dismiss it as too much. But

then, like some huge, adorable sheepdog that keeps putting its nose in your hand, it just won’t go away. For all of its

ripeness and power, the wine fills the palate and moves with great waves of fruit, spice, and briaryness. It is a slam-

dunk kind of cabernet and one that would meet filet mignon head on. Chateau St. Jean, founded in 1973 near the

tiny town of Kenwood, is one of the most impressive estates in Sonoma. The 1920s-era château on the property

(once a private family home) is on the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Cinq Cépages, and all of Chateau

St. Jean’s distinctive wines, have been made for the past thirty-three-plus years by Margo V an Staaveren.

The old village of Mendocino in Mendocino County was once a small whaling port. Today it is a very low-key artists’

hamlet.

MENDOCINO

California’s two most northern wine regions, Mendocino and Lake County, are just north

of Sonoma and Napa counties, but they are light-years away in temperament and style.

The vast, ravishing wilderness here, and tranquil, almost reckless beauty is the California

of a century ago. Rolling mountains covered in golden grasses and wild oats alternate with

immense stands of giant redwoods. In Mendocino, more than a million acres (more than

400,000 hectares) of forest stand majestically amid the vine-covered, sun-dappled hills.

Orchards and ranches are sprinkled over the landscape. On the coast, the windswept town

of Mendocino is an artists’ hamlet. Mendocino has the largest percentage of organic

vineyards of any county in California—nearly 30 percent are certified by the California

Certified Organic Farmers—and countless others are organic but not certified.

The word mendocino is a diminutive of de Mendoza, the name of one of the

earliest Spanish explorers to come ashore in Mendocino, in the late sixteenth

century.

AMERICA’S FINEST BRANDY

In 1982, American Ansley Coale and Frenchman Hubert Germain-Robin founded the artisanal distillery

Germain-Robin near the town of Ukiah, in Mendocino. T oday, Germain-Robin’s brandies are considered

the best brandies made in the United States and have, in multiple blind tastings, repeatedly bested a

host of Cognacs.

T o make these brandies, Hubert Germain-Robin, a master Cognac distiller whose family has produced

Cognac since 1782, uses an antique alembic still. Each year, he hand-distills eighty barrels of brandy

from such premium grapes as pinot noir and sauvignon blanc (in Cognac and elsewhere in Europe,

brandies are usually distilled from lesser grape varieties). Of the five brandies Germain-Robin makes, the

most stunning is the XO Reserve, a brandy so smooth, elegant, and lush it can leave you speechless.

Mendocino’s jagged, almost menacing coastline has been carved out over eons by icy,

dark-blue waters. Farther inland, in the middle of Lake County, the grand body of water

known as Clear Lake is the largest natural lake in California. On any given day in these

two regions you’re more likely to see a whale, mountain lion, or rattlesnake than someone

in a business suit. Indeed, when the sixties ended in San Francisco, some “flower

children” simply dropped out of city life and moved north to the backwoods of Mendocino

(today, besides grapes, marijuana is a popular crop). In this section, I’ll focus on

Mendocino, the more significant of the two wine regions. Lake County is addressed in the

box above.

The first small wineries in Mendocino were established in the 1850s by failed

prospectors turned farmers, in the wake of the Gold Rush. But by the end of Prohibition,

virtually every winery had disappeared, and pear orchards or nut trees stood where

vineyards had once flourished. The two counties, so rugged and remote, were not quick to

be reborn as wine regions. As of 1967, there was only one winery in Mendocino

(Parducci), even though the wine business was beginning to take off in both Napa and

Sonoma. The next year, however, proved to be a turning point. In 1968, Mendocino’s

Fetzer Vineyards was founded by lumber executive Barney Fetzer. Fetzer’s growth was

meteoric. During the decade of the 1980s, ten of Barney Fetzer’s eleven children built the

family winery into one of the largest in California. Although Fetzer Vineyards is now

owned by Chile’s huge wine firm Concha y Toro, the Fetzer family continues to hold

prime vineyard land in Mendocino.

LAKE COUNTY

T aking its name from Clear Lake (the largest natural lake in California), Lake County is smaller, drier, and

less diverse than Mendocino. There are 8,400 acres (3,400 hectares) of vineyard in Lake County, but just

over thirty wineries, most of which focus on relatively inexpensive cabernet sauvignons and sauvignon

blancs that are often just simple and serviceable. On the other hand, this is where stunning bargains can

be found—like Six Sigma’s Cuvée Diamond Mine, a delicious blend of cabernet sauvignon and

tempranillo that tastes like it ought to cost a whole lot more than it does. Other wineries have paid close

attention to the deals that can be made here. Indeed, Lake County is primarily a provider of grapes to a

number of huge wineries, including Beringer, Sutter Home, and Kendall-Jackson (which began here).

Lake County’s first important vineyards were cultivated by the enterprising English actress Lillie

Langtry, who planted the hillsides of her remote estate in the 1880s, intending to make what she hoped

would become “the greatest claret in California.

” The vineyards ultimately became a part of the winery

called Guenoc, now known as Langtry Estate & Vineyard. The other notable Lake County winery, Steele

Wines, is owned by Jed Steele, a well-known and highly respected winemaker who, as the wine-maker

at Kendall-Jackson in the 1980s and early 1990s, established the Kendall-Jackson style of soft, round,

easy-drinking chardonnay. Under four different labels, including Steele and Shooting Star, Steele makes

some fifty different wines from varieties as diverse as aligoté and counoise, as well as exciting, well-

priced old-vine zinfandels.

Mendocino’ s simple beauty remains unspoiled. A large percentage of vineyards here are farmed organically.

Thus, Mendocino became home to one of California’s most technologically

sophisticated large wineries. Surrounding it are some ninety smaller wineries, plus about

345 grape growers who range from modern, large-scale operators to tiny, one-man

operations where the last technological innovation might well have been replacing the

horse with a tractor. Today there are just over 17,000 acres (6,880 hectares) of vineyards in

Mendocino, and the leading grape varieties are chardonnay and cabernet sauvignon. That

said, some terrific pinot noir is beginning to be made here, too (especially in Mendocino’s

Anderson V alley). Mendocino is also where you’ll find one of the producers of

California’s most stunning, complex sparkling wines—Roederer Estate—plus Germain-

Robin brandy, considered the finest brandy made in the United States.

California’ s giant redwoods—a state treasure. Many of Mendocino’ s best vineyard areas are surrounded by these

majestic trees, which can reach 367 feet (112 meters) in height and have a width of 22 feet (7 meters) at the base.

Mendocino stretches from the cool Pacific coast inland to several warmer wine valleys

tucked between the coastal mountain range and the Mayacamas. The headwaters of the

powerful Russian River are located here and flow down through Mendocino and much of

Sonoma County before curving abruptly and spilling into the Pacific Ocean. Within

Mendocino are several smaller A V As, the most important of which is Anderson V alley.

ANDERSON VALLEY

Slicing like a fjord inland from the cold sea, Anderson V alley, especially its northwestern

end, is one of the chilliest grape-growing areas in California. Chardonnay and pinot noir

are the leading grapes, with, in particular, wineries such as Goldeneye, Baxter, Williams

Selyem, Littorai, and Husch making fantastic pinots from Anderson V alley grapes. Not

surprisingly, pinot and chardonnay are blended by Roederer Estate (owned by the

Champagne house Louis Roederer) to make some of the raciest sparkling wines in

California.

Before it bought land in Anderson V alley in 1981, the house of Louis Roederer

searched for several years for the perfect sparkling wine site in California. Roederer was

so convinced that Anderson V alley was that place that it waited seven years—until its own

vineyards matured—before making its first sparkler, instead of buying grapes from

someplace else.

Winter blankets Mariah Vineyards’ high-elevation zinfandel vines.

Anderson V alley’s dramatic coolness means the region is also ideal for two grapes that

other parts of California have largely given up on, gewürztraminer and riesling. The most

hedonistic and exciting gewürztraminers and rieslings in California are made here by

Navarro Vineyards.

Like Sonoma’s Russian River V alley, Mendocino’s cool Anderson V alley has some

warm spots. High above the chilly and often foggy valley are mountain ridges directly

exposed to the warm sun. The grapes for some of Mendocino’s top berry-and-spice

zinfandels come from vineyards here, especially Mendocino Ridge, composed of disparate

mountain areas, and the first noncontiguous A V A in California.

WHEN YOU VISIT… MENDOCINO

BESIDES BEING HOME to a slew of laid-back wineries, Mendocino in particular is full

of zany things to do. You may want to crack, slurp, and sip your way through the

Mendocino Crab and Wine Days festival (in January), check out the whale festival

(usually in March, when the whales are running off the coast), taste through the self-

proclaimed world’s largest salmon barbecue (in July), take in the Paul Bunyan parade

(on Labor Day), or go for a vegetarian lunch at the City of T en Thousand Buddhas, the

largest Buddhist monastery in California. For a full calendar of events, contact the Fort

Bragg Mendocino Coast Chamber of Commerce.

The Mendocino and Lake County Wines to Know

SPARKLING WINE

ROEDERER ESTATE

BRUT | ANDERSON VALLEY , MENDOCINO

Approximately 60% chardonnay, 40% pinot noir

I drink this wine about once a week, and would happily drink it every day if there weren’t so many other wines in

the world to taste. The wine’s wonderful play of creamy yet spiky textures, the apple Danish, limey flavors, and the

overall impeccable focus and clarity of the wine all add up to a completely satisfying experience and one of the best

ways possible to greet six o’clock after a long workday.

WHITES

LA FOLLETTE

CHARDONNAY | MANCHESTER RIDGE | MENDOCINO COUNTY

100% chardonnay

From a coastal plateau 2,000 feet (610 meters) above the adjacent Mendocino shoreline comes this beautifully

elegant chardonnay with its lovely custard and crème brûlée notes, and merest hint of enticing spice. I especially

love the wine’s vividness—the result of a fresh, tactile backdrop of acidity. And that, in turn, probably comes from

the cold Pacific breezes that cool this vineyard every day.

NA V ARRO VINEYARDS

GEWÜRZTRAMINER | ANDERSON VALLEY , MENDOCINO

100% gewürztraminer

Navarro makes the most sophisticated, complex, and delicious dry gewürztraminers in California. Vintage after

vintage, they are wines of remarkable clarity, precision, and pizzazz. Pears, tangerines, stones, minerals, and

lychees come at you in what can only be described as a driving rainstorm of flavor. Navarro first planted

gewürztraminer grapes in 1974, and has since developed a cult following for the wine it produces.

REDS

PHILLIPS HILL

PINOT NOIR | OPPENLANDER VINEYARD | MENDOCINO COUNTY

100% pinot noir

Here’s a beautiful pinot noir for people who like pinot noir the old-fashioned way—earthy and graceful. And in the

case of this wine, with a subtle exotic character, not unlike Darjeeling tea. Phillips Hill is owned by Toby Hill, a

formally trained artist whose study of composition in the abstract eventually found its physical grounding when Hill

decided to reinvent himself by making wine. The Oppenlander Vineyard is just 10 miles (16 kilometers) from the

ocean.

GOLDENEYE

PINOT NOIR | ANDERSON VALLEY , MENDOCINO

100% pinot noir

Goldeneye, owned by the same partners that own Napa V alley’s Duckhorn Vineyards, began making pinot noir in

Anderson V alley in 1997, and they quickly set about making a style that’s different from that of most of their

neighbors. This is not delicate, ethereally light pinot noir, but rather, dense, saturated pinot with a texture that’s

thick and velvety, with spicy, wood-smoke aromas and flavors. To me, this is pinot noir for the wintertime, when

there’s a fire in the fireplace and a roast in the oven.

LANGTRY

PETITE SIRAH | SERPENTINE MEADOW | GUENOC VALLEY , LAKE COUNTY

100% petite sirah

Langtry’s petite sirah smells like chocolate truffles dusted in dirt—it’s a great smell! Black in color, dense in flavor,

packed with fruit, gripped by tannin and bold in intent, this wine is classic petite sirah. Serpentine Meadow—a

vineyard at 1,000 feet (305 meters) in elevation—is just a tiny part of the 21,000-acre (8,500-hectare) Langtry

Estate.

STEELE

PERSONA NON GRATA | LAKE COUNTY

50% syrah, about 20% each of zinfandel and petite sirah, plus barbera and petit verdot

As one might imagine, Persona Non Grata has something to say—even something to prove. This wine soars all

over the palate. It’s bold and rugged and the flavors come fast and dense, with no elegance whatsoever—just a

dagger of intense fruit. When I first tasted this wine I thought of the miners during the Gold Rush, and thought that

this was the kind of wine they might have drunk. But on reflection, I think the miners would have felt they’d died

and gone to heaven if they had something this good lying around ready to gulp down. The back label of this wine

acknowledges that, despite the quality of the grapes grown in Lake County, the region remains unknown. Steele

writes,

“In drinking and enjoying this wine, you will be helping us to shed the chains that have for so long bound us

in the role of ‘Persona Non Grata.

’”

SWEET WINE

NA V ARRO VINEYARDS

MUSCAT BLANC | CLUSTER SELECT LATE HARVEST | ANDERSON VALLEY , MENDOCINO

100% muscat blanc à petits grains

This may well be the most lovely dessert wine made in the United States. It’s not super syrupy, not opulent, not

oozing with honey. It’s more like the Audrey Hepburn of dessert wines, the liquid version of pure, pristine, sweet

fresh fruit. I love the sense of minerals in this wine and the way it lifts off the palate with zesty tangerine and lime

flavors. A sensational bottle to have at the end of a meal with nothing more than some soft cheese.

THE SIERRA FOOTHILLS

Until the mid-nineteenth century, California’s wine industry was centered around Los

Angeles. But in 1849, with the discovery of gold near the town of Coloma, in the Sierra

Nevada foothills, the wine industry took off in a new direction. Mining camps sprang up

everywhere, and in their wake, so did vineyards and small wineries begun mostly by

immigrants seeking their fortunes. By the 1860s, there were nearly 200,000 vines growing

in the “gold counties” of northern California, and wineries there outnumbered those in

other parts of the north. These were the first wineries in the state to forgo the common

mission grape in favor of better varieties, such as zinfandel.

In time, the gold supply diminished and eventually dried up. The population shrank.

Winemaking and grape growing slowed considerably and then, following the double

blows of phylloxera and Prohibition, virtually disappeared in some areas. By the end of

World War II, the Sierra Foothills were home mostly to ghost wineries and abandoned

vineyards. Only one winery managed to remain continuously in operation, the D’Agostini

Winery, now the Sobon Estate, in Amador County.

A renaissance began in the 1970s, and today there are some one hundred wineries in the

Sierra Foothills and more than 6,400 acres (2,600 hectares) planted with vines.

The region known as the Sierra Foothills is a strip of eight remote counties roughly

stacked one on top of the next, from north to south. California’s capital, Sacramento, is to

the west, the Nevada border to the east. Of the eight counties, the two most important are

El Dorado and Amador, ruggedly beautiful regions where the spirit of the Old West and a

strong sense of individualism live on.

El Dorado, a mountainous region with mostly volcanic and granitic soils, has some of

the highest-elevation vineyards in California, including what is thought to be the highest

of all, Madroña Vineyards, at an elevation of 3,000 feet (900 meters). Thanks to the

breezes that sweep down off the 10,000-foot (3,000-meter) peaks of the Sierra Nevada,

nights here are very cool. Amador County, warmer than El Dorado, is spread over lower

foothills composed of granite with some sandy loam. Amador first came onto the modern

scene in the 1970s with gutsy, teeth-staining, King Kong–size zinfandels that lots of red

wine drinkers immediately fell in love with. The intensely flavored grapes came from very

old (often pre-Prohibition) vineyards that had been kept in production as a source of fruit

for home winemakers. One of the first wineries to realize the value of these old Amador

vineyards was Sutter Home, in Napa V alley. In 1971, the winery released its first Amador

County zinfandel, a stunning wine made from grapes from the now highly regarded

Deaver Ranch, in the Shenandoah V alley.

El Dorado County took its name from a mythical being—El Dorado, the

golden one. According to legend, Spanish conquistadores searched for El

Dorado believing he would lead them to a place of gold and riches.

Most wineries of the Sierra Foothills are not yet well known, and many deserve to be,

given the quality and distinct personality of the best wines. This is changing quickly,

however. Domaine de la Terre Rouge, Montevina, Skinner, and Boeger, for example, have

already developed followings nationally, and there are a half dozen more wineries poised

to join them.

A remarkable number of grape varieties (more than thirty) are planted in the Sierra

Foothills, but the best wines are almost invariably from red Mediterranean varieties. In

particular, the zinfandels, barberas, syrahs, mourvèdres, and Rhône blends have a robust

boldness that can be irresistible.

THE NORTH CENTRAL COAST:

SANTA CRUZ MOUNTAINS, MONTEREY , CHALONE, MOUNT HARLAN,

CARMEL VALLEY , & SANTA LUCIA HIGHLANDS

Monterey County and those American Viticultural Areas north of it, up to San Francisco

Bay, are often collectively referred to as the North Central Coast. The area includes the

important wine regions of Santa Cruz Mountains, Chalone, Mount Harlan, Carmel V alley,

Santa Lucia Highlands, and, of course, Monterey. These A V As range in size from quite

large (Monterey has about 40,000 acres/16,187 hectares of grapevines) to diminutive

(Chalone has 300 acres/120 hectares of grapevines), and each has a distinct personality.

SANTA CRUZ MOUNTAINS

South of San Francisco, about an hour and a half’s drive along California’s iconic

Highway 101, is the funky university town of Santa Cruz, a coastal haven for aging

hippies and ardent surfers. Although it’s right next door to Silicon V alley, Santa Cruz is,

experientially speaking, about as far away as you can get. Here, the mountain air has a

thrillingly sharp, close-to-the-ocean freshness to it. Ancient redwood forests soar up into a

cerulean sky. The mountains themselves have been torn and thrust into beautifully rugged

formations by the perilous San Andreas Fault, which lies below them.

Thanks to the tangle of mountain crevices, canyons, hilltops, craggy slopes, knolls, and

valleys, plus varying altitudes and orientations to the sun, the vineyards of the Santa Cruz

Mountains can have widely different mesoclimates. In general, the higher vineyards (some

are more than 2,000 feet/600 meters in elevation) and those facing the Pacific Ocean are

considerably cooler than lower vineyards and those facing east, toward the warmer interior

valleys.

The individuality of the vineyards explains why the region is known, seeming

paradoxically, not only for cool-climate varieties like pinot noir and chardonnay but also

for those that like more warmth, including zinfandel and cabernet sauvignon. What all

vines here do share is the beneficial struggle of growing in the region’s thin, stony

mountain soil.

For more than forty-five years, winemaker Paul Draper has made one of California’ s most prestigious and age-worthy

cabernet sauvignon–based wines—Ridge Monte Bello—from the Santa Cruz Mountains.

Because vineyards here are neither easy to farm nor high-yielding, most of the district’s

seventy wineries are small-production companies making personality-driven wines.

Heading the list are three wineries with stellar reputations—Ridge Vineyards, Mount Eden

Vineyards, and David Bruce Winery.

Indeed, Ridge would be on most wine collectors’ A-lists—especially after the winery

came in first in the thirty-year retrospective of the famous Judgment of Paris Tasting of

1976 (see page 671). Y ear in and year out, Ridge’s wines are exemplary, and their cabernet

sauvignons are nothing short of majestic. They possess the utterly fascinating ability to be

refined yet powerful in the same split second. No wine illustrates the idea better than the

hauntingly rich, explosive Ridge cabernet sauvignon from the Monte Bello vineyard, first

planted in the Santa Cruz Mountains in 1855 and purchased by Ridge in 1959.

BORN TO RHÔNE

I first met Bonny Doon’s owner, Randall Grahm, a ponytailed, MIT-educated intellectual, in the mid-

eighties, a couple of years after he founded his vinous “dooniverse” in Santa Cruz. Even in the early

days, Bonny Doon was full of idiosyncratic wines and zany ways of showcasing them. What other winery

has owned two large spaceships? (Bonny Doon’s current flying machine is suspended from the ceiling of

the tasting room.)

Grahm’s love of wine took hold in Los Angeles in the 1970s, while he worked as a wine shop sales

clerk (mostly sweeping floors). With financial backing from his family, he eventually created Bonny Doon,

initially conceived as a winery devoted to pinot noir. But within a decade, Grahm had come under the

spell of Rhône varieties such as syrah, grenache, marsanne, and roussanne. Among his first wines was

the inaugural vintage (1984) of Le Cigare Volant, a sexy, syrah-based red that catapulted Grahm to fame

in California winemaking circles. It was an enological foot in the door, and Grahm (thereafter dubbed the

“Rhone Ranger”) went on to make dozens of successful wines from dozens of varieties that had

theretofore been largely overlooked by other California winemakers.

David Bruce Winery has a cult following for its pinot noirs, which are pinots to the

core—unpredictable (sometimes great, sometimes not so), but always full of character.

And the estate chardonnays from Mount Eden Vineyards have almost mythic stature. The

vineyards, on the crest of a mountain, were planted with chardonnay in 1948.

The super-creative winery known as Bonny Doon Vineyard is also located here, in a

hamlet named Bonny Doon. In the 1980s and 1990s, the erudite (if madcap)

owner/winemaker Randall Grahm was the first wine-maker to produce a string of

successful fine wines from obscure or never-before-tried-in-California grape varieties, and

his impact on the California wine industry was profound.

MONTEREY COUNTY

Descending southeast from the vast arc of Monterey Bay lies Monterey County, the largest

appellation within the northern part of the Central Coast. There are about 40,000 acres

(16,200 hectares) of vines here, plus thousands upon thousands of acres of vegetables in

the fertile garden known as the Salinas V alley. (Indeed, the Salinas V alley, nicknamed the

“lettuce capital of the world,

” is also where more than 50 percent of all the United States’

broccoli, strawberries, mushrooms, spinach, artichokes, and chile peppers are grown.)

Although there were Franciscan missions in Monterey in the eighteenth century, the

area did not really emerge as a wine region until the 1960s and 1970s, when extensive

urban development in Livermore and Santa Clara, plus rising land prices in Sonoma and

Napa, caused many wineries to look elsewhere for suitable vineyard land. Monterey, an

easily accessible, agricultural coastal region, was just waiting to be tapped.

The southern part of Monterey can be extremely hot, but the northern part of the county

is a chilly tunnel for cold winds that whip in off the whitecapped waters of Monterey Bay

(home to otters, seals, and migrating whales). The severity of the winds can be seen in the

permanently bowed trees, many of which are stripped of growth on their ocean-facing

side. While a little bit of wind is generally good for vines (it cools them and helps guard

against mildew and rot), extreme wind can cause the cells responsible for photosynthesis

to shut down, inhibiting the ripening of the grapes. In a region that’s already cool,

anything that further constrains ripening is no blessing. Thus, the top vintners have had to

be extremely careful in selecting protected vineyard sites. Even then, Monterey’s cabernet

sauvignons often have a green tobacco note to them, the result of borderline ripeness.

There are just under forty wineries in Monterey, and a considerable number of wineries

located elsewhere buy Monterey grapes. Chardonnay and pinot noir are the dominant

grapes in the county, especially in the cooler northern part, where wines of real character

can be made. Caymus and Morgan are just two of the best producers making lively

Monterey wines.

The irrepressible Gary Pisoni, owner of Pisoni Vineyards in the Santa Lucia Highlands. Pisoni expanded the idea of just

how luscious and rich California pinot noir could be.

SANTA LUCIA HIGHLANDS, CHALONE, MOUNT HARLAN, AND CARMEL

VALLEY

Within Monterey County and its neighbor, San Benito County, are several small A V As, the

most significant of which are Santa Lucia Highlands, Chalone, Mount Harlan, and Carmel

V alley.

In the past decade, Santa Lucia Highlands has come on as a stellar place for pinot noir

—and not just any pinot noir, but rich, bold, flashy, scrumptious pinot. (Some Burgundy-

loving arch-traditionalists say Santa Lucia Highlands’ pinot noirs are, in fact, too rich and

dense.) The nearly 6,000 acres (2,400 hectares) of vineyards here undulate along a single

impressive southeastern-facing bank of the Santa Lucia mountain range. As you drive

south through the Salinas V alley, the vineyards are easy to see, folded up into crevices

1,000 to 2,000 feet (300 to 600 meters) above the valley below, and gently exposed to cold

fog that sweeps down from Monterey Bay morning and night. For all of its proximity to

the sea, this is a very dry place (often no more than 15 inches/38 centimeters of rainfall a

year) and the well-drained, sandy loam and decomposed granite soils have been carried

down canyons in the hillsides on alluvial fans for centuries.

The name to know here is Gary—there are two of them, local childhood friends who

reportedly shared tractors as toddlers. Gary Pisoni is the owner of Pisoni Vineyards and in

many ways the ambassador of the Highlands. (In a family debate, to convince his farmer

father to expand beyond growing vegetables and plant a vineyard, Pisoni challenged,

“Have you ever been to a $250 lettuce tasting?” His father relented.) Pisoni’s original 5

acres (2 hectares) of pinot noir vines, planted in 1982, are rumored to be “Samsonite

cuttings” (that is, brought to the U.S. surreptiously in a suitcase) from a “famous domaine

in V osne-Romanée, Burgundy.

” Gary Franscioni (the other Gary) owns vineyards with

Pisoni (Rosella’s Vineyard, and one called simply Gary’s), as well as a winery known as

ROAR, which makes phenomenally complex, riveting pinot noirs that sell out

instantaneously. Besides Pisoni Vineyards and ROAR, there are dozens of small producers

making fantastic pinot noirs here, as well as wineries located elsewhere that make pinot

noir from Santa Lucia Highlands grapes.

In addition to pinot noir, Santa Lucia Highlands is known for chardonnay as well as

impressive syrah. Many top wineries in other parts of California buy grapes from Santa

Lucia Highlands, including Kosta Browne, Siduri, Peter Michael, Belle Glos, Capiaux,

Copain, and others.

Chalone and Mount Harlan are two very tiny A V As; indeed, Mount Harlan has but one

winery: Calera. The Chalone appellation (the name comes from the Native Americans

who lived there) is home to Chalone Vineyard. Both Chalone Vineyard and the Calera

Wine Company were founded by individuals maniacally possessed by the conviction that

chalky limestone (a major component in the best soils of Burgundy) was essential for

world-class pinot noir and chardonnay.

In the case of Chalone Vineyard, that individual was Curtis Tamm, a Burgundian who,

in 1919, found limestone in the Gavilan mountain range and planted a vineyard. This first

Chalone Vineyard is the oldest still producing in Monterey County. Chalone today is

owned by the drinks giant Diageo.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Y ale- and Oxford-educated Josh Jensen also went

looking for limestone in California. He, too, found it in the Gavilan mountain range

where, on Mount Harlan, he established the Calera Wine Company in 1975. Calera’s six

pinot noirs, named after people who have been important to Jensen—Jensen (his father),

Mills, Reed, Selleck, Ryan, and deVilliers—are handcrafted from single vineyards and

made in what can only be described as a purist’s manner. Like most of the best pinots, they

are variable and capricious: Sometimes they’re stunning, sometimes not quite so.

Carmel V alley is named for the postcard-quaint tourist town of Carmel nearby, and the

Carmel River watershed. There are only a handful of wineries spread over this

mountainous area, including, notably, Bernardus and Heller Estate. Most of the better

vineyards sit on warm, east-facing benches and ridges. Unlike the rest of Monterey, which

is known for white wine, this is prime cabernet sauvignon and merlot territory.

WHEN YOU VISIT… THE NORTH CENTRAL COAST

THE WINERIES of the North Central Coast are spread out over a large and diverse

area. Several of the most beautiful are tucked into remote enclaves in the coastal

mountains. They are not on a tourist route, so calling ahead for an appointment is a

must.

IF MONEY IS NO OBJECT , don’t miss an overnight stay, or at least dinner, at either the

Highlands Inn, on Highland Drive in Carmel, or the Ventana Inn, on Highway 1 in Big

Sur. Two of the most spectacular, secluded hotels on California’s coast, each has

stunning views of the Pacific Ocean.

The North Central Coast Wines to Know

WHITES

CALERA

VIOGNIER | MT . HARLAN

100% viognier

Viognier is a tough-go in California. Too often the wine tastes like spongy orange Halloween candy. But since

1975, Calera has made one of the few excellent viogniers in the state. Long, distinctive, and elegant, its beautiful

aromas are pure and floral—not cosmetic-y. There’s also a lovely sense of tangerine juice and pith. But what’s

especially distinctive are the edgy, tactile hints of white pepper and minerality that give the wine dynamism. Calera,

one of the blue chips of the North Central Coast, also has an illustrious track record with pinot noir.

DA VID BRUCE

CHARDONNAY | SANTA CRUZ MOUNTAINS

100% chardonnay

High in the Santa Cruz Mountains, David Bruce makes Meursault-like chardonnays. With their deep golden, nutty,

luscious flavors, they are reminiscent of those Turkish pastries where layers of phyllo are drizzled with honey and

walnuts. And as with good white Burgundy, the opulence and creaminess is beautifully balanced—in this case by a

fresh line of crisp, appley flavor and little sparks of spice. David Bruce winery was founded in the early 1960s by

David Bruce, a young doctor who had just completed his residency. Bruce purchased 40 acres (16 hectares) of

remote land in the Santa Cruz Mountains and cleared it, by hand, himself. Bruce’s chardonnay was one of the

original eleven California wines to be included in the famous Judgment of Paris Tasting of 1976 (see page 671).

The winery is also known for its stellar pinot noirs.

REDS

ROAR

PINOT NOIR | SANTA LUCIA HIGHLANDS

100% pinot noir

Saying ROAR to a pinot noir lover is a little like saying “Ferrari” to a person who loves cars. Some of the most

luscious, complex, and rich pinots in the state are made by this small producer. Besides the regular (delicious) Santa

Lucia bottling, there are two other, especially highly sought-after ROARs—Gary’s Vineyard and, a fraction more

expensive, Pisoni Vineyard. Both are phenomenal wines. Gary’s Vineyard lifts off the palate like a rocket launcher

and is infused with attractive peat and cranberry flavors (a great pinot for Scotch lovers). The Pisoni Vineyard pinot

noir is dense, long, and almost muscular for pinot noir. But its tiny explosions of spice keep it fascinating and alive

on the palate. ROAR gets its name from the sound of the Monterey Bay winds roaring through the winery’s

vineyards.

CALERA

PINOT NOIR | MILLS | MT . HARLAN

100% pinot noir

Calera makes six single-vineyard pinot noirs from vineyards on limestone soil in the heart of the Gavilan

Mountains. Each year they are some of the most ethereal, delicate, refined pinots in California. Picking a favorite is

next to impossible, for what they all possess is the seamless beauty of elegant fruit that drives pinot noir lovers

mad. Calera’s pinots are not superfruity, and they don’t jump out of the glass with richness. Indeed, in a blind

tasting, most professionals confuse them with subtle Burgundies for their contemplative character.

BONNY DOON VINEYARD

LE CIGARE VOLANT | RESERVE | CENTRAL COAST

Approximately 30% syrah, 30% grenache, 20% mourvèdre, 20% cinsaut

Randall Grahm’s first (1984) and leading Rhône wine, Le Cigare V olant, is modeled after the wines of

Châteauneuf-du-Pape and takes its name from a real law on that city’s books prohibiting flying saucers—or “flying

cigars,

” as they’re called in France—from landing in the region’s vineyards. Dark and savory, Le Cigare V olant is

not a massive wine nor even a wine that’s “Californian” in style. Rather, it’s an homage to the delicious Rhône

gestalt of flavors—wild herbs, roasted game, leather, salt, white pepper, and a wonderful gush of cherry preserves

smack in the center. There is a “regular” Le Cigare V olant, but the Reserve—aged in large glass jars known as

carboys in English and called, more beautifully, bonbonnes in French—is more compelling, more vivid, and the

wine you want.

RIDGE

MONTE BELLO | SANTA CRUZ MOUNTAINS

Approximately 70% cabernet sauvignon, with the remainder merlot and petit verdot

As structured, powerful, and impeccably balanced as a First Growth Bordeaux, the Ridge Monte Bello cabernet

sauvignons are majestic wines. Opening one from a great vintage when it’s young is almost criminal, for while the

inky, dense, young version will knock you out with its flavor impact, older ones are mesmerizing. With a decade or

more of age, Monte Bello unfurls into a hauntingly complex wine that is quite simply one of the greatest cabernets

in the United States. For anyone who has tasted an older Monte Bello, it will come as no surprise that this was the

wine that placed first in the thirty-year reenactment of the Judgment of Paris Tasting. Ridge was founded in 1959 by

four Stanford Research Institute engineers, who still own it; the winery’s famous wine-maker, Paul Draper, is still at

the helm after forty years.

LIVERMORE V ALLEY

East and slightly south of San Francisco is one of California’s most historically influential

wine regions, the small, 15-mile-long-(24-kilometer) Livermore V alley. Some of the

state’s most important wineries were begun here over a century ago, including Wente,

Concannon, and Cresta Blanca (now gone). Atypically for valleys in California, the

Livermore V alley runs east-west. Although it can be brightly sunny and as hot as blazes

during the day, the valley becomes an enormous wind tunnel by late afternoon.

Temperatures can drop by a full 50°F (28°C) at night. The combination of bright light,

heat, and strong winds, followed by nighttime cooling, plus the valley’s shallow soil, is

reminiscent of parts of southern France.

Among the top wineries here, Wente, in particular, has made remarkable contributions

not solely to Livermore V alley but to the California wine industry as a whole—especially

concerning chardonnay. Most of the chardonnay grapes grown in the state today, for

example, are Wente clones or derived from Wente clones, including California’s most

planted chardonnay clone, known as clone 4 (technically, Foundation Plant Sciences

Clone 04). The Wente clones, as well as other clones derived from these, were the result of

painstaking genetic research that Ernest Wente conducted over his lifetime. Son of the

winery’s founder, Carl H. Wente, Ernest began experimenting with chardonnay in 1912,

when the grape was all but unheard of in California and only a minuscule amount was

planted, most of it in Livermore. Ernest imported his chardonnay from the nursery at the

University of Montepellier, France, still considered one of the leading viticultural schools

in France. Today Wente continues to make wonderful chardonnays in a variety of styles,

from full and buttery to a fresh, unoaked style.

Most of the sauvignon blanc in California came from cuttings brought initially

to Livermore V alley from Bordeaux’s famous Château d’Y quem.

The current generations of Wentes: Phillip, Carolyn, Karl, Christine, and Eric. The Wente family brought some of the

first chardonnay to California from France in 1912.

Livermore’s other leading historic winery is Concannon, built in 1883 (the same year as

Wente) by Irish immigrant and devout Catholic James Concannon. During his lifetime,

Joseph, James Concannon’s son, sent a barrel of the Concannon muscat de Frontignan to

the pope every five years. Joseph’s brother Jim was the first to introduce a varietal petite

sirah in California, in 1961. Concannon is now owned by The Wine Group, the third

largest wine company in the U.S. and makers of Franzia wine-in-a-box.

The Wentes and Concannons were helped significantly by the ambitions of another

prominent Livermore figure, newspaper journalist turned winemaker Charles Wetmore.

Just before founding Cresta Blanca in 1882, Wetmore persuaded the California legislature

to establish the state viticultural commission. As the commission’s first president and

CEO, Wetmore headed straight for Europe, where he obtained cuttings from prestigious

sources, including cuttings of sauvignon blanc and sémillon from no less than Bordeaux’s

Château d’Y quem. Those cuttings became the plant material for vineyards in Livermore,

which, in turn, provided it to other vineyards all over the state. Thus, the leading clone of

sauvignon blanc now grown in California (called clone 1) is Wetmore’s acquisition from

Château d’Y quem.

Early on, Livermore V alley thrived not only because of the dynamism of its first

vintners and its suitability for viticulture, but also because of its close proximity to San

Francisco. Sadly, the latter would also prove—almost—to be the valley’s undoing.

Housing divisions, industrial parks, and an endless stream of urban development

throughout the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s gobbled up Livermore’s vineyards with

frightening finality. By the late 1980s, thousands of acres of grapes had simply

disappeared. The valley has initiated an innovative land-use comeback, and there are now

some fifty wineries in the region.

Among the top Livermore wineries are Wente and Concannon, along with Steven Kent,

McGrail, Kalin, Fenestra, Page Mill, and Darcie Kent.

PASO ROBLES AND YORK MOUNTAIN

About halfway between San Francisco and Los Angeles (but light-years away from the

cosmopolitan way of life) is Paso Robles, with its rustic, country western feel. (If you’ve

never seen a horse drinking beer in a bar—surely a seminal experience for anyone who

appreciates beverages—you’ll want to mark your calendar for the annual Pioneer Day

celebration at the Pine Street Saloon in October.) Here, along California’s quiet mid-

Central Coast, are 26,000 acres (10,500 hectares) of Paso Robles vineyards and more than

230 wineries.

TABLAS CREEK

T ablas Creek Vineyard was established in 1989, when the Perrin family of Château de Beaucastel, in

Châteauneuf-du-Pape, France, and Robert Hass, famed U.S. importer and founder of Vineyard Brands,

purchased 120 acres (50 hectares) in Paso Robles after a four-year search throughout California for the

optimal site to grow Rhône varieties. In 1990, the partners began the lengthy process of importing vines

from the Château de Beaucastel estate, including several clones of mourvèdre, grenache noir, syrah,

counoise, roussanne, viognier, marsanne, grenache blanc, and picpoul blanc. After a three-year, USDA-

mandated indexing process to ensure the vines were virus-free, the vines were ready to be multiplied

(eventually reaching some 200,000 annually) and planted at T ablas Creek, both for the winery’s own use

and to be sold to others. California producers who have planted T ablas Creek clonal material include

Ridge, Bonny Doon, Qupé, Zaca Mesa, and Stolpman, among many others.

The A V A is the most dramatic exception to the generally cool climates of the middle

and southern Central Coast. A generally very warm expanse of sun-baked, oak-studded

hills (the original name, El Paso de Robles, means “the pass of oaks” in Spanish), Paso

Robles is shielded from the cool, maritime influence of the Pacific Ocean by the almost

solid curtain of the Santa Lucia Range on the A V A ’s western side. That said, producers

here are quick to point out whether their vineyards are on the slightly cooler and hillier

western side of Paso Robles, closest to the ocean (the “west side”

—considered the better

part of the region), or the flatter, hotter eastern part.

EDNA V ALLEY AND ARROYO GRANDE

At 35 square miles and 67 square miles (91 square kilometers and 174 square kilometers), respectively,

Edna Valley and Arroyo Grande may be small viticultural areas, but they are pinot noir and chardonnay

edens. Located about 40 miles (64 kilometers) south of Paso Robles, both areas are close to the sea

and profoundly influenced by its cool, damp breezes. These coastal effects temper Edna Valley’s climate

enough to create one of the longest growing seasons of any wine region in California. Arroyo Grande is

even cooler, being blanketed in fog for most of the day (which begins to explain why pinot noir thrives

here).

Edna Valley was one of the first areas where Spanish missionaries planted the mission grape, but the

region lay neglected for centuries until the Goss family planted vineyards in 1973, and started Chamisal

Vineyards. Arroyo Grande was similarly brought out of obscurity in the second half of the twentieth

century, thanks to Maison Deutz, the California subsidiary of the Champagne house Deutz, which

purchased land in Arroyo Grande in 1982, but sadly no longer makes wine there.

T oday, the most well-known pinot noirs (and they are sensational) are from Chamisal and Laetitia, and

the best chardonnays are made by Edna Valley Vineyards and T alley Vineyards. In addition, using

grapes from Edna Valley, tiny Alban Vineyards makes one of the most sensual viogniers in California.

The significant variation between hot daytime and nighttime temperatures, often as

great as 50°F (28°C), saves the best wines from being simply overripe and overwrought.

In addition, many of the top wines are the result of vines planted in calcareous clays

(limestones), which, in particular, can be found on the west side of Paso Robles, closer

toward the ocean.

For years, the top wineries of Paso Robles felt that the region needed to be divided into

smaller A V As that would reflect the overall region’s diversity. In 2014, that’s exactly what

happened. The Bureau of Tax and Trade approved the largest appellation proposal in U.S.

history and established eleven new appellations within Paso Robles: Adelaida District,

Creston District, El Pomar District, Paso Robles Estrella District, Paso Robles Geneseo

District, Paso Robles Highlands District, Paso Robles Willow Creek District, San Juan

Creek, San Miguel District, Santa Margarita Ranch, and the Templeton Gap District. It

will undoubtedly be many years before the distinctive characteristics of the wines from

these A V As are known.

The rocky, limestone-laced vineyards of Tablas Creek in Paso Robles.

As for grapes, the most widely planted varieties in Paso Robles are cabernet sauvignon,

merlot, syrah, zinfandel, and chardonnay (in that order). Indeed, some of the syrah planted

in California is thought to be descended from syrah vines planted by Paso Robles’s Eberle

Winery in 1975. Later, in the late 1990s, the nursery at Tablas Creek was the source of

200,000 cuttings a year of Rhône varieties, much of which was syrah.

Although the Central Coast has a reputation for expansive vineyards yielding high

volumes of grapes, nearly two-thirds of wineries in Paso Robles produce fewer than five

thousand cases annually. Additionally, 95 percent of wineries are family owned and

operated.

A winter sunset in the dry-farmed, wide-spaced, head-pruned zinfandel vineyards of Dusi Vineyard. The Dusi family has

been farming zinfandel grapes in Paso Robles since 1924.

Among the top wineries of Paso Robles are Saxum, Turley, L’Aventure, and Daou

Vineyards. Additionally, Ridge Vineyards (located in the Santa Cruz Mountains) makes

one of its twelve exquisite zinfandels from Paso Robles grapes; and Andrew Murray

Vineyards (located in the Santa Ynez V alley) makes devastatingly good grenache from

Paso.

Just west of Paso Robles, on the eastern side of the Santa Lucia Range, the Y ork

Mountain A V A—the smallest in the mid-Central Coast—sits more than 1,500 feet (460

meters) high in the mountains, near a deep gash in the range known as the Templeton Gap.

This cool-climate viticultural area is only 7 miles (11 kilometers) from the Pacific Ocean.

Although today there are only 50 acres (20 hectares) of vineyards, the first winery on the

Central Coast was established here. Originally known as Ascension Winery and later as

Y ork Mountain Winery, it was built by trailblazer Andrew Jackson Y ork in the late

nineteenth century using bricks that were hand-formed and fired onsite. Alas, the building

was devastated by the 2003 Paso Robles earthquake, but it is being rebuilt by its new

owner, Epoch Winery.

BIEN NACIDO

In the early 1980s, when I went to Santa Barbara wine country for the first time (amazingly enough, on

assignment for Playboy magazine), Bien Nacido was already famous. At the time, it was highly unusual

for an American vineyard to be well known, especially one in the Santa Maria Valley of Santa Barbara

County (itself not well known then). But the name Bien Nacido, which means “well born,

” said it all.

Indeed, it seemed like a majority of the greatest wines coming out of Santa Barbara County all had the

words Bien Nacido Vineyards on their labels. The sloped vineyard, with panoramic views facing

southwest, had been planted in 1973 by a multigenerational farming family named Miller. It was a huge

vineyard—600 acres (240 hectares) of mostly chardonnay, pinot noir, and syrah—divided into small

blocks that were named alphabetically. Winemakers, then and now, contracted for the fruit by specific

rows of grapes. In 2007, after nearly thirty-five years of custom farming, the family decided to make their

own wines as well. Bien Nacido pinot noir from Bien Nacido Vineyards (eight rows from Q block) is

classically bien nacido: elegant and sumptuous.

THE SOUTH CENTRAL COAST:

SANTA BARBARA COUNTY , SANTA MARIA VALLEY , SANTA YNEZ VALLEY ,

STA. RITA HILLS, BALLARD CANYON, AND HAPPY CANYON

About an hour and a half’s drive north of Los Angeles, the American Viticultural Area

Santa Barbara County contains two large A V As within it: Santa Maria V alley and Santa

Ynez V alley. Telescoping down further within the Santa Ynez V alley, there are three

smaller A V As: Sta. Rita Hills, Ballard Canyon, and Happy Canyon. Collectively, these are

called the South Central Coast, and they are among the most dynamic wine regions in the

state. The sheer concentration of supertalented, independently minded winemakers here is

astounding, from the wise old guard (men like Richard Sanford, Jim Clendenen, and Bob

Lindquist) to younger winemakers crafting some of the most delicious, enticing wines in

the state (Greg Brewer, Jenne Lee Bonaccorsi, Paul Lato, Steve Clifton, Gavin Chanin,

Matt Murphy, Adam Lee, Sashi Moorman, and dozens of others).

Unlike the North Central Coast, where the viticultural areas are distinctly different, the

South Central Coast’s A V As share an overriding style and character. As a result, I’ll talk

about them jointly, while noting some climatic differences.

In a state that is never at a loss for beauty, the Santa Ynez and Santa Maria valleys may

be the most alluring wine regions. In the spring and fall, the sunlight has an unreal clarity

to it, as if the light itself were looking at you. The hills are curved in feminine roundness.

Immense mesas spread out magnificently, then stop and fall into the scarred arroyos that

split them. Ancient oaks, with their tangled arms, seem twisted in their own embrace.

Everywhere, cattle and horses graze. Fields of strawberries go on forever. Within an hour,

you’re so mellow that drinking really good pinot noir strikes you as a constitutional right,

not to mention a necessary part of your life’s work.

Paradoxically, the South Central Coast is one of the oldest wine regions in California—

and, at the same time, among the hippest and newest. Spanish missions and vineyards

were strung like beads on a necklace here in the eighteenth century. As of the early 1980s,

the South Central Coast had become a haven for tiny, imaginative wine companies on

shoestring budgets, headed by maverick winemakers who intuitively understood the

region’s potential (wineries like Sanford, Au Bon Climat, Qupé, Foxen, and Zaca Mesa,

for example). By the late 1980s, however, so many delicious wines were coming out of the

region that big companies like Robert Mondavi, Beringer, and Kendall-Jackson moved in

and snapped up huge tracts of vineyard land at comparatively rock-bottom prices. It

seemed like the indie character of the South Central Coast would be lost in a sea of

corporate winemaking.

THE WINE GHETTO

In distance, Santa Barbara County may be the closest wine region to Hollywood. But in style, you

couldn’t get farther away than the decidedly reverse-chic “wine ghetto.

” Located in the town of Lompoc,

in the Sobhani Industrial Park, the ghetto is a confab of small, hip tasting rooms and wine production

facilities. The first winemaker to set up shop here was Rick Longoria, who did so in 1998. Longoria didn’t

have the money to build an impressive winery (or any winery at all, for that matter), and he figured the

industrial park’s proximity to his vineyards would be advantageous. T oday, the blue and white industrial

buildings house more than twenty brands, including Evening Land, Samsara, Fiddlehead, Stolpman, and,

of course, Longoria. The laid-back atmosphere, exuberant camaraderie, world-class wines, and ethno

food trucks all add up to what has become, against the odds, a not-to-be-missed wine destination.

But that has not happened. If anything, these valleys continue to be a hotbed of young

energy, originality, and a fervor to make great wine. Indeed, and not so surprisingly, some

of the newest, tiny wine companies have been started not by trained winemakers but by

sommeliers who taught themselves winemaking and for whom the South Central Coast is

the place to be.

Despite a southerly latitude, parts of the South Central Coast are by far among the

coolest wine areas in the state. The reason: the direction in which the main valleys lie.

During California’s tumultuous geologic past, most of the state’s mountain ranges were

formed in a north/south direction, tearing open valleys that also ran essentially north to

south (think of Napa and Sonoma as well as the huge Central V alley, for example).

Unusually for California, however, the wine areas of Santa Ynez and Santa Maria were

formed so that the valleys run basically east to west, enabling them to become direct

conduits for fog and cold offshore winds that barrel inland from the Pacific Ocean, making

summertime temperatures hover around the low 70s (around 21°C). The soils here have

also been influenced by the Pacific Ocean. Most are sedimentary soils left from ancient

seabeds, now often covered by many feet of wind-blown sand. Indeed, in the far western

parts of the valleys—in an area such as Sta. Rita Hills, for example—the soils are often

fossilized, diatom-rich sand dunes that have been weathered by centuries of age.

Jim Clendenen, one of the pioneers and most influential winemakers of the South Central Coast.

Within an hour of being in the South Central Coast, you’re so mellow that

drinking really good pinot noir strikes you as a constitutional right, not to

mention a necessary part of your life’s work.

Of the two main regions, Santa Maria is the most northern and Santa Ynez is just

southeast of Santa Maria. Within Santa Ynez, from west (coldest climate) to east (warmest

climate) are: Sta. Rita Hills, Ballard Canyon, and Happy Canyon.

Sitting at the far western end, the small cluster of hills known as the Sta. Rita Hills was

considered far too cold for grape growing until 1970, when maverick vintners Richard

Sanford and his partner Michael Benedict decided to take the risk and plant pinot noir

there. The vineyard they established—known as Sanford & Benedict—went on to become

one of the most legendary vineyards in California, and proof that the Sta. Rita Hills, one of

the coldest parts of the South Central Coast, was capable of producing pinot noirs with an

elegance that rivaled Burgundy. Today, some fifty wineries are located in Sta. Rita Hills or

make wine (primarily pinot noir and chardonnay) from vineyards here.

As you travel east, inland and farther from the ocean, you come to Ballard Canyon and

eventually Happy Canyon. Both are known for some devastatingly good syrahs, more on

which in a moment. Plus, in Happy Canyon, good cabernet sauvignons are now being

made, along with wonderful sauvignon blancs (try the delicious sauvignons from Grassini

Vineyards and from Margerum, especially the one called Sibarite). Finally, a piece of

history that cannot go unmentioned: The evocatively titled Happy Canyon got its name

because it was once a moonshine-making site for local dude ranches. It’s also where

Hollywood directors filmed feel-good westerns like The Lone Ranger. (And yes, the

stallion Silver—as in “hi-ho Silver!”

—lived here.)

As for grapes and the wines made from them, chardonnay makes up about 40 percent

of the grapes grown in the Santa Maria V alley and Santa Ynez V alley. To me, the wines

made from them are some of the most distinct, precise, and complex chardonnays in the

state. Chardonnays like those from Diatom, Lafond, Sandhi, Au Bon Climat and its sister

winery, Clendenen Family Vineyards, Melville Estate, and Paul Lato, for example, have

pristine flavors thanks to their through-line of vibrating acidity. Y et, they are lushly

textured at the same time. In this regard, they are like Burgundian Premier Crus. There’s

also a fantastic sense of exotic fruit about them (quince, bergamot, kaffir lime) plus a very

apparent minerality or salinity—what longtime wine-maker Rick Longoria calls a “chalky,

rocky, salty” character, perhaps from the region’s sandy seabed soils replete with marine

fossils.

Many of California’ s top wine regions surround Catholic missions founded in the 1700s. From San Diego and Santa

Barbara in the south to Sonoma in the north, the missions were strung out like pearls on a necklace, each a one-day

horseback ride from the next.

As for pinot noir, the South Central Coast makes, as I’ve said, some of the most elegant

pinots in the state. They are absolutely driven by vividly bright fruit and spice flavors—a

pinot lover looking just for earthiness won’t find much in these wines. (I think of them as

tasting like tiny wild woodland strawberries in the forest, not the forest itself.) And

although they do not taste tart, South Central Coast pinot noirs have a structure that comes

from cool fruit with lots of acid. As a result, the wines have a precise, silky, tight-knit

character, almost as if the fruit is spring-loaded. Then, once you sip, all that fruit explodes

into aromas and flavors. Many of these pinots benefit from very early bud-break, then a

very long, gentle growing season (considered one of the core requirements for complexity

in wine). Moreover, the absence of heat spikes means the grapes retain their lovely

aromatics and crisp acidity, giving them bright flavors. Says winemaker Greg Brewer,

“Ripening in California is like a big and rapid heartbeat; except down here. Here, the

heartbeat is slow and long.

”

Finally, a word about syrah. The South Central Coast may well be syrah’s ultimate

California home—that singular place where it consistently makes uncommonly good

wine. For now, and for sure, this is true: Syrah here is huge, meaty, thick, and wild. The

vivid, almost blueberry syrup-like character is slashed with spiciness and something like

wild lavender. They are syrahs evocative of blood and strength. Indeed, one of the top

syrah producers here is Sanguis—the Latin word for “blood” or “strength.

” Also fantastic

and worth seeking out: Jonata, Refugio Ranch, The Ojai Vineyard, Stolpman, Margerum,

Andrew Murray, Qupé, Sans Liege, and Zotovich.

WHEN YOU VISIT… THE SOUTH CENTRAL COAST

SANTAS YNEZ, MARIA, AND RITA are among the most charming, laid-back-but-

sophisticated wine regions in the state, and hospitality here runs deep. Since the

countryside itself is drop-dead beautiful, wandering around the countryside among

wineries is a simply fantastic experience. Or, wander around in town. Santa Barbara

County has a number of small towns virtually devoted to tasting. In Los Olivos, for

example, the thirty plus tasting rooms can keep you busy for hours.

THE RESTAURANT not to be missed in this part of wine country is The Hitching Post II

in Buellton, a no-frills local hangout (made famous in the movie Sideways and usually

full of winemakers) where the specialty is grilled red meats.

The South Central Coast Wines to Know

WHITES

DIATOM

CHARDONNAY | MIY A | STA. RITA HILLS

100% chardonnay

After I tasted this wine for the first time (in 2012; it was the 2010 vintage), my view of California chardonnay

changed forever. Frankly, I didn’t think California’s chardonnays would ever broach this level of exquisiteness. But

Diatom’s Miya (the name means “Beautiful Night”) is as pristine and exact and pent up as a wave about to break in

the early morning sea. Avant-garde winemaker Greg Brewer says he is motivated by “a Japanese aesthetic,

”

“negative space,

” “the movement of the restricted voice,

” and a “dread for the explicit.

” This is not conventional

winespeak, to be sure. But few words are needed anyway. The wine, in this case, actually does say it all.

MELVILLE

CHARDONNAY | INOX | STA. RITA HILLS

100% chardonnay

Over the past decade, Melville has quietly become one of the most exciting wineries on the South Central Coast.

Indeed, the winery makes such soulful, sensual pinot noirs, it’s almost a crime to write about anything else. But

Melville’s Inox (the name means “stainless-steel” in French) is an amazingly lush chardonnay—every molecule of

which is based simply on the purity of the fruit (the wine is not exposed to oak barrels). Of course, dozens of

chardonnays in California are now made in the “unoaked” style—but none of them comes close to the complexity

and excellence of this one.

AU BON CLIMAT

CHARDONNAY | BIEN NACIDO VINEYARD | SANTA MARIA VALLEY

100% chardonnay

When he began his winery in 1982, Jim Clendenen, the owner and winemaker of Au Bon Climat, was an irreverent,

irascible nonconformist with fierce opinions and colossal talent. Now, all these years later, he’s exactly the same,

with one added trait—he’s inspired and mentored more young winemakers than perhaps any other winemaker in

southern California. As such, his artistic impact on the region and its wines has been profound. As a young man,

Clendenen immersed himself in the artisanal wine-making of Burgundy. Today, his wines still evoke that early love

affair with Burgundian chardonnay and pinot noir. This chardonnay from the famed Bien Nacido Vineyard, for

example, is as voluptuous, creamy, nutty, lees-y, and earthy as can be, and yet it’s vibrant, precise, complex, and

imbued with a pulsing force of acidity (hello, Bâtard-Montrachet). And for bigger-is-always-better drinkers, this

wine’s sister, Au Bon Climat’s Nuits-Blanches au Bouge, steps it up just a notch. I asked Jim what Nuits-Blanches

au Bouge meant, and here was his answer: “A nuits-blanches (white night) is a night without sleeping in French

slang. A bouge, in the French dictionary, is a pig warren or den, or in slang, a brothel. So a Nuits-Blanches au

Bouge is a sleepless passage in a decadent environment. Oenologically speaking, it is a multiple-entendres of

nuanced but daunting complexity.

”

REDS

BREWER-CLIFTON

PINOT NOIR | MOUNT CARMEL | STA. RITA HILLS

100% pinot noir

Greg Brewer and Steve Clifton are, like many business partners, very different men. But when it comes to

winemaking, both are poets, able to find the deep and the meaningful. Somehow, they always coax out an extra

sense of purity, richness, and rhythm that then defines their wines. This Mount Carmel pinot noir, for example, is a

bottomless pond of kirschlike fruit, framed by echoes of spice, violets, and sea salt, plus a wonderful umami

character reminiscent of the savoriness of beef juices. All these hedonic flavors are carried on slow waves of

sensation, giving the wine an unreal sense of length. The small Mount Carmel vineyard, right in the heart of Sta.

Rita Hills, was first planted in 1992.

SIDURI

PINOT NOIR | CLOS PEPE VINEYARD | STA. RITA HILLS

100% pinot noir

Siduri is a tiny enterprise, which, in certain years and despite its size, makes an astounding twenty-five different

pinot noirs. I love this one in particular, from the Clos Pepe Vineyard, named for the first vineyard Stephen and

Catherine Pepe ever planted, which was in their backyard. Full of personality and refinement, it is a study in

contrasts. In the same sip, it is silky yet charged with firecrackers of spice. Long swaths of earthiness are

interspersed with flecks of espresso-like bitterness. There’s a coolness here (like menthol) at the same time that the

wine is infused with warm tones (like sun-baked raspberries).

SANFORD

PINOT NOIR | SANFORD & BENEDICT | STA. RITA HILLS

100% pinot noir

Y ear after year, the freshness, purity, beauty, lift, and sheer exquisiteness of this wine continue to amaze wine

professionals and pinot noir lovers alike, for in many ways, this was the pinot noir that first inspired a whole

generation of southern California wine-makers. Established in 1971 by maverick vintners Richard Sanford and

Michael Benedict, the Sanford & Benedict vineyard was the first vineyard in what today is the Sta. Rita Hills A V A.

Countless advice at the time warned the two men that they were out of their minds, for the region was considered

too close to the Pacific Ocean and therefore too cold to grow grapes. A few years later, Richard Sanford established

his eponymous winery and began making pinot noir with the Sanford & Benedict grapes. Today, Sanford Winery is

owned by the Terlato Wine Company, which continues to carefully make this crown jewel of the South Central

Coast.

JONATA

SYRAH | LA SANGRE DE JONATA | SANTA YNEZ VALLEY

97% syrah, 3% viognier

Jonata is a great example of the bold, distinctive, artisanal syrahs coming out of Santa Ynez. With its flavors

reminiscent of meat juices, charcuterie, and exotic spices, this wine clearly pays homage to Côte-Rôtie. Y et, with all

of the beautiful blueberry and blackberry fruit, it is also definitively Californian. The complexity here is almost a

kind of moodiness, as the wine explores the edges of bitterness, chalk, lavender, and violets. Jonata (pronounced

ho-NA-ta; it’s the Chumash Indian word for “live oak”) comes from grapes grown on a small part of a 600-acre

(240-hectare) ranch in Ballard Canyon. Winemaker Matt Dees has a degree in soil science, but is self-taught as a

winemaker. The owner of Jonata, billionaire sports-team and real estate tycoon Stan Kroenke, also owns Napa

V alley’s Screaming Eagle winery, the NFL’s St. Louis Rams, the NBA ’s Denver Nuggets, and the English soccer

club Arsenal.

THE OJAI VINEYARD

SYRAH | SOLOMON HILLS VINEYARD | SANTA MARIA VALLEY

100% syrah

Syrah—unhinged. (I’m not sure how a wine can take on the character of a psychological thriller, but this one has.)

The wild—almost savage—energy of flavors in this wine is mesmerizing: cedar, incense, sage, spice, and a deep,

rich, red meatiness, like an oxtail stew that has simmered for hours. But as primordial as the aromas and flavors are,

it’s the choreography—the way this wine detonates on the palate—that leaves you most impressed. Among wine

industry insiders, Adam Tolmach, the owner/winemaker of the tiny Ojai Vineyard, is considered one of the best

winemakers in California.

W ASHINGTON STATE

Most of the world’s classic grapes can grow in lots of places, but each has a kind of

spiritual home—a place (or sometimes places) where that grape can ascend beyond what

is merely good and be transformed into stunning wine. In the 1990s, Washington State,

much to most wine drinkers’ surprise, emerged as one of the great spiritual homes of

cabernet sauvignon and merlot. The phenomenon was startling, for only a dozen or so

years earlier most winemakers’ hopes were pinned on gewürztraminer, chardonnay, and

other white grapes that filled the vineyards. As it turns out, these grapes (which are still

widely grown in Washington) make good wine there. But nothing like the top tier of

cabernets and merlots.

By the late 1990s, with cabernet and merlot well established, two more grapes captured

the imaginations of Washington wine-growers: riesling and syrah. By the late 2000s,

Washington State made the best riesling in the country, and the state had become known as

a hotbed of fantastic, rich, complex syrahs that were the equal of (and some would argue

better than) syrah grown anywhere else in the United States.

What you notice immediately about the greatest Washington State cabernet sauvignons

and merlots (or blends of the two) is the concentration of the wines. It almost seems as

though, by some magical osmosis, they’ve been infused with the primal, lush berryness of

wild Northwest blackberries, boysenberries, raspberries, and cherries.

THE QUICK SIP ON W ASHINGTON STATE

WASHINGTON STATE is the second-largest wine-producing state in the United States

(after California), and is known for highly structured, deeply flavored cabernet

sauvignon, merlot, and syrah, as well as inspired rieslings.

WASHINGTON STATE is one of the few places in the U.S. (and indeed, in the world)

where many vines grow on their own roots (not on phylloxera-tolerant rootstocks).

VIRTUALLY ALL of Washington’s vineyards are in the dry, warm, eastern part of the

state, separated from the rainy western part by the Cascade Range.

The high-elevation Cascade Mountains form a rain shield, insuring that the wine regions in eastern Washington State

don’ t have Seattle’ s weather.

To the uninitiated, the idea that Washington can produce great wine seems, at first,

nonsensical. After all, the state is best known for its rain—a factor that led to the rise of its

famous coffeehouses (what else to do when it’s pouring?), including Starbucks, which

began here. However, virtually all of the state’s grapes (there are more than thirty

varieties) are grown not in the west, near Seattle, but in the arid, almost desertlike eastern

part of the state. The massive Cascade mountain range, which divides the two areas, is so

effective as a rain shield that eastern and western Washington are about as similar in

appearance as Montana and V ermont.

There are thirteen A V As in Washington State, the three most prominent of which are

the gigantic Columbia V alley, and within it, the two smaller but highly thought of

appellations Y akima V alley and Walla Walla V alley. Most of the other A V As are also

within the Columbia V alley A V A. They include Red Mountain, Horse Heaven Hills,

Wahluke Slope, Rattlesnake Hills, Snipes Mountain, Lake Chelan, Naches Heights, and

Ancient Lakes of Columbia V alley. Indeed there are only two appellations that fall outside

of the Columbia V alley: Columbia Gorge, on the Oregon-Washington border (in 1805, the

gorge was the route used by the Lewis and Clark Expedition to reach the Pacific), and the

smallest appellation in the state and the only one on the western side of the Cascades—

Puget Sound.

Although the first wine grapes were planted in Washington State by Italian and German

emigrants in the 1860s and 1870s, the modern wine industry was born a hundred years

later. Over the past few decades, the number of wineries in the state has increased rapidly.

In 1960, Washington State had fifteen wineries; in 1995, it had eighty-eight. By 2012,

there were just over 740.

The forerunners of Washington’s powerful merlots and cabernets were three wines,

pinot noir, grenache, and gewürztraminer, made in 1951 by a psychology professor in his

basement. Humble as those wines must have been, they held a promise. Indeed, a little

more than a decade later, the modern Washington wine industry began to take form. The

professor, Dr. Lloyd Woodburne, was a home winemaker who was soon joined in his

hobby by several of his university colleagues. They named themselves Associated

Vintners and began making wine together. As their skills and production increased, the

hobby turned serious. A commercial winery was built, and in 1967 the first wines—

cabernet sauvignon, gewürztra-miner, pinot noir, and riesling (then known as Johannisberg

riesling)—were produced. In 1984, Associated Vintners became Columbia Winery, one of

the first Washington State wineries devoted to premium wines.

THE MOST IMPORTANT W ASHINGTON STATE

WINES

LEADING WINES

CABERNET FRANC red

CABERNET SAUVIGNON red

CHARDONNAY white

MERLOT red

PINOT GRIS/PINOT GRIGIO white

RIESLING white (dry and sweet)

SAUVIGNON BLANC white

SYRAH red

WINES OF NOTE

FRUIT WINES MADE FROM RASPBERRIES, PEARS, AND OTHER FRUIT

GEWÜRZTRAMINER white

LEMBERGER red

MALBEC red

SÉMILLON white

SPARKLING WINES white

VIOGNIER white

DON’T CRY FOR ME W ALLA W ALLA

Wine and roses? That’s already had its day(s). Wine and cheese? Been there, done that. Wine and

onions? Okay, you’re listening. Walla Walla V alley—the tiny wine region in southeastern Washington—is

perhaps the only wine region in the world that is famous for both its delicious red wines and its delicious,

jumbo-size sweet onions—24 million pounds (11 million kilograms) of which are harvested each year.

Like the Vidalia from Georgia and the Maui from Hawaii, Walla Walla onions are low in sulfur (the

compound that makes you cry) and so sweet they can be eaten out of hand, as you would an apple.

Meanwhile, other wines were being produced in Washington, just as they had been for

decades. Mostly they were cheap, sweet, and fortified. After Prohibition, for example, the

companies Pommerelle and National Wine Company (NAWICO) made millions of

gallons of such stuff from Concord and other native varieties. Pommerelle and NAWICO

are now unknown names, but the company that they eventually became, after they merged,

is the most well-known and largest winery in Washington State: Chateau Ste. Michelle,

founded in 1965 under the name Ste. Michelle Vintners. Chateau Ste. Michelle

immediately hired the most famous United States wine consultant of the postwar era,

André Tchelistcheff. Cabernet sauvignon, pinot noir, sémillon, and grenache were the first

varieties the winery produced.

CHATEAU STE. MICHELLE

The seventh-largest winery in the United States is also the godmother of the Washington State wine

industry: Chateau Ste. Michelle. During the 1980s and 1990s, Chateau Ste. Michelle—with its

considerable financial, enological, and viticultural resources—helped push Washington State into the

limelight, and in the process created a market for the wines of countless top-notch small wineries like

Leonetti Cellar, Cayuse, and Betz Family. Ste. Michelle, owned by the tobacco company Altria (the

parent company of Philip Morris), farms more than 3,500 acres (1,400 hectares) of vineyards in the state

and contracts with growers for another 17,000 acres (6,900 hectares); indeed, some 60 percent of all

vineyard acreage in Washington State is devoted to grapes grown for Ste. Michelle. The winery, which

produces 2 million cases a year of good to very good wine, also owns several other brands, including

Columbia Crest (one of the best brands in the U.S. for inexpensive, easy-drinking, every-night wines),

Northstar, Spring Valley, Col Solare (a joint venture with Italy’s Piero Antinori), and Eroica (a joint venture

with Germany’s Dr. Loosen), plus two wineries in California’s Napa Valley: Conn Creek and (famously)

Stag’s Leap Wine Cellars.

For the next twenty years, the Washington State wine industry moved steadily along the

quality track. Every winery, from Chateau Ste. Michelle to the smallest family-run

operation, was on a steep learning curve, for Washington had almost nothing in common

—climatically or geographically—with its neighbors to the south, Oregon and California.

What it did share with the wine industries of these states was the discovery that the best

teacher was trial and error.

THE LAND, THE GRAPES, AND THE VINEYARDS

Were it not for several cold mountain rivers—the Columbia, the Y akima, the Snake, and

the Walla Walla—eastern Washington would be a desert. Rainfall here is no more than 8

inches (20 centimeters) per year on average (compared to western Washington’s 48

inches/122 centimeters). But the river valleys and the irrigation they make possible have

transformed the vast expanse into hauntingly beautiful rangeland, wheat fields, and

orchards. Plus prime vineyards.

The dryness of the climate is only one of the factors that give Washington its distinct

viticultural personality. Because of its northern latitude, the vineyards here get an average

of two more hours of sun per day than vineyards in California’s Sonoma County or Napa

V alley. Temperatures are very warm but, again because of the latitude, not excessively hot.

The extended hours of light and warmth (but not severe heat) help ripening progress

evenly.

The day-to-night temperature contrast in eastern Washington can be remarkable—a

difference of 50°F (28°C) or more in a single day is not uncommon. This diurnal

temperature fluctuation is categorically good, for cool nights mean that grapevines can

temporarily shut down and rest, thereby preserving acidity in the grapes.

Long Shadows Winery’ s vineyard, known as The Benches, is poised 1,400 feet (427 meters) above the grand Columbia

River . The vineyard includes twenty-seven geologically created “benches” formed 20,000 years ago.

Sometimes, however, temperature drops can be lethal to vines. Brutal winters with fast-

moving, subzero arctic winds are one of the most severe threats in eastern Washington.

Temperatures may go from 40°F (about 4°C) to well below zero (–18°C) in a matter of a

few hours. In situations such as this, water in the plants’ system freezes so quickly, the

vines can literally explode.

Soils in Washington are a mix of sand, silt, gravel, and volcanic ash—the result of two

cataclysmic events. First, some 140 million years ago, the crashing together of the tectonic

plate beneath the Pacific Ocean and the North American Plate resulted in an uplifted chain

of highly pressurized volcanoes (consider Mount St. Helens) parallel to the coast. These

systematically and repeatedly erupted all along the northern part of the western United

States. Then, about 15 million years ago (during the last Ice Age), the repeated freezing

and melting of a colossal ice dam resulted in massive floods—known as the Missoula

Floods—covering the entire Columbia Basin of Washington, along with much of Oregon,

Idaho, and Montana, in fast-moving water and depositing nutrient-poor sand, silt, and

gravel as the water traveled toward the Pacific Ocean.

Indeed, perhaps because of the state’s sandy soils and very cold winter climate,

phylloxera—the deadly insect that, in the late nineteenth century, damaged most of the

vineyards in the world, including those in California and Oregon—has never destroyed

vineyards in Washington State (the pest has occasionally shown up for a few days at a

time, probably brought in on farm equipment). As a result, 99 percent of the vineyards

here are planted on their own roots, not on phylloxera-tolerant rootstock. Does that make a

difference in flavor? Some winemakers believe it does, arguing that slight differences in

any aspect of a wine’s terroir affect flavor. Other winemakers disagree, saying that, in a

blind tasting, no one has ever been able to differentiate wines grown on their own roots

from wines grown on rootstock.

THE GRAPES OF W ASHINGTON STATE

WHITES

CHARDONNAY: A major grape; a source of wines that are dependably good but rarely extraordinary.

CHENIN BLANC: A minor grape that can become a delicious or merely decent wine.

MADELEINE ANGEVINE: A very minor variety but appealing for its pleasing, offbeat floral character.

Most of what is grown in the world is found in England.

MUSCAT CANELLI: A minor variety, the same as muscat blanc à petits grains. It can turn into simple but

delightful sweet wines.

RIESLING: A very important grape; the top wines made from it are extraordinary, and even more modest

versions can be very attractive, snappy, peachy, and minerally. It is made into dry, off-dry, and sweet

wines.

SAUVIGNON BLANC: A minor grape; the top wines are appealingly fresh, clean, and herbal-tasting.

SIEGERREBE: A very minor grape, but a curiosity, grown in the Puget Sound region. It is thought to be a

cross of Madeleine Angevine and gewürztraminer, bred in Germany in 1929.

REDS

CABERNET FRANC: A minor grape, but it shows potential, especially in blends with merlot and/or

cabernet sauvignon.

CABERNET SAUVIGNON: A major grape capable of making powerful, rich, balanced wines with

structure and depth. It is used alone and blended with merlot.

LEMBERGER: A very minor but interesting grape, traditionally grown in Germany and Austria (where it’s

known as blaufränkisch). Washington State has the only significant plantings in the United States.

MERLOT : A major grape and the source of many of the state’s most lush, concentrated, beautifully

balanced wines. It is used alone and blended with cabernet sauvignon.

SYRAH: A major grape that has achieved impressive success over the past ten years, making

Washington State one of the best places in the U.S. for this variety.

As for grapes, while cabernet sauvignon, merlot, chardonnay, riesling, and syrah (in

that order) clearly lead production, with cabernet franc, malbec, pinot gris, and sauvignon

blanc following, winemakers here also grow tiny amounts of grapes that almost no one has

ever heard of, such as Madeleine Angevine (grown mostly in England), siegerrebe (a

German cross), and Lemberger (grown mostly in Germany and Austria as blaufränkisch).

Despite having a name that makes marketing executives wince, Lemberger can make rich,

dark, spicy reds; Madeleine Angevine makes easy-to-like, very floral white wines; and

siegerrebe grows in the Puget Sound wine region, where rainfall can broach 48 inches

(122 centimeters) a year.

With 43,800 acres (17,700 hectares) of grapevines, Washington State is a far smaller

wine producer than California, where there are 543,000 acres (219,700 hectares) of vines.

Of Washington’s thirteen appellations, Columbia V alley, as we noted, is the largest. It

extends over one third of the state’s entire landmass—some 11 million acres (4.5 million

hectares). The appellation is bordered on the north by the Okanagan wilderness, near

Canada, on the south by Oregon (the appellation is actually shared by the two states), and

on the east by the Snake River and Idaho. Almost 99 percent of the state’s total production

comes from this single appellation. Like large appellations in premium winegrowing areas

everywhere, Columbia V alley contains smaller appellations, including Y akima V alley,

Horse Heaven Hills, Walla Walla V alley, and many others.

The Y akima V alley, within Columbia V alley, is generally considered the heart of

Washington wine country. Here, some of the state’s most established wineries, including

Hogue, are clustered fairly close together, and many other wineries buy Y akima grapes.

Within Y akima V alley are three smaller A V As: Rattlesnake Hills, Snipes Mountain, and

Red Mountain.

Despite its small size, Walla Walla V alley, within Columbia V alley, boasts some of

Washington’s best wineries, including historic ones such as Leonetti Cellar, Woodward

Canyon, and L’Ecole No 41, all of which helped put Washington State and Walla Walla on

the map—as well as newer, top-notch wineries like Cayuse, Gramercy Cellars, K

Vintners/Charles Smith Wines, and Long Shadows.

Finally, a word on Puget Sound, which could seem more of a curiosity than a wine

region. The area, close to Seattle, spreads over islands in the Pacific Ocean and over

Washington State lands that adjoin the sound itself. The climate in this western part of the

state is very wet, and thus the forty-five wineries that are located here generally buy their

grapes from the eastern (dry) side of the Cascades. That said, some wineries maintain a

buy-local focus, growing Madeleine Angevine, siegerrebe, and pinot noir.

SOME OF THE BEST PRODUCERS OF WASHINGTON’S BIG REDS:

CABERNET SAUVIGNON, MERLOT, AND SYRAH

Andrew Will Winery • Betz Family • Boudreaux Cellars • Cadence • Cayuse • Chateau Ste. Michelle • Col

Solare • DeLille Cellars • Den Hoed • Doubleback • Fidelitas • Force Majeure • Gorman • Hestia • Januik •

L’Ecole No 41 • Leonetti Cellar • Long Shadows (Pirouette, Sequel) • Mark Ryan • Matthews Cellars • Owen

Roe • Pepper Bridge Winery • Quilceda Creek Vintners • Rasa Vineyards • Reynvaan • Sheridan • Sleight

of Hand • Sparkman • Woodward Canyon • Zero One

WHEN YOU VISIT… W ASHINGTON STATE

A MAJORITY of Washington State’s wineries are in rural eastern Washington. The

Yakima Valley, for example, is about a two-and-a-half-hour drive from Seattle; Walla

Walla, five hours. That said, the drive over the Cascade Mountains can in itself be an

exhilarating part of the journey.

DESPITE THE FACT ABOVE, several small top wineries have tasting rooms in

Woodinville, less than an hour from Seattle, and Chateau Ste. Michelle, Washington’s

largest winery (very much worth visiting), is also here.

FINALLY , a food lover alert: The icy bays and estuaries around Puget Sound are home

to a wide variety of Pacific Northwest oysters, from the thumbnail-size Olympias to

those named after the bays from which they come, such as Penn Cove, Westcott Bay,

and Shoalwater Bay. Pacific Northwest oysters, generally more briny and minerally than

East Coast or Southern varieties, are a perfect match for Washington State’s crisp,

minerally dry rieslings.

The Washington State Wines to Know

WHITES

CHATEAU STE. MICHELLE AND DR. LOOSEN

RIESLING | EROICA | COLUMBIA VALLEY

100% riesling

Eroica (the name means “heroic” in Italian) is a joint venture between Washington State’s Chateau Ste. Michelle

and Germany’s Weingut Dr. Loosen. While commonplace today, joint ventures were relatively new in 1999, when

the Eroica project began, and time has proved the collaboration a huge success. Stunning nectarine and peach

aromas lure you in to a flavor that’s minerally and beautifully refined. Although the grapes were grown in

Washington State’s Columbia V alley, Eroica has the Mosel’s penchant for clarity, lightness, and freshness. Eroica

was the name Beethoven gave to his passionate Third Symphony, a musical metaphor for this wine.

POET’S LEAP

RIESLING | COLUMBIA VALLEY

100% riesling

This is wine masquerading as a butterfly. Ethereally light and lacy, it dances (hovers) on the palate with great

delicacy. The aromas and flavors of pear, green apple, and orange citrus are as sheer as possible. Exquisite lightness

like this is, in a sense, the spiritual side of wine, and is hard to achieve in fine wine. Poet’s Leap is part of the Long

Shadows portfolio (all of which are joint ventures between visionary businessman and former CEO of Chateau Ste.

Michelle Allen Shoup, and notable winemakers from around the world). Poet’s Leap was made by the German

winemaker Armin Diel.

WOODW ARD CANYON

CHARDONNAY | WASHINGTON STATE

100% chardonnay

Founded in Walla Walla in 1981 by Rick and Darcey Fugman-Small, Woodward Canyon has always been known

for its well-structured reds—especially its cabernet sauvignons. But the beauty of their chardonnays is indisputable.

And while many wineries make very good cabernets in Washington State, it’s a rare artistic achievement to make

very good chardonnay. The wine moves from stone fruit to star fruit, from the familiar to the exotic. It’s lovely,

balanced, and long—so long you feel like someone has thrown a stone in a pond, and you’re watching the endless

circles of ripples that flow from the center.

REDS

SPARKMAN

DARKNESS | SYRAH | YAKIMA VALLEY

100% syrah

The name of this wine, Darkness, says it all. Drinking it was like being in some dark, shadowy coffeehouse

drinking espresso. The gamyness, the spices, the coffee and cocoa, the sense of black licorice and black pepper—

it’s all dark. Wines like Darkness are tailor-made for dark winter nights. Sparkman, a relative newcomer on the

Washington scene, makes wines from a number of varieties, red and white. But by far its best wines are syrahs.

K VINTNERS

PHEASANT VINEYARD | WAHLUKE SLOPE

100% syrah

As animal as it gets. Every carnivorous thing you can think of seems woven together here—the fatty, cured smells

of salami… the tantalizing, umami-rich flavors of meat juices… the gamy, savory, sexy flavor of roast lamb. And

woven through all that are whiplashes of minerals and stones. Outrageous, almost foreboding syrah like this is more

often the product of the Rhône V alley of France than it is of the New World, but K Vintners has captured it. The

winery, begun in 2001 by self-taught winemaker Charles Smith (a former rock band manager), initially focused on

syrah, hence the “K” in its name (que sera, sera; get it?). But the way I see it, K could also stand for “killer” syrah.

DELILLE CELLARS

CHALEUR ESTATE | RED MOUNTAIN

Approximately 65% cabernet sauvignon, 25% merlot, and tiny amounts of cabernet franc and petit

verdot

For more than a decade, DeLille’s Chaleur Estate has been one of the top Bordeaux-style blends in Washington

State. The wine’s refinement and structure look toward Bordeaux, but the intense cassis fruit and the creamy echo

of melted chocolate speak to Washington. Best of all, and for all of its richness, the wine has lift and grace on the

palate. Chaleur Estate’s baby brother—known as D2—is packed with juicy, spicy black cherry flavors threaded

with notes of stones, savory herbs, and sea salt.

LEONETTI CELLAR

RESERVE | WALLA WALLA

Approximately 50% cabernet sauvignon, 30% merlot, plus cabernet franc and malbec

Founded by Gary and Nancy Figgins in 1977, on their family’s farm begun in 1906, Leonetti Cellar was the first

commercial winery in the then unknown appellation of Walla Walla. The quality of its initial wines was shockingly

good. Now, more than three decades later, the winery continues its reputation as one of the greatest wine estates not

only in Washington State but on the entire West Coast. Indeed, it was hard to choose which Leonetti wine to write

about, for they are all magnificent. In the end, the Reserve won out for the sheer number of exclamation marks in

the margins next to my original notes. Leonetti’s Reserve is both elegant and mighty at the same time, rather like a

Gothic arch that can both be exquisitely graceful and hold up the cathedral.

LONG SHADOWS

PIROUETTE | COLUMBIA VALLEY

Approximately 55% cabernet sauvignon, 25% merlot, plus cabernet franc and malbec

This is quite simply an extraordinary wine made by some of the best wine pros in the United States. Refined, yet

full of pent-up raw power, it’s cabernet sauvignon at its exquisite best. The wine comes onto the palate with classic

First Growth Bordeaux-like cassis flavors, then slowly unleashes itself in a torrent of savory deliciousness. The

minds behind this remarkable wine are the joint-venture team of Allen Shoup (founder of Long Shadows), Agustin

Huneeus Sr. (founder of Quintessa), and the remarkable Napa V alley-based winemaker Philippe Melka.

OREGON

If Oregon had been established as a wine region during the Middle Ages, it would

undoubtedly have been the work of monks, for only those with an ascetic temperament

(and considerable faith) could find joy in the nail-biting, nerve-racking reality of Oregon

viticulture. Growing grapes here is fraught with challenges. Sunlight and heat can be in

short supply; ripening, as a result, is never a given. Rain (about 40 inches/102 centimeters

a year in the Willamette V alley) and frost can be threats during spring and fall—the two

times when grapes are most vulnerable. Weather patterns can be erratic (you need

sunglasses one minute, an umbrella the next)—a stressful scenario for vines, which, like

all plants, love constancy and stability.

And yet it’s precisely the marginality of Oregon’s climate, along with the state’s unique

geologic past, that forms the cradle of its success as a wine region. Grapes here cannot

burst into ripeness, but instead must make their way slowly and methodically toward

maturity and complexity. Each year is a gamble, but when the forces of nature align with

skilled winemaking, Oregon wines of utter beauty, focus, and finesse emerge.

When I wrote about Oregon in the first edition of The Wine Bible, the wine industry

there was tiny, and the wines were sometimes surprisingly wonderful, sometimes sadly

wanting. Then, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, Oregon turned the big

corner. It had long since given up California as a viticultural and winemaking role model.

Next, France, too, was abandoned. As Oregon winemakers set out on their own vinous

course, they began to forge a new way of working with the unique demands of their land.

The result has been a mega-leap in quality—especially for the state’s signature pinot noirs.

If wines can be graceful and luscious, if they can have richness without heaviness, then

Oregon is the place to find them.

THE NINETY PERCENT LA W

While Oregon, of course, abides by U.S. wine laws, the state has opted to make some wine regulations

stricter. For example, according to state regulations the leading Oregon wine types—pinot noir,

chardonnay, and pinot gris—must contain at least 90 percent of whatever grape variety is named on the

label (as opposed to the U.S. law, which mandates a minimum of 75 percent). Several grapes, however,

are excepted from the Oregon 90 percent rule: Cabernet sauvignon, cabernet franc, merlot, syrah,

sauvignon blanc, and several others that are thought to benefit from greater blending need only be 75

percent of the grape named.

THE QUICK SIP ON OREGON

OREGON’S SPECIALTY is pinot noir, a delicate and temperamental grape considered

by many to make the most sensual red wines in the world.

OREGON’S RELATIVELY COOL, marginal climate is a major factor in the elegance

that characterizes its top wines.

MOST OF THE STATE’S best wines come from a group of small appellations that make

up the Willamette Valley, in the northwest corner of the state.

The late David Lett (left) with son Jason. David Lett is considered the father of Oregon pinot noir.

Although a number of small wineries struggled along prior to Prohibition, the modern

Oregon wine industry takes 1961 as the date of its birth. In that year, Richard Sommer, a

graduate in agronomy from the University of California at Davis, planted riesling and

other grapes at Hillcrest Vineyard in the Umpqua V alley. Four years later, David Lett,

another UC Davis graduate, planted the state’s first pinot noir at Eyrie Vineyards, in the

long valley south of Portland known as the Willamette (rhymes with dammit, as locals are

fond of saying). Both men were warned by university professors that vinifera-species

grapes would not fare well in Oregon. And with that piece of advice unheeded, the Oregon

wine industry was born.

Today there are more than 20,000 acres (8,100 hectares) of grapes and more than three

hundred wineries in the state. Most of them grow pinot noir, the great (if fragile) red grape

of Burgundy, France. Indeed, Oregon is one of only a few regions in the New World to be

manically focused on a single grape variety.

While the story of Oregon is definitively the story of pinot noir, other grape varieties

are also grown, albeit in far smaller amounts. Most are white. Among these whites,

chardonnay is thought to have the most potential. Pinot gris is appreciated as a no-fuss

local favorite that, as one winemaker puts it,

“you drink while you’re deciding which pinot

noir to have.

” And finally, there’s riesling. A dry riesling renaissance has swept Oregon,

with several dozen winemakers now making small-production lots of this cool-climate

grape.

Oregon wine country comprises four major regions, but the Willamette V alley is

certainly the most important. Tucked into the northwest corner of the state, just south of

Portland, and running north-south for 100 miles (160 kilometers), this corridor of soft,

green hills could be visually described as the V ermont of the West. Here, more than two-

thirds of the state’s wines, including most of the best, are made. This one place—

Willamette V alley—has put Oregon on the international wine map and indeed, has become

virtually synonymous with “Oregon wine.

” So while some good wines are indeed made in

the Umpqua, Rogue, and Applegate valleys, as well as in eastern Oregon in the Walla

Walla region (which Oregon shares with Washington State), this chapter will focus on the

Willamette V alley. Lastly, Oregon winemakers are a story in themselves. Independently

minded farmers at heart, a surprising number of them are dropouts or exes. Dropouts from

big-city life. Ex-high-tech execs. Dropouts from college. Ex-professors. Dropouts from

the counter-culture. Ex-theologians. A growing number are even ex-California

winemakers.

Of course, many Oregon winemakers have enology degrees, but it doesn’t always

matter, for in Oregon, the greatest (most demanding) teacher remains Nature herself.

THE (INCONCEIV ABLE) LAND

Like California’s, Oregon’s geologic history is fascinating and violent. Here’s a quick

window into that past.

In a brutal collision some 140 million years ago, the tectonic plate beneath the Pacific

Ocean crashed against the North American Plate and began to subduct, or plunge,

underneath it. The massive crunch thrust up the sea bottom, creating the mountainous

western coast of the United States, including much of Oregon. The mountainous landmass

of uplifted seabed lay relatively still for millennia. Then, some fifteen million years ago,

the volcanoes that formed Idaho’s Blue Range Mountains erupted in a fury of wicked and

immense activity. Hot lava spewed from the epicenter, covering the seabed with molten

rock 1,000 feet (300 meters) deep. Such was the force behind the lava that it quickly

oozed across the entire state of Oregon a potent flood of fiery volcanic sludge. Once

cooled, the lava became a type of rock called basalt.

THE MOST IMPORTANT OREGON WINES

LEADING WINES

CHARDONNAY white

PINOT GRIS white

PINOT NOIR red

RIESLING white

It was just the beginning. Some 15,000 years ago, during one of the earth’s coldest

periods, at the end of the last Ice Age (15,000 to 25,000 years ago), massive ice dams in

Montana were breached, sending walls of water rushing toward the Pacific Ocean at a

speed of 60 miles (97 kilometers) per hour. The entire Columbia River basin flooded.

Over two thousand years, the Missoula Floods, as they became known, occurred again and

again, each time creating a huge glacial lake where the Willamette V alley is today. The

floods broke down the basalt in places and, in the process, deposited hundreds of feet of

rich sediment on the floor of the valley.

OREGON, WOMEN, AND PINOT NOIR

Oregon has more women wine-makers than California does, despite having one-twenty-seventh the

grape acreage. Indeed, in the one U.S. state devoted to pinot noir, women account for 10 percent of all

winemakers. The question seems obvious: Do women choose pinot noir? Or does it choose them?

I asked Lynn Penner-Ash, who in 1988 became the first female winemaker in Oregon, her view.

Recounting the early days, she says,

“Oregon was made up of small family-owned wineries and was just

starting to understand the business of making and selling wine. Winemakers were eager to learn and

eager to help establish Oregon as a place for world-class pinot noir. Female or male, if you were willing

to work hard at making pinot, you were welcome.

” But Penner-Ash says there are also more subtle

powers at work.

“Pinot noir is a reflective grape. We strive to be guardians of it, but not dominators, which

some might say reflects a more feminine sensibility.

”

Fast-forward to our time. All of the top vineyards of Willamette V alley exist above that

fertile valley floor. The vineyards exist on “islands” of basalt (cooled lava), or ancient,

uplifted marine seabed (sandy sediment), or windblown sand and silt (loess). Or

sometimes a little of all three. From any one of the hilltops of the Willamette, this part of

the distant past can be sensed immediately. The rich valley floor, barren of grapes, is lush

with (and perfect for) grass. The vineyards—impeccably manicured—all begin rolling at

about 200 feet (60 meters) up the slopes of numerous hills.

Stoller Vineyards, in the Willamette V alley’ s Dundee Hills.

I will never forget the stark yet somehow gentle beauty of these vineyards. To reach

them, you often wind along roads that are still dirt. Rare breeds of sheep graze. Swollen,

slate-colored clouds drifting in off the Pacific Ocean sometimes hang in ponderous

skepticism above the grapes.

As in Tuscany, there are no straight lines in the Willamette V alley. To drive is to

meander up and down and around not just vineyards, but endless hazelnut orchards (more

than 95 percent of the hazelnuts in the U.S. are grown here); forests of fir, oak, and maple;

plus fields and fields of Christmas trees—an employment boon if you’re an agricultural

worker with little vineyard work in winter. (In the 1970s, land here cost $1,000 an acre;

approximately $2,500 a hectare. Today prices broach $30,000 an acre; $74,000 per

hectare).

Befitting this pastoral landscape, the wineries themselves are modest and farmlike. No

châteaus, not even ranchettes. The state’s progressive land-use laws stipulate that wineries

must be true working wineries—each winery must earn a minimum of 75 percent of its

revenue from the sale of wine (not baseball caps, jams, aprons, etc.). Plus there’s a legal

ratio of land to gallons produced. For example, anyone producing 50,000 to 150,000

gallons (1,900 to 5,700 hectoliters) of wine must have a corresponding parcel of 40 acres

(16 hectares) of land. Mansions with “lifestyle vineyards” don’t fit the bill.

THE CLIMATE

The vineyards of Willamette V alley are, for the most part, protected from the wet, cold

onslaughts of the Pacific Ocean by a small chain of mountains known as the Coast Range.

Winemakers here call it the first line of defense. The only gap in the range—the V an

Duzer Corridor—is the one Achilles’ heel. Still, while rain on the coast is often in excess

of 80 inches (200 centimeters) a year, it’s less than half that in Willamette V alley.

Nonetheless, the region is generally cooler and wetter than its wine-producing neighbors,

California and Washington State.

Importantly, however, most of the rain falls in winter—when the vines are dormant.

And thus, the best growing seasons in Oregon are sunny—light at this northern latitude

lasts until 10:00 p.m. in summer—but still relatively cool. (Locals report that, more than

once, they’ve worn a down jacket to Fourth of July fireworks celebrations.) A cool

growing season allows grapes to ripen slowly. And slow ripening, in turn, is the critical

criterion for making Oregon’s elegant style of top-notch pinot noirs. These pinots have a

hum of acidity—a brightness and delicacy that defines them. They are just-ripe fruity, but

not hot-sun jammy.

As for chardonnay, pinot gris, and riesling, the same cool climate that lends itself to

well-balanced, earthy pinot noirs gives these white grapes a natural restraint. Of course,

any wine-maker with money to spare could override this inherent “quietness” with rap-

music-like wine-making (lots of extraction) and a million dollars’ worth of new oak

barrels. Whether for philosophic or economic reasons (or both), this usually doesn’t

happen in Oregon. But there are some exceptions.

THE APPELLATIONS WITHIN WILLAMETTE

V ALLEY

In the early 2000s, the winemakers of Willamette V alley came together and collectively

mapped out six small areas within the valley that were ultimately given their own status as

A V As (American Viticultural Areas) in 2004, 2005, and 2006.

Each of these appellations begins about 200 feet (60 meters) above the valley floor and

rises to about 1,000 feet (300 meters; above that, the climate here is too cool for grapes).

Here is a short sketch on each, with a quick—but in no way complete—list of producers to

seek out. Keep in mind that many top producers—Ken Wright and Bergström, for example

—make excellent wines from virtually every A V A, and thus aren’t listed below.

THE DIJON CLONES

One of the key drivers behind the vast improvement in Oregon wine in the 2000s was the widespread

implementation of so-called Dijon clones. The University of Oregon was the first entity in the United

States to bring in these clones of pinot noir and chardonnay (clones are genetic subtypes of a variety; for

more information, see page 30). Named after Dijon, the city in Burgundy where France’s ONIVINS plant

materials laboratory is located, the numerous Dijon clones (with exciting names like 115, 667, and 777)

are heralded for their complex flavors and ability to ripen fully in cool climates. In addition to Dijon clones,

Willamette Valley pinot noirs are also often made from the Pommard clone, another well-suited clone

from Burgundy.

CHEHALEM MOUNTAINS

This is a single, 20-mile-long (32-kilometer) landmass made up of several hilltops and

ridges lifted up from the Willamette V alley floor. Parts of these hills (the south and

southeast slopes) are mostly basalt and marine sediment; the more northern-facing slopes

tend to be covered in loess. At more than 68,000 acres (27,500 hectares), this is the largest

A V A within the Willamette. My top picks among the best producers include Adelsheim,

Chehalem, and Ponzi.

DUNDEE HILLS

A small group of hills, Dundee is where the Willamette V alley’s first pinot noir was

planted, in 1965, by David Lett of Eyrie Vineyards. The area has unique red soils formed

from ancient volcanic basalt. My top picks among the best producers include De Ponte,

Domaine Drouhin, Stoller, and Domaine Serene.

EOLA-AMITY HILLS

This A V A is due west of the V an Duzer Corridor, a gap in the Coast Range, and thus is

cool, thanks to exposure to air flowing in from the Pacific Ocean. Soils are a combination

of volcanic basalt and marine sediment. My top picks among the best producers include

Bethel Heights and Cristom.

Evesham Wood Winery, in the Willamette V alley’ s Eola-Amity Hills.

THE GRAPES OF OREGON

WHITES

CHARDONNAY: Considered the leading white grape in terms of potential; wines made from it range in

quality from good to very good.

PINOT GRIS: The leading white grape in terms of production. A white variant of pinot noir, in Oregon it’s

usually made into popular, easy-to-like crisp whites.

RIESLING: An up-and-coming white, mostly made into light, fresh, dry wines, although there are some

stunning examples of sweet dessert rieslings.

REDS

CABERNET SAUVIGNON, SYRAH, AND MERLOT : Minor grapes in Oregon, these are grown in the

southern and eastern parts of the state. Their success is highly dependent on mesoclimates and

producers.

PINOT NOIR: Oregon’s most prestigious grape—virtually every winery in Willamette Valley grows it. It

makes aromatic, elegant, earthy wines with supple textures.

MCMINNVILLE

Just west of the famous wine town of McMinnville, the A V A sits in a rain shadow of the

Coast Range and is thus relatively warm and dry. It has shallow, uplifted marine

sedimentary soils. My top picks among the best producers include Brittan and Y amhill

V alley.

RIBBON RIDGE

The smallest of the A V As, Ribbon Ridge is contained within the Chehalem Mountains

A V A. It is an “island” of old silty/clay sedimentary soils, well protected by geographical

features on all sides and thus a relatively moderate climate. My top picks among the best

producers include Beaux Frères and Brick House.

YAMHILL-CARLTON

The A V A surrounds the hamlets of Y amhill and Carlton on coarse-grained, ancient marine

sedimentary soils. Top producers include Shea, Soter, Penner-Ash, and Elk Cove. In

addition, the highly important Burgundy firm Louis Jadot, which bought vineyard land

here in 2013, will be a producer to watch.

PINOT NOIR

Because Oregon, and the Willamette V alley in particular, is so strongly associated with

pinot noir, a few words on the character of these wines is in order.

The best Oregon pinots possess what might be called a complex and quiet

compellingness. They are rarely (if ever) dense, alcoholic blockbusters. Instead, the best

of them offer a unique richness of supple fruit, without weight—the kind of pinot noir that

would make a Burgundian monk genuflect. In fact, the kind of pinot noir that follows

more in the tradition of V osne Romanée than Santa Lucia Highlands.

PAPA PINOT

A photo in the February 16, 1967, Newberg Graphic Farm News shows a smiling young couple in heavy

jackets and work boots, standing behind a wheelbarrow heaped with roots. The caption reads,

“David

and Diana Lett, who recently purchased the John Marner place in Dundee, pause with their European

wine grape rootings. The Letts plan to remove prunes from the 20-acre farm and put in quality wine

”

grapes.

The town’s farmers thought David Lett was crazy, of course. And, in a way, he was possessed—by an

idea. Namely, that finesse and complexity in wine were related to the marginality of the climate where the

grapes were grown. In other words, grapes that had it easy, that ripened effortlessly thanks to

unmitigating sun, would never make elegant wine. On the other hand, grapes that lived on the edge, that

received barely enough sun to help them cross the finish line of ripeness, had at least a chance of

making graceful wine.

Lett had earned a degree in viticulture at the University of California at Davis, but his thinking had

been shaped even more pivotally by wandering around French vineyards for a year. The lesson out

there, among the vines, seemed to be that grapes were sort of like life: No pain, no gain.

Lett had his mind set on pinot noir, and he planted it, along with pinot gris, riesling, and several other

grapes that do well in cool, marginal climates. Eventually, other pioneer winemakers joined him. In the

process, Oregon established itself as a wine region built not on trends, not on marketing strategies, not

on the personal wine preferences of the vintner, but on the simple reality of its own terroir. David Lett,

whose nickname was Papa Pinot, is today considered the father of Oregon pinot noir. Lett passed away

in 2008.

The flavors of these pinots often seem to mirror the land itself, with their forest floor,

wild mushroom, and brambly characteristics, circling a core of sweet, ripe berries. These

aromas and flavors often get more vivid with time. Indeed, some of the most spell-binding

Oregon pinot noirs I’ve tasted have been fifteen to thirty years old (this sort of

ageworthiness is especially remarkable given that the entire Oregon wine industry is still

quite young).

“[Great Oregon pinot noir] . . . is about the complete power of gracefulness.

When I’m drinking a pinot noir, I want it to taste like Grace Kelly just walked

into the room.

”

— ROLLIN SOLES,

winemaker, Argyle Winery

Then there’s the issue of what I call “cool-climate lag time.

” Which is to say that

almost no really good Oregon pinot noir tastes full-on the minute it’s poured. In my

experience, the best of these wines hit their stride and open up to a plethora of flavors

twenty or more minutes after that. I wonder how many people have missed the beauty of a

given Oregon pinot simply because they took one quick sip, then moved on.

But above all, the story of Oregon pinot is the story of texture. The best wines have a

gentle feel of succulence—a sweet, palate-clinging character that is sometimes described

as “sappy.

”

A PARTNER FOR PINOT

In the United States, the sumptuous combination of grilled salmon and Oregon pinot noir was the first

well-known food and wine marriage to forsake the old chestnut: white wine with fish; red wine with meat.

And that it did brilliantly, for as anyone who has tasted grilled salmon and Oregon pinot noir together

knows, the two are a consummate match. The rich fattiness and light char of the grilled salmon could

have no better partner than an earthy Oregon pinot noir, with its relatively high (for red wine) acidity. Also

critical to the partnership is the fact that pinot noir is very low in tannin, and thus doesn’t interfere with the

beautiful flavors of the fish. (By contrast, wines that are high in tannin, such as cabernet sauvignon, often

make fish taste dry or metallic.) The biggest testament to the success of Oregon pinot noir and salmon

happens each year on the final night of the wild and fantastic International Pinot Noir Celebration, when

600 pounds (272 kilograms) of chinook salmon are consumed with no one knows how many bottles of

pinot noir.

SOME OF THE BEST PRODUCERS OF WILLAMETTE VALLEY PINOT NOIR

Adelsheim • Amity • Anam Cara • Argyle • Beaux Frères • Belle Pente • Bergström • Bethel Heights • Brick

House • Brittan • Broadley • Carter • Chehalem • Cristom • De Ponte • Domaine Drouhin • Domaine Serene

• Elk Cove • Erath • Et Fille • Evening Land • Evesham Wood • Ken Wright • Panther Creek • Penner-Ash •

Ponzi • Raptor Ridge • REX HILL • Shea • Soter • St. Innocent • Stoller • The Eyrie Vineyards • Yamhill

Valley

CHARDONNAY

In Oregon—as in Burgundy and Champagne—chardonnay is considered pinot noir’s cool-

climate sister. When asked which white grape has the most potential for excellence here,

most Oregon winemakers name it. But Oregon chardonnay’s road to success has been

rocky, and the state is just beginning to produce the kind of stop-you-in-your-tracks

chardonnays that will command top dollar. I have to admit that, as of this writing, I’m only

cautiously optimistic.

For the few really fabulous chardonnays, the quality surge has been largely the result of

new Dijon clones brought to Oregon from Burgundy and now widely planted. (Originally,

most Oregon chardonnay was made from a warm-climate California clone that didn’t

ripen well in Oregon’s cool climate, and thus produced thin, lean, bland wines.) Over the

coming decade, Dijon clones are expected to be the chardonnay equivalent of a rising tide

that lifts all boats.

The Willamette (rhymes with dammit) V alley is lush and serene.

PEAR EXCELLENCE

Although traditional in Europe for centuries, the making of handcrafted eaux-de-vie and fruit brandies is

rare in the United States. Only a handful of tiny American distillers now practice the craft; among these is

Clear Creek Distillery in Portland, Oregon. Clear Creek makes a pear brandy and an eau-de-vie de poire

Williams that are two of the most extraordinary eaux-de-vie in America—indeed, in the world. T o make

them, perfectly ripe Williams pears (as the French call them; they’re Bartletts in the United States) from

orchards in Parkdale, Oregon, are fermented and then distilled in German-made pot stills. Although the

process sounds straightforward, enormous skill is required to achieve an eau-de-vie with intense fruit

concentration that is smooth and elegant at the same time. Clear Creek’s eau-de-vie de poire Williams is

especially renowned (and difficult to make) because it has an actual pear inside each bottle. T o achieve

this, empty bottles are carefully attached to tree limbs just after flowering. The pears actually grow inside

the glass. After being rinsed with a special citric solution to sterilize the pears, the bottles are then filled

with 80-proof pear eau-de-vie.

In Oregon, the moody vineyards of Maresh Red Hills in winter have a special charm.

There are already a few stunning examples—chardonnays that are elegant yet

thoroughly rich, with waves of citrus, quince, and nut and mineral flavors. In style, they

are closer to Burgundy than to California or Australia, and are rarely dominated by planky,

sweet oak flavors.

Domaine Drouhin’s Edition Limitée, Bergström’s Sigrid, and Adelsheim’s Stoller are

already three of the best chardonnays in the United States.

WHEN YOU VISIT… OREGON

THE MAJORITY OF OREGON’S wineries are in the verdant Willamette Valley, an easy

drive from Portland. Most of these wineries are as welcoming and down-to-earth as

they come. Often the owner is also the winemaker, tour guide, and tractor operator. It’s

best to call ahead for an appointment.

OVER THE MEMORIAL DAY and Thanksgiving weekends, Oregon wineries host

massive open houses. Virtually every winery, no matter how tiny, is open for tastings

and tours, and there are usually heaps of food and music, to boot.

WHENEVER YOU VISIT , don’t miss a dinner at the Joel Palmer House, in Dayton, in

the Willamette Valley. Owned by Jack and Heidi Czarnecki, two of the leading wild-

mushroom experts in the United States and authors of several mushroom cookbooks,

the Joel Palmer House specializes in (what else?) mushroom dishes paired with

Oregon pinot noirs.

AS FOR PLACES TO STAY , my favorite B and B is the charming Black Walnut Inn in

Dundee, and the best hotel by far is the Allison, a sophisticated luxury property with

great food, a phenomenal spa, and a fantastically long list of exciting Oregon pinot

noirs.

The Oregon Wines to Know

WHITES

PENNER-ASH

RIESLING | WILLAMETTE VALLEY

100% riesling

Lynn Penner-Ash makes such beautiful pinot noirs that it might seem unusual to write about her riesling. But this

delicious wine attests to just how good Oregon rieslings can be. Minerally and snappy, it’s got a thrilling purity of

pear and star fruit flavors. Refreshing? Kind of like a cold slap on a hot day.

CHEHALEM

SEXT | RIBBON RIDGE

100% riesling

In 1990, Harry Peterson-Nedry, one of the early winemakers in Willamette V alley, founded Chehalem (a Native

American word meaning “valley of the flowers”). The winery makes beautiful pinot noirs and racy dry rieslings,

but you should also know about Sext, Chehalem’s fantastic, semi-sparkling dry riesling. It’s a hailstorm in your

mouth. Fresh, light flavors bolt around like electrons circling a core of apricots and other stone fruits. Liveliness is

the wine’s middle name.

BERGSTRÖM

CHARDONNAY | SIGRID | WILLAMETTE VALLEY

100% chardonnay

Josh Bergström, winemaker and co-owner, with his father and mother, John and Karen, named this extraordinary

wine after Josh’s Swedish grandmother. In luscious waves of golden richness, the flavors evoke images of quince,

buttery pie crust, baking spices, and roasted nuts. The texture—utterly creamy yet framed by precise acidity—is

reminiscent of great white Burgundy.

PONZI

PINOT GRIS | WILLAMETTE VALLEY

100% pinot gris

Drinking this wine, it seemed as though perfectly ripe pears and juicy tangerines were being transmogrified right

then and there in the glass. Many wines, of course, are like fruit, but this wine seemed to be fruit. I like the wine not

only for its exquisite fruit-fulness but also because of its distinctiveness. It is far, far away from whispy pinot grigio,

and neither does it manifest an Alsace pinot gris’ gravitas. Instead, this good and beautiful wine has captured a split

second of pure flavor that is Oregon.

REDS

BEAUX FRÈRES

PINOT NOIR | THE BEAUX FRÈRES VINEYARD | RIBBON RIDGE

100% pinot noir

Michael Etzel, winemaker and co-owner (with his brother-in-law, the wine critic Robert M. Parker Jr.) of Beaux

Frères, makes gorgeous pinot noirs. Sweetly ripe and lushly textured, they are at the same time majestically refined

and complex. To taste a great Beaux Frères pinot is to ride on wave after wave of sophisticated, sexy flavor.

Impossible to resist such hedonism.

ADELSHEIM

PINOT NOIR | CALKINS LANE VINEYARD | CHEHALEM MOUNTAINS

100% pinot noir

David Adelsheim was among the pioneers of pinot noir in Willamette V alley and was instrumental in bringing new

clones to the state. His wines continue to stand out for their beauty, balance, and integration. Suppleness and

earthiness are their signatures. And yet, waves of delicate cherry fruit are woven, like ribbons, through the wines.

Adelsheim makes many different pinots, but this one from Calkins Lane is a favorite.

DOMAINE DROUHIN

PINOT NOIR | LOUISE CUVÉE | DUNDEE HILLS

100% pinot noir

Famous Burgundy vintner Robert Drouhin planted vineyards in Willamette V alley in 1988 and put his winemaker

daughter, V eronique, in charge. Louise Cuvée is named for Véronique’s daughter. Not surprisingly, this wine

possesses the finely tuned sensibilities of great Burgundy. It sways with the deep, primordial aromas of damp earth,

wild herbs, warm rocks, fall leaves, and the most “earthy” aroma of all—the sweet, sweaty smell of men (not a

pejorative by any means). The silky, supple texture here is enticing, and a marker for the top Oregon pinot noirs.

KEN WRIGHT

PINOT NOIR | SAVOYA | WILLAMETTE VALLEY

100% pinot noir

I have always thought that a prerequisite for great pinot noir is precision—a sense that the wine’s flavors are crystal

clear… like the sound of a church bell in the mountains. Ken Wright makes mind-blowing pinots like that. Savoya

(a phonetic reference to the wild onions the Spanish-speaking workers found in the vineyard) crests along a perfect

wave of suppleness, with sonorous flavors that are deeply earthy, berried, and spicy.

SOTER

PINOT NOIR | MINERAL SPRINGS | WILLAMETTE VALLEY

100% pinot noir

Winemaker Tony Soter began California’s Etude Winery, and made more than a decade’s worth of luscious

Carneros pinot noir before selling Etude and moving to Willamette V alley. The man knows how to coax gorgeous

fruit and spice from the earth. Soter’s pinots have an extra dimension and depth of flavor—like the puddle of berry

filling that oozed out of the pie while it baked, then fell onto the baking sheet, getting more and more concentrated

until you swiped it up with your finger and ate it.

STOLLER

PINOT NOIR | SV ESTATE | DUNDEE HILLS

100% pinot noir

Stoller’s exquisite pinot noirs are a testimonial to texture. Sappy, supple, silky, sensual, succulent (have I missed

any other s words?). It was a Stoller pinot noir that first drove home for me the idea that pinot noir could have

richness without ponderous weight. The exotic aromas and flavors are reminiscent of things like anise and

sarsaparilla, with a smoky, peat bog kind of earthiness. Stoller is one of the biggest vineyards in the state, and many

top producers (besides the Stollers themselves) make wine from this vineyard.

NEW YORK STATE

The words New York generally evoke glamorous images of one of the world’s most high-

powered cities. But there is another New Y ork as well, the New Y ork of cornfields and

potato barns, of rolling farmland and flowing rivers, of sapphire-colored lakes and

graceful mountains. Much of New Y ork State is, in fact, utterly and magnificently rural.

What would become New Y ork State was formed during the Ice Age, as receding

glaciers gouged out the Adirondack and Catskill mountains and carved deep passageways

that would become the Hudson and Mohawk river valleys. As the glaciers retreated north,

more than eight thousand lakes and ponds were created in the state. Eventually, these same

glaciers would hollow out the five massive Great Lakes, including Lake Erie and Lake

Ontario, which form parts of the northern and western borders of the state. In their wake,

the glaciers not only left behind bodies of water but also deep, well-drained soil. By the

time the colonists arrived, the area, already full of wild, indigenous vines, seemed

naturally poised to become an important place for grapes. And so it would become; by the

latter part of the twentieth century, New Y ork State would have three major wine regions:

the Hudson River V alley, the Finger Lakes, and Long Island. These remain the three

important New Y ork wine districts today.

In the Finger Lakes region, the grapes themselves have the best views of the deep lakes created by receding glaciers.

Native Americans believed the stunning lakes—shaped like fingers—to be the hand of the Great Spirit.

THE QUICK SIP ON NEW YORK STATE

NEW YORK STATE’S modern wine industry, like all of the other major state wine

industries, is based on fine wines made from vinifera species grape varieties. But up

until two generations ago, the state was also known for a fascinating array of native

American grapes and hybrids.

NEW YORK’S COOL northern climate makes it well suited to producing not only dry,

still table wines, but also lively sparkling wines, plus some excellent late-harvest and

icewines.

OF NEW YORK’S three major wine regions, the Finger Lakes is the fastest growing

and accounts for almost half of the total wineries in the state.

Although Dutch colonists attempted to grow grapes on Manhattan Island as early as

1647, viticulture and winemaking did not take serious hold until the nineteenth century,

when French, Dutch, and English immigrants began planting vineyards on the rolling hills

of the Hudson River V alley. From there, the immigrants pushed westward into the state’s

stunning, remote, lake-clad interior. In particular, the Finger Lakes benefited from waves

of German, French, and Swiss immigrants who were experienced at both grape growing

and winemaking, and by the 1870s the Finger Lakes had become the heart of the New

Y ork wine industry. Steamboats laden with grapes and wine cruised back and forth doing a

brisk business among the wineries that ringed the lakes. With the founding of the Geneva

Experiment Station in the early 1880s, significant advances in grape breeding and

viticulture led to leaps in quality among Finger Lakes wines.

The southern shores of Lake Erie, now one of the largest grape belts in the United

States, were also planted with grapes around this time. The region, however, soon became

a political stronghold for America’s nascent temperance movement. All too soon, growers

who might have planted wine grapes were focusing on table grapes instead. Indeed,

because grapes grown in the Lake Erie region today are mainly destined for jelly and juice

(not wine), I’ve left the region out of this chapter.

POLITICAL BEGINNINGS

Two of the most culturally significant political movements in the history of the United States began in the

wine regions of New Y ork State: the temperance movement and the women’s rights movement. The

temperance movement began in Saratoga Springs and quickly spread to the Lake Erie region as early as

1808, eventually culminating in national Prohibition in 1920. The women’s rights movement began in

Seneca Falls, in the Finger Lakes, with the first Women’s Rights Convention in 1848.

From the end of Prohibition until the mid-1970s, the New Y ork wine industry was

controlled by a few powerful companies. As of 1976, there were only nineteen wineries in

the state, most of them specializing in native American grapes, crosses, and hybrids. Small

growers, their hands tied by exorbitant New Y ork State licensing fees and bureaucratic red

tape, grew grapes for a handful of big wineries rather than creating fine-wine brands of

their own. By the middle of the 1970s, New Y ork’s reputation as a producer of high-

quality wines seemed to be sliding downhill fast.

In 1976, the critical turnaround came with the passage of the Farm Winery Act, which

made operating a small winery economically feasible by permitting direct sales to

restaurants, wine stores, and consumers. Within seven years, nearly fifty small farm

wineries had opened for business. Today, with the exception of the state’s sole very large

winery, Canandaigua Wine Company (itself part of Constellation Wines), the majority of

New Y ork’s 283 wineries are small to medium in size.

THE MOST IMPORTANT NEW YORK STATE WINES

LEADING WINES

CABERNET FRANC red

CABERNET SAUVIGNON red

CHARDONNAY white

MERLOT red

RIESLING white (dry and sweet)

SPARKLING WINES white

WINES OF NOTE

BACO NOIR red

CATAWBA

CATAWBA red and rosé

CAYUGA white

GEWÜRZTRAMINER white

NIAGARA white

RKATSITELI white

SEYVAL BLANC white

VIDAL white (dry and sweet)

VIGNOLES white (dry and sweet)

THE GRAPES AND THE WINES

As noted, New Y ork’s modern wine industry is based on familiar European (Vitis vinifera)

grapes—especially riesling, chardonnay, merlot, and cabernet franc (in that order). But as

a historical aside, it’s worth noting that New Y ork’s vinous genetic scope was once quite

broad. Two generations ago, the state was also known for grapes that belonged to native

American species (Concord is an example; today these go into jelly and jam); dozens of

crosses of grapes within various American species (the grape catawba may be an

example); and numerous hybrids, such as seyval blanc, Vidal, vignoles, and Cayuga

(grapes created by breeding two different varieties that belong to different species). It

made for a fascinating world of flavor.

THE GRAPES OF NEW YORK STATE

Crosses and hybrids have been included in this list for reference purposes, although today they

constitute a small part of the modern industry.

WHITES

CAYUGA: A French-American hybrid, Cayuga is often used in off-dry blends and for dessert wines.

CHARDONNAY: A major grape; the good to very good wines it becomes are leaner in style than

California chardonnays.

GEWÜRZTRAMINER: One of New York’s best-kept secrets, it can be turned into delicious wines

reminiscent of the gewürztraminers of Alsace.

NIAGARA: Foxy-tasting American cross that is often made into off-dry and dessert wines. It was first

bred in the 1860s by growers in Niagara County, New York.

RIESLING: A major grape that makes many dynamic, vibrant dry wines, as well as delicious off-dry and

dessert wines. Most of the best examples of riesling come from the Finger Lakes.

SEYVAL BLANC: A major French-American hybrid that is used on its own and in blends. Can make

good-tasting, dry wines.

VIDAL: A French-American hybrid; a source of dry wines and some exceptional icewines.

VIGNOLES: A somewhat rare French-American hybrid also known as Ravat 51; used for dry wines and

some tasty icewines.

REDS

BACO NOIR: A French-American hybrid that makes simple, fruity red wines that aren’t particularly foxy.

CABERNET FRANC: A major grape that is often blended with merlot and cabernet sauvignon for

Bordeaux-style reds.

CABERNET SAUVIGNON: Often blended with merlot to create Bordeaux-style reds. Only a modest

number of producers, notably on Long Island, use it as a single varietal.

CATAWBA: A cross or hybrid (the genetic history is unclear) that was very popular in the American

Northeast in the nineteenth century (back then, sparkling catawba was a specialty of the Finger Lakes). It

makes spicy, grapey, high-acid, light red and rosé wines.

CONCORD: A native grape belonging to the labrusca species, it was first grown from seed in

Massachusetts along the Concord River. It is the most widely planted grape in New York State, although

most of the production is used for grape juice and jelly, not wine. The remainder is used to make sweet

kosher wines and fortified wines.

MERLOT : A major grape, merlot can become sleek, berried wines that range from good to delicious,

especially those produced on Long Island.

PINOT NOIR: Generally used for New York’s numerous sparkling wines.

HYBRIDS AND CROSSES IN AMERICA

From the mid-1800s to the mid-1900s, French scientists and horticulturists attempted to

develop grape varieties that would taste similar to vinifera varieties, yet be more hardy

and disease-resistant, like native American varieties. T o come up with these new

“super” grape varieties, hundreds, if not thousands, of hybrids of vinifera and native

American varieties were bred. (Reminder: A hybrid is not the same as a cross. A hybrid

is a grape variety created by breeding two grapes of different species—for example, by

breeding a vinifera-species grape with a grape that belongs to an American species. A

cross is a grape created by breeding two varieties from within the same species.)

Many of the hybrids created by the French scientists (such as seyval blanc, vignoles,

Vidal, and Baco noir) turned out to be fairly successful. They were indeed hardy in the

vineyard, and their flavors, while not absolutely vinifera-like, also usually did not have

the pungent grapey/animal fur character referred to as “foxy.

” Some of these French-

American hybrids were initially widely planted in France, although all hybrids were

ultimately outlawed in that country. Such hybrids are, however, still grown today in New

York State (and other northeastern U.S. states, as well as Canada).

The history behind New York’s French-American hybrids revolves around an

assumption that later proved to be false. For centuries, European grapes were wrongly

presumed too fragile to withstand New York’s cold winters—especially in the Finger

Lakes. But as the 1970s and 1980s progressed, more and more vintners took the risk

of planting vinifera varieties, and consumers grew far more comfortable with New York

wines based on them. The vinifera revolution was imminent.

As of the early 2010s, about 60 percent of all the wine produced in New Y ork State was

white, but red wines continue to show leaps in quality and sophistication. In particular, the

Bordeaux varieties cabernet franc and merlot are the hot varieties to watch—especially on

Long Island, which has the longest growing season in the state and a climate warm and

sunny enough to bring these red varieties to ripeness. Sleek and medium-bodied, these

reds are far more like Bordeaux wines than they are like California wines.

With all due respect to the state’s increasingly solid reputation for fine red wines, New

Y ork’s rieslings are among the most evanescent rieslings made in the United States (only a

few rieslings of the Pacific Northwest can compare). Utterly light in body but

concentrated in flavor, they have what the Germans—riesling specialists, after all—would

approvingly call precision and transparency (meaning they reflect the character of their

site). New Y ork’s rieslings come in all styles: dry, off-dry, slightly sweet, late-harvest, and

icewines. The dry versions are wonderfully crisp, even austere; the off-dry rieslings,

harmonious and mellow; the sweet rieslings, luscious yet exquisitely balanced. There are

numerous New Y ork rieslings that shouldn’t be missed, including those from Dr.

Konstantin Frank, Hermann J. Wiemer, and Sheldrake Point, to name three producers.

CABERNET FRANC AND THE ISSUE OF COOL

Some 500 years ago, cabernet franc and sauvignon blanc had a nice moment in nature and cabernet

sauvignon was born. Like cabernet sauvignon, parent cabernet franc has always been associated with

relatively cool or maritime climates—the Loire Valley and Bordeaux, in France, for example, and New

York State, in the United States. The reason is completely practical.

Cabernet franc vines bud late in the season (decreasing the chances that a catastrophic spring frost

will kill the tender green growth and thus destroy the crop), and at the same time, cabernet franc grapes

ripen early (avoiding potential fall rains and freezes that could decimate the harvest). Growers of cool-

climate cabernet franc also argue that cool temperatures are what give the grape its distinct, sleek purity

and nuanced flavors (including, often, violets, lavender, and a pleasing, resiny, green chaparral quality).

But in a fascinating shift in the 2000s, cabernet franc plantings began increasing in numerous warm

areas, such as California’s Napa and Sonoma valleys. Winemakers in these warmer areas say there’s a

different side to the grape—a rich side that’s evocative of dark chocolate, blueberry, and black olive. So,

while warm-climate cabernet franc is now cool, don’t forget, if you’re in France or New York, that cool-

climate cabernet franc is still hot.

Speaking of sweet wines, New Y ork makes some of the best in the country—and not

only from riesling but also from French-American hybrids, such as Vidal and vignoles.

Sweet wines in the state come in two styles: late-harvest wines made with the help of

Botrytis cinerea, the noble rot that gives French Sauternes its character, and icewines. Like

the magnificent eisweins of Germany, Austria, and Canada, New Y ork’s icewines are

made naturally from frozen grapes that have been left on the vines until well into winter.

VINIFERA VARIETIES SWEEP INTO THE STATE

Two prescient European immigrants are credited with ushering in a modern era for New

Y ork State wines. Charles Fournier, a former Champagne master at the house of V euve

Clicquot and later the head of New Y ork’s Gold Seal Wine Company, and Dr. Konstantin

Frank, a Ukrainian-born professor with a PhD in viticulture and plant sciences, ultimately

changed the course of New Y ork’s viticultural history by initiating, in the 1950s, what

would become a vinifera revolution. Frank, who spoke nine languages but no English,

came to New Y ork City as an immigrant in 1951, at the age of fifty-four, and took the only

job he could find—washing dishes. Later, Charles Fournier hired him at Golden Seal and

allowed him to plant whatever European varieties he wished. Frank knew that vinifera

grew in Ukraine, where winter temperatures were well below those in the Finger Lakes.

By employing some careful and, at the time, sophisticated viticultural techniques, Frank

was successful at growing the species, and Fournier at making it into good wine. By the

early 1960s, Frank had established his own winery and was growing chardonnay, riesling,

rkatsiteli (are-cat-si-TELL-ee; a leading grape still grown in Georgia, Ukraine, and the

Republic of Moldova), and some sixty other European grapes theretofore considered

impossible to cultivate in New Y ork State.

This triumph inspired other leading-edge winemakers. By 1996, there were 4,000 acres

(1,600 hectares) of vinifera grapes in New Y ork State, a 1,200 percent rise over the

acreage of 1980, and such wines as riesling, chardonnay, and merlot were breathing new

life into New Y ork’s wine industry.

Dr . Konstantin Frank, a Ukrainian-born professor of viticulture and plant sciences, changed the course of winemaking

in New York State by successfully growing Vitis vinifera varieties in the 1950s.

THE LAND

If you subtract the grapes grown for juice and jelly, New Y ork has approximately 17,000

acres (6,890 hectares) of wine grapes, a small amount compared to California’s 543,000

acres (219,700 hectares).

New Y ork is, perhaps needless to say, very cool. Winter comes soon after Thanksgiving

and can last until April, well after vines in California are already budding. Long hours and

months of continuous sunshine are definitely not the norm, and achieving total ripeness

can be an iffy proposition. Of course, there is a blessing buried within this imperfect

situation. New Y ork State, like other areas with cool climates, has the potential to make

some lovely, elegant wines.

L’CHAIM

Wine is central to the religious rites of Jews, and especially to such profoundly important Jewish holidays

as Passover. Historically, in the United States, most of the wine used in Jewish ceremonies was made in

New Y ork State, relatively near large urban centers of Jewish populations, including New Y ork City.

While today dry kosher wines are made all over the world (and many are very sophisticated), sweet kosher

wine remains a New Y ork tradition and is made from native American varieties, particularly Concord

grapes. Today, the leading brands of sweet kosher wine are Manischewitz, Kedem, and Mogen David.

The English naval explorer Henry Hudson (1565 to 1611), after whom the Hudson V alley is named.

The state’s three major wine regions are fairly distant from one another, but share an

important common denominator. All are adjacent to large bodies of water, which help

moderate extremes of temperature, protecting the vines from severe cold snaps in spring

and fall and fanning them with refreshing breezes during hot summers.

During the Ice Age, the glaciers that created New Y ork’s myriad lakes also left behind

an amalgam of well-drained soils, from shale, schist, and limestone in the Finger Lakes to

silt and loam on Long Island. Taken together, the combination of a cool but water-

moderated climate, the variety of soil types, and individual sites that, geographically, can

deviate considerably, means that New Y ork State wines are highly influenced by the

specific place where the grapes are grown.

Below are short profiles of the three major wine-producing regions.

THE HUDSON RIVER V ALLEY

The Hudson River, the first great passageway into the New World, was explored in 1609

by the Englishman Henry Hudson who, on behalf of the Dutch East India Company,

searched for a water route across North America to the Pacific. The deep, navigable river

quickly became so important to trade that the harbor at its mouth is credited with helping

New Y ork City become one of the world’s most prominent cities.

The vineyards of the Hudson River V alley, first planted in 1677 by French Huguenots,

are the oldest in New Y ork State. They begin just 40 miles (64 kilometers) north of

Manhattan. Of the region’s thirty-nine wineries, most are small or medium size, and

production focuses on vinifera and some hybrid varieties. Perhaps the most forward-

thinking winery in the region is Millbrook, owned by John Dyson, the former state

commissioner of agriculture and markets and also the owner of the prominent Sonoma

pinot noir-oriented winery Williams-Selyem.

Wish you were here! A postcard circa 1950 from the Finger Lakes, then (as now) a great rural vacation destination,

especially for East Coast city dwellers.

THE FINGER LAKES

Upstate New Y ork’s Finger Lakes region has been the center of the New Y ork wine

industry since the Civil War. Today, 118 wineries call this area home. The region fans out

from eleven finger-shaped lakes, the four major ones called Seneca, Cayuga,

Canandaigua, and Keuka, all Native American names. These narrow, deep lakes (some

deeper than the sea floor) were considered by the Iroquois to be formed by the hand of the

Great Spirit. Many wineries are within sight of the lakes, which are considered some of

the most beautiful in New Y ork State.

Originally planted with labrusca varieties and American crosses to make sweet wines,

the vineyards of the Finger Lakes were where the state’s French-American hybrids and

vinifera varieties got their start. Today, the region is abuzz with familiar activity. All types

of modern varieties are made here, from tasty chardonnays to sheer rieslings to lightly

spicy gewürztraminers. Not to be missed are the region’s excellent late-harvest and

icewines, some based on hybrids.

THE GRAPES OF (WELCH’S) WRATH

New York produces more grape juice than any other state. That rich, purply, aromatic juice includes the

famous brand Welch’ s Concord grape juice, invented by Dr . Thomas Welch in 1869. Like most other grape

juices, Welch’ s is made from native Concord grapes grown along the banks of Lake Erie, a huge viticultural

region spanning not only New York but also parts of Ohio and Pennsylvania. Were it not for Dr . Welch, an

ardent Prohibitionist, the Lake Erie region might have developed as an important producer of wine grapes

rather than juice grapes.

Among the Finger Lakes’ most famous historic wineries are Dr. Konstantin Frank

Vinifera Wine Cellars, Hermann J. Wiemer, Wagner Vineyards, and the off-the-wall,

highly idiosyncratic Bully Hill Vineyards. The Finger Lakes region is also home to a

number of newer, exciting wineries, including Standing Stone Vineyards, Ravines, Knapp

Winery, Fox Run, and Sheldrake Point.

LONG ISLAND

About 95 miles (150 kilometers) from New Y ork City, the eastern end of Long Island is

New Y ork State’s youngest wine region. The wine boom began here in earnest in the late

1970s and early 1980s, after John Wickham, a farmer in the small hamlet of Cutchogue,

successfully grew vinifera grapes in the mid-1960s. Although Wickham never made a

commercial wine, it was only a matter of a decade before someone did.

In 1973, Louisa and Alex Hargrave founded Hargrave Vineyard in a former Cutchogue

potato field. Several years later, the Hargraves’ cabernets were generating waves of

surprise and excitement throughout the state. Other would-be Long Island vintners soon

followed. By the late 1990s, Long Island had twenty-four wineries, and today it boasts

sixty-three.

Shaped like a lobster claw, Long Island begins close to the mainland of New Y ork State

and then thrusts out into the sea on a northeast angle, roughly parallel to the Connecticut

coast. The end of the island splits into two slivers of land, called the North Fork and the

South Fork. The North Fork was historically known for its orchards, potato fields, and

small farms; the South Fork for its white-duned beaches and whaling ports. Today, the

South Fork is probably best known for the Hamptons, a string of chic, small villages

where well-to-do Manhattanites spend summer weekends.

Although there are a sprinkling of wineries in the Hamptons, most of Long Island’s

vineyards are on the more protected and less populated North Fork. While it is surrounded

by water (Long Island Sound to the north, Peconic Bay to the south, and the Atlantic

Ocean to the east), the North Fork is not exposed broadside to the ocean, as is the South

Fork. Thus, the North Fork benefits from the moderating influences of the waters around

it, yet at the same time remains fairly well sheltered from severe saltwater storms and the

area’s not-infrequent hurricanes. As an additional boon, the North Fork of Long Island is

the sunniest part of New Y ork State, an obvious advantage for ripening grapes.

A viticultural threat both forks share, however, is birds. Long Island is on the Atlantic

flyway, a migratory route for numerous species of birds who can decimate a vineyard

within days. Many Long Island vineyards must be netted, at considerable expense to

vintners.

Long Island’s Atlantic maritime climate led early vintners to look at another Atlantic

maritime climate for inspiration and guidance: Bordeaux. As a result, Long Island is now

commonly planted with the Bordeaux red varieties merlot and cabernet franc.

Many Long Island wineries are among the most expensively and technically well

equipped in the state. The island’s proximity to Manhattan also means that vineyard land

here is the most expensive in New Y ork—far more expensive than that in the Finger

Lakes, for example. Top Long Island wineries include Channing Daughters, Shinn, and

Paumanok.

WHEN YOU VISIT… NEW YORK STATE

THE WINERIES of New York are set into some of the most charming,

“small-town-

America” landscapes in the United States. Many are housed in converted barns or

colonial farmhouses, and the wine districts are full of old-fashioned inns, bed-and-

breakfasts, and country restaurants. Because of their proximity to waterways, many

wineries have panoramic views of stunning lakes or bays.

IF YOUR VISIT INCLUDES the Finger Lakes, be sure to experience the New York Wine

and Culinary Center in the town of Canandaigua, on Lake Canandaigua—an

educational tasting room, restaurant, and bar devoted to exploring the state’s many

wines and artisanal beers. And a word of travel advice: No bridges exist on the lakes,

so plan on long, scenic, rural drives around them to get from place to place.

The New York State Wines to Know

WHITES

CHANNING DAUGHTERS WINERY

MEDITAZIONE | SOUTH FORK OF LONG ISLAND

38% muscat ottonel, 27% sauvignon blanc, 26% pinot blanc, 6% chardonnay, 2% pinot grigio, 1%

malvasia bianca

Among the wines that Channing Daughters makes are two extraordinary and unusual wines—called Meditazione

and Envelope—both of which are reminiscent of the so-called “orange wines” made in Georgia, Slovenia, and the

Friuli-V enezia Giulia region of northern Italy. The Meditazione (of which just four barrels are made) is a beautifully

lush wine, exuberant with apricot and peach marmalade flavors and laced with notes of bitter orange zest. The

grapes for the wine were grown in Bridgehampton, on the South Fork, where the winery is located, as well as on

the North Fork, and the wine takes its vivid amber-orange color from eighteen months’ aging in Slavonian

hogsheads (a barrel slightly larger than a standard barrel). One of Long Island’s most avant-garde wineries,

Channing Daughters bases many of its wines on northern Italian grape varieties, many of which are fairly rare.

Cofounder Walter Channing named the estate for his four daughters.

DR. KONSTANTIN FRANK

DRY RIESLING | FINGER LAKES

100% riesling

The late Dr. Konstantin Frank—a Ukrainian viticulturist who came to the U.S. in 1951 and specialized in cold-

climate varieties—was one of the pioneers of viticulture in New Y ork’s Finger Lakes region. Today, the winery’s

experience shows, especially with temperamental varieties like riesling. The Konstantin Frank rieslings have a

tactile sense of aliveness—a kind of kinetic edginess that makes them super refreshing. They are also delicate, and

laced with spiciness. But more than any other quality, they demonstrate fruity concentration without weightiness.

HERMANN J. WIEMER

DRY RIESLING | FINGER LAKES

100% riesling

Of all Finger Lakes rieslings, the one from Wiemer is perhaps most like the vibrant, dry rieslings from Germany.

Maybe this is no surprise, since the late Wiemer emigrated to New Y ork from the Mosel village of Bernkastel and

planted his vineyards in 1976. There’s an exquisite sense of peach and tangerine fruit at the core of the wine,

framed by delicate floral notes and a slight, zesty lime bitterness. I can’t help imaging the clear, glacial waters of

the lakes themselves when drinking this.

FOX RUN

RIESLING 12 | HANGING DELTA VINEYARD | FINGER LAKES

100% riesling

From sites all along Seneca Lake, Fox Run makes a score of rieslings from dry to sweet and every permutation in

between. Riesling 12 is the winery’s name for their light-bodied off-dry riesling with a touch of gentle sweetness.

Hanging Delta Vineyard is a reference to the ancient glacial deltas (now planted with vines) that formed thousands

of years ago when a far larger lake drained to become Seneca Lake. This is an utterly delicate wine, and one that

captures riesling’s evanescent sense of beauty. As noted, it’s also a bit sweet, but not in an ultrarich, viscous, or

candied way. Rather, you have the sense that you’ve drunk the lightest essence of apricots, peaches, and

strawberries—and that you could drink it all day long.

MILLBROOK

TOCAI FRIULANO | LOLLIPOP HILL | HUDSON RIVER VALLEY

100% Friulano

Millbrook’s Friulano (at the time of this writing, the winery still used the old name for the grape, tocai Friulano)

totally captures the essence of the delicious Friulanos from the northern Italian province Friuli-V enezia Giulia. It’s

light, zesty, and spicy, and has just the merest spin of something green, like dried sage or the way hedges smell in

spring. Y et, like all good Friulanos, it also has a beautiful, creamy middle that makes the wine irresistible.

Millbrook is owned by David Bova and his brother-in-law, John Dyson, a former agricultural commissioner of New

Y ork.

REDS

PAUMANOK

CABERNET FRANC | GRAND VINTAGE | NORTH FORK OF LONG ISLAND

100% cabernet franc

Paumanok makes some of the top reds on Long Island. The wines are beautiful expressions of their grape varieties,

and are always juicy and dead-on delicious. My favorite is the winery’s cabernet franc—a woodsy, violety, wild-

berried wine that exudes a lip-smacking “red” quality—almost like grenadine. The wine couldn’t be easier to drink.

Imagine a farmers’ market stand of Long Island berries. Y et there’s structure and firmness here, too. A serious,

sophisticated Hampton party red.

SHINN ESTATE

NINE BARRELS | MERLOT | RESERVE | NORTH FORK OF LONG ISLAND

96% merlot, with small amounts of malbec and petite verdot

From the husband-and-wife team of David Page and Barbara Shinn (former New Y ork City restaurateurs) comes

Nine Barrels—a merlot that’s neither heavy nor lean, but beautifully mid-prance between the two (not unlike a Cru

Bourgeois Bordeaux). The fascinating combination of raspberry, pomegranate, and rhubarb pie aromas and flavors

has a cool purity that’s true to Long Island’s relatively cool climate. The savory whoosh of spice, black tea, and

mineral flavors at the end is unusual for merlot, and deliciously distinctive. Needless to say, just nine barrels of this

wine (about 225 cases) are made each year.

SWEET WINES

SHELDRAKE POINT

ICEWINE | FINGER LAKES

100% riesling

Upstate New Y ork is famous for its icewines, dessert wines made by allowing the grapes to remain on the vine well

into the winter. When the frozen grapes are finally picked, the juice that slowly oozes from them is completely

luscious. Sheldrake Point’s stunning icewine engulfs your senses with slow-motion tidal waves of dense apricot

flavor. Although massively concentrated and quite sweet (28.3 percent residual sugar—or 283 grams of sugar per

liter), the wine soars on the palate with a Zen-like lightness of being. A totally sensual experience.

STANDING STONE

RIESLING ICE | FINGER LAKES

100% riesling

Sweet wines can be bold and intense or ethereally exquisite and delicate. Standing Stone’s the latter. With its

beautifully pensive flavors (apricots, peaches, lemon curd), this is the “quiet music” of sweet wine. Even the

sweetness itself seems to come at you in whispers. And the achingly long finish is just the way a great dinner

should end. Technically speaking, Riesling Ice is not a traditional icewine, since the grapes were not fully frozen on

the vine (the grapes were picked after they began to freeze, but were then placed in very cold storage until they

were frozen solid). The grapes come from the remarkable, old Gold Seal Vineyard, planted with riesling in 1974.

TEXAS

Some wine drinkers may find it surprising that good wine—or any wine at all, for that

matter—can be eked out of dusty lands that even the cowboys found trying. Perhaps more

surprising is the idea that Texas may have been one of the earliest places in the United

States to produce wine. Historians theorize that Franciscan priests planted vineyards

possibly as early as 1660, at missions in what is now far west Texas. Today, winemaking

continues in the Lone Star State, and it’s definitely not cowboy juice.

Texas is the largest of the forty-eight contiguous states. In landmass, it is bigger than

France, although all of the vineyard acreage in the state, some 3,500 acres (1,400

hectares), could easily fit into the confines of the small French appellation of Sancerre.

There are three broad grape-growing areas—the Texas Hill Country, the High Plains, and

the vast Trans-Pecos region (more on all to follow). Within each region, wineries are not

grouped closely together but scattered across hundreds of miles/kilometers of differing

mesoclimates and terrains. Neighboring wineries are often more than an hour’s drive

apart.

As was true in California, the first grapes planted in Texas were mission grapes, a

Spanish variety (known in Spain as listán prieto) that was the same as Chile’s país grape,

and that was one of the parents of Argentina’s criolla grape. However serviceable mission

wine might have been, it was only that—serviceable. By the nineteenth century, as new

immigrants from Germany, Italy, and France came to Texas, they brought more European

grape varieties. Generally, the vines succumbed to the severities of the climate and

disease. Texas’s immigrant winemakers were undeterred. When their new European vines

failed, they made wine from native Texas grapes, including one called, appropriately

enough, mustang.

Fall Creek Vineyards in the Texas Hill Country near Austin. In the mid 1970s, owners Ed and Susan Auler were among

the first in Texas to take a serious approach to grape growing and winemaking.

While there were at least sixteen commercial wineries operating in Texas prior to

Prohibition, after it, only V al V erde Winery, near the border city of Del Rio, on the Rio

Grande, remained. Almost four decades passed. Then, in the 1970s, the modern wine

boom boomed—and it did so in a peculiarly Texan way.

THE QUICK SIP ON TEXAS

TEXAS IS ONE OF THE OLDEST wine regions in the United States.

ALTHOUGH CABERNET SAUVIGNON and chardonnay are the most widely planted

grapes in the state, dozens of varieties—from tempranillo and syrah to viognier and

roussanne—are now grown, as T exans continue their search to determine which

grapes will excel.

TEXAS’S NEARLY 250 WINERIES are scattered across thousands of miles, with

differing mesoclimates.

In 1973, Ed Auler, a Texas cattle rancher and lawyer, went to France with his wife,

Susan, to further his knowledge of cattle breeds. A few days of looking at cattle

metamorphosed into several weeks of looking at vineyards and tasting wine. When the

Aulers stood outside Clos de V ougeot, one of Burgundy’s most famous vineyards, they

noticed how much the topography and the limestone soil reminded them of their ranch in

the Texas Hill Country. The Aulers thought the Texas thought: We can do that. Fall Creek

Vineyards was born ten years later.

Meanwhile, out on the High Plains, in Lubbock, other vineyards were being planted. In

1974, after noticing how exuberantly the grape trellis over his patio was growing, Texas

Tech professor Bob Reed teamed up with another professor, Clinton McPherson, and the

two scientists planted one hundred varieties intended merely as a fun science project for

their students. Within a few years, the project had become the highly successful Llano

Estacado Winery, currently the largest winery in the state.

A TEXAS HERO

T exas horticulturist T . V. Munson (1843–1913) played a central role in saving the vineyards of Europe

from phylloxera devastation in the nineteenth century. In 1876, Munson began studying grapes, traveling

from his home north of Dallas, in Denison, some 75,000 miles (120,700 kilometers) throughout the

United States and Mexico (often on horseback), collecting native American grape varieties as he went.

Using these as parents, Munson developed more than three hundred disease-resistant varieties of

grapes. Based on his research, he wrote the classic text Foundation of American Grape Culture in 1909.

When phylloxera struck the vineyards of Europe, Munson was among those who shipped supplies of

native rootstocks to European vintners. By grafting their vines onto the T exas-grown rootstocks,

Europeans were ultimately able to salvage what remained of their vineyards. For his work, Munson was

awarded the French Legion of Honor Cross of Mérite Agricole in 1888.

Segue to 1976. The University of Texas began to ponder the future of its 2.1 million

acres (849,800 hectares) of land scattered across nineteen counties in the West Texas

desert. Early in 1921, the Santa Rita oil well struck lucky, helping the university to

become one of the richest in the world. But oil was a limited resource. The university’s

manager of lands and property, Billy Carr, proposed a mind-blowing idea: plant vineyards.

In 1981, the first vines belonging to what would later become Ste. Genevieve Winery

(named after a fifth-century nun who is the patron saint of Paris) were planted beside a

giant mesa in the middle of the West Texas desert. By 1992, the winery was producing

more than 100,000 cases of wine each year. And so the stories went. Texans thinking

about cattle, about land, about oil, about agricultural innovation found their way to wine

grapes. The movement had begun.

SPAIN’S GIFT

No alcoholic beverage made from grapes appears to have been produced in the Americas before the

arrival of the Spanish conquistadores in the sixteenth century, according to Tim Unwin in Wine and the

Vine: An Historical Geography of Viticulture and the Wine Trade. Instead, the indigenous peoples of

Mesoamerica made such alcoholic drinks as pulque, the forerunner of mescal, from the maguey or agave

plant; tesgüino, from the sprouted kernels of maize; and balche, from mead, flavored with the leaves of

the Lonchocarpus, a tropical tree or climbing shrub with colorful flowers. What makes this all the more

fascinating is that numerous native species of the grape genus Vitis were to be found in the Americas,

including in the Rio Grande V alley of Texas.

THE GRAPES OF TEXAS

WHITES

BLANC DU BOIS: A hybrid developed at the University of Florida in 1968 and now grown in Florida,

T exas, and the Gulf States because of its tolerance of humidity and resistance to Pierce’s disease. It

makes fresh, clean, fruity wines.

CHARDONNAY: A major white grape; the styles and quality of the wines made from it are variable and in

flux.

CHENIN BLANC: A minor grape that is often made into good off-dry wines as a counterpoint to the

region’s chile-rich cuisine.

MUSCAT CANELLI: A minor grape, the same as muscat blanc à petits grains. It is made into very good

off-dry wines.

SAUVIGNON BLANC: A major grape that can be the source of good, tasty, often peachy-herbal-flavored

wines.

VIOGNIER: Plantings are small but growing. Many viticulturists believe T exas’s future lies in Rhône

varieties.

REDS

CABERNET FRANC: A modest amount is grown, often used for blending, but it is sometimes made into

very good wine on its own.

CABERNET SAUVIGNON: A leading red grape; makes good wines.

LENOIR: An American-species grape, also known as “black Spanish” because of its incredibly dark

color. Native to T exas, it is appreciated for its resistance to Pierce’s disease and is usually used in

blends.

MALBEC: A minor grape currently, but plantings are increasing significantly and the wines show

promise.

MERLOT : A significant amount is grown, but it’s mostly blended into cabernet sauvignon-based wines.

SANGIOVESE: A minor grape, but plantings are increasing a bit as vintners experiment with Italian

varieties.

SYRAH: An important grape; increasingly planted, with growing success.

TEMPRANILLO: Plantings are small but growing. Expectations are high for the eventual success of this

variety in T exas.

THE LAND AND THE GRAPES

There may be a Texas spirit, a Texas accent, a Texas cuisine, a Texas way of considering

things, maybe even a Texas ego—but there is not a Texas land. Texas covers more than

267,000 square miles (691,500 square kilometers). Geologically and climatically, the state

is enormously varied.

The three broad grape-growing regions—Texas Hill Country, in the center of the state;

High Plains, on the Texas Panhandle; and Trans-Pecos, a large winegrowing area in the

southwest bordering Mexico—all encompass numerous smaller A V As. Texas Hill Country

is a concatenation of rolling hills and color. The white limestone and pink granite soil

stares out from the rough rock faces it clings to. In the spring, these hills are covered with

scratchy olive-green mesquite and awash in bluebonnets and wagon-red wildflowers

called Indian paintbrushes. By comparison, the High Plains are precisely that: majestic,

flat plains some 3,600 feet (1,100 meters) above sea level, carpeted with wild grasses as

far as the eye can see. The Trans-Pecos, in the West Texas desert, is yet again different,

full of awe-inspiring, isolated mountainscapes; vast, barren red mesas; canyons; and,

occasionally, fertile river valleys. Within the Trans-Pecos region, the Escondido V alley

viticultural area is made up of limestone-laced hills and mountains full of marine

sedimentary rock.

A country highway leads through a field of Texas bluebonnets in the Texas Hill Country. The dazzling wildflowers of

central Texas were seeded several decades ago as a gift from Lady Bird Johnson, wife of 36th U.S. president Lyndon

Johnson.

THE MOST IMPORTANT TEXAS WINES

LEADING WINES

CABERNET SAUVIGNON red

CHARDONNAY white

SAUVIGNON BLANC white

WINES OF NOTE

BLANC DU BOIS white

CHENIN BLANC white

MUSCAT white

SYRAH red

TEMPRANILLO red

VIOGNIER white

What is viticulturally critical in each of these regions are the well-drained soils, the

high altitude of the best vineyards, and the fact that hot days usually don’t end in equally

hot nights. Without some temperature drop at night, Texas would not be able to produce

good wine. Still, Texas is a comparatively warm place for grape-growing. The vines often

wake up from their winter dormancy early in the year, and are sometimes ready to be

harvested by the end of July—a full two to three months before the harvest in California

and most European wine regions. As a result of this shortish, immediately warm growing

season, grapes in Texas sometimes lack sufficient hang time at cooler temperatures. This,

in turn, may be why so many Texas wines are simple and good—but not complex. (A long

hang time and a progressive but slow pace en route to ripeness are thought to be some of

the factors behind complexity in wine.)

THE FOODS OF TEXAS

For most of its history, Texas was better known for its cowboy boots than for its culinary

bounty. That changed radically in the 1980s when, just as the modern wine industry was

forming, a handful of dynamic young chefs began to piece together a maverick new style

of cooking deemed Southwestern cuisine. Although it had no tidy parameters,

Southwestern cuisine did have deep historical roots. They begin with the native Hopi and

Pueblo Indians, who roasted corn to bring out its sweetness, used chiles to heighten flavor,

grilled fish over hot-burning Texas woods, and smoked game.

Aging wine at Caprock Winery, on the High Plains of the Texas Panhandle near the town of Lubbock. Vineyards here are

planted on a vast plateau 3,600 feet (1,000 meters) above sea level.

Cowboys, too, left their culinary mark. With only a sack of pinto beans, a bucket of

lard, a dozen eggs, chiles, garlic, a sack of masa harina (ground corn), a sack of flour, and

coffee as provisions, cowboys set off to uninhabited ranch lands for weeks at a time. They

hunted and grilled wild turkey, quail, and venison and made rough homemade biscuits or

camp bread cooked over coals in black cast-iron pots. Biscuits, in fact, were a cowboy’s

silverware.

Although both are Texas specialties, grilling is not the same as barbecuing. Grilled food

is cooked quickly over an open flame. The American word barbecue comes from

barbacoa, the word Spanish explorers used to describe meats cooked extremely slowly in

a pit, so that the meat was cooked by smoke as much as by flame, if not more so. In the

end, the meat would be so tender and succulent it would fall off the bone. Pit barbecue

restaurants are still found all over the state.

Texas shares 1,240 miles (2,000 kilometers) of border with Mexico. From the

Mexicans, Texans learned how to cook with avocados, tomatoes, vanilla, and chocolate.

Texas salsas (rough, uncooked sauces made from diced tomatoes, other vegetables,

tropical fruits, and spices) are Mexican-inspired, as are flan desserts. Mexican home cooks

taught Texans how to make food refreshing by using lime juice in marinades and as a

seasoning. (Today, many Texans still drink beer as Mexicans do, with fresh lime squeezed

in.) Mexican tortillas—thin, unleavened corn or flour disks—are the unofficial Texas

bread.

The greatest commingling of Mexican and Texan cooking has been the development of

Tex-Mex cuisine. Gutsy, homey, and inexpensive, Tex-Mex was created by Mexican

Americans living in Texas and working with limited ingredients and a limited budget. The

most famous Tex-Mex dishes (tacos, burritos, chiles rellenos, fajitas) are all based on

tortillas, usually wrapped around some combination of beans, melted cheese, and ground

or sliced beef or pork, all spiked up with a fieryhot dipping sauce. Texans say that if your

forehead does not break out in beads of sweat, you are in the wrong Tex-Mex restaurant.

Chicken-fried steak with cream gravy. Not chicken; not steak exactly, and no cream. But a Texas specialty nonetheless

and great with a Texas sauvignon blanc.

Texas, however, is as much the South as it is the West. Chicken-fried steak with cream

gravy—a Southern dish—could almost be called the official Texas state dish. The name

makes little sense, for the dish has nothing to do with chicken, and there is no cream in the

gravy. To make it, an inexpensive cut of beef is seasoned with black pepper, flattened into

a thin patty, coated in a flour, milk, and egg batter, and then deep-fried until it is crunchy.

Over it, Texans pour the cream gravy, a dense, gray-brown sauce made by mixing flour

with nutmeg, black pepper, and a little milk and then cooking the mixture until it is thick

and lumpy. If anything begs for a glass of Texas cabernet, it’s chicken-fried steak.

WHEN YOU VISIT… TEXAS

THERE’S SOMETHING indescribably charming about watching wine-makers wearing

cowboy boots as they explain the intricacies of their “whyyyyyne…

” (a multisyllabic

word in the Lone Star State). Many T exas wineries welcome visitors, although it’s a

good idea to look up specific directions, since most wineries are deep in the

countryside. It’s often the owners themselves who will take you around.

The Texas Wines to Know

WHITES

PEDERNALES

VIOGNIER | RESERVE | TEXAS

100% viognier

Viognier, the great aromatic white grape of France’s minuscule Condrieu region, in the northern Rhône V alley,

would seem one of the least likely candidates for vinous residency in Texas. But viognier made in the Lone Star

State can be surprisingly good, and Pedernales is one of my favorites. With its deep floral/honeysuckle aromas and

fresh apricot and vanilla flavors, this viognier is spot-on in terms of personality, but a steal in terms of price.

Pedernales was founded in 2008 by the fifth, sixth, and seventh Texas generations of the Kuhlken family (just about

everybody in the family works at the winery).

HAAK VINEYARDS & WINERY

BLANC DU BOIS | TEXAS

100% blanc du bois

No doubt about it—a winery located on the way to Galveston from Houston deserves to show up as the subject of a

country western song. Especially Haak Vineyards—whose owner made the first blanc du bois in Texas back in the

early 1980s. This wine is fruity and fresh—the kind of tasty, crisp white you might imagine would be perfect on a

hot southern Texas night. Indeed, Texas vintners are pretty keen on this little grape—a complex hybrid developed in

1968 at the University of Florida. Blanc du bois is now grown all over the Gulf States, thanks to its amazing ability

to tolerate humidity, pests, and fatal vine diseases like Pierce’s disease.

LLANO ESTACADO

VIVIANA | TEXAS

An ever-changing blend of gewürztraminer, muscat canelli, viognier, riesling, and chardonnay

The winery’s name, Llano Estacado, means “staked plains,

” which is what the area was called by Francisco

Coronado, the early explorer who marked his way across the High Plains searching for the legendary cities of gold.

Startling as the thought of northern European aromatic varieties planted in Texas may be, Llano Estacado’s Viviana

is a lively, fresh, thirst-slaking quaff that’s beautifully aromatic and fruity. It’s got some great crispness (perhaps

from the riesling) and a wonderful, marmalade-like hint of bitterness (that’s gewürztraminer talking).

REDS

RED CABOOSE

CABERNET FRANC-TEMPRANILLO | TEXAS HIGH PLAINS

70% cabernet franc, 30% tempranillo

Texans boast that they can cook a mean steak, and this cabernet franc-tempranillo blend would be just the right

partner. With the very first sip, you know you’re in for something dramatic and flavorful. Slightly rugged in an

attractive way, this blend has terrific structure and appealing aromas and flavors reminiscent of woodsmoke,

graphite, tobacco, and roasted coffee beans. Indeed, this wine recently won “Class Champion” at the Houston

Livestock Show and Rodeo (eat your heart out, Château Margaux). Founded in 2003, Red Caboose is the effort of

father-son team Gary and Evan McKibben. Gary, an architect, specializes in sustainable structures, and thus Red

Caboose uses geothermal power for heating, cooling, refrigeration, and all other electricity, and the winery is built

to harvest rainwater (1 inch of rainfall = 16,000 gallons; 2.54 centimeters = 606 hectoliters), which is used to

irrigate the vineyards. The winery also makes a fun syrah/tempranillo/cabernet sauvignon blend called Range Rider.

FALL CREEK

SALT LICK VINEYARD | TEMPRANILLO | TEXAS

100% tempranillo

Fall Creek, one of the early pioneers of the modern Texas wine industry, made this rugged tempranillo from the

vineyards at The Salt Lick—a famous down-home barbecue joint in Driftwood, Texas (don’t plan on leavin’ after

the pork ribs without takin’ a whole homemade pecan pie home, y’all). Back to the wine, this is tempranillo

reminiscent of the center of Spain—juicy yet edgy, with a good grip of bitterness that makes you want meat charred

on the grill.

SWEET WINE

CAP ROCK

ORANGE MUSCAT | TEXAS HIGH PLAINS

100% orange muscat

Muscat may well be the most beloved variety of grape. Indeed, the intense fruitiness of muscat wine is like the

liquid version of a tropical fruit salad. And this one, from Cap Rock, is true to the orange in its name, for the wine

also bursts with tangerine, kumquat, and mandarin flavors. This is a wine to be iced down cold and served all by

itself on a hot weekend afternoon. (Orange muscat is a cross of muscat blanc à petits grains and chasselas.)

Barboursville Vineyards, a plantation, vineyard, and mansion founded in 1821 by James Barbour , former governor of

Virginia and secretary of war (1825–1828) under President John Quincy Adams. The estate was purchased and restored

in 1976 by the Italian winemaking family Zonin.

VIRGINIA

Among the first wines produced in America were those made around 1607 by Jamestown

colonists, from wild, musky-tasting scuppernong grapes. The wines were so poor—even

by colonial standards—that in 1619 the Virginia Company sent French vine cuttings and

eight French winemakers to Jamestown to help establish proper vineyards and make

decent wine. That same year, by legislative act, each colonist was required to plant at least

ten grapevines. French help proved futile. The maiden vineyards soon died from fungal

diseases and pests.

THE QUICK SIP ON VIRGINIA

ATTEMPTS TO MAKE WINE in Virginia began in 1607—the earliest record of wine

production in the United States.

DISEASES, PESTS, and difficult weather destroyed most of the early vineyards,

including those planted by third U.S. president, Thomas Jefferson.

THE MODERN ERA of Virginia wine-making started in the late 1970s with the planting

of chardonnay, cabernet sauvignon, and other grapes.

The old barn at Early Mountain Vineyards, along the Monticello Wine Trail in the pastoral Blue Ridge Mountains of

Virginia. The mostly small family wineries here continue to be inspired by Thomas Jefferson’ s vision of an American

wine culture.

Remarkably, the early Virginians were undeterred. For almost two centuries they

continued to plant vines, and the vines, for their part, continued to perish. By President

Thomas Jefferson’s time, the prospects for a Virginia wine industry appeared nonexistent.

Not that this stopped Jefferson (see box, page 793); he planted his Monticello vineyard in

1807. Alas, the vines eventually died because of diseases and pests.

Then, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the picture changed radically.

The devastation wrought by severely cold winters, plus vine diseases and phylloxera,

caused plant breeders to develop (and import) a number of new crosses and hybrid grapes

(for information about crosses and hybrids, see page 771). These crosses and hybrids

became quite successful, even though, compared to European wines, some were still an

acquired taste because of their grapey/animal fur character, known as “foxy.

” As time

went on, however, several hybrids—including Vidal, Maréchal Foch, and chambourcin—

were singled out as higher in quality, thanks to their relative lack of foxiness. Each is still

grown (in small quantities) in Virginia today.

AMERICA’S FIRST WINE EXPERT

Thomas Jefferson, third president of the United States and author of the Declaration of Independence,

was an accomplished architect, scientist, musician, philosopher, scholar, and farmer in addition to being

a politician. He was also America’s first wine expert.

Born in Albemarle County, Virginia, on April 13, 1743, Jefferson was appointed ambassador to France

at the age of forty-one, and moved to Paris. There he became deeply impressed by the French—

especially their love of food and wine. Subsequently, he arranged for his slave James Hemings to take

lessons from a French chef, promising Hemings his freedom if he would teach French cooking to the

other slaves at Monticello.

During his time in Europe, Jefferson became profoundly curious about viticulture. In 1787 and 1788,

he toured the wine regions of France, Germany, and northern Italy, visiting the top producers and taking

detailed notes in hopes of growing European (vinifera) grapes and making wine at Monticello. When he

returned in 1789, wines from the most prestigious vineyards of Europe were included in his eighty-six

packing cases. He also came back zealously enthusiastic, convinced that, in moderation, wine was an

integral part of healthful living. Alas, Jefferson’s own attempts at establishing a vineyard in Virginia and

making wine repeatedly failed.

Consuming great wine was, luckily, easier than producing it. Not surprisingly, the White House cellar

was amply stocked—especially with French wines—during the Jefferson presidency. Indeed, Jefferson

personally spent many thousands of dollars on wine—a feat in and of itself, given what wine cost in

1800. But Jefferson had an impact on the White House cellar well before and long after his terms. From

Washington’s presidency through Monroe’s, Jefferson positioned himself as the unofficial presidential

wine adviser, always ready with recommendations, even when none were requested.

No president since Jefferson has ever taken such a profound interest in wine and wine’s beneficial

role in society. The White House cellar remains, however, well stocked—today, mostly with American

wines.

But the real birth of the state’s modern wine industry came in the 1980s, with the

widespread planting of vinifera grapes such as chardonnay and cabernet franc. A new

period of optimism ensued. In 1979, there had been just 286 acres (116 hectares) of

vineyards and six wineries in Virginia. By 2011, there were 2,600 acres (1,052 hectares)

and 250 wineries. And, helpfully, some of the modern families who now own those

wineries have a lot of experience with new ventures. Real estate magnate Donald Trump

and AOL founder Steve Case, for example, both own wineries in Virginia.

THE LAND, THE GRAPES, AND THE VINEYARDS

The state’s wineries are scattered over seven appellations, from Shenandoah V alley, in the

northwest, between the Allegheny and Blue Ridge Mountains; to Monticello (named after

the nearby home of Thomas Jefferson); to Northern Neck (George Washington’s

birthplace); North Fork of Roanoke; Rocky Knob; and the Eastern Shore.

VIRGINIA COUNTRY HAM

Arguably the quintessential Southern food, country ham has been produced in Virginia and its

neighboring states from the earliest Colonial times. As the number of artisanal producers has declined,

however, production of true country ham has diminished sharply.

Unlike the baked ham often eaten at Easter, Virginia country ham has a very dramatic, sweet, meaty

flavor and can be quite salty. Like Italian prosciutto, it’s meant to be sliced paper thin.

The best country hams—such as those produced near the town of Smithfield—come from peanut-fed

hogs. The hams are dry-cured with sugar and seasonings, then smoked over hickory wood and aged

from three months to up to one year. The longer the aging, the saltier the meat.

Salty foods often work best with either high-acid wines or sweet wines. Or, if you’re up for an

adventure, try a juicy, fruity red that’s uniquely Virginian: Norton.

Here are three top Virginia ham producers: Smithfield Packing Co., Gwaltney of Smithfield, and S.

Wallace Edwards & Sons.

Eastern Virginia’s vineyards tend to be planted mostly in clay and loam soils, while

soils in the western part of the state are more granite based. Despite these soil differences,

and although the vineyards are scattered across the entire state, all of them share a

dramatic continental climate. Winters can be so bitingly cold that the trunks of the vines

can freeze and split open. Springtime frosts can kill new buds. In summer, excessive heat

can make the grapes ripen too quickly, which detracts from the elegance of the final wine.

Humidity during the growing season can lead to rot, mildew, and disease. And as if all of

this wasn’t enough, hurricane season overlaps with the harvest, posing a threat of

torrential rains. In Virginia, winemakers and viticulturists need to be extremely well

skilled, and it’s critical to plant vineyards only in sites where threats and problems are

minimized.

THE MOST IMPORTANT VIRGINIA WINES

LEADING WINES

CABERNET FRANC red

CABERNET SAUVIGNON red

CHARDONNAY white

MERLOT red

VIDAL BLANC white

VIOGNIER white

WINES OF NOTE

CHAMBOURCIN red

NORTON red

PETIT VERDOT red

Monticello, the Virginia estate of Thomas Jefferson, third President of the United States. Had Jefferson’ s hopes come

true, the United States would have had a thriving wine industry by the turn of the 19th century, for Jefferson considered

wine the most healthful and civilized of beverages.

THE GRAPES OF VIRGINIA

WHITES

CHARDONNAY: A widely planted grape; virtually every winery makes a chardonnay.

VIDAL BLANC: An important French-American hybrid that can make very good wines.

VIOGNIER: The second-leading white grape in the state; its quality can be very good.

REDS

CABERNET FRANC: An important grape that shows promise. It makes lean reds that are smoky and

slightly spicy.

CABERNET SAUVIGNON: Generally less successful than cabernet franc; the wines from cabernet

sauvignon vary in quality.

CHAMBOURCIN: An important hybrid with very good success in Virginia. It makes lean reds.

MERLOT : An important grape; most examples are fairly light and lean.

NORTON: A hybrid that makes simple, fruity wines with a lot of berry flavors. Although only a small

amount is planted, the quality can be high.

PETIT VERDOT : An up-and-coming grape that makes lean, slightly spicy reds, sometimes with a lot of

tannin.

WHEN YOU VISIT… VIRGINIA

JUST OVER 60 PERCENT of Virginia wine is sold in-state, and much of that is sold

directly from the wineries themselves. As a result, even the tiniest of Virginia wineries

welcomes (with considerable Southern hospitality) visitors and conducts tours and

tastings.

VIRGINIA WINE COUNTRY is among the most beautiful in the United States, and

many wineries have pick-your-own apple orchards, picnic areas, wine festivals, and

even, should you be spontaneously swept away, wedding facilities.

The Virginia Wines to Know

WHITES

MICHAEL SHAPS

TANNAT | MONTICELLO

100% tannat

It’s hard to know if tannat has a future in Virginia (or in the U.S.), but this wine gives a hopeful glimpse of what

might be possible. Bold and packed with tar and dark chocolate flavors, it’s a wine that needs a shivery night and

snow on the ground. Indeed, the savory/salty/bitter flavors and sleek but mouthfilling texture are just waiting for a

roast leg of lamb to be taken from the oven. Michael Shaps, a veteran of the Virginia wine scene, studied in

Burgundy before making wine for several Virginia wineries, including, as of 2007, his own.

CHATEAU MORRISETTE

VIOGNIER | MONTICELLO

100% viognier

Chateau Morrisette, founded in the Blue Ridge Mountains in 1978, is owned by the Morrisette family, who are

clearly dog lovers (the corks are branded “woof woof,

” the wine’s back label is in the shape of a dog bone; the

website is thedogs.com; and many of their wines are named after dogs: Black Dog, Frosty Dog, and Our Dog Blue).

But canines aside, viognier is one of the family’s strong suits. It’s full of floral aromas (though thankfully it’s not

excessively perfumey) and tastes of dried apricot, quince, and citrus. Viognier fans, this is for you.

REDS

CHRYSALIS

NORTON | LOCKSLEY RESERVE | VIRGINIA

100% Norton

Made from the American hybrid called Norton, this juicy, light-bodied wine has a strawberry preserve quality, plus

the hint of a good, bitter, Campari-like edge. Chill it just a bit (as if it were Beaujolais) and serve with some good

Virginia country ham. Chrysalis has the largest plantings of Norton grapes in the world.

BARBOURSVILLE VINEYARDS

CABERNET FRANC | RESERVE

95% cabernet franc, 5% cabernet sauvignon

Barboursville, a historic Virginia landmark located between Monticello and Montpelier, boasts the ruins of the

elegant 1814 brick house that Thomas Jefferson designed for his friend, the governor of Virginia and U.S. Senator

James Barbour. The winery was founded in 1976 by Gianni Zonin, heir to one of the largest wine companies in

Italy, and grows more than a dozen varieties of grapes. In particular, the winery’s cabernet franc shows fine

character and the potential for this variety in Virginia. With a distinct cedar/earth/cassis-like aroma and flavor, plus

a significant structure, the wine is reminiscent of an easy-drinking but sophisticated Cru Bourgeois Bordeaux.

LINDEN

HARDSCRABBLE | VIRGINIA

Approximately 70% cabernet sauvignon, 15% cabernet franc, and small amounts of petit verdot and

merlot

Linden, a small winery in the Blue Ridge Mountains, about an hour’s drive west of Washington, D.C., has made

cabernet-based wines since 1987, and their experience shows. Hardscrabble (named for a difficult plot of rocky,

arid land) is the real deal—a Bordeaux-style wine with a solid core of licoricey/cocoa-y fruit, and a wonderful

barklike character reminiscent of sophisticated bitters.

FLYING FOX

PETIT VERDOT | MONTICELLO

Approximately 80% petit verdot, with merlot

This inky wine is a surprise for Virginia, and perhaps an indication of good things to come from this variety. The

wine is classic petit verdot—black in color, packed with rich red currant flavors, smoky, chocolaty, and very

structured. Flying Fox, a small family winery, takes its name from the fox-topped weathervane on the property.

KING FAMILY

MERITAGE | MONTICELLO

Approximately 50% merlot, plus petit verdot, cabernet franc, and malbec

The King family make very good Bordeaux-style wines from their estate in Monticello (the term meritage refers to

wines made from a blend of varieties historically grown in Bordeaux). These are medium-bodied, easy-drinking

wines that have a nice sleekness to them and terrific structure. Their sophisticated flavors and aromas lean toward

dark chocolate, licorice, and tar. Like many Virginia wineries, this one is beautiful and has a deep sense of Southern

hospitality. Every Sunday in summer, polo matches are held at the winery’s polo field.

Casa Rondena Winery in the Rio Grande V alley, Albuquerque, New Mexico.

OTHER IMPORTANT

WINE REGIONS

ARIZONA | MISSOURI | NEW MEXICO | PENNSYLVANIA | IDAHO | MICHIGAN

| COLORADO | NEW JERSEY

A cabernet from New Jersey with dinner? It’s no longer a completely far-fetched idea. As

of the early twentieth century, most states in the U.S. had wine industries. But a

combination of Prohibition, vine diseases for which there was then no remedy, and the

Great Depression led farmers to pursue other crops in place of wine grapes. Today, the

situation has completely turned around. All fifty states now have established wine

industries. We’ve covered California, Washington State, Oregon, New Y ork, Texas, and

Virginia earlier in this chapter. Here are eight other states that make wines I think you’ll

want to taste and know about.

ARIZONA

Whatever the Apache warrior chief Cochise envisioned as the destiny of his homeland, it

probably wasn’t as wine country. But on the parched, blindingly bright high desert of

southeast Arizona where Cochise once reigned, that’s exactly what has happened. Just 20

miles (32 kilometers) from the Mexican border, the cactus-ringed villages of Sonoita,

Sedona, and Wilcox (John Wayne westerns were filmed here) have sprouted the

improbable: small green vines that clutch the earth with true grit.

Arizona’s three major winegrowing areas are all on high deserts, and although a

scorching desert climate would seem to preclude grape-growing, sixty-three wineries now

exist, thanks to irrigation. All is not quite perfect, however. As it turns out, the state’s

coyotes and javelinas not only adore grapes but also possesses a special fondness for the

flavor of irrigation hoses, without which no Arizonan winery could survive.

A horse-drawn wagon may still be the best way to experience the vineyards of Arizona. Here, Sonoita Vineyards.

The first attempts to grow grapes in Arizona were made by Franciscan missionaries in

the late seventeenth century, but the state’s modern wine industry didn’t emerge until the

1980s, when Dr. Gordon Dutt, who has a PhD in soil science from the University of

Arizona, planted grapes near Sonoita. Today, the leading wineries include Callaghan

Vineyards, Lawrence Dunham, Alcantara, Pillsbury, Javelina Leap, and Bitter Creek,

several of which make good red wines based on Mediterranean and Spanish varieties such

as tempranillo, mourvèdre, and grenache.

MISSOURI

With 119 wineries, Missouri is one of the most prominent up-and-coming wine regions in

the United States. Until relatively recently, Missouri’s was a riches-to-rags story. In 1866,

George Husmann, a professor at the University of Missouri, prophesied that the United

States would one day be the world’s greatest wine-producing country. At the time, it

seemed as if his home state might lead the way; it ranked second in the nation in grape-

growing, and wines from Missouri quite frankly stunned critics in wine exhibitions in

Paris, Vienna, and elsewhere in Europe. The grape variety Norton, a hybrid, was

especially highly regarded—it was compared by one British wine expert to no less than

French Burgundy “without the finesse.

” (As descriptions go, this was probably a bit

fanciful; Norton’s deep color, full body, and jammy fruit flavors are more reminiscent of

zinfandel than pinot noir.) Ultimately and unfortunately, a combination of disease

(especially mildew and rot), overproduction, and local Prohibition laws took their toll on

Missouri’s wine industry. By the 1880s, most vineyards were dying or abandoned. Those

that survived national Prohibition did so by reinventing themselves as juice and jelly

manufacturers.

Stone Hill Winery in Hermann, Missouri, on the banks of the Missouri River . Before Prohibition, Hermann was one of

the flourishing centers of wine in the United States, and Stone Hill Winery was one of the five largest wineries in the

world.

A rebirth came in the 1970s and 1980s, with new laws that helped jump-start a modern

wine industry, and by 2010, Missouri was spawning nearly a dozen new wineries every

year. The top three producing wineries in Missouri are St. James, Stone Hill, and Les

Bourgeois.

NEW MEXICO

In the 1990s, a sparkling wine named Gruet developed a cult following in knowledgeable

wine circles around the United States. On the face of it, there was nothing remarkable

about this; there were, after all, many terrific California sparkling wines made according

to the traditional (Champagne) method.

But Gruet wasn’t from Napa or Sonoma, or for that matter from anyplace else in

California. Gruet was from Truth or Consequences, a small town in New Mexico, and as

surprising as that was, another surprise was in store when you called the winery looking

for the owner. A Frenchwoman got on the line.

In 1983, Nathalie Gruet, her brother Laurent Gruet, and her husband, Farid Himeur,

moved from France to Truth or Consequences, a stark plateau 150 miles (240 kilometers)

south of Albuquerque, with the intention of making sparkling wine. As tourists years

before, they’d fallen in love with the American Southwest and instinctively felt that it was

wine country waiting to be discovered. Land prices were cheap. They figured that if the

wine they made turned out bad, they wouldn’t be out a lot of capital; if it turned out well,

the notoriety would launch them. And that’s exactly what happened. The first Gruet brut

was released in 1989 to amazing press reviews. Crisp, frothy, and elegant, it’s easily the

equal of many California sparklers.

As in Arizona, New Mexico’s first grapes were planted in the seventeenth century by

Franciscan fathers who required wine for the Mass (this was earlier than in California by a

few decades). But as in so many other states, disease, severe weather, and national

Prohibition proved the New Mexican wine industry’s undoing. At least until the 1980s.

Today, New Mexico boasts fifty-two wineries, including two meaderies (wineries that

make mead, or wine from honey), proving that truth, consequences, and wine can be a

formidable combination.

PENNSYLV ANIA

With hundreds of chardonnays made in California, you don’t expect to find one of your

favorites in Pennsylvania, but many wine lovers have. The state has more wineries than

most of us would guess—123. Pennsylvania was the location of one of the first successful

commercial winegrowing ventures in the United States: the Pennsylvania Wine Company,

which began in 1793 but closed soon thereafter, its vineyards decimated by disease.

Today, more advanced viticultural knowledge promises a brighter future for the state.

Pennsylvania has highly diversified climates, and thus a wide variety of wines are

made. On the one hand, vinifera varieties such as chardonnay, pinot gris, and cabernet

sauvignon are quite successful here, but so are hybrids such as catawba, Cayuga,

chambourcin, seyval blanc, and Vidal blanc. In Pennsylvania’s far north, near Lake Erie,

icewines are made. As is true in New Jersey, Pennsylvania has a very active vintners’

alliance dedicated to improving quality—the Pennsylvania Wine Quality Initiative—

which is credited with raising wine quality dramatically in the past decade. Among

Pennsylvania’s top wineries: Chaddsford Winery, Windgate Vineyards, Mazza Vineyards,

and Twin Brook Winery.

IDAHO

The first wineries in the Pacific Northwest were not in Oregon or Washington State but in

Idaho, the oft-forgotten third member of the Pacific Northwest triad. German and French

immigrants planted grapes here as early as 1864, but as with so many states, national

Prohibition took a debilitating toll on the industry and brought production to an absolute

halt.

Today, the Idaho wine industry is in the process of a whirlwind rebirth. Just ten years

ago the state had eleven wineries; today it has forty-nine.

Harvesting grapes in the Snake River V alley of southwestern Idaho.

That rebirth first began in the 1970s, when wine grapes were planted along the Snake

River V alley, in the southern part of the state. Indeed, the Snake River V alley—an 8,000-

square-mile (20,700-square-kilometer) expanse—was Idaho’s first American Viticulture

Area (A V A), having been approved in April 2007. The Snake River V alley is part of a

larger southwestern Idaho area that today has the highest density of vineyards and

wineries in the state.

From a geographical standpoint, southern Idaho has several viticultural assets. The area

is at the same latitude as many European winegrowing regions, yet is sunnier and has far

less rainfall. The characteristic cold winters, which might at first seem a disadvantage, are

in fact quite conducive, allowing the vines to go completely dormant, thus conserving

important carbohydrates for the coming season and at the same time ridding the vines of

bugs and discouraging disease. In addition, the region’s summer combination of cold

nights and warm days helps create a good balance of sugars and acid, resulting in well-

balanced wines.

Among the wineries to seek out: Cinder Winery, Coiled Winery, and Clearwater

Canyon Cellars.

MICHIGAN

The first time I tasted a Michigan wine—it was a riesling from the small wine district Old

Mission Peninsula—I was pretty astounded. But perhaps I shouldn’t have been. Michigan

has had a well-established wine industry for decades, and the state’s climate is perfect for

varieties such as riesling, pinot gris, and gewürztraminer, that thrive in cool temperatures.

The Michigan wine industry took its first formal step as far back as 1939, with the

establishment of the Michigan Wine Institute, a trade association formed to benefit local

grape growers. For many of these early decades, the industry revolved, as it did in nearby

New Y ork, around French-American hybrid grapes such as Vidal blanc. But in 1969, Carl

Banholzer and Leonard Olson, owners of Tabor Hill Winery, in Buchanan, Michigan, took

the next step and planted the state’s first documented vinifera grape varieties—in this case,

chardonnay and riesling.

There was no turning back. Lake Michigan’s temperate shoreline and the bounty of

cherry orchards and farmland enticed would-be wine-makers By the late 1970s, many of

Michigan’s important wineries were founded, including Leelanau Cellars, Fenn V alley

Vineyards, L. Mawby Vineyards, and Good Harbor Vineyards. Most importantly, large-

scale plantings of vinifera varieties began, notably at Chateau Grand Traverse, one of the

state’s important wineries on Old Mission Peninsula.

That peninsula, by the way, is now one of Michigan’s most important A V As. Old

Mission Peninsula extends north for 19 miles (31 kilometers) from Traverse City into the

Grand Traverse Bay of Lake Michigan, ending at Old Mission Point. The climate on the

peninsula is moderated by the surrounding waters, helping to prevent frost during the

growing season. Today, there are ninety-three wineries in Michigan. Among the most

influential: St. Julian Winery, Tabor Hill Winery, and Leelanau Cellars.

Punching down the “cap” of red grape skins at Chateau Grand Traverse on Old Mission Peninsula. One of Michigan’ s

most important wineries, Chateau Grand Traverse introduced vinifera varieties to Michigan in the 1970s.

COLORADO

When you visit a hip city like Boulder, Colorado, it seems entirely logical that the state

has an enthusiastic wine culture. That comes as no surprise. What is surprising, however,

is viticulture in Colorado. The Rocky Mountain state’s 105 wineries are mostly nestled in

high-elevation river valleys and on mesas—many of which are at elevations of 4,000 to

7,000 feet (1,200 to 2,100 meters) above sea level, making Colorado’s vineyards some of

the highest in the world.

At such elevations, nights are cold, but during the ripening season in late summer, days

are 30°F (17°C) warmer, dry, and sunny. Indeed, as in Argentina (where vineyards are

often 4,000 to 5,000 feet/1,200 to 1,500 meters in elevation), the grapes experience an

intense luminosity during ripening. In Colorado, that luminosity is coupled with long

daylight hours. The combination of these factors bodes well for an industry that is just

now beginning to get some traction. Among the most highly thought of wineries are

Winery at Holy Cross Abbey, Two Rivers Winery, Bookcliff Vineyards, Creekside Cellars,

and Garfield Estates Vineyard.

Striking palisades loom over the vineyards of Palisade, near Grand Junction, in northwest Colorado.

NEW JERSEY

The Garden State is often the butt of less-than-genteel jokes. But one thing that’s no joke:

New Jersey makes surprisingly good wines.

The first time I tasted a group of New Jersey wines, I figured it would take a few

minutes and no more (very simple wines = fast tasting). But a half hour later, my tasting

group and I were still discussing how much the reds (especially merlot, cabernet

sauvignon, and cabernet franc) reminded us of Bordeaux.

And speaking of Bordeaux: In New Jersey, an audacious tasting occurred in 2012 that

immediately put New Jersey wine on a whole new level. Called “The Judgment of

Princeton,

” the tasting was modeled on the famous Judgment of Paris Tasting of 1976,

which put California wine on the international map. The Princeton Tasting was led by

none other than George Taber who, as a TIME magazine reporter in 1976, broke the Paris

Tasting story. For the Judgment of Princeton, nine judges from France, Belgium, and the

U.S. blind-tasted New Jersey wines against top Bordeaux—indeed, against the same top

Bordeaux as were included in the 1976 tasting: Château Mouton-Rothschild, Château

Haut-Brion, and others of high status. In the end, the highest-scoring white and red were

both French wines (a Joseph Drouhin Beaune Clos des Mouches and Château Mouton-

Rothschild, respectively). But—and here’s the astounding part—three of the four top

whites were from New Jersey, and the best New Jersey red ranked third.

Y ou could be cynical. Y ou could make a dozen arguments about the questionable

validity of taste-offs. But, OMG. New Jersey rests her case.

Among my favorite New Jersey wineries: Hawk Haven, Unionville Vineyards,

V entimiglia Vineyard (which makes a stunning wine from the hybrid grape chambourcin),

Heritage Estate, Working Dog Winery, and Bellview.

The shaded areas of this map indicate entire states where wine is made. The actual vineyard areas are smaller and

scattered throughout the state.

MEXICO

As an important wine region, Mexico may seem unlikely. Y et this is where the history of

wine in the Americas began. Indeed, the first winery in the New World—Casa Madero—

was established in 1597 in the Mexican town of Santa Maria de las Parras (“Holy Mary of

the Grapevines”), and the winery continues to thrive today.

Like many wine drinkers, I once assumed that most Mexican wine would be cheap,

rough-and-ready stuff sold in supermarkets. Admittedly, such wines do exist in Mexico (as

they do nearly everywhere else). But beginning in the 1990s, and building on the success

of already established wineries like Monte Xanic, Santo Tomás, and L.A. Cetto, a group of

creative young winemakers quietly began making small lots of surprisingly delicious

wines. Today, Mexico’s rapidly growing fine wine industry is bursting with energy, and

the top wines are astonishing in quality.

Mexico has some 7,660 acres (3,100 hectares) of vineyards, and wine is produced in

three principal areas—in the northwest, specifically in the Baja Peninsula, immediately

south of California; in the north central states of Coahuila, Durango, and Chihuahua, all

just south of Texas and New Mexico; and in the center of Mexico, in the states of

Zacatecas, Aguascalientes, and Queretaro. Of these three regions, more than 90 percent of

all fine wine is produced in Baja.

The 1,012-mile-long (1,629-kilometer) Baja Peninsula is divided lengthwise by the

mineral-rich Sierra de Baja California mountain range, which effectively divides the

climate of the peninsula in half. All of the vineyards lie in arid valleys to the west of these

mountains, where the climate is Mediterranean-like and cold air from the Pacific Ocean

acts as a giant air conditioner, cooling the grapes. The main valleys extend, from the

thriving port city of Ensenada on the Pacific Ocean. (A gastronomically oriented city,

Ensenada is famous for its fish tacos, in which Pacific lobster or shark are deep-fried in

lard, then wrapped in fluffy, homemade flour tortillas.)

The vineyards of Adobe Guadalupe in Mexico’ s Guadalupe V alley on the Baja Peninsula. Besides making excellent wine,

the estate breeds prize-winning Azteca sport horses and has a stunning small hacienda-like inn.

“Wine is our path of life. It is not what we do; it’s our path to who we are.

”

— JOSÉ LUIS DURAND,

winemaker and owner, Durand Viticultura

The main valleys include Guadalupe, San Antonio, Ojos Negros, Santo Tomás, San

Vicente, and Llano Colorado. But of these, Guadalupe V alley is, by far, Mexico’s Napa

V alley. Here, along the largely unpaved Ruta del Vino (“Wine Route”) are some seventy

wineries, several of which also boast stellar avant-garde restaurants (Laja has exquisite

food), and small hacienda-like hotels (Adobe Guadalupe is a spiritual haven). The number

of physical wineries, however, does not directly reflect the booming industry here, for

many boutique wineries are brands that buy grapes and, lacking their own facilities, rent

space in other wineries. Many of these boutique wineries began as a result of La Escuelita

(“The Little School”)—part trade school, part wine boot camp, where locals are trained to

make artisanal wines by one of the most passionate Mexican enologists, Hugo d’Acosta,

owner of Casa de Piedra winery. (D’Acosta’s minerally, creamy chardonnay, called Piedra

de Sol, is one of the best chardonnays in Latin and South America.)

At 231 square miles (598 square kilometers), Guadalupe V alley is almost as big as

Chianti Classico. Thanks to irrigation, green vineyards dot a ranching landscape that

otherwise is so dry that little besides chaparral and desert shrubs grow. The lack of water

is a concern for every vintner here and the leading limitation to further growth of the

valley’s wine industry. The soils are divided into those that are extremely sandy and

infertile, near the now-dry river and streams that once ran through the valley, and those

that are made up of eroded, decomposed granite washed down millennia ago from nearby

mountains. Salinity in these soils often adds an unusual, attractive “minerality” to the

flavor of the wines. Interestingly, the Guadalupe V alley wines that come from grapes

grown in the sandy soils often display the greatest elegance.

As for grapes, Guadalupe V alley is a seemingly incongruous whirlwind of diversity.

The three main grapes used in top wines are tempranillo, nebbiolo, and cabernet

sauvignon, but many other varieties appear to do well here, including syrah, merlot,

cabernet franc, malbec, pinot noir, mourvèdre, grenache, and petite sirah among reds; and

among whites, sauvignon blanc, chardonnay, viognier, and chenin blanc. Rarely are the

grapes made into monovarietal wines. Instead, virtually all of the wines are blends—often

blends that have no precedent anywhere in the world (imagine, if you can, the flavor of a

wine based on a combination of nebbiolo, petite sirah, petit verdot, merlot, and cabernet

sauvignon).

In Mexico, as in California, the harvest is often done in the cool of night.

A word on Mexican nebbiolo. As delicious as wines made from it can be, the

morphology of the leaves and clusters, as well as the character of the wine itself, indicate

that it’s not nebbiolo from Piedmont. (As of this writing, DNA analysis had not yet been

performed to determine the grapes’ genetic identity.) Indeed, leading enologists here

believe that Mexican nebbiolo is probably not a single variety, but several varieties that

were brought from Italy after World War II by the Italian winemaker Esteban Ferro, then

at Santo Tomás winery. Ferro’s cuttings were apparently stalled at the port of V eracruz for

a long period of time, and the identification tags, wet and disintegrating, were eventually

lost. But the cuttings were planted and collectively called nebbiolo.

Mexican wines run the gamut from ethereally elegant and refined to powerhouses of

intensity. Like Mexican culture, the wines often seem to simultaneously possess fragility

and resilience. Among the best wines are Adobe Guadalupe’s Gabriel (a vividly alive and

rich Bordeaux-like blend of cabernet sauvignon, merlot, and malbec); La Lomita’s

Singular (always a dramatic, spicy, and distinctive red, although the blend changes

completely every year); and José Luis Durand’s Ala Rota and Ícaro (the first, a mostly

cabernet sauvignon and petite sirah blend that’s mind-blowingly elegant, minerally, and

delicious; the second, an intense, vivid, almost gamy wine based on nebbiolo and

Bordeaux varieties).

Finally, because Mexico has no system of denominations of origin, many Mexican

wines are simply labeled “product of Mexico,

” although some indicate the valley in which

most of the grapes grew. Additionally, no regulatory wine laws means that the varieties

listed on a label may or may not be listed in the order in which they dominate in the blend.

A wine labeled tempranillo, cabernet sauvignon, and syrah, could be mostly syrah.

CANADA

CANADA RANKS SIXTEENTH AMONG WINE-PRODUCING COUNTRIES WORLDWIDE. CANADIANS

DRINK AN AVERAGE OF 4 GALLONS (15 LITERS) OF WINE PER PERSON PER YEAR.

Canada is one of the newest wine regions in the New World. And like its southern

neighbor, the United States, the country possesses a pioneering spirit thanks to its early

days as a vast wilderness. Today, from seemingly out of nowhere, an exciting wine

industry has sprung, and the top Canadian wines—dry and sweet—are now turning heads

in competitions internationally. Though the industry is small, in the ten years between

2003 and 2013, the number of wineries here quadrupled. Today, there is no doubt that the

wine industry in Canada is on a roll and that many distinctive, exciting dry wines are

being made. As for Canada’s renowned, sweet icewines—prepare to be devastated by their

deliciousness.

As the harvested grapes arrive, winemakers at Malivoire Winery in Ontario sort out any that aren’ t perfect.

Many Americans, and, indeed, many Canadians, may never have tasted a Canadian

wine (the modern industry is still in its infancy), but grape-growing actually began here in

the 1860s, when grapes intended for sacramental wine were planted near the Okanagan

Mission in British Columbia, as well as on Lake Erie’s Pelee Island, at a winery with

what, at the time, was the evocative name Vin Villa. Y et for more than a century, the

development of a prosperous wine industry was hampered by a complex series of political

and economic barriers, including the creation of government monopolies that controlled

the sale and distribution of alcoholic beverages. It was not until the late 1980s and early

1990s that a modern wine industry finally took hold.

Hillside vineyards in the sunny, dry Okanagan V alley of British Columbia. Millions of years ago, the hillsides were

formed by receding glaciers.

It is still a very tiny industry by world standards. As of 2012, there were approximately

29,000 acres (11,700 hectares) of vineyards in Canada. That’s less than the grape acreage

in Switzerland, for example, and even the small Napa V alley in California has one and a

half times as much vineyard acreage as Canada does.

For an explanation of Canadian wine law, see the Appendix on Wine Laws, page 928.

THE QUICK SIP ON CANADA

CANADA’S TINY WINE industry is one of the newest and most exciting in the New

World.

CANADA MAKES surprisingly excellent dry wines—especially rieslings and pinot noirs

—as well as what has become one of the country’s super-stars—icewine, a rich, sweet

nectar made from grapes frozen on the vines and harvested in the dead of winter.

CANADA’S TWO most important wine regions are on opposite sides of the country—in

the west, British Columbia (principally the Okanagan Valley); in the east, Ontario

(principally the Niagara Peninsula).

THE LAND, THE GRAPES, AND THE VINEYARDS

I think of the wine regions of Canada as existing in a state of refrigerated sunlight. The

country’s cool, sunny, mostly dry climate and northern latitude come together to create an

ideal environment for making pristine wines with highly precise, pure flavors. Indeed, the

first research center dedicated to cool-climate grape-growing and winemaking—the Cool

Climate Oenology and Viticulture Institute—was established in Ontario in 1997.

THE GRAPES OF CANADA

WHITES

CHARDONNAY: A major grape, it can make very good wines ranging from lean, cool-climate styles to

wines that are reminiscent of white Burgundies.

GEWÜRZTRAMINER: One of Canada’s best-kept secrets. Can make beautifully aromatic, refreshing

wines.

PINOT GRIS: A major grape; it makes crisp, distinctive, high-quality whites.

RIESLING: A major grape, made into sensational, concentrated, dry wines that are crisp and lively, as

well as beautifully elegant icewines.

SAUVIGNON BLANC: An important grape; combined with sémillon, it makes good Bordeaux-style

whites.

VIDAL BLANC: A major French-American hybrid created in the 1930s in France. It makes what many

consider to be among Canada’s best icewines, as well as good dry table wines.

VIOGNIER: A minor grape, but it can make amazingly beautiful, fresh wines in the Okanagan Valley in

particular.

REDS

BACO NOIR: A French-American hybrid; it makes simple, fruity wines in Ontario, Quebec, and Nova

Scotia.

CABERNET FRANC: A major grape; it is made into sleek, dry reds in the manner of Chinon, from

France’s Loire Valley, and also red icewines.

CABERNET SAUVIGNON: Often blended with merlot to make good, if usually lean, Bordeaux-style

blends.

GAMAY: A minor grape, but it can make some amazingly fruity, fresh wines evocative of good Beaujolais.

MERLOT : Made as a single variety and combined with cabernet sauvignon and cabernet franc to make

some good Bordeaux-style blends.

PINOT NOIR: Canada’s star red grape, especially in the Okanagan Valley, where it makes elegant, silky

pinot noirs reminiscent of those made in Burgundy and Oregon.

SYRAH: A minor grape in terms of production, but growing. Thus far, it is made into some exciting wines

reminiscent of those of France’s northern Rhône Valley. Shows promise.

In particular, white varieties seem to soar with elegance and freshness here. The best

Canadian rieslings could fool you into thinking you’re drinking something from the Mosel

region of Germany; the best chardonnays have a sense of precision that white Burgundies

possess; the pinot gris are terrific wines—reminiscent of Alsace pinot gris; and the

aromatic varieties gewürztraminer and viognier may have their best New World homes in

Canada. As for red wines, pinot noir is the absolute star, making wines of world-class

stature. Red wines based on Bordeaux varieties are, as of this writing, perhaps not as

evolved, although cabernet franc shows promise.

The Niagara Peninsula (best known for the Falls of honeymoon fame) makes surprisingly good wines.

“I liken making pinot noir to waking up a woman at three in the morning. Y ou

never quite know what you’re going to get.

”

— LUKE SMITH,

owner and winemaker, Howling Bluff

Winery, British Columbia

Canada’s vineyards and wineries are concentrated in just two provinces: Ontario and

British Columbia, which, although on opposite sides of the country, more than 1,900 miles

(3,100 kilometers) apart, together account for 98 percent of the volume of premium

Canadian wine made. (Wine is also made in Quebec, and a tiny amount of sparkling wine

is made in Nova Scotia, although neither region yet makes wine in commercially

significant amounts.)

Of the two states, most of the wineries (299 as of 2014) are located in British Columbia

and are small-production, family-run businesses. Despite their size, many wineries make

six to twelve different wines. It’s quite common for the lion’s share of these wines to be

sold from the wineries’ own tasting rooms.

COLD WINES AND HOT NIGHTS

If you’re reading this book, you’re probably the kind of person who’d want to go to Niagara to taste some

of Ontario’s top wines. But it’s worth noting that you could honeymoon there, too. Each year, more than

fifty thousand people do. The tradition of honeymooning at Niagara Falls began in 1801, with the then-

famous couple of Joseph Alston and Theodosia Burr, the daughter of U.S. Vice President Aaron Burr.

Three years later, Napoléon’s younger brother, Jérôme Bonaparte, honeymooned there with his

American bride, Elizabeth Patterson. The falls, which are composed of two major sections, the

Horseshoe Falls on the Canadian side and the American Falls on the American side, were formed when

glaciers receded at the end of the last Ice Age, and water from the newly formed Great Lakes carved a

path through the Niagara Escarpment to the Atlantic Ocean. T oday, more than 6 million cubic feet

(169,900 cubic meters) of water falls over the crest line every minute in high flow. Interestingly, that water

appears unusually green thanks to the 66 tons (60 metric tons) a minute of embedded dissolved salts

and very finely ground rock generated by the erosive force of the Niagara River itself. Indeed, currently,

the falls erode at a rate of about 1 foot (30 centimeters) a year. Scientists believe that, fifty thousand

years from now, the remaining 20 miles (32 kilometers) to Lake Erie will have been undermined, and the

falls will cease to exist. Presumably honeymoons will continue to endure.

THE VQA SEAL OF APPROV AL

Most top Canadian wines carry a government seal with the letters VQA, which stand for Vintners Quality

Alliance. Used on wines from Ontario and British Columbia (the tiny vineyards of Quebec and Nova

Scotia are not yet included in the program), the VQA seal ensures that the wine has been professionally

tasted and adheres to standards set forth by a board of Canadian vintners and growers. The VQA also

stipulates how and when appellation names such as Okanagan V alley or Niagara Peninsula can be used,

plus the percentages of grape varieties required in making the wine.

Of the two regions, Ontario, despite having fewer wineries, is the larger producer,

accounting for more than 50 percent of all the wine made in the country. Ontario’s four

wine districts—Niagara Peninsula (the largest, with 14,000 acres/5,700 hectares of

grapes), Lake Erie North Shore, Prince Edward County, and Pelee Island—all lie along the

shores (or just offshore) of two of the Great Lakes, Lake Ontario and Lake Erie. Within

the Niagara Peninsula are fifteen smaller sub-appellations, many of which, like Beamsville

Bench and the Niagara Escarpment, have gained quite a bit of prestige for their wines.

Ontario’s wine districts are Canada’s most southerly, but the icy arctic winds that sweep

across the region would render viticulture nearly impossible were it not for the warming

and moderating effect of the lakes. Like the lakes themselves, the wine districts of Ontario

were carved out by retreating ancient glaciers that left behind a variety of deep, well-

drained soils.

THE MOST IMPORTANT CANADIAN WINES

LEADING WINES

CABERNET FRANC red

CHARDONNAY white

GEWÜRZTRAMINER white

ICEWINE white and red (sweet)

PINOT GRIS white

PINOT NOIR red

RIESLING white

SAUVIGNON BLANC and white BORDEAUX-STYLE BLENDS

SYRAH red

VIDAL BLANC white

WINES OF NOTE

BORDEAUX-STYLE BLENDS (merlot and cabernet sauvignon) red

GAMAY red

SPARKLING WINE white

VIOGNIER white

British Columbia, at the 50th parallel in latitude, is Canada’s most westerly viticultural

area, and one of the newest top wine regions of the New World. It’s also one of the most

northern. Close your eyes when you taste, and you could be in the Mosel (if the wine is

riesling) or in Burgundy (if it’s pinot noir). British Columbia is made up of five wine

districts—the Okanagan V alley, Similkameen V alley, Fraser V alley, Gulf Islands, and

V ancouver Island. Of these, the 150-mile-long (240-kilometer) Okanagan V alley (known

as the “fruit bowl” of Canada) is where most of British Columbia’s wineries are located

and where any wine lover will be most impressed (and impressed you will be).

On the Niagara Peninsula, the gentle sloping vineyards of the Beamsville Bench district sit on an elevated escarpment.

Though it may not look like it, the region benefits from warming breezes during winter (and cooling breezes in summer).

Although British Columbia is considerably farther north than Ontario, the temperatures

in the region are often warmer thanks to its climate and geography. This is especially true

of the sunny Okanagan V alley, which, while quite close to the Pacific Ocean as the crow

flies, is sheltered behind the curtain of the Coastal Mountain range. Rainfall here is scant,

and the southern end of the valley is in fact the northern tip of the Sonoran Desert. Days

are consistently bright with sunlight; nights are very cool—a viticulturist’s dream

scenario.

The name Okanagan has two possible origins: Historians tell us it means

“rendezvous” and refers to the meeting place on Lake Osoyoos where the

Native Americans of Washington and British Columbia gathered annually to

stock up on supplies, while a local legend has it that the name means “big

head” and refers to an ancient native people of exceptional bravery.

In the center of the Okanagan V alley is the long, narrow, pristine Okanagan Lake,

carved out by receding glaciers and so deep that the distance from the bottom of the lake

to the top of the surrounding mountains exceeds the depth of the Grand Canyon. All

around the lake, orchards and vineyards flourish, many of them located on lateral

outcroppings or “benches” created when the sides of the lake were scoured by giant blocks

of ice that repeatedly froze and melted. In the winter, this is ski country, but the very

warm, dry summers are perfect for growing all manner of fruit, including of course,

grapes. As such, the Okanagan is not exactly a “cool climate” in the traditional viticultural

sense, but, more accurately, a northern latitude with a short, warm growing season. As a

result, the wines, while displaying ripe, bright flavors, never have a flaccid, over-ripe

character. This fact is, of course, crucial for making British Columbia’s elegant pinot noirs

and rieslings.

ONE OF CANADA’S BEST (FROZEN) ASSETS–

ICEWINE

Thanks to Canada’s reliably bone-chillingly cold winters, icewines are produced here

every year, and the wines are so ethereal, they have near mythic status and an international

following. Indeed, Canada is now the leading producer of icewine in the world.

As is true in Austria and Germany, in Canada, icewine (or eiswein, as it is written in

Europe) is made only in the traditional, centuries-old manner, by allowing the grapes—

usually riesling or Vidal—to freeze naturally on the vine (as opposed to a shortcut

sometimes used elsewhere: freezing grapes in huge industrial freezers). When the outside

ambient temperature is no higher than 17.6°F (-8°C; a Canadian legal requirement), the

grapes are picked by hand, one frozen grape at a time. As the frozen grapes are pressed

(the yield of juice for icewine is a mere 15 percent of the yield of juice for regular table

wine), the sweet, high-acid, concentrated juice is separated from the ice. The ice is thrown

away and the resulting wine is made solely from the hyperconcentrated juice. (Usually, no

botrytis is involved.) By law, Canadian icewine must be 12.5 percent residual sugar (125

grams per liter), but there is no maximum, and indeed many are 20 percent or more. The

painstaking process is, needless to say, fraught with numerous difficulties, from the

exigencies of harvesting in subzero-degree weather to the challenge of dealing with

hungry bears, coyotes, deer, and birds, who can quickly strip the vines of every last sweet,

frozen grape.

Virtually every top producer in Canada tries to make icewine at some point or another,

and many producers are renowned for them, including Cave Spring, Inniskillin, and

Mission Hill.

In Ontario, frozen grapes, soon to be made into icewine, are netted to protect them from being eaten by wildlife.

CANADA’S OTHER GREAT ICE CAPADE

The lusciousness of Canadian icewine has inspired another cool, delicious phenomenon in Canada—ice

cider. Made principally in the province of Quebec, ice ciders can be produced in two ways: The apples

(many different varieties) can be left on the tree to freeze and are then pressed, or the apples can be

picked at the height of ripeness, pressed, and the juice set outside over the winter to freeze. In both

cases, the concentrated juice is fermented for six months into a cider containing 7 to 13 percent alcohol.

The purity and freshness of a sip is like biting into a hundred fresh apples at once. Some of the best

producers include Neige, Domaine Pinnacle, and Clos St.

-Denis.

Snow-capped heirloom apples. Once frozen, they are destined to become ice cider.

As you can imagine, the greatest Canadian icewines possess an almost otherworldly

contrapuntal tension between acidity and sweetness, making drinking them an ethereal

sensation. That’s saying it in an intellectual way. But here’s the kid-in-you version: Y ou’ll

want to lick the bowl.

They forgot to write “Please Don’ t Touch!” on the sign.

SOME OF THE BEST PRODUCERS IN CANADA

BRITISH COLUMBIA

Blue Mountain • Burrowing Owl • Church and State • Culmina • Gray Monk • Hawthorne Mountain • Hester

Creek • Howling Bluff • Konzelmann • Lake Breeze • Liquidity • Meyer Family • Mission Hill • Nk’Mip •

Orofino • Osoyoos Larose • Painted Rock • Quail’s Gate • Red Rooster • Road 13 Vineyards • Sandhill •

Sumac Ridge Estate • Summerhill • T antalus • Tinhorn Creek Vineyards • Wild Goose

ONTARIO

13th Street • Cave Spring Cellars • Château des Charmes • Colaneri • Fielding Estate • Flat Rock • Henry

of Pelham Estate • Inniskillin • Jackson Triggs • Le Clos Jordanne • Malivoire • Pillitteri Estates • Ravine

Vineyard • Stratus • T awse • Thirty Bench • Trius at Hillebrand • Vineland Estates They forgot to write

“Please Don’t Touch!” on the sign.

WHEN YOU VISIT… CANADA

GETTING MARRIED at Niagara Falls aside, one of the best ways to experience

Canada is to visit its small wineries. Many offer not only tastings and tours but also

breathtakingly beautiful scenery, and some have terrific cafés or restaurants. In

addition, numerous festivals and concerts are held throughout the year.

The Canadian Wines to Know

Canadian wine is, of course, not a single thing; the wines of British Columbia and Ontario are distinctly different

from one another, thanks to the great distances that separate the two regions. What unifies the wines, however, is

their amazing progress. Barely thought about in the twentieth century, the wines of Canada are now deliciously

established “players” in the New World.

WHITES

COLANERI

ALLEGRIA | NIAGARA-ON-THE-LAKE, ONTARIO

52% gewürztraminer, 36% sauvignon blanc, 7% chenin blanc, 5% riesling

This fascinating and delicious wine was made appassimento style, an Italian term that means the grapes were

partially dried in order to concentrate their juices before they were pressed and fermented. The result is Allegria, a

wildly aromatic wine that is off-dry and beautifully fruity, with notes of white peaches, exotic oranges, and dried

apricots. In 1967, the Colaneri family came to Canada from Italy, and today, three generations are involved in

working on the vineyard.

CA VE SPRING

RIESLING | BEAMSVILLE BENCH, NIAGARA PENINSULA, ONTARIO

100% riesling

Whenever I taste this wine, I can’t help but think the word spring in the name is apt, for this riesling is as spring-

loaded as wine gets. The beautiful tangerine, peach, and star fruit flavors rush at you with such energy, it’s almost

as though the wine can’t talk fast enough. Founded by the Italian Pennachetti family in 1978, the winery is named

for the limestone caves and mineral springs discovered on the property by European settlers in the eighteenth

century.

TANTALUS

RIESLING | OLD VINE | OKANAGAN VALLEY , BRITISH COLUMBIA

100% riesling

The first buzz in the wine world that phenomenal wines were being made in Canada occurred in the 1990s, and

Tantalus’ dry riesling was invariably named as evidence. Made from vines planted in the 1970s, the wine has a

pure, crystalline focus and effusive exotic citrus flavors—like icicles of limeade. Darting around inside the main

flavor are shooting-star-like notes of apricot, peach, spices, and star fruit. This is a riesling lover’s riesling, and a

wine that’s both elegant and formidable.

MISSION HILL FAMILY ESTATE

RIESLING | MARTIN’S LANE | OKANAGAN VALLEY , BRITISH COLUMBIA

100% riesling

Mind-blowing in its sorbetlike intensity, Martin’s Lane dry riesling from Mission Hill ranks with the top rieslings of

the New World. Pure and vivid in flavor, it has an enticing, languorously silky texture. In great vintages, the fruit is

so dense it seems combustible. The wine is named after proprietor Anthony von Mandl’s father, Martin, and the

grapes are grown on the steepest slope on the estate.

PERPETUA

CHARDONNAY | OSOYOOS VINEYARD | OKANAGAN VALLEY , BRITISH COLUMBIA

100% chardonnay

Perpetua, a brand owned by Mission Hill, makes fantastic cool-climate chardonnays that have a precision and

distinctiveness not often found in New World chardonnay. This wine begins with high soprano notes of tangerine

and citrus, then descends in long sweeps to deep bass notes of earth and tarte Tatin. The Osooyos Vineyard, named

for nearby Odoyood Lake, is located in Canada’s only desert.

MEYER FAMILY

CHARDONNAY | OLD MAIN ROAD | OKANAGAN VALLEY , BRITISH COLUMBIA

100% chardonnay

The Meyer Family chardonnays have beautiful richness wrapped around a core of freshness. The grapes for this

wine are often picked late into the fall, contributing perhaps to the wine’s “warm baked pears and cool whipped

cream” character. There’s also a deep earthiness to this and all of the four other Meyer Family chardonnays—a nod

to Burgundy, where the winemaker worked for a time.

LIQUIDITY

VIOGNIER | OKANAGAN VALLEY , BRITISH COLUMBIA

100% viognier

Viognier is not easy to make. The wine often gets bogged down in its own full body and heavy perfume. But

Liquidity manages to make one of the best in the New World. Fresh, humming with lovely acidity, and nearly

kinetic with light wisps of energy, the wine’s floral and peach flavors are like tiny lights twinkling on and off.

Liquidity, perched on an outcropping over Okanagan V alley, also makes very good pinot noir and has a fantastic

restaurant.

WILD GOOSE

GEWÜRZTRAMINER | OKANAGAN VALLEY , BRITISH COLUMBIA

100% gewürztraminer

It wasn’t easy deciding which Wild Goose to write about—the pinot gris, the pinot blanc, or this gewürztraminer,

for these three Wild Goose whites are all exciting, deeply flavorful, elegant wines (the pinot blanc may be the single

best New World pinot blanc I’ve ever tasted). But I chose the gewürztraminer for its sheer beauty and utter

deliciousness. Wild Goose channeled Alsace on this one. The wine seems to lift out of the glass on aromatic waves

of rose petals, peaches, and spice. The flavors are finely etched and pure—peaches again, plus star fruit and

minerals. But best of all, the wine shows pedigree of place—gewürztraminer this refined can come only from a cool

climate and high latitude. Canada appears to be tailor-made.

REDS

MALIVOIRE

GAMAY | COURTNEY | NIAGARA ESCARPMENT , NIAGARA PENINSULA, ONTARIO

100% gamay

Until I tasted this wine, I felt there was no delicious gamay in the Americas. But here it is: a magenta-colored

gamay with all the cool, vibrant freshness of a great Beaujolais. The wine’s exuberant fruitiness is laced with hints

of spice. Malivoire is owned by Martin Malivoire, a director of special effects for several Hollywood movies.

HOWLING BLUFF

SUMMA QUIES | PINOT NOIR | OKANAGAN VALLEY , BRITISH COLUMBIA

100% pinot noir

If I were tasting this wine blind and you told me it was Chambolle-Musigny, Burgundy, I’d believe it. Former

investment banker Luke Smith left his day job to build his modest winery by hand and plant every grapevine

himself. This wine—a testament to how good pinot noir in the Okanagan can be—has a sumptuous red fruitiness

and freshness, a sexy saddle-leather character, and an evocative earthy quality—like the smell of warm rocks after a

rainstorm.

STRATUS

CABERNET FRANC | NIAGARA-ON-THE-LAKE, ONTARIO

100% cabernet franc

If cabernet sauvignon is about power, cabernet franc is about mystery. It doesn’t rush out of the glass and

overwhelm you with flavor. It waits, and draws you in. At least that is what the excellent Stratus cabernet franc

seems to do. As you might expect from a cool-climate cabernet franc, the wine is sleek and pretty, with notes of tar,

minerals, and grenadine. I am not surprised that wine-maker Jean-Laurent Groux is a native of the Loire V alley,

France, where cabernet franc excels.

BURROWING OWL

ATHENE | OKANAGAN VALLEY , BRITISH COLUMBIA

50% cabernet sauvignon, 50% syrah

Big red grapes like cabernet sauvignon and syrah generally don’t do well in cool climates like much of Canada’s.

But in the warmer pockets of the dry, sunny Okanagan V alley, it’s a different story. The rich aroma of this wine is

completely evocative of both varieties—a mélange of tobacco and cassis, plus spiced plums, menthol, and a tiny

nuance of gaminess. And the powerful structure gives the wine good grip on the palate. It’s definitely worthy of

slow-roasted game on a cold Canadian winter night.

SWEET WINES

CA VE SPRING

RIESLING ICEWINE | NIAGARA PENINSULA, ONTARIO

100% riesling

Mindlessly good. Cave Spring’s Riesling Icewine, at 22 percent residual sugar, starts with exquisite, sweet fruit that

seems charged by minerals. As in all great dessert wines, savoriness and acidity lurk just below the surface and

counterbalance the sweetness, giving the wine its complexity and mental intrigue. The grapes were allowed to

raisin on the vine, then were frozen solid by the cold winds of Lake Ontario, then hand-picked and pressed at

temperatures below 14ºF (–10°C); a phenomenal achievement.

INNISKILLIN

CABERNET FRANC ICEWINE | NIAGARA PENNINSULA, ONTARIO

100% cabernet franc

This is a hard wine to make.… Cabernet franc (like all of the red Bordeaux varieties) has tannin, after all, and

tannin can taste drying and bitter (in the manner of espresso). So, can one make a luscious, sweet icewine from

cabernet franc? Inniskillin does. The wine, distinctive and unusual, is sweet, but then bitterness and acidity kick in,

giving it fantastic play between components. As for the fruits, one might imagine one is in the Canadian forest,

where tiny berries—black, red, and blue—thrive naturally. Inniskillin also makes a riesling icewine, of course, and

it’s drop-dead gorgeous.

AUSTRALIA

SOUTH AUSTRALIA | NEW SOUTH W ALES | VICTORIA | WESTERN

AUSTRALIA

AUSTRALIA RANKS SEVENTH AMONG WINE-PRODUCING COUNTRIES WORLDWIDE.

AUSTRALIANS DRINK AN AVERAGE OF 8 GALLONS (30 LITERS) OF WINE PER PERSON PER YEAR.

If it were superimposed over Europe, Australia—a huge land-mass of 3 million square

miles (7.8 million square kilometers)—would stretch from London to the Black Sea. The

wine industry within this large country is one of the most dynamic and cutting-edge in the

world.

The past few decades have been a period of phenomenal growth for Australian wine.

According to Wine Australia (formerly known as the Australian Wine and Brandy

Corporation), during the ten years from 1995 to 2005 alone, the number of wine

companies more than doubled (to more than two thousand); the grape crush more than

doubled to 2 million tons (1.8 million metric tons); and vineyard plantings tripled to

390,000 acres (157,800 hectares). Exports during this period quadrupled in value, and for

two countries—the United Kingdom and the United States—Australian wine, especially

good-value Australian wine, became a comfortable mainstay on the wine scene.

High-tech could be the Australian wine industry’s middle name. Most wineries use

state-of-the-art equipment and employ wine-makers trained in the most advanced

techniques. Virtually every vineyard task, from pruning to harvesting, is automated. Y et,

for all this industrial sophistication, most Australian wines are rather like the Australians

themselves: charismatic and outgoing. This is certainly true of the country’s simple,

inexpensive wines. But even Australia’s most prestigious and complex wines, like

Penfolds Grange and Henschke’s Hill of Grace, have a hedonistic charm that makes them

disarmingly approachable.

For a large part of the twentieth century, the majority of the wine made in Australia was

either cheap and sweet or had a substantial level of alcohol. But, as was true in the United

States, the industry here changed radically in the 1970s, as high-quality dry wines became

the focus. By the mid-1980s, Australia had a well-developed modern industry made up of

small, top-notch producers, as well as big brands focused on creamy chardonnays and soft

shirazes.

THE QUICK SIP ON AUSTRALIA

AUSTRALIA BOASTS hundreds of small, top-notch producers of complex, age-worthy

wines. But it’s also known for simple, good-value white and red wines that are

mouthfilling and easy to drink.

THE MOST RENOWNED, best-loved, and most widely grown grape is shiraz (the same

as the French grape syrah), which is turned into irresistible red wines with deep berry

flavors laced with spice.

THE MAJORITY of Australia’s vineyards are clustered in the southeastern part of the

continent, relatively near the major cities of Sydney, Melbourne, and Adelaide.

However, one of the newest fine wine regions in the world, Margaret River, is on

Australia’s west coast.

Hollywood’s portrayal of Australia as an untamed outback populated mainly by sheep,

crocodiles, and kangaroos doesn’t quite square with most people’s idea of a top-class wine

region. Of course, vineyards are not planted in the desertlike center of the country, nor in

the steamy, tropically hot north. The greatest number are located in the cooler, southern

part of the continent, within a few hours’ drive of the coast.

Today, there are just under 2,500 wineries in Australia, and they make every style of

wine: dry, sweet, still, sparkling, and fortified. More than forty varieties of grapes are

grown, but the five most important (by tonnage harvested) are shiraz (it alone accounts for

30 percent of the total wine grape acreage), chardonnay, cabernet sauvignon, merlot, and

sémillon. To that list, I’ll add grenache and riesling, which, while produced in smaller

amounts, are nonetheless important by virtue of their quality and distinctiveness.

The first Australian vineyards were planted in New South Wales at the end of the

eighteenth century, more than one hundred years after the first vineyards were planted in

other parts of the New World, including Colonial Virginia, in the United States, and Cape

Town, in South Africa. The men who planted them were Australia’s first European

settlers, mainly Englishmen who knew a lot about drinking wine but little about growing

grapes. The vines they planted were cuttings of European (vinifera) varieties, generally

brought from the South African Cape of Good Hope, where ships stopped for provisions

en route to Australia.

Unfortunately, the area where the first tiny vineyards were planted—part of a penal

colony—was so hot and humid that the grapes rotted and the vines died. Today, ironically,

Sydney’s botanical gardens are just across the road from that same spot. The Australian

settlers were undeterred. They moved slightly inland, to what is now the Hunter V alley,

and with practice, grew more adept at grape-growing. Between the 1850s and 1870s, as

new, more viticulturally savvy immigrants arrived, vineyards began to thrive.

In 1877, phylloxera was discovered in Australia, specifically in the state of Victoria.

Although the pest did not spread to every other wine region, it effectively crippled some

important vineyards (especially in Victoria) before the vines could be replanted on tolerant

American rootstocks. Replanting resulted in the production of fine wines by some

producers, but others rebounded by doing the opposite—making cheap, sweet fortified

wines of passable quality, often from large tracts of hot, fertile, irrigated valley land.

With the 1960s and 1970s, a new era dawned. Changing tastes, changing economic

forces, and the development of new wine technologies all propelled Australia toward the

modern wine industry that exists there today. Production statistics tell the story in a

snapshot. In 1960, only 1 million cases of dry table wine were produced. By 2010, the

amount had shot up to 134 million cases. (Alas, stupendous growth can have a downside.

Australia now produces so much wine that the Australians themselves only consume about

40 percent of what is made each year. Even the country’s well-established export markets,

such as Great Britain and the United States, cannot absorb it all. In 2010, Australia’s wine

industry leaders, including the Winemakers’ Federation of Australia, concluded that in

2009 the country produced 20 million to 40 million more cases of wine than it sold. Part

of the solution has been to voluntarily reduce vineyard acreage. In 2010, for example,

nearly 20,000 acres/8,100 hectares of vineyards were pulled out.)

THE MOST IMPORTANT AUSTRALIAN WINES

LEADING WINES

APERA white (fortified, Sherry-style wine; dry and sweet)

CABERNET SAUVIGNON red

CABERNET-SHIRAZ BLENDS red

CHARDONNAY white

FORTIFIED TAWNY red (fortified, Port-style wine; sweet)

GRENACHE-SHIRAZ-MOURVÈDRE BLENDS red

MUSCAT white (fortified; sweet)

PINOT NOIR red

RIESLING white (dry)

SÉMILLON white (dry and sweet)

SHIRAZ red

SHIRAZ-CABERNET BLENDS red

TOPAQUE white (fortified; sweet)

WINES OF NOTE

CHARDONNAY-SÉMILLON BLENDS white

SPARKLING white and red

VERDELHO white

VIOGNIER white

In 1970, every single winery in Australia was family-owned, and today, scores of

small, high-end wineries—Clarendon Hills, Henschke, Grosset, Torbreck, Jim Barry,

Jasper Hill, and many others—still are. That said, the industry is now dominated by a

handful of very large, influential companies that together are responsible for the lion’s

share of all Australian wine. Two notable ones are Pernod Ricard, owner of the brands

Jacob’s Creek and Wyndham, and Treasury Wine Estates, which owns Penfolds,

Lindemans, Rosemount, Wynns, Mildara, and Wolf Blass (as an aside, they also own the

prominent California wineries Beringer, Stags’ Leap Winery, Etude, and Chateau St. Jean).

“Great wine is born not in the vineyard, but in the brain.

”

— BRIAN W ALSH,

director of winemaking, Y alumba

For an explanation of Australian wine law, see the Appendix on Wine Laws, page 928.

[YELLOW TAIL]: THE CRITTER THAT STARTED A CRAZE

In 2001, a little Australian brand named [yellow tail]—the company stylizes [yellow tail] with brackets and

lowercase letters—entered the U.S. market with the goal of selling 25,000 cases. By the end of that first

year, the wine with the yellow kangaroo on the label had sold eight times that amount. It was only the

beginning. [yellow tail] sold two million cases in the U.S. in its second year and an incredible eight million

cases by its fifth year. By 2012, it was the single largest-selling imported wine in the U.S. and the fastest-

growing brand in the history of the U.S. wine industry. Why did a simple wine—so undistinguished in

terms of quality—achieve such success? The critter was, of course, cute. But [yellow tail] somehow

captured a craving for the uncomplicated. It was easy to understand and easy on the wallet, and it

ushered in a whole new wave of wine consumers. Wine’s “critter era” had begun. T oday, labels around

the world sport not only kangaroos but also scores of other animals, including elephants, frogs, wild

boars, bobcats, chickens, alligators, buzzards, butterflies, beavers, bees, aardvarks, and eagles

(screaming, of course).

TWO PHILOSOPHIES OF WINEMAKING

Conventional European wisdom holds that good wine comes from specific sites that have

distinctive terroirs. Accordingly, some of Australia’s very best wines come from single

vineyards in top regions such as Coonawarra, Barossa V alley, Margaret River, and others.

However, many Australian winemakers believe that good wine needn’t derive from a

single terroir, or even from a small number of them. Instead, these Australian winemakers

arrive at a good wine through an extensive process of selection and blending.

For example, the grapes for many Australian wines are grown over vast stretches of

territory. Wines labeled South Eastern Australia, for instance, may be made with grapes

grown anywhere within the southeastern part of the entire continent. (This philosophy is

not at work quite as much in the United States, where it would be unusual to blend, say, a

batch of chardonnay from southern California with a batch from Washington State and

then label it Western U.S.A. Chardonnay.)

The process of selecting and blending is practiced mostly for the production of lower-

and moderately priced wines. The goal here is to make brands of wine that have fairly

consistent flavors year after year, in the manner of beer. Simple, inexpensive wines like

Jacob’s Creek and Y alumba’s “Y” Series, for example, are dependably tasty no matter the

vintage.

What’s surprising (at least to a traditionalist) is that, in addition to low-priced, everyday

wines, some of the most prestigious wines in Australia are also made by the process of

selecting and blending. Australian winemakers know they may lose a bit of the sense of

place when they blend wines from different sites, but they are hoping to achieve more

complexity. As an Australian winemaker once said to me,

“How interesting would a

perfume be if it was just one aroma?”

One of the best examples of the selecting and blending philosophy is Australia’s most

legendary and expensive wine, Penfolds Grange—a blend of shiraz grapes (sometimes

with small amounts of cabernet sauvignon) grown in various vineyards as many as 600

miles (970 kilometers) apart. To make Grange, winemakers at Penfolds start out with

tanks and barrels holding the equivalent of 40,000 cases of wine. After selecting the very

best lots and blending them together, fewer than 7,000 cases of Grange are made. The

remaining lots go down the ladder to make progressively more humble-quality and less

expensive Penfolds wines.

THE LAND, THE GRAPES, AND THE VINEYARDS

Australia, along with India and Africa, is one of the oldest landmasses. The ancient,

weathered soil here is impoverished and, in many places, highly eroded. In the center of

the continent is the vast, flat, arid area known as the Outback, where it often fails to rain

for years. Y et water surrounds the continent on all sides—the Timor and Arafura Seas and

the Gulf of Carpentaria to the north, the Coral Sea and the Tasman Sea to the east, and the

Indian Ocean and Southern Ocean to the west and south, respectively. Antarctica is about

2,380 miles (3,830 kilometers) away.

Kangaroo Island scallops—a sure sign you’re in Oz. Especially good with a glass of brisk, cold sémillon.

BINS AND SHOWS

Australian wines are labeled varietally, making label reading easy enough. But there are two

idiosyncracies that will be helpful for a wine drinker to know about: bin numbers and designations such

as Show Reserve.

Bin numbers are used by many Australian wine companies as the names of various wines. Penfolds,

for example, makes three cabernet sauvignons—Bin 407, Bin 707, and Bin 389—each of which is a

different blend and is priced differently. Probably the most recognized bin number is Lindemans Bin 65

chardonnay, one of the biggest-selling brands of chardonnay in the world. Bin numbers were put on

Australian wine labels as early as the 1930s, although it’s not clear exactly when the practice began.

Originally the numbers were probably a winemaker’s way of tracking the wines through blending and

aging, and signified the underground cellar bin or place in the winery where a given wine was typically

stored year after year. The shorthand stuck, and now countless Australian wines are known by their bin

numbers.

Special designations, such as Show Reserve, frequently appear on wine labels, but such terms have

no legal definition. Rather, they refer to the fact that the wine has won an award in one of Australia’s

many wine shows or competitions. More than wine drinkers elsewhere in the world, Australians take wine

competitions seriously and have a good deal of faith in their results.

THE GRAPES OF AUSTRALIA

WHITES

CHARDONNAY: The leading white grape, made into wines that span all levels of quality, from simple,

fruity quaffers to lush, complex, elegant wines.

MUSCADELLE: Renowned in the Victoria wine district of Rutherglen, where it makes the rare but

renowned sweet, fortified wine known as topaque, once called Australian tokay.

MUSCAT BLANC Á PETITS GRAINS: Considered the best of the different varieties with the word muscat

in their names. It makes the rare but extraordinarily sweet, fortified muscat wines of Rutherglen in

Victoria.

RIESLING: A major grape with a long history in Australia, it makes dry, racy wines evocative of exotic

citrus. It also ages beautifully into wines with creaminess and almost Danish pastry–like characters.

SAUVIGNON BLANC: A minor grape, but some excellent examples exist. It is often blended with

sémillon in the manner of white Bordeaux.

SÉMILLON: A major grape and a signature of Australia, especially in the Hunter Valley, of New South

Wales and in the Margaret River area of Western Australia. It makes snappy, tightly wound wines when

young. With age, the wines undergo a magical transformation, becoming honeyed, with rich lanolin

textures.

VERDELHO: A minor grape, but fascinating, since it was brought to Australia directly from the

Portuguese island of Madeira in the 1820s. Grown mostly in Western Australia, it makes good, tasty

wines with soft, fruity flavors.

VIOGNIER: A minor grape, but surprisingly excellent examples exist—especially in the Barossa Valley.

REDS

CABERNET SAUVIGNON: A major grape that can make delicious, powerfully structured wines with

notes of green tobacco, especially in Coonawarra and Margaret River. It is considered by some

Australian vintners to be more sophisticated than shiraz, with which it is sometimes blended.

GRENACHE: An important, distinctive grape that makes rich, concentrated red wines with a core of

cherry jam character, especially when made from grapes grown in older vineyards. It is also commonly

blended with shiraz and mourvèdre to make Rhône-style blends and is used as a main part of the blend

in many of the country’s sensational Australian fortified tawnies.

MERLOT : Significant in terms of production, but largely undistinguished in quality. It is grown mostly for

use in cabernet sauvignonmerlot blends.

MOURVÈDRE: An important grape, especially for Rhône-style blends, in which it’s combined with shiraz

and grenache. Also used along with grenache as part of the blend in Australia’s fortified tawnies. Also

referred to as mataro.

PINOT NOIR: On the rise in production, although the jury is out on eventual success. It is grown

especially in the cool areas of Victoria and makes good and occasionally great still pinot noir, and is used

as well for sparkling wines.

SHIRAZ: The leading red grape, the same as the French grape syrah. At its best, it makes seductive,

lusciously textured, complex wines. It is sometimes blended with cabernet sauvignon, or with grenache

and mourvèdre in Rhône-style blends, and is also used in Australia’s top fortified tawnies.

Virtually all of the vineyard land—some 417,000 acres (168,800 hectares) as of 2012—

(not to mention most of the population) is clustered in the southeastern or southwestern

corners of the continent. In the southeast, wine is made in three important states: South

Australia (nearly half of all the vineyards in the country are planted in this one state), New

South Wales, and Victoria. In the southwest is the lone wine state of Western Australia.

Whether they are in the southeast or southwest, most of these regions share a sunny,

fairly stable, Mediterranean-like climate. In some parts, however, despite warm days,

nighttime temperatures can be quite cold. Which is how Australia can, paradoxically, be

known for great dry riesling (a cool-climate grape) at the same time as it is known for

great cabernet sauvignon (a warmer-climate grape). The harvest takes place during the

southern hemisphere’s summer, February through May.

A cherished old vine in what is probably the oldest cabernet sauvignon vineyard in the world—Penfolds’ s legendary

Block 42 in the Barossa V alley.

Naturally, there are challenges. Rot, frost, drought, and strong, salt-laden winds all take

their toll in various districts. Not to mention kangaroos, which jump (literally, of course) at

the chance to feed on the soft leaves and buds of young vines. High fences topped with

barbed wire surround some vineyards to keep the herbivorous marsupials out.

Given its fairly limited population, Australia lacks a ready supply of harvest workers.

As a result, viticulture here is the most mechanized in the world. While some small,

prestigious vineyards are cared for by hand, often by Southeast Asian field workers, in

most Australian vineyards, machines perform almost every critical task, including picking

the grapes, pruning the vines, spraying for disease, trimming leaves during the growing

season, and so on.

Here is a quick look at some of Australia’s signature grapes and the wines made from

them, starting with white grapes, then progressing to red.

RIESLING

In Australia, riesling goes back to the 1840s, predating chardonnay by more than a

century. Today, most Australian wine experts consider riesling and sémillon to be the two

great Australian whites. Most of the country’s top rieslings come from either Eden V alley

or Clare V alley (named after County Clare in Ireland), both of which are north of the city

of Adelaide, in the state of South Australia. That said, some terrific rieslings are also to be

had from Victoria, Western Australia, and even the large island of Tasmania.

Chardonnay grows on gentle slopes in the Adelaide Hills. With its creamy, mouthfilling character , Australian

chardonnay first took the world by storm in the 1980s.

The first time I tasted a group of top Australian rieslings, I was struck by two things.

First, they didn’t taste anything like the rieslings of Germany, Austria, or Alsace. Second,

they didn’t taste conventionally Australian, by which I mean they weren’t big, soft, dense,

or any of the other descriptors that have come to be widely associated with Australian

wine.

Indeed, Australian rieslings are as unique as they are counterintuitive. These are

snappy, frisky rieslings with an electrical current of acidity. Bracing and bone dry, they are

usually light to medium in body and very elegant. Most are aromatic, minerally, and

especially evocative of citrus zest and citrus marmalade. Because they are so pure, fresh,

crisp, dry, citrusy, and light, they are enchanting with seafood, and are terrific with dishes

that incorporate aromatic Asian ingredients like Kaffir lime, lemongrass, and ginger.

Lastly, like riesling from all great areas, Australian riesling ages beautifully and

gracefully. I love the rieslings from Pewsey V ale (especially The Contours), Petaluma

(especially Hanlin Hill), Grosset (especially Polish Hill), Kilikanoon (especially Mort’s

Reserve), Henschke (especially Julius), Leo Buring, Craigow, and De Bortoli.

CHARDONNAY

Chardonnay is so popular in Australia (a 500 percent increase in production occurred

between 1986 and 1996 alone), you’d think the Aussies invented it. Virtually every firm

now makes the wine, yet as late as 1967 there was only a minuscule number of

chardonnay vines in the entire country. (Tyrrell’s, in the Hunter V alley of New South

Wales, made the first chardonnay in 1971, calling it V at 47 Pinot Chardonnay.)

When Australian chardonnays first burst onto the international scene in the early 1980s,

there were few white wines like them anywhere. They were so creamy, it seemed as if a

spoon would stand up in them. Chardonnay lovers went mad. Today, Australia’s greatest

chardonnays take a more elegant approach. Although the wines are certainly rich, they are

refined as well. Among the very best of these are Leeuwin Estate’s Art Series, Penfolds

Y attarna, V asse Felix, Giaconda Estate, Domaine Epis, Mount Mary, and Rosemount

Estate’s Roxburgh, all phenomenal wines suffused with flavor.

OLD, OLDER, OLDEST

Amazingly, many of the oldest cabernet, syrah, and grenache vines in the world are in Australia. It’s no

surprise, then, that the words old vines often show up on wine labels. Yet, as is true in other countries,

the term is not legally defined in Australia. In the beginning of the 2000s, the family winery Yalumba

sought to clarify the issue by creating an Old Vine Charter that defines just how old an old vine is. In

2009, this was adopted and expanded by other Barossa wine-growers to create the Barossa Old Vine

Charter. It designates the following age classifications:

OLD VINE

A vine at least thirty-five years of age. Vines of this age are beyond adolescence and have a fully mature

trunk and root system.

SURVIVOR VINE

An antique vine, defined as a vine of at least seventy years of age. Such vines have weathered

significant fluctuations in climate, as well as social and political changes that have influenced Australia’s

wine industry.

CENTENARIAN VINE

An exceptionally old vine of at least one hundred years of age. These vines have thick, gnarly trunks and

were planted at a time before irrigation or trellising were possible.

ANCESTOR VINE

A vine at least 125 years old. These vines are considered living tributes to Australia’s European settlers.

SÉMILLON

The most novel white grape in Australia, however, is sémillon, which the Australians

pronounce SEM-eh-lawn and spell semillon—without the accent used in France; for

consistency’s sake, I’ve kept the accent here. Australia is sémillon’s second-most-famous

home, after Bordeaux (the dry whites of Bordeaux, as well as sweet Sauternes and Barsac,

are traditionally made by blending sémillon with sauvignon blanc).

When young and when grown in top vineyard sites, Australian sémillon is as tight, tart,

and edgy as white wine gets. It’s a wine for acid freaks (the nickname for wine drinkers—

and I’m one—who love acidity). This young, dagger-sharp style evolved in Australia’s

Hunter V alley, in the state of New South Wales. There, the unusually cloudy, rainy climate

compelled winemakers to pick sémillon early (when it was barely ripe), before the onset

of autumn rains. With time, these young sémillons became famous for their dramatic,

kinetic snap.

Today, though, delicious young sémillon is also grown in the Adelaide Hills of South

Australia and in the Margaret River region of Western Australia, where it is blended with

sauvignon blanc to make sophisticated white blends not unlike a good Pessac-Léognan,

from the Graves region of Bordeaux (try Cape Mentelle’s version).

BUBBLES AND THE BARBIE

About 10 percent of Australian wine production are sparkling wines. These are made by the traditional

(Champagne) method, from pinot noir and chardonnay, and are brut (dry) in style. In character, most are

fresh, lively, and unfussy, lacking the complexity of Champagne. It’s easy to imagine oceans of such

bubbly being downed while yabbies (freshwater Australian crawfish) are searing on the barbie

(barbecue). Among the best Australian producers is the French Champagne house of Moët & Chandon,

whose subsidiary, Domaine Chandon Australia, makes a whole range of sparklers, from blanc de blancs

to rosés. And finally, although it’s not particularly sophisticated, sparkling shiraz must be mentioned.

Spunky, fruity, and vividly red, sparkling shiraz is an Aussie signature. The wines are intense with

raspberry, strawberry, blackberry, and spice notes. Generally, the dosage (approximately 3.5 percent, or

35 grams of sugar per liter) is twice that of standard brut sparkling wine in order to balance the tannin in a

bubbly made with red grape skins. The first red sparklers in Australia were made in the 1840s and called

sparkling Burgundies. Seppelt, still a leading producer, has made red sparklers on a continual basis

since the 1890s.

Interestingly, with aging time in the bottle, Australian sémillon displays radically

different characteristics than young sémillon. After five years or more, the best wines take

on honey, brioche, and roasted cashew flavors, plus a wonderful, lanolin-like texture. No

one who loves Australian wines should miss the magnificent sémillons of Tyrrell’s

(Tyrrell’s V at 1 is possibly the most awarded Australian wine ever made), Hart & Hunter,

V asse Felix, Rothbury Estate, Thomas Wines, and Tim Adams.

CABERNET SAUVIGNON

Many winemakers consider cabernet sauvignon the elite red grape of Australia, although

shiraz may be closer to many Australians’ hearts. Cabernet is not new to Australia. Indeed,

the grape was planted here in the mid-nineteenth century. In fact, the cabernet vines

planted in 1888 in Penfolds’s famous 10-acre (4-hectare) Block 42 parcel within the

Kalimna Vineyard, in the Barossa V alley, are thought to be the oldest cabernet sauvignon

vines in the world. The vines are on their own roots, not grafted on rootstock. (With the

2004 vintage, Penfolds held back a tiny portion of the wine from the Block 42 vineyard

and kept it separate from their main blends. After aging it for several years, the company

released just twelve bottles of the wine in 2012. Each bottle of Block 42 was packaged in

a handblown glass sculpture and sold for about $168,000.)

The simplest cabernets are blackberry flavor-packed bargains. But at the very top,

Australian cabernets are refined and complex. Cabernets such as Henschke’s Cyril

Henschke, Wendouree, and Penfolds Bin 707 bring together the gripping structure of a

good Bordeaux with pure, concentrated black currant flavors, graced by notes of green

tobacco and a green chaparral character. Many of these top cabernets come from either

Coonawarra, a small region in South Australia known for its red, clay-over-limestone

soils, or the Margaret River region, of Western Australia.

Not surprisingly, cabernet is also often blended with shiraz—an inspired idea,

especially when the blend captures cabernet’s prodigious structure and at the same time

has shiraz’s succulent core of fruit. Y alumba’s Signature Cabernet Sauvignon/Shiraz, from

the Barossa V alley, and Penfolds Bin 389 Cabernet Sauvignon/Shiraz, from South

Australia, are both fantastic examples.

SOME OF THE BEST PRODUCERS OF AUSTRALIAN CABERNET

SAUVIGNONS

Several of the following producers are large and make wines at many price levels. Their top cabernets are

generally their most expensive wines.

Cape Mentelle • Cullen • Greenock Creek • Hardys • Henschke • Leeuwin Estate • Moss Wood • Noon •

Penfolds • Vasse Felix • Wendouree • Yarra Yering

GRENACHE

Grenache was probably brought to Australia in the late 1820s and 1830s by James Busby,

known as the father of Australian and New Zealand viticulture. (Having studied viticulture

and winemaking in France and Spain, Busby arrived in Australia in 1824 and helped

establish the Hunter V alley as one of the country’s premier wine regions.) It’s thought that

Busby brought the grenache directly from Spain, the variety’s ancestral home. Y et, despite

the direct link, Australians call the grape by its French name, grenache, rather than its

original Spanish name, garnacha. Today, one-hundred-year-old grenache vineyards still

exist in Australia, and the grapes are used to make sensational table wines. Interestingly,

much of this now treasured grenache would have been pulled out in the early and mid-

twentieth century, except for the fact that grenache was (and still is) the “secret sauce” that

made many of Australia’s fortified wines taste so good.

Much of the great grenache in Australia is grown in the state of South Australia, in

particular in McLaren V ale and the Barossa V alley. The grapes are sometimes made into

single-varietal wines, and sometimes into blends of grenache with syrah, or with syrah and

mourvèdre (the so-called “GSM” wines).

Kangaroos in the vineyards of South Australia.

A top Australian grenache is a vibrant, spicy, kirschlike wine with a rich core of

boysenberry and cherry confiture flavor. While not as massive as shiraz or cabernet, it is

nonetheless more full-bodied than pinot noir, making it, for many Australians, the perfect

red wine.

Grenaches like d’Arenberg’s The Beautiful View, or Kilikanoon’s The Duke, or

Y alumba’s Bush Vine are not to be missed.

SHIRAZ

And finally, there’s shiraz, which is to Australia what cabernet sauvignon is to Bordeaux

—the signature. Australians are chauvinistically crazy about it, and not surprisingly it’s

the leading variety in terms of production. The sheer number of spellbinding small-

production shirazes in Australia is dizzying.

Shiraz is another name for the grape syrah. Interestingly, until the 1980s, Australians

called syrah “hermitage” and occasionally “shiraz.

” But because Hermitage is an official,

protected appellation in the northern Rhône V alley of France, use of that term was

ultimately deemed unfair to French vintners. Thus, for the past two decades in Australia,

syrah has been known almost exclusively as shiraz, although the derivation of the name

remains something of a mystery. One myth—that the grape originated in the Persian city

of Shiraz—has been shown by DNA typing to be exactly that: a myth. (Syrah/shiraz is

indigenous to east-central France.) But myths aside, what is known is that syrah has

several closely related names in France. There, it’s been known as schiras, sirac, syra,

syrac, serine, and sereine. Indeed, prior to the mid-nineteenth century, Australians

sometimes called the grape scyras. In the end, the term shiraz is probably yet another

linguistic variation on the name of a grape with a long line of similar-sounding names.

EUCALYPTUS ELUCIDATED

One of the signature aromas and flavors of many Australian wines (especially shiraz and cabernet

sauvignon) is eucalyptus—a fresh, cool, minty, and even medicinal character. How is this possible? The

presence of eucalyptus-like aromas and flavors is directly related to a vineyard’s proximity to eucalyptus

trees (which are native to Australia). The closer the trees to the vineyard, the stronger the character in the

wine. It is believed that the compound responsible for this distinct character (1,8-cineole, commonly

referred to as eucalyptol) accumulates on the skins of the grapes and from there, combines with the juice

during maceration. This may explain why white wines (which are quickly pressed and separated from

their skins) generally have little eucalyptus character, but red wines (which are often macerated with their

skins) can have moderate to even high levels.

There is no doubt that shiraz helped establish Australia as one of the world’s top wine-

producing countries. The wine’s seductive aromas, up-front, unctuously soft texture, and

saturated berry flavors are impossible to ignore. The best of these wines are a hedonistic

puddle of flavor—dark plum, boysenberry, blueberry, and mocha, with hints of spice,

violet, and black pepper, plus an echo of gaminess and often an iron (ferrous) quality. By

comparison, they are much more saturated with fruit than the syrahs of the Rhône. Which

is not to say they are all the same. Australian shirazes can differ considerably depending

on the region(s) where the grapes were grown. In general, cooler-climate Australian

shirazes are more spicy and savory than their warmer-climate cousins. And shiraz is often

blended with grenache to make sensational, complex wines (labeled shiraz/grenache) with

dark, sappy, rich cherry confiture and chocolate flavors, often overlaid by a sense of

minerals and tar. S.C. Pannell Shiraz/Grenache, from McLaren V ale, and Charles Melton

Nine Popes Shiraz/Grenache, from the Barossa V alley, are impressive, delicious examples.

The most iconic—and expensive—Australian shiraz is Grange (once called Grange

Hermitage), made by the powerful wine firm Penfolds. Dr. Christopher Rawson Penfold,

an Englishman, emigrated to South Australia and, in 1844, established Penfolds to make

Port-style wines for his anemic patients. Grange was first made in 1951 by Penfolds’s then

winemaker Max Schubert, who, after a trip to Bordeaux during which he tasted the wines

of several great châteaux, wanted to make a wine of similar intensity, structure, depth, and

ageability—but using shiraz grapes.

With the 1953 vintage, the wine was released to the market. Alas, critics were not kind.

One belittled it as “a concoction of wild fruits and sundry berries with crushed ants

predominating.

” Today, Grange is widely praised for its power, concentration, elegance,

and beautiful flavors and aromas of leather and tobacco mingled with boysenberries and

mint. To make Grange, Penfolds winemakers blind-taste hundreds of different shirazes

from vineyards they own or have contracts with all over Australia. In the end, fewer than

seven thousand cases of Grange are made each year. And while the wine may be 100

percent shiraz in some years, it isn’t always so. Depending on the character of the shirazes

in any given year, small amounts of cabernet sauvignon may be added to the final blend.

The wine is always aged in brand-new American oak.

The wrinkled, purple skins of shiraz grapes left behind after wine is made at Jim Barry winery, one of the top family

estates in the Barossa V alley of South Australia.

STICKIES

Australia makes some of the world’s most wickedly exquisite fortified sweet wines. To

me, they are nothing short of ravishing. Just the thought of drinking one gives me a rush.

And while Australia has made them for centuries, they remain largely unknown (a crime

to be sure).

Australians call them stickies—a catchall term for both sweet fortified wines and their

sweet, but not fortified, cousins. There are several types. The most sensational and rare of

the stickies are Australia’s sweet fortified muscats and topaques, made in Rutherglen, in

the northeast corner of Victoria. (Topaques were formerly known as tokays, but the name

was changed in 2010 as a result of an agreement between Australia and the European

Union, in which Australia agreed to recognize Tokay—or Tokaji, as it is written in

Hungarian—as the name reserved exclusively for a historic appellation in Hungary.)

Muscats and topaques have an almost primordial character. Nearly black in color, with

slashing glints of orange and green, they ooze around the sides of a wineglass, taking their

time. Drinking them is a mind-blowing experience; indeed, it seems to take forever for the

languorous sensation of flavor to end.

The muscats are made from a brownish-tinged version of the white grape muscat blanc

à petits grains; the topaques, from the white muscadelle grape (the latter is sometimes

listed on wine labels as topaque muscadelle). The best are usually made in tiny quantities

and are rarely exported. To make the wines, the grapes are left on the vine long after the

normal harvest, until they begin to shrivel and their sugar intensifies. During fermentation,

the soupy mass of crushed grapes is fortified with neutral grape spirits, which stops the

fermentation, leaving a wine with natural residual sugar. The wine is then aged for ten to

twenty years or more in small, used oak barrels (not brand-new) set up like a Sherry solera

(see page 458), until the wine takes on unreal, hard-to-describe flavors reminiscent of

toffee, brown sugar, vanilla, chocolate, fig syrup, miso, molasses, and honey. Among the

best sweet, fortified muscats and topaques are those produced by Chambers Rosewood

Vineyards, Campbells Wines, and Morris.

The second vintage (1952) of Penfolds Grange—its label still mostly intact—being poured for a guest.

Next are Australian Port-style wines, now called Australian fortified tawnies.

Australian fortified tawnies, most of which are made in South Australia, are made in a

way roughly approximate to that used for Portuguese tawny Ports, although the Australian

versions are sometimes vintaged wines, and shiraz, grenache, and mourvèdre (which

fortified wine producers often call “mataro”) are used instead of native Portuguese grapes.

The finest Australian fortified tawnies are as complex (if not more) as Portuguese tawny

Ports and are surging with dramatic, rich, nutty, caramelly, espresso, citrus, and spice

flavors, and unreal colors that often seem flecked with neon orange. The two blockbusters

of the genre are Seppeltsfield DP 90 and Seppeltsfield Para—with luscious fortified

tawnies also made by Penfolds, Y alumba, Reynella, and Stanton & Killeen.

As for Australian Sherry-style wines (now called “apera”), they are made using two

Spanish grapes, palomino and Pedro Ximénez, sometimes with muscat gordo blanco

blended in. Made in minute quantities, the best come pretty close to having the finesse,

complexity, and flavor of true Spanish Sherry. Again, Seppeltsfield makes a very fine one.

In addition to topaques, muscats, fortified tawnies, and aperas, Australia also boasts

numerous nonfortified sweet wines made from late-harvested grapes, usually riesling or

sémillon, that have been affected by Botrytis cinerea (just the way Sauternes is).

THE WINE REGIONS

Here are thumbnail sketches of Australia’s major wine states and some of the best-known

wine regions within them. Remember that for multiregional blends labeled South Eastern

Australia, the grapes will probably have come from disparate regions, possibly quite far

apart. For such wines, the most important guide to quality is the producer’s name.

SOUTH AUSTRALIA

ADELAIDE HILLS | BAROSSA VALLEY | EDEN VALLEY | CLARE VALLEY | MCLAREN VALE |

COONAWARRA

South Australia is the driest state in Australia (which is the driest continent). More than

half of all Australian wine is produced in this state, including many of the country’s best

cabernet sauvignons, shirazes, chardonnays, rieslings, and sémillons.

The wine regions of South Australia span out from the city of Adelaide. Among the top

regions are Adelaide Hills, Barossa V alley, Eden V alley, Clare V alley, McLaren V ale, and

Coonawarra. These districts were founded by men whose names have become

synonymous with Australian wine: Hamilton, Seppelt, Penfold, and so on. And today, a

Who’s Who of large Australian wine companies is located here, including Hardys,

Penfolds, Peter Lehmann, Seppeltsfield, Wolf Blass, Wynns, and Y alumba. But the region

is also a hotbed of small and medium-size avant-garde producers such as Henschke, Jim

Barry, Grosset, Torbreck, Shaw & Smith, and Tim Adams.

A cool-climate region just east of the city of Adelaide, the Adelaide Hills is one of the

largest geographical regions in Australia, and one of the most diverse. A wide range of

grape varieties—everything from riesling, sauvignon blanc, and chardonnay to shiraz and

cabernet sauvignon—grows here. Viticulture in the Adelaide Hills began in the 1840s, but

a modern industry took hold only after the 1970s.

SOUTHERN COMFORT–SORT OF, MATE

Many Australian wines are labeled South Australia or South Eastern Australia. Are these designations

essentially the same? The answer is no. In fact, they could not be more different. South Australia is one

of the five Australian states. (These are comparable to states in the United States, although Australian

states are much larger.) Within the state of South Australia are some of the country’s most famous wine

regions, including the Barossa Valley (renowned for shiraz), the Clare Valley (remarkable for dry riesling),

and Coonawarra (known for cabernet sauvignon). By contrast, South Eastern Australia is not a state, and

in a sense, not a place. It’s a legal designation that means the wine in the bottle is a blend of wines made

from grapes grown thousands of miles apart, often in three different states—New South Wales, Victoria,

and South Australia. T o give a New World analogy, a wine labeled South Eastern Australia is the rough

equivalent of a wine hypothetically made from a blend of grapes grown in California, Oregon, Washington

State, and T exas and then called “Western United States.

” Not surprisingly, South Eastern Australia

wines are often inexpensive wines meant for everyday drinking, while wines from South Australia are

among the most expensive in the country.

Eden V alley and Clare V alley are both known for exquisite rieslings, although both also

make very precise shirazes. Eden V alley (actually a plateau above the Barossa V alley) is

known for more floral, exotic, medium-bodied rieslings, while those of Clare V alley

(again, not a true valley, but an elevated plateau) are more citrusy, with driving acidity. It

is commonly assumed that the rieslings from these two areas are picked early to achieve

their dizzying crispness, but they are not. Rather, the regions’ extremely cold nights and

water-holding, limestone-laced soils are credited with preserving riesling’s backbone of

inherent acidity.

In a blind tasting, the shirazes from McLaren V ale always seem relatively easy to pick

out, first for their powerful and ripe character but sleek structure, and second for their

dramatic lift of spiciness, black olive, menthol, and dark chocolate. Both Clarendon Hills’

Astralis Shiraz and d’Arenberg’s The Dead Arm Shiraz are perfect examples. The small

region, a mix of hills and valleys with ironstone and loamy clay soils, is just 22 miles (35

kilometers) south of Adelaide, on the Fleurieu Peninsula. It is bounded on the northwest

by the Onkaparinga River, and on the west by Gulf St. Vincent, giving at least some of the

vines a bit of cooling maritime influence, which may help account for the wine’s structure

and elegance. Grapes were first planted here in 1838, by John Reynell and Thomas Hardy,

who started Seaview and Hardy Wine Company, respectively. Shiraz accounts for more

than 50 percent of the wine made in McLaren V ale.

Coonawarra (the name is Aboriginal for “honeysuckle”) is considered (along with

Western Australia’s Margaret River) one of the best places in the country for structured

cabernet sauvignons. The region, about 230 miles (370 kilometers) south of Adelaide, is a

cigar-shaped strip just 7.5 miles (12 kilometers) long and 1.2 miles (1.9 kilometers) wide

of terra rossa soil, porous reddish clay soil overlaying limestone. The climate, not

surprisingly, is maritime, like that of Bordeaux.

THE ABORIGINES

Many of Australia’s wine districts have Aboriginal names, such as Coonawarra (“honeysuckle”), Mudgee

(“nest in the hills”), and Padthaway (“good water”). The Aborigines, Australia’s native inhabitants, are a

distinct race that has no close affinity with any other people. They have lived in Australia for more than

thirty thousand years and are the oldest race on earth today.

I find these cabernets evocative of black currants, with a discernible note of something

green—not unripe green bell pepper, but rather a more sophisticated suggestion of

chaparral.

But for all of the deserved excitement of the regions above, the best-known wine region

in the state of South Australia—indeed, perhaps the best-known wine region in all of

Australia—is the Barossa V alley. The wide, fertile valley is made up of biscuit-colored

rolling hills, with vineyards planted in the best sites, where the soils are laced with

ironstone, red clay, quartz, and limestone, and everywhere else, fields of corn, wheat,

barley, legumes, and orchards as far as the eye can see. Sheep meander in paddocks, and

the small hamlets are full of old stone cottages. The Barossa (as it is simply known) was

settled in the early 1800s by a handful of Englishmen, as well as a large Lutheran Silesian

community (Silesia, today part of Poland, was then part of Germany, and German is still

regularly spoken in the Barossa). The Silesians were an insular community of

hardworking, frugal farmers with a strong food culture. Baked, pickled, preserved, and

smoked foods were—and still are—local specialties, as evidenced by the hugely popular

Barossa Farmer’s Market and the annual dill gherkin and pickled onion championships.

Great cabernet is made in the Barossa, and I’ve loved many grenaches and grenache

blends from here, as well as the superb Australian fortified tawnies made in the region.

But above all, the Barossa is known for shiraz—rich, sappy shiraz with a concentrated

core of vivid “berriness” overlaid by wild lavender, spice, brambly, and licorice notes. Y et,

for all their dramatic richness and bigness, the best Barossa shirazes also have a superb

structure, balance, and sense of precision.

NEW SOUTH WALES

HUNTER VALLEY

New South Wales is Australia’s second-leading state in wine production, after South

Australia. (A lot of this is very inexpensive wine.)

The most famous wine district in the state is the relatively small Hunter V alley, 75

miles (120 kilometers) north of Australia’s oldest and largest city, Sydney. The Hunter

V alley was the first wine area in Australia, vineyards having been planted here at the

beginning of the nineteenth century by the country’s earliest European settlers. Around

1960, Penfolds moved to an area slightly north of the original vineyards, initiating the

distinction between what is now known as the Upper Hunter and the Lower Hunter.

The whole Hunter V alley region is something of an anomaly. Being one of the most

northerly of Australia’s wine districts, it is closer to the equator and its weather patterns

are influenced by warm ocean currents coming from the tropics. As a result, it is very

warm and almost too humid for grapes. Nonetheless, and almost against all odds, several

top chardonnays and shirazes come from here.

But if the Hunter V alley has an ace in the hole, it’s sémillon, a wine that starts out as

bracing, limey, white peppery, and as high in acid as wine gets. Drinking it is like being

slapped. But with age—five to ten years or more—something startling happens: The wine

turns into a honey pot of rich, nutty, buttery fruit. Great examples are found from Tyrrell’s,

McWilliam’s, Mount Pleasant, Hart & Hunter, Thomas Wines, and Brokenwood.

VICTORIA

BEECHWORTH | GEELONG | GLENROWAN | GOULBURN | VALLEY | GRAMPIANS | HEATHCOTE |

MACEDON RANGES | MORNINGTON PENINSULA | NAGAMBIE LAKES | PYRENEES | RUTHERGLEN |

SOUTH GIPPSLAND | SUNBURY | YARRA VALLEY

Just as northern California’s wine industry was jump-started by the gold rush of 1849, the

discovery of gold in Victoria, in 1851, paved the way for a fledgling wine industry in the

state. As Victoria’s economy and population boomed, the ambitions of vintners soared

every bit as high as those of the gold diggers. Eventually, as the supply of gold dwindled,

vintners were known to hire out-of-work miners to dig underground wine cellars.

But when the gold ran out completely, Victoria’s fortunes began to spiral downward.

The picture grew especially gloomy for wineries as phylloxera, economic decline,

competitive wines from South Australia, and changing land use all took a toll. (As an

aside, while phylloxera did affect a small number of vineyards in Victoria, the country as a

whole has largely escaped the pest, and most vineyards are on their own roots rather than

grafted onto tolerant rootstock.) By the 1960s, Victoria’s wine industry was a shadow of

its former self. When the Australian wine industry as a whole began to take off in the

1970s and 1980s, however, a new period of growth ensued for the state.

Fermentation—a family affair at Torbreck.

Of all of mainland Australia’s wine regions, Victoria is the smallest and most southern

(only the island of Tasmania, off the Victorian coast, is smaller and farther south). The

region includes more than 820 producers, spread over more than a dozen small wine

districts that fan out directly from the city of Melbourne.

Victoria’s wine districts vary considerably in climate, terrain, and soil, thanks in part to

the Great Dividing Range, which cuts through Victoria, creating mountainous and hilly

terrain over more than a third of the state. Several of the most renowned wine districts—

the Y arra V alley, Geelong, and Mornington Peninsula, for example—are very close to the

sea and benefit from cool breezes that sweep in off the Great Southern Ocean. In these

cool areas, chardonnay and pinot noir grapes thrive. Farther inland, in slightly warmer

pockets like Beechworth, the chardonnays that are made can again be stellar, if richer

(Giaconda Estate’s fantastic chardonnay comes from here). Victoria is also known for

cabernet sauvignon and shiraz, with some producers—such as Y arra Y ering and Mount

Mary—making delicious red blends.

One of Victoria’s specialties is the captivating, sweet muscats and topaques made in

northeastern Victoria, in the district of Rutherglen, by producers such as Chambers

Rosewood Vineyards and Campbells Wines. Spellbinding and unctuous, these wines are

deliciously unique (see Stickies, page 835).

Finally, Victoria has always been associated with sparkling wine because Seppelt, one

of Australia’s oldest and most important sparkling producers, is located in the district of

Grampians. And in 1986, the French house Moët & Chandon founded Chandon Australia

here in the Y arra V alley.

TASMANIA

T asmania, the smallest state of the Commonwealth of Australia, is a triangular, mountainous island in the

Southern Ocean, about 150 miles (240 kilometers) south of Victoria. With its mild, sunny, cool, maritime

climate, the island is an up-and-coming wine region, known especially for its pinot noir, as well as

chardonnay, sauvignon blanc, riesling, and sparkling wines. While most of its 160 wine producers are

small, winemaking here has exploded, especially in the past decade. From a mere 100 acres (40

hectares) of vines in the 1950s, T asmania now has some 3,700 acres (1,500 hectares) of vineyards.

T asmania (or “T azzy,

” as it is often called locally) is named for the Dutch explorer Abel T asman, who

discovered it in 1642. The island’s vast array of plant and animal life includes the T asmanian devil, a not

very devilish, doglike creature, which, like the kangaroo, is a marsupial.

WESTERN AUSTRALIA

MARGARET RIVER | GREAT SOUTHERN REGION | PEMBERTON | PERTH HILLS | SWAN VALLEY

Far on the other side of the Australian continent, 3,000 miles (4,800 kilometers) away

from the power centers of winemaking in the southeast, is the remote state of Western

Australia. The first known sighting of the western coastline was in 1622, by the Dutch

vessel Leeuwin, meaning “lioness.

” The name would later be adopted by one of the state’s

most prominent wineries.

Western Australia’s several wine districts, which include Margaret River, Great

Southern Region, Pemberton, Perth Hills, and Swan V alley, stretch out from the coastal

city of Perth. Vines were planted in this area in 1829, some years before the first plantings

in either South Australia or Victoria. But the state’s isolation and limited population

hampered the industry’s growth and scope until the 1980s.

The Swan V alley, north of Perth, was Western Australia’s first wine district. It became

known for table grapes as well as wine grapes, and the leading wines were mostly sweet

and/or fortified, and were sold in bulk. It was here that Houghton White Burgundy, once

Australia’s most recognized white wine, was born in the years just before World War II.

Although it is slightly more polished now (and renamed Houghton White Classic), it was

originally a rustic, powerfully alcoholic wine made from chenin blanc, muscadelle, and

chardonnay. Amazingly, the Swan V alley is also where the Portuguese grape verdelho was

planted—almost two centuries ago, in 1829. It was brought by one of Western Australia’s

first colonists, a botanist named Thomas Waters, who took cuttings from the island of

Madeira, off the African coast (a stopping point to pick up provisions on the long voyage

out). Among the best verdelhos to try are Ashbrook Estate, Chestnut Grove, and Capel

V ale.

The Margaret River wine region, where the cold Southern Ocean and the warm Indian Ocean splash together.

Take a three-hour bus ride south from Perth, and you’ll come to the corner where the

great, warm Indian Ocean and the cold Southern Ocean collide. This is where you’ll find

the most renowned and ambitious of all the Western Australian districts: Margaret River.

Originally known for its timber, Margaret River is one of the world’s newer fine wine

regions. Vines weren’t planted here until the late 1960s, more than a century after grapes

were planted in the Napa V alley, for example. The region is still extremely remote and is

best known for its hypnotic giant waves. (Many of the local winery staff surf daily before

work.)

One of the key pioneers of the Margaret River region was David Hohnen, a modest but

smart farmer who moved to California briefly to learn winemaking, then cobbled together

bank loans to found Cape Mentelle winery in 1970. (The prescient Hohnen is also credited

with being one of the first to recognize the potential of Marlborough, in New Zealand; he

founded Cloudy Bay there in 1983.)

Given Margaret River’s maritime location and gravelly soils, Hohnen and several other

pioneers focused not on shiraz, but on Bordeaux varieties. Today, the region is considered

something of a “little Bordeaux” for the loveliness of its sémillon/sauvignon blanc blends

and the structure and elegance of the cabernet sauvignons—especially those from the

leading wineries, among them the aforementioned Cape Mentelle, plus Leeuwin Estate

and V asse Felix.

All of this said, chardonnay, too, has an almost magical affinity for the region. Leeuwin

Estate, in particular, makes its Art Series Chardonnays—wines of depth that with several

years’ aging grow even richer and more expansive. They are among the best produced in

all of Australia.

Despite a nearly ideal sunny/ocean-cooled climate in Margaret River, there is one huge

problem: birds. As harvest approaches and the grapes begin their final push toward

ripeness, each row of vines must be netted. Before netting was used, three crops out of

five would be lost because the grapes would be eaten by the omnivorous birds called

silvereyes. Finally, in addition to Margaret River, the cool subdistricts within the Great

Southern Region are generating excitement. Wineries to watch here include Howard Park,

Houghton, and Plantagenet.

SOME OF THE BEST PRODUCERS OF AUSTRALIAN SHIRAZ AND SHIRAZ

BLENDS

Several of the following producers make wines at many price levels. Their top shiraz or shiraz blends are

their most expensive wines.

Charles Melton • Clarendon Hills • Clonakilla • Craiglee • d’Arenberg • Giaconda • Grant Burge • Hardys •

Henschke • Jasper Hill • Jim Barry • Kilikanoon • Leasingham • Mitchelton • Mount Langi Ghiran • Ngeringa

• Noon • Penfolds • Peter Lehmann • S.C. Pannell • Shaw & Smith • St. Hallett • T orbreck • Tyrrell’s • Vasse

Felix • Wendouree • Wynns • Yabby Lake • Yalumba

WHEN YOU VISIT… AUSTRALIA

AUSTRALIA’S WINERIES are generally well set up for visitors, and the larger wineries

often have multiple facilities and attractions, including restaurants, galleries, concerts,

and so forth. The small wineries are far more humble, but chances are you’ll have the

opportunity to taste with the owners themselves.

MANY WINERIES are within easy driving distance of Australia’s major cities: Sydney,

Melbourne, Adelaide, and Perth. In each of these cities, there are a number of wine

bars worth visiting to get you started on the right foot.

WHEN YOU VISIT THE STATE of South Australia, don’t miss the extraordinary

Seppeltsfield where, for a small fee, you can taste the wine of your birth year, going

back to the early 1950s.

The Australian Wines to Know

WHITES

TYRRELL’S

SÉMILLON | VAT 1 | HUNTER VALLEY , NEW SOUTH WALES

100% sémillon

Dry sémillon (or as the Australians write it, semillon) is one of Australia’s great treasures, and no winery is more

lauded for it than Tyrrell’s, which has made sémillons back to 1963 from a site memorably called Short Flat

Vineyard. When young, Tyrrell’s V at 1 is like a flash of moonlight… a hauntingly stark, bright wine that’s racy,

limey, and needle-sharp on the palate. With time, however, the wine undergoes a magical transformation for which

it is famous. The edginess melts away to reveal a great white wine of beauty and strength—a wine evocative of

brioche, whipped butter, and cashews. In these older Tyrrell’s V at 1 sémillons, the butteriness and vibrancy are like

oppositely charged molecules in total attraction.

GROSSET

RIESLING | POLISH HILL | CLARE VALLEY , SOUTH AUSTRALIA

100% riesling

Jeffrey Grosset is the patriarch of riesling in Australia… a man who has helped put Australian riesling on the

international map; a man who has spent his life exploring finesse in a wine country often better known for power.

The Grosset rieslings are spot-on for Clare V alley—sharp and vivid, with intense, citrusy notes, but a lightness of

being that defines them. With age, the wines take on richness, creaminess, plus brioche notes, and a weathered rock

character, but their vivacity and focus never leave.

PEWSEY V ALE

RIESLING | THE CONTOURS | EDEN VALLEY , SOUTH AUSTRALIA

100% riesling

The Contours is perhaps Australian riesling’s most sacred site. Planted in 1961, high up on the limestone-laced

Eden V alley plateau above the Barossa V alley, the undulating vineyard is planted on terraces contoured to the sway

of the hills, an early method of catching precious rainfall. Unlike most dry rieslings worldwide, The Contours is

released only after five-and-a-half years of aging, when it has taken on a lanolin-like texture, as well as the

mesmerizing and unusual aromas and flavors of marzipan, pistachio, Kaffir lime, and Danish pastry. This is one of

Australia’s most sophisticated whites and a must for riesling lovers.

LEEUWIN ESTATE

CHARDONNAY | ART SERIES | MARGARET RIVER, WESTERN AUSTRALIA

100% chardonnay

Seemingly at the end of the world in far Western Australia, 3 miles from the Indian Ocean, Leeuwin Estate makes

extraordinary, age-worthy, rich chardonnays that, in top vintages, are suffused with complex and mysterious

nuances. Never heavy or ponderous, despite their intensity and concentration, these are chardonnays that, sip after

sip, draw you into them, revealing something new each time. Leeuwin’s Art Series wines (so called to distinguish

them from the regular Leeuwin wines) are blends of the top lots. Each year, labels for the Art Series are

commissioned from leading Australian artists.

REDS

HENSCHKE

SHIRAZ | HILL OF GRACE | EDEN VALLEY , SOUTH AUSTRALIA

100% shiraz

Y ear in and year out, Hill of Grace, as it is known, is one of Australia’s most voluptuous and impressive shirazes.

Named after a local church and made from vines that, amazingly, are over 130 years old, it is a rich, aromatic,

impossibly sensual wine suggestive of black raspberry, bitter chocolate, boysenberries, cedar, leather, and cigar

boxes. The density and power behind the wine is indelible. Vintages many decades old take on complex camphor

and cedar chest aromas, with deeply satisfying, savory umami flavors. Hill of Grace’s sister shiraz, Mount

Edelstone (these vines were planted in 1912), is equally captivating, with waves of exotic spices and plush fruit and

a long, peppery tail of a finish.

JIM BARRY

SHIRAZ | THE ARMAGH | CLARE VALLEY , SOUTH AUSTRALIA

100% shiraz

Pure hedonism in a bottle, The Armagh (named after a county in Northern Ireland) is a majestic and distinctive

wine—one that shocks you with its masculine force of dark rock, iron, and mineral flavors, then, the next minute,

spreads over the palate like velvet jam. In the middle is the kind of “corruption” only syrah is capable of: flavors

that swirl around the ideas of blood, hung game, cigars, and sweat. Jim Barry began his career in 1959, a

contemporary of Max Schubert at Penfolds. Today, the vineyards are cared for by Jim’s son, the feisty, irrepressible

Peter Barry, who has been known to tell if shiraz is ripe by sticking his balding pate between the vines and seeing

how quickly his head feels warm.

TORBRECK

SHIRAZ | THE LAIRD | BAROSSA VALLEY , SOUTH AUSTRALIA

100% shiraz

The world has many excellent fruity wines with notes of spice and minerals—but not many spicy/minerally wines

with notes of fruit. This is the latter—a masculine wine of incredible rockiness, angularity, firmness, and precision.

It’s the iron fist, with only the merest velvet glove. Torbreck (named after a forest in Scotland) was founded by the

indomitable, insatiable David Powell, a man who seems like he could stare down the end of a gun barrel… and

chuckle. The wine is aged in wood for three years, in special barrels made of staves 1.8 inches (45 millimeters)

thick (an average stave is only about half as thick—

.87 to 1.1 inches (22 to 27 millimeters) and then never topped

up, since the thicker staves serve to inhibit evaporation. Unusual winemaking, but the proof is in the pudding.

CHARLES MELTON

SHIRAZ GRENACHE | NINE POPES | BAROSSA VALLEY , SOUTH AUSTRALIA

Approximately equal parts shiraz and grenache, with 5% mourvèdre

Nine Popes is an homage to Châteauneuf-du-Pape. The famous appellation in the Rhône V alley of France translates

as “new castle of the pope,

” a reference to the time in the thirteenth century when the papacy was located here.

However, Charlie Melton’s French skills being modest, he thought the name meant “home of nine popes,

” and

named his wine accordingly. The wine, intense and complex, proves just how riveting Rhône-style blends can be in

Australia. Lashings of leather, tar, and espresso-like bitterness hit the palate in between herb-scented notes of wild

lavender and thyme, salty notes of minerals, and fruit flavors that are more blue (blueberry) than red (cherry).

Today, Charlie Melton is considered one of the protectors of old-vine Rhône varieties in the Barossa.

KILIKANOON

SHIRAZ | ATTUNGA 1865 | CLARE VALLEY , SOUTH AUSTRALIA

100% shiraz

It’s hard to choose a Kilikanoon wine to write about, as the winery makes killer riesling and grenache in addition to

several extraordinary shirazes. Attunga shiraz (the word means “high place” in the Aboriginal language) won out

for its sublimeness. Made only in extraordinary years, the wine comes from a low-yielding, old vineyard just 2.5

acres (1 hectare) in size. Lushly textured but not immediately effusive, Attunga is a shiraz that reveals its menthol

character slowly on the palate. And that choreography sneaks up on you as it can only in great wines.

PENFOLDS

GRANGE | SOUTH AUSTRALIA

Mostly shiraz, occasionally with a tiny bit of cabernet sauvignon

Grange is widely considered to be Australia’s most famous shiraz and the country’s most famous wine, comparable

in status to a First Growth Bordeaux. A wine of exquisite balance, it embodies power and elegance simultaneously.

When the wine is young, the texture is velvet-on-velvet, and the lush berry flavors are infused with vanilla (thanks

to long aging in American oak). With time, Grange becomes deliriously supple, with aromas and flavors suggestive

of violets, black figs, cedar, and spices. Grange has one of the longest track records when it comes to long aging.

Wines from the 1950s, made by the master winemaker Max Schubert, are still in amazing condition.

FORTIFIED SWEET WINES

CHAMBERS ROSEWOOD

TOPAQUE MUSCADELLE | CLASSIC | RUTHERGLEN, VICTORIA

100% muscadelle

In a tasting of Rutherglen topaques not long ago, I was tempted—maybe compelled—to score the wines. They were

so good, so distinctive, so unique, so emotion-inducing. I wrote 100 repeatedly. Chambers (as it’s usually simply

known) was one of those 100-point wines—a wine that has a plumb line deep into figs, chocolate, and molasses.

The texture was unreal… like some ethereal combination of honey and melted chocolate. Most remarkable of all,

despite its luxuriousness, the wine was alive with energy, and very vivid on the palate.

SEPPELTSFIELD

PARA | AUSTRALIAN FORTIFIED TAWNY | BAROSSA VALLEY , SOUTH AUSTRALIA

Matro (mourvèdre), shiraz, grenache, in varying combinations each year

Each year, tiny amounts of this mind-blowing wine are released when the wine is a century old (in 2010, the 1910

was released; in 2012, the 1912 was released, and so on). And the wine is a steal (in 2012, the small, 3- to 4-

ounce/100-milliliter bottle of the 1912 Para cost $300—a bargain given its age). The complexity of Para is

astounding. The wine’s flavors seem to spread through your body like a hypnotic drug. And what flavors! Surges of

sweet licorice, molten chocolate cake, dried fruit soaked in liqueur, molasses, citrus peel, anise, toffee, bark, and

peat. Wines like this have no reference point. They are simply plunges into a netherworld of sensory pleasure.

Seppeltsfield has made Para since 1878. The name Para refers to a small river in the Barossa V alley.

NEW ZEALAND

NEW ZEALAND RANKS FOURTEENTH AMONG WINE-PRODUCING COUNTRIES WORLDWIDE. NEW

ZEALANDERS DRINK AN AVERAGE OF 4 GALLONS (14 LITERS) OF WINE PER PERSON PER YEAR.

Located roughly midway between the equator and the South Pole, New Zealand lies

isolated in the middle of the South Pacific Ocean. The nearest landmass, Australia, is

1,000 miles (1,600 kilometers) to the northwest. The country is composed of two long

main islands, called simply the North Island and the South Island, plus numerous small

off-shore islands. New Zealand’s vineyards are the southernmost in the world. They are

also the first vineyards on earth to see the sun each day, thanks to New Zealand’s location

close to the International Date Line.

In the 1970s, when so many wine-producing countries were moving toward modern

wine industries, New Zealand was still far better known for lamb than wine (indeed, the

country had more sheep than people at the time). Then, in the mid-1980s, and almost

against all odds, one wine rose to extraordinary fame—Cloudy Bay Sauvignon Blanc. The

first few vintages put the whole of New Zealand on the international wine map. It was the

first time a single wine had ever had such impact—a feat made even more surprising by

the fact that sauvignon blanc was, at the time, considered something of a second-string

variety. But Cloudy Bay’s sauvignon blanc was startlingly different. It rocked the wine

world by opening the door to a whole new galaxy of flavor. Every adventurous wine

drinker in the world had to taste it because it expanded the known realm of what wine

could taste like. Since that time, countless wine drinkers have had the same oh-my-god

experience with other New Zealand sauvignon blancs. The wines are, quite simply,

outrageousness in a bottle. And they’ve flung the door wide open to other exciting New

Zealand varietals—especially pinot noir.

“New Zealand is the youngest nation in the world, both geologically and in

terms of human settlement. It’s four million people, still wandering around in

dazed wonder at its beauty, still trying to figure out what they want to do with

it all.

”

— NIGEL GREENING,

proprietor of Felton Road

The remote islands of New Zealand were unknown to the western world until Abel

Tasman, the Dutch sea captain after whom Tasmania was named, landed on the northern

tip of the South Island in 1642. There, Tasman encountered a violent group of native

peoples—the Maori—and promptly left. More than a century would pass before the next

westerner ventured onto New Zealand’s shores. In 1769, the English explorer Captain

James Cook circumnavigated the islands. His explorations resulted in the British

colonization of New Zealand, and in the bond between the two countries that still exists

today.

Almost fifty years later, in 1819, the first New Zealand vines were planted by an

Anglican missionary named Samuel Marsden, although there is no record of wine being

produced from the grapes. Then, in 1839, Scotsman James Busby successfully made the

country’s first wines. Both Marsden and Busby had written of New Zealand’s promise as a

wine producer, for the climate and terrain appeared exceptionally well suited to

grapevines.

THE QUICK SIP ON NEW ZEALAND

NEW ZEALAND is best known for its racy, vibrant sauvignon blancs and earthy, elegant

pinot noirs.

NEW ZEALAND’S wine industry, while growing and infused with excitement, remains

tiny by global standards. Wine production here accounts for less than 1 percent of the

world’s total.

ONE OF THE COOLEST maritime wine regions in the New World, New Zealand boasts

vineyards that are the most southerly on the globe.

Despite this auspicious beginning, it would be a century and a half before a solid wine

industry would take hold. From the 1840s to the 1980s, the obstacles to success were

pervasive. To begin with, many of the pioneering New Zealand winemakers were English

immigrants who had no history or experience with grape-growing. To make matters

worse, for decades before and after the turn of the twentieth century, New Zealand came

under the influence of a relentless temperance movement, which severely handicapped the

establishment of any sort of wine culture. For most of the 1800s, wineries could not sell

wine to consumers; they could only sell to hotels for banquets, and then only if certain

conditions were met. It wasn’t until after World War II that wine was permitted to be sold

by the bottle from wine shops, and selling wine in restaurants became legal only in the

1960s. Even then, there was a 10:00 p.m. cutoff after which no wine or alcohol could be

sold.

None of this fully deterred the young country’s would-be winemakers. In the late

1800s, immigrants from the Dalmatian coast, now in Croatia, intending to make their

fortunes in New Zealand’s gum fields, eventually turned to farming and grape growing

instead. Although many of these immigrants were experienced winemakers, they were

powerless against oidium (powdery mildew) and phylloxera, which soon decimated their

young vineyards. In the wake of these diseases and the economic downturn that followed,

the industry turned for a time to hardy hybrid grapes and the production of poor-quality,

sugary, fortified concoctions roughly modeled on inferior brandy and ersatz Sherry.

The snowcapped Kaikoura Ranges are a stunning backdrop for vineyards in Marlborough.

Today, New Zealand is a vastly different place. The fine wine industry that began to

take hold in the mid-1980s has boomed. Between 1994 and 2013, for example, the number

of wineries skyrocketed from just thirty to over seven hundred. More recently, between

2003 and 2013, vineyard acreage doubled, and now stands at 88,300 acres (35,700

hectares). And despite a global financial crisis in the late 2000s, New Zealand’s wine

production grew by more than 50 percent in the four years between 2007 and 2011.

New Zealand’s seven hundred wine producers range from tiny family operations to

large, global companies (Pernod Ricard, for example, owns several New Zealand brands,

including Brancott Estate and Church Road). While some producers do grow all their own

grapes, the majority of New Zealand wineries buy grapes from the country’s 833

independent grape growers. Increasingly, of course, these grape growers are making wine

and coming out with their own small brands.

Of the twenty-five or so grape varieties grown in New Zealand today, sauvignon blanc

and pinot noir are the most renowned and, respectively, the most widely planted. While

it’s true that 78 percent of the vineyards are planted with white grape varieties (primarily

sauvignon blanc), pinot noir has had a stellar rise to fame in this country. In addition, pinot

gris and riesling (the latter, both as a dry wine and as a late-harvest dessert wine) are

creating a great deal of excitement, especially on the South Island, in Marlborough and

Canterbury/Waipara V alley.

For an explanation of New Zealand’s wine laws, see the Appendix on Wine Laws, page

928.

THE MOST IMPORTANT NEW ZEALAND WINES

LEADING WINES

CHARDONNAY white

PINOT GRIS white

PINOT NOIR red

RIESLING white (dry and sweet)

SAUVIGNON BLANC white

SPARKLING WINES white and rosé

WINES OF NOTE

CABERNET SAUVIGNON and BORDEAUX-STYLE BLENDS red

GEWÜRZTRAMINER white

SYRAH red

THE LAND, THE GRAPES, AND THE VINEYARDS

The factor that most influences New Zealand’s grapes, and hence its wines, is the coolness

of the climate. New Zealand has some of the coolest maritime wine regions in the New

World. Because of the long, narrow shape of the two main islands, no vineyard is more

than 80 miles (130 kilometers) from the sea. This cool, steady climate allows the grapes to

ripen evenly and gently over the course of a long growing season, culminating in a harvest

that can take place anytime from March to May (this is, after all, the Southern

Hemisphere). In the best of circumstances, the length of the growing season can lead to

elegant wines with wonderfully pure flavors. It’s often said that New Zealand vegetables

and fruits, including grapes, have an intensity of flavor rarely found in produce grown

elsewhere. Of course, a cool climate also means that, generally speaking, the grapes boast

a good amount of natural acidity. For the best New Zealand whites, this can translate into

a dazzling sense of crispness.

THE GRAPES OF NEW ZEALAND

WHITES

CHARDONNAY: The third-most widely planted grape in New Zealand, chardonnay is a source of wines

of character. The wines can be found in a variety of styles, from lush to lean and Chablis-like. Also used

for sparkling wine.

GEWÜRZTRAMINER: While acreage is still small, gewürztraminer shows considerable promise here.

PINOT GRIS: An important variety creating lots of excitement. Plantings have multiplied more than

sixfold in the past decade.

RIESLING: An up-and-coming variety with lots of promise. It can make delicious dry wines and

sensational botrytized dessert wines.

SAUVIGNON BLANC: The grape that focused world attention on New Zealand wines, sauvignon blanc

makes outrageously good wines with full-throttle green and lightly tropical fruit flavors.

REDS

CABERNET SAUVIGNON: Planted in the warmest pockets around the country and often blended with

merlot and other varieties to make Bordeaux-style blends. Plantings are in decline as cool-climate

varieties like pinot noir move ahead.

MERLOT : Almost always blended with cabernet sauvignon.

PINOT NOIR: The most widely planted red grape in New Zealand, and the country’s red specialty. Pinot

noir can make delicious, earthy, still wines; it is also used for sparkling wines.

SYRAH: A minor but potentially important grape, viewed as having significant potential.

All of this said, New Zealand is not without viticultural hurdles. Principal among these

is rain. In the past, rainy weather often led to moldy grape bunches, dense vine canopies,

and wines that tasted like stewed green vegetables. In the 1980s, however, top

viticulturists—including the internationally famous Australian Dr. Richard Smart—

developed trellising systems and viticultural techniques that help promote ripeness and

maturity. In New Zealand, such techniques led to a whole different sort of green character

—a ripe, complex, fresh green flavor rather than a vegetative one. Needless to say, many

of these techniques have been copied around the world and are used to grow numerous

different grape varieties.

New Zealand’s two main islands stretch more than 900 miles (1,400 kilometers) in

length. Both islands boast extensive and beautiful mountain ranges (the glacier-laced

Southern Alps, with twenty-three peaks that are more than 10,000 feet/3,000 meters in

height, are located here). But the mountain slopes are so steep and erosion is such a

problem that the country’s vineyards are mostly planted on flat plains or gently rolling

hills. Soil varies considerably, from clays interspersed with particles of volcanic rock to

fertile river-basin types. Such diversity is the result of New Zealand’s tumultuous geologic

past. The country lies at the active juncture of two of the world’s great tectonic plates, the

Indo-Australian Plate and the Pacific Plate.

On New Zealand’s North Island, two of the largest and most important wine districts

are Gisborne and Hawke’s Bay. Gisborne, near the International Date Line and the small,

easternmost landmass in the country (an area known as the East Cape), is the site of the

world’s easternmost grapes and is known for numerous tasty chardonnays, often with light

honey and tropical fruit flavors. Hawke’s Bay is the second largest wine region in the

country and is considered one of the best. Its complex and varied soil patterns allow for

many types of vines to thrive here. Gimblett Gravels, an area within Hawke’s Bay, is

particularly known for producing high-quality merlot, syrah, cabernet franc, and cabernet

sauvignon. (The wine known as Dada 2, which is made from these varieties, is stunning.)

Gimblett Gravels soil, called Omahu soil, was deposited in the area by the Ngaruroro

River, and its layers of sand and stony gravel drain water well, creating ideal growing

conditions for these red varieties. Additionally, merlot, syrah, and cabernet sauvignon

thrive in warm summer weather, and by virtue of its long hours of sunshine, Hawke’s Bay

is one of the warmer regions in New Zealand. I’m sure that if I was poured blind the sleek

Mission Estate Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon, with its fine cassis and tobacco aromas and

flavors, I’d think I was drinking good Bordeaux.

Cloudy Bay, one of the wineries that put New Zealand on the international map, is known for sauvignon blanc and pinot

noir.

The third major wine district on the North Island is often simply called Auckland,

although what is really meant is the territory around Auckland, New Zealand’s largest city.

Far smaller than Gisborne or Hawke’s Bay in terms of wine production and vineyard

acreage, Auckland nonetheless boasts the greatest number of wineries. Many of New

Zealand’s top wine companies are headquartered here, even though their vineyards are

located elsewhere in the country. And there are several first-rate small family producers,

such as Kumeu River. Auckland encompasses a handful of smaller, well-known wine

districts, including Kumeu/Huapai, Henderson, and Waiheke Island. Because the

Auckland area is somewhat warmer than other districts, the focus here is chardonnay and

Bordeaux blends.

THE MAORI

New Zealand was originally inhabited by the Maori, a Polynesian people who, over centuries, migrated

from subtropical Pacific islands. The Maori developed a concept called kaitiakitanga, which means

“guardianship.

” When westerners arrived in large numbers at the end of the eighteenth century, they

quickly adopted the Maori way of thinking. T oday, one-third of the island nation’s land is owned by the

government and protected against development.

Although the Maori had no written language, Christian missionaries in the nineteenth century recorded

the words the Maori spoke. T oday, many towns, wineries, and even vineyards have Maori names. The

Maori name for New Zealand, Aotearoa, means “land of the long white cloud.

”

In Central Otago, pinot noir vines are covered in nets to prevent birds from eating the grapes.

Finally, in the southeast corner of the North Island, relatively near New Zealand’s

capital, Wellington, is the small wine region Wairarapa/Martinborough. The two dozen or

so high-quality producers here make a variety of good wines. However, their most

noteworthy—and hard-won—successes have been with pinot noir. In just a few short

years, Ata Rangi, Martinborough Vineyard, Dry River, Schubert Wines, Craggy Range,

and others have produced remarkable pinot noirs with international reputations.

Compared to the North Island, the South Island is even cooler and was very rural until

relatively recently. There were no commercial vineyards on the South Island until 1973. In

that year, the company known as Montana Wines planted vines in Marlborough, on the

northeastern tip of the South Island, and pioneered what was to become the most

prestigious wine district in the country (in 2005, Montana Wines was absorbed into the

large French conglomerate Pernod Ricard and renamed Brancott Estate). Today, more than

60 percent of all New Zealand vineyards are in Marlborough alone, and the region

produces 70 percent of all New Zealand wine and 80 percent of all New Zealand

sauvignon blanc. Indeed, Marlborough is quintessential sauvignon blanc territory, as wines

from wineries like Cloudy Bay, Greywacke, Wairau River, and Villa Maria demonstrate.

Y et, fantastic pinot gris and riesling are also on the rise here (Forrest’s botrytized riesling

is a beautiful wine), and Marlborough is also one of the country’s main regions for top

pinot noir (more on this in a moment).

Other wine districts on the South Island include Nelson, a small but beautiful wine

region about 40 miles (64 kilometers) west of Marlborough, and Canterbury, a cool region

midway down the length of the island. But the most southerly and important of all is

Central Otago, a small region within Otago that, in Maori, means “place of red earth,

”

referring to the region’s ocher-colored soils. It was here that New Zealand’s Gold Rush

occurred in the 1850s, but today Central Otago is best known as one of the hubs of great

pinot noir in New Zealand, and is home to such wineries as Felton Road, Burn Cottage,

and Amisfield.

SAUVIGNON BLANC

If any grape is central to New Zealand’s wine identity, it’s sauvignon blanc, now the

leading variety in the country and the wine that dominates exports. New Zealand

sauvignon blancs have no parallel anywhere in the world. Explosive yet taut, they evoke a

spectrum of fresh greens: limes, wild herbs, watercress, gooseberries, green olives, green

figs, green tea, green melons, plus a host of green vegetables from snow peas to green

beans. (So ubiquitous are these flavors that one might well wonder if some Narnia-like

green netherworld exists under New Zealand.)

THE OTHER KIWI

Because of New Zealand’s prolonged isolation, which lasted until the eighteenth century, it has both

unusual vegetation and a high proportion of species found nowhere else. The only native mammals, for

example, are two species of bats. In the absence of predatory mammals, New Zealand became home to

several rare species of flightless birds. One of these, the kiwi (about the size of a large hen), is also the

nickname for a New Zealander.

But, of course, greenness is a double-edged sword. Green can also be gawky, acrid, and

vegetal, and come at you like an assault rifle firing asparagus. For the top estates, the key

has been to harness sauvignon’s freshness and zing but leave out any strident, raw, unripe

flavors. And greenness isn’t the whole story. New Zealand sauvignons also have an exotic

tropical backdrop. They often hint at mango, papaya, or passion fruit. The combination

can be dynamite, making for untamed, unleashed wines that are true to their name—

sauvignon, from the French sauvage, means “wild.

”

Finally, two notes on how New Zealand sauvignon blancs are made. First, most are

fermented in stainless steel so that their green/tropical flavors don’t get bogged down by

oak. That said, some estates now ferment a tiny portion of the wine in older oak barrels

and blend that portion back in, to give the wine a subtle sense of roundness. And second,

the top New Zealand sauvignon blancs are dry. It’s something of a desperate move (and a

cheap trick) to try to mask unripe, vegetal wine by leaving residual sugar in it.

THE GUMBOOT CLONE

The Gumboot Clone (gum-boot is the New Zealand term for a rain boot), also known as the Abel Clone,

is the Kiwis’ secret weapon for rich, balanced pinot noir, but it is also a story of intrigue. As it goes, in the

1970s a New Zealand rugby player returning from France tried to sneak pinot noir cuttings into the

country in his rain boot (in which case he must have had huge feet). The rumor is that they were cuttings

from the Domaine de la Romanée-Conti, in Burgundy. The plants were found by a fastidious customs

agent named Malcolm Abel, who also just happened to be a grape grower in Auckland. Abel suspected

he might have something of real value, and after passing them through customs and quarantine, he

planted the cuttings in his vineyards (we can’t vouch for the legality of all this), and shared them with his

friend Clive Paton, of Ata Rangi. Abel passed away shortly afterward, but Paton continued to grow the

Abel Clone and began turning out stunning pinot noirs. The clone eventually spread across the country,

and now accounts for some of the best pinot noirs in New Zealand.

PINOT NOIR

As mentioned, pinot noir has proven hugely successful in New Zealand, and in a very

short period of time. (Plantings of pinot doubled in the decade between 2003 and 2013.)

Indeed, winemakers at top estates like Cloudy Bay, Ata Rangi, and Dry River began

experimenting with pinot noir clones only as of the late 1980s, and pinot noir represents

such a new phenomenon in New Zealand that growers and winemakers are still

discovering the best sites to plant vineyards and the best methods for winemaking.

New Zealand pinot noir is planted throughout the entire country, but the lion’s share is

grown on the South Island. Almost half of this is grown in Marlborough alone, and a

significant amount of the rest comes from Central Otago, in the far southern part of the

South Island. In general, Marlborough pinot noirs appear to be the fruitier of the two, with

nuanced red fruit flavors. They are often used to make sparkling wines, which are very

popular in New Zealand, although not often exported. Central Otago pinot noirs, on the

other hand, often display an earthiness and wild herb character, which places them

stylistically between Old World and New World pinot noirs.

On the North Island (at the southern tip), the small region of Martinborough also

produces stellar pinot noirs whose concentration and depth can be spellbinding. After a

1978 New Zealand government report found the soils of Martinborough to be very similar

to the soils of Burgundy, a rush to plant pinot noir vines swept the region, and it now

produces some of the best pinot noirs in New Zealand.

SOME OF THE BEST PRODUCERS OF NEW ZEALAND SAUVIGNON BLANC

Astrolabe • Ata Rangi • Auntsfield • Brancott • Clos Henri • Cloudy Bay • Craggy Range • Dada • Dog Point

• Giesen • Greywacke • Mahi • Man O’ War • Martinborough Vineyard • Misha’s Vineyard • Mud House

Wines • Neudorf • Palliser Estate • Pegasus Bay • Saint Clair • Seresin Marama • Spy Valley • T e Mata •

Villa Maria • Wairau River • Wither Hills

MUTTON NO MORE

Once known culinarily as the land of lamb and little else, New Zealand now boasts some of the most

exciting food in the Pacific. Auckland alone has dozens of wildly creative restaurants where the dramatic,

boldly seasoned dishes are a spin on European ideas infused with the complex flavors of Southeast

Asia, Polynesia, and the South Pacific islands. And on every restaurant table, it seems, is a bottle of New

Zealand wine. But then, not just any wine will work when it comes to dishes uninhibitedly laced with

chiles, lime, and tropical fruits. What do work are New Zealand’s burstingly fresh pinot gris and rieslings,

and the country’s racy, herbal, tropical sauvignon blancs.

WHEN YOU VISIT… NEW ZEALAND

NEW ZEALAND’S WINERIES and vineyards are often surrounded by beautifully

pastoral rolling hills, majestic mountains, and unspoiled coastlines. Don’t miss one of

the country’s most breathtaking features, the Southern Alps on the South Island, with

twenty-three peaks that are more than 10,000 feet (3,000 meters) in height, including

Mount Cook.

MOST NEW ZEALAND WINERIES—small and large—are well set up for tours and

tastings, and a number of wineries have restaurants and picnic facilities.

The New Zealand Wines to Know

WHITES

GREYW ACKE

SAUVIGNON BLANC | MARLBOROUGH

100% sauvignon blanc

New Zealand sauvignon blanc is never about delayed gratification. It generally comes hurtling at you, arms wide

open. But Kevin Judd’s Greywacke sauvignon blanc is, like his pinot noir, a very sophisticated wine. It starts out

with intriguing, spicy green notes reminiscent of baby arugula, then moves to mango, then to something deep and

foresty. The texture, meanwhile, is alive, bouncy and brisk, and the finish lingers for a long while (a rarity with

sauvignon blanc). In summer especially, I could drink this all day long.

CLOUDY BAY

SAUVIGNON BLANC | MARLBOROUGH

100% sauvignon blanc

When Cloudy Bay Sauvignon Blanc was first released in 1985, it became an overnight sensation and, for the first

time, focused world attention on the wines of New Zealand. The wine is a torpedo of intensity. Lime zest, newly

mown grass, green tea, grapefruit, mint, wheatgrass, seawater, green peppercorns, caraway, and a flurry of exotic

green flavors go off like grenades in your mouth. But it is not the green explosion that makes Cloudy Bay so

compelling. It’s the way all of these flavors are intricately woven together to create a complex, round, mouthfilling

wine with a sophisticated, long finish. Cloudy Bay was founded in 1985 by David Hohnen (who, earlier, had

founded Western Australia’s Cape Mentelle winery), and today it is owned by Moët Hennessy-Louis Vuitton.

W AIRAU RIVER

SAUVIGNON BLANC | MARLBOROUGH

100% sauvignon blanc

The Wairau River sauvignons are often seized tight when you first open them, but then their spring-loaded acidity

and wild flavors burst on the scene and everything gets fascinating. I love this wine’s ocean-fresh saline/briny

aromas, and the pithy, spicy “bite” of peppery greens like arugula, dandelion leaf, and tomato leaf. Lest the

sophisticated, salty/bitter flavors get too much, there’s also a beautiful richness here, as if someone drizzled lemon

crème anglaise over everything. Wairau River was founded in 1978 by Phil and Chris Rose, who run the estate with

their children today.

MUD HOUSE

SAUVIGNON BLANC | THE WOOLSHED VINEYARD | MARLBOROUGH

100% sauvignon blanc

Named after the shed where wool was stored on the sheep farm that occupied the land before Mud House purchased

it in 2002, the Woolshed Vineyard sauvignon blanc is saturated with tropical fruit flavors—pear, passion fruit,

melon, and lime—and a luscious texture. A clean, linear thread of acidity keeps the wine fresh and lively, and a hint

of herbaceousness arrives at the last minute, delivering that classic Marlborough greenness in the form of thyme

and green tea. Founded in 1996, Mud House is owned by the Australian-based wine group Accolade.

VILLA MARIA

DRY RIESLING | ESTATE CELLAR SELECT | MARLBOROUGH

100% riesling

Villa Maria, founded in 1961 by Sir George Fistonich, was one of the early, pioneering wineries in New Zealand

and, for many wine drinkers, their well-known and widely praised sauvignon blanc has been an initiation into “New

Zealand flavor.

” But I have decided to write about their cutting-edge dry riesling, for it demonstrates the beauty this

variety can achieve in New Zealand. Flashy and vibrant, the wine has lovely notes of apricots, peaches, yellow

fruits, and citrus. It’s cleansing and brisk, with a cool mineral finish that makes it a perfect counterpoint to many

foods, but bold-flavored dishes like spicy Southeast Asian crab or pad thai with lots of mint are especially terrific

matches.

KUMEU RIVER

CHARDONNAY | KUMEU

100% chardonnay

Y ear in and year out, Kumeu River makes two of the most impressive chardonnays in New Zealand—the “regular”

Kumeu River and the vineyard-designated Maté’s Vineyard. Both are fascinatingly distinctive and artisanal, and

seem to have more in common with white Burgundies than with other New World chardonnays. The regular Kumeu

is rich, leesy, and nutty, and has an earthy/salty character. A vibrant line of acidity holds it all together so that the

wine tastes both rich and elegant. The Maté’s Vineyard is the more powerful and the more expensive. Kumeu River

is owned by the Brajkovich family, which came to New Zealand from Croatia in 1937. Winemaker Michael

Brajkovich was also New Zealand’s first Master of Wine.

REDS

ATA RANGI

PINOT NOIR | MARTINBOROUGH

100% pinot noir

My tasting notes on Ata Rangi’s pinot noirs always include the word beautiful.

“Beautiful harmony.

” “Beautiful

spiced tea flavors.

” “Beautiful silky texture.

” Beauty is indeed a concept that reverberates through these lovely

pinots, which draw you in with their pure cranberry/raspberry flavors and the soft echo of something earthy. Ata

Rangi (the name in the Maori language means “dawn sky” or “new beginning”) was founded in 1980 by Clive

Paton, a former cattle farmer. To make ends meet when the vines were young (and not yet producing grapes), Paton

sold pumpkins and garlic, which he grew between the rows until the new vines began producing the quality fruit

that has made Ata Rangi one of the best pinot producers in New Zealand.

GREYW ACKE

PINOT NOIR | MARLBOROUGH

100% pinot noir

In 2009, Kevin Judd, the super-talented original winemaker for Cloudy Bay, started his own brand, Greywacke

(named for the round greywacke river stones found in the soil). The man has a golden touch. It takes years of

experience to get pinot noir right, but Judd’s Greywacke is dead-on—a complex, spicy, earthy, cranberry-scented

pinot noir with an underlying quiet freshness that pinot noir holds onto in cool climates. The wine’s delicacy and

arc of flavor are simply beautiful.

CRAGGY RANGE

PINOT NOIR | TE MUNA ROAD VINEYARD | MARTINBOROUGH

100% pinot noir

Ripe cherry and spiced cranberry aromas pull you in, but it’s the delicious wave of black cherry, raspberry, bitter

earth, and white pepper flavors in Craggy Range’s Te Muna pinot noir that take over your senses (te muna, in

Maori, means “the secret”). The wine’s telltale earthiness and enticing spiciness are hallmarks of Martinborough,

but the richness of this wine is probably the result of the elevated terraces in the vineyard, which cause the vines to

struggle. Craggy Range was founded in 1997 by Terry Peabody, an American businessman, and Steve Smith, a

leading viticulturalist in New Zealand. In 1999, when the pair planted a vineyard off Te Muna Road, a local

Aboriginal woman named Aunt Sally buried a piece of the Peabody family’s silver in the vineyard as a good luck

omen. Nice move, Aunt Sally. Craggy Range also makes a stellar syrah called Le Sol from Gimblett Gravels, in

Hawke’s Bay.

DRY RIVER

PINOT NOIR | MARTINBOROUGH

100% pinot noir

Quiet beauty can be very delicious. In top vintages, Dry River’s pinot noir opens with a gentle spicy aroma and a

fine spicy “frame” within which all sorts of delicious fruit flavors congregate—pomegranate, cranberry, vanilla.

These are the elegant clouds of flavor that form the core of Dry River’s exquisite, distinct pinot noir. Then there’s

that silken softness—a texture that pinot noir lovers around the world crave. Neil and Dawn McCallum planted

their first vineyard in 1979, and Dry Creek became one of the first wineries in Martinborough. It was also one of

the five pioneering wineries that defined and created the Martinborough Terrace appellation, based on the area’s

low rainfall and free-draining soils. This wine’s oxymoronic name comes from one of the first sheep stations in the

area, which was called Dry River and was later renamed Dyerville.

WILD EARTH

PINOT NOIR | CENTRAL OTAGO

100% pinot noir

This is certainly a well-named wine, for Wild Earth’s pinot is full of delicious, wild, earthy aromas and flavors—

peat, bark, damp earth, and wild herbs. But against that background come other flavors… currants, cranberries,

raspberries, and spices (like an exotic Christmas cranberry sauce). And then, something leathery or gamy, almost

Rhône-like. When pinot noir takes you on a journey through different worlds of flavor, you know you are in the

midst of something complex, artisanal, and very captivating.

CHILE

CHILE RANKS SIXTH AMONG WINE-PRODUCING COUNTRIES WORLDWIDE. CHILEANS DRINK AN

AVERAGE OF 5 GALLONS (17 LITERS) OF WINE PER PERSON PER YEAR.

Chile exists in near perfect seclusion. On the west is the Pacific Ocean; on the east, the

massive Andes Mountains; to the north, the Atacama Desert; and to the south, about 400

miles (640 kilometers) across the water, frozen masses of Antarctic ice. The country,

squeezed in between these barriers, is roughly 2,700 miles (4,300 kilometers) long, but at

its narrowest point, only 96 miles (155 kilometers) wide. Within these formidable natural

boundaries exists an almost Eden-like environment for grapes and other crops. The warm,

dry, brightly sunny days recall the Mediterranean. Irrigation is easy thanks to snow

melting on the Andes, which feeds roaring rivers, themselves the products of melting

ancient glaciers. And thanks to the country’s physical isolation, there are very few vine

diseases and pests, obviating the need for almost all sprays and chemical treatments. In

short, grape-growing conditions are so ideal, the cost of vineyard land and labor is so

reasonable, and serviceable wines are so easy to make that Chile has become one of the

world’s leading producers of value wines.

“The beauty of great wine is revealed not by adding adornment, but by

removing it.

”

— ALEXANDRA MARNIER

LAPOSTOLLE,

Lapostolle

Those bargains have built an enviable export empire. From a negligible monetary value

in 1980 (when less than 2 percent of Chile’s wine production was exported), the value of

Chilean wine exports rose to $50 million in 1990, then a staggering $1.5 billion in 2010.

Indeed, today, 70 percent of Chilean wine is exported. But there’s a dark side, too. Chile’s

early reputation for the $6.99 steal has inhibited the development of a vibrant upscale wine

industry founded on more complex, higher-quality wines. Even now, few wine lovers with

$50 to spend on a bottle of wine head straight for the Chile aisle in the wine shop. Or at

least, until recently they haven’t. But Chile is changing, and fine wine is becoming a part

of its future.

In winter , Chile’ s vineyards look stark and somber against the backdrop of the magnificent Andes Mountains.

THE QUICK SIP ON CHILE

CHILE’S MODERN WINE industry achieved international recognition in the early 1980s

for bargain-priced wines (especially chardonnay and cabernet sauvignon) intended for

export. T oday, many top Chilean winemakers are focused on producing higher-quality,

more expensive wines while continuing to maintain a reputation for value quaffs.

WHILE THERE IS VASTLY more cabernet sauvignon planted in Chile than any other

grape variety, the country’s signature grape is carmenère, a red grape variety

indigenous to Bordeaux but now virtually extinct there.

CHILE’S MOST NOTABLE wine area is the vast Valle Central (“Central Valley”), where

a majority of the most important appellations are to be found, including the two most

renowned: Maipo Valley and Colchagua Valley.

The first European vines (Vitis vinifera) in Chile were Spanish varieties planted in the

mid-sixteenth century by Spanish missionaries and conquistadores, who carried them

directly to Chile (and later, overland to Chile from Peru and Mexico). The important first

of these varieties was listán prieto, which went on to form the foundation for the entire

wine industry in the Americas. Listán prieto was originally known in Chile as criolla chica

(“creole girl”), but by the nineteenth century, the variety was so common it was

rechristened simply as país (“country”). It was the same variety as the grape known as

misión in Mexico, and eventually, as it was brought north, known as mission in California,

New Mexico, and Texas.

Despite Spain’s historic and political hegemony in Chile, France, not Spain, has had the

greatest influence on the country’s wines. In the mid-nineteenth century, rich Chilean

landowners and mining barons showcased their wealth by building wine estates modeled

after Bordeaux châteaux. Bordeaux, after all, was the wine superpower of the era, and

after the 1855 Classification, grapes from Bordeaux’s top communes were held in almost

religious esteem. The Chileans planted vineyards with imported French grapes, most

notably cabernet sauvignon, merlot, and (although they probably didn’t know it at the

time) carmenère. And whenever possible, they hired French winemakers, who, by the

latter part of the century, were easy to lure from their homeland thanks to a twist of fate.

The deadly insect phylloxera had just begun its sweep through France. As vineyard after

vineyard was destroyed, unemployed winemakers looked to other wine regions, including

the wine frontiers of the New World. (Although phylloxera ultimately ravaged vineyards

in virtually every wine-producing country, Chile has never been affected.)

THE CURIOUS ABSENCE OF PHYLLOXERA

As of this book’s writing, Chilean vineyards have never been victims of the lethal insect phylloxera, which

devastated most of the world’s vineyards in the mid- and late-nineteenth century. Chile, in fact, is the only

major wine country in the world where no phylloxera exists. Although Chile’s physical isolation, dry soil,

and use of flood irrigation may all have helped to protect the country, phylloxera’s absence is not fully

understood—especially given the fact that phylloxera is present right next door, in Argentina. Some

scientists speculate that it’s only a matter of time before the pest finds a route in, despite the Chilean

government’s strict quarantine requirements for plant materials. As a result of that fear, some of Chile’s

modern vineyards are based on vines grafted onto phylloxera-resistant rootstock—but not all of them.

Chauvinistic Chileans argue that the flavor of wine from vines planted on the vine’s own (vinifera) roots is

better, somehow more authentic. This has never been demonstrated, nor have blind tastings revealed

ungrafted vines to produce superior wine. What is known comes down to cold hard cash. Between the

cost of the rootstock itself and the labor cost of grafting, a vineyard on rootstock costs four times more to

plant than a vineyard where the vine is planted with its own roots.

For much of the twentieth century, Chilean wine was unexceptional and serviceable,

rarely more. The combined impact of political instability, bureaucratic red tape, high

taxes, low wages, and a local market that seemed perfectly satisfied with (if not thankful

for) inexpensive quaffing wine effectively handcuffed Chilean winemakers and limited the

scope of their ambitions.

Alexandra Marnier Lapostolle, owner of Lapostolle, and the woman who, more than any other , ushered into Chile a fine-

wine revolution.

Then, in the late 1980s, vast changes in the country’s political, economic, and social

climate led to considerable domestic and foreign investment in the wine industry. In less

than two decades, Chile went from being a Third World wine producer to being dubbed

the Bordeaux of South America. Among the first leading European wine families to invest

were the Torres family from Spain and the Rothschilds from Château Lafite-Rothschild, in

Bordeaux, who bought land in Curicó and Colchagua (Kohl-CHA-gwa), respectively.

Within a few years, Paul Pontallier, director of Bordeaux’s Château Margaux, and Bruno

Prats, the former owner of Château Cos d’Estournel, founded a Chilean winery called

Domaine Paul Bruno (and later renamed Viña Aquitania). From the United States,

Chilean-born vintner Agustin Huneeus, owner of the prestigious Napa V alley winery

Quintessa, jumped into the game, buying land in the cool, coastal valley of Casablanca

and founding V eramonte winery in 1990. But perhaps no outsider has accelerated the

reputation of Chilean wine more than Frenchwoman Alexandra Marnier Lapostolle

(owner, with her family, of the famous French liqueur firm Grand Marnier). In 1994,

Marnier Lapostolle bought property in the Colchagua V alley and immediately hired

French enologist Michel Rolland (the world’s most famous consulting winemaker) to help

make world-class wine at the Lapostolle winery.

THE GRAPES OF CHILE

WHITES

CHARDONNAY: Along with sauvignon blanc, chardonnay is one of the two most important white grapes.

It makes good, drinkable wines that rarely achieve complexity or sophistication.

SAUVIGNON BLANC: Many Chilean wine-makers consider this grape better suited to Chile than

chardonnay. It makes sassy, fresh wines with an unmistakable bolt of greenness.

SAUVIGNON GRIS: A gray-colored mutation of sauvignon blanc that tastes less herbal. Small amounts

are grown in Chile.

SAUVIGNON VERT : Not related to sauvignon blanc, despite its name; rather, the grape is the same as

sauvignonasse and northern Italy’s friulano. In Chile, it makes a wine with light herbal and almond

flavors.

REDS

CABERNET SAUVIGNON: Chile’s major grape; it makes a full range of styles, from quaffing wines to

quite extraordinary wines. It is often blended with carmenère and merlot to make Chile’s greatest wines.

CARMENÈRE: A variety brought to Chile in the late-nineteenth century from Bordeaux, where, for all

practical purposes, it no longer exists. Originally mis-identified as merlot, it is today considered Chile’s

signature grape, and plantings are on a dramatic rise. The highest-quality examples are fascinating, soft,

plush wines redolent of green tobacco, coffee, and leather.

MERLOT : Chile’s second-most-planted fine-wine grape after cabernet sauvignon, merlot makes good to

very good wines.

PAÍS: A major grape, país is Chile’s historic mass-production grape, brought in the sixteenth century from

Spain, where it is known as listán prieto. It is still widely planted for use in jug wines.

PINOT NOIR: A minor grape, but plantings are on the rise thanks to export demand for inexpensive pinot

noir. So far, it makes mostly undistinguished wine, except in the hands of a very few producers.

SYRAH: An up-and-coming Chilean grape, syrah makes surprisingly good wines, with classic gamy/spicy

aromas and flavors. It is sometimes blended with carmenère to very good result.

The largest winery in South America and one of the Chilean “old guard,

” Concha y Toro was founded in 1883 by Don

Melchor de Santiago Concha y Toro, who brought vines to Santiago from Bordeaux.

THE ANDES

Rising up behind many of Chile’s vineyards are the majestic Andes, the longest mountain chain in the

world. The Andean peaks reach 22,000 feet (6,700 meters) and are exceeded in elevation only by the

Himalayas. When the mountain chain was formed, sedimentary rocks were folded and bent into ridges,

creating many of the sheltered valleys in which Chile’s vineyards lie. Today, no visitor to Chile’s wine

country (or to the wine country of Argentina, just on the other side of the Andes) can help but be awed by

the sheer beauty of vineyards framed by these magnificent, snow-laden peaks.

Simultaneously, Chile’s historic, grand wine firms, such as Cousiño-Macul, Concha y

Toro, Canepa, Errázuriz, Santa Rita, Undurraga, and Santa Carolina, spent millions

modernizing their wineries and buying both new equipment and new French and

American oak barrels. Moreover, for many of these firms, a whole new avenue of business

sprang to life: the international joint venture.

In the early 1990s, Errázuriz partnered with California’s Robert Mondavi Winery to

create Seña, a Bordeaux blend that cost a startlingly high $55 in 1998, when it was first

released. A year later, the joint-venture team of Château Mouton-Rothschild and Concha y

Toro debuted their Bordeaux-style blend, Almaviva, at $70 a bottle.

THE SPIRIT OF THE DESERT

On several trips to Chile, I’ve felt it culturally imperative to start the evening with a pisco sour (strictly for

research purposes, of course). Chile’s famous and traditional distilled spirit, pisco, was first developed in

Peru by Spanish settlers in the sixteenth century. By the mid-eighteenth century, however, northern Chile

had become an important center of pisco production, and today, Chile ranks as the leading producer of

the yellowish-colored brandy. Chilean pisco is made from grapes that, by law, can be grown only in the

desertlike, high-altitude regions of Atacama and Coquimbo, in the northern part of the country. (In some

parts of the Atacama Desert, no measurable rainfall has ever been recorded.)

Pisco can be made from any one or a combination of muscat of Alexandria, torontel, and Pedro

Ximénez grapes, which can grow only because snowmelt from the Andes creates small rivers that can

be tapped for irrigation. The wine is aged for a few months in oak barrels and then distilled with mountain

water.

Momentum had begun to build. And at the same time, as all of the above was

happening, a new type of winery was also quietly emerging in Chile—the small wine

estate owned by a grower who, instead of selling his grapes, decided to market his own

brand.

Remarkably, the success of Chile’s wine revolution hinged on a bet that the United

States and Great Britain would become the major markets for all of these new wines—

from the better-quality bargain wines to the new class of what the Chileans call “icon”

wines. To help ensure this would be the case, Chilean producers initially focused their

exports on wines that were already extremely popular, especially chardonnay, sauvignon

blanc, merlot, and cabernet sauvignon. By the early 2000s, the red Bordeaux variety

carmenère was also part of that list.

As it turned out, the United States and Great Britain have not only become the leading

export markets for Chilean wine, but many of the more expensive wines are sold almost

exclusively in the two markets. During the fiscal year 2010 to 2011, for example, more

than eight million cases of Chilean wine were exported to the U.S., and more than ten

million to Great Britain.

For an explanation of Chilean wine laws, see the Appendix on Wine Laws, page 929.

HUMPHREY BOGART DID NOT SLEEP HERE

Casablanca… ah, yes. Humphrey Bogart steamily kissing Ingrid Bergman. Morocco in the 1940s. WAIT

—wrong Casablanca. The pastoral, vineyard-filled valley of Casablanca in Chile is not related to the

iconic World War II movie of the same name. Chile’s Casablanca V alley is named after the Chilean town

of Casablanca (the word means “white house”), founded in 1753 under the original name Santa Barbara

Queen of Casablanca (that’s the English version) in honor of Doña Barbara de Braganza, wife of

Fernando VI, King of Spain. Understandably, with the passage of time, the town’s name was shortened

simply to Casablanca.

Some Chilean vineyards are harvested by machine, but the top grapes are still picked by hand.

THE LAND, THE GRAPES, AND THE VINEYARDS

Unlike the arid, extremely high-altitude vineyards in Argentina, on the other side of the

Andes, Chile’s main wine regions are low in altitude and relatively close to the sea. But

while they are cooled by the Pacific, Chilean vineyards are largely protected from extreme

maritime weather by a low-lying range of mountains, called the Coastal Range, just inland

from the coast.

If you flipped Chile over into the northern hemisphere, the best vineyards would fall

roughly at the latitude of North Africa or southern Spain. But this image skews the reality

of Chilean climate and viticulture. Thanks to the Pacific Ocean’s Humboldt Current,

which brings ice-cold water and air up the coast from Antarctic waters, temperatures in

Chile’s wine country rarely rise above 90°F (32°C) and summertime nights are cool.

Indeed, in very cool regions like Casablanca V alley, harvest (theoretically the warmest

time of the year) can be so nippy that everyone is wearing fleece vests.

THE MOST IMPORTANT CHILEAN WINES

LEADING WINES

CABERNET SAUVIGNON red

CARMENÈRE red

CHARDONNAY white

MERLOT red

SAUVIGNON BLANC white

WINE OF NOTE

SAUVIGNON VERT white

Chile’s 506,000 acres (204,800 hectares) of vineyards and two hundred plus wineries

are located in five major Denominacions de Origen (DOs). From north to south, they are:

Atacama, Coquimbo, Aconcagua, the V alle Central, and the Southern Regions. The

northernmost DOs of Atacama and Coquimbo are desertlike; the DO Southern Regions is

the coldest. But the DOs to know are the ones in the middle—Aconcagua (ah-kon-KAH-

gwa) and the V alle Central (“Central V alley”). These make up Chile’s historic wine center,

and they are still today the areas where most of Chile’s best wine districts are to be found.

Indeed, a lion’s share of all of the wine exported from Chile comes from these two areas.

Aconcagua, which takes its name from the nearby Aconcagua River, includes the

warmish Aconcagua V alley (home to Errázuriz, one of Chile’s prominent wine producers)

and the more coastal, cool, avant-garde districts of Casablanca V alley and San Antonio

V alley (and within San Antonio V alley, the very upcoming zone of Leyda V alley). In the

1990s, these regions experienced the wine equivalent of a mini gold rush, as investors

swooped in, bought land, and began planting sauvignon blanc and chardonnay.

Chile’ s dry climate and geographic isolation have meant that many wineries farm organically using an integrated,

sustainable approach. Here, friends of Cono Sur winery check out the vines.

Southwest of Chile’s capital, Santiago, lies the large V alle Central, an expanse of fertile

and fairly flat land lying between the Andes and the Coastal Range, low-lying mountains

just inland from the Pacific. The most fertile part of the V alle Central (the center of the

valley, where the soils are deepest) is indeed fertile. There, an abundance of crops, from

wheat, corn, and beans to nuts, fruits, and sugar beets, are grown. By contrast, it’s in the

less fertile, granitic soils that wine grapes are grown. These soils often hug the hillsides,

and span five distinct sub-valleys within the V alle Central: Maipo, Cachapoal, Colchagua,

Curicó, and Maule. (Wine label readers note: Sometimes the Cachapoal and Colchagua

valleys are referred to together as the Rapel V alley.) Many of these sub-valleys are

separated by rivers that begin high in the Andes and flow to the Pacific Ocean.

Of all of the important central valleys, perhaps the two most renowned are Maipo

V alley and Colchagua V alley. It’s from these two districts that most of Chile’s so-called

icon wines are sourced.

Edged up against the city limits of Santiago, the Maipo V alley is one of Chile’s oldest

wine regions and, because of its proximity to the capital, many wineries are headquartered

there. This is where the huge wineries Concha y Toro and Cousiño-Macul are located, the

latter with its massive, cavernous cellars and stately 125-acre (50-hectare) park, a

dreamlike expanse of private gardens tended by fifteen full-time gardeners.

Colchagua is fast becoming the Napa of Chile, especially the tiny district of Apalta, a

small, moon-shaped internal valley hard up against the Coastal Range. This is where

Neyen, Viña Montes’s Alpha M, and Lapostolle’s Clos Apalta wines are sourced, and all

three are among the most iconic of the icon wines of Chile, each with dozens of

international awards and high scores from critics.

Dancing the cueca, a family of traditional dances from Chile, Argentina, and Bolivia.

Soils in Chile’s top vineyards within the major valleys are often a type of well-drained,

friable granite. As one moves closer to the deepest center parts of the valleys, the soils get

more fertile and granitic stone is interspersed with loam, sand, and clay. In addition, on the

eastern side of these valleys, below the Andes, many vineyards have alluvial fans,

essentially rocky streams that have washed down mountainsides through the force of

water.

Speaking of which, the easy availability of water is one of Chile’s leading viticultural

assets. But it can also be a downfall as far as the quality of the wine is concerned. Snow

melting on the Andes provides a steady supply of water that is channeled to the vineyards

through a system of dikes and canals. Growers who want huge crops to make bland wine

that can be sold for peanuts have no problem achieving such wines by literally flooding

the vineyards. The top wine producers eschew such practice, using controlled drip

irrigation—or even watering by hand—instead.

Approximately fifteen varieties of wine grapes are grown in Chile—everything from

riesling and sémillon to pinot noir and malbec. But most wines are based on just five

major grapes: cabernet sauvignon, chardonnay, merlot, sauvignon blanc, and carmenère.

Of all the grapes grown in Chile, cabernet sauvignon is by every account the star.

Moderately priced Chilean cabernets are usually very easy to drink, with soft, minty, black

currant, and olive flavors. The newer, high-priced icon cabernets and cabernet blends are

polished wines, with much more concentrated and complex flavors and firmer structure.

Chilean empanadas are a traditional dish. Usually made from chopped beef or pork plus black olives, hard-cooked eggs,

and raisins, they are especially delicious hot, when right out of a brick oven.

In the 1990s, chardonnay was extensively planted in response to the seemingly

bottomless demand for inexpensive chardonnay in the United States and Great Britain.

Today, most Chilean chardonnay is exactly that—bargain-priced, uncomplicated, and with

a few exceptions (such as Lapostolle and Montes), unremarkable. Chilean sauvignon blanc

is definitely the more exciting white grape. Zesty and bold, the best Chilean sauvignons

have surprisingly vivid flavors. Chile is also known for the milder-tasting sauvignon vert,

which is not related to sauvignon blanc at all, but rather is a grape called sauvignonasse

(or, in Italy, friulano).

But by all accounts the grape to watch is carmenère, which holds a signature position in

Chile, similar to that of malbec in Argentina. Carmenère (which the Chileans pronounce

car-men-AIR) has a fascinating story.

The grape is indigenous to the Bordeaux area of France, but it ripens so late in the year

that, in Bordeaux, it barely ever achieved ripeness, producing wines that tasted more like

rhubarb juice than a grand vin. After the nineteenth-century phylloxera epidemic in

France, it was almost never replanted.

In Chile, however, carmenère found a hospitable home. Chile’s warm, long growing

season was perfect for the grape, and thus, after being brought to Chile, probably in the

1850s with the great influx of “noble” grapes from Bordeaux, carmenère thrived. Not that

anyone knew it was carmenère, exactly. Grapevine importation was at an all-time high—

and at a time before any reliable method of grapevine identification existed in Chile. Over

the next 145 years, carmenère was generally misidentified as a late-ripening type of

merlot. Indeed, it wasn’t until the mid-1990s that many producers discovered that the

“merlots” they were exporting were, in fact, something else.

Chilean huasos (“cowboys”) are skilled horsemen. Here, they rope a bull during a rodeo competition. Rodeo was

declared Chile’ s national sport in 1962.

The word carmenère comes from the Latin carmin (“crimson”) and is a reference to the

bright reddish color of the variety’s leaves come harvest time. In a stroke of perfect

coincidence, carmenère was “rediscovered” at Viña Carmen, a winery in the Maipo V alley

in the mid-1990s. Álvaro Espinoza, Viña Carmen’s winemaker at the time, had brought in

Jean-Michel Boursiquot, a famous French ampelographer (grapevine identification

specialist) to determine why some merlots ripened so much later and tasted so different

from others. Boursiquot hypothesized that what Chile had in at least some of its “merlots”

was an entirely different grape called carmenère. DNA typing later confirmed that

Boursiquot was right.

Subsequently (and sadly), some producers tore out their old carmenère vineyards and

replanted with true merlot. Others saw an opportunity—a chance to carve out a unique

position for Chile in the world of wine.

V ery low in acid, and lower in tannin than cabernet sauvignon, carmenère grapes—

when grown in great sites at low yields—make wines with a naturally plush texture (in

this they are like the top malbecs) that boast a mocha, coffee, green tobacco, and spice

character. But quality is the key. For as fascinating as top Chilean carmenères are, the

basic ones are definitely a yawn.

Similarly, with top wines, when carmenère is blended with cabernet, it provides a nice

“fatness” to the final wine. Carmenère/cabernet blends like Neyen’s Espiritu de Apalta can

be stupendous wines—fleshy and spicy thanks to the carmenère, structured and majestic

thanks to the cabernet.

Genetically, carmenère is a natural cross of cabernet franc and gros cabernet—the latter

an old Bordeaux variety, not the same as cabernet sauvignon, that is no longer cultivated.

BRAZIL AND PERU

If you’ve been sidetracked by caipirinhas and pisco sours over the last few years, you’re forgiven. But

while you were “spiritually” preoccupied, the wine industries of both Brazil and Peru have been working

hard to become players on the South American wine scene.

Brazil now boasts 213,000 acres (86,200 hectares) of vines, and Peru has 43,000 acres (17,400

hectares), although in both countries, per capita wine consumption is low and a modern wine-drinking

culture is in its infancy. Indeed, for both Brazil and Peru, a good share of their future success may hinge

on their ability to develop international export markets for their wines.

The largest country in South America, Brazil has a long, though difficult, history of grape growing. The

first vines were brought here in 1532 by the Portuguese explorer Martim Afonso de Souza, who planted

them in the southeastern state of São Paulo. But even far away from the tropical jungles of the north, the

vines perished from disease in the hot, humid climate. Over the next century, many more attempts at

grape growing were made, with patchy success, by Jesuit priests hoping to make wine for Mass. A solid

wine industry finally took form in the late-nineteenth century, when Italian immigrants began planting

American hybrid grapes such as Isabella, as well as Italian Vitis vinifera varieties and tannat in the drier

mountainous region of the Serra Gaúcha near the border with Uruguay and Argentina, still the key region

for fine wines.

Brazil’s most important wines include the reds syrah, tannat, malbec, cabernet sauvignon, and

tempranillo, but the category that’s been hot for decades is sparkling wine. Every type of sparkler is

made in Brazil—from traditional-method (Champagne) sparkling wines based on chardonnay and pinot

noir to Brazil’s version of simple prosecco to tank-fermented fizzy moscato.

Thanks to its high altitude and dry, desertlike climate, Peru has many of the viticultural assets of

Argentina and northern Chile. Indeed, this may be the most exciting undiscovered wine country in South

America, not to mention the most dynamic culinarily.

In 1528, the Spanish explorer Francisco Pizarro and his troops arrived at the northern border of the

vast Inca empire, which then included not only Peru but parts of Equador, Chile, and the Amazon basin.

By 1572, the henceforth named Viceroyalty of Peru belonged to the Spanish crown, and in the years in

between, grapevines were introduced both by explorers and priests. Over the next century, as the city of

Lima grew and as a mining industry took hold, the production of Peruvian wine increased substantially.

But an enormous earthquake in the late 1600s, religious suppression in the mid-1700s, the rise in

popularity of the spirit pisco, and the demand for cotton, all contributed to the ripping out of vineyards and

wine’s general decline.

In the 2000s, the Peruvian wine industry initiated a comeback. The industry is centered around the

towns of Pisco and Ica on the Central Coast. Numerous types of red and white wine are made primarily

from cabernet sauvignon, malbec, grenache, and barbera, as well as sauvignon blanc and torontel,

which, like Argentine torrontés, is a cross of mission and muscat of Alexandria.

WHEN YOU VISIT… CHILE

A NUMBER OF CHILE’S top wineries are in the Maipo Valley, just minutes from the

capital, Santiago, or a few hours’ drive south in the Colchagua and Cachapoal regions,

or north of the city, in Casablanca. Do not miss, for example, Lapostolle’s stunning

estate in the Colchagua Valley or the palatial Cousiño-Macul just minutes from the heart

of Santiago. For all wineries, it is best to make an appointment in advance.

The Chilean Wines to Know

WHITES

LAPOSTOLLE

CHARDONNAY | CUVÉE ALEXANDRE | CASABLANCA VALLEY

100% chardonnay

Lapostolle makes one of the great chardonnays of the New World. The wine is extraordinarily fresh and lively as

well as rich and opulent—loaded, in fact, with beautifully precise tropical fruit flavors. Unlike virtually all New

World wineries making chardonnay, Lapostolle goes through the vineyards multiple times at harvest. The early

pickings give bright, snappy fruit flavors, and the later pickings give deeper, more opulent, riper fruit flavors. The

process is expensive, to be sure, but the effort shows in the beauty and complexity of this wine.

COUSIÑO-MACUL

SAUVIGNON GRIS | MAIPO VALLEY

100% sauvignon gris

This is a simple white, but it’s so delicious I wanted you to know about it. The historic, family-owned producer

Cousiño-Macul (founded in 1856) is one of the few producers in the world to make a 100 percent sauvignon gris

(an entirely different variety from sauvignon blanc). With its gorgeous tangerine aromas and lovely, minerally,

spicy flavors, this is the kind of fresh, pure wine you just can’t stop drinking on a summer night. Sauvignon gris is

more mouthfilling and fruity than sauvignon blanc, and has less of sauvignon blanc’s “greenness.

”

REDS

NEYEN

ESPIRITU DE APALTA | COLCHAGUA VALLEY

Approximately 80% carmenère, 20% cabernet sauvignon

In the indigenous language of central Chile, neyen (which, curiously, can be read forward or backward) means

“spirit.

” And the wine is certainly soulful. Dense and concentrated on the palate, Neyen has a texture that’s almost

furry. In great years, it has majestic power and a thundering, immediate impact of flavor. Spicy and minerally, it’s

evocative of espresso and bitter chocolate, with notes of violets and kirsch. The hand-watered Neyen vineyard

(which includes 120-year-old cabernet vines) is tucked into a serene cul-de-sac in Apalta—a tiny, prestigious area

within the very important region of Colchagua.

LAPOSTOLLE

CLOS APALTA | COLCHAGUA VALLEY

Percentages vary, but typically 40% to 80% merlot, with carmenère, cabernet sauvignon, and petit

verdot

Lapostolle’s greatest wine is one of the icon wines of Chile, and it is stunning. Owner Alexandra Marnier

Lapostolle (of the Grand Marnier family) likes elegance in wine; her consultant, the famous French enologist

Michel Rolland, likes power. Together they’ve created a wine that bridges both worlds. No expense is spared in

making the wine: Among other nuances, the grapes are even de-stemmed by hand, by women. Clos Apalta’s flavors

are unique—a fascinating swirl of cocoa beans, vanilla, woodsmoke, and chaparral, along with something almost

piquant, like cayenne pepper. The texture is soft, almost syrupy. But what really gets to you is the finish… the long,

slow waves that don’t stop.

TERRANOBLE

CARMENÈRE | COSTA | CA2 | COLCHAGUA VALLEY

100% carmenère

From vineyards near the Coastal Range comes this fantastic carmenère that won’t require anyone to hock the family

jewels. Highly structured and sleek, in great vintages it’s got amazingly vivid violet and white pepper flavors offset

by whooshes of mocha and minerality. Terranoble winery, which specializes in carmenère, believes that two

different expressions of the grape exist in Colchagua. Their wine designated CA1 is from carmenère vineyards on

the eastern side of the valley, near the Andes. CA2 is the name of their wine from carmenère vineyards on the

western side of the valley, near the Coastal Range.

VERTICE

APALTA VINEYARD | COLCHAGUA VALLEY

Approximately 51% carmenère, 49% syrah

The V ertice (VER-tea-say) wines are a partnership between the large Chilean wine company Viña V entisquero and

renowned Australian winemaker John Duval (formerly the winemaker of Penfolds Grange). And what a win-win.

V entisquero’s quartz-

, granite-

, and iron-rich vineyards and Duval’s sheer talent come together in a dramatic,

sumptuous, dark cocoa-y/spicy/earthy wine with a texture like a velvet pillow. But in top years, there’s also

breathtaking complexity and length here, making V ertice (the word vértice means “apex”) a showstopper.

MONTES

ALPHA M | COLCHAGUA VALLEY

80% cabernet sauvignon, 10% cabernet franc, 5% merlot, 5% petit verdot

From the steep hillsides of their Finca de Apalta vineyard comes Montes’s Alpha M, a Bordeaux blend that, when it

was first made in the mid-1990s, ambitiously sought to be Chile’s equivalent of a First Growth. The wine is

massively intense and often closed when it is released. But a few years later (or after an hour or two in a decanter),

the wine unfurls into an amazing, richly structured beauty packed with cassis, woodsmoke, and graphite flavors.

The small, half-moon-shaped Apalta region—the best area in Chile for ageworthy reds—has long, warm days, but

it lies just 18 miles (29 kilometers) from the sea and thus benefits from cool ocean breezes.

ARGENTINA

ARGENTINA RANKS FIFTH AMONG WINE-PRODUCING COUNTRIES WORLDWIDE. ARGENTINIANS

DRINK AN AVERAGE OF 10 GALLONS (36 LITERS) OF WINE PER PERSON PER YEAR.

Of all the wine-producing countries that have come of age in the past twenty years, none

has come quite so far so fast as Argentina.

As of the late 1980s, much of the wine Argentina produced was, as it had been for

centuries, dirt cheap and dead ordinary. Sometimes oxidized and occasionally microbial, it

was funky but serviceable. The Argentines had grown used to it. And, with a big national

population and no major export markets, they drank virtually all of it themselves.

Which, as it turns out, was a lot of wine. Until the late 1990s, Argentine per capita

consumption had hovered for decades at around 26 gallons (98 liters) a year. It’s now

about 9.5 gallons (36 liters) per year. (In the U.S., the figure is about 2.4 gallons/9.1 liters

per year.) Argentina not only drank a lot of wine, it also produced a lot. Indeed, since the

mid-1960s, in wine production volume, Argentina has ranked between fourth and sixth

place in the world; fifth is where it currently sits.

Today, Argentina is a wine country transformed. The best wines (mostly malbecs) are

distinct in character and spellbinding in flavor. Even the simple wines have a delicious

charm. In less than a generation, Argentine wine has gone from run-of-the-mill to

remarkable.

What prompted this profound shift in quality? A single answer is hard to come by. But

vintners point out that by 2000, Argentina had come to the end of nearly a century’s worth

of political instability and economic depression, during which time inflation often soared

over 1,000 percent and the country wobbled under dictators and a series of power-hungry

military governments. With the new economic, political, and social climate of the twenty-

first century came vast new business opportunities. A stellar wine industry was one.

Then, within the new business-friendly climate, two other influences emerged as added

incentives.

First was what might be called the “Chile factor.

” Throughout the 1990s, Argentina had

watched as its neighbor Chile virtually reinvented its wine industry by improving the

quality of its basic wines, pricing those wines higher, and then exporting them at a good

profit, especially to the United States and Great Britain. Many of Argentina’s most

forward-thinking wineries figured (correctly): If Chile can do it, why can’ t we?

The stunning, 22,800-foot-high (6,960-meter) Andes Mountains—snow-covered year-round—frame the vineyards of

Mendoza. Here, the vineyards of Catena Zapata, a winery at the forefront of the new era for top-class wine in Argentina.

Second was the astounding success of one man—Nicolás Catena. Catena grew up in an

Argentine winemaking family but graduated with a PhD in international economics from

Columbia University in New Y ork, and had been a visiting professor at the University of

California at Berkeley. During his time in northern California, Catena developed a strong

friendship with Robert Mondavi, ultimately, he says, preferring Mondavi’s wines over

those of his own family. When it came time for Nicolas to take over the reins of the family

business, he did so with a resolute determination to make the sort of wines he had

experienced in Napa and Sonoma. During the 1980s and 1990s, Nicolas turned the family

wine business inside out—in the process, creating the winery he called Catena Zapata (the

sum of his parents’ surnames). By the late 1990s, it was the most innovative and

successful winery in the country. Nicolas Catena’s huge success in export markets like the

United States inspired other Argentine vintners, who hoped they could get a piece of the

pie.

Fairly quickly, a new Argentine wine industry bloomed. Sometimes with the help of

foreign investment or via joint ventures, Argentine wineries hired French, Italian, and

American consultants (notably Michel Rolland, Alberto Antonini, and Paul Hobbs,

respectively) to help them modernize. New French oak barrels and temperature-controlled

stainless-steel tanks (the indispensable tools of modern winemaking) were purchased.

Most significantly, vineyards were often completely overhauled, with the old parral

system of overhead canopies replaced by modern trellising and modern farming

techniques that minimized yields and maximized quality.

Importantly, Argentina quickly aimed higher than Chile, and sought to compete in

world markets not only with modestly priced, every-night wines, but also with fine,

ageworthy wines that could command $50 or more a bottle. Export figures told the story

best. In 1994, Argentina exported 389,000 gallons (14,700 hectoliters) of wine to one of

its lead customers, the United States. Four years later that figure was 3.3 million gallons

(124,900 hectoliters). And by 2010, Argentina way outpaced even Chile, with a record

export to the U.S. of nearly 40 million gallons worth just shy of $230 million.

THE QUICK SIP ON ARGENTINA

THE MODERN ARGENTINE wine industry came of age at the turn of the twenty-first

century. After centuries of producing copious amounts of cheap quaffing wine,

Argentine winemakers are increasingly focused on producing world-class wine.

MALBEC IS ARGENTINA’S signature grape. Nowhere else in the world does malbec

rise to such heights of quality and richness as it does in Argentina.

ARGENTINA’S MOST NOTABLE wine region is Mendoza, made up of vast, very high-

altitude, steplike plains below the peaks of the Andes.

At more than 1 million square miles (2.6 million square kilometers), Argentina is the

second-largest country in South America, after Brazil. From the hot jungles of the Tropic

of Capricorn in the north, the country extends southward to the icy habitat of penguins at

the tip of the continent, just a few hundred miles from Antarctica. Argentina’s western

border with Chile lies along the crest of the Andes. From these majestic peaks, the highest

in the Americas, the country slopes downward until it meets the Atlantic Ocean in the east.

Winemaking began here, as it did in Chile, in the latter part of the sixteenth century,

with Spanish missionaries and conquistadores who brought grape seeds and cuttings with

them from Spain. Some vines landed in Chile or Peru first and were later brought overland

to Argentina. And some vine varieties may have been born spontaneously—the result of

natural crossings of European varieties that occurred in Argentina itself. Initially, the most

significant of these grapes was criolla grande (“big Creole”), an Argentine-born, pink-

skinned member of the group of vines with criolla in the name, but a grape whose parents

are not known. It made (and makes) the most bland of bland rosé and white red wines.

But there was also another criolla—the so-called criolla chica (“Creole girl”)—which

came to Argentina directly from Spain. From DNA typing, we know that this was the

Spanish grape listán prieto—the same grape as Chile’s país and California’s mission. (For

the full story of the intersection between these grapes, see the criolla and listán prieto

entries in Getting to Know the Grapes, pages 81 and 86, respectively). In time, in

Argentina, listán prieto crossed naturally with muscat of Alexandria (which had also been

brought from Spain). One result was a pink-skinned grape called cereza (cherry), still

Argentina’s most widely planted grape but used only for the most basic supermarket rosés

and whites. Another spontaneous cross of these two parents resulted, however, in

something quite amazing: the white grapes torrontés Riojano and torrontés Sanjuanino.

(More on this in a moment.)

Although the early Spanish settlers planted vines on the Argentine coast as well as

inland, it soon became apparent that the high-altitude, sunny, bone-dry plains below the

Andean peaks were an ideal location. Employing a system of dams and canals begun

hundreds of years before by the Incas and local Huarpe Indians, the early missionaries

learned to use snowmelt from the mountains to irrigate what otherwise would have been a

virtual desert. With a constant supply of water, vineyards flourished.

In the 1820s, with the end of Spanish colonial rule, waves of European immigrants—

mostly from Italy, France, and Spain—came to Argentina, bringing vines with them. (The

first malbec in Argentina dates from this time.) They were followed in the 1890s by a

second wave of Italians, French, and Spaniards, many of whom were from wine-producing

regions and were escaping the phylloxera epidemic, which had ravaged the vineyards of

the Old World. (Today, Argentine winemakers often joke that roughly half of them are

Italian by descent, half are Spanish, but the wines they produce virtually all come from

—oh, no!—French varieties.) For all of these immigrants, wine was an integral part of

daily life. In Argentina, they found a place where wine could play a similar role.

One of the most important early events in the formation of the Argentine wine industry

happened in 1853, with the founding of the Quinta Nacional, the national vine nursery. Its

creator, the Frenchman Michel Aimé Pouget, established the nursery by bringing

numerous vine cuttings from France, including the reds malbec, cabernet sauvignon, pinot

noir, gamay, grenache, and petit verdot, as well as the whites sémillon, malvasia, and

muscat. Criolla grande and cereza now had serious competition.

Then, in 1885, the first railway linking Argentina’s premier wine region, Mendoza,

with its capital city, Buenos Aires, was finished, opening access to a huge new market of

wine drinkers. By 1900, Argentina had the beginnings of a massive wine industry.

There are now some 1,400 wineries in Argentina, according to the Instituto Nacional de

Vitivinicultura, including a few very large players who make wine (often sold not in

bottles, but in cartons like milk) primarily, if not exclusively, for the domestic market. But

the wineries we are most concerned with here are Argentina’s fine wine producers—a

growing number of well-capitalized, often family-owned or joint-venture companies

making some of the most spellbinding wines in South America. Among them: Alta Vista,

Achaval Ferrer, Bodega Noemia, Catena Zapata, Cheval des Andes (a joint venture

between Bordeaux’s famous Château Cheval Blanc and Terrazas de los Andes, a winery

owned primarily by Moët & Chandon), Clos de los Siete (a partnership that includes the

world’s most famous wine consultant, Michel Rolland), Viña Cobos (begun by famous

U.S. winemaker Paul Hobbs and partners), Dominio del Plata, Fabre Montmayou, Bodega

Piedra Negra, Nieto Senetiner, O. Fournier, Renacer, Salentein, Terrazas de los Andes,

Tritono, Trivento, and Vistalba, among others.

THE MOST IMPORTANT ARGENTINE WINES

LEADING WINES

CABERNET SAUVIGNON red

CHARDONNAY white

MALBEC red

TORRONTÉS white

WINE OF NOTE

BONARDA red

Almost unilaterally, their star grape is malbec, a variety that, in Bordeaux (where it is

also grown), ranks well below cabernet sauvignon and merlot in quality. In Argentina,

however, malbec can broach magic.

For an explanation of Argentine wine laws, see the Appendix on Wine Laws, page 929.

THE LAND, THE GRAPES, AND THE VINEYARDS

Argentina’s 545,000-plus acres (220,600 hectares) of vineyards are found in seven

important wine provinces in the west central part of the country, scattered across the

foothills of the Andes at elevations ranging up to 5,000 feet (1,500 meters) above sea

level, making these some of the highest-altitude wine areas in the world. (Chile’s major

wine regions are directly across the Andes; close to the Pacific coast, they are therefore

considerably lower in elevation.)

TANGO LESSONS

“If music be the food of love, play on,

” says Duke Orsino in Shakespeare’s Twelfth Night. If the music had

been tango and the duke had been drinking malbec, well, the romance part would have fallen quickly

(and deeply) in place.

Indeed, while wine tasting seems romantic the world over, it’s only in Argentina that you could find

yourself at a winery at midnight, sipping a soft, saturated red wine while watching a man and a woman,

entwined in each other, move, in raw desire, across a sweeping marble floor. (If nothing else, the

provocativeness of wine takes on a whole new meaning here.)

The national dance of Argentina, the tango, is thought to have originated in working-class slums in

Buenos Aires, as well as in Montevideo, Uruguay, in the late 1800s. While many styles of tango now

exist, the dance is characterized by a palpable sexiness and the close embrace of the partners, who

often seem joined at the hip, thighs, and chest. According to Ernesto Catena, one of the country’s leading

vintners, the tango is all about “desireability”

—not unlike Argentine wines themselves. Maybe more

winemakers around the world need tango lessons.

The provinces are often grouped, north to south, into three main areas:

THE NORTHWEST, generally the warmest region; includes the provinces Salta, Catamarca,

and La Rioja

CUYO, the largest region, in the middle; includes Mendoza and San Juan

PATAGONIA, the farthest south, coolest, and smallest region; includes Neuquén and Río

Negro

Of these, Mendoza, in the Cuyo region, is by far the largest and most important

province. We will examine it in more detail later in this section.

With the exception of Patagonia, Argentina’s wine regions all have a dry, desertlike

climate, with copious amounts of intense sunlight—some 320 days per year on average—

and rainfall that rarely exceeds 8 to 10 inches (20 to 25 centimeters) per year. Amazingly,

despite the strong sunlight, temperatures are generally mild thanks to the high elevation of

the vineyards. Indeed, during the long grape-growing cycle, vineyard temperatures are

surprisingly just 60°F to 75°F (16°C to 24°C).

Yes, there was a llama in this vineyard—a whole goofy flock of them, in fact. Llamas migrated to South America from the

plains of North America some three million years ago.

THE GRAPES OF ARGENTINA

WHITES

CHARDONNAY: A major grape, especially for exported wines. Wine styles range from simple to toasty

and oaky, in the manner of many California chardonnays.

TORRONTÉS: An Argentine specialty, although there are three distinct varieties with torrontés as part of

their names. The most famous and widespread is torrontés Riojana, which makes delightful, dry, spicy,

aromatic wines with a lightly unctuous texture. It is a centuries-old natural crossing of muscat of

Alexandria with the red grape listán prieto. More rare is torrontés Sanjuanino, also a natural cross of

muscat of Alexandria and listán prieto. And the final variety, torrontés Mendocino, is generally not as

aromatic or high in quality; only one of its parents (muscat of Alexandria) is known.

REDS

BARBERA, SANGIOVESE, AND TEMPRANILLO: Planted by early Italian and Spanish immigrants,

these varieties are used mainly in inexpensive blends that are sold in jugs and cartons, although

sometimes they are made into varietal wines.

BONARDA: Once Argentina’s main red grape, bonarda is now second to malbec. It makes tasty, bold

wines that can have some complexity with age. Despite its name, it is not related to the Italian bonarda

Piemontese. DNA analysis reveals that Argentine bonarda is the French grape douce noir, which

originated in the Savoie region of France. In California, douce noir (bonarda) is called charbono.

CABERNET SAUVIGNON: An important red mainly intended for the export market. Its wines can range

from simple to powerful and sleek.

CEREZA: The most widely planted variety, it is used for inexpensive wines sold in cartons on the

domestic market. Like two of the torrontés varieties, it is a cross of listán prieto and muscat of Alexandria,

but is not as successful. The word means “cherry” in Spanish.

CRIOLLA CHICA: The same grape as listán prieto, the original grape variety brought to Argentina from

Spain.

CRIOLLA GRANDE: A widely planted if undistinguished pinkish-skinned grape related to other criollas,

but its parents are not known. It is used to make coarse, bland white and rosé wines sold on the

Argentine domestic market in jugs or cardboard cartons, or in bulk.

MALBEC: Argentina’s most important and impressive red. The grape originated in southwestern France,

near the region of Cahors, where it is known by its proper name, côt. The first malbec vines were brought

to Argentina in the 1830s, and better selections arrived in the 1890s. In the top sites and in the hands of

the best winemakers, the grape makes wines of surprising grip, depth, concentration, and velvety

texture.

MERLOT : While less prestigious and less successful than cabernet sauvignon, mer-lot is still a source of

good-value wines mainly for the export market.

The Argentine asado is a barbecue built for carnivores. Every cut of beef imaginable is thrown on the grill along with

sausages, ribs, chivito (baby goat), and a few, ahem, surprises. This is malbec territory, big time.

Immense luminosity—but without immense heat—creates a unique environment for

photosynthesis and ripening. The top Argentine malbecs, for example, are often lush and

rich in flavor, yet never ponderous, fat, and alcoholic in the way wines from very warm

regions can be. As an aside, the bone-dry air means that Argentine vineyards are mostly

free of diseases, virtually eliminating the need to spray preventive chemicals.

Of course, the lack of rain means irrigation is essential. For new vineyards, that means

drip irrigation, which uses water sparingly. But some older vineyards are still irrigated by

the historic old canal system. Interestingly, vineyard properties do not automatically come

with water rights; even water from the narrow canals must be licensed and paid for by the

vintner.

SPEAKING OF MALBEC . . .

Although it is now famous in Argentina, malbec’s ancestral home is Cahors, a tiny, ancient wine region

in southwest France. Here, the wine is known as le vin noir,

“the black wine,

” not only because of its

dark color, but also because of its severe, tannic,

“dark” flavors. The word malbec is actually a nickname

for the grape’s true ampelographic name: côt. In the nineteenth century, malbec was a slang term for

someone who spoke badly of others (from the French mal, or “bad,

” and bec, or “mouth”). There must

have been a lot of malbecs in Cahors, for the word became a common surname—and an affectionate

term for the local grapes.

While no winemaker here worries about rain, there is one type of moisture that can be

frightening and ruinous: hail. The legendary hailstorms that can build off the Andes in

March and April (right during harvest) have, all too many times, wiped out entire

vineyards. (Local wisdom says there’s a one in ten chance every year of complete

devastation.) Just a few decades ago, Argentine vintners hired “witch doctors” to cast

spells to protect against the ice balls. Today, many vineyards are protected with expensive

hail netting. The netting (which does reduce the direct light of the sun on the grapes) must

be replaced every five or so years—a cost that most other vineyard owners around the

world don’t have to worry about.

A word about soils. While Argentina is a huge country, the wine districts are all in well-

drained areas of very low soil fertility—a good thing for grapevines, as lack of water and

low fertility lead to small yields. Many vineyards are visibly gravelly and rocky, thanks to

deposits from glaciers and rivers millennia ago. Many also contain significant amounts of

sand, clay, and limestone.

Like Chile, Argentina has never been the victim of phylloxera, the insect that

decimated many of the world’s vineyards in the mid- and late-nineteenth century and

showed up again in the 1980s and 1990s, destroying many vineyards in the western United

States. As a result, many Argentine wines are made from vines that still grow on their own

roots (not on pest-tolerant rootstocks, as has been typical throughout the world for a

century). It’s not that phylloxera doesn’t exist here—it does, in spots. But for reasons no

one seems to fully understand, the insects here do not have a fully functioning “fly cycle”

(phylloxera are airborne during part of their lives), causing difficulty in reproduction. In

addition, phylloxera have a hard time thriving in sandy, dry soils and in soils that can be

flooded via irrigation if need be. Still, most modern Argentine winemakers say they don’t

plan to press their entomological luck, and thus, new vineyards are almost always planted

on rootstock.

PERFECTING THE RED-WINE-WITH-MEAT RULE

In no other country in the world is beef as celebrated, or as much a part of daily life, as it is in Argentina.

Argentines eat beef in every form—breaded, fried, rolled, stuffed, chopped, and combined with raisins,

olives, and eggs in empanadas. But perhaps most irresistible of all is beef right off the parilla, or grill, as

part of the Argentine asado, a no-holds-barred barbecue for which ribs, chorizo (sausage), chivito (baby

goat), and vizchaca (why didn’t someone tell me this was chinchilla before I ate it?) are also obligatory.

But it’s the beef, above all, that counts. Beef is so much a part of Argentine cuisine that Argentines eat

more of it than almost any other people in the world. In 2010, consumption was an enthusiastic 124

pounds (56 kilograms) per person per year. (In the United States, itself no slouch in the beef department,

per capita consumption was approximately 60 pounds/27 kilograms in 2010.) Argentine beef is relatively

lean, with a pronounced flavor that Argentines say is the true beef flavor, attributable to the fact that the

cattle feed on grasses as they roam over enormous expanses of land, rather than being fattened in feed

lots and fed growth hormones. And what do the Argentines drink with their national culinary treasure?

Their national vinous treasure: malbec. (Wine, incidentally, was actually signed into law as Argentina’s

national beverage by President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner in 2010.)

The most famous grape in Argentina—and specifically in Mendoza—is malbec. While

widely associated with Bordeaux (it’s one of the permitted red varieties there), malbec is

native to the area around Cahors, slightly south of Bordeaux, in southwest France.

In Cahors, malbec is known by its original name, côt. But while the grape may be the

same, the wine has hugely different characteristics depending on where the grapes are

grown. Cahors’ côt, for example, is extremely hard, sleek, and tannic. Argentine malbec,

on the other hand, is usually remarkably soft, rich, and palate-coating. And in Bordeaux,

the grape makes a wine somewhere in the middle of those flavor bookends.

Not that there’s much malbec left in Bordeaux. The variety is prone to certain fungal

diseases, and thus, after the phylloxera epidemic of the late 1800s, very little was

replanted in Bordeaux, a wet climate at risk for fungal problems. Today, a typical

Bordeaux wine has less than 10 percent malbec, if it has any at all.

In arid Argentina, however, the grape variety thrived and continues to do so. Indeed,

Argentina may now have the deepest DNA pool of malbec and malbec clones in the world.

Malbec also does very well in California, where it is increasingly planted and used to

add richness and dark, cocoalike flavors to many top-notch California cabernet blends.

MENDOZA

Mendoza is the name of Argentina’s leading wine province, and the name of the

province’s capital city, founded in 1561. The province and city were named for Don

García Hurtado de Mendoza, a sixteenth-century Chilean governor (Mendoza was once a

Chilean colony and belonged to what was called the Captaincy of Chile).

Huddled in the high desert foothills of the Andes, the province covers more than 36

million acres (14.6 million hectares)—yes, million. Indeed, at more than 57,000 square

miles (147,600 square kilometers), Mendoza is about the size of New Y ork State. Not all

of this huge area is covered by vineyards, however. Given the prominence of wines from

Mendoza, it’s interesting to know that less than 5 percent of the surface area of the

province is planted with grapevines.

Nonetheless, Mendoza is more than just the leading wine region—it is the heartbeat of

the Argentine wine industry. Virtually all of the wineries of any importance are to be

found here, and a map of the province reads like a Who’s Who of wineries. Indeed, of the

approximately 1,400 wineries in Argentina, nearly 1,000 are in this one province, and a

majority of all Argentine wine, including the vast majority of all malbec, is grown here.

The region lies directly west of Buenos Aires, roughly 1,000 miles (1,600 kilometers)

inland from the Atlantic Ocean. The vineyards, at 4,000 feet (1,200 meters) and more

above sea level, are framed by the snowcapped Andes, and are the highest in the country.

The climate is, as I’ve noted, extremely dry. But it’s the light one never forgets. What the

Mendozans call “sunlight density” is nothing short of riveting.

Within Mendoza province, the most important subregions fall south of Mendoza city

along the Ruta 40 (Highway 40) corridor. These include the two well-known subregions

Luján de Cuyo and the Uco V alley, the latter made up of the three well-known wine

districts Tupungato, Tunuyán, and San Carlos.

SALTA

While nowhere close to Mendoza in terms of the volume of wine produced, the province

of Salta, in northernmost Argentina (a twoday drive north of Mendoza), is a place any

wine lover should know. The region itself was founded in the fifteenth century by Incas

moving out of Peru. It is warm and more moist this far north, with cold nights thanks to

altitudes of 5,600 feet (1,700 meters) and higher. And it is here that Argentina’s best

torrontés (specifically, the variety known as torrontés Riojana) is grown.

Torrontés Riojana is, of course, Argentina’s top white wine—a wine of dazzling

aromatics with a dry, snappy flavor, and a curious, unctuous feel. The top torrontés wines

tend to come from Salta’s wine capital, the town of Cafayate. Most of the torrontés here is

grown using the parral system of pergolas that lift the vines high overhead, keeping the

clusters cool, free of sunburn, and dry of evaporating dew.

Among my favorite torrontés wines are those made by Alta Vista, Terrazas de los

Andes, and Tomero.

URUGUAY

In the language of the indigenous people, the Guaraní, Uruguay means “river of birds” thanks to their

more than 450 species of birds. There are far fewer species of grapes, of course, but Uruguay is

nonetheless one of the most exciting emerging wine regions in the Americas. Grapevines were first

brought there in the 1870s by Basque immigrants, but a serious wine industry began only as of the

1980s and 1990s. T oday, the country has 22,000 acres (8,900 hectares) of vineyards and 270 wineries,

most of which are small and family-run and sometimes helped by one of several famous international

wine consultants, among them the American Paul Hobbs, the Italian Alberto Antonini, and the

Frenchman Michel Rolland.

Uruguay (which lies at the same latitude range as Argentina, South Africa, and Australia) has a gentle

maritime climate due to its location on the edge of the Atlantic Ocean. The country also boasts the purest

vineyard environment in the world, according to the Environmental Sustainability Index published by Yale

and Columbia Universities in the United States (Finland and Norway rank higher for total environmental

purity, but good luck trying to grow grapes in either country).

The signature grape of Uruguay is tannat, a tannic grape that originated in southwest France, although

today more tannat is grown in Uruguay than in the entire rest of the world. Aged in oak to soften it, tannat

(whose name refers to the dark color of the grapes) can be rich and mouthfilling, with black cherry,

chocolate, and espresso flavors. In Uruguay, it is considered the perfect accompaniment to the popular

local asados, wood-fired barbecues devoted to Uruguay’s high-quality beef. Other promising grape

varieties include merlot, cabernet sauvignon, chardonnay, sauvignon blanc, and the unusual French

white variety petit manseng, which was brought to Uruguay at the same time as tannat, and makes dry,

floral wines. Some of the best producers of Uruguayan wine include Stagnari, Bouza, Pizzorno, Pisano,

and Juanicó.

WHEN YOU VISIT… ARGENTINA

ASIDE FROM BEING the best-known wine region in Argentina, Mendoza is also the

most accessible and rewarding for wine-tasting experiences. You’ll need a car to travel

between destinations, but with so many new wineries and boutique hotels, you won’t

have to drive far. Many of the wineries, like Familia Zuccardi, have fantastic restaurants

that specialize in Argentine cuisine.

The Argentine Wines to Know

WHITES

TERRAZAS DE LOS ANDES

TORRONTÉS | SALTA

100% torrontés Riojana

Terrazas de los Andes is making some of Argentina’s most intriguing and complex wines, including this beautifully

vivid, fresh torrontés, with its cooling aromas and flavors of lime blossom, lychee, and tangerine. But what really

escalates the deliciousness here is an intriguing touch of citrusy bitterness (like grapefruit pith), which gives the

wine its exotic distinctiveness.

REDS

RENACER

MALBEC | GRAN RESERVA | MENDOZA

100% malbec

One look at the electric purple color of this wine and you can’t help thinking you’re in for something good. In point

of fact, you’re in for something great. Waves of exotic aromas and flavors—black figs, spices, minerals, cocoa—fill

your senses. At the same time, the texture of the wine knocks you out with its yin-yang of rockiness and lushness.

But the aspect I love most about Renacer’s Gran Reserva is its vividness and precision. It’s as if every molecule of

flavor is pulsing with intensity. Renacer makes Gran Reserva only in exceptional years, and the wine tastes like it.

CATENA ZAPATA

MALBEC | NICASIA | MENDOZA

100% malbec

I love many of the Catena Zapata wines, but Nicasia, named for the small area where the vineyard is located, is a

favorite. From a vineyard that gives less than 1 ton per acre, it’s a massively structured malbec, with its sappy

texture and explosive flavor. Y et for all of the wine’s ripe fruit and black licorice flavors, there’s also a beautiful

hum of acidity here. Indeed, it’s the wine’s impeccable balance between ripe fruit and acidity that gives always-

powerful Nicasia a sense of gracefulness.

TERRAZAS DE LOS ANDES

MALBEC | LAS COMPUERTAS | MENDOZA

100% malbec

Spellbinding precision and structure. That’s what Terrazas de los Andes’s top wine from the single vineyard Las

Compuertas possesses in great years. Indeed, this wine comes from vines that are more than eighty years old, and it

soars with a sense of majesty. The flavors are all about dark fruits, black licorice, charred meat, and spice, all

overlaid by a sprinkling of something deliciously dusty, like cocoa. The vineyard Las Compuertas (“the

floodgates”) is considered one of the top vineyards in Mendoza, and it’s the vineyard that inspired famous

winemaker Pierre Lurton, from Bordeaux’s Château Cheval Blanc, to begin making wine in Argentina.

CHEV AL DES ANDES

MENDOZA

Approximately 50% malbec, 45% cabernet sauvignon, 5% petit verdot

Cheval des Andes makes only one wine—an expensive wine, intended to be among the very greatest wines of the

world. And like great Bordeaux, the wine is named simply by its estate; no designation of grape variety is given on

the label. The wine is a blend that includes fruit from malbec vines planted on their own roots in 1929. Like

Château Cheval Blanc (the wine to which it is an homage), Cheval des Andes defines the intersection of grace and

power. Complex and sumptuous, it’s got the full complement of Mendozan malbec aromas and flavors: spices,

grilled meat, licorice, espresso, dark fruits, dried herbs… and a texture like ribbons of black velvet. But at the same

time, there’s a sustained minerally, rocky character here that’s mesmerizing.

NIETO SENETINER

MALBEC | CADUS | MENDOZA

100% malbec

With its fine precison and concentration, Cadus (the word means “amphora”) from Nieto Senetiner is a beauty.

Sleek and less syrupy than many top malbecs, it is a structured wine, with wonderful violet aromas and flavors

evocative of spices, cassis, cocoa, and blackberries. And its finish lingers and lingers. Nieto Senetiner is one of the

larger wineries in Argentina, and it makes an inexpensive, simple malbec that’s fine for quaffing. But Cadus is their

top of the line, and it’s the one you want.

TOMERO

MALBEC | GRAN RESERVA | MENDOZA

100% malbec

This small-production malbec is as dark and saturated as they come. With aromas and flavors evocative of

Christmas pudding or Fig Newtons, Tomero has an impression of sweetness thanks to the rich ripeness of the

grapes. Wonderful spice notes and a distinct minerality give the wine complexity. Tomero is owned by Carlos

Pulenta, one of the key figures in the Argentine wine industry and the scion of the family that built Argentina’s first

massive-production wine company—Peñaflor.

ACHA V AL FERRER

MALBEC | FINCA BELLA VISTA | MENDOZA

100% malbec

The soaring, savory aromas of this wine can cause you to imagine that you’re standing on the high Andean plain,

surrounded by chaparral. With intense and complex flavors of black figs, black licorice, peat moss, grilled meats,

minerals, and spices, Achaval Ferrer’s malbec is dramatic and lively. Less soft than many other malbecs, it is

monolithic in structure and intensity and delicious to drink with a thick grilled steak that’s crusty black on the

outside and pinkish red on the inside.

ALMA NEGRA

MISTERIO | MENDOZA

Grape varieties never revealed

Alma Negra is owned by Ernesto Catena, son of Nicolas Catena, the father of the modern Argentine wine industry.

Rather iconoclastic and highly spiritual, Ernesto Catena never reveals the grapes in the logically named Misterio

(mystery). No matter, the wine is sensational. Incredibly spicy with loads of black licorice and blackberry flavors,

it’s also minerally, indeed almost salty, on the palate. The commanding structure is impeccable, and the texture,

grippy and almost furry, is fascinating. All in all, this is a sensational wine. (After much journalistic pressing, Mr.

Catena hinted that the mystery in question might involve cabernet franc, cabernet sauvignon, malbec, bonarda, and

syrah.)

SOUTH AFRICA

SOUTH AFRICA RANKS EIGHTH AMONG WINE-PRODUCING COUNTRIES WORLDWIDE. SOUTH

AFRICANS DRINK AN AVERAGE OF 2 GALLONS (7.5 LITERS) OF WINE PER PERSON PER YEAR.

Of the more than fifty countries on the African continent, only eight are wine producers:

South Africa, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Zimbabwe, and Kenya. Most

make only minuscule amounts of bland wine. South Africa, by comparison, is both a

leading wine producer (eighth in the world by volume) and the source of the continent’s

finest wines.

Not quite twice as large as Texas, South Africa is bordered on the north by Namibia,

Botswana, and Zimbabwe, and on the east by Mozambique and Swaziland. The country

has about 323,000 acres (130,700 hectares) of planted vines, cared for by just over 3,500

grape growers who supply nearly six hundred wineries (known in South Africa as “wine

farms”). With about 1,800 miles (2,897 kilometers) of coastline, South Africa is one of the

only wine regions in the world sandwiched between two oceans—in South Africa’s case,

the Atlantic and the Indian.

The first South African wines were made more than three centuries ago by Dutch

colonists who vinified the wild grapes they found growing on the southwestern tip (known

as the Western Cape) of the African continent. The colonists, employees of the Dutch East

India Company, planned to establish the Western Cape as a restocking station for food and

provisions for ships, halfway between Europe and the spice-rich East Indies.

Although the presence of native grapes was encouraging to the colonists, the wine

made from them was not. The commander of the small settlement, Jan van Riebeeck,

immediately sent word back to Holland, imploring his employers to send European vine

cuttings on the next ship out. Within a decade, French vine cuttings—most probably

chenin blanc and muscat of Alexandria—were thriving in Western Cape soil.

The closely spaced vineyards were too narrow to be worked by animal-drawn plows

and too extensive to be worked by the colonists alone. The colony relied, regrettably, on

slaves—at first Malay, and then, in 1658, Dutch ships brought two hundred slaves from

Madagascar and Mozambique to the settlement. The very next year, on the first day of the

harvest, February 2, 1659, van Riebeeck recorded in his journal: “Today, God be praised,

wine was pressed for the first time from Cape grapes.

”

A baobab tree in the middle of the renowned vineyards of Groot Constantia, where the extraordinary dessert wine Vin de

Constance is made. Native to Africa and Madagascar , baobab trees are oddly shaped and long-lived (up to 2,000 years).

THE QUICK SIP ON SOUTH AFRICA

SOUTH AFRICA has a more than three-hundred-year-old history of grape growing.

THE BEST SOUTH AFRICAN wines come from an emerging group of small private

estates devoted to making artisanal, high-quality wine. That said, a large percentage of

South African wine is still utterly simple stuff made by large cooperatives.

MOST DRY WINES are based on five well-known grapes: sauvignon blanc,

chardonnay, cabernet sauvignon, merlot, and syrah. Along with these, the country is

known for an unusual red wine specialty: pinotage. Some stunning (and famous) sweet

wines are also made—often from muscat blanc à petits grains.

Despite the long history of Western Cape winemaking, South African wines were

virtually unknown in the United States and in many European countries before the 1990s,

as a result of trade sanctions imposed in response to the South African policy of racial

apartheid. When apartheid ended and the bans on South African goods were lifted (mostly

in 1991), the doors of commerce swung open. By mid-decade, Western Cape wines had

begun to turn up in wine shops in Europe, as well as in the United States.

South Africa has five major wine zones—referred to as geographical units. Of these,

only one is important for fine wine: the Western Cape, located in the most southwesterly

part of the country. Telescoping down further, within the Western Cape, one region is

more important than all others: the Coastal Region. All of South Africa’s top wine districts

are here. One of the smallest of these districts, Constantia, was already so well established

by the mid-1700s that a sweet, muscat-based wine named simply Constantia was

renowned throughout Europe and was reportedly a favorite of Napoléon.

THE DESSERT WINE OF KINGS, POETS, AND PARTYGOERS

During the nineteenth century, Constantia winery, nestled in a serene valley south of Cape T own, South

Africa, was known for its sweet wine; during the twentieth century, it was known for throwing one hell of a

party.

Founded in 1685 by then governor of the Cape Simon van der Stel, Constantia was one of South

Africa’s first “wine farms” (the local term for winery). Constantia produced Vin de Constance, a luscious

dessert wine made from muscat blanc à petits grains grapes. The wine rose to become one of the most

sought-after dessert wines in all of Europe, ordered by the case by Napoléon Bonaparte and never

absent from the table of King Frederick the Great of Germany.

In addition to being a royal preference, Vin de Constance was immortalized by some of the most well-

respected authors and poets of their day. Jane Austen reflects on the wine’s “healing powers on a

disappointed heart” in Sense and Sensibility, while Charles Dickens enshrines it as the cure-all in The

Mystery of Edwin Drood. The wine even made its way into Baudelaire’s poetry: “Even more than

Constantia, than opium, than Nuits, I prefer the elixir of your mouth, where love performs its slow dance.

”

Now, who could argue with that?

With the death of van der Stel in 1712, Constantia was broken up into three entities—two wineries:

Groot Constantia (Big Constantia) and Klein Constantia (Little Constantia); and a farm called Bergvliet

(Mountain Stream).

During the Roaring Twenties, Klein Constantia hosted the most extravagant parties on the African

continent. After American heiress Clara Hussey de Villiers purchased and restored the Klein Constantia

manor house in 1913, guests strolled the lawns alongside peacocks, while enjoying live orchestras and

feasting on oysters and Russian caviar laid on barrels of ice arranged around the gardens. Jay Gatsby

would have been proud.

T oday, both Groot Constantia and Klein Constantia continue to operate, and each continues to

produce the fabled Vin de Constance. And while the courtly glamour of Constantia’s past may have

waned slightly, the wine remains extraordinary. Klein Constantia, in particular, makes a Vin de Constance

that is one of the greatest and most spiritual wine experiences to be had.

If there is one factor that, more than any other, shaped the current state of South

African wine, it was the establishment of extremely powerful cooperatives at the turn of

the twentieth century. The cooperative movement began after the combined devastation of

the Anglo-Boer War and phylloxera, a root-killing insect (see page 30), left the country’s

vineyards in near ruins. In the aftermath of these destructive forces, South African

vineyards were replanted with a vengeance. Overproduction ensued, and grape prices hit

rock bottom. In 1905, the South African government appointed a commission to examine

the widespread financial depression in the wine industry. The result was the formation of

the first South African co-op, funded with huge government grants. The stage was set.

IS THE TABLECLOTH ON?

South Africa’s Coastal Region includes one of the most impressive sights to be found in wine country

anywhere—the 3,563-foot-high (1,086-meter), flat-topped, granite-based mountain known as T able

Mountain. Singular and dramatic, with a plateau more than 2 miles (3.2 kilometers) long, T able Mountain

forms an amphitheater around the charming, bustling seaside city of Cape T own. The mountain was

formed approximately 250 million years ago as a result of massive geologic eruptions that resulted in

plutons, domelike protrusions of hot lava that rose from deep within the earth to penetrate its crust. After

cooling, the plutons of the Western Cape eroded into unusual, flat-topped mountains like T able Mountain.

Fascinatingly, the top of T able Mountain is often covered by clouds, forming what the locals call the

“tablecloth.

”

Almost a dozen co-ops sprung up over the next several years, but many of these were

unsuccessful. Grape prices plummeted again after World War I. In desperation, 10 million

vines were uprooted, and grape growers planted alfalfa fields to feed ostriches—ostrich

feathers being highly fashionable in Europe during the (roaring) 1920s. But when the

feather fad faded and growers went back to planting grapes, overproduction loomed yet

again.

THE MOST IMPORTANT SOUTH AFRICAN WINES

LEADING WINES

CABERNET SAUVIGNON red

CHARDONNAY white

CHENIN BLANC white (dry and sweet)

SAUVIGNON BLANC white

SYRAH/SHIRAZ red

WINES OF NOTE

PINOTAGE red

SPARKLING WINES white

In 1918, one of the most massive, mighty cooperatives in the world was formed—the

KWV , or Koöperatieve Wijnbouwers V ereniging van Zuid Afrika (the Cooperative Wine

Growers’ Association of South Africa). Over the next few decades the KWV became

omnipotent. No wine could be made, sold, bought in South Africa, or exported from it,

except through the KWV . After the end of apartheid in 1991, wine surpluses disappeared

and wine sales and exports increased. The KWV was mostly dismantled, and today the

much-reduced company is focused largely on producing inexpensive brandy. Most

importantly, the grape growers and small wineries who had relied on the KWV to buy

their excess grapes and distill them have now turned their focus toward lowering yields

and making better, higher-quality wine instead.

With the end of the KWV era, South Africa began moving toward the production of

quality wines. At first, the pace of change was modest. For example, even as late as 1990,

70 percent of all South African grapes were still being distilled into cheap brandy, sold as

table grapes, or even simply discarded. Only 30 percent were used to make wine intended

for consumers. Today, that picture is entirely reversed, with nearly 80 percent of all grapes

being made into wine.

A monkey sits contentedly among the vines.

Still, South Africa is a wine region caught in a protracted struggle to modernize. On the

one hand, the country is blessed with an abundance of geological and climatic factors that

bode well for fantastic wine. On the other, South Africa remains economically strained

and technologically challenged. Too many wine companies, large and small, are still

working with poor-quality, outdated equipment, and are short on modern wine-making

expertise. Harvesting in South Africa is often inefficient, and the industry is fraught with

labor problems as well as occasional labor abuses.

For example, South Africa still suffers from the vestiges of the so-called tot system,

whereby workers were paid in distilled alcohol in lieu of wages. Although the system was

officially declared illegal in 1962, the practice persisted for years, furthering the rampant

alcoholism and misery that have existed for generations among the poorest laborers,

virtually all of whom are black. In addition, in 2011, Human Rights Watch reported that

some laborers in the Western Cape’s wine and fruit industries were subject to appalling

conditions. In response, the top wineries with ethical labor practices have formed an

organization called the Wine and Agriculture Industry Ethical Trade Association (WIETA)

and have created much-needed fair labor standards.

THE CAPE OF GOOD HOPE

On a momentous day in 1488, the Portuguese navigator Bartolomeu Dias became the first European to

sail through tempestuous seas past the rocky headland of the Cape Peninsula. He named the area Cabo

T ormentoso, the Cape of Storms. Later, Portugal’s king, fearing that mariners would refuse to sail around

the Cape to the Far East to trade, renamed it Cabo de Boa Esperança, the Cape of Good Hope. Dias’s

achievement was stunning, for traveling south down the coastline of Africa, the Cape of Good Hope

marked the point where a ship began to travel more eastward than southward, and thus on a direct

course for Asia. Despite its importance, the Cape of Good Hope is not the southern tip of Africa. The

southernmost point is Cape Agulhas, about 90 miles (145 kilometers) to the east-southeast.

At this writing, South Africa still produces large quantities of undistinguished, cheap

wine. Most wine is still made by co-ops. But there is also a growing cadre of ambitious

small estates who are making remarkable wines, and in some cases pioneering entirely

new, cool coastal areas. Increasingly, there’s also much-needed foreign investment—not

only of capital, but also of expertise. While we’ve perhaps had only a small “taste” of it so

far, the South African wine revolution is clearly in full swing.

THE GRAPES OF SOUTH AFRICA

WHITES

CAPE RIESLING: A minor grape when it comes to the production of fine dry wines, but it can make

some delicious, old-style sweet wines. It is not related to riesling, despite its name, but is the same as the

French grape crouchen blanc.

CHARDONNAY: An important and very popular grape that is made into good every-night wines as well

as stunningly complex, creamy wines.

CHENIN BLANC: A major grape, although production is in decline. Historically it was often called steen.

Small producers working with old vineyards are making stellar dry and sweet wines, although a lot of

very neutral-tasting chenin blanc is also made by co-ops.

MUSCAT OF ALEXANDRIA: One of the many grapes with the word muscat in the name, it is used,

along with other muscat varieties, for sweet fortified wines, some of which can be very appealing.

MUSCAT DE FRONTIGNAN: The South African name for the grape muscat blanc à petits grains, the

leading muscat variety. It is used in the extremely famous dessert wine Vin de Constance.

SAUVIGNON BLANC: A very important major grape used to make delicious, smoky, grassy, minerally,

snappy dry wines with high acidity and lots of personality.

REDS

CABERNET FRANC: A minor blending grape, generally used with cabernet sauvignon.

CABERNET SAUVIGNON: A prestigious red grape planted in the best regions and often made into

Bordeaux-style blends.

CINSAUT : A southern French variety; in South Africa it’s often called hermitage. It is the source of light

reds and is often used in blending.

MERLOT : Gaining in popularity, although it is not yet as successful as cabernet sauvignon. Merlot is

made as a varietal wine and is used for blending.

PINOTAGE: A South African cross, in 1925, of cinsaut and pinot noir. It makes rustic reds that are rarely

complex.

PINOT NOIR: A minor grape; historically not very successful in South Africa, but its quality is improving.

It is used primarily for sparkling wines.

SYRAH/SHIRAZ: The grape goes by both names in South Africa, and shows considerable promise here.

It is the source of popular, big-fruit wines with lots of smoky chocolate flavors. It is used for varietal wines

as well as for blending.

For an explanation of South African wine laws, see the Appendix on Wine Laws, page

929.

Men punch down the cap of grape skins by hand at Kanonkop winery in the Stellenbosch district of the Western Cape.

THE LAND, THE GRAPES, AND THE VINEYARDS

As noted earlier, grape growing and wine making in South Africa are spread out over five

huge areas known as geographical units, but most of these areas have the barest minimum

of a wine industry. For all practical purposes, the single area that matters most (and the

one to know) is the Western Cape—an area concentrated in the southwestern part of the

country, bordered on the west by the Atlantic Ocean and on the south by the Indian Ocean.

The geology of the Western Cape is ancient and remarkable. Massive geologic

upheavals over millions of years resulted in majestic mountain ranges on the southern tip

of the Cape. The enormous pressures exerted during these upheavals caused folding and

uplifting, creating high peaks and deep valleys. On these slopes and in these valleys, South

African viticulture takes place today. About 250 million years ago, an intensive period of

folding and uplifting occurred, followed by massive erosion that “flat-topped” the

mountains. The results were dramatic sandstone mountains like Table Mountain (3,563

feet/1,086 meters high) and Simonsberg (4,590 feet/1,399 meters high).

NELSON MANDELA

Elected in 1994, Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela was South Africa’s first black president and the first to be

elected with voter participation from all races. Mandela’s release from Victor Verster Prison in Paarl in

1990, after more than twenty-seven years in confinement, signaled a new era in South African politics

and paved the way for the lifting of trade sanctions and the importation of South African wine into the

United States. Nelson Mandela’s connection to wine grew even more substantial in 2010, when his

daughter Makaziwe and granddaughter Tukwini launched the House of Mandela wine brand, which

includes a chardonnay, cabernet sauvignon, shiraz, and a sparkling wine. For the Mandela family, who

are part of the royal abaThembu lineage and the Madiba clan, honoring the ancient wisdom of one’s

ancestors and honoring the earth gives meaning and purpose to life. Upon the release of their wines, the

family wrote,

“We have chosen wine as a bridge into the future.

”

The Western Cape is divided into five areas: Breede River V alley, Klein Karoo, Coastal

Region, Olifants River, and Cape South Coast. As mentioned earlier, the most established

of these (and the area from which the best wines to date have come) is the Coastal Region.

Spreading out like a fan from the charming city of Cape Town, the Coastal Region

includes the fine wine districts of Constantia, Franschhoek V alley, Paarl, and Stellenbosch.

Here the climate is largely Mediterranean, with a beautiful growing season free of frost

and rain. What occasionally could be scorching heat is kept at bay by the comingling of

cooling maritime breezes off the Atlantic and Indian Oceans. The best vineyard sites in

these districts are often on slopes, sheltered from the late afternoon sun.

RICH BEYOND GRAPES

South Africa has the largest known reserves of gold in the world, and is the foremost supplier

(accounting for about 35 percent of total world production). Johannesburg, in fact, began as a gold-

mining camp in the 1800s. Indeed, in 1961, South Africa’s modern currency was named the rand after a

gold-mining region—Witwatersrand (“ridge of white waters” in Afrikaans). The ridge is a north-facing

scarp 35 miles (56 kilometers) long, over 2 miles (3 kilometers) deep, and traversed by several north-

flowing rivers that form impressive waterfalls. Forty percent of all the gold ever mined from the earth has

been mined from this one place.

In 1867, the country’s diamond industry began with a young boy who found a transparent “pebble” on his

father’s farm. The pebble turned out to be a 21-carat diamond, and so began South Africa’s diamond rush. South

Africa also has the largest known reserves of chromium, platinum, vanadium, manganese, andalusite, and fluorspar,

as well as substantial deposits of many other minerals, such as coal, uranium, iron ore, antimony, asbestos, nickel,

and phosphates.

As seems logical, given so much geologic activity in this part of South Africa, soils

vary considerably in the top wine districts. Some of the most prominent types include

gravel, granite, clay, sand, schist, shale, and hutton, a deep, rich red soil also known as

Cape sandstone.

Historically, more white grapes than red were grown in South Africa—a reflection of

the past importance of South African “sherry” and brandy. Indeed, brandy was so

important in the past that even as of 1993, more than 80 percent of all grapes planted were

white, and most of those were destined for distillation. By 2011, the percentage of white

grapes was down to 55 percent. Chenin blanc (the leading grape that had been grown at

high yields for brandy) accounted for much of what was lost.

Although official viticultural statistics track the acreage of more than ninety grape

varieties in South Africa, the vast majority of the vineyards are planted with just seven

varieties: chenin blanc, chardonnay, sauvignon blanc, cabernet sauvignon, merlot, shiraz,

and pinotage. The most planted of these seven is still chenin blanc (although, as noted, its

acreage is in decline). Lots of South African chenin blanc is pleasant and simple at best.

But treasure troves of old chenin blanc vineyards can still be found, and the grapes from

these vineyards are often turned into amazingly delicious wines—both dry and sweet.

Then there are sauvignon blanc and chardonnay, which are key grapes for top

producers. South African sauvignons are some of the most distinctive and bold in the

world. Wildly tangy, citrusy, minerally, and smoky, they have a gunflint character that’s

extremely appealing, as the terrific sauvignon blancs from Neil Ellis, Fairview, Saxenburg,

and others demonstrate. South African chardonnay, when at its best, is creamy,

sophisticated, and rich, without the overwrought buttery or oaky flavors that can often mar

New World chardonnays. Hamilton Russell is a perfect example.

The leading red grape is cabernet sauvignon, followed by syrah and merlot. At a basic

level, South African cabernets, syrahs, and merlots are unfussy, straightforward wines,

often with a smoky character balanced by cherry, plum, and coffee flavors. Higher-priced,

higher-quality South African reds are a different story. Wines like Anwilka (a syrah-

cabernet blend), Saxenburg’s Private Collection Shiraz, or Mullineux’s Syrah are

sophisticated, classy, and could easily be mistaken for high-quality French wines.

THE NEDERBURG AUCTION

Held each September in Paarl, the Nederburg Auction of rare Cape wines is one of the leading wine

auctions in the world, along with Burgundy’s Hospices de Beaune, Germany’s Kloster Eberbach, and

Napa V alley’s Auction Napa V alley. The first Nederburg Auction, which was held in 1975, was intended

both as a showcase for South African wine and as an incentive for vintners to produce higher-quality

wine. Today, the Nederburg Auction is actually two separate auction events—one for the public, and the

other a commercial auction, which can only be attended by wine producers. Three community-based

charities are the beneficiaries.

And then there’s pinotage. Produced almost nowhere else in the world, pinotage was

created in 1925 when Cape cinsaut was genetically crossed with pinot noir in a South

African laboratory. The grape was first bottled by the Stellenbosch Farmers’ Winery in

1959. Today, pinotage has a sort of second-class status in South Africa, and many

examples, made without a lot of care or attention to cleanliness, taste lackluster at best

(and are packed with brettanomyces—see page 112).

While it may seem surprising, South Africa produces a small quantity of tasty sparkling

wines made by the traditional (Champagne) method. South Africa’s official name for these

traditional-method sparklers is Cap Classique. They are usually made from chardonnay,

pinot noir, and pinot meunier, although sometimes from a blend that includes sauvignon

blanc and chenin blanc.

THE FOODS OF SOUTH AFRICA

Once, as a young child, I saw a vivid photo in National Geographic of a South African

ostrich egg. It was frighteningly large. Around it were even more frightening-looking

tribesmen. On my first trip to South Africa’s wine regions, I wondered if I’d be eating

anything other than ostrich omelets. In fact, Cape cooking goes far beyond egg dishes. The

culinary bold strokes are a curious blend of Dutch, English, and Malay cookery, Malays

having been brought to the earliest Cape settlements as slaves.

Well-loved dishes include bredie, a humble Malay stew often made with lamb neck

bones and waterblommetjie, water lilies. These are a popular South African vegetable and

taste like a cross between artichokes and green beans. They grow wild on the surface of

roadside ponds. Somewhat more exciting than bredie is bobotie, best described as Malay

shepherd’s pie. In the tastiest boboties, chopped meat is spiked with cinnamon, curry, and

raisins, and it is frequently served with a chutney of dried peaches and apricots.

South Africa is, not surprisingly, a land of extraordinary game. All sorts of deer and

antelope are roasted and made into pies. During the famous South African braai (rhymes

with cry), a traditional, outdoor Sunday barbecue, an amazing number of meats are grilled

—guinea fowl, several types of antelope and deer, plus pork, Karoo lamb, beef, and

ostrich, which tastes remarkably like sirloin steak but is leaner and lower in fat than

chicken. (The Cape alone has almost three hundred ostrich farms.) In the wine regions, the

meats are grilled over a fire fueled with branches pruned from grapevines. A braai may

also include potjiekos (pot food), layers of vegetables, onions, and beef, cooked all

afternoon in a pot over the fire; and potbrood, bread baked in a cast-iron pot over the fire.

In restaurants, the bread that is virtually always served is a sprouted wheat bread that

harkens back to the Cape’s Dutch heritage. Any number of dishes will be accompanied by

chips (potato chips) or slap chips (French fries).

Poised as it is between two oceans, South Africa is famed for its seafood, including

what outsiders call South African lobster tails and the South Africans call crayfish. Both

are incorrect. The creature in question is actually a type of spiny lobster with a wide tail

but no claws. Then there are perlemoen (abalone), mussels, calamari, clams, oysters, and

several kinds of deep-sea fish, such as snoek (pronounced snook), a large fish related to

the barracuda family. Smoked snoek pâté shows up everywhere.

South African desserts are humble—even now in keeping with the customs of the

earliest settlers, for whom things like cream, chocolate, and fresh fruit were rarities. The

two homiest desserts are koeksusters (a dish that definitely requires careful pronunciation)

—deep-fried dough, recooked in sugar syrup—and milk tarts, essentially rich pastry tarts

filled with cinnamon-spiked milk custard.

On South Africa’ s beloved public holiday—National Braai Day (September 24)—just about every meat you can think of

gets thrown on the grill.

WHEN YOU VISIT… SOUTH AFRICA

MOST OF THE TOP MOST OF THE TOP wine estates in South Africa are located in

the Coastal Region, an easy drive from Cape T own. Many of them have beautifully

restored buildings in the whitewashed Cape Dutch style, tasting rooms, and exciting

restaurants. In fact, some of the best restaurants in the Coastal Region are part of

wineries, and the Franschhoek Valley is often called the culinary capital of the Cape.

IF YOU HAVE TIME to visit just one winery, consider making it Groot Constantia. Groot

(the word means large) Constantia, with its classic Cape Dutch architecture, embodies

South Africa of the past, while its sister winery next door, Klein (which means little)

Constantia is a good example of the modern wine-making now taking place in South

Africa.

The South African Wines to Know

WHITES

FAIRVIEW

SAUVIGNON BLANC | DARLING

100% sauvignon blanc

The vivid, briny, oceanic aroma of Fairview’s remarkably inexpensive sauvignon blanc reminds me of cracking

open a fresh, minerally oyster. But then waves of other cooling aromas and flavors follow—limes, snowpeas,

grapefruits, guava, hedgerows, and that distinctive gunflint character that so many South African sauvignons

possess. Fairview is owned by the Back family, originally immigrants from Lithuania who arrived in South Africa

in 1902.

NEIL ELLIS

SAUVIGNON BLANC | GROENEKLOOF

100% sauvignon blanc

Decades ago, some of the original Neil Ellis sauvignon blancs were bullet trains of outrageous, smoky green

flavors. But the winery has matured and its style has evolved. Now these sauvignons are among the most lovely and

sophisticated in South Africa. They open with fresh mineral flavors and then take on a crisp, salty, tangy character

(rather like good Sancerre), and finally finish with an ever-so-gentle creaminess. The vines that produce the grapes

for this wine are planted in decomposed red granite as “bush vines” (without trellising).

HAMILTON RUSSELL VINEYARDS

CHARDONNAY | HEMEL-EN-AARDE VALLEY

100% chardonnay

A wonderful example of a full-bodied, New World–style chardonnay, with custard and crème brûlée-like flavors

and a toasty, nutty edge. And while the wine is palate-coating and long, a background of crisp citrus and fresh pear

notes keeps the creaminess in check. One of the most southerly wine estates in Africa, and one of the closest to the

sea, Hamilton Russell is located in the cool, maritime Hemel-en-Aarde V alley, just behind the old fishing village of

Hermanus, southeast of Cape Town.

DEMORGENZON

CHENIN BLANC | WESTERN CAPE

100% chenin blanc

In a sea of commercial chenin blancs, this one from DeMorgenzon is an artisanal beauty. The rich, caramel-apple

flavors are laced with notes of whipped cream, roasted nuts, spices, and sea salt. A beautiful crispness underlies the

wine, lifting it up and giving it incredible vibrancy. And don’t miss the lush DeMorgenzon chardonnay, another of

the winery’s several exemplary wines. Owners Wendy and Hylton Appelbaum pipe Baroque music through their

vineyards twenty-four hours a day, believing that the music exerts a powerful positive influence on the ripening

process. The winery is named after DeMorgenzon, a small, high-altitude area (now the location of one of its

vineyards) that is the first place within the Stellenbosch V alley to see the sun each day. DeMorgenzon means “the

morning sun” in Afrikaans.

REDS

MULLINEUX

SYRAH | SWARTLAND

100% syrah

Mullineux’s fantastic syrah could easily appear in a blind tasting of Rhône V alley syrahs and never be caught out.

Wildly gamy, smoky, and peppery, it’s packed with the vivid charcuterie flavors that many syrah lovers go mad for.

But that’s just for openers. Next, loads of briary chaparral flavors appear, plus notes of resiny sage, dried lavender,

and black licorice. Y et for all this unleashed, untamed wildness, the wine also has a rich core of soft blackberry

fruit. Like most great syrahs, this one loves to unwind in the presence of oxygen, so it will be even more charming

if poured from a decanter. Husband and wife Chris and Andrea Mullineux (their surname is an adaptation of

Moulineaux, French for “water mill”) are both winemakers.

ANWILKA

STELLENBOSCH

48% shiraz, 42% cabernet sauvignon, 10% merlot

Quite possibly the single best red of South Africa, Anwilka has a majestic structure and is a distinctive synthesis of

two great grapes (with a little merlot thrown in to knit the flavors together). From the cabernet, the wine gets its

rich, red currant, green tobacco, and black plum aromas and flavors. From the syrah come sweet, meaty flavors,

like skirt steak sitting in a pool of meat juices. Begun in the late 1990s, the winery had an impeccably talented team

of owners: Lowell Jooste (the former co-owner of Klein Constantia), Hubert de Boüard (co-owner of Bordeaux’s

Château Angélus, in Saint-Emilion), and Bruno Prats (former owner of Bordeaux’s Château Cos d’Estournel, in

Saint-Estèphe). All three men remain involved with the project, although Anwilka has since merged with Klein

Constantia and has new owners: Czech-born Zdeněk Bakala, a United States investment banker, and Charles

Harman, a British investment banker.

SWEET WINES

MULLINEUX

STRAW WINE | SWARTLAND

100% chenin blanc

The chenin blanc grapes for this artisanal wine come from thirty-plus-year-old vines growing in stony schist and

shale soils on Riebeek Kastel Mountain, and forty-plus-year-old vines growing in decomposed granite soils on

Paardeberg Mountain. The young husband-and-wife winemaking team of Chris and Andrea Mullineux place the

harvested grapes on racks outdoors and allow them to dry and partially shrivel in the South African sun for three

weeks. The result is an exquisite straw wine that is a poem to apricots—not to mention to orange marmalade,

quince, and papaya. The wine’s dizzying vividness keeps it remarkably light and fresh on the palate, setting it apart

from many sweet wines.

KLEIN CONSTANTIA

VIN DE CONSTANCE | CONSTANTIA

100% muscat de Frontignan

Klein Constantia (Little Constantia) is part of the famous Constantia wine estate founded in 1685. Constantia has

historically been known for Vin de Constance, a luscious dessert wine made from muscat blanc à petits grains

grapes (known as muscat de Frontignan in South Africa). The wine rose to become one of the most sought-after

dessert wines in all of Europe, ordered by the case by Napoléon Bonaparte. And the wine remains extraordinary

today. To begin, the color is unreal. Filaments of orange and amber light glint off the surface of the wine like tiny

bolts of lightning. The ethereal apricot sweetness and citrus-skin bitterness detonate on the palate, then seem to

float up in clouds of lingering richness. Y et for all its opulence, Klein Constantia is impossibly light and fresh. It is

wine as a halo.

The shaded areas of this map indicate entire areas where wine is made. The actual vineyard areas are smaller and

scattered throughout them.

ASIA

CHINA | JAPAN | INDIA

Asia’s modern wine industries have sprung on the scene so quickly and, in some cases, are

evolving so fast that they almost defy a book author’s ability to write about them. Y et wine

is produced in China, Japan, and India, as well as in rather astonishing places such as

Thailand, Vietnam, Iran, Taiwan, Myanmar, Cambodia, Korea, and even Kazakhstan,

Kyrgyzstan, and several of the other “stans.

” In the pages that follow, I have done my best

to explore Asia’s three main wine-producing countries, for these are places—China

especially—that knowledgeable wine drinkers will increasingly want to know about. No

entity has stated the case more succinctly than the prestigious London-based wine firm

Berry Brothers & Rudd, which predicts that within fifty years, the quality of Chinese wine

will rival that of Bordeaux.

Female construction workers carry rocks on their backs in Yunnan Province, one of China’ s newer wine regions.

The shaded areas of this map indicate entire provinces where wine is made. The actual vineyard areas are smaller and

scattered throughout the province.

CHINA

A decade ago, most wine drinkers in the Western world rarely would have come across the

words China and wine in the same sentence. Times have changed. As of 2012, China was

already, in volume, the fifth leading wine-consuming nation, according to the OIV

(L’Organisation Internationale de la Vigne et du Vin), the intergovernmental organization

that tracks global wine statistics. That, perhaps, was not entirely surprising; China, with

fully 19 percent of the world’s population, is the most populous country on earth. But the

fact that, by 2012, China was also fifth in world wine production—now, that was

something almost no Westerner saw coming.

For all of its newness on the modern wine scene, China has had a long history of wine-

making. Numerous archaeological findings have revealed evidence of an ancient wine

culture here, and in the mid-1990s, a joint American-Chinese archaeological team

uncovered yet more evidence—this time, dating wine production in Shandong Province

back to 2500 B.C. At two sites near the city of Rizhao, more than two hundred clay vessels

contained the residue of wines made from grapes, as well as from rice and from honey

(mead).

But by the end of the Bronze Age in China (around 700 B.C.) grape-based wines

(known as pútáojiˇ

u) had been almost completely overshadowed by a range of alcoholic

beverages made from grains like millet and sorghum and from fruits like lychees and

Asian plums, and these beverages remained cultural mainstays until modern times. Even

as of the 1970s, China was a devoted beer- and spirits-drinking society. The World Health

Organization estimated that beer and spirits made up 99 percent of alcohol consumed in

China in 1970. Today, along with beer, the two most popular alcoholic drinks are baijiu

and huangjiu. The first, distilled principally from sorghum, is the world’s most consumed

spirit, and, at 40 to 60 percent alcohol by volume, packs a powerful punch. The second,

popularly known as “yellow wine,

” is usually fermented from rice and millet.

How, then, to account for the current explosion of the modern Chinese grape-wine

industry? Here is an extremely brief sketch of China’s history, to put that wine revolution

in context.

The Chinese Empire was established around 221 B.C., when the Qin Dynasty first

conquered several states and peoples, uniting them into a single entity. Numerous

dynasties followed, over the next two thousand plus years, until 1911, when the Republic

of China overthrew the last dynasty, the Qing Dynasty (also known as the Manchu

Dynasty), which had ruled since 1644. The Republic of China went on to govern the

mainland until 1949. After the defeat of the Empire of Japan in World War II, the Republic

of China devolved into fractious internal fighting between its two main parties—the

Communist Party and the Kuomintang nationalist party. The Communist Party prevailed,

forming the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in Beijing on October 1, 1949 (the

Kuomintang relocated the Republic of China government to Taiwan). In 1978, the PRC

initiated a series of major economic reforms, as a result of which China has become one of

the world’s fastest-growing major economies.

In the 2000s, China’s rapid modernization shifted into warp speed. Living standards

among the country’s 1.35 billion people soared, and the percentage of wealthy Chinese

skyrocketed. (Of the ten countries with the most millionaires, China is third—after the

U.S. and Japan—and Taiwan ranks seventh; Hong Kong, tenth.) With their burgeoning

wealth, Chinese consumers grew increasingly fascinated by Western culture, Western

lifestyle, and Western luxury goods. The stage was set for fine wine.

Since 2008, China’s almost over-the-top passion for wine has been head-spinning.

THE NAME CHINA

The word China Cīna B.C.

is derived from the Persian word Chin , which is the Sanskrit word

. It was first recorded in 1516, in the journal of the Portuguese explorer Duarte Barbosa,

and later translated into English by Richard Eden, in 1555. It is commonly thought that the word is

derived from the name of the Qin Dynasty, the first imperial dynasty of China, lasting from 221 to 206

WINE CONSUMPTION doubled in five years between 2008 and 2013.

IN 2011, A CHINESE BUYER paid a record $541,000 for twenty-five cases of Château Lafite

Rothschild at a Christie’s auction.

CHINA IS ON TARGET to be the world’s largest consumer of wine by volume as of 2016.

ACKER MERRALL & CONDIT, the world’s largest auction house for wine, set 483 new world

records in Hong Kong for the prices paid for wines sold at auction in 2013. The majority

of these new records were related to the sale of Burgundy wines, as Hong Kong has, since

2011, become the most important auction market worldwide for both Bordeaux and

Burgundy.

As for its own domestic production, the statistics are equally stunning. From 2000 to

2012, wine production in China nearly doubled, to 393 million gallons (14.9 million

hectoliters). That made China, as noted, fifth in the world in wine production. Importantly,

these statistics come from the authoritative OIV , which counts only grape wine

production. (Independent Chinese statistics are next to impossible to come by, and those

that are available don’t appear to distinguish between wine made from grapes and wine

made from rice or from other fruits like plums.) But even the OIV numbers must be taken

with a grain of salt, for there’s another problem, too—and it exists everywhere in Asia.

The wine that producers bottle (and thus the wine that is counted as “production”) doesn’t

come from Chinese grapes exclusively. China, like all Asian wine-producing countries,

buys a considerable amount of bulk wine and grape concentrate from its Pacific Rim

neighbors, Australia, South America, and North America, not to mention from parts of

Europe as well. As a result, Chinese wine production—while certainly enormous—is not

entirely related to Chinese-grown grapes.

LOST IN TRANSLATION—THE CASSIS CONUNDRUM

In the late 1990s, my wine classes in California often included a handful of students from Asia. They

were studious, attentive, and polite. But the teacher in me knew something wasn’t clicking. Finally one

young Chinese man confided he’d never tasted a raspberry or blackberry in his life, and by the way, what

was cassis? For days, I’d been comparing the flavor of wines to fruits, flowers, and foods he’d never

even heard of.

For wine professionals in the Asian headquarters of the big auction houses, such as Sotheby’s and

Christie’s, the lack of a universal wine language is painfully apparent. Not only is it next to impossible to

translate the names of European wineries into Chinese characters based on the Mandarin

pronunciations of the syllables in the names, but tasting notes written by European wine experts often

make no sense to Chinese buyers. Accordingly, some Chinese wine experts have now begun the

daunting task of reinterpreting the descriptions of famous wines using locally understood flavors. So, a

great Burgundy? Forget the cherries and earth. Think, a hint of dang gui (a traditional Chinese medicinal

herb), a suggestion of fermented cabbage, and maybe some notes of Chiuchow stock (an aromatic, soy-

based liquid for poaching meats).

The Chinese wine industry is currently made up of approximately seven hundred

wineries that fall into two camps: extremely large producers of inexpensive, utterly basic

wine (companies such as Dynasty, China Great Wall, and Changyu) and newer estates

making expensive wines targeted at affluent Chinese consumers (in 2012, Chateau

Hansen, based on the edge of the Gobi Desert, in Inner Mongolia, released the first

vintage of its top cabernet sauvignon—called Red Camel—for just under $700 a bottle).

As for quality, the cheap wines from the very large producers have mostly verged on

dismal. Wines from the cutting-edge wineries are far better. Indeed, some of these wines

are so good they could easily pass for a California or Bordeaux wine in a blind tasting.

China’s love affair with fine wine began as, and remains, mostly a love affair with

Bordeaux and Burgundy (the Chinese mania for Château Lafite-Rothschild has no equal,

and the Domaine de la Romanée-Conti could easily sell its entire production here).

Accordingly, many of the newer, high-end wineries are aesthetically influenced by France.

Some, for example, are designed to look like Bordeaux châteaux and have the word

château in their names; others are French-Chinese joint ventures. A prominent example is

a partnership announced in 2009 between Château Lafite-Rothschild and Citic Group

(China’s largest state-owned investment company), to make wine in Shandong Province.

Another is the joint venture between Champagne producer Moët Hennessy and SOE

Nongken, which resulted in a $5.5 million sparkling wine facility (and impressive wine) in

Ningxia in 2013.

All over China, impressive wineries (and the roads to them) are being built by tens of thousands of people working

around the clock. Wine regions that would have taken centuries to develop in Europe have often sprung up within five

years in China.

THE LAND, THE GRAPES, AND THE VINEYARDS

At 3.7 million square miles (9.6 million square kilometers), China is the fourth largest

country on Earth. Its borders stretch from its 9,000 miles (14,500 kilometers) of Pacific

Ocean coastline in the east to the border with Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Pakistan, 3,100

miles (5,000 kilometers) away in the west. In the north, China touches Russia, Mongolia,

and Kazakhstan, and in the south, the (contested) Chinese territory of Tibet lies along the

border with India. Within this vast country are some twenty-two provinces, five

autonomous regions, and two self-governing special administrative regions (Hong Kong

and Macau).

Collectively, these possess virtually every type of climate and geography—from

subtropical forests to subarctic scrubland, and from flat deserts to some of the tallest

mountains in the world (the Himalayas include ten of the tallest mountain peaks on earth).

As you can imagine, much of the country is either too muggy and hot (monsoons are a

problem) or too excruciatingly cold to sustain viticulture. Even in several existing wine

regions, vines must be “weather-protected”

—that is, banked up with soil in winter to

prevent the roots and some of the trunk tissue from being fatally damaged by deep freezes.

In parts of Inner Mongolia and Ningxia, where vines must often survive temperatures as

low as –20ºF (–29°C), a local viti-cultural technique goes a step further. Called deep-ditch

cultivation, it starts with vines planted in trenches 3 to 5 feet (.9 to 1.5 meters) deep. Each

year, soil is added to the trench in order to more deeply bury the newest roots, which are

closest to the surface of the land. Meanwhile, the deepest, main roots are progressively

buried deeper and deeper, allowing them to resist the damage caused by subzero soil

temperatures.

Women tending the roses at Changyu Global Winery outside of Bejing. All over China’ s wine regions, women do a large

share of the agricultural and landscaping work.

As of 2012, vineyards were spread over 1.41 million acres (570,600 hectares) in China

(double the area in 2000). By comparison, Spain had 2.5 million acres (1 million hectares,

the world’s most); France, 1.97 million acres (797,200 hectares); while the U.S., with 1

million acres (404,700 hectares), had fewer than China. (But here’s a critically important

fact: The vineyard acreage for China includes table grapes—not just wine grapes.

China’s vineyards are planted with only a small number of grape varieties that would

be recognized in the West. New plantings are often of red grapes (a culturally preferred

color), including cabernet sauvignon, merlot, cabernet franc, syrah, and what is called

cabernet gernischt (DNA profiling reveals this to be identical to carmenère) for still wines

and pinot noir for sparkling wines. Among whites, chardonnay (largely for sparkling

wines) is planted along with a small amount of chenin blanc, sémillon, and a few other

whites. Cold-climate varieties such as rkatsiteli and saperavi, both successful in Russia

and the Republic of Georgia, are also planted. In addition to these classic wine grapes, a

number of table grapes are planted and used for wine, including muscat Hamburg, niunai

(“cow’s nipples”), kyoho, Thompson seedless, and longyan (“dragon eyes”). And new

hybrid grape varieties are being developed to withstand central and northern China’s

brutal winters.

As of this writing, China does not have a formal system of delineating appellations.

(Because of that, most of the key wine regions are actually administrative provinces.) The

top wine regions are clustered in five parts of the country:

THE NORTHEAST (including the wine regions Shandong, Hebei, Beijing, Tianjin, Liaoning,

Jilin, and Shanxi)

EAST CENTRAL (Ningxia Hui and Gansu)

NORTH CENTRAL (Inner Mongolia)

FAR WEST (Xinjiang Uyghur)

FAR SOUTH (Y unnan and Sichuan)

Here are brief notes on each, as well as wineries located in each. (Note that many

wineries have a presence in several regions.)

SHANDONG PROVINCE

Located on the Shandong Peninsula, on Bohai Bay in northeastern China, Shandong has a

maritime climate and, despite summer storms, is fairly well suited to European Vitis

vinifera grapes. This is China’s main wine region by both volume and value of the wines

produced, and it was the first well-established region in the modern Chinese wine era.

Importantly, this is where Château Lafite Rothschild established its joint venture with the

state-owned investment firm Citic Group, and there are a number of other cutting-edge

wineries (Chateau Reifeng-Auzias and Qingdao Great River Hill Winery) as well as large

players like Changyu Pioneer Wine Company and China’s largest wine producer, the

China Great Wall Wine Company.

HEBEI PROVINCE

Relatively near Shandong, and also benefiting from a maritime climate thanks to Bohai

Bay, Hebei is China’s second region in terms of sales. This is where some of the first dry

whites and dry reds were made. Historically, off-dry reds made from longyan table grapes

were also local specialties. Well-known wineries here include China Great Wall Wine

Company, Chateau SunGod, Chateau Red Leaf, and Sheng Tang Winery.

BEIJING

Beijing is geographically located within Hebei Province, but it is considered its own

“direct controlled” municipality. Because of Beijing’s prominence as the political and

cultural capital of China, it has attracted small wineries with strong orientations to wine

tourism. However, if land were not scarce, this could well be an important larger wine

region, for the climate is fairly dry and sunny in summer. Wineries include Dragon Seal,

Chateau Bolongbao, and Fengshou Wine Co.

TIANJIN

Located just south of Beijing, Tianjin is well known as the location of one of the first

Chinese-French joint ventures—the Sino-French Joint-V enture Dynasty Winery Ltd.

(Cognac producer Rémy Martin was the French partner). Opened in 1980, the company

makes wines and brandies. The Dynasty wines, as they are simply known, have been

served at countless Chinese state banquets.

LIAONING PROVINCE

North of Beijing, on the border with North Korea, Liaoning Province is known, amazingly

enough, for icewines made from Vidal grapes in the Golden Ice Wine V alley, notably by

the wine company Changyu. Otherwise, the province is one of China’s most industrial,

with heavy industries built on iron, steel, coal mining, petroleum, and natural gas.

JILIN PROVINCE

Jilin Province, located north of Liaoning, in what was once called Manchuria, is known

for native grapes of the species Vitis amurensis. This species of grapes is amazingly cold-

tolerant, and thus has been the source of plant-breeding material for Chinese scientists

hoping to cross it with Vitis vinifera varieties. Wineries include Tonghua Grape Wine Co.

and Changbaishan Wine Holding Co.

SHANXI PROVINCE

Vineyards here are concentrated in the Taiyuan Basin, and the wineries are small. But

Shanxi rose to fame on the success of Grace Vineyard, perhaps China’s first “cult winery.

”

Founded in 1997 by industrialist C. K. Chan, Grace Vineyard was taken over by Chan’s

daughter, Judy Chan Leissner, when she was just twenty-four years old. Grace Vineyards

makes more than a dozen wines, including cabernet sauvignon, cabernet franc, and merlot,

the vines for which were brought in from a Bordeaux nursery. The top wine—called

Chairman’s Reserve—is a mainstay on expensive hotel and restaurant wine lists in China.

In addition to Grace Vineyard, Shanxi is the location of another high-end winery—

Chateau Rongzi. Founded in 2007, Rongzi achieved almost instant credibility by

convincing Jean-Claude Berrouet (former winemaker of Bordeaux’s ultrafamous Château

Petrus) to be its wine consultant.

NINGXIA HUI AUTONOMOUS REGION

Sometimes referred to as the Napa of China, Ningxia (as it is simply known) has a

semiarid climate conducive to growing grapes, and water from the nearby Y ellow River

provides irrigation. Considerable investment in the region—both by wineries large and

small and by the Chinese government in the form of infrastructure—have placed Ningxia

(especially the region within it, known as Helan Mountain East Foothills) at the top of the

hierarchy of China’s most impressive wine regions. Wineries here include Moët

Hennessy’s Chandon China (the first Chinese sparkling wine house), Helan Qingxue, Zhi

Hui Y uan Shi, Silver Heights, Lux Regis, Domaine de Arômes, Chateau Y unmo, Chateau

Changyu Moser XV , Lanny Chateau, Domaine Helan Mountain, and many others.

The ornate gates outside the city of Yinchuan, the capital of Ningxia, which intends to be the “Napa V alley of China” by

2020.

GANSU PROVINCE

A fairly isolated, cool region, Gansu has several wineries, although the province is not

thought to be among those with the most promising futures. Ripening can be a difficult

process here. The main wineries include Mogao Winery, Qilian Wine Company, Zixuan

Wine, and Grand Dragon.

THE DARK SIDE: COUNTERFEIT WINES

In the 2000s, the Chinese frenzy to buy ultra-expensive wines created another sort of frenzy—a

whirlwind counterfeit industry, more extensive and skilled than anything that has ever before existed in

the global wine industry. As of 2013, industry analysts estimated that as much as 50 percent of the

foreign wine sold in China may have been fake. Certain individuals among a small army of Chinese

bottle scavengers (aka “professional bottle recyclers”) have been known to pay over $300 for a single

empty bottle of Château Lafite-Rothschild or Château Pétrus. After their tasting events, auction houses in

China now routinely smash empty bottles with a hammer, to prevent the bottles from ending up on the

black market and being refilled with cheap wine or worse, a concoction of citric acid, flavoring essence,

and food coloring. Of course, skillful counterfeiters have also taken another tack. Instead of using

authentic bottles with real labels, many have simply bought facsimile bottles and then replicated the

labels of great estates, dispersing the fakes among genuine bottles in wine shops all over Asia.

Gansu Province, on the ancient “Silk Road” of central China, has a small number of wineries, though the rugged

terrain and hot climate present challenges.

INNER MONGOLIA

Inner Mongolia has a long history of raisin production and winemaking, especially in the

area near Wuhai. The days during the short growing season are hot; the nights, cold.

Sunlight is intense and humidity is low. So far so good. But the extremely cold, snowless

winter means that the ground freezes hard and deep. As a result, much of the leading

research on winter-hardy grape varieties and cold-climate viticultural techniques like

deep-ditch cultivation have happened here. As is easily imagined, researchers in Inner

Mongolia are also at the forefront of developing new, extremely cold-tolerant hybrids,

especially of grapes belonging to the species Vitis vinifera and Vitis amurensis (thus far,

the resulting grape varieties have been given names like Red Wine Grape #1 and Inner

Mongolia #1). There also exists here a fascinating Vitis vinifera variety called Tuo Xian,

thought to be one of the most cold-tolerant vinifera varieties in existence. Its pink berries

and huge, foot-long clusters are amazing, but the wine from these grapes is rather basic.

Finally, Inner Mongolia is known for a special drink—Tuo Xian white wine infused with

fresh flowers of the Osmanthus fragrans shrub. The drink, said to have a strong, floral

cherry aroma, is usually sweet and is served as a highly aromatic dessert wine. Among the

top wineries here are Chateau Hansen, Viction Winery, and In the Clouds Winery.

Wa Ta Si—The Temple of the Five Pagodas in Inner Mongolia, where there is a long history of winemaking.

XINJIANG UYGHUR AUTONOMOUS REGION

Originally famous for its raisins (frequently used culinarily by the largely Muslim

population), Xinjiang (as it is simply known) now has the largest wine grape production in

China. The region—in far western China—is extremely remote, and while vineyard

acreage has grown quickly over the past several years, transporting products out of the

region is difficult and expensive. Still, it was through Xinjiang—one of the ancient Silk

Road transit points—that Vitis vinifera vines (and many foods) came into China from

Europe. The region is also noteworthy for a special drink of the Uyghur people

—musailaisi wine. Local Vitis vinifera table grapes (munage and hashihaer) are cooked

with roses, wild berries, saffron, and cloves, along with (sometimes) velvet antler, pigeon

blood, and roasted lamb. After cooking, the mixture is strained, poured into jars, and

allowed to ferment for about forty days. Brownish in color, and both sweet and bitter,

musailaisi is considered to have very positive health benefits, and it certainly seems like

an antidote to a cold night on the edge of Mongolia. But of course, it is also a treasured

part of the local Uyghur heritage, and to accept some upon being offered a cup is to be a

courteous (not to mention adventurous) guest.

Main wineries in Xinjiang include Citic Guoan Wine, Xinjiang Xiangdu Winery,

Chateau Loulan, Niya, Skyline of Gobi, Château Zhongfei Winery, China Great Wall

Wine Company, and others.

YUNNAN PROVINCE AND SICHUAN PROVINCE

The two wine provinces of Y unnan and Sichuan are often mentioned together because of

their proximity along the border with Tibet. Despite their low latitude in southern China,

both regions have altitude in their favor. Altitude with a capital A. Vineyards here on the

10,000-foot (3,000-meter) Diqing Plateau are more than twice as high as the highest

vineyards in the foothills of the Andes in Argentina. Thus, the climate in these provinces

tends to be cool. Also because of altitude, both areas benefit from intense luminosity,

leading to efficient photosynthesis and ripe grapes. The hilly terrain is a challenge,

however, so vineyards exist as small fields dotting the mountains, rather than large tracts

of land. Y unnan and Sichuan are very new wine regions in China, but they have attracted a

considerable amount of investment. Wineries include the Shangri-La Winery, the Spirit of

Highland Winery, Kangding Hong Winery, Hongxing Leader Winery, and AoY un by Moët

Hennessy.

Walking among the tall flowers in Yunnan Province. Some vineyards in the province are planted at an altitude of 10,000

feet (3,000 meters).

The shaded areas of this map indicate entire prefectures where wine is made. The actual vineyard areas are smaller and

scattered throughout the prefecture.

JAPAN

Considered one of the most gastronomically sophisticated countries in the world, Japan

was the first Asian country to fully embrace European wines and develop a strong

connoisseurship of them. In contrast to China, where wine education is growing but still in

its infancy, Japan boasts countless wine schools, numerous wine experts, a flourishing

wine book industry, and a thriving sommelier association (ten thousand strong). Indeed, as

far back as 1995, Japanese sommelier Shinya Tasaki was named the most knowledgeable

and skillful sommelier in the world when he won the Sommelier World Championship.

Thanks to their strong affinity for Western luxury goods (including fine wine), Japan

and China do share spiraling wine consumption. Between 2000 and 2013, Japan’s total

wine consumption increased 28 percent, according to the OIV , although, on a per-person,

per-year basis, the amount remains relatively small. Y et Japanese consumption has

historically been somewhat higher than Chinese consumption (.72 gallons/2.73 liters per

capita in Japan versus .35 gallons/1.32 liters per capita in China).

In fact, for many urban Japanese, the culture of consuming wine is now fully integrated

into modern living. Imported wines from across the world and of every level of quality are

now widely available at diverse locations from high-end restaurants and standing wine

bars to conveyor-belt sushi restaurants, convenience stores, and roadside vending

machines.

But despite its early and avid adoption of imported wine, Japan has struggled to

establish its own domestic wine industry—and for good reason. At 145,925 square miles

(377,900 square kilometers; about the size of Norway), the Japanese archipelago is made

up of 6,852 islands that sit between a huge landmass (China) and a huge body of water

(the Pacific Ocean). As a result, Japan is buffeted by erratic extremes of climate. When it

isn’t freezing cold, it’s often humid or rainy. Indeed, Siberian winds and typhoons (along

with occasional monsoons and hurricanes) all take their toll—often during the growing

season or at harvest time. And then there’s the topography itself. Japan, the product of

volcanoes, is so steeply mountainous that little usable land is available. Take some of that

for cities and towns to support the dense (126 million) population, and some of it for other

types of agriculture (such as rice), and what’s left for vineyards is tiny and massively

expensive, if it’s even suitable for viticulture. Y et, for all of this, Japan does have a

domestic wine industry, and we will explore it in a moment.

THE NAME JAPAN

The English word Japan derives from the Chinese pronunciation of the Japanese name, , which in

Japanese is pronounced Nippon (formally) or Nihon (more casually). Japanese people refer to themselves

as Nihonjin and to their language as Nihongo . Both Nippon and Nihon mean

“sun-origin,

” and are often translated as Land of the Rising Sun.

It is commonly believed that the first wines were brought to Japan in the sixteenth

century by Portuguese Jesuit missionaries, as gifts for the feudal lords of Kyushu.

However, the modern wine industry takes its beginnings from the 1860s, during the so-

called Meiji Restoration, when the state was centralized under one emperor, and Japan

began to seek out Western ideas and emulate Western lifestyles. The consumption of

alcohol evolved to become a more regular custom, even for those outside the leisure

classes. Most importantly, the development of commercial agriculture other than rice (or

mulberry for the declining silk industry) became a focus. Establishing fruit grow-ing—and

later winemaking—became a stated national priority. The Japanese government sent

technicians to the United States and Europe to collect hundreds of grape varieties for trials

and to study winemaking practices. The amount of land planted with table grapes rapidly

expanded. In the Kofu Basin north of Mount Fuji in Y amanashi Prefecture, table grape

farmers using earthenware containers and second-hand sake tanks began fermenting their

harvested but unsold grapes to make wine for personal consumption. Many of these

operations were later legitimized to collect tax revenues, and thus began a small Japanese

wine industry. Mercian and Suntory—the two biggest producers in Y amanashi Prefecture

(still one of the most important locations for vineyards)—began making wines in 1877 and

1909, respectively.

The grapes used during the late nineteenth century included koshu (more on this soon)

and hardy varieties grown in cold, wet areas on the East Coast of the United States, such

as the French-American hybrid Delaware and the American cross Niagara. Later, grapes

that could adapt to the Japanese climate were developed in Japan. The best known of these

—muscat Bailey A—is a red table grape developed in 1927 by Zenbei Kawakami, at the

Iwanohara Winery in Niigate Prefecture. A cross of Bailey and muscat Hamburg (both of

which are crosses themselves), muscat Bailey A produces a sweet, candy-ish, grape-juicy

red wine that is popular on the domestic market. Drier versions are often blended with

imported bulk wine (such as cabernet sauvignon and merlot) to make simple red wines.

(Like all Asian wine-producing countries, Japan imports a considerable amount of bulk

wine and grape concentrate.)

The proud Mt. Fuji, which can be seen from the vineyards of Yamanashi Prefecture.

By the 1970s and 1980s, however, Japan had at least some success in developing

sophisticated viticultural techniques that allowed for the production of Japanese-grown

merlot, chardonnay, and other popular Vitis vinifera varieties, even in humid conditions

and in areas without significant periods of sun. Among these techniques were planting

vines like hedges on steep mountain terraces for maximum sun exposure and constructing

high, elevated trellises or pergolas that kept the fruit as much as 10 feet (3 meters) off the

ground for maximum air ventilation. Alas, for the most part, both techniques encouraged

quantity over quality, and thus met with only partial success. As a result, in the last two

decades, grape-growing for fine wine continues to shift beyond traditional areas and

toward cool but sunnier and somewhat drier areas such as Nagano Prefecture and

Y amagata Prefecture, as well as on the far northern island of Hokkaido.

Nagano Prefecture, west of Tokyo, one of Japan’ s newer wine regions. Here, the prefecture’ s Matsumoto Castle, officially

a “National Treasure of Japan.

”

One grape that has been quite successful in Y amanashi Prefecture, however, has been

koshu, a Vitis vinifera pinkish-hued, humidity-tolerant white grape with a long, somewhat

mysterious history in Japan. Before it was possible to identify grapes by DNA typing,

legend had it that koshu was a cross of a native, wild Japanese grape with a vinifera

variety brought from the Caucasus to China and then, approximately a thousand years ago,

by Buddhist monks, to Japan. But DNA typing has revealed no relationships with other

known varieties, and thus koshu’s origins remain unknown. Today, koshu is experiencing

a newfound popularity as the hip wine of young professionals. Still versions are dry,

delicate, and crisp (not unlike Muscadet), and there are sparkling versions as well, which I

find even more attractive.

Ranking forty-seventh in the world in vineyard land, Japan has some 45,000 acres

(18,200 hectares) of vines, most of which are planted on two islands—Honshu, the largest

island, where Tokyo is located; and Hokkaido, the most northern island. The wine districts

of Honshu include the prefectures of Y amanashi, Nagano, and Y amagata. As noted, in

Y amanashi, southeast of Tokyo, most of the vineyards are planted in the Kofu Basin, with

spectacular views of Mount Fuji towering above. The growing season here is one of the

longest in Japan, and the relatively low level of rainfall is a huge asset (Mount Fuij

provides the convenient rain shadow effect). Nagano, northwest of the capital, is located

farther inland, on mountain foothills over 2,000 feet (600 meters) in altitude. Y amagata, in

the far northern part of Honshu, is a mountainous region facing the Sea of Japan. Despite

its humid summers, the autumns are dry, and the region has begun to produce good-quality

merlot and chardonnay. Then there’s Hokkaido, Japan’s northernmost and coldest island.

Despite the cold, it is fairly well suited to viticulture, in part because the growing season is

not dominated by bouts of rain. Interestingly, cool-climate grapes associated with northern

Italy, Germany, and Austria have done well here, including Kerner, Müller-Thurgau,

riesling, and Zweigelt.

Yamagata Prefecture is a wine region facing the Sea of Japan. Here, the prefecture’ s Yamadera Temple, reachable by a

thousand-step climb, is where the famous haiku poet Matsuo Bashōo wrote and worked.

Finally, a few words about the structure of the domestic wine industry. Japanese vine-

yards—especially in the traditional areas—are usually small and owned by independent

growers, each of whom farms numerous non-contiguous, tiny plots of vines, along with

other crops. These farmers typically concentrate on higher-valued table grapes, but also

sell their wine grapes to large drinks companies which then ferment the grapes to make

Japanese wines sourced from Japanese grapes (often koshu). Though a source of local

pride, such wine is, however, only a small part of the total amount of wine produced in the

country, for large drinks companies such as Suntory, Mercian, Sapporo, and Asahi also

make wine from grape juice purchased on the international market.

When you need a bottle of wine, even the most humble shop will do.

INDIA

Whenever I imagine wine in India, I invariably picture British colonists during the Raj

(the word means “reign” in Hindi, and denotes the period between 1858 and 1947) sitting

under fans in the sweltering humidity, drinking Madeira and Port. But that image is only

one part of the complex, on-again-off-again story of wine on the Indian subcontinent.

Viticulture in India has been estimated to date back as far as the fourth millennium B.C.,

when traders from Persia (modern-day Iran) are said to have introduced grapevines to the

subcontinent. The date would mean that Indian viticulture (although not necessarily wine

making) was established significantly earlier than viticulture in China, and the idea is

indeed conceivable. Biomolecular archaeologist Patrick McGovern’s considerable

findings on wine in the ancient world include Neolithic jars containing winelike residues

dating from 5400 to 5000 B.C. at the site of Hajji Firuz Tepe, in the Zagros Mountains of

Iran. It is possible that from there, grapevines were brought to the Indus V alley civilization

(an area that extends from what is today northeast Afghanistan to Pakistan and northwest

India) between 3300 and 1300 B.C. The Indus V alley civilization is considered one of the

three great early civilizations of the Old World, along with Ancient Eygpt and

Mesopotamia.

Evidence specifically of winemaking comes much later in India, however. As of the

fourth century B.C. (just two hundred years after wine began to be made in France), grape-

based wines known as madhu were among the popular indulgences of the Emperor

Chandragupta Maurya, and were chronicled, along with the emperor’s revelries, by his

chief minister, Chanakya. Wine became, as it did in Europe, the drink of the privileged

and noble classes, while the poor drank alcoholic beverages made from millet, barley, and

wheat.

But India soon entered one of its many anti-alcohol eras. During the otherwise

enlightened and artistic era known as the Muslim Mughal Empire (A.D. 1526 to

approximately 1700), wine was banned in accordance with Islamic teachings. It wasn’t

until the British Raj, during the Victorian era, that views on alcohol made an about-face.

Vineyards were planted throughout the Baramati, Kashmir, and Surat regions and

winemaking was strongly encouraged, largely so that British colonists would have a

domestic supply, lest the imported Madeira run out.

But just as it was reaching some measure of critical mass, at the end of the nineteenth

century, the wine industry in India was devastated by phylloxera. In the early part of the

twentieth century, the industry barely recovered, and it didn’t help that another growing

temperance movement in India resulted in several Indian states banning all alcohol

outright.

Still, by the 1970s, India, like many of its Asian neighbors, had a growing middle class

for whom wine was a sign of Westernization and sophistication. A new, modern wine era

began. In the mid-1980s, in the state of Goa, for example, the Tonia Group (originally

producers of fennys—high-alcohol spirits distilled from coconuts and cashews) imported

varieties like cabernet sauvignon, chardonnay, chenin blanc, and pinot noirs and began

making wine. About the same time, based on research by Champagne Technologies of

France, Chateau Indage was founded in Narayangaon, in Maharashtra state. Today, the

large winery makes high-end cabernet sauvignon and chardonnay under the brand

Chantilli. There are numerous other small, high-end Indian wineries, including Sula

Vineyards, begun by Rajeev Samant, a Mumbai-born, Stanford University-educated

former executive with Oracle corporation (the winery is known for sauvignon blanc and

chenin blanc); as well as Chateau d’Ori (known for its merlot) and Grover Vineyards

(known for its cabernet sauvignon-shiraz blend). All told, in 2011, India had an estimated

10,000 acres (4,000 hectares) of grapevines (about a quarter of the number of vineyard

acres in the tiny Napa V alley), according to the organization Indianwine; the exact number

of wineries is not tracked and remains unknown.

Establishing a modern wine industry in India has been fraught with challenges—the

first of which is climate. The southern half of India lies squarely in the tropics, thus the

summer growing season is extremely hot, humid, and prone to monsoons. As a result,

vineyards must be planted in cooler, higher-altitude areas, or viticultural techniques to

mitigate the effects of heat and humidity have to be employed. Among the coolest wine-

producing regions are the states of Kashmir and Punjab, in the north, near the Himalayas.

But wine is also made in the southern states of Maharashtra (the area around Nasik is

considered the heart of Indian wine country), Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Goa, and in the

farthest southern state of Tamil Nadu. In these areas, vines are often trained on tall

pergolas, creating a large canopy to protect the grapes from sunburn and simultaneously

lifting the vines up to provide maximum air circulation.

Finally, grapes intended for wine represent just a small fraction of all the grapes grown

in India, many of which, like anabeshahi, arkavati, and arkashyam, are indigenous table

grapes. And although they can be used for wine, the three most widely planted grapes of

all—sultana (known in California as Thompson seedless), Bangalore blue (the American

hybrid Isabella), and gulabi (black muscat)—are far more often eaten out of hand.

WINE LA WS

Maybe you’d like to pour yourself a glass of wine and get comfortable before reading further. What follows are

overviews of the (sometimes complex) wine laws of each wine-producing country included in this book. We’ll

start with France, and because it is often considered a model for the rest of the world, we’ll go into it in some

depth. In addition, be sure to see the box on European Union Wine Laws (page 142) for how EU law

intersects with specific national regulations.

FRANCE

In 1935, the Institut National de l’Origine et de la Qualité (previously the Institut National des Appellations

d’Origine—INAO) was created with the mission of setting up the French Appellation d’Origine Contrôlée

(AOC) system. T oday, the AOC is still administered and periodically revised by the INAO. The AOC is

equivalent to the European Union designation PDO, Protected Designation of Origin.

The system sets standards for specific categories of wine as well as various foods, including Grenoble

walnuts, Bresse chickens, Isigny butter, Puy lentils, Nyons olive oil, and Brie, Cantal, Roquefort, and

Reblochon cheeses.

Under the AOC system, the two main categories of wine, in descending order of quality, are:

VINS D’APPELLATION D’ORIGINE CONTRÔLÉE

The category Vins d’Appellation d’Origine Contrôlée—AOC—includes the finest wines of France. Each wine

must abide by a strict set of regulations. Among other issues, the regulations cover:

AREA OF PRODUCTION: Each area is precisely defined. Only wines made from vines growing within the

borders of the appellation have the right to use that appellation.

VARIETY OF GRAPE: Each area has permissible grape varieties, which may be used only in given

proportions. If a producer makes wine from grapes other than those permitted, or uses a ratio of grapes that

is not permitted, he or she must forfeit the appellation.

YIELD PER HECTARE: The basic yield allowed is set, although in some years it may be increased. In

Bordeaux, for example, the yield permitted for red wine is 55 hectoliters per hectare, or 1,452 gallons of wine

for every 2.47 acres. The legal yield for white wine is slightly higher.

VINEYARD PRACTICES: How and when the vines can be pruned, the type of trellising system, and whether

the use of irrigation is permitted are regulated. For some AOCs, even the start date of the harvest is specified.

DEGREE OF ALCOHOL: All AOC wines have a required minimum level of alcohol content, and some have a

maximum level.

WINEMAKING PRACTICES: Winemaking practices, such as chaptalization and acidification, are regulated,

as are, in some cases, aging requirements.

TASTING AND ANALYSIS: All AOC wines must go through a chemical analysis and pass a taste test for

typicity—that is, they must taste true to their kind. Those wines that fail must be declassified.

VARIETAL LABELING: All French wines may now put the grape variety on the label, but only if 85 percent of

the wine constitutes the variety mentioned. Some AOCs are even more strict, specifying that a grape variety

can be listed only if the wine is 100 percent of that variety.

While it may seem that such detailed rules are unfairly strict (especially compared to the New World, where

winemakers have vastly more creative rein), a majority of French wine producers support such regulations (as

do their counterparts in other European countries). Why?

The answer can be summarized this way. By holding all variables constant, French and other European

producers are able to determine which vineyard plots consistently produce the greatest wines. In other words,

since all producers make essentially the same kind of wine in essentially the same way from the same grapes

grown in essentially the same manner, the only thing left that might account for quality differences is the exact

plot of land where the grapes were grown. The French/European approach highlights the terroir of the place

where the grapes were grown.

VINS DE PAYS

France’s so-called country wines—vins de pays—are defined by region. Like AOC wines, they must meet

certain rules, although these rules are usually far less strict than for AOC wines. Permissible yields are higher,

and the rules concerning grape varieties are more flexible. Vins de Pays must carry the logo/stamp for the

European Union designation PGI—Protected Geographical Indication or, in French, Indication Géographique

Protégée (IGP). They may choose to be known by the EU designation rather than the French Vin de Pays.

ITALY

Italian wine regulations are roughly similar to the French Appellation d’Origine Contrôlée laws. The Italian

Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry oversees the regulations. There are four categories. In ascending order

they are: VDT , IGT , DOC, and DOCG. You’ll find an overview of these laws below. However, as Italy is a

member of the European Community (EU), some Italian wineries use EU wine designations as well as (or in

place of) Italy’s national wine laws. T o understand how EU regulations intersect with Italian and other national

regulations, see PDO, PGI—The European Union Wine Laws on page 142 in the French chapter.

VDT (Vino da Tavola): These are simple, generic table wines that may list only the type of wine inside—

red, white, or rosé. Sometimes, a varietal name is also listed, for example, Merlot, Italy.

IGT (Indicazione Geografica Tipica): Roughly equal to the French designation Vin de Pays, IGT wines are

“country wines” that must meet certain rules regarding the area of production, the permissible grape varieties,

the maximum yield of grapes per hectare, and so forth, but these rules are generally much less stringent than

for DOC or DOCG wines. There were 118 IGT s as of 2013.

DOC and DOCG (Denominazione di Origine Controllata and Denominazione di Origine Controllata e

Garantita): There are more than 330 areas where wine is produced that have been given DOC status, and 73

have DOCG status. In these regions, the DOC and DOCG laws govern the area of production, the

permissible grape varieties, the maximum yield of grapes per hectare, the minimum degree of alcohol the

wines must possess, such vineyard practices as pruning and trellising systems, winemaking practices, and

the requirements for aging. In addition, all wines must pass chemical analysis and taste tests for typicity. The

rules for DOCG wines are somewhat stricter than those for DOC wines. And, interestingly, most DOCGs are

found in the northern part of the country, with Tuscany, Piedmont, and the Veneto accounting for the lion’s

share of them. A full list of Italy’s DOCGs can be found on page 967.

SPAIN

The Spanish Denominación de Origen (DO) laws, first enacted in 1932 and revised since, are similar to

France’s Appellation d’Origine Contrôlée laws, which define and protect wines from specific geographic

areas. You’ll find an overview of these laws below. However, as Spain is a member of the European Union

(EU), some Spanish wineries use EU wine designations as well as (or in place of) Spain’s national wine laws.

T o understand how EU regulations intersect with Spanish and other national regulations, see PDO, PGI—The

European Union Wine Laws, on page 142 in the chapter on France.

Spanish regulations currently cover sixty-nine DOs, or officially recognized and geographically defined

wine regions. An even higher designation—the Denominación de Origen Calificada (DOCa, or Qualified

Denomination of Origin)—was created in 1991. T o qualify for DOCa status, a region’s wines must have

demonstrated exceptional quality over a long period of time, and the region must have had DO status for at

least ten years. Currently, only two regions in Spain have DOCa status: Rioja and Priorat.

Each DO and DOCa has its own Consejo Regulador, a governing control board that enforces specific

viticultural and winemaking standards and regulates the total acreage that may be planted, the types of

grapes planted, the maximum yield, the minimum length of time wines must be aged, plus the information that

may be given on the label. In addition, each Consejo Regulador maintains a laboratory and tasting panel.

Every wine awarded DO or DOCa status must be tasted, evaluated, and found to be true to type.

Since 2003, Spanish law also allows for a status that many consider higher than DOCa—Pago. The word

pago means “single estate.

” Thus, estates of exceptional merit (the Spanish equivalents of grand crus) may

each have their own Pago DO if they meet certain guidelines. The bodega must make wines only from grapes

grown on the estate, and the wine must be made and bottled on the estate. Interestingly, to be awarded Pago

status, the estate must also have an international reputation for quality, as measured by receiving high scores

from the world’s top wine critics and placements on the wine lists of the world’s most famous restaurants. The

first estate in Spain to receive its own Pago DO was the Dominio de Valdepusa estate, in Castilla-La Mancha.

The estate, owned by well-known Spanish vintner Carlos Falcó, makes wines under the name Marqués de

Griñón (Falcó’s title). T oday, some ten estates have Pago DO status, most of them in the regions of Castilla-

La Mancha and Navarra.

If a grape variety is listed on a Spanish label, the wine must be composed of at least 85 percent of the

variety named.

The term Vino de Pago may be used for an estate wine of recognized prestige that comes from a certain

place or site within a recognized DO. Such wine must be made and bottled at the winery of the specific

vineyard named.

As for aging, the terms below, when used, carry the following national requirements. A DO or DOCa region

—Ribera del Duero or Rioja, for example—may choose to make their local requirements more strict than what

follows, but not more lenient.

Vino de Crianza: May be used for red wines aged a minimum of twenty-four months, six of which must be

in oak containers of a maximum capacity of 330 liters. White and rosé wines must be aged at least eighteen

months.

Reserva: May be used for red wines aged a minimum of thirty-six months, twelve of which must be in oak

and twenty-four of which must be in bottle. White and rosé wines must be aged eighteen months, six of which

must be in oak.

Gran Reserva: May be used for red wines aged a minimum of sixty months, eighteen of which must be in

oak. White and rosé wines must be aged forty-eight months, six of which must be in oak.

PORTUGAL

Portugal was one of the first European countries to have wine laws. As early as 1756, Portugal’s then prime

minister, the Marquis da Pombal, established the legal boundaries of the Douro River Valley to protect the

authenticity of Port wine. Portugal’s wine industry was dramatically modernized after the country joined the

European Economic Community (later renamed the European Union) in 1986. Below, you’ll find an overview

of Portuguese wine law.

As Portugal is a member of the European Union (EU), some Portuguese wineries use EU wine

designations as well as (or in place of) Portugal’s national wine laws. T o understand how EU regulations

intersect with Portuguese and other national regulations, see PDO, PGI—The European Union Wine Laws on

page 142.

T oday, the country has more than fifty DOPs (Denominação de Origem Protegida, or Designations of

Protected Origin) within its eleven major wine regions. These designations, similar to France’s AOC

(Appellation d’Origine Contrôlée, or Appellations of Controlled Origin) are set forth by Portugal’s Instituto da

Vinha e do Vinho (Institute of Vines and Wines), as well as by numerous local commissions. The regulations

not only determine the physical boundaries of a wine district, but also set forth strict requirements for the

wines made there, including the total acreage that may be planted, the types of grapes and their maximum

yield, the methods of vinification, the minimum length of time wines must be aged, and the information given

on the label. As for labeling, most Portuguese table wines are named according to the geographic area from

which they come: Douro, Dão, Alentejo, and so forth. However, some wines are also labeled according to

grape variety. If the grape variety is given, at least 85 percent of the grapes for that wine must be of that

variety.

GERMANY

The vineyards and wines of Germany are governed by a monumental set of laws that took effect in 1971 and

were aimed at simplifying German wine. The 1971 law established the eleven original German anbaugebiete

or wine regions (which, in 1989, with the reunification of Germany, became thirteen) and their subdivisions—

the thirty-nine districts known as bereiche and 167 collections of vineyards known as grosslagen. The 1971

law also effectively collapsed the then-existing 30,000 individual named vineyard sites down to some 2,600

individual vineyard sites, or einzellagen.

The most basic category of German wine is called, by law, Deutscher wein (formerly this was called

tafelwein). Deutscher wein must be made from German grapes in Germany.

For Deutscher wein as well as the higher quality category, Qualitätswein bestimmter Anbaugebiete (QbA)

and higher still, Prädikatswein, Germany’s detailed wine laws regulate where the grapes can be grown, the

maximum yield of wine per hectare, the minimum alcohol level the wine must attain, whether chaptalization is

permissable, what methods of fermentation may be used, and what information must appear on the label. The

laws also specify how ripe the grapes must be (measured in Oechsle) in order to be considered a QbA, or a

Prädikatswein and its subdivisions of kabinett, spätlese, auslese, and other even greater ripeness levels.

Finally, the law requires that each wine be examined, tasted, and found to be true to type. For more

comments on the requirements for QbA and Prädikat wines, see the German and Austrian glossary, page

963.

AUSTRIA

Austria’s wine laws are among the strictest in Europe. They stipulate precise requirements for every wine,

including the minimum sugar content of the grapes at harvest and the maximum alcohol level.

Basic, neutral wine, referred to as Landwein, is not ripe. One step up, so-called quality wine

(Qualitätswein) is a bit riper. But fine wine falls into a higher category still, called Prädikatswein. These are

high-quality wines that must achieve higher levels of ripeness and may not be chaptalized or sweetened after

fermentation. Thus, in a dry table wine, any tiny amount of residual sugar in the wine may only result naturally

(that is, the fermentation stopped on its own before every trace of residual sugar was gone). For sweet wines,

fermentation can be stopped, leaving natural residual sugar in the wine, but again, the sweetness cannot be

added after the fact (i.e., after fermentation). For Prädikatswein, there are also detailed laws regulating where

the grapes can be grown, the maximum yield of wine per hectare, what methods of fermentation may be

used, and what information must appear on the label. If a wine lists a specific grape, for example, it must

contain at least 85 percent of that grape. If a wine has a vintage on the label, it must contain a minimum of 85

percent of that vintage. If a wine region is listed, all of the wine (100 percent) must come from that region.

The laws also require that each wine be examined, tasted, and found true to type. Finally, each wine must

be scientifically tested and given an official test number. Indeed, all Austrian wines have a red-and-white

striped “banderole” around the neck or on top of the cork or screwcap, which must be purchased by the

producer to ensure that official regulations are not breached.

HUNGARY

Hungarian wines are governed by a set of national laws last revised in 1997. Roughly similar to the

Appellation d’Origine Contrôlée (AOC) laws of France, Hungary’s regulations define the boundries of wine

regions, stipulate the grape varieties that can be planted, designate allowable winemaking and viticultural

processes, and govern how wines are labeled.

GREECE

When Greece joined the European Union in the 1980s, it revised its regulations along the lines of the

Appellation d’Origine Contrôlée (AOC) laws of France. The laws defined the boundaries of wine regions,

stipulated which grape varieties could be planted, designated allowable winemaking and viticultural

processes, specified aging regimes, and governed how wines were labeled. However, after the European

Union established its own set of wine laws in 2009, Greece adopted these in place of its national laws. (All

twenty-seven EU member countries are free to do this, or any member country may institute a hybrid system

that recognizes both EU wine law and the country’s own national laws.) Following are the designations you

will find on Greek wines:

PROTECTED DESIGNATION OF ORIGIN (PDO) WINES

The European Union designation PDO is the highest designation and is equivalent to what, in France, would

be a wine designated as AOC, or Appellation d’Origine Contrôlée. In essence, a PDO indicates a historic top

wine-producing area. In Greece, twenty-nine wines carry PDO status. They fall into two categories:

• AOQS (Designation of Origin of Superior Quality) for dry wines. These must carry a red band on the neck of

the bottle.

• AOC (Controlled Appellation of Origin) for sweet wines. These carry a blue band on the neck of the bottle.

PROTECTED GEOGRAPHICAL INDICATION (PGI) WINES:

The European Union designation PGI falls below PDO. Historically, these were the table wines of a country.

(In France, for example, PGI is equivalent to Vin de Pays.) In Greece, the PGI designation covers all local

wines (before the EU law was adopted, these were called topikos oenos) and traditional wines such as

retsina.

UNITED STATES

Although winemakers in the United States have considerable creative freedom to make whatever sort of wine

they want, there are several important federal rules and regulations wine producers must abide by. These are

administered by the TTB (Alcohol and T obacco T ax and Trade Bureau), under whose jurisdiction wine falls.

Here is a quick summary of the most important laws.

• When a wine is labeled with an American Viticultural Area (AVA), at least 85 percent of the grapes that

make up the wine must come from that AVA.

• In place of an AVA, a wine can be labeled by county—Sonoma County, Mendocino County, and so on.

When a wine is labeled by county, at least 75 percent of the grapes must come from that county.

• In place of an AVA, a wine may be labeled by state. Wines labeled by state must contain at least 75 percent

wine from that state. Some states, however, require higher percentages. In California, 100 percent of the

wine must be from California. In Washington State, 95 percent of the wine must be from Washington State.

• When a grape variety is named on the label, the wine must be composed of at least 75 percent of that

variety. Again, some states have stricter rules. In Oregon, this percentage has been raised to 90 percent for

the most-planted grapes, such as pinot noir and chardonnay. (But for wines made from many varieties

grown in small amounts in Oregon—cabernet sauvignon, cabernet franc, merlot, malbec, sauvignon blanc,

and others—the percentage remains at 75 percent.)

• When a vintage is declared on the label, 95 percent of the wine must be from that vintage.

• All bottles of wine made in the United States are required to carry a warning about the dangers of alcohol

and to indicate that the wine contains sulfites (see page 41).

CANADA

The Vintners Quality Alliance (VQA) is the agency responsible for the creation and administration of the rules

and regulations that govern quality wine in Canada’s two main wine regions, British Columbia and Ontario.

There are slight variations to the rules between the two regions, but the major points are the same. Like the

regulations set forth in most of the New World, the VQA laws are far less stringent than the laws governing

most European regions. Some of the most important regulations in Canada are as follows:

• If a grape variety is named on the label, at least 85 percent of the wine must be composed of the grape

named.

• If two varietals are listed, they must comprise at least 90 percent of the blend.

• If a vintage is indicated on the label, 85 percent of the wine must be composed of grapes from that vintage.

• If a vineyard is named on the label, 100 percent of the grapes must be from that vineyard.

• In order for a wine to be labeled ‘British Columbia’ or ‘Ontario’ 100 percent of the grapes must be from the

corresponding region.

• The regulations for icewine are Canada’s strictest. Among them: only certain grape varieties are allowed,

the grapes must be naturally frozen on the vine, and the external temperature must reach –8°C (17.6°F)

before the grapes can be picked.

AUSTRALIA

Australia, like the United States, does not have a strict system of laws regulating grape growing and

winemaking. There are no rules similar to the French Appellation d’Origine Contrôlée laws, which govern the

varieties of grapes that can be planted in specific areas, the yield produced from those grapes, how the

grapes are vinified, how long the wines are aged, and so on.

However, there are regulations that govern labeling and define viticultural areas. These areas, known as

Geographic Indications (GIs), are similar to American Viticultural Areas (AVAs) in the United States. All of

Australia’s wine regulations are set forth by the governmental agency Wine Australia, and notably stipulate

the following:

• If a grape variety is named on the label, 85 percent of the wine must be composed of the grape named.

• If two or more varieties are listed, they together must comprise at least 85 percent of wine, must be the

major contributing varieties of the blend (each must contribute at least 5 percent of the blend), and must be

listed on the label in order of percentage. Thus, a wine labeled Cabernet-Shiraz has more cabernet than

shiraz; a wine labeled Shiraz-Cabernet has just the opposite.

• If a vintage is indicated on the label, 85 percent of the wine must be composed of grapes from the vintage

indicated.

• If a Geographical Indication (GI), state, zone, region, subregion, or vineyard is named on the label, 85

percent of the wine must come from that place.

NEW ZEALAND

There is no strict system of laws regulating grape-growing and winemaking for New Zealand—nothing

comparable to the French Appellation d’Origine Contrôlée laws, governing such matters as the varieties of

grapes that can be planted in specific areas, the yield produced from those vines, how the grapes are vinified,

or how long the wines are aged. New Zealand does have regulations that govern labeling and certain aspects

of wine production. These rules are part of the country’s official Food Act and Food Regulations, and they

mandate that:

• If a grape variety or varieties are named on a label, 85 percent of the wine must be composed of the variety

or varieties named. In practice, many New Zealand wines are 100 percent the variety or varieties named.

• If two grapes are named on the label, they must be listed in order of percentage. When you see a wine

labeled Cabernet-Merlot, it contains more cabernet than merlot; a wine labeled Merlot-Cabernet has just the

opposite.

• When an area, district, or region appears on a label, 85 percent of the wine must come from that place.

CHILE

Like most New World countries, Chile does not have a strict system of laws that regulate grape-growing and

winemaking—nothing comparable to the French Appellation d’Origine Contrôlée laws, which govern which

grape varieties can be planted in which areas, as well as myriad other details concerning how the vines are

grown and how the wine is made and aged. In 1994 and 1995, for the first time, however, new laws went into

effect establishing each key viticultural region as a Denominacion de Origen (DO). These were established

jointly by the Servicio Agricola Ganadero, the Ministerio de Agricultura, and the wineries themselves. The

laws define not only the key appellations but also the subregions and zones within those regions.

The 1995 laws also mandated that:

• If a wine is labeled with a viticultural region, at least 75 percent of the wine must come from that region.

• If a grape variety is named on the label, the wine must be composed of at least 75 percent of the grape

named.

• In wines with labels specifying a vintage, at least 75 percent of the wine must come from that vintage.

In practice, most Chilean wineries observe an 85 percent minimum for all three categories above, to

comply with European Union standards for export.

Finally, while there are no legal aging requirements for terms like Reserva Especial and Gran Reserva,

Chilean law does mandate that wines that use these designations must spend at least some time in oak. That

said, labeling a $14 wine as a Gran Reserva (as is often done in Chile) seems, if nothing else, a little

misdirected.

ARGENTINA

Although wine exports are monitored by its Instituto Nacional de Vitivinicultura, Argentina does not have a

well-defined system of appellations, and thus, where wine regions begin and end is more a matter of common

opinion than law. Nor are there laws regulating grape growing and wine-making. There are, for example, no

rules similar to the French Appellation d’Origine Contrôlée laws, governing what grapes may be planted in

which regions, with details for their cultivation and how wine should be made from them.

All of this said, Argentina’s rapid evolution has meant that the wine industry itself has begun to attempt to

define specific viticultural regions, especially within the main large wine-producing region, Mendoza.

As for labeling regulations, if a grape variety is named on the label, 85 percent of the wine must consist of

that grape. You will also find label terms such as reserva and gran reserva on Argentine wine labels, but

neither of these terms is defined by law. Either term can be used by a winery to mean whatever the winery

intends.

SOUTH AFRICA

In 1973, South Africa’s Wine of Origin (WO) legislation was enacted, defining the geographical boundaries of

wine regions and regulating labeling. The system, which is administered by the Wine and Spirit Board (WSB),

does not impose strict grape-growing and winemaking regulations in the manner of, say, France’s Appellation

d’Origine Contrôlée system. But it is more strict than most New World systems and requires, for example, that

all wines be analytically tested, as well as tasted by a professional panel, before the wine can be certified to

be sold. Once certified, the wine receives the official seal of the WSB (locally known as a “bus ticket”), which

is affixed to the neck of the bottle.

The WO system establishes four nested categories of appellations. The largest category is a geographical

unit. There are five of these, the most important of which is the Western Cape. Within each geographical unit

is a region, followed by a district, followed by the smallest geographical entity, a ward. So, for example, within

the Western Cape is the Coastal region and within that, the district Stellenbosch and within that, the ward of

Papegaaiberg.

Most wines in South Africa are labeled by grape type. A wine labeled with a variety must be composed of

at least 85 percent of that variety. And if a single area is named as the appellation, then 100 percent of the

grapes must come from that area. If the grapes come from multiple areas, that, too, must be indicated on the

label.

GLOSSARIES

I’ve provided here a main glossary with a comprehensive set of definitions for common English wine words

and extensive glossaries for French, Italian, Spanish, and German and Austrian wine terms. You’ll also find

glossaries for the most important Portuguese, Hungarian, and Greek terms. Words appearing in all capital

letters are cross-referenced within the main glossary or the glossaries for individual countries. The French

glossary begins on page 950, the Italian on page 954, the Spanish on page 957, the Portuguese on page

959, the German and Austrian on page 960, the Hungarian on page 964, and the Greek on page 965.

MAIN GLOSSARY

A

ACETALDEHYDE: Produced naturally during FERMENTATION, acetaldehyde is a colorless volatile

component with a pungent ODOR. It is an asset in flor-based (see FLOR, Spanish Glossary) wines, such as

Sherry, but a detectable amount in table wine is considered a flaw. Also occurs in coffee and ripe fruit.

ACETIC: A negative description for a wine with an unpleasant, sharp, vinegarlike smell and taste. A wine

becomes acetic as a result of the presence of acetobacter, a bacteria that causes the natural conversion of

wine to vinegar by producing acetic acid in the presence of air. See VOLATILE ACIDITY .

ACID: A natural component of wine; responsible for the zesty, refreshing qualities of some, acidity also helps

wine to age. Wines with the proper amount of acid relative to their ALCOHOL content are vibrant and lively to

drink. Wines with little acid relative to the alcohol are the opposite: FLAT and blowsy. Wines with excess acid

taste sharp and biting. There are multiple acids in wine, the three most important of which—tartaric, malic,

and citric—all come from the grapes. Other acids may be produced during FERMENTATION.

ACIDIFICATION: A process practiced in warm wine regions whereby a winemaker adds ACID to grape MUST

before or during FERMENTATION in order to boost its naturally low level of acidity, in hopes of creating a

more balanced wine. Acidification is legal and widely practiced in many parts of the world, including

California. Also called acidulation.

ACIDITY: See ACID.

AERATION: The process of intentionally exposing wine to oxygen to “open up” and soften it. Aeration occurs

during the winemaking process, as when wine is poured or racked (see RACKING) from barrel to barrel, but it

may also take place at serving time, such as when a young wine is poured into a carafe or a decanter or even

just swirled in the glass.

AFTERTASTE: See FINISH.

AGING: The process of intentionally holding a wine for a period of time so that the components in it can

integrate and the wine can grow softer and possibly more COMPLEX. Wines are generally aged first in a

barrel and later in bottles, since wines evolve differently in each vessel. The length of time any wine is aged is

initially up to the producer, though many of the top European wines by law must be aged a certain minimum

number of months or years. Most wines worldwide are aged only briefly before release.

AH-SO: A wine opener often used by sommeliers to remove corks that have begun to crumble, as with very

old wines. The device does not penetrate the cork, but instead two flat metal blades are inserted down the

sides of the cork and then the device is gently twisted while pulling upward, to remove the cork. It was

originally named the Magic Cork Extractor and patented in 1879, but it has been called the Ah-So since the

1960s.

ALCOHOL: During FERMENTATION, yeasts convert the natural sugar in grapes to alcohol (also known as

ETHANOL or ETHYL ALCOHOL) and CARBON DIOXIDE. The riper the grapes, the more sugar they contain

and the higher the potential alcohol content of the wine will be (see How Wine Is Made, page 37). Wines with

low alcohol (German rieslings, for example) are LIGHT-BODIED wines. With high alcohol (many California

chardonnays) are FULL-BODIED and almost CHEWY . When a high alcohol wine has too little FRUIT and a

low ACID content, it tastes out of BALANCE and gives off a HOT or slightly burning sensation in your mouth.

ALCOHOL BY VOLUME: The percentage of the ALCOHOL content by volume in a wine must, by United

States law, appear on every wine label. However, because alcohol can be difficult to measure precisely and

because wineries often need to print their labels before they know the exact alcohol content, the percentage

stated on the label need only be accurate within 1.5 percent as long as the total amount is not more than 14

percent. If greater than 14 percent, it must be accurate to within 1 percent. For example, a wine labeled 12

percent alcohol by volume may contain anywhere from 10.5 to 13.5 percent alcohol.

ALDEHYDES: Produced as FERMENTATION converts sugar to ALCOHOL, aldehydes have pungent odors

that contribute to the flavor and quality of wine but in excess are undesirable.

AMPELOGRAPHY: The science of the identification and classification of grapevines according to their

physical properties, such as the size and shape of their leaves and grape clusters. Increasingly, grapevines

are also being identified by DNA typing.

AMPHORAE: Earthenware vessels, ranging in size from that of a milk can to a refrigerator, used by the

ancient Greeks and Romans to store and ship wine. An amphora was oval in shape, with two large handles at

the top for carrying and a pointed bottom so that the vessel could be pushed into the soft earth, where it

would remain upright.

ANTHOCYANINS: The red pigments in grape skins and wine.

APPEARANCE: One of the categories by which a wine can be judged by sensory evaluation, generally

including an assessment of clarity and COLOR.

APPELLATION: In general conversation the word appellation is often used simply to indicate the place where

the grapes for a given wine were grown and subsequently made into wine. T echnically, however, the word has

much broader significance and importance. For this we must turn to the French for whom the full term is

Appellation d’Origine Contrôlée, often abbreviated as AOC (see page 137). France’s AOC regulations have

become the world’s model for laws that define and protect geographically named wines, spirits, and even

certain foods. For any given wine the AOC laws stipulate, among other things, the precise area where the

grapes that make the wine can be grown, the grape varieties that the wine can be made from, the permissible

YIELD, aspects of VITICULTURE, such as PRUNING and irrigation, the minimum alcoholic strength of the

wine, plus various details of how the wine can be made. For a given French wine to carry an appellation, it

must meet all of the criteria set down in the AOC laws. Multiple appellations can exist within a larger

appellation. For example, Margaux is an AOC within the AOC Haut-Médoc, which itself is an AOC within the

larger AOC Bordeaux. The AOC laws evolved progressively, beginning in the 1930s. T oday, most European

wine-producing countries have similar, fairly stringent systems that define and govern the wines produced. In

the NEW WORLD, including the United States, regulations defining the geographic boundaries of wine-

producing areas are more recent. While New World regulations may specify the boundaries of a given place

such as the Napa Valley, they rarely specify or regulate details, such as grape varieties, permissible yields, or

how the wine can be made. See also AVA.

AROMA: A term broadly used to describe a wine’s smell. T echnically, however, the smell of any wine is

divided into the aroma, the smell that derives from the grapes, and the BOUQUET , a more complex smell that

a wine acquires after AGING.

AROMATIC: A positive description, indicating that a wine has a pronounced AROMA. Some VARIETAL wines,

such as muscat and gewürztraminer, are well known for being especially aromatic, often having SPICY and/or

floral (see FLOWERY) scents.

ASTRINGENT : A term describing the drying MOUTHFEEL of a wine with a considerable amount of TANNIN:

a dry sensation provoked by some wines and certain foods, such as walnuts. Often used negatively to

describe red wines with a lot of green or unripe tannin. Excess astringency is unpleasant and causes the

mouth to pucker.

AUTOLYSIS: The decomposition of spent yeast cells by enzymes they contain. When a wine is SUR LIE, or

on the LEES, it is left in contact with the spent yeasts that performed the FERMENTATION. As the yeast cells

break down, they impart, for reasons not fully understood, an extra dimension of flavor, texture, VISCOSITY ,

and complexity to the wine.

AVA: The acronym for American Viticultural Area. An AVA is defined as “a delimited grape growing region,

distinguished by geographical features, the boundaries of which have been recognized and defined.

” On

United States wine labels, such place names as Napa Valley, Sonoma Valley, Columbia Valley, and so on, are

all AVAs. There are now more than 203 AVAs in the United States.

B

BAKED: Negative term used when a table wine’s AROMA and/or flavor seems overripe, caramel-like, or even

burnt. Poorly made table wines allowed to get too warm or to become oxidized often taste baked (see

OXIDATION). For certain wines, such as Sherry and Madeira, however, some “bakedness” is considered

appropriate and positive, especially when combined with the wines’ tangy nuttiness.

BALANCE: A harmonic equilibrium among the components of a wine (ACID, ALCOHOL, FRUIT , TANNIN, and

so on) such that no one characteristic stands out like a sore thumb. Great wines have balance.

BARREL-FERMENTED: Used to describe a wine—usually a white—that has undergone FERMENTATION in

small oak barrels as opposed to in more neutral large casks, cement vats, or stainless-steel tanks.

Fermentation in a small barrel can impart a richer flavor and creamier texture to some wines, though these

characteristics may be acquired at the expense of the wines’ FRUIT . T o mitigate against too intense a barrel-

fermented character, winemakers can use older barrels, and/or ferment only a portion of the wine in barrels

and then BLEND this portion with wine that has not been barrel-fermented.

BENTONITE: A type of light clay, usually from the United States or Africa, mixed into wine to clarify it by

removing tiny suspended protein molecules that can cause a hazy appearance (see FINING). As the

bentonite settles, it absorbs and carries the particles suspended in the wine along with it to the bottom of the

vessel. The clear wine is then racked off the settled material.

BIG: A descriptive term used for FULL-BODIED, robust wines that are usually high in ALCOHOL.

BIODYNAMIC VITICULTURE: See box, page 34 in the chapter Where It All Begins.

BITTER: A harsh flavor in wine, often derived from stems and seeds that have been carelessly or

inadvertently crushed along with the grapes. Bitterness can also be caused by unripe grapes or unripe

TANNIN. In certain big red wines, a slight bitterness is considered a positive nuance, just as it would be in a

good espresso.

BLEND: T o combine two or more lots of wine in hopes of enhancing flavor, BALANCE, and/or complexity.

Often these are wines from different grape varieties (cabernet sauvignon and merlot, for example). However,

blends may also be made up of wines that come from grapes grown in different soil or microclimates, wines

that come from vines of different ages, wines from different CLONES, or wines made by different winemaking

methods (some aged in one kind of oak, some in another, for instance). Virtually all Bordeaux wines and

Champagnes are blends, as are wines from France’s southern Rhône Valley and numerous other wines from

elsewhere around the world.

BODY: The perceived weight of a wine in your mouth. The perception is dependent on ALCOHOL—the

higher the alcohol content, the more FULL-BODIED the wine. As a point of reference, consider the relative

weights of skim milk, whole milk, and half-and-half. Light-bodied wines feel like skim milk, medium-bodied

ones like whole milk, and full-bodied ones like half-and-half.

BOOZE: Once spelled “bouse,

” the term comes from a medieval Dutch word, büsen, meaning “to drink to

”

excess.

BOTRYTIS CINEREA: A beneficial fungus, also known as noble rot, which is necessary to produce many of

the world’s great sweet wines, including Sauternes. In certain years, when the degree of humidity is just right,

Botrytis cinerea will attack grapes, covering them with a gray mold. The mold lives by penetrating the grapes’

skins and using up the available water in the juice. This concentrates the sugar, flavor, and ACID so that a

COMPLEX wine of exceptional sweetness can be made. Botrytis is unique in that, unlike other molds, it

produces flavors that harmonize with the flavors of particular grapes.

BOTRYTIZED: Affected by BOTRYTIS CINEREA.

BOTTLE: Initially, the amount glass bottles held was not consistent. From the fifteenth to the seventeenth

century, bottles held anywhere from 16 to 52 ounces. T oday a standard wine bottle holds 25.36 ounces (750

milliliters). Restaurants generally pour five to six glasses of wine from a single bottle.

BOTTLE AGING: The process of allowing a wine to rest for a considerable period of time (usually years) in a

bottle. Wines that have been bottle aged taste more mature, and their flavors can become so integrated that

it’s no longer easy to identify such specific fruit flavors as lemon, raspberry, or cherry. Bottle aging adds to the

complexity of a wine (see AGING).

BOTTLE SICKNESS: A temporary condition that occurs following the bottling process, during which wine is

exposed to large amounts of oxygen as it is transferred from barrels or tanks to bottles. A wine with bottle

sickness, sometimes called bottle shock, can temporarily taste FLAT , dull, or out of BALANCE. The condition

usually goes away in a few weeks, occasionally after months.

BOUQUET : T echnically, bouquet refers specifically to the aspects of a wine’s scent derived from BOTTLE

AGING (see AROMA).

BRIARY: A term used to describe a briar patch or barklike taste in a wine. Often briary wines have a slightly

scratchy texture, rather than being soft and round.

BRILLIANT : When applied to a wine’s color, it means the wine is absolutely clear.

BRIX: A measure of the sugar content of grapes before they are harvested. Used to estimate the ALCOHOL

content of the resulting wine.

BRUT : French term indicating a Champagne or sparkling wine that is dry to very dry, with less than 1.5

percent residual sugar.

BUD: The small node on a grapevine shoot that carries within it the grape clusters for the year to come. In the

early spring, these buds open, allowing the frail green SHOOTS and tiny clusters to emerge.

BUDDING: The act of grafting buds of one vine onto an existing planted vine. When buds from the scion

variety are grafted onto the rootstock, the process is known as “field budding.

”

BULK PROCESS: An inexpensive and quick way of making SPARKLING WINE. The bulk process, also

called the Charmat method, involves placing wine in large, pressurized tanks for its SECONDARY

FERMENTATION. In an alternative and far more expensive method, known as the MÉTHODE

CHAMPENOISE (see French glossary), the secondary fermentation takes place inside individual bottles.

BULK WINE: Literally, wine not in a bottle. Wineries of all types, sizes, and levels of quality buy and sell wines

in bulk. Some sell all of their production that way. Most large producers buy significant amounts of bulk wines

from other wineries and then BLEND, bottle, and distribute those wines under their own labels. Small

prestigious wineries, however, may also sell small amounts of high-quality wine in bulk to producers who will

use it to enhance their own wines. In harvest years when the size of the crop is small, the prices for bulk wine

go up.

BUNG: A plug for stoppering a wine barrel.

BUSHVINE: A vine that is free-standing with no trellis system that looks like a bush. It is also known as a

goblet-trained vine, and many of the world’s oldest vines are trained in this manner.

BUTTERY: Used to describe a wine that has an AROMA and flavor reminiscent of butter. Buttery aromas and

flavors in wine are the result of DIACETYL, which is a by-product of MALOLACTIC FERMENTATION.

C

CANE: A SHOOT (stem) that has turned from green to tannish brown and has become hard and fibrous.

Shoots turn to canes in the fall in order to withstand the oncoming winter. The canes will ultimately be pruned

back, usually in the late winter. See PRUNING.

CANE TRAINING: The process of training a vine along a structure such as a trellis.

CANOPY: The “umbrella” formed by the leaves and SHOOTS of the grapevine.

CAP: The crusty layer—up to two feet or more deep, of grape skins, pulp, stems, and seeds—that rises and

floats on top of the juice during a red wine’s FERMENTATION. The cap must be kept in contact with the juice

by one of several methods. It may be frequently PUNCHED DOWN into the juice, or the juice can be

PUMPED OVER—that is, drawn up from the bottom of the tank and then showered over the cap. As a result

of being punched down or pumped over, the ALCOHOL in the fermenting juice can extract COLOR, AROMA,

flavor, and TANNIN from the cap. In addition, if the cap is not broken up and kept wet with the juice, it dries

out and becomes a haven for bacteria that will ultimately mar the wine.

CAPSULE: The molded plastic, bimetal, or aluminum sheath that fits over the cork and top part of the neck of

a wine bottle. Historically, capsules were made of lead to keep animals and bugs away from the cork. T oday

lead is banned because of potential health risks.

CARBON DIOXIDE: Along with ALCOHOL, the gas carbon dioxide (CO2) is a by-product of

FERMENTATION. Sometimes the small amounts of CO2 remaining in a wine make it slightly SPRITZY . If

fermentation occurs in a closed vessel, such as a bottle, the CO2 becomes trapped in the wine and will

ultimately form bubbles.

CARBONIC MACERATION: More accurately called semicarbonic maceration, carbonic maceration is a type

of FERMENTATION in which bunches of uncrushed grapes are placed whole inside a closed tank. The

weight of the bunches on top crushes those on the bottom, releasing juice that ferments in the standard

manner. For the intact bunches on top, however, fermentation takes place inside each grape, leading to an

extremely juicy style of wine. Carbonic maceration is used extensively in Beaujolais, where it heightens the

wine’s already grapy flavor.

CARTOUCHE: The raised glass logo or emblem embossed on a bottle of wine, most often found on the

wines from the region of Châteauneuf-du-Pape. A cartouche is added to a wine bottle by pressing a mold

filled with molten glass to the already-finished bottle. The word cartouche comes from the oval symbol used in

ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics to indicate that the name written within the oval was a royal name.

CHAPTALIZATION: The addition of cane or beet sugar to wine MUST before or during FERMENTATION in

order to increase the total amount of sugar and hence raise the potential ALCOHOL content (see page 932).

Chaptalization is legal and widely practiced in many cooler northern European wine regions, where cool

vintage years can lead to grapes that aren’t fully ripe and, in turn, to wines that are thin and lacking in BODY .

By increasing the alcohol content of such wines, the winemaker can make them fuller bodied and therefore

make them seem more substantial. Chaptalization is not permitted in many warm wine regions, including

California, where it is not needed but could be used to produce cheap wines high in alcohol but with virtually

no flavor.

CHARMAT METHOD: See BULK PROCESS.

CHEWY: A term for mouthfilling, FULL-BODIED wines, chunky and viscous enough to seem almost

chewable. Certain grape varieties, such as zinfandel, produced in very warm areas like Amador County,

California, often take on a chewy character.

CLONE: The verb to clone means to propagate a group of vines from a “mother” vine that has desirable

characteristics. The noun clone refers to plants of the same species that have identical physical

characteristics and hence probably can be traced to a common “mother” plant. Clones are the result of

natural genetic mutations, with each mutation then being replicated via cuttings. For example, pinot noir, a

variety of grape, has many clones thanks to natural genetic mutations that have occurred over hundreds,

possibly thousands, of years. Clones are critical in VITICULTURE because two clones of the same grape

variety can taste remarkably different. Because clones occur spontaneously in nature, there is no way of

knowing how many clones of a given variety exist at any one time.

CLOSED IN: Refers to a wine that seems to have considerable potential, yet its AROMAS and flavors are

temporarily muted. A wine can be closed in for a variety of reasons. Two common ones: It’s young or it’s

densely concentrated and needs time and/or oxygen to open up. In the first instance, the closed in wine may

need additional BOTTLE AGING before it opens up; in the second case, pouring the wine into a carafe or

decanter and giving it an hour or so to breathe will help.

CLOUDY: Descriptive term, not necessarily negative, for a wine that looks hazy rather than brilliantly clear. A

wine can be slightly cloudy because it has not undergone FINING or filtration (see FILTER). Some wines,

however, are cloudy as the result of faulty winemaking.

CLOYING: Describes a wine with unbearable, candy-like sweetness. Dessert wines should not be cloying.

CLUSTER: An entire bunch of grape berries.

CLUSTER THINNING: During the vine’s growth cycle, the act of removing the fruit to enhance the quality of

the fruit left on the vine.

COARSE: Descriptive term for a harsh, unsophisticated wine, lacking in FINESSE.

COLD FERMENTATION: A type of FERMENTATION that takes place in a vessel that can be cooled, usually a

stainless-steel tank. Because cool fermentations are slower and more gentle than those that occur at warm

temperatures, they help preserve the wine’s fresh FRUIT AROMAS and flavors. Many light- and medium-

bodied white wines are cold-fermented.

COLD STABILIZATION: A common winemaking technique whereby harmless TARTRATE crystals and small

protein molecules are intentionally precipitated out of the wine. This is done by quickly chilling it. Unstabilized

wines sometimes become hazy or form snowflake-like crystals, which are odorless and tasteless but look a

bit unnerving.

COLOR: One of the distinguishing characteristics of wine, color is derived primarily from grape skins. White

wines vary from pale straw to greenish yellow to yellow-gold amber; reds from garnet to crimson to brick red

to lipstick red to purple. While the color of a wine is a tip-off to its variety (zinfandel is usually purplish in color,

for example) and an indication of its age (white wines get darker as they get older; red wines get lighter), color

is not a predictor of a wine’s flavor or quality.

COMPLEX: Describes a multifaceted wine with compelling nuances and character. Importantly, in a complex

wine, the multiple AROMAS and flavors reveal themselves subsequently over time. Thus, a complex wine is

unknowable in one sip. All great wines are complex.

CONCRETE EGGS: Large egg-shaped concrete vessels (usually 5 to 6 feet tall) used to ferment white wine.

Fermenting in concrete eggs has been practiced in France for decades, and the technique is now also used

in the New World. There are distinct advantages to fermenting wine in concrete eggs instead of oak barrels or

stainless-steel tanks. As fermentation gets underway, the oval shape of the egg helps create a vortex,

causing the wine to roll in circular arcs, assuring a thorough, active fermentation. The concrete itself holds

heat well, so the warmth created by fermentation is not quickly dissipated, and the wine doesn’t experience

wide temperature swings. Lastly, concrete is porous like wood, which allows for the gentle introduction of air,

which softens the wine.

COOPERAGE: Containers a winery uses for storing wine, usually barrels or wood casks, though the term

cooperage can also apply to concrete or stainless-steel vessels.

CORDON: A permanent woody arm that is trained horizontally from the trunk of the vine. The cordon will

support the SHOOTS and grape clusters.

CORKED: A term used to describe a wine that smells like a wet dog in a basement or, sometimes, like wet

cardboard. Wines become corked when certain bacteria in the cork cells interact with minute amounts of

chemical residues that may remain in corks or wine bottles after they are cleaned. A corked wine has a

defective AROMA and flavor, although it will not harm the drinker. Corked wine cannot be predicted. Any

wine, regardless of its quality or price, can be corked.

CROSS: A grape created by fertilizing one genetic variety of grape with another genetic variety that belongs

to the same species. While a cross may be the result of breeding, most crosses occur spontaneously in

nature. Within the European species VITIS VINIFERA two highly regarded man-made crosses are scheurebe

(riesling × silvaner) and pinotage (pinot noir × cinsaut). A cross is different than a HYBRID.

CRUSH: Used as a verb, to crush means to break the grape skins so that the pulp oozes out and

FERMENTATION can more easily begin. As a noun, crush is the general term used for all of the steps (e.g.,

harvesting) that take place just prior to fermentation.

CUTTING: A segment of a dormant CANE 14 to 18 inches long that is cut off a growing vine and used to

propagate a new plant through GRAFTING or direct planting.

D

DECANT : The act of pouring a wine (generally an older wine) off any SEDIMENT or deposits that may have

precipitated out and settled in the bottle. Sometimes the term is used to describe the action of pouring a

young wine into a decanter or carafe to mix it with oxygen and open it up, but this is more correctly called

AERATION.

DECLASSIFY: With European wines, the decision to place a wine in a category that is lower in status than

seems appropriate given the quality of the wine. European wines may be declassified for a variety of reasons.

In France, for example, wines that do not meet the strict requirements of AOC laws are declassified, usually

to TABLE WINE.

DEMI-SEC: Literally, half-dry in French. T erm used for a SPARKLING WINE or Champagne that is moderately

sweet.

DEPTH: Intensity and concentration. An especially intense and concentrated cabernet sauvignon, for

example, might be described as having depth.

DESSERT WINE: General term for a wine that is sweet and, as such, could accompany, or be, dessert. In the

United States, such wines often fall into the category of LATE HARVEST . There are many ways of making

dessert wines (see page 693). Two of the world’s most famous dessert wines, French Sauternes and German

trockenbeerenauslesen, are the result of grapes that are infected with the noble rot BOTRYTIS CINEREA.

DESTEMMER: A machine that separates the stems from the grapes. When combined with a crusher, it is

called a crusher-destemmer.

DIACETYL: Buttery-tasting compound created as a by-product of MALOLACTIC FERMENTATION.

Chardonnays that have gone through malolactic fermentation often have noticeable diacetyl.

DIRTY: A negative description of wines with off flavors and odors resulting from faulty winemaking. The

implication is that something is present in the wine that shouldn’t be.

DISGORGING: Referred to in French as DÉGORGEMENT (see French glossary), this is the process used in

the making of Champagne or SPARKLING WINE by which yeasty sediment is removed from the bottle after

the second bubble-forming FERMENTATION.

DIURNAL TEMPERATURE FLUCTUATION: The difference in temperature from the coolest point in the

morning to the warmest point in the afternoon. A large difference between these two temperatures is ideal for

wine-growing regions, as it allows the sugars to ripen during the heat of the day while the natural acids are

preserved thanks to the coolness of the night. In regions such as central Spain and Mendoza, Argentina, the

diurnal temperature fluctuation can be as much as 30°F to 40°F (-1°C to 4°C).

DNA PROFILING: The practice of using DNA markers to identify the parentage of a vine. Also called DNA

typing or fingerprinting.

DRY: Commonly used to describe any wine that doesn’t contain significant grape sugar. T echnically, a dry

wine is one fermented until less than 0.2 percent of natural (RESIDUAL SUGAR) remains. A wine can be dry

and taste FRUITY at the same time.

DUMB: Describes a wine that temporarily has little taste. This can be a wine, usually white, that is served so

cold that it tastes as though it’s not altogether there. Or it can be a wine, usually red, in an awkward stage of

its development when it tastes neither full of FRUIT and young, nor mature. In this strange state, sometimes

called adolescence, the wine seems dull, ungenerous, almost mute. Why some wines go through dumb

phases is not fully understood.

E

EARTHY: Used to describe a wine the AROMA or flavor of which is reminiscent of the earth. It usually refers

to flavors that evoke soil or the forest—moss, dried leaves, bark, mushrooms, and the like. The term is

sometimes extrapolated to include the pleasant, sensual aromas of the human body.

ELEGANT : A descriptive term for a wine with such FINESSE and BALANCE that it tastes refined rather than

rustic.

ENOLOGY: The science and study of winemaking, differentiated from VITICULTURE, the study of grape

growing. Also spelled oenology.

ESTATE BOTTLED: Exact definitions of estate bottled differ depending on the country from which the wine

comes. In the United States, the term may be used by a winery only if 100 percent of the wine came from

grapes grown on land owned or controlled by the winery, and both the land and winery must be in an

authorized viticultural area. The winery must produce 100 percent of the wine, age it, and bottle it at the

winery. While the winery and vineyard must be within the same viticultural area, the parcels do not need to be

contiguous.

ESTERS: Aromatic compounds produced by yeasts and bacteria primarily during FERMENTATION. Esters

may be complementary or deleterious to the wine.

ETHANOL OR ETHYL ALCOHOL: Commonly referred to simply as alcohol. ALCOHOL results when yeasts

convert the natural sugar in ripe grapes during FERMENTATION.

EXTRACT : The soluble particles in wine that would remain if all the liquid was drawn off.

EXTRA DRY: A confusing designation, extra dry actually refers to Champagne or SPARKLING WINE that is

slightly sweet, containing 1.2 to 2.0 percent residual sugar.

F

FAT : A descriptive term for the texture of a FULL-BODIED wine with saturated fruit. Although being fat is

generally considered a positive wine trait, being flabby is not. A flabby wine is a fat wine that lacks acidity so

that it seems gross and unfocused.

FERMENTATION: Also known as primary fermentation, the process whereby yeasts convert the natural sugar

in the grapes into ALCOHOL and CARBON DIOXIDE. The alcohol will remain a constituent of the wine that

results, but in most cases, the carbon dioxide will be allowed to escape as a by-product.

FIELD BLEND: An old method of VITICULTURE whereby different grape varieties are planted within a single

vineyard. The grower then harvests all of the grapes at the same time and ferments them together. Thus, the

final blend of the wine is based on the percentages of the varieties in the vineyard. If about 20 percent of the

vineyard was planted with syrah, then the final wine will be composed of about 20 percent syrah. Before the

twentieth century, most blended wines were based on field blends. T oday, vineyards (or at least blocks within

a vineyard) tend to be planted with a single variety. The grower can then harvest that variety when it is

optimally ripe and ferment it separately in order to evaluate it before using it in the final blend.

FIELD SELECTION: Known in French as selection massale, a field selection is made up of a group of clones

within a given vineyard. When a grower wants to create a new vineyard using field selection, he takes

cuttings not from one mother vine (which would be a single clone) but rather from a series of different

“mothers” in the vineyard, hoping to replicate the clonal diversity with that site.

FILTER: A filter is a porous membrane or other device used to remove selected particles from a liquid. In

winemaking, a filter can be used to remove yeast cells and bacteria from the wine. Winemakers may filter a

wine extensively, not at all, or to any degree in between. Some critics contend that some wines are filtered

excessively, thereby stripping them of positive flavors and textures.

FINESSE: Used to describe a wine with elegance and BALANCE. The term implies that the wine is polished

and sophisticated. Hearty, rustic country wines would not be described as having finesse, while a well-made

Champagne or top white Burgundy might be.

FINING: A process of softening the texture of a wine by adding one or more protein coagulants, such as

gelatin, egg whites, or ISINGLASS, to the wine. The coagulant attaches itself to TANNIN molecules, then

settles to the bottom of the container, carrying tannin along with it. Fining can also be done to clarify the color

of a wine, as when BENTONITE, a clay, is used to remove unwanted particles suspended in the wine that are

making the wine appear hazy.

FINISH: The impression that a wine leaves in your mouth even after you have swallowed it. A finish may be

almost nonexistent, fairly short, or extremely long. It may be smooth and lingering or rough and choppy. A

finish may also be dominated by one component in the wine, such as ALCOHOL (a HOT finish), ACID (a tart

finish), or TANNIN (an ASTRINGENT finish). A great wine, as opposed to a good wine, always has a

pronounced, very long, lingering, well-balanced finish. In some judgings, officials actually measure the length

of time that the wine can still be tasted after it has been swallowed.

FLAT : Refers to wines that taste dull and uninteresting. Often this is because the wine lacks ACIDITY .

FLOWERY: Used to describe AROMAS and flavors, usually present in white wines, that are reminiscent of

flowers.

FORTIFIED: A wine, such as Sherry or Port, that has had its ALCOHOL content increased by the addition of

distilled grape spirits (clear brandy). Most fortified wines contain 16 to 20 percent ALCOHOL BY VOLUME.

FOXY: An odd descriptive term (having nothing to do with foxes, or sex appeal, for that matter) for the wild,

candylike aroma and flavor associated with wines that come from native American grapes of the VITIS

labrusca species, such as Concord. The flavor is derived from an ESTER, methyl anthranilate.

FREE RUN: The juice that runs—freely—simply as the result of the weight of the grapes, before any

mechanical pressure is applied in a PRESS.

FRUIT : The part of a wine’s AROMA and flavor that comes from grapes. The fruit in a wine is distinguished

from the wine’s ALCOHOL or ACID.

FRUITY: A catchall term for the pronounced flavor or AROMA that comes from the wine grapes themselves.

Wines are generally most fruity when they are young. In addition, certain VARIETAL wines (gewürztraminer,

gamay, zinfandel) seem more fruity than others.

FULL-BODIED: Having pronounced weight on the palate. Full-bodied wines are to LIGHT-BODIED wines as

half-and-half is to skim milk. All other things being equal, the higher a wine’s ALCOHOL content, the more full-

bodied it will seem.

FUTURES: See EN PRIMEUR in the French glossary.

G

GENERIC: A category of inexpensive wine that has been given a general generic name that is not controlled

by law. In the United States, terms such as “chablis,

” “rhine,

” “sherry,

” and “burgundy” are all considered

generic terms because they are not controlled by United States law. Note that in Europe these are stringently

defined terms. Thus, any inexpensive blended wine in the United States may be called “chablis” even though

the wine itself will bear no resemblance to its namesake.

GLYCERINE: Also called glycerol, glycerine is a colorless, odorless, slightly sweet, oily substance that is a

minor by-product of FERMENTATION. Though often commented upon by tasters, glycerine probably makes

no more than a negligible contribution to a dry wine’s viscosity and it is not responsible for a wine’s so-called

“legs” or “tears.

” The wines with the highest glycerine levels are sweet botrytized wines. In these wines,

glycerine may contribute slightly to the wine’s sweetness and unctuous feel.

GRAFT : T o splice one grape species (say, vinifera) onto another species (say, rupestris). Grafting makes it

possible to grow, say, chardonnay, (which belongs to the species vinifera), onto a native American species

ROOTSTOCK. Without the ability to graft, many of the great vineyards of the world would have long ago

succumbed to the insect PHYLLOXERA.

GRASSY: A descriptive term for the green flavors and AROMAS reminiscent of just-cut grass, meadows,

fields of hay, and the like. The VARIETAL most often described as grassy is sauvignon blanc.

GREEN: A flavor in wine generally associated with those of grass, moss, or vegetables. Also a flavor found in

wines made from underripe grapes. A certain amount of greenness can be characteristic of, and therefore

positive in, some varietals like sauvignon blanc. With most red VARIETALS, however, obvious greenness is

considered a fault.

GUNFLINT : The taste or smell suggested by wet metal. Often used to describe sauvignon blancs, particularly

OLD WORLD ones.

H

HERBAL: When used to describe a wine with flavors or AROMAS slightly reminiscent of herbs, herbal is

positive. Good sauvignon blanc, for example, is considered slightly herbal. When herbal flavors become

extreme, they are often described as herbaceous, a quality some wine drinkers like and others don’t. Herbal

is different than VEGETAL, a term used negatively to describe a wine with a dank green OFF ODOR.

HOGSHEAD: A modern hogshead, quite a bit larger than a small barrel, holds 79.25 gallons (300 liters).

Winemakers use hogsheads when they want the wine to be less stamped by oak, as may be the case with

such delicate varieties as sangiovese and pinot noir.

HOT : Refers to a wine with a level of ALCOHOL that is out of BALANCE with its ACID and FRUIT . The

impression of excessive alcohol produces a slight burning “hit” at the top of the nasal passages and on the

palate.

HYBRID: A new grape variety developed by breeding two or more genetically distinct varieties from different

species. When the hybrid is a cross of a European species (VITIS VINIFERA) grape and a grape from any

one of several American species, it is referred to as a French-American hybrid. These hybrids were

developed by French plant breeders after the massive PHYLLOXERA infestation in the late nineteenth

century, but are now banned in most French appellations. Well-known hybrids include baco noir, villard blanc,

and seyval blanc, all of which are grown in the eastern United States.

I

IRF SCALE: A scale created to indicate how dry or sweet a riesling tastes. Created by the International

Riesling Foundation (IRF) in 2007, the chart (which appears on the back label of many riesling wines globally)

shows a spectrum from dry to medium dry to medium sweet to fully sweet. It then pinpoints where that wine

falls. The IRF scale is based on sophisticated technical guidelines, including the ratio of sugar to acid in the

wine. Wines with very high acid, for example, may still taste dry even though they have some amount of

residual sugar.

ISINGLASS: A gelatinous material, obtained from the air bladders of sturgeons and other fish, that is used in

FINING to clarify and/or soften the texture of wine; happily enough, it is removed before bottling.

J

JAMMY: Having the thick, concentrated berry AROMA or flavor of jam. Also, the thick, rich, mouthfilling

texture of jam. Full-bodied, ripe red zinfandel is often described as jammy.

JUG WINES: Inexpensive wines sold in large bottles. Jug wines can be GENERIC blends or made from one

variety of grape.

L

LABRUSCA: See VITIS LABRUSCA.

LATE HARVEST : As the term suggests, a wine that comes from grapes picked after the normal harvest and

therefore contains a greater percentage of sugar. Late-harvest wines may also be infected with the noble rot,

BOTRYTIS CINEREA. DESSERT WINES are usually late harvested.

LEES: The remnants of yeast cells and bits of grape skin that settle to the bottom of the container after

FERMENTATION is complete. Leaving the fermented wine in contact with its lees (SUR LIE), rather than

removing the lees right away, often adds complexity and nuance. See AUTOLYSIS.

LEGS: Also known as tears in Spain and cathedral windows in Germany, legs are the rivulets of wine that

have inched up the inside surface of the glass above the wine, then run slowly back down. Myth has it that

the fatter the legs, the better the wine. This is not true. The width of legs is determined by the interrelationship

of a number of complex factors, including the amount of ALCOHOL, the amount of glycerol (see

GLYCERINE), and the rate of evaporation of the alcohol and the surface tension between solids and liquids.

But the most important point is this: Legs have nothing to do with quality. It is irresistible to point out that

wines—like women—should not be judged by their legs.

LIGHT-BODIED: The term that describes a wine that has very little weight on the palate. A light-bodied wine

literally feels light in your mouth, while a FULL-BODIED wine feels just the opposite. Light-bodied wines are

low in ALCOHOL.

LUXURY WINE: The top category within the widely accepted hierarchy of wine prices established by

Gomberg, Fredrickson & Associates. Luxury Wine is defined as wine that costs more than $25 per bottle.

M

MADERIZED: A term for a wine that has been subject to a long period of OXIDATION and heat. The best-

known example is Madeira, from which the term maderized comes. TABLE WINES should not be maderized.

See OXIDATION.

MAGNUM: A 1.5-liter bottle, which contains the equivalent of two normal (750 milliliter) bottles. Magnum

means “large” in Latin.

MALOLACTIC FERMENTATION: This process has nothing to do with primary FERMENTATION, since it does

not involve yeasts or the production of ALCOHOL. Rather, malolactic fermentation is a chemical conversion of

ACID instigated by beneficial bacteria. During the process, the sharp malic acid in grapes is converted to

softer lactic acid. As a result, the wine tastes less crisp and more creamy. During malolactic fermentation, the

by-product DIACETYL is created, giving the wine a buttery character. Malolactic fermentation can either occur

naturally or be prompted by the winemaker. All red wines go through malolactic fermentation, rendering them

more microbially stable. White wines may or may not. If the winemaker wants to achieve a soft MOUTHFEEL

in the white wine, then malolactic fermentation is induced. If he or she prefers to retain dramatic, snappy

acidity, then malolactic fermentation is prevented, usually by the use of SULFUR.

MASSALE SELECTION: An ancient method (literally “mass selection”) of establishing a new vineyard or

replanting an old one by selecting numerous older vines throughout an existing vineyard, propagating and

planting them. Mass selection can help to maintain the consistency of style of the wine from a particular

vineyard. The opposite of massale selection would be to replant a vineyard using specific clonal material from

a nursery.

MERCAPTANS: Offensive-smelling compounds that result from poor winemaking when hydrogen sulfide

combines with components of the wine. The AROMAS can include putrid food, skunk, and burnt rubber.

MERITAGE: A United States trademarked designation, adopted in 1988 by the Meritage Association, for

California wines that are a blend of the varieties of grapes used in Bordeaux. A red Meritage might be made

up of cabernet sauvignon, merlot, and cabernet franc. A white Meritage would be a blend of sauvignon blanc

and sémillon. Meritage wines are usually moderately expensive and are often given fanciful proprietary

names. Such wines as Opus One, Insignia, Cain Five, and Magnificat would all qualify as Meritage if their

producers chose to have them so designated. Producers may choose not to use the term Meritage even if

their wine meets the qualifications.

MICROOXYGENATION: A process winemakers use to add oxygen to wine in a controlled fashion. Adding

oxygen changes the chemistry of the wine and, depending on the timing of the introduction, can have several

different effects. Microoxygenation is most commonly used to assist fermentation, and/or accelerate

maturation.

MOUTHFEEL: The tactile impression of a wine in your mouth. Like clothing, wine can feel soft, rough, velvety,

and so on.

MUST : The juice and liquidy pulp produced by crushing or pressing grapes before FERMENTATION.

MUSTY: A dank, old-attic smell in a wine, attributed to unclean storage containers and sometimes to grapes

processed when moldy.

N

NÉGOCIANT : See the French glossary.

NEW WORLD: A descriptive term encompassing all of those wine-producing countries that do not belong to

the OLD WORLD. The most important New World wine producers are the United States, Australia, New

Zealand, South Africa, Argentina, and Chile. By extension, New World techniques generally refer to modern

viticultural and winemaking methods that rely heavily on science. Avant-garde Old World wine producers are

often said to use New World techniques.

NOBLE ROT : See BOTRYTIS CINEREA.

NONVINTAGE: When applied to Champagne, a blend of wines from different vintage years. (A more correct

term would be multivintage.) The majority of Champagnes are nonvintage. Sherry, Port, and Madeira are also

usually nonvintage.

NOSE: The smell of a wine, including both the AROMA from the grape and the BOUQUET from AGING.

O

OAKY: A descriptive term for the toasty, woody, and vanilla smells and flavors contributed to wine during its

FERMENTATION and/or AGING in oak barrels. The newer the oak barrel, the greater the potential for the

wine to have a pronounced oaky character. Often (but not always) the longer the wine is left in oak, the

greater the oaky influence. A wine that has an oak flavor that dominates all natural fruit flavors is considered

over-oaked.

ODORS: The panoply of smells that may emanate from a wine. These include a whole range of fruits and

berries (apple, lemon, peach, apricot, cherry, raspberry, cranberry, plum, and so on); plus flowers

(honeysuckle, rose, violet, geranium, and so forth); plus assorted other smells reminiscent of the earth, yeast,

beer, leaves, herbs, vegetables, mushrooms, truffles, straw, wet wool, caramel, pepper, spices, nuts, oak,

wood, meat, game, mold, cigar boxes, dust, mint, pine, eucalyptus, olives, fuel oil, and rubber boots.

OENOLOGY: See ENOLOGY .

OFF-DRY: Ever so slightly sweet. In the U.S., there is however, no legally defined amount of sugar a wine

must have to be considered off-dry.

OFF ODORS: Unpleasant smells (chemicals, dankness, moldiness, rotten eggs, burnt rubber, sauerkraut,

and so on) that suggest that the wine was stored in unclean containers or poorly made.

OIDIUM: A vine disease also known as powdery mildew.

OLD WORLD: As applied to wine, Old World refers to those countries where wine first flourished, namely

Western or Central European countries and others ringing the Mediterranean basin and in the Near East. Old

World techniques, by extension, refer to ways of growing grapes and making wines that rely more on tradition

and less on science. The Old World is usually talked about in contrast to the NEW WORLD. Wine producers

in the New World, however, are often fond of saying that they employ Old World techniques as a way of

establishing that their wines are made at least in part by traditional methods.

OLFACTION: The process of perceiving smells. In order to smell things—that is, in order for olfaction to occur

—humans use two separate sensory areas. The first is the nasal cavity. AROMAS smelled via the nose are

said to occur by orthonasal olfaction. The other area is at the cavity at the back of the palate. Aromas

perceived this way—retronasally—happen as a result of wine first being warmed in the mouth and mixed with

saliva.

ORGANIC VITICULTURE: See box, page 35, in the chapter “Where It All Begins.

”

OXIDATION: The process of exposing wine to air, which changes it. A little oxidation can be positive; it can

help to soften and open up a wine, for example. T oo much exposure to air, however, is deleterious. It can

make a wine turn brown and take on a tired flavor. When too much exposure to air occurs, the wine is

described as oxidized.

P

PH: A measure of the strength of the relative acidity versus the relative alkalinity of wine (or any liquid) on a

logarithmic scale of 0 to 14. The lower the number is below 7 (the neutral pH of water), the greater the relative

acidity. Winemakers consider the pH of a wine in relationship to other factors (ALCOHOL, TANNIN,

EXTRACT , and the like) to determine if the wine is in BALANCE. As grapes mature, plotting the change in the

pH of their pulp is a way of determining ripeness.

PHENOLS: A group of chemical compounds occurring naturally in all plants. In wine, phenols are derived

from grape skins, stems, and seeds, as well as from oak barrels. Among the most important phenols are

TANNIN, COLOR pigments, and some flavor compounds, such as VANILLIN. Depending on their chemical

structure, some phenols are known as polyphenols.

PHYLLOXERA: A small, aphid-like insect that attacks the roots of vines belonging to the species VITIS

VINIFERA. Phylloxera slowly destroys the vine by preventing the roots from absorbing nutrients and water.

Native American vines, such as those belonging to the species VITIS LABRUSCA or Vitis riparia, tolerate the

insect without adverse consequences. In the latter part of the nineteenth century, a phylloxera epidemic swept

through Europe and eventually around the world. By the time a remedy was discovered, millions of acres of

vines had been destroyed. The remedy, still the only known solution, was to replant each vineyard, vine by

vine, with native American ROOTSTOCKS, then graft VITIS VINIFERA vines on top.

PIPE: In Victorian England, where a pipe of Port was commonly given to a newborn child as a gift, a pipe held

141.13 gallons (534.24 liters). T oday, a pipe holds a volume ranging from 145.29 gallons (550 liters) to 166.42

gallons (630 liters), depending on the country they come from and whether they are used for maturing or

shipping a wine. Pipes commonly contain Port, Sherry, Madeira, Marsala, or Cognac.

POMACE: The mashed-up solid residue (skins, stems, seeds, pulp) that is left after grapes are pressed.

When pomace is distilled, it can be made into GRAPPA (Italy), MARC (France), or EAU-DE-VIE (France and

the United States).

PREMIUM WINES: In the 1980s, the California-based wine consulting and management company of

Gomberg, Fredrickson & Associates established a hierarchy of wines according to price. The hierarchy

includes four levels of premium wine—Popular Premium ($3–$7), Mid Premium ($7–$10), Super Premium

($10–$14), and Ultra Premium ($14–$25).

PRESS: T o press means to exert pressure on grapes to extract their juices. A press is a device used to do

that. There are many kinds; one of the simplest and oldest is the hand-operated wooden basket press. A

more modern press—the bladder press—is essentially a horizontal tank with an inflatable membrane running

through its middle. As the membrane swells, it gently squeezes the grapes against the side of the revolving

tank. Grape bunches can be put whole into a press, but more often they are crushed and the stems are

removed first.

PRIVATE RESERVE: A term found on some NEW WORLD wine labels for which there is no legal definition.

Sometimes a wine labeled Private Reserve is truly special and of high quality (such as Beaulieu Vineyards’

Georges de Latour Private Reserve). Other times, however, the phrase is simply a hackneyed way of

marketing an ordinary wine. Similar terms include Proprietor’s Reserve and Grand Reserve.

PRODUCED AND BOTTLED BY: A term found on U.S. wine labels indicating that not less than 75 percent of

the wine was fermented at the address on the label and that the wine was bottled at that address. See

VINTED AND BOTTLED BY .

PRUNING: The removal of living canes, shoots, leaves, and other vegetative growth. Vines are usually

pruned in winter when the plant is dormant (and thus less susceptible to diseases that could infiltrate the vine

via the pruning wounds). Pruning is generally severe. About 90 percent of the previous season’s growth is

removed each year. Pruning keeps vines manageable and affects how the vine will grow in the following year.

Thus, pruning can be used to regulate the size and quality of the next year’s crop. Pruning is usually done by

hand with shears, but mechanical pruners do exist to speed up pruning in large vineyards, especially in

countries like Australia, where agricultural workers are in short supply.

PUCKERY: Used to describe a wine that is so high in TANNIN that it causes your mouth to pucker with

dryness. Most often the wine will have been made from insufficiently ripe grapes.

PULP: The soft, fleshy part of the grape, which is infused with juice.

PUMPING OVER: A process during the FERMENTATION of red wine in which the juice is pumped from the

bottom of the container to the top and then sprayed over the CAP of skins to break it up and keep it wet. By

trickling through this mass of skins, the juice picks up even more COLOR, flavor, and TANNIN. Pumping over

also helps prevent the growth of undesirable bacteria that might spoil the wine or create off flavors.

PUNCHEON: Modern puncheons, commonly used for wines like sangiovese that don’t benefit from a lot of

wood contact, come in two sizes: 79.25 gallons and 132.08 gallons (200 and 500 liters, respectively).

PUNCHING DOWN: The opposite of PUMPING OVER, this process accomplishes the same goals. During

punching down, the CAP is pushed down with a paddle into the fermenting grape juice. Punching down,

despite its name, is a gentle process.

PUNT : The indentation found in the bottom of most wine bottles. The punt may be shallow or, as in the case

of Champagne bottles, quite pronounced. The punt adds stability by weighting the bottom of the bottle and

strengthens the glass at its weakest point.

PYRAZINES: Molecular compounds in certain wines that give them a distinct green bell pepper flavor.

Pyrazines are found in high concentrations in the skins of cabernet sauvignon, sauvignon blanc, merlot, and

cabernet franc in particular. When these grapes do not get fully ripe, the pyrazine flavor is highly apparent.

Q

QVEVRI: A large earthenware vessel originating in Georgia around 6000 B.C. Lined with beeswax and sunk

into the ground to control temperature, it was traditionally used to ferment and store wine.

R

RACKING: A method of clarifying a wine that has SETTLED by siphoning or pumping off solids and

particulate matter, such as yeast cells and bits of grape skins, and pouring it into a different clean barrel.

Racking also AERATES a wine.

RAISINY: A descriptive term for a wine (generally a red) that tastes slightly like raisins because the grapes

were overripe when picked. A small bit of this quality can add an interesting nuance to the wine, but too much

is a flaw.

RESERVE: Many producers the world over make a reserve wine in addition to their regular offering, the

reserve being of higher quality (theoretically) and higher price (dependably). In the United States, a reserve

wine may be a selection of the best lots of wine from grapes grown in the best vineyards, and/or it may be a

wine that has been allowed to age longer before release. But since the term reserve is not actually defined by

United States law, an embarrassing number of producers use it purely as a marketing ploy to get you to buy

wine that is, in fact, of cheap quality and rather pedestrian. The one exception to this is Washington State,

where in 1999, an industry group, the Washington Wine Quality Alliance, set forth its own stipulations

regarding the term reserve. Members of the alliance—virtually all of the top wine producers in the state—

agreed to use the term reserve only for 10 percent of a winery’s production or 3,000 cases, whichever is

greater. Additionally, a wine labeled reserve must be among the higher-priced wines the winery produces, and

all of the grapes for the wine must be grown in Washington State. In contrast to the United States, most

European countries strictly define the terms reserve, RISERVA (Italy), RESERVA (Spain), and the like.

RESIDUAL SUGAR: Natural grape sugar that remains in wine because it has not been converted into

ALCOHOL during FERMENTATION. Wines that taste dry can nonetheless have a tiny amount of residual

sugar in them. Winemakers often leave small amounts of sugar in wine to make it seem rounder and more

appealing (sweetness has a slight fat feeling to it). Wine producers are not required to list residual sugar

content on labels.

RIDDLING: Called RÉMUAGE in French, riddling is the process during the making of Champagne or

SPARKLING WINE whereby the bottles are individually rotated and tilted a small bit day after day in order to

concentrate the yeast sediment in the necks prior to DISGORGING. In the past, bottles held in A-shape

frames called pupitres were riddled by hand. T oday, it may also be done by a computerized machine called a

gyropalette.

ROOTSTOCK: The part of the grapevine that is planted directly in the soil. Rootstocks from different varieties

have different tolerances to disease and climatic stress and will be more or less suitable to a given type of

soil. The variety of rootstock also affects how slowly or quickly the vine itself will grow. A vine need not grow

from its own roots. In fact, most vines are not grown from their own roots but instead are grafted onto select

rootstocks that have been bred for their disease-resistant properties (see PHYLLOXERA and VITIS).

ROTTEN EGG: The term most often used to describe a wine that exhibits the fault of having excessive

hydrogen sulfide.

ROUGH: Used to describe the coarse texture of a (usually young) tannic red wine before it has begun to

round out. AGING can sometimes soften a rough wine.

S

SCION: The portion of the vine that is grafted onto the rootstock and determines the type of fruit grown by the

plant.

SEC: French for DRY . In wine, however, the opposite is usually true. Champagne that is labeled sec, for

example, is medium sweet to sweet.

SECONDARY FERMENTATION: A FERMENTATION that takes place after the first fermentation, either

spontaneously or by intention. In the making of top Champagnes and SPARKLING WINES, the secondary

fermentation takes place inside the bottle and produces the gas that eventually becomes the wines’ bubbles

(see CARBON DIOXIDE). In table wine, a secondary fermentation is undesirable.

SECOND CROP: Fruit that matures after the first crop has been picked. This is usually not picked because

the quantity is too small to be economically viable and the grapes may not be sufficiently ripe.

SECOND WINE: The term for a secondary and usually less expensive wine made by a winery. In Bordeaux,

for example, Château Latour’s second label is Les Forts de Latour. Most wineries that make a second label

are highly respected for their primary label and may not want to actively market (or be known for) their second

label. The wine that is sold under the second label is never as high in quality as wine of the primary label. The

grapes may come from younger vines and/or lesser vineyards.

SEDIMENT : The particulate matter (usually harmless) and color pigments that may precipitate out of a wine

as it ages. The presence of sediment is not negative; many of the best wines in the world throw off sediment

as they age.

SETTLING: The precipitation (settling out) of solid matter in wine. SEDIMENT , for example, settles out of a

mature wine.

SHATTER: A phenomenon that can occur in the spring whereby individual grape berries become separated

from the stem and fall to the ground. May be caused by cool, wet weather during early grape development,

which tends to prevent the tiny cap on each fertilized berry from falling off. Then as the berries start to grow,

they push against the cap and shatter, significantly reducing yields.

SHOOT : A new green stem that springs from the CORDON of the vine as it begins to grow in the spring. The

shoots will ultimately sprout leaves and clusters of grapes.

SHOOT THINNING: The act of removing some shoots in order to improve the quality of the fruit, as well as to

reduce vine stress. By thinning the shoots, the winegrower attempts to get the vine to put its energy into

ripening its clusters rather than growing green vegetative parts.

SKIN CONTACT : In a sense, all red wines experience skin contact since in red wine FERMENTATION the

juice and skins of the grapes are in contact. But in contemporary winemaking, the term skin contact generally

refers to the process of letting crushed white grapes sit with the skins and the juice together, rather than

immediately separating them. This process helps add flavor and AROMA to the final wine. A white wine may

be given anywhere from a few hours to a couple of days of skin-contact time.

SMALL BARREL: Although first used as a general term to describe any wooden container, barrels are now

used as specific measures. Three types of small barrels are standard around the world. French oak Bordeaux

barrels, known as barriques, are used for many types of wine, including cabernet sauvignon, merlot, and

Bordeaux. They hold 59.43 gallons (225 liters). French oak Burgundy barrels, known as pieces, are generally

used for pinot noirs worldwide, including Burgundies. They hold 60.2 gallons (228 liters). And American oak

barrels, used for all types of wine, are made in both sizes.

SMOKY: A smoky smell and taste found in both white and red wines. Though wines can take on smoky

characters from the barrels in which they are aged, certain wines just have a naturally smoky character as a

result of their TERROIR (see the French glossary). Many Pouilly-Fumés and Sancerres from France’s Loire

Valley are smoky, for example.

SOMMELIER: The French term for a wine steward, which has also been appropriated by the English

language. In American slang, the word sommelier is sometimes contracted to somm.

SOUR: A descriptive term, generally used negatively, for a wine with a flavor that, as far as the taster is

concerned, is too sharp and acidic.

SPARKLING WINE: A wine with bubbles. The most famous sparkling wine is Champagne, made in the region

of the same name in France. Other types of sparkling wine include CAVA (from Spain), SEKT (from

Germany), and PROSECCO (from Italy).

SPICY: A descriptive term for a wine with an AROMA or flavor suggestive of aromatic spices. Spicy wines are

also often peppery and can have a slight, pleasantly scratchy texture.

SPLIT : A small wine bottle containing 6.4 ounces (187.5 milliliters), one fourth of a standard 750 milliliter

bottle.

SPRITZY: Wines with a small amount of sparkle from carbonation left or trapped in the wine. In a still wine,

this is usually undesirable.

STARTER: Commercial YEASTS used to initiate and ensure fermentation.

STEMMY: A descriptive term for a wine with the green odor or flavor of stems or, sometimes, wet grain.

STILL WINES: All wines that are not SPARKLING WINES.

SULFUR: A natural chemical compound that has been used as a wine preservative since antiquity. The most

common form of sulfur used in wine making is sulfur dioxide (SO2), which is formed when elemental sulfur is

burned in air. Added to wine (usually as a gas), sulfur dioxide prevents OXIDATION as well as bacterial

spoilage, and it inhibits the growth of YEASTS. As a result of this, sulfur dioxide can be used to stop

FERMENTATION in order to produce a sweet wine, and it can be used to prevent MALOLACTIC

FERMENTATION. A form of sulfur dioxide known as metabisulfite is often added to freshly picked grapes

(and fruit juices in general) as a preservative. Sulfur dioxide’s disadvantage is that it has an unpleasant,

burnt-match odor, which can be smelled at low concentrations, although people vary widely in the thresholds

at which they can detect it. The ability to detect sulfur dioxide also varies based on the type of wine, since in

some wines the compound reacts to or combines with other compounds, rendering it more difficult to

perceive. In any case, during the last few decades, winemakers the world over have sought to minimize the

amount of sulfur dioxide they use in winemaking, mostly in response to health concerns voiced by wine

drinkers. Nonetheless, it’s virtually impossible to produce a wine that is entirely sulfur-free, because a small

amount of sulfur dioxide is a byproduct of the metabolic action of yeasts during fermentation (this is why

bread, too, contains sulfur dioxide). As a result, United States law mandates that the term “contains sulfites”

appear on all wine labels that contain more than 10 parts per million of sulphur dioxide (and most do), even

when the wine has been produced without the addition of any sulfur dioxide. The word sulfites in the warning

is a catchall term for sulfur in all its various forms, including sulfur dioxide, sulfurous acid, bisulfite ion, and

sulfite ion, as well as other complex forms. Sulfur in all its forms is harmless to people except for the tiny

number of individuals who are severely allergic to it..

SUR LIE: Literally,

“on the lees.

” Some white wines, notably white Burgundies, are, for a period of time, left in

contact with the lees (spent YEAST) after FERMENTATION is complete. Wines that have been left take on a

creamy, rounder MOUTHFEEL and generally display more complex flavors.

SUSTAINABLE VITICULTURE: See box, page 35 in the chapter “Where It All Begins.

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T

TABLE WINE: The term used around the world to describe wines of moderate alcoholic strength (usually 9 to

15 percent ALCOHOL BY VOLUME) as opposed to FORTIFIED wines, which have grape spirits added to

them and thus are stronger in alcoholic strength (usually between 16 and 20 percent alcohol by volume). In

common speech, however, the term table wine is often used to indicate dry, STILL WINES served to

accompany dinner, rather than sweet wines intended for dessert or SPARKLING WINES.

TANNIN: A PHENOL (a kind of compound) derived from the skins, seeds, and stems of grapes and from

barrels. The presence of tannin is beneficial, for it gives red wines a firm structure as well as the potential for

aging. T annin is both tasted and felt. When young, highly tannic wines have a slight bitterness (like espresso

or chocolate) and a drying, astringent feel. If the wine has been made from mature grapes with ripe tannin,

the bitter, dry quality will be ameliorated. Excessively dry, harsh, scratchy tannin is a negative and may never

ameliorate. Harsh tannin, often called green or unripe tannin, most often results when grapes have been

picked before they are completely physiologically mature. Most white wines have only tiny amounts of tannin

because they are not fermented on their skins.

TARTRATES: T asteless, odorless, harmless bits of tartaric ACID that can precipitate out of a wine that has

not been COLD STABILIZED. T artrates look like small white snowflakes.

TASTEVIN: See the French glossary.

TERPENE: An organic compound that is produced by a variety of plants, including grapevines, which can

produce a strong aroma. It is found in higher concentrations mostly in gewürztraminer, muscat, riesling, and

other German crosses. Muscat has one of the highest concentrations of terpenes, and, therefore, its

characteristic aroma can often be said to smell of “terpene.

”

TERROIR: See the French glossary.

THIN: Used to describe a wine lacking body, because it is low in ALCOHOL, as well as lacking fruit flavors,

possibly because it was made from grapes produced at a very high YIELD. An extremely thin wine tastes

watery.

TOASTING: Charring the inside of new barrels over an open flame. Charring caramelizes the staves of the

wood. Wine stored in barrels treated this way will pick up a VANILLIN, toasty character.

TOPPING UP: T o add more wine to a barrel or container to replace any wine lost through evaporation, and

thereby prevent the wine from experiencing OXIDATION. The term is also used in more general

circumstances to mean adding wine to a glass in which there’s only a sip or two left.

TRANSFER PROCESS: A less expensive way of making SPARKLING WINE than the traditional MÉTHODE

CHAMPENOISE (see the French Glossary). In the transfer process, the SECONDARY FERMENTATION

takes place in the individual bottles (as it does in Champagne), but then instead of RIDDLING and

DISGORGING each bottle, the wine is emptied into large tanks where these two processes take place under

pressure. Finally, the wine is filtered, a DOSAGE (see the French glossary) is added, and the wine is

rebottled.

TRUNK: The vine’s permanent vertical stem, which grows out of the ground.

TYPICITY: A quality that a wine possesses if it is typical of its region and reflects the characteristics of the

grape variety from which it came. Whether or not a wine demonstrates typicity is pretty subjective. It also has

nothing to do with how good the wine tastes. A wine can be quite delicious and nonetheless show no typicity.

A rich, full-bodied, buttery, oaky Sancerre, for example, would not have typicity, since Sancerres are typically

lean, minerally, and zesty, and have tangy flavors. In certain OLD WORLD countries, an evaluation of typicity,

even though it’s subjective, is required by law in order for a wine to obtain APPELLATION status.

U

ULLAGE: The space that develops near the neck and shoulder inside a wine bottle or container because wine

has been lost through leakage or evaporation. In a bottle with significant ullage, the wine will often be

OXIDIZED and spoiled. In a wine auction, a wine with ullage will not command top dollar.

UNFILTERED: Used to describe a wine that has not been FILTERED to clarify it and remove any unwanted

YEASTS or bacteria. Winemakers who believe that filtering strips wine of some flavors and texture may leave

their wines unfiltered and may even label them as such. An unfiltered wine will often undergo FINING to

remove large particles in suspension as well as coarse TANNIN. Unfiltered wines are sometimes less than

brilliantly clear.

UNFINED: A wine that has not gone through FINING to remove large particulate matter and some tannins. As

with FILTERING, many winemakers believe fining can harm the flavor and texture of the wine. An unfined

wine may still be filtered.

UNOAKED: A wine that has been fermented and aged in stainless-steel or concrete vessels, instead of oak.

This style gives the wine more clarity and purity of fruit.

V

VANILLIN: A compound in oak barrels that is ultimately imparted to wine as a flavor and smell reminiscent of

vanilla. New barrels have more vanillin than older barrels, and hence wine stored in new barrels has a more

pronounced vanilla character.

VARIETAL: Wine made from a particular variety of grape. Chardonnay, riesling, pinot noir, cabernet

sauvignon, and so on are all varietal wines. In general, each varietal has a unique flavor, distinct from other

varietals. When a wine has a pronounced varietal flavor, it is said to have varietal character. On January 1,

1983, United States law established that a wine named after a grape—a varietal—must contain 75 percent or

more of that grape variety and must have been grown in the appellation of origin appearing on the label. Prior

to that date, a varietally labeled wine had to contain 51 percent or more of the named grape.

VEGETAL: Used to describe a wine with off-putting AROMAS and flavors reminiscent of stewed or canned

green beans, asparagus, artichokes, and the like.

VERAISON: The change of color of the grape berries, signaling the onset of ripening. White grapes go from

green to yellow, and red grapes go from green to red.

VINEGARY: Describes a wine with the harsh aroma of vinegar, usually produced by ACETIC acid.

Considered a major fault in a wine.

VINICULTURE: The science of winemaking. The term is used much less frequently than ENOLOGY .

VINIFERA: See VITIS.

VINOUS: Winelike. Europeans sometimes criticize California wines as being too fruity and so not vinous

enough.

VINTAGE: The year the grapes were grown and harvested. A vintage year appears on the labels of most

wines, though some famous wines—nonvintage Champagne, Sherry, and many styles of Port, for example—

never carry a vintage date because they are blends of wines from several different years. In the United

States, most wines bottled with a vintage date are made up entirely of grapes from that year. T echnically,

however, United States law requires only that 95 percent of the wine comes from grapes harvested in the

year appearing on the label.

VINTAGE CHAMPAGNE: Champagne made from a single year’s harvest. Aged a minimum of three years

and often four or five. Called MILLÉSIME in French.

VINTED AND BOTTLED BY: A term found on United States wine labels, indicating that the wine was bottled

at the address on the label and that some cellar treatment (such as aging) was performed at the address on

the label. However, vinted and bottled by does not mean that the wine was necessarily fermented at the

address on the label. See PRODUCED AND BOTTLED BY .

VINTNER: A person who makes or sells wine. Often used to describe the owner of a winery who may also

employ a winemaker.

VISCOSITY: The character some wines possess of being somewhat syrupy and slow to move around in the

mouth. A spoonful of honey, for example, is more viscous than a spoonful of water, and ALCOHOL, by its

nature, is viscous. Thus both sweet wines and wines with high alcohol are more viscous than dry wines and

wines low in alcohol.

VITICULTURE: The science of growing grapes.

VITIS: The genus of the plant kingdom to which grapevines belong. Within the genus Vitis there are some

sixty separate species. The most famous species—and the only one to have originated in Europe—is VITIS

VINIFERA, which includes all of the well-known wine grapes: chardonnay, pinot noir, cabernet sauvignon, and

so on (and accounts for virtually all of the wines made today). Most species of vines, however, originated in

North America. These include VITIS LABRUSCA, Vitis riparia, Vitis rupestris, Vitis rotundifolia, and Vitis

berlandieri, among others.

VITIS LABRUSCA: American vine species that generally produces wines that are far less sophisticated and

complex than vinifera varieties. In particular, labrusca grapes are easily recognizable by their pungent,

candylike aroma and flavor, usually described as FOXY . Concord, for example, is a grape variety that belongs

to the species Vitis labrusca. Over centuries, many American species have hybridized by chance. In addition,

from 1880 to 1950, plant scientists in both France and the United States intentionally created HYBRIDS by

crossing vinifera varieties with hardier, more disease- and pest-resistant American varieties. While their use

for wine is declining, hybrids remain critically important as ROOTSTOCKS. Two other North American vine

species are Vitis riparia and Vitis rotundifolia. Although no well-known wines are made from these species,

they are very resistant to PHYLLOXERA and so are frequently used for root-stocks. French/American hybrids

such as baco noir are also made with these species.

VITIS VINIFERA: A vine species accounting for most of the wines made in the world today. Such grapes as

chardonnay, cabernet sauvignon, pinot noir, syrah, and riesling are all Vitis vinifera varieties. Vitis vinifera

originated in Europe and the Middle East.

VOLATILE ACIDITY: All wines have a tiny amount of volatile acidity, usually, with any luck, imperceptible. In

excess, V.A., as it is known, causes a wine to have an unpleasantly sharp, vinegary aroma. Volatile acidity

occurs because unwanted bacteria have produced ACETIC acid, the result of poor winemaking.

Y

YEASTS: Single-celled microorganisms used to convert sugar to alcohol and carbon dioxide during

fermentation.

YEASTY: In STILL WINES, yeasty describes an AROMA suggestive of the yeasts used in FERMENTATION.

The quality should not be pronounced. In Champagne and SPARKLING WINES, it refers to the aroma of

bread dough, considered positive and often the result of long aging on the LEES.

YIELD: The measure of how much a vineyard produces. In general, very high yields are associated with low-

quality wine, and low yields are associated with high-quality wine. However, the relationship of yield of grapes

to wine quality is extremely complex and not linear. Thus, a yield of 2 tons per acre does not necessarily

produce better wine than a yield of 3 tons per acre, which doesn’t necessarily portend better wine than if the

yield were 4 tons per acre. Every vineyard is different, and yield must always be considered in light of multiple

other factors, including the variety of grape, the type of CLONE, the age of the vine, the particular

ROOTSTOCK, and the TERROIR. In Europe, yield is measured in hectoliters per hectare (one hectoliter

equals 26.4 gallons; one hectare equals 2.47 acres). The unofficial French dictum is that great red wine

cannot be made from yields of more than 50 hectoliters per hectare. In the United States, yield is generally

measured in tons of grapes per acre. Roughly speaking, 1 ton per acre equals 15 hectoliters per hectare.

Yields in the United States can range from less than 1 ton per acre to 10 or more. This said, the way yield is

thought about in the United States is changing as a result of new vineyards, many of which are now planted

so that the vines are much more closely spaced than they were in the past. With such vineyards, viticulturists

talk of pounds of grapes per vine, rather than tons per acre.

FRENCH WINE TERMS

A

APPELLATION D’ORIGINE CONTRÔLÉE (AOC): See page 137.

ASSEMBLAGE: A Champagne or SPARKLING WINE term that refers to the blending, or assembling, of still

wines before the SECONDARY FERMENTATION, which creates the bubbles.

B

BAUMÉ: The scale used in France and much of the rest of Europe for measuring sugar in grapes and, hence,

their ripeness. Other scales for measuring sugar include BRIX (used in the United States) and OECHSLE

(used in Germany).

BAN DES VENDANGES: Literally,

“opening of the harvest”

—the official date when harvest can begin.

Growers can choose to begin harvest anytime after the ban des vendanges but not before it. A ban des

vendanges is mandatory in some (but not all) AOCs, including Champagne and Burgundy. Within a given

area, the ban des vendanges differs depending on the grape variety and location of the vineyard.

BLANC DE BLANCS: Literally,

“white from whites.

” A golden Champagne or SPARKLING WINE made

entirely from white grapes, usually chardonnay grapes.

BLANC DE NOIRS: Literally,

“white from blacks.

” A golden Champagne or SPARKLING WINE made from

black (noir) grapes. (The French refer to red grapes as black.) It is possible to make a white wine from red

grapes because the juice and PULP of red-skinned grapes is white. Blanc de noirs are usually made from

pinot noir, but pinot meunier may be used in some cases. Very few Champagne houses produce blanc de

noirs Champagnes. The practice is more common among makers of Californian sparkling wines.

BOUCHON: A type of restaurant in Lyon, France, known for serving traditional Lyonnaise dishes, which are

heavy on meat and fat. The goal of a bouchon is not haute cuisine but a friendly and personal atmosphere.

There are about 20 certified bouchons in Lyon, although many more proclaim themselves to be. Bouchon

also refers to a stopper for the mouth of a wine bottle, most often a sparkling wine, as it prevents the bubbles

from escaping.

BOTRYTIS CINEREA: See Main Glossary.

BRUT : A DRY to very dry Champagne or SPARKLING WINE containing less than 15 grams of sugar per liter

(equal to 1.5 percent residual sugar). EXTRA BRUT is slightly drier than brut.

C

CÉPAGE NOBLE: Cépage means “grape variety.

” The so-called noble grape varieties—cépages nobles—are

those that consistently make fine wine, such as cabernet sauvignon, pinot noir, or chardonnay.

CHAI: Above-ground facility used to store wine.

CHAPTALIZATION: See Main Glossary.

CHÂTEAU: A building where wine is made and around which vines grow. Despite the images most of us have

of palatial estates, such as Bordeaux’s regal Château Margaux, a château can be as humble as a garage.

The names of most Bordeaux estates are preceded by the word château, though the word is used

infrequently elsewhere in France and never in Burgundy, where the roughly equivalent term would be

DOMAINE.

CLIMAT : The term used especially in Burgundy to mean a specific field or plot. Each climat is distinguished by

its own soil, climate, orientation to the sun, slope, drainage capacity, and so on.

CLOS: A term used especially in Burgundy to indicate a vineyard enclosed by a wall. One of Burgundy’s

largest and most famous walled vineyards is Clos Vougeot.

COMMUNE: A small village that is often an APPELLATION. In Bordeaux, the communes of Margaux,

Pauillac, St.

-Julien, and St.

-Estèphe are famous appellations. Communes are also the lowest level of

administrative division in France, and as such, are the equivalent of incorporated cities in the United States.

COULURE: The failure of grapes to develop after flowering occurs. Weather conditions during the spring,

such as clouds and cold temperatures, wind, rain, and high temperatures, can cause the flowers to stay

closed or drop off the vine, and therefore not become fertilized. Each flower represents a potential grape, and

vines that experience coulure, sometimes called SHATTER in English, often have irregular bunches that are

missing grapes.

CRAYÈRES: Deep chalk pits used by Champagne houses to age Champagne. Originally dug by the Romans

in A.D. 300 to source stones for building the city of Reims, these cold, dark, humid chambers are as deep as

60 feet underground and are shaped like a pyramid, with the bottom of the pit being the widest.

CRÉMANT : T oday the word crémant is reserved for French SPARKLING WINES made outside the

Champagne region using the MÉTHODE CHAMPENOISE. Important examples include Crémant d’Alsace,

Crémant de Bourgogne, and Crémant de Loire. Since 1994, the term has not been permitted to be used in

Champagne. It was once used to describe a Champagne with about half the usual effervescence, often called

a creaming wine. These half-sparkling Champagnes are still made, but today they are given proprietary

names.

CRU: Translated in English as “growth,

” the word cru can mean a vineyard or an estate, usually a superior

one, that has been classified geographically or by reputation. A classified cru is known as a cru classé. Within

any given classification (such as those in Bordeaux and Burgundy), there are Premiers Crus (first growths),

Grands Crus (great growths), and so on. The word is the past participle of the French verb croître, meaning

“to grow.

”

CUVÉE: The wine from a selected barrel or vat (the term is derived from the French cuve, meaning “vat”). In

Champagne, however, the word cuvée is used to describe a blend of wines. A Champagne cuvée is often

made up of different varieties of grapes, or grapes from different vineyard plots, or both. The term prestige

cuvée is used in Champagne to refer to a house’s most expensive and prestigious wine. Dom Pérignon, for

example, is the prestige cuvée of Moët & Chandon.

CUVERIE: The building that houses FERMENTATION tanks or vats. The place where the wine ferments.

D

DÉGORGEMENT : Disgorgement (see DISGORGING in Main Glossay)—the process of removing the yeasty

sediments from a Champagne bottle after the second, bubble-forming FERMENTATION.

DEMI-SEC: A sweet Champagne or SPARKLING WINE containing 33 to 50 grams of sugar per liter (equal to

3.3 to 5 percent residual sugar). Demi-sec is sweeter than EXTRA DRY , which is sweeter than BRUT .

DE PRIMEUR: Wines that are sold and drunk very young. The most famous of these is Beaujolais Nouveau,

although dozens of French wines are allowed by law to be sold the year the grapes were harvested. Not to be

confused with EN PRIMEUR.

DOMAINE: A wine-producing estate. Many wineries throughout France incorporate the word in their names,

especially Burgundian estates, the most famous of which is the Domaine de la Romanée-Conti.

DOSAGE: The degree of sweetness of the LIQUEUR D’EXPÉDITION, which is used to top up Champagne

before its final corking. The dosage is what determines whether a Champagne will be BRUT , EXTRA DRY ,

DEMI-SEC, and so on.

E

EAU-DE-VIE: Literally, water of life. Eaux-de-vie (the plural) are grape spirits, or clear brandies, that have

been made by distilling wine or POMACE.

ENCÉPAGEMENT : The various grape varieties used in any given wine.

EN COTEAUX: Vines planted on slopes, usually making superior wine.

EN PRIMEUR: A method of buying wherein the wine is bought before it is released. Also known as buying

futures. Buying wine en primeur allows collectors to be more certain of securing given wines. The wines most

likely to be sold en primeur are Bordeaux wines from top châteaux.

EXTRA BRUT : A very DRY Champagne or SPARKLING WINE, with minimal (less than 0.6 percent) added

sweetness. Drier than BRUT .

EXTRA DRY: Slightly sweeter than BRUT , contains extra dry Champagne or SPARKLING WINE. Do not

confuse extra dry with EXTRA BRUT , which is the driest dosage level.

F

FOUDRE: Large wooden vat used to age wines.

G

GARIGUE: A word used to describe the arid landscape of Provence and the southern Rhône, which is

covered with dry scrub and tough, resiny wild herbs, such as rosemary, thyme, and lavender. The wines of

Provence and the southern Rhône are said to smell and taste of garigue (garrigue in French).

GOÛT DE TERROIR: The distinctive taste of a given grape variety grown in a specific TERROIR.

GRANDE MARQUE: A member of a particular association of about thirty of the longest-established

Champagne HOUSES. The Syndicat de Grandes Marques is devoted to upholding a written charter of high

standards in the production of Champagne.

H

HOUSE: As used in the Champagne region, house refers to a producer who sells Champagne under its own

brand name. The grapes may come from its own vineyards, from independent growers, or most often from a

combination of the two. Such firms as Veuve Clicquot, Moët & Chandon, and T aittinger are all referred to as

houses.

L

LEFT BANK: The term refers to all of the appellations of Bordeaux that are on the left side of the Gironde

River as it flows out to the Atlantic Ocean. The main grape variety used for Left Bank wines is cabernet

sauvignon. Many famous communes are on the Left Bank, such as Margaux, St.

-Julien, Pauillac, St.

-

Estéphe, Graves, and Sauternes.

LIQUEUR D’EXPÉDITION: The wine added to the Champagne bottle after DISGORGING to top it up. The

liqueur d’expédition is often made up of wines reserved from previous years and it contains some sweetness

(known as the DOSAGE).

LIQUEUR DE TIRAGE: The mixture of wine and sugar added along with YEASTS to the blend of still wines in

a Champagne bottle in order to induce the second, bubble-forming fermentation.

M

MACÉRATION CARBONIQUE: CARBONIC MACERATION, as it is referred to in English, is a type of

FERMENTATION in which uncrushed grapes are placed whole into vats that are then closed. As the weight of

the grapes on top crushes grapes on the bottom, juice is released and fermentation begins. This in turn

releases the gas CARBON DIOXIDE (CO2), which causes other grapes to ferment, in effect, within their

skins. Carbonic maceration is commonly used to ferment fruity red wines for early drinking, typically in

Beaujolais and sometimes in the Loire.

MARC: The French term for an EAU-DE-VIE made specifically by distilling the POMACE (grape skins, stems,

and seeds) left over after pressing, not by distilling wine. Marc is generally a slightly more powerfully flavored

spirit than eau-de-vie.

MAS: The southern French term for a DOMAINE, sometimes translated as “farm.

”

MÉTHODE CHAMPENOISE: The labor-intensive method used to make Champagne and other fine

SPARKLING WINES. In this method, the wine undergoes a SECONDARY FERMENTATION, which creates

the bubbles, in its individual bottle rather than in one large cask or vat.

MILLERANDAGE: A viticultural problem caused by abnormal pollination and fruit set. It results in differently

sized berries with different numbers of seeds within one bunch. The yield of the crop is reduced, although

some winemakers believe the smaller berries can increase the quality of the wine.

MILLÉSIME: A vintage Champagne.

MOELLEUX: A term commonly used in the Loire for very sweet, luscious white wines that can be almost

syrupy.

MONOPOLE: Used most frequently in Burgundy and to a lesser extent in Champagne, a monopole is a

vineyard owned entirely by one estate.

MOUSSE: The French term for the snowy layer of bubbles that form on the top of a poured glass of

Champagne or SPARKLING WINE.

MOUSSEUX: French for “sparkling.

” Some VIN MOUSSEUX are made by the MÉTHODE CHAMPENOISE

(with SECONDARY FERMENTATION taking place in the bottle); other less expensive mousseux are made in

large tanks.

MUSELET : Meaning “muzzle” in English, a muselet is the wire cage that holds a Champagne or SPARKLING

WINE cork in place. It is important when opening a bottle of bubbly safely. The muselet should not be

removed before the cork is eased out. Rather, it should be loosened and then removed with the cork at the

same time.

N

NÉGOCIANT : An individual or firm that buys grapes and/or ready-made wine from growers and/or

cooperatives. The négociant then blends, bottles, labels, and sells the wine under its own brand or name. The

first négociant houses were established in France around the time of the French Revolution. The sudden

profusion of peasant growers who were inexperienced in sales created the need for firms that could bottle

and sell the production from many small properties.

NOUVEAU: A young wine meant for immediate drinking, usually seven to ten weeks after being made. The

most famous wine made in a nouveau style is Beaujolais Nouveau.

O

OEIL DE PERDRIX: Literally,

rosé.

“partridge eye,

” oeil de perdrix is the term used to describe the color of a pale

P

PRISE DE MOUSSE: Literally,

“capturing the sparkle,

” a term for the SECONDARY FERMENTATION in

Champagne. The secondary fermentation takes place inside each individual bottle. It is this secondary

fermentation that creates Champagne’s bubbles.

R

RÉMUAGE: The RIDDLING (rotating and tilting) of Champagne bottles to concentrate yeast sediments in

their necks. Riddling is done by hand in A-shape frames called pupitres or by a computerized machine called

a gyropalette.

RIGHT BANK: The term refers to all of the appellations of Bordeaux that are on the right side of the Gironde

River as it flows out to the Atlantic Ocean. The main grape varieties used for Right Bank wines are merlot and

cabernet franc. The well-known communes of Pomerol and St.

-Emilion reside on the Right Bank.

ROSÉ CHAMPAGNE: A pink Champagne. The rosé color, which actually ranges from translucent pink to

coppery salmon, is obtained either by blending a bit of still red wine into the Champagne blend before the

SECONDARY FERMENTATION or by leaving the base wines in contact with the grape skins for a brief period

of time to absorb color. Because rosé Champagnes are difficult and risky to make, production is limited and

the wines are generally more expensive than golden Champagnes.

S

SAIGNÉE: A process used to make rosé by drawing pink-colored juice off fermenting red grapes. This

process also results in concentrating the remaining red wine, since the ratio of skins to juice in the tank is

increased when some juice is drawn off.

SEC: DRY . However, when sec appears on a Champagne or SPARKLING WINE label, the wine inside will be

medium sweet to sweet.

SÉLECTION DE GRAINS NOBLES: In Alsace, the term for wines made from very-late-picked berries that

have been affected by BOTRYTIS CINEREA.

SUR LIE: Literally,

“on the LEES.

” For a period of time after fermentation is complete, some white wines,

notably white Burgundies, are left in contact with the lees (spent YEASTS). Wines that have been left sur lie

take on a creamy, rounder MOUTHFEEL and generally display more COMPLEX flavors.

T

TASTEVIN: A shallow, silver tasting cup used by a SOMMELIER. The cup was designed with dimpled sides

that would reflect candlelight in dark cellars and thereby allow the sommelier to see the color of the wine.

TERROIR: French term for the sum entity and effect (no single word exists in English) of every environmental

factor on a given piece of ground. Included within terroir, for example, are a vineyard’s soil, slope, orientation

to the sun, and elevation, plus every nuance of climate: rainfall, wind velocity, frequency of fog, cumulative

hours of sunshine, average high temperatures, average low temperatures, and so on. Each vineyard is said

to have its own terroir.

V

VENDANGE TARDIVE: In Alsace, the term for wines made from late-picked, very ripe grapes. VT wines, as

they are called, are not as sweet as SELECTION DE GRAINS NOBLES nor are they botrytized.

VIGNERON: Literally,

“vine grower.

” Many French winemakers refer to themselves as vignerons.

VIN DE GARDE: A wine to save—in other words, a wine that can and should receive AGING.

VIN DE PAYS: Country wine—an everyday wine from a specific region, but less rigorously controlled than a

wine with an APPELLATION D’ORIGINE CONTRÔLÉE.

VIN DE TABLE: T able wine. Generally used to indicate a simple wine without APPELLATION D’ORIGINE

CONTRÔLÉE status.

VIN GRIS: A very pale rosé wine, sometimes light gray in color.

VIN LIQUOREUX: A very sweet, syrupy white wine, generally made from grapes affected by BOTRYTIS

CINEREA.

VIN MOUSSEUX: SPARKLING WINE, made either by SECONDARY FERMENTATION in bottle or in tank, or

by the addition of carbon dioxide for inexpensive wines.

VIN ORDINAIRE: Literally,

“ordinary wine”

—a plain wine with no regional or VARIETAL characteristics. An

everyday drinking wine, vin ordinaire is the opposite of VIN DE GARDE, a wine to save; that is, a wine with

aging potential.

ITALIAN WINE TERMS

A

ABBADIA: The term for “abbey,

” sometimes shortened to just badia. Buildings that were once abbeys have

often been converted into renowned Italian wine estates, such as Tuscany’s Badia a Coltibuono.

ABBOCCATO: Slightly sweet.

AMABILE: A little sweeter than ABBOCCATO.

AMARO: Bitter. Many Italian wines, both white and red, have a slight amaro character, which is considered a

positive attribute by Italians.

ANNATA: The year of the vintage.

APPASIMENTO: The process of drying grapes on mats or shelving (or hanging them in the air) in protected

cool, dry lofts. There, the grapes shrivel and raisinate, concentrating their sugars.

ASCIUTTO: T otally DRY .

AZIENDA AGRICOLA: Wine estate—this term, sometimes abbreviated Az. Ag., often appears on wine labels,

along with the actual name of the wine estate, when the grapes were grown on that estate, and the wine that

was produced there as well.

AZIENDA VINICOLA: The term for a winery. It often appears on wine labels.

AZIENDA VITIVINICOLA: Grape-growing and wine-making company. Like AZIENDA AGRICOLA and

AZIENDA VINICOLA, the term often appears on wine labels.

B

BIANCO: White, as in vino bianco: white wine.

BOTTE: Cask or barrel.

BOTTIGLIA: Bottle.

BRICCO: The sunny slope of a hill.

C

CANTINA: Wine cellar, or yet another term for a winery.

CANTINA SOCIALE OR COOPERATIVA: A growers’ cooperative cellar. Italy, like France and Spain, has

hundreds of wine co-ops, some of which make good but rarely great wine.

CASA VINICOLA: A wine firm, usually making wine from wine or grapes it has purchased (as opposed to

grapes grown on its own estate). The word casa means “house.

”

CASCINA: Northern Italian term for a farmhouse or estate.

CASTELLO: The word for “castle.

” Several famous Italian wine estates are housed in what were once castles

—Castello dei Rampolla in Tuscany, for example.

CHIARETTO: A very light red or even a rosé wine.

CLASSICO: An official designation, referring to the heart of a DOC zone—by implication the classic or best

part. In Chianti, the classico zone is so highly regarded that it has a DOC of its own—Chianti Classico.

CONSORZIO: A consortium of producers of a certain wine, who join forces to control and promote it.

COOPERATIVA: See CANTINA SOCIALE.

D

DENOMINAZIONE DI ORIGINE CONTROLLATA (DOC): See page 328.

DENOMINAZIONE DI ORIGINE CONTROLLATA EGARANTITA (DOCG): See page 328.

DOLCE: Fully sweet. Italy produces countless sweet wines from many different grape varieties.

E

ENOTECA: Wine library; a place where bottles of wine from different regions are displayed. Often these

wines are also available for tasting. The most famous enoteca in Italy is in Siena. T oday, enoteca is also used

to indicate a wine bar.

ETICHETTA: Label.

F

FATTORIA: Tuscan term for a farm or wine estate. Many top Chianti producers use this term as part of their

names—Fattoria di Felsina, for example.

FIASCO: Literally,

“a flask”; more often used for the straw-encased Chianti bottle that was a fixture of the

bohemian lifestyle in the 1960s in the United States. Chiantis sold in fiaschi (the plural) were usually pretty

thin and quite cheap. T oday, very few Chiantis are sold in straw-covered bottles.

FRIZZANTE: Slightly fizzy, but less so than SPARKLING WINE.

G

GRADAZIONE ALCOOLICA: Percentage of ALCOHOL BY VOLUME.

GRAN SELEZIONE: Highest-quality category in Chianti Classico. Wine must be made from estate-grown

grapes and aged at least 30 months before it is sold.

GRAPPA: A clear brandy (EAU-DE-VIE in French) made by distilling the POMACE left over after MUST or

wine is pressed. Grappa di monovitigno is a grappa from a single grape variety, such as moscato or picolit.

Because grappas made this way have a subtle suggestion of the AROMA and flavor of the original grapes,

they are considered superior.

I

IMBOTTIGLIATO ALL’ORIGINE: Bottled at the source; the term may be used only by estates that produce

and bottle the wine on the property where the grapes were grown.

IMBOTTIGLIATO DA: Bottled by, which will be followed by the producer’s name; does not denote an ESTATE

BOTTLED wine.

IMBOTTIGLIATO DAL VITICOLTORE: Bottled by the grower; may be used only by growers bottling their own

wines.

INDICAZIONE GEOGRAFICA TIPICA (IGT): See page 328.

L

LIQUOROSO: Strong wine, often but not necessarily FORTIFIED, which can be sweet or not.

M

METODO TRADIZIONALE: The Champagne method (MÉTHODE CHAMPENOISE) for making SPARKLING

WINE; also referred to as metodo classico. Most top Italian sparkling wines are made this way.

N

NERO: Black or very dark red; said of both grapes and wines.

P

PASSITO: The general term for wines made from intentionally raisinated grapes.

PASTOSO: Medium (not very) dry.

PODERE: A small farm, often turned into a wine estate. These often use the word podere in their names, as

in the Tuscan Podere Il Palazzino.

PRODUTTORE: Producer.

R

RECIOTO: A word indicating the wine is sweet (as in recioto di Soave and recioto di Valpolicella). T o make a

recioto wine, the grapes are left for months to dry and raisinate, usually on mats or shelving in cool, dry lofts

(a process called APPASSIMENTO). In Italy, the general term for wines made from intentionally raisinated

grapes is passito. The word recioto comes from recie in the Venetian dialect, meaning “ears”

—a reference to

the little lobes or ears on a grape cluster that usually get very ripe because they are the most exposed to the

sun.

RISERVA: A wine that has been matured for a specific number of years, according to DENOMINAZIONE DI

ORIGINE CONTROLLATA regulations.

ROSATO: Rosé.

ROSSO: Red. Vino rosso is distinguished from vino bianco (white wine) and vino rosato (rosé wine).

S

SECCO: DRY .

SEMISECCO: Semidry; in reality, medium sweet.

SORI: The sunny top of a hill where the snow melts first.

SPUMANTE: Sparkling; literally,

“foaming.

”

STRAVECCHIO: Very old; a term more frequently applied to spirits than wine.

SUPERIORE: Generally indicates a wine of higher quality, often because it has more alcohol than the

minimum required and/or it has been aged longer than regulations stipulate. Valpolicella Superiore, for

example, is a Valpolicella with at least one year of aging, in contrast to basic Valpolicella, which has no

minimum.

T

TENUTA: Holding or estate. Wine estates often incorporate the word tenuta into their names, as in the

Tuscan estate T enuta San Guido.

U

UE: A softer, lighter type of GRAPPA achieved by distilling actual grapes rather than POMACE.

UVA: Grape.

V

VECCHIO: Old; said of mature wines.

VENDEMMIA: The vintage; can be used in place of ANNATA on labels.

VIGNA: Vineyard, also referred to as a vigneto.

VIGNAIOLO: Grape-grower, also called a viticoltore.

VILLA: Country manor; often one where wine is produced.

VINO DA ARROSTO: Wine for a roast, implying a red that is FULL-BODIED and has a deep COLOR.

VINO DA PASTO: Everyday wine.

VINO DA TAVOLA: T able wine—the regulation term for non-DOC wines.

VINO NOVELLO: The wine of the current year, now used in the same sense as Beaujolais Nouveau, though

Italy’s vino novellos are not as highly promoted as France’s Beaujolais Nouveau.

VITE: Vine.

VITICOLTORE: Grape grower.

VITIGNO: Grape variety.

SPANISH WINE TERMS

A

AÑADA: See VENDIMIA.

AÑO: Year.

B

BODEGA: Wine cellar or wine-producing company. Curiously, a single wine company may nonetheless use

the plural form bodegas in its name, as in Bodegas Ismael Arroyo.

C

CAVA: The name for Spanish SPARKLING WINE made by the Champagne method (MÉTHODE

CHAMPENOISE). Cava is a specialty of the Penedès region of north-central Spain near Barcelona. The two

largest cava producers, Freixenet and Codorníu, each produce far more sparkling wine by the Champagne

method than any Champagne house makes.

CONSEJO REGULADOR: Local governing body that enforces wine policy for a given area, including the

boundaries of the area, the grape varieties permitted, maximum YIELD, and so forth. Every Spanish wine

region with a DENOMINACIÓN DE ORIGEN has a Consejo Regulador.

COSECHA: Year of harvest, or vintage.

CRIADERA: Literally,

“nursery.

” Criadera refers to a layer of Sherry casks, all of which contain wine of

approximately the same age and blend. Multiple criaderas, sometimes more than a dozen, make up a

SOLERA.

CRIANZA: The basic-quality wine produced by each BODEGA. Crianzas are considered every-night drinking

wines. They are less prestigious, less costly, and aged for shorter periods than RESERVAS or GRAN

RESERVAS. While national law stipulates that crianzas must be aged for a minimum of six months in oak

barrels, each DENOMINACIÓN DE ORIGEN or DENOMINACIÓN DE ORIGEN CALIFICADA can set higher

standards. In Rioja, for example, a crianza must be aged for at least two years, one of which must be in oak

barrels.

D

DENOMINACIÓN DE ORIGEN (DO): See page 925.

DENOMINACIÓN DE ORIGEN CALIFICADA (DOCA): See page 925.

DULCE: Sweet. Spain has less of a reputation for making top-quality sweet wines than France, Italy, or

Germany, although several styles of Sherry, Spain’s extraordinary FORTIFIED wine, can be sweet.

E

ELABORADO POR: Produced by.

EMBOTELLADO POR: Bottled by.

EN RAMA: Literally,

“in an unrefined state.

” The name of fino or manzanilla Sherries drawn from barrels in the

spring when the flor is thickest, then immediately bottled—usually unfined and without stabilization. En rama

Sherries are extremely fresh and vivid and last mere months because they are so fragile. The equivalent of

drinking Sherry directly from the cask, en rama Sherries are extremely rare on the commercial market.

EXTRA SECO: SPARKLING WINE that is not quite as dry as BRUT (SECO).

F

FLOR: Literally,

“flower.

” A layer of YEAST cells that forms naturally on top of manzanilla and fino Sherries as

they age in the cask. Flor acts to prevent OXIDATION and also contributes a unique flavor to the wine.

G

GRAN RESERVA: A BODEGA’S top wine, produced only in excellent years and then subject to lengthy

AGING. Though national law stipulates that red gran reservas must be aged two years in oak barrels, each

DENOMINACIÓN DE ORIGEN or DENOMINACIÓN DE ORIGEN CALIFICADA can set higher standards. In

Rioja, for example, red gran reservas must be aged for two years in barrel followed by three years in bottle,

and in practice, many Rioja producers exceed that.

L

LÁGRIMA: Literally,

pressing.

“tears.

” Lágrima also refers to a wine made from free-run juice without any mechanical

M

MÉTODO TRADICIONAL: Spanish term denoting SPARKLING WINE made by the Champagne method

(MÉTHODE CHAMPENOISE). CAVA, by law, must be made this way.

P

PAGO: T erm commonly used for a single estate. In 2003, the government of Spain also gave the term a legal

definition and status, incorporating it into the official denominación system. Thus, in addition to Spain’s DOs,

(DENOMINACIÓN DE ORIGEN) and DOCAs (DENOMINACIÓN DE ORIGEN CALIFICADA) there exists the

status DO Pago. These are denominations of origin awarded to just a single estate considered exemplary.

So, for example, the estate Dominio de Valdepusa has its own DO Pago called Dominio de Valdepusa. Many

Spanish equate a DO Pago with a French Grand Cru. As of 2012, there were about ten DO Pago estates in

Spain.

PASADA: T erm used to describe a well-aged Sherry.

R

RESERVA: A wine produced only in excellent years. Though national law stipulates that red reservas must be

aged for one year in oak barrels, each DENOMINACIÓN DE ORIGEN or DENOMINACIÓN DE ORIGEN

CALIFICADA can set higher standards. Red reservas from Rioja, for example, must be aged for a minimum of

three years, one of which must be in barrel. Many Rioja producers nonetheless exceed these requirements.

ROBLE: Oak. Despite Spain’s proximity to France, many Spanish producers age their wines in American oak.

ROCIOS: Literally,

“morning dew.

” The name of the process of transferring Sherry between the CRIADERAS.

The name is a reflection of the gentleness with which the process is done.

ROSADO: Rosé. It’s still a well-kept secret that Spain makes some of the best rosés in Europe. The rosés

from Navarra are especially well regarded.

S

SECO: Dry.

SEMISECO: Medium dry.

SOBRETABLE: In Sherry production, the term for the period of time a new wine spends before it goes into the

SOLERA. The sobretable is usually six to eight months, but occassionally up to a year.

SOLERA: Complex network of barrels used for aging Sherry by progressively blending younger wines into

older wines. Since the barrels are not completely filled, the wine is allowed to be gently subjected to

OXIDIZATION during the process. Wine held in a solera is said to undergo the solera process.

V

VENDIMIA: Vintage.

VIEJO: Old.

VIÑA: Literally,

Arana.

“vineyard,

” but the word viña is often used as part of a brand name as, for example, in Viña

VINO DE MESA: T able wine.

VINO ESPUMOSO: General term for SPARKLING WINE.

VINO GENEROSO: FORTIFIED wine developed under FLOR.

PORTUGUESE WINE TERMS

B

BRANCO: Denotes a white wine.

C

COLHEITA: Literally,

“harvest.

” However, colheita is also the name for an aged tawny Port from a single

harvest. Colheita Ports are rare.

CUBA DE CALOR: A method of making fortified base wine for inexpensive Madeiras that involves heating the

base wine in large vats fitted with serpentine-shaped, stainless-steel heating coils very slowly over a period of

three to six months.

D

DENOMINAÇÃO DE ORIGEM CONTROLADA (DOC): See page 926.

E

ESCOLHA: Translated as “choice,

” escolha is used on labels to denote special selection wines in Portugal.

ESTUFAGEM: The step in the process of making Madeira that involves heating the wine. Depending on the

quality of the Madeira being produced, there are several estufagem methods. The most basic involves placing

the FORTIFIED base wines in containers that are then heated to an average temperature of 113°F/45°C (with

a maximum temperature of 131°F/55°C allowed) for three to six months. T o make the very finest Madeiras,

however, the containers may be placed in a warehouse attic, which builds up tremendous heat thanks to the

intense Madeiran sun. There, the Madeira-to-be may be left for twenty years or more.

G

GARRAFEIRA: Used in reference to Portuguese still wines, the word garrafeira indicates a wine of especially

high quality. But the word also means “wine cellar” or “bottle cellar” (from the Portuguese garrafa—

“bottle”). In

addition, garrafeira is a style of Port, albeit a rare one. Rich and supple, garrafeira Ports are usually from a

single outstanding year and are aged briefly in wood and then for as many as twenty to forty years in large

glass bottles. After aging, the garrafeira is decanted and transferred into standard 25-ounce (750-milliliter)

bottles and sold.

L

LAGAR: A shallow stone or cement trough in which grapes are trodden by foot (usually for several hours) in

order to crush them and mix the skins with the juice. Treading grapes by foot, an ancient practice, is still

widely practiced in Portugal, and thus many wineries have lagares.

P

PIPE: A traditional Port barrel holding the equivalent of sixty cases of wine. Historically, Port was shipped by

the PIPE to importers who would then bottle it for sale to consumers.

Q

QUINTA: Literally,

“farm.

” In Portugal, the word quinta is used to refer both to a specific vineyard and to a

wine estate. Quinta do Noval, for example, is the name of a highly regarded wine estate in the Douro region.

Ports known as single-vintage quinta Ports come from grapes grown on a single estate in a single year.

T

TINTO: Denotes a red wine.

GERMAN AND AUSTRIAN WINE TERMS

A

ALTE REBEN: The term used in Germany and Austria for old vines.

AMTLICHE PRÜFUNGSNUMMER: A quality-control test number (the AP number) signifying that a wine has

passed official analytical and taste tests. It appears on every bottle of quality German wine in the category of

QUALITÄTSWEIN BESTIMMTER ANBAUGEBIETE (QBA) or QUALITÄTSWEIN MIT PRÄDIKAT (QMP).

ANBAUGEBIET : One of thirteen specified winegrowing regions in Germany. Plural: anbaugebiete.

AUSBRUCH: A category of wine made in Austria, in Burgenland. Ausbruche (the plural) are slightly more

opulent than BEERENAUSLESEN, and must be made from overripe, BOTRYTIZED and/or naturally

shriveled grapes.

AUSLESE: Plural: auslesen. Literally,

“select harvest.

” A level of full ripeness according to the traditional

German system. In the modern VDP system in Germany, denotes a wine with significant sweetness.

B

BEERENAUSLESE (BA): Plural: beerenauslesen. Literally,

“berry select harvest.

” A level of considerable

ripeness and sweetness in both the traditional and modern German systems. Beerenauslesen have often

been the product of at least some BOTRYTIZED grapes.

BEREICH: One of thirty-nine official districts. Germany’s thirteen wine regions (ANBAUGEBIETE) are

officially broken down into thirty-nine bereiche (the plural of bereich), which in turn are broken down into 167

GROSSLAGEN, which are broken down into approximately 2,658 EINZELLAGEN.

BERG: Hill or mountain.

BLAU: Blue; when used to describe grapes, it means red.

BOCKSBEUTEL: Flagon-shaped bottle used for the wines of Germany’s Franken region.

BURG: Fortress.

BUSCHENSCHENK: In the southern Austrian countryside, this is the name for a rustic restaurant that

elsewhere is called a HEURIGE. A buschenschenk is easily identified by the buschenschenk (also the name

for a swag of fir branches) tied to its doors.

D

DAC: Districtus Austriae Controllatus, or protected Austrian declaration of origin. Instituted in 2001, this

system organizes Austrian wine into regions with specific laws on which grapes are allowed to be grown and

other viticultural and winemaking regulations. It was modeled after France’s AOC system in an effort to

increase quality and put the focus on TERROIR.

DEUTSCHER WEIN: German table wine, the humblest category of wine. Although the ALCOHOL content,

acidity level, and origin of grapes are all controlled by law, Deutscher wein is usually so light, it’s often just a

step above water. The term Deutscher means “of Germany.

” Absent that designation, the wine may be a

“Euroblend” based on grapes that may come from one of several other European Union countries.

E

EDELFÄULE: BOTRYTIS CINEREA; Germany’s and Austria’s luscious DESSERT WINES—

BEERENAUSLESEN and TROCKENBEERENAUSLESEN—are made with the help of edelfäule.

EINZELLAGE: The official name for an individual vineyard site. There are approximately 2,658 of them in

Germany. Germany’s thirteen wine regions are officially broken down into thirty-nine BEREICHE, which in

turn are broken down into 167 GROSSLAGEN, which are broken down into einzellagen, the plural of

einzellage.

EISWEIN: A rare and especially intense DESSERT WINE made by pressing frozen grapes that have been left

hanging on the vine into midwinter, sometimes February. (Eiswein carries the vintage date of the main harvest

year, so even if, for example, eiswein grapes were harvested in January 2015, the bottle would carry the

vintage date 2014.) When eiswein grapes are harvested in late winter, they are gently pressed while still

frozen so that the ice is separated from the remaining concentrated, very sweet, high-acid juice. Because of

their ACIDITY , eiswein are usually less unctuous but more vibrant than BEERENAUSLESEN or

TROCKENBEERENAUSLESEN. Eisweins age for decades and are extremely expensive.

ERSTE LAGE: Designation that indicates a first-class vineyard, similar to the designation Premier Cru in

Burgundy. The designation used by the 200 plus members of the VDP . The term Erste Lage generally

appears on the neck label. See description of the VDP system on page 553.

ERSTES GEWÄCHS: An old term meaning first growth. Used before 2006 in the Rheingau for high-quality

dry wines made from riesling and pinot noir. T oday, used less frequently as producers adopt VDP terms

instead.

ERZEUGERABFÜLLUNG: Wines produced and bottled by a grower or a cooperative. You won’t see

erzeugerabfüllung on the labels of well-known estates.

F

FEDERSPIEL: A term used in the Wachau region of Lower Austria to indicate natural unchaptalized wines

with at least 11.5 but no more than 12.5 percent ALCOHOL.

FEINHERB: An unofficial term used in Germany as a synonym for halbtrocken or half-dry wines—defined as

less than 1.8 percent residual sugar. Wines called feinherb usually still taste extremely DRY because of the

high corresponding ACIDITY in German wines.

FLASCHE: Bottle—the English word flask is derived from flasche.

G

GROSSLAGE: One of approximately 167 collections of vineyards. Germany’s thirteen wine regions are

officially broken down into thirty-nine BEREICHE, which in turn are broken down into 167 grosslagen (the

plural of grosslage), which are broken down into approximately 2,658 EINZELLAGEN.

GROSSE LAGE: A term used by members of the VDP in Germany to indicate a vineyard that is of the highest

quality. The term roughly corresponds to the Burgundian term Grand Cru. The term Grosse Lage will appear

on the neck label. See description of the VDP system page 553.

GROSSES GEWÄCHS: The VDP term for a dry wine from a vineyard designated GROSSE LAGE, or of the

highest quality.

GUTSABFÜLLUNG: Estate bottled.

GUTSWEIN: A term used by members of the VDP to indicate the wine comes from a good- but not great-

quality vineyard owned by the winery. See description of the VDP system, page 553

H

HALBTROCKEN: Literally,

“half-dry”

—defined as less than 1.8 percent residual sugar. The term is used in

Germany, but rarely in Austria. Wines labeled halbtrocken usually still taste extremely DRY because of the

high corresponding ACIDITY in German wines. The term FEINHERB is often used as a synonym.

HEURIGE: In Austria, a rustic type of restaurant often attached to a winemaker’s home. Traditionally, all of the

food at a heurige is made from scratch by the winemaker and his family. Similarly, the wine offered (which is

also referred to as heurige) is the winemaker’s.

K

KABINETT : A level of ripeness indicating that the wine was not completely ripe according to the traditional

German system. Kabinett wines are drunk by Germans as every-night wines and their dependable presence

in the family’s kitchen or living room cabinet gave them their name. In the modern German system adopted by

members of the VDP , kabinett is a level of minor sweetness. The term was also once used in Austria to

indicate a table wine of modest ripeness, but ripeness designations now rarely appear on Austrian wines

unless the wines are sweet (i.e. AUSBRUCH, BEERENAUSLESEN, etc.).

KELLER: Cellar.

KMW: Acronym for Klosterneuburger Mostwage. In Austria, the KMW scale is used to measure sugar in

grapes and hence their ripeness. In Germany, sugar is measured in OECHSLE; in France, in BAUMÉ; and in

the United States, in BRIX.

L

LESE: Harvest. Harvest dates generally range from September to December, according to the variety of

grape, weather conditions, and the kind of wine being produced. One exception is EISWEIN, which can be

harvested in January of the year following the main harvest.

LIEBLICH: Semisweet. The term used to describe German wines with discernible sweetness. Lieblich wines,

therefore, are those that taste sweeter than HALBTROCKEN (half-dry). They can have up to 4.5 percent

residual sugar (45 grams per liter).

O

OECHSLE: Scale used in Germany to indicate the ripeness of grapes. Developed in the nineteenth century

by the physicist Ferdinand Oechsle, Oechsle measures the weight of the grape juice or MUST . Since the

contents of the must are primarily sugar and ACIDS, the must weight is an indication of ripeness. According

to traditional German law, ripeness categories are based on Oechsle levels that are specified for each grape

variety and wine region (meaning they can change region to region). For example, for a riesling wine in the

Mosel to be considered a SPÄTLESE, it must have 76 degrees Oechsle; in the Rheingau, a riesling must

have 85 degrees Oechsle to be a spätlese. These adjustable levels reflect the fact that in some very cold

regions like the Mosel, ripeness is harder to achieve.

ORTSWEIN: Designation that indicates the wine comes from a good but not great vineyard—roughly the

equivalent of a Burgundian village wine. The designation used by the 200-plus members of the VDP . See

description of the VDP system page 553.

P

PRÄDIKAT : The word roughly translates as “superior quality” or “possessing special attributes.

” Prädikatswein

therefore is the general term for high-quality wine.

Q

QUALITÄTSWEIN BESTIMMTER ANBAUGEBIETE (QBA): A broad category of basic everyday wine under

German law. QbA wines must come from one of the official thirteen winegrowing regions (Anbaugebiete), and

the region must be shown on the label. QbA wines are made from grapes that have attained only a low level

of ripeness, though there must be at least enough sugar in the grapes to produce a wine with 7 percent

ALCOHOL BY VOLUME. CHAPTALIZATION (adding sugar to the unfermented grape juice to boost the body

and final alcohol level) is permitted and often used. QbA wines range from dry to semisweet.

QUALITÄTSWEIN MIT PRÄDIKAT (QMP): Translated as “quality wine with specific attributes,

” this is the top

level of German wines. In the traditional German system, QmP wines prominently display a ripeness level on

the wine label (from KABINETT up to TROCKENBEERENAUSLESE) and a sweetness level, from dry

(TROCKEN) to extremely sweet. Unlike QbA wines, QmP wines may not be CHAPTALIZED. QmP wines

must be produced from allowed grape varieties in one of the 39 subregions (BEREICH) of one of the 13 wine-

rowing regions, although it is the region rather than the subregion that is mandatory information on the label.

R

ROTWEIN: Red wine; Germany and Austria are famous for their whites, but a good deal of red wine is made

in each and consumed locally.

S

SCHILCHER: Austrian name for a high-acid rosé made from the blauer wildbacher grape, which grows

almost exclusively in west Styria.

SCHLOSS: Castle—many German wine estates are housed in what were once medieval castles.

SEKT : SPARKLING WINE.

SMARAGD: Austrian term used in the Wachau region of Lower Austria for the ripest grapes and hence are

the fullest-bodied wines. Smaragd wines must have a minimum of 12.5 percent alcohol, but most have

considerably more. The word smaragd is also the name of a bright green lizard that suns itself in the Wachau

vineyards.

SPÄTLESE: Plural: spätlesen. Literally,

“late harvest.

” A level of ripeness indicating that the wine was just ripe

according to the traditional German system. According to this traditional system, a spatlese could be dry, half-

dry, or semisweet. In the distinctly different modern German system adopted by members of the VDP ,

spätlese is a level of sweetness above KABINETT .

STEINFEDER: In the Wachau region of Lower Austria, natural unchaptalized wines with no more than 11.5

percent alcohol are referred to as steinfeders. These come from the least ripe grapes and hence are the

lightest bodied of Wachau wines.

STRAUSSWIRTSCHAFT : German wine pubs, often attached to growers’ homes, where they can sell their

own wines and light foods for a total of only four months of the year, so as not to take business away from full-

fledged restaurants open twelve months a year. A strauss—

“wreath”

—is usually hung over the door.

SÜSSRESERVE: Grape juice that has been held back from the harvest and unfermented so that it has all of

its natural sweetness. In Germany, small amounts of süssreserve may be added to some high-ACID wines in

order to BALANCE them.

T

TROCKEN: Dry. Wines labeled trocken from both Germany and Austria must have less than 0.9 percent

RESIDUAL SUGAR.

TROCKENBEERENAUSLESE: Plural: trockenbeerensauslesen, but usually referred to as TBA. Literally,

“dry

berry select harvest”

—an indication that the grapes had hung so long on the vine that they had shriveled

almost to raisins before being picked. TBA is the ripest and sweetest level of both German and Austrian wine.

The grapes for the wine are often BOTRYTIZED.

V

VDP: Verband Deutscher Prädikatsweingüter, or Association of German Prädikat Wine Estates. An

organization of some 200 prestigious estates throughout Germany that are revising the traditional concepts of

ripeness and sweetness in the country. The VDP has also instituted a Burgundian-like ranking system for

vineyards, from GROSSES LAGE (Grand Cru) down to GUTSWEIN (village wine).

W

WEINGUT : Wine estate.

WEINKELLEREI: Winery that buys grape MUST or wine from a grower, then bottles and markets the wine.

WEINSTUBE: German for “wine tavern;” a comfortable, casual restaurant where Germans go for simple food

and a bottle of wine.

WEISSHERBST : In Germany, a rosé wine of at least QUALITÄTSWEIN BESTIMMTER ANBAUGEBIETE

(QBA) status made from red grapes of a single variety. A specialty of Baden.

WINZER: Grape farmer.

HUNGARIAN WINE TERMS

A

ASZÚ: The term for shriveled grapes that have been attacked by the beneficial mold BOTRYTIS CINEREA.

More commonly, however, you’ll encounter aszú as part of the name of Hungary’s most famous wine: T okaji

Aszú. Luscious and honeyed, T okaji Aszú is to Hungary what Sauternes is to France—a renowned sweet

wine that is both difficult and expensive to make.

E

EDES: Slightly sweet, a term usually applied to Szamorodni, the type of wine made in T okaj from vineyards

where the grapes have not been sufficiently affected by BOTRYTIS CINEREA to make T okaji Aszú.

Szamorodni may be slightly sweet or dry (SZÁRAZ).

G

GÖNCI: The traditional barrels (named after the village of Gönc, known for its barrel makers) used in making

T okaji Aszú. Gönci hold about 37 gallons (140 liters) of wine.

P

PRIMAE CLASSIS: Literally,

“first class.

” A Latin designation used by the Hungarians since around 1700 to

indicate a T okaj vineyard of first-class stature. The T okaji Aszú wines produced from grapes grown in such a

vineyard would by extension be considered top flight.

PRO MENSA CAESARIS PRIMUS: Around A.D. 1700, two T okaj vineyards were given this designation,

which means chosen for the royal table. These vineyards, Csarfas and Mézes Mály, ranked above those

designated PRIMAE CLASSIS.

PUTTONY: The traditional basket in which ASZÚ grapes were gathered. The word puttony has given rise to

puttonyos, the manner by which the sweetness of T okaji Aszú is measured. T okaji Aszú wines are labeled

from two to six puttonyos; the more puttonyos, the sweeter the wine.

S

SECUNDO CLASSIS: “Second class” in Latin, first used in Hungary around 1700 to indicate a T okaj vineyard

considered second-best. Hence, a T okaji Aszú wine that is second in quality compared to wines made from

grapes grown in PRIMAE CLASSIS vineyards, but still well above most other vineyards.

SZÁRAZ: Dry. The term is usually applied to Szamorodni, the type of wine made in the T okaj region from

vineyards where the grapes are not sufficiently affected by BOTRYTIS CINEREA to make T okaji Aszú.

GREEK WINE TERMS

A

AMPHORA: An earthenware vessel used by the ancient Greeks and Romans to store and ship wine. An

amphora was oval in shape, with two large handles at the top for carrying, and a pointed bottom so that the

vessel could be pushed into the soft earth, where it would remain upright. Amphorae range in size from that of

a milk can to a refrigerator.

ARCHONDIKO: A word appearing on the labels of TOPIKOS OENOS, or PGI, wines. Archondiko roughly

translates as CHÂTEAU.

E

EPITRAPEZIOS OENOS (E.O.): The simplest category of Greek wine, equivalent to VIN DE TABLE, or

TABLE WINE, in France.

K

KRATER: A shallow bronze or pottery bowl used in antiquity to hold wine; wine would be poured from an

AMPHORA into a krater for serving.

KTIMA: Estate; can appear on the labels of TOPIKOS OENOS wines.

KYLIX: A shallow, two-handled, often beautifully decorated cup from which wine was drunk in antiquity.

KYTHOS: In antiquity, a ladle used to scoop wine from the KRATER and transfer it into a KYLIX.

M

MONASTIRI: Monastery; several Greek wine estates are located in former monasteries, and several Greek

monasteries still produce wine. The word monastiri sometimes appears on the labels of TOPIKOS OENOS

wines.

S

STEFÁNI: A way of training grapevines that is especially common on windswept Greek islands. The vines are

trained in a circle low to the ground (stefáni means “crown”), so that the grapes grow in the center, protected

from the wind.

T

TOPIKOS OENOS (T .O.): One of the simpler categories of Greek wine, equivalent to PGI in European Union

wine laws, or VIN DE PAYS, France’s country wine.

THE CHÂTEAUX RANKED IN THE 1855 CLASSIFICATION OF

BORDEAUX

THE MÉDOC

In the Médoc, the 1855 classification was based on the reputation of the châteaux (not on the ground where

the vines grew) and did not take into account whether the châteaux produced red or white wines. In point of

fact, virtually all of the Médoc châteaux listed below make red wines exclusively.

FIRST GROWTHS (Premiers Crus)

CHÂTEAU HAUT-BRION (Pessac-Léognon, in Graves, not the Médoc)

CHÂTEAU LAFITE-ROTHSCHILD (Pauillac)

CHÂTEAU LATOUR (Pauillac)

CHÂTEAU MARGAUX (Margaux)

CHÂTEAU MOUTON-ROTHSCHILD (Pauillac)

SECOND GROWTHS (Deuxièmes Crus)

CHÂTEAU BRANE-CANTENAC (Margaux)

CHÂTEAU COS D’ESTOURNEL (St.

-Estèphe)

CHÂTEAU DUCRU-BEAUCAILLOU (St.

-Julien)

CHÂTEAU DURFORT-VIVENS (Margaux)

CHÂTEAU GRUAUD-LAROSE (St.

-Julien)

CHÂTEAU LASCOMBES (Margaux)

CHÂTEAU LÉOVILLE-BARTON (St.

-Julien)

CHÂTEAU LÉOVILLE-LAS CASES (St.

-Julien)

CHÂTEAU LÉOVILLE-POYFERRÉ (St.

-Julien)

CHÂTEAU MONTROSE (St.

-Estèphe)

CHÂTEAU PICHON-LONGUEVILLE (Pauillac)

CHÂTEAU PICHON-LONGUEVILLE, COMTESSE DE LALANDE (Pauillac)

CHÂTEAU RAUZAN-GASSIES (Margaux)

CHÂTEAU RAUZAN-SÉGLA (Margaux)

THIRD GROWTHS (Troisièmes Crus)

CHÂTEAU BOYD-CANTENAC (Margaux)

CHÂTEAU CALON-SÉGUR (St.

-Estèphe)

CHÂTEAU CANTENAC-BROWN (Margaux)

CHÂTEAU DESMIRAIL (Margaux)

CHÂTEAU D’ISSAN (Margaux)

CHÂTEAU FERRIÈRE (Margaux)

CHÂTEAU GISCOURS (Margaux)

CHÂTEAU KIRWAN (Margaux)

CHÂTEAU LAGRANGE (St.

-Julien)

CHÂTEAU LA LAGUNE (Haut-Médoc)

CHÂTEAU LANGOA-BARTON (St.

-Julien)

CHÂTEAU MALESCOT ST .

-EXUPÉRY (Margaux)

CHÂTEAU MARQUIS D’ALESME (Margaux)

CHÂTEAU PALMER (Margaux)

FOURTH GROWTHS (Quatrièmes Crus)

CHÂTEAU BEYCHEVELLE (St.

-Julien)

CHÂTEAU BRANAIRE-DUCRU (St.

-Julien)

CHÂTEAU DUHART-MILON (Pauillac)

CHÂTEAU LAFON-ROCHET (St.

-Estèphe)

CHÂTEAU LA TOUR-CARNET (Haut-Médoc)

CHÂTEAU MARQUIS-DE-TERME (Margaux)

CHÂTEAU POUGET (Margaux)

CHÂTEAU PRIEURÉ-LICHINE (Margaux)

CHÂTEAU ST .

-PIERRE (St.

-Julien)

CHÂTEAU TALBOT (St.

-Julien)

FIFTH GROWTHS (Cinquièmes Crus)

CHÂTEAU BATAILLEY (Pauillac)

CHÂTEAU BELGRAVE (Haut-Médoc)

CHÂTEAU CANTEMERLE (Haut-Médoc)

CHÂTEAU CLERC-MILON (Pauillac)

CHÂTEAU COS LABORY (St.

-Estèphe)

CHÂTEAU CROIZET-BAGES (Pauillac)

CHÂTEAU D’ARMAILHAC (Pauillac)

CHÂTEAU DAUZAC (Margaux)

CHÂTEAU DE CAMENSAC (Haut-Médoc)

CHÂTEAU DU TERTRE (Margaux)

CHÂTEAU GRAND-PUY-DUCASSE (Pauillac)

CHÂTEAU GRAND-PUY-LACOSTE (Pauillac)

CHÂTEAU HAUT-BAGES-LIBÉRAL (Pauillac)

CHÂTEAU HAUT-BATAILLEY (Pauillac)

CHÂTEAU LYNCH-BAGES (Pauillac)

CHÂTEAU LYNCH-MOUSSAS (Pauillac)

CHÂTEAU PÉDESCLAUX (Pauillac)

CHÂTEAU PONTET-CANET (Pauillac)

SAUTERNES AND BARSAC (Also part of the 1855 Classification)

These châteaux in Sauternes and Barsac make mainly sweet white wines.

FIRST GREAT GROWTH (Premier Cru Supérieur)

CHÂTEAU D’YQUEM (Sauternes)

FIRST GROWTHS (Premiers Crus)

CHÂTEAU CLIMENS (Barsac) CHÂTEAU COUTET (Barsac)

CHÂTEAU DE RAYNE-VIGNEAU (Sauternes)

CHÂTEAU GUIRAUD (Sauternes)

CHÂTEAU LAFAURIE-PEYRAGUEY (Sauternes)

CHÂTEAU LA TOUR BLANCHE (Sauternes)

CHÂTEAU RABAUD-PROMIS (Sauternes)

CHÂTEAU RIEUSSEC (Sauternes)

CHÂTEAU SIGALAS-RABAUD (Sauternes)

CHÂTEAU SUDUIRAUT (Sauternes)

CLOS HAUT-PEYRAGUEY (Sauternes)

SECOND GROWTHS (Deuxièmes Crus)\*\*

CHÂTEAU BROUSTET (Barsac)

CHÂTEAU CAILLOU (Barsac)

CHÂTEAU D’ARCHE (Sauternes)

CHÂTEAU DE MALLE (Sauternes)

CHÂTEAU DE MYRAT (Barsac)

CHÂTEAU DOISY-DAËNE (Barsac)

CHÂTEAU DOISY-DUBROCA (Barsac)

CHÂTEAU DOISY-VÉDRINES (Barsac)

CHÂTEAU FILHOT (Sauternes)

CHÂTEAU LAMOTHE (Sauternes)

CHÂTEAU LAMOTHE-GUIGNARD (Sauternes)

CHÂTEAU NAIRAC (Barsac)

CHÂTEAU ROMER (Sauternes)

CHÂTEAU ROMER-DU-HAYOT (Sauternes)

CHÂTEAU SUAU (Barsac)

\*\*When Sauternes and Barsac were classified in 1855, twelve Deuxièmes Crus Classés were designated.

Since then, some of these have split into more than one château. The Deuxièmes Crus Classés now number

fifteen.

THE DOCGS OF ITALY

ABRUZZI

MONTEPULCIANO D’ABRUZZO

APULIA

CASTEL DEL MONTE BOMBINO NERO

CASTEL DEL MONTE NERO DI TROIA RISERVA

CASTEL DEL MONTE ROSSO RISERVA

PRIMITIVO DI MANDURIA DOLCE NATURALE

BASILICATA

AGLIANICO DEL VULTURE SUPERIORE

CAMPANIA

AGLIANICO DEL TABURNO

FIANO DI AVELLINO

GRECO DI TUFO

TAURASI

EMILIA-ROMAGNA

ALBANA DI ROMAGNA

COLLI BOLOGNESI CLASSICO PIGNOLETTO

FRIULI-VENEZIA GIULIA

COLLI ORIENTALI DEL FRIULI PICOLIT

RAMANDOLO

ROSAZZO

LAZIO

CANNELLINO DI FRASCATI

CESANESE DEL PIGLIO

FRASCATI SUPERIORE

LOMBARDY

FRANCIACORTA

OLTREPÓ PAVESE METODO CLASSICO

SCANZO

SFORZATO DI VALTELLINA

VALTELLINA SUPERIORE

MARCHE

CASTELLI DI JESI VERDICCHIO RISERVA

CONERO

OFFIDA

VERDICCHIO DI MATELICA RISERVA

VERNACCIA DI SERRAPETRONA

PIEDMONT

ALTA LANGA

ASTI

BARBARESCO

BARBERA D’ASTI

BARBERA DEL MONFERRATO SUPERIORE

BAROLO

BRACHETTO D’ACQUI

DOLCETTO DI DIANO D’ALBA

DOLCETTO DI DOGLIANI

DOLCETTO DI OVADA SUPERIORE

ERBALUCE DI CALUSO

GATTINARA

GAVI

GHEMME

NIZZA

ROERO

RUCHÉ DI CASTAGNOLE MONFERRATO

SARDINIA

VERMENTINO DI GALLURA

SICILY

CERASUOLO DI VITTORIA

TUSCANY

BRUNELLO DI MONTALCINO

CARMIGNANO

CHIANTI

CHIANTI CLASSICO

ELBA ALEATICO PASSITO

MONTECUCCO SANGIOVESE

MORELLINO DI SCANSANO

SUVERETO

VAL DI CORNIA ROSSO

VERNACCIA DI SAN GIMIGNANO

VINO NOBILE DI MONTEPULCIANO

VENETO

AMARONE DELLA VALPOLICELLA

ASOLO PROSECCO

BAGNOLI FRIULARO

BARDOLINO SUPERIORE

COLLI DI CONEGLIANO

COLLI EUGANEI FIOR D’ARANCIO

CONEGLIANO VALDOBBIADENE-PROSECCO

LISON

MONTELLO

PIAVE MALANOTTE

RECIOTO DELLA VALPOLICELLA

RECIOTO DI GAMBELLARA

RECIOTO DI SOAVE

SOAVE SUPERIORE

UMBRIA

SAGRANTINO DI MONTEFALCO

TORGIANO ROSSO RISERVA

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TheEssential

Guide

toWineWelcome to the

Wine Merchants

&Shippers Essential

Guide to Wine...

...your concise guide about all that’s important in the world of wine.

We know that it can seem like a complicated subject with lots of

make it accessible and, hopefully, fun!

Over the next few pages and during the course, we hope you discover a

bit more about wine and approach it in a positive and enthusiastic way.

A couple of really important things to remember about wine:

L **A little bit of knowledge goes a very long way; you really don’t**

**need to know lots.**

L **Selling decent wine to your customers is an incredibly easy task.**

**All you need to do is suggest a wine. Nine times out of ten they’ll**

**be grateful for your help. Select a few wines to suggest, two red,**

**two white and a rosé.**Index

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Basics

Wine in Numbers

L **Over 50 wine-producing countries**

L **1000s of regions producing wine**

L **UK imports over 1 billion bottles each year**

L **Wine is a growing category**

L **More wine is drunk now than beer, cider and spirits**

L

L **In 2016 60% of the UK population drank wine (WSTA)**

What do Drinkers Expect? L **Wine to be of good quality**

L **Wine to be in good condition**

L **Wine to be served at correct temperature**

L **A choice of wines to be available**

L **Wine service to be professional**

L

Understandingthe winedrinker

Looking at your list, what do you think the following customers are likely to drink?

L A female group of 20-somethings? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

L \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

L \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

L 2 girlfriends sharing a bottle?\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

4What is Wine?

L **Wine is an alcoholic beverage made from the fermented juices of**

**freshly gathered grapes**

L **Produced in the district of origin**

L **Made according to local tradition and practice**

What affects the taste of wine?

L **Grape Variety**

L **Climate**

L **Soil**

L **Weather**

L **Viticulture (the way grapes are grown)**

L

Wine Styles

The vast majority of wine is Light Wine. This simply means that it is still wine, not sparkling,

between 8% and 15% alcohol by volume (ABV). This indicates the alcoholic strength of the

drink. When people generically talk about wine, Light Wine is what they are referring to.

Sweet Wines

The riper the grapes, the more sugar they have. Remember that fermentation converts that

sugar into alcohol with the help of yeast. It’s not unusual for trace amounts of sugar to be

left after the fermentation, and some wines are made in styles that purposefully leave some

extra sugar behind.

Sparkling

This is wine which has bubbles in it. The most famous sparkling wine is Champagne, which

comes from the Champagne region in France, but sparkling wine is made all over the world.

Remember that during the process of fermentation, carbon dioxide is also produced.

This is what is trapped in sparkling wines to give it the bubbles.

L **Traditional method**

(**Champagne, Cava and English sparkling)**

L **Tank method (Prosecco)**

5Canada

50 N

North

America

10˚ Celsius

30 N

20˚ Celsius

0 Equator

South

America

Brazil

20˚ Celsius

30 S

50 S

Chile

10˚ Celsius

Argentina

Wine Producing Regions of the World

6Russia

Europe

China

South Africa

50 N

30 N

Australia

30 S

New

Zealand

50 S

7Grape Varietals

**White Grapes White Grapes Phonetic Phonetic Where it Grows Where it Grows Characteristics**

**Characteristics**

Chardonnay Shar-don-ay California, Chile, Australia, France, (Burgundy, Champagne & South) and more

From warmer climates - ripe melon, fresh pineapple,

tropical fruits.

From cooler climates - steely, apple, citrus, crisp.

Can be matured in oak to give it toasty vanilla flavours.

Chenin Blanc Shen-in-blonk France (Loire), South Africa, California and

more

Crisp, citrusy, apple: sometimes more tropical

fruit & honey. Can be dry, medium or sweet.

Riesling Reece-ling Germany, USA, France, New Zealand, South Africa and more Apricot, nectarine, peach, apple, pear, pineapple, lime,

lemon, honey, honeycomb, beeswax, petrol, ginger,

citrus blossom. AGED FLAVORS - diesel, petrol, lanolin.

Dry, medium or sweet.

Pinot Gris / Pinot Grigio Pee-noh- GREE-joe Italy, France, USA, and more Pinot Gris - Aromatic & spicy.

Pinot Grigio - Crisp, neutral & light.

Sauvignon Blanc Soh-vin-yon- Blonk California, Chile, France, New Zealand, South Africa and more Lime, green apple, asian pear, kiwi, passion fruit, guava,

white peach, nectarine, green bell pepper, gooseberry

basil, jalapeño, grass, tarragon, lovage, celery,

lemongrass, box of chalk.

OAK FLAVOURS - Vanilla, pie crust, dill, coconut, butter,

nutmeg, cream.

Viognier Vee-oh-nyay France (Rhone), Chile, Australia, California, South

Africa and more

Aromatic, floral, peach and apricot.

Thick mouth feel with good depth of flavour.

Picpoul Blanc Pick-pool blonk France (Languedoc) Crystal clear with green highlights, though can be more

golden from older vines, Soft, delicate nose, with pleasant

hints of acacia and hawthorn blossom. Delicate and fresh

in the mouth it has an excellent acid/structure balance.

Sauvignon Blanc Pinot Grigio Albariño Chardonnay

8**Red Grapes Red Grapes** Cabernet Sauvignon Merlot Pinot Noir Syrah (Shiraz) Zinfandel (Primitivo) Malbec Tempranillo Merlot **Phonetic Phonetic Where it Grows Where it Grows** Ka-ber-nay So-vin-yon France (Bordeaux & South), USA, Chile, Australia, and more Mer-loh France (Bordeaux & South), USA, Chile, Australia and more Pee-noh Nwar France (Burgundy & Champagne), USA, Australia New Zealand, Chile See-rah (Shee-razz) France (Rhone & South), Australia, USA, Chile, South Africa and more Zin-fun-dehl (Prim-i-teevo) California & Italy Mahl-bek France (Bordeaux & Cahors) Argentina tehm-prah- NEE-yoh Spain Various aliases; Portugal various aliases; Australia,

North America

Cabernet Sauvignon **Characteristics**

**Characteristics**

Herbaceous when not fully ripe with capsicum and grassy

undertones. As it ripens, it tends towards the flavour of

blackcurrant; when very concentrated, cassis; you can

often detect mint or eucalyptus. Oak lends secondary

characters of vanilla, cedar, sandalwood, tobacco, coffee,

musk and spicy notes.

Cool climate - more structured with a higher presence of

tannins and earthy flavours like tobacco and tar.

Warm climate - more fruit-forward (cherry, raspberry)

less tannin. Judicious oak-treatment of up to 24 months

gives Merlot more structure.

Young Pinot Noir can smell almost sweet, with freshly

crushed raspberries, cherries and redcurrants.

When mature, the best wines develop a sensuous, silky

mouth feel with the fruit flavours deepening and gamey

forest floor nuances emerging.

Blackberry, blueberry and boysenberry (tart to jammy).

Olive, pepper, clove, vanilla, mint, liquorice, chocolate,

allspice, rosemary, cured meat, bacon fat, tobacco,

herbs and smoke.

Jammy, blueberry, black pepper, cherry, plum,

boysenberry, cranberry, and liquorice,. Often explodes with

candied fruitiness followed by spice and often a tobacco-

like smoky finish.

ARGENTINA: blackberry, plum, and black cherry. Milk

chocolate, cocoa powder, violets, leather, (depending on

oak ageing), and a sweet tobacco finish.

FRANCE: From the Cahors region; leathery with tart

currant, black plum and savory bitterness often described

as green at the start; higher acidity with lower alcohol;

tend to age longer.

Medium- to full-bodied, with red-fruit characteristics,

(cherry, plum, tomato), dried fig, cedar, leather,

tobacco, vanilla, dill, and clove.

Pinot Noir Malbec

9Making Wine

Wine is simply fermented grape juice.

White Wine

To make white wines the grapes are picked, crushed and pressed quickly to extract the

juice and retain freshness with minimal grape skin contact. The juice is then fermented

in vats for 2-4 weeks. Vats are most commonly made of steel or wood. Fermentation is

simply added yeasts feeding on the sugars in the grapes and turning them into alcohol.

Red Wine

The crushed grapes are allowed to mix with the skins during fermentation to allow the

juice to soak up the natural colour from the skins. This process is called maceration. As

well as colour, the juice soaks up ‘tannins’ from the skin (that’s what makes the roof of

your mouth feel dry when you taste red wines). The longer the juice soaks up the tannins

and colour, the more full bodied the wine will be. Pressing occurs after fermentation.

Rosé Wine

Made the same way as red wine but not allowed skin contact for as long to produce a

pink rather than a red colour. Rosé wines are not a blend of red and white wines as is

often thought.

Once made some wine can then be matured before bottling. This is usually done in

the American Oak barrel and the French Oak barrel. However, Hungarian and Slovenian

barrels also have a following with certain winemakers. American Oak barrels are cheaper,

have a wider grain and lower wood tannins as compared to French Oak.

0Alcoholic

Fermentation

Grape

Sugar

Glucose

100%

Yeast

Catalyst

Ethyl

Alcohol

Ethanol

48%

Carbon

Dioxide

+

49%

PLUS 3% of many compounds giving FLAVOUR

Make up of a Grape

Stalk

Tannins

Flor

Yeasts

Skin

Colour

Tannin

Flavourings

Pulp Sugar

Acid

Water

Flavourings

Pips Bitter Tannins

1The winemaking process

White Wine Red Wine

Grapes

crushed to

break skins

Stalks removed

Stalks may

be removed

PRESS

Crushed

grapes pressed

to remove skins

FERMENTATION

VAT

Juice run

off after a

few hours to

produce rosé

wines

Must and skins

kept in contact,

usually by

pumping over,

to facilitate

colour

extraction

FERMENTATION

VAT

Traditionally

oak, now often

stainless steel

FREE-RUN

WINE

PRESS

Juice only

fermented,

no skins

PRESS WINE

May or may not

be blended with

free-run wine

Maturation

Maturation

BOTTLING

2How are

wedoing?

Name two old world and

two new world

countries

name three

grape varieties

that make

red wine

name three grape varieties

that make white

wine

name three wine

regions

13Sale & Service

of Wine

Storing Wine

Unopened Bottles

L On its side, unless the wine is sealed under a screw-cap closure, in which case the

dry out, which would cause it to shrink and make the bottle no longer airtight.

L At a constant, cool temperature (13-16°C). It is especially important to avoid major

L Away from bright light (to prevent premature ageing and fading of the label).

L Free from vibration.

L Rotate stock used in displays or that wine will often be spoilt.

Opened Bottles L How long a wine will last for after opening will depend on the wine.

Where possible, keep wines refrigerated (whites and rosés) to preserve freshness.

Bottles must be sealed.

L If you are just using the original cork or screw cap, make sure the wine isn’t kept for

more than 3 days.

L Preservation systems exist that can extend the shelf life once opened.

4Wine Faults

Once a bottle of wine is opened it can often be detected that there is a fault with

the liquid i.e. it is spoilt in some way.

Corked wine?

A “corked” wine is one that has been spoiled by a cork contaminated by “Trichloranisole”,

This is the most common wine fault and can occur at the rate of one in 20 bottles opened

made from types of plastic, agglomerate cork and screw tops.

cork or

it could simply be that the bottle has been opened poorly. Mould on top of the cork is

nothing to worry about either.

Change the Bottle Immediately

Re-fermentation

Modern techniques mean this is now really rare. If it happens in a bottle, the wine will

Tartrate Change the Bottle Immediately

Crystals Tartaric Acid is a natural component found in grapes, and therefore wine, that crystalises

when wine becomes very cold, or if the wine is old.

Tartrates are usually a sign of a quality wine that has not been over-treated during

Be careful when you pour the wine.

How do you tell if a wine is too old to drink? Contact with air, or “oxidisation”, spoils wine and is caused when a wine has been open

wine will have a sherry-like smell and will taste dull and lifeless. Red wines will be dull

brown in colour, and White wines will turn a tawny or brown colour.

Change the Bottle Immediately

Sediment

As red wines mature in the bottle, they may develop sediment which is the tannins and

colour elements falling out of the wine. This is quite natural and the bottle may need

decanting before serving.

Be careful when you pour the wine.

15Serving Wine

Ideal Serve Temperatures L

L

L

chilled (12 °C).

Glassware

L Ensure glasses are clean and dry.

L

Opening Bottles: Opening wine with a cork

L Remove the top of the foil capsule by cutting around the lip of the bottle with

a waiter’s knife.

L Ensure the neck of the bottle is clean.

L Turning the cork screw, not the bottle, drill into the cork (remember not to

pierce the wine end of the cork).

L Position and hold the hinged part so that it is touching the rim of the bottle.

Ensure the cork leaves the bottle gently without a pop.

Opening Sparkling Wine L

hand once the wire is removed.

L Tilt the bottle to a 30° angle making sure you are not pointing directly at

anyone.

L Gripping the cork in one hand, use the other to grip the base of the bottle

and turn the bottle, not the cork.

L Hold the cork steady, resisting its

L Keep twisting until the cork eases out of the bottle slowly and the gas

pressure is fully released. Hold on tight to the cork to ensure the cork

releases slowly without a loud ‘pop’.

6Merchandising

Outside

customers’ attention.

Front of Bar

Blackboards can be used to highlight wines of the moment. They can be high cash margin

wines, seasonal promotions or wines that just need more ‘hard sell’.

Where possible the message can be reinforced by displaying these highlighted wines in

an ice bucket on the bar to entice that customer who is still undecided.

Back Bar

blocks of the same colour, ideally 3 bottles of the same together.

Hot Spots

sales). Popular and high margin items should be the easiest to see and buy.

trade up from the entry level option.

Tables

dining should always include wine glasses.

Wine Lists

Wine lists on the bar and on tables are vital. Make sure they are kept clean and well

presented. Wine lists should be clear, concise and eye catching.

Remember

It’s not rocket science but it’s important to keep your products

free. So make sure those bottles don’t get left on shelves for months on end. And don’t

forget the loo! You have a very receptive audience in there and more often than not their

next port of call is the bar!

17Wine Upselling

L **Increase credibility of venue**

L **Increase sales**

L

L **Match food and wine**

L **Tips!**

and improve their experience. It is absolutely not about pushing them into choosing an

expensive wine that they neither want nor enjoy.

cornered into choosing the most expensive option.

Each wine on the list can be categorised by style, and this will help group the choices

together when discussing with customers.

**Rosé Red Light, dry, subtle Light Fruity and juicy**

**Juicy Spicy Oaked, intense**

Know your wine list! Vital to upselling wine is knowing your wine list, and learning the styles, grape varieties

with the customers.

L Smile, relax and engage with the customer to provide them with a better experience

of wine choosing that is fun and informative.

L

L Show them two

L Suggest some of your

personal recommendation than a written choice.

L a few words.

L Link the food that they have chosen with the wine.

L If a white wine has been chosen for the starter, but the main course is better suited to

L Selling the wine fully to customers should be an intrinsic part of the service, and

can provide the customer with a great food and wine match that turns their ordinary

experience into a special occasion.

8The Sale and

Service of Wine

L **Always present the Wine List with the Food Menu**

L

**(especially to accompany any Seafood dishes)**

L **Show Wine**

**List (i.e. the person who ordered it - lady or gentleman)**

L **Open Wine**

L **Tasting to Host - serve from the right**

L **Use “twist” technique when serving to minimise drips and use a folded**

**napkin as “pad” to wipe the bottle**

L **Pour Ladies**

L **Red Wine - leave on the table, label facing outwards**

L **White Wine - place in a “wine cooler”**

L **Champagne/Sparkling Wine - place in Ice Bucket with a napkin**

L **Re-charge glasses when appropriate**

L **“May I bring you a fresh bottle?”**

L **Remember appropriate also by the glass**

L **glass of Port or Sherry as “After Dinner” wines**

L **Number of glasses from a 75cl bottle**

**3 large (250ml) - 4 medium (175ml)**

**- 6 small (125ml)**

19Food Pairing

Nowadays there is so much disagreement about what food matches what wine it’s hard

not to feel confused. Below are some simple guidelines but bear in mind that food and

standby rule of matching white wine with white meat and red wine with red meat is still a

good guideline but can vary depending on the structure of the dish and the sauce used.

body

MATCH WEIGHT

A big, strong wine is best with big, strong food and light wine is better with

similarly light food. Most red wines are going to be better with heartier dishes

and most whites will suit the lighter ones. For example, roast beef and Cabernet

Sauvignon, or seafood and Chablis.

acidity

MATCH INTENSITY

fruity

and lemongrass but doesn’t sit too heavily on the stomach. These will match

fruity

well with similarly intense and fragrant wines which are still light bodied, for

body

body

example Riesling.

dryness

acidity

acidity

dryness

dryness

MATCH OR CONTRAST ACIDITY

Acidity is an important part of any wine. It makes your mouth water and makes

the wine refreshing. The trick here is to make sure that foods with a lot of

acidity, e.g. vinaigrette dressing, are paired with a crisp refreshing wine, for

example Sauvignon Blanc. Sometimes oily food, e.g. smoked salmon, needs

palate-cleansing, high acidity wine.

fruity

fruity

MATCHING SWEETNESS

Sweet foods

food will make the wine taste too dry. Sweet wines are also a good contrast

for salty foods, for example, foie gras or blue cheese with Sauternes (a sweet

dessert wine from Bordeaux in France).

It is also worth considering the following:

WATCH OUT FOR

L **Chilli vs tannin (accentuate each other)**

L **Mouth coating foods e.g. chocolate**

L **Smoked and red wine (creates a metallic taste)**

L **Asparagus (intense** )

fruity

0body

acidity

dryness

fruity

MATCHES MADE IN HEAVEN

L **Goats’ cheese & Sauvignon Blanc**

fruity

L **Duck & Pinot Noir**

L **Stilton & Port**

L **Thai dishes & Riesling**

MATCHING FOOD AND WINE IN PRACTICE

When tasting food and wine together, simply taste the wine, then taste the food

food and wine you are more likely to notice a bad match than a good match,

so making a note of both is useful.

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF

L

overpower the other?

L

L the wine make the food taste odd?

L If the food is sweet does it make the wine taste drier?

L the wine make the food taste better, or vice versa?

L cleanse your palate after oily food?

L soften or enhance components of the food? E.g. chilli often

tastes hotter with tannic red wines and softer with slightly sweet whites,

whereas the protein in meat softens the tannins in red wine.

element of personal taste involved. What tastes fantastic to you might not

taste the same to someone else. The most useful question of all is to ask your

customer, “What do you normally like to drink?”

2**DESCRIPTION**

**BONE DRY,**

**DELICATE,**

**NEUTRAL WINES**

**DRY &**

**AROMATIC**

**JUICY FRUIT**

**DRIVEN,**

**RIPE WINES**

**FULL**

**FLAVOURED,**

**NUTTY WHITES**

**LIGHT REDS**

**JUICY REDS**

**SPICY REDS**

**OAKED**

**INTENSE REDS**

**LIGHT, DRY,**

**SUBTLE**

**ROSÉ WINES**

**FRUITY, JUICY,**

**MEDIUM ROSÉ**

**WINES**

**TRADITIONAL**

**METHOD FIZZ**

**OTHER FIZZ**

**(Tank Method/**

**Charmat Method)**

2

**EXAMPLES**

Frascati, Muscadet,

Pinot Grigio, Soave

Sauvignon Blanc,

Dry Chenin Blanc,

Dry Riesling

Chenin Blanc,

Semillon, Viognier

Burgundy,

Australian,

Californian

Beaujolais, Light

VDP Reds, Light

Chianti and Valpolicella

Pinot Noir, Merlot,

Chianti, Grenache,

Rioja

Shiraz, Rhone Reds

Bordeaux and New

World Cab Sauv,

Top Riojas

Provence Rosé,

Pinot Grigio Blush,

Spanish Rosé

White Zinfandel,

White Grenache,

Shiraz Rosé

Champagne,

Prosecco, Cava,

Sparkling Wine

Prosecco and

Inexpensive Fizz.

Light undressed salad

E.g. Green salad,

Feta Salad

Fish based salad, Shellfish

and delicate White Fish e.g.

Plaice, Skate, Sole, Clam

Chowder, Smoked Fish

Caesar, Egg, Fish and

Carrots

Caesar, Chicken, Gilled

Peppers,

Onion Tart, Cooked

Grilled and Roasted Veg,

Olives, Prosciutto,

Ratatouille,

Smoked Meats

Roasted Veg,

Smoked Meats,

Wild Mushrooms

Red Meat Salads

Red Meat Salads

Most fish salads and

Vegetable tarts

Roasted Veg,

Pasta Salad,

Chicken Salad

Asparagus & Prosciutto

Salad, Strawberries

White asparagus, light

salads. Mini quiches

and frittata

Clam Chowder, Halibut,

Herring, Mussels, Oysters,

Prawns, Trout

Fish based sauces e.g.

Olive oil

or light cream sauce

Salmon, Scallops

Crab, Lobster, Monkfish,

Swordfish, Tuna, Salmon,

Smoked Fish

Cod, Seared Salmon,

Sea Trout, Tuna

Tuna or Salmon

Generally too heavy for

fish and seafood

Generally too heavy for

fish and seafood

White Fish, Prawns,

Scallops and Mussels

Salmon and Tuna

Poached Salmon, Sole,

Lobster, Shrimps

Sushi, Baked Fish, Crab

Cakes to Prawn Cocktails

to Grilled Salmon

Very light Olive Oil

and Fish based sauces

E.g. Marinara

Fish based sauces

Fish based sauces,

light creamy sauces,

Hollandaise, Pesto

Butter and Cream

based sauces

e.g. Carbonara, Pesto

Tomato based sauces

e.g. Arrabbiata,

Napolitano, Lasagne

Bolognese,

Carbonara, Cooked Tomato

Sauce, Lasagne

Cream based sauces

e.g. Carbonara,

Lasagne, Bolognese,

BBQ and Pepper sauce

Cream and cheesy

based sauce e.g.

Carbonara, Parmesan,

Gorgonzola

Light sauces and

Tomato based sauces

Great with Tomato

based sauces

Light, Fish based

sauces

Cream based saucesGenerally too light

for most meats

Simple sauces on

Chicken, Pork

and Veal

Grilled, BBQ, Baked,

Casseroled White

Meats: Chicken, Pork,

Turkey, Veal, Duck

Roast Chicken, Duck,

Ham, Pork,

Turkey

Light Pork dishes,

Roast Chicken and

Turkey

Chicken, Duck, Turkey, light

Beef or Pheasant dishes,

Smoked Meats and Sausages

BBQ, Grilled, Roasted,

Casseroled Game: Duck, Goose

Pheasant, Venison Sausages,

Beef and Lamb

Heavy meat such as Grilled,

Roasted, BBQ, Casseroled

Game: Boar, Duck, Pheasant,

Venison, Beef and Lamb

Meats, Antipasti

meats, Chorizo, Chicken,

Pork and Sausages

BBQ meats, Burgers

and Chops

Antipasti

Parma and other

air-dried ham

Delicate seasoning of

Chives, Dill, Coriander, Fennel,

Parsley, Tarragon

Chives, Coriander,

Dill, Ginger, Lemongrass,

Lime, Tarragon

Basil, Coriander,

Fennel, Light Garlic, Ginger,

Parsley, Tarragon

Basil, Chives, Cloves, Cinnamon,

Coriander, Fennel, Garlic, Ginger,

Nutmeg, Parsley, Spring Onions,

Tarragon

Basil, Coriander,

Garlic, Nutmeg

Basil, Chives,

Coriander, Garlic, Mint,

Nutmeg and Thyme

Black Pepper, Chives,

Cloves, Coriander,

Garlic and Nutmeg

Black Pepper, Chives,

Garlic, Mint, Nutmeg,

Rosemary and Thyme

Basil, Chives,

Lemongrass, Thyme,

Dill, Parsley

Basil, Nutmeg, Garlic,

Pepper

Saffron, Ginger,

Coriander, Garlic

Garlic, Rosemary,

Mustard Greens Generally spice

overwhelms these wines

Especially good with Thai dishes

and some lighter and milder

Indian Meals, Tandoori Fish

Thai & light Indian

dishes e.g. Tandoori,

Korma, Rogan Josh

Coconut flavoured dishes,

Indonesian and some lighter

Indian dishes

Italian and Spanish dishes

with spicy sauces

e.g. Chorizo, Arrabbiata

Moderately hot Indian dishes,

Black bean Sauces, Italian

and Spanish Dishes with

spicy sauces

Rich, Creamy based Indian

Curries e.g. Korma, Balti, Black

Pepper steak sauce

Be careful when pairing up

intense wines with spicy

foods

Spicy Arrabbiata,

Thai and Indonesian

cuisine

Chinese Food e.g.

Plum sauce, Lemon

Chicken

Thai, Indian, Highly

spiced foods

Thai/Indian curry

Very mild flavoured

Cheese e.g. Cream cheese,

Feta, Mozzarella, Ricotta

High acidity cheese

such as Goats Cheese

Semi-soft Cheese e.g.

Brie, Camembert, Chaume,

Mozzarella, some Mature

Cheddars

Mozzarella and

Smoked Cheeses

Cheddar, Mozzarella,

Parmesan and Port-Salut

Cambozola, and other Creamy

Blue Cheeses, Goats

Cheeses and Mature Cheddar

Cambozola, and

other Creamy Blue

Cheeses e.g. Stilton

Brie, Camembert, Chaume,

Cheshire, Edam, Parmesan,

Pont L’Eveque and

Red Leicester

Feta, Goats Cheese

and Mahon Cheese

Creamy Italian

Cheese e.g. Ricotta

and Goats Cheese

Brie, Goats Cheese,

Gouda, Edam,

Parmesan

Parmesan, Gorgonzola,

Camembert, Gruyere,

Pecorino or Talegio

23Tasting**,**

Assessing & DescribingAPPEARANCE

L **Is it clear and bright?**

L **How intense is the colour?**

L **What colour is it?**

**White: lemony or more golden?**

**Reds: purple (young wine) or more red?**

NOSE

L **Does it smell fresh and clean?**

L **How powerful are the aromas?**

L **Does it smell fruity or spicy?**

**What fruit characters do you smell?**

**Whites: green fruit or ripe, tropical fruit?**

TASTE

L **Is it dry or can you taste a bit of sweetness?**

L **Does it make your mouth water? This is a sign of acidity.**

L **If it’s red – does it leave your gums dried or a sticky feeling?**

**This is tannin**

L **What kind of body does it have? Big and full or light?**

L **What fruit can you taste? Is it the same as what you could**

**smell?**

**Whites: green and crisp or ripe and tropical?**

**Reds: red berries, plums or ripe black fruit?**

L **How long does the taste last in your mouth?**

CONCLUSIONS

L **Do you like it?**

L **Which customers do you think it will appeal to?**

L **How could you describe it in 3-4 words?**

L **Can you think of suitable food matches?**

4Wordsfor

DescribingWine

**SWEETNESS ACIDITY FRUIT BODY STYLE TANNIN OAK FLOWER HERB &**

Dry Off Dry Medium Medium Sweet

Sweet Luscious Citrus Zesty Refreshing Bright Zippy Racy Edgy Lively Fresh Crisp Jammy Ripe Juicy Fleshy Plummy Red Fruit Dark Fruit

Berry Cassis Citrus Stone Fruit

Tropical Melon Apple

Light Medium Full Short Delicate Elegant Complex Powerful Concentrated Opulent Rich Barnyard Smoky Earthy Leathery Accessible Clean Delicate Elegant Polished Refined Grippy Powerful Firm Structured Chewy Silky Smooth Round Opulent Voluptuous Supple

Soft

Mellow

Smoky Sweet Tobacco

Toasty Spicy Clove Nutty Caramel Vanilla Buttery Creamy White Flowers

Violet Perfumed Lavender Rose Citrus Blossom

Geranium Vegetal

Cat’s Pee

Asparagus

Green

Grassy

Sage

Eucalyptus

Jalapeño

Dill

Bell

Pepper

2Tastingnotes

Wine Name: £

Region/Country: Vintage

Grape Variety:

Appearance: Nose: Palate:

How would you describe this wine to a guest? Food match?

Wine Name: £

Region/Country: Vintage

Grape Variety:

Appearance: Nose: Palate:

How would you describe this wine to a guest? Food match?

Wine Name: £

Region/Country: Vintage

Grape Variety:

Appearance: Nose: Palate:

How would you describe this wine to a guest? Food match?

6Tastingnotes

Wine Name: £

Region/Country: Vintage

Grape Variety:

Appearance: Nose: Palate:

How would you describe this wine to a guest? Food match?

Wine Name: £

Region/Country: Vintage

Grape Variety:

Appearance: Nose: Palate:

How would you describe this wine to a guest? Food match?

Wine Name: £

Region/Country: Vintage

Grape Variety:

Appearance: Nose: Palate:

How would you describe this wine to a guest? Food match?

2Tastingnotes

Wine Name: £

Region/Country: Vintage

Grape Variety:

Appearance: Nose: Palate:

How would you describe this wine to a guest? Food match?

Wine Name: £

Region/Country: Vintage

Grape Variety:

Appearance: Nose: Palate:

How would you describe this wine to a guest? Food match?

Wine Name: £

Region/Country: Vintage

Grape Variety:

Appearance: Nose: Palate:

How would you describe this wine to a guest? Food match?

8Tastingnotes

Wine Name: £

Region/Country: Vintage

Grape Variety:

Appearance: Nose: Palate:

How would you describe this wine to a guest? Food match?

Wine Name: £

Region/Country: Vintage

Grape Variety:

Appearance: Nose: Palate:

How would you describe this wine to a guest? Food match?

Wine Name: £

Region/Country: Vintage

Grape Variety:

Appearance: Nose: Palate:

How would you describe this wine to a guest? Food match?

2Tastingnotes

Wine Name: £

Region/Country: Vintage

Grape Variety:

Appearance: Nose: Palate:

How would you describe this wine to a guest? Food match?

Wine Name: £

Region/Country: Vintage

Grape Variety:

Appearance: Nose: Palate:

How would you describe this wine to a guest? Food match?

Wine Name: £

Region/Country: Vintage

Grape Variety:

Appearance: Nose: Palate:

How would you describe this wine to a guest? Food match?

0Quiz

**1**

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**2**

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**3**

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**4**

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**5**

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**6**

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**7**

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

**8**

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**9**

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**10**

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3

(SOME OF) THE STUFF

YOU ALWAYS WANTED

TO KNOW ABOUT WINE

**From a South African Perspective**

CAPE OF GOOD WINE and CASSIDY DART MW

TRANSLATED BY MLONDOLOZI PUTEFOREWORD

I have been lucky enough to work with

wine my entire professional life.

It’s greatest attribute and perhaps

biggest challenge is its inherent

complexity.

We need more people drinking wine

and not being afraid of it.

South Africa is making the greatest

wine in its almost 300 year history, and

our aim of this guide was to attach

contemporary South African wine

alongside an international context and

to encourage a new generation of wine

drinkers.

Cassidy Dart MW

I’ve always enjoyed wine but it wasn’t

until I learned more about it that I

found a true appreciation. When we’re

able to appreciate wine, there’s less

inclination to abuse it. There’s respect

for how it’s made: the land, the raw

ingredients and most importantly, the

people. Wine represents people. Our

endless combination of quirks, how

our histories are woven together, our

cultures and the way we celebrate. And

yes, our different colours. Wine Wise is

my attempt to encourage more people

to appreciate wine...so that, ultimately,

when I’m next at the wine store, wine

farm, or tasting event, I’ll see more

people who look like me.

Cape of Good Wine

KUNYE

THE WINE

WISE

2 | WINE WISE SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINE**Contents**

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Wine has been made

for a very long time.

Far longer than most

of us would have ever

considered.Wine has been made for a very long

time. Far longer than most of us would

have ever considered.

In 8000 BC, the ancient

8000 BC

Egyptians and Chinese

made fermented

beverages from fruits

(including grapes), honey, and rice.

They’d store these in earthenware jars.

The oldest winery in

4100 BC

the world was traced

to Armenia circa 4100

BC. Winemaking

earthenware vessels were submerged in

the ground in Israel, Georgia, Armenia,

and Iran.

From 1500 BC to

15oo BC-1200 bc

1200 BC, during the

Iron Age in Northern

Europe, barrels were

the preferred container for storing and

shipping wine.

15oo BC-300 bc

Phoenicians spread *Vitis*

*vinifera* throughout the

Mediterranean from

1500 BC to 300 BC.

During 900 BC to 100

900 BC-100 bc

BC, clay amphorae

were used to store

and transport wine in

ancient Greece and Rome.

But that’s the Old

1500’s

World. How did we

come to enjoy wine in

the New World? In the

1500s, Portuguese explorers transported

vines and introduced winemaking to

Brazil. Yes, Brazil has a long history of

grape growing and wine production.

The Spanish brought *Vitis vinifera* to

the Americas. The Dutch started the

5 | WINE WISE South African wine industry. And finally,

the British introduced winemaking to

Australia and New Zealand.

Here in South

1659

Africa, 02

February is a very

special day. As it

is on this day, in 1659, Jan van Riebeeck

first pressed wine in the Cape.

But it was

1685

Governor Simon

van der Stel who

truly furthered the

South African wine industry, establishing

Constantia Wine Estate. After his death,

the estate would be split and sold into

what are now Groot Constantia, Klein

Constantia, and Buitenverwachting.

In 1693, Dom

1693

Pérignon ‘invents’

champagne,

exclaiming

“Come quickly, I am drinking stars!”. In

actuality, there was less invention and

far more surprise at exploding corks

- a frightening side effect of the wine

undergoing refermentation inside the

bottles. Even though the poet Samuel

Butler referred to ‘brisk champagne’ as

early as 1663, there is a valid argument

that Sir Christopher Merret discovered

champagne when he added sugar

to bottles of wine that resulted

in the wine refermenting and

creating bubbles. In an eight-

page paper delivered to

the Royal Society in 1662,

Merret details the use of

sugar or molasses to give

wine or cider some fizz.

This would predate the

famous monk by three

decades.

SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINEA BRIEF HISTORY OF WINE

Interestingly, wine

1740 1920 to 1933

bottles weren’t always

laid on their sides. In

1740, wine bottles were redesigned to

enable them to lay on their sides. Having

the bottles on their sides allowed the

wine to stay in contact with the cork,

ensuring that the cork stayed moist.

Without moisture, the corks would

dry out and crack, resulting in oxygen

exposure that would spoil the wine. This

bottle redesign would allow for long-

term ageability.

Continuing with the

mid 1800’s

bottle improvements,

sparkling wines gained

popularity in the mid-

1800s partially thanks to more consistent

wine bottle production. Sparkling wines

can exert an internal pressure of around

five to six atmospheres. Developing a

bottle that could withstand that pressure

surely saved lives.

In the 1900s, phylloxera

1900’s

destroyed roughly 70%

of French vineyards.

This microscopic pest,

native to America and accidentally

introduced to Europe, attacks the roots

of *Vitis vinifera* vines when in its louse

form. *Vitis vinifera* is not able to protect

itself from the pest, the vine is weakened

and eventually dies. However, American

vines are naturally immune to phylloxera.

The solution to phylloxera was to graft

the European *Vitis vinifera* cane onto the

resistant American rootstock, producing

the sought after European grape

flavours with the safety and resistance of

American vines but with none of its wild

and foxy flavours.

During the 1920-

1933 prohibition,

statewide

legislation banned almost all production,

importation, transportation, and sales

of alcohol in the United States of

America. This undoubtedly delivered

a massive blow to the burgeoning U.S.

wine industry, setting it back by many

decades. Alcohol consumption wasn’t

illegal - only the sale and distribution

of alcohol were. There were a few

exceptions to the ban - sacramental

wines were permitted for religious

purposes, and pharmacies could sell

‘medicinal whisky’. Amazingly, 10 states

still have counties where the sale of

alcohol is still prohibited.

A cross between

1925

Pinot Noir

and Cinsaut

(then known as

Hermitage in South Africa) was created

in 1925 by Abraham Izak Perold, the first

professor of viticulture at Stellenbosch

University. Professor Perold was aiming

to create a more robust Pinot Noir with

the best characteristics of the more

dependable Cinsaut.

1965

The first bag-

in-box wines

were invented in

Australia in 1965.

In 1978, Robert

1978

Parker’s Wine

Advocate

established a

100-point wine rating system.

6 | WINE WISE SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINEApartheid is abolished

1994

in South Africa in 1994,

opening up the overseas

market and allowing South Africa to shed

itself of the mass-produced co-op wines

that it had built its wine industry upon.

2010

Cabernet Sauvignon became

the most planted grape in

the world in 2010. It holds

this position to this day.

Kanonkop’s Paul

2018

Sauer becomes the

first South African

wine to receive a 100-point score by a

Master of Wine from the UK in 2018.

100

7 | WINE WISE SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINE**02. VITICULTURE**

Growing grapes

is hard work.

8 | WINE WISE SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINEGrowing grapes

is hard work.

There are many factors to consider, some

outside of the grower’s control. It is a risky

industry, but it can result in great reward.

vineyard and

site

selection

choice of

rootstock

soil

preparation

choice of

vine density

training the

vine

pruning

the vine

9 | WINE WISE VITICULTURE

The viticulturist (science and practice of

grape culture) has as great an impact

on wine quality as does the winemaker.

Below are a few of the most important

considerations for the viticulturist and

winemaker.

vine variety

and clone

soil

testing

trellis

system

vine

planting

control of

pests and

diseases

harvest

SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINEVITICULTURE

30º to 50º

3

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Wine grapevines are grown between 30º to 50º south of the

equator and 30º to 50º north of the equator. These are the

areas where grapes can survive and thrive, receiving enough

sunlight and warmth to produce a successful yearly crop.

Anything further away from the equator would be too cold

for the vines to survive. Anything too close to the equator

becomes too tropical and hot to produce a viable harvest.

3

0

º-

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With global warming, we’ve seen and will continue to see these boundaries being

expanded. e.g. England now has a growing wine industry.

The lifecycle of the grapevine

The lifecycle of the grapevine remains constant. Some vintages may be harvested

earlier, and others later. But the pattern remains the same...

**Budbreak** - early spring when the vines

start showing signs of life

their leaves and prepare for a hard-

earned slumber, an opportune time to

prune the vines and secure the structure

**Early Shoot & Leaf Growth** - where the

for the next season.

shoots start to unravel and produce their

little leaves

...and then we do it all again next year.

**Flowering & Fruitset** - we start to see

the clusters of flowers that will

be pollinated and develop into

clusters of berries

**Veraison & Berry Ripening** - a

marvellous time in the vineyards

with the berries starting to change

colour (white grapes change from

green to pale translucent yellow,

black grapes change from green to

purple)

**Harvest** - mid-to-late summer, our

favourite time of year when the

vineyards and wineries come alive

with frenetic activity as viticulturists

and winemakers weigh up the best

time to pick and process the grapes

**Winter Dormancy & Pruning** - at

the end of autumn, the vines drop

10 | WINE WISE SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINEVITICULTURE

WHITE GRAPE

BLACK GRAPE

WHITE WHITE

ORANGE RED

ROSE

11 | WINE WISE SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINEVITICULTURE

An important part to understanding

how wine is made is to understand

SKIN

Colour

the various elements in a grape that

STEMS

Tannins

Flavour

Tannins

SEEDS

contribute to the end product.

Bitter Oils

Tannins

Starting at the top, the **stems** contain

tannins, with their inclusion, or exclusion,

having a marked impact on the wine.

The **skins** contain colour, tannins and

flavour. The longer the grape juice

remains in contact with the skins, the

more flavour, tannins and colour can be

BLOOM

extracted into the juice.

Ambient Yeasts

it contains native yeasts that are able

to ferment the grapes when they come

into contact with the juice. Think back

to 8000 BC, before cultured yeasts were

harvested. It was these native, or ambient

yeasts that fermented those first wines.

Yeasts originated millions of years ago

and can be found all around us, including

pULP

in vineyards and inside wineries. We

Water

currently recognise at least 1,500

Sugar

Acids

different species.

This also explains how it is possible to

produce white wines from black-skinned

grapes. e.g. Champagne and blanc de

noirs.

If a black grape is pressed immediately,

little colour is extracted because

the pulp of most grapes is

clear. There are some

grapes with tinted pulp.

These grapes are known

as *teinturier*, and their

resultant wines have

a richer colour.

SEEDS

Bitter Oils

Tannins

However, most

grapes have clear

pulp.

Inside the grape, you will find the pulp

and seeds. **Pulp** consists of mainly water,

with sugars and acids. Ergo, most of your

bottle of wine is made up of water, acids,

and the sugars that have been

converted to alcohol. Flavour

SKIN

Colour

Tannins

Flavour STEMS

Tannins

accounts for a minute

percentage in wine. Yet,

it’s the flavour that is the

most important to us.

You may have

noticed a waxy film

coating the outside

of unwashed grapes.

This is usually most

noticeable on black

grapes. This film is

called the **bloom**, and

BLOOM

Ambient Yeasts

pULP

Water

Sugar

Acids

The **seeds** contain

bitter oils and

tannins. Tannins

help add structure

to a wine. That

structure makes it

possible to age a

wine. We certainly

want the structure,

but not too much of

the bitter oils. When

wines are pressed

to release their juices

12 | WINE WISE SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINEVITICULTURE

(the harder you press, the more juice you get) the winemaker needs to be incredibly

mindful of pressing too hard and releasing too much of these bitter, unpleasant oils. In

Champagne, there are strict rules that legally require producers to press the grapes only

to a certain pressure.

So with all that pressing I’m sure you’re wondering just how many grapes it takes to

make a bottle of wine? One grapevine yields approximately 10 bottles of wine. There

are roughly 400 grapes in each bottle of wine. If a wine bottle pours four glasses, and

my maths is to be relied upon, each delicious glass equates to 100 grapes.

1 grapevine

EQUALS

+ 10 bottles of

wine

+ 400 GRAPES

EQUALS

1 BOTTLE OF

WINE

13 | WINE WISE SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINE**03. WINEMAKING**

**{ sugar + yeast = alcohol + CO2 }**

**Sulfur dioxide**

Sulfur dioxide kills bacteria and inhibits yeast. It’s an essential tool for winemaking,

whether to clean the barrels and equipment, or to neutralise any ambient yeasts present

on the grapes before adding a cultured yeast. It can also be used as a final dose before

bottling the wine to ensure its stability. Sulfur dioxide occurs naturally, and every wine

contains a degree of SO2. Some winemakers opt to work without any addition of

SO2. Next time you think of blaming your headache on sulfur, know that the dried fruit

industry uses far higher levels in their production.

**Corks vs screw caps**

There are a variety of options for bottle closures – from corkscrews harvested from

***Quercus Suber L*** trees to the unpleasant plastic versions. Traditional natural corks have

traditionally been the most popular, given their ability to allow the wine to breathe over

time. But screw caps have gained in popularity. Not enough time has passed for us to

conclusively measure the ageability of wines sealed by screw caps. For now, they’re

indicative of early drinking wines meant to be enjoyed whilst still fresh and fruity.

14 | WINE WISE SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINEWINEMAKING

Sugar + Yeast = Alcohol + CO2

That’s all. We can all go home now.

Sugar + Yeast = Alcohol + CO2 That’s the most important part of winemaking. Without

this recipe, we’d all be drinking grape juice. As lovely as grape juice tastes, I’m sure

you’ll agree that there’s a certain delight in consuming an adult beverage.

The winemaking process for red, white, rosé, sparkling, and fortified wines, be they dry

or sweet, starts off in the same way.

**Harvesting**

The producer will keep an eagle eye on

the ripening grapes, picking them at

the optimum balance of ripeness and

acidity. In South Africa, we harvest our

grapes by hand as labour is plentiful

and, questionably, inexpensive. But in

other parts of the world, grapes can be

harvested with machinery that speeds up

the picking process. There is technically

no difference in the quality of the wines

based on whether they are hand- or

machine-harvested. Some winemaking

styles use the entire grape bunch,

including the stems, and this is much

easier to do by hand. Some of the best

sweet wines in the world are made from

grapes affected by botrytis (“noble rot”),

requiring individually selecting the best

grapes from the bunch. This is a process

that can only be done by hand. Sauternes,

Tokaji, and our very own Noble Late

Harvest are examples of these carefully

harvested grapes.

**Transporting**

Whether they are producing sweet wines

or dry wines, the best producers will

take care not to damage the grapes in

the picking process. Lug boxes are used

to transport the grapes from the fields

to either a larger container, or they are

stacked in a vehicle destined for the

winery. These lug boxes won’t be filled

to the top, as stacking could damage the

grapes and expose them to unwanted

oxygen and potential rot.

The grapes are

transported to the winery

as quickly as possible

and are either kept in

a cold container until

processed or crushed

immediately.

**Crushing**

Traditionally, crushing was done by foot.

In some wineries, grapes are still crushed

this way. But most wineries make use of

modern machinery that can crush and

destem the grapes quickly and efficiently.

At this point, white winemaking and

red winemaking proceed differently.

15 | WINE WISE SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINEWHITE WINEMAKING

GROW GRAPES

HARVEST GRAPES

CRUSH GRAPES

**YEAST**

FERMENT grapes

press grapes

AMPHORA OAK CONCRETE EGG

STAINLESS STEEL

MATURATION OPTIONS

MALIC ACID

CONVERTED TO

LACTIC ACID

BOTTLING (filling, corking) and labelling

16 | WINE WISE SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINEWINEMAKING

White winemaking

After the grapes are crushed, they are usually pressed immediately to avoid contact with

unwanted oxygen and to retain the freshness of the grape juice.

There are variations to this, with some winemakers leaving the juice in contact with the

skins. This extended skin contact will add depth of flavour, texture, and can also add

tannin. Amber wines, or orange wines as they’re also called, are wines made through

extended skin contact.

**Pressing**

Pressing was

traditionally

done in a

basket press

that requires manual labour and is time-

consuming. Modern wineries opt to use

a large pneumatic press as this saves

time and avoids the ever-present risk of

excessive oxygen exposure. The harder

the must is pressed, the more flavour from

the skins and bitter oils from the pips

are extracted. There’s a careful balance

that needs to be found so as not to over-

extract the juice.

We refer to the pressed juice as must.

Remember that until yeast starts

converting the juice into alcohol (and

CO2), we still have only grape juice.

**Yeast**

The grapes are then pumped

into a waiting stainless steel

**YEAST**

tank, where a cultured yeast

is added to the juice. An

extensive range of yeasts are created in

laboratories, each with properties that

best suit the style of winemaking, e.g.

Champagne yeast for sparkling wines,

yeasts that are best suited to Bordeaux-

style wines, yeasts cultured for every style

of beer making.

We know that grapes naturally have

ambient or natural yeasts that live on

their skins. There is a move towards

producing wines that use the minimum

of intervention, and some winemakers

choose not to add a cultured yeast,

instead relying on the native yeasts in the

bloom. However, one doesn’t know what

types of yeasts might be on the grape

skins. In a risky and costly winemaking

business, it could be safer to rely on a

proven strain of yeast instead.

**Fermentation**

We now wait for

fermentation, the process

where the yeast converts

the juice into wine. Most

white wines are fermented

at cooler temperatures

and in inert, or non-

reactive, vessels to retain the freshness,

purity of fruit and flavours, and to

preserve the natural varietal character of

the grape.

**Stainless steel tanks**

Stainless steel tanks are

an excellent vessel to

control temperatures as

they conduct heat and cold

efficiently. They are also easy

to clean.

A producer could choose to leave the

grapes to ferment in stainless steel

or decide to place the juice (or wine,

depending on the stage) in a number of

different vessels.

17 | WINE WISE SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINE**Concrete - either tanks**

**or eggs**

Concrete is an inert

vessel that minimises

contact with air making.

It is naturally cool, is

less expensive, but it

is also hard to clean. I’ve heard many

winemakers state that winemaking is 50%

cleaning. Unwanted bacteria can ruin

your wine and result in very expensive

vinegar.

**Amphora**

These beautiful clay vessels

have been used since the

beginning of winemaking.

In Georgia, the vessels are

called Qvevri and are sunk

into the earth to further keep

the wines cold.

Amphora vessels are gaining popularity

around the world.

**Oak**

Oak barrels are made by

a *tonnelier* or cooper, who

heats and moulds staves

of seasoned wood into

barrels. They also toast

the wood over a flame

to add varying levels of

flavour ranging from light to heavy. The

most popular oak is sourced from France,

Hungary, and America. Each imparts a

unique flavour to the wine. European oak

from cooler climates grow more slowly

and is denser, imparting less flavour than

American oak.

French and Hungarian oak offer subtle

and spicy notes of vanilla, toffee,

butterscotch, chocolate, and coffee that

have a silky texture. American oak is

known for more intense flavours of vanilla

and coconut with a creamier texture.

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A brand new, and very expensive, oak

barrel is usually reserved for red wines

that benefit more from spending time

in oak. However, some producers

might want to impart some of the new

oak flavours into their white wines.

Chardonnay is synonymous with varying

degrees of new oak that add vanilla and

toasty flavours to the wine.

Older oak that has been used for

winemaking in previous vintages loses its

toasted flavours. Older barrels are often

referred to as neutral barrels because

they don’t influence the flavour of the

wine, whether it’s white wine or red wine.

Oak also has tannins of its own, and you

might find that you can pick up on some

of these tannins in a glass of white wine.

**MLF (optional)**

Malolactic fermentation,

or conversion since

it’s not technically a

fermenting process, is

the result of harsh malic

acids (found in Granny Smith apples)

being converted into softer lactic acids

(found in milk and yoghurt). It softens the

flavours and texture of the wine as well

as adding complexity and stability to the

finished wine.

How do you detect malolactic in a wine?

Look for a creamy, buttery, oily texture as

the giveaway. All red wines go through

malolactic conversion, but not all white

wines are made this way. Chardonnay and

Viognier are two of the most common

wines that go through the malolactic

process.

SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINE**Lees stirring**

Once the yeasts have converted the

grape juice to alcohol, they die. These

dead yeast cells are known as lees and

fall to the bottom of the fermentation

vessel. Some producers choose to stir the

lees into the wine, instead of immediately

separating the clear wine from the lees.

Lees stirring adds extra body and texture

to a wine, as well as flavour. Still white

wines will have more yeast-like flavours.

Still wines that are lees aged in oak could

amplify the wood aromas of caramel,

smoke, spices, and umami.

**Fining**

At this stage, the wine is usually still hazy

and cloudy with lees and bits of grapes

floating in the liquid. Before a wine is

bottled, it is usually fined and filtered to

add clarity and stability to the wine.

Fining involves adding an agent that

attaches to any sediment left behind.

Fining agents include bentonite clay

(vegan), egg whites, isinglass (dried fish

bladders), and casein (milk protein).

**Racking**

Racking is the process of separating

the wine from the lees. It can be done

at various stages of the winemaking

process. It removes the sediment and

helps to produce a clearer and ‘cleaner’

wine. Racking after fining will remove the

finer sediment that has attached to the

chosen fining agent.

**Filtering**

Filtering can also be done a few times in

the winemaking process, but it is usually

done one more time before bottling.

Fining and filtering stabilise the wine by

removing any microbial elements that

could spoil the wine.

There are winemakers who choose not to

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fine or filter their wines as this is thought

to affect the texture and flavour in the

wine.

**Bottling and Ageing**

And finally, the wine is bottled. Producers

will either have their own bottling line or

will make use of a mobile bottling service.

The wines are pumped from their vessels

into the bottle, and a cork or screw cap is

added.

Not all white wines benefit from ageing.

Some wines are meant to be drunk when

they’re young and fresh. Regardless of

when the wine is meant to be consumed,

a period of rest is beneficial for allowing

the wine to settle in its bottle. Heavier

white wines might require some ageing,

especially if they’ve seen oak. Riesling

is known for its ability to age for more

than 50 years and retain its freshness.

If you ever come across an old Chenin

Blanc or Sauvignon Blanc that has been

stored correctly, you might find that

their naturally high acidity has helped

to preserve the wines. Having said this,

white wines are still usually released a few

months after they’ve been bottled.

SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINERED WINEMAKING

HARVEST GRAPES

GROW GRAPES CRUSH GRAPES

press grapes

MACERATE FERMENT grapes

MATURATION OPTIONS

BOTTLING (filling, corking) and labelling

20 | WINE WISE SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINEWINEMAKING

Red winemaking

The fundamentals of red winemaking are much the same as for white wines. The key

difference is that the **grapes are macerated and fermented BEFORE they are pressed**.

We need to impart their colour, flavours, and tannins into the juice.

After the grapes are crushed, yeast is added if necessary, and the wines are allowed to steep

in their skins for varying periods of time (maceration). Stainless steel is most commonly used

as it is easier to clean - the skins and pips don’t cling to the smooth surface.

**Cap management**

During this time, the CO2 that develops

as a result of fermentation pushes the

skins, otherwise known as the cap, to the

top of the wine. The cap, which can be

quite sturdy given claims that a grown man

can stand on it, floats on top of the liquid

and needs to be broken up, submerged,

and reintegrated with the juice for the

colour, flavour, and tannins to continue to

be released. This can be done by a few

methods:

**Punch down (*pigeage*)**

The cap is physically punched down and

swirled into the wine. This is not often done

mechanically and is physically demanding.

**Pump over**

A pump is placed into the tank and the

liquid is drawn out and pumped back

over the floating cap. Pump overs can be

gentle or aggressive, frequent or less so,

all depending on the style of wine being

made.

**Maturation**

After fermentation has completed, the wine

is pressed and racked into its maturation

vessel. This could be another stainless

steel, concrete or amphora vessel for

freshness.

**Barrel ageing**

Red wine is synonymous with oak, and

the wines can spend anywhere from a few

months to a few years in new or old barrels

of different sizes. The larger the barrel,

the less surface contact with the wine -

meaning less influence from the oak. The

older the barrel, the less toast and flavour

in the oak - meaning less influence on the

wine. The newer and smaller the barrel, the

more flavour is imparted into the wine.

Oak is not an inert vessel. It allows for a

degree of oxygen to reach the wine. This

oxygen, together with the oak, can soften

the tannins in wines, making them silkier

and more pleasant to consume.

When the winemaker deems the wine

ready, the wine is racked, fined and filtered

before being bottled.

Another important difference between

white winemaking and red winemaking

is that red wines are more often than not

stored in the cool cellars of the winery to

age in their bottles. Again, this period of

time can range from a few months to many

years. The more time it spends in bottle,

the more the flavour compounds merge.

Corks also allow a small and controlled

amount of oxygen to reach the wine. In

these measured amounts, the oxygen has

positive effects. The tannins and acidity in

red wines allow for reds to age for some

time in bottle, and with time more complex

tertiary aromas develop. There is nothing

better than a red wine that’s had time to

develop complex notes - and this is the

reason why wine collections exist!

21 | WINE WISE SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINESAIGNEE \ bleeding

**Saigneé**

Rosé wines begin as a byproduct of

red winemaking. After several hours

of maceration, 10% to 20% of the

juice is drawn off to be fermented as

rosé wine (the remaining juice, which

is now more concentrated, continues

to be fermented as red wine).

Although the saigneé method can

feel like the indecisive option, it is still

used and can be a preferable

technique for certain grapes. For

example, the saigneé technique does

not include pressing, minimising the

risk of bitterness in Syrah and

Cinsault, and resulting in a smoother,

more mellow wine. The wines are

noticeably darker, fuller-bodied with

more tannins.

**Direct Pressing**

Direct pressing, where the grapes are

pressed immediately without any skin

contact, produces the palest colour

wines that display more citrus, lemon,

raspberry and strawberry notes. Whole

bunch pressing is desirable as it is

gentler, often compared to pressing by

hand.

It is the most popular style with

consumers and is the trademark of the

Provence region in southern France.

**Limited Skin Maceration**

The red grapes are crushed, and the

juice is left in contact with the skins

for a limited period of time. Limited

skin maceration results in a range of

colours and additional flavours

imparted into the juice depending

on the amount of time the

winemaker chooses to leave the

juice in contact with the skins. The

longer the skin contact, the deeper

the colour and more intense the

flavours. Think of it like steeping a

tea bag in hot water.

This method results in a wide range

of styles of wine. Tavel, an

appellation in Southern Rhône that

is only allowed to produce rosé

wines, is famed for its darker,

watermelon colour wines. Three of

the nine permitted grapes are white,

but these must be fermented with

the red grapes.

**Blending**

The last method of producing rosé

wine is by blending. A finished

white wine is blended with a

finished red wine.

This technique is used in only a

few New World countries, and is

banned in all Old World countries,

except for the Champagne region.WINEMAKING

Rosé winemaking

We now know that the skins of grapes are responsible for the colour in wine. We also

know that the longer we steep the juice in the skins, the deeper the extraction of colour,

flavour, and tannins. This explains why rosé wines come in all shades of pink, ranging

from light salmon all the way to deep rosy red.

Rosé winemaking is most similar to white winemaking. Instead of white grapes, red

grapes are used for their pigment. There are four ways to make rosé - Saigneé, Direct

Pressing, Limited Skin Maceration and Blending (see previous page).

Over 50% of rosé wines are pale, but

colour has more to do with marketing

than it is an indication of quality. In

some ways, the consumer dictates the

colours as paler wines sell in far higher

quantities than darker wines. One way

of increasing the aromatics to create a

fashionably pale wine without extracting

more colour is by employing a technique

called **stabulation**. This is where some

of the juice is left on the lees for one

or two weeks at very low temperatures.

After stabulation, the juice is much more

aromatic and has a richer texture. It can

be used as a blending component.

Producers have long realised that rosé

wines can be premium products. As such,

the grapes are now grown specifically to

make rosé wines. At the top end, these

wines are able to express terroir and are

capable of ageing for many years. The

picking time of the grapes is incredibly

important. They are often picked earlier

than red wines to retain the freshness and

acidity (in warmer regions, it is common

to adjust the acidity in the winery.) For

example, Grenache grapes destined for

rosé can be picked 10 -12 days earlier

than Grenache for red wines. The ripe

tannins and extra colour aren’t needed.

A blend of

grapes is also

common,

as the

combination

of grapes

can produce

a more complex wine. The grapes will

be co-fermented rather than blending

together the finished wines.

Producers can choose to work with

**press fractions** (different parcels of

juice separated after varying degrees

of pressing). Free run juice is always the

most prized. The first pressing is usually

an acceptable colour. But the second

pressing might get fined to remove

excess colour. The last pressing will not

be used for rosé as it will be too dark and

tannic. Filtering (carbon) can be used to

achieve the pale colour - but filtering also

filters out the aromatics.

There was a time when all rosé wines

were fermented at very low temperatures.

But lower temperatures can result in

simpler wines that don’t extract enough

flavour and aren’t able to express terroir.

Overly high temperatures destroy the

aromatics and extract unwanted high

levels of tannins.

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Paler, more aromatic styles of rosé are almost always fermented in stainless

steel. These styles rely on as little contact with oxygen as possible. They will

make use of wine presses that pump nitrogen over the grapes and juice

during pressing. They might even choose glass stoppers over corks to

further prevent oxidation of the wine inside.

The use of old, bigger oak vessels can add structure and texture

to more premium wine, without imparting any of the oak flavours.

Some producers choose to use lighter doses of untoasted oak as,

aside from structure, this can also add a little sugar.

>50%

With a 50% increase in growth in the United States during

2019, rosé is a serious category of wine. Perhaps it’s the pretty,

photogenic colours that make the paler colours more popular. The

bottles are often clear to entice the consumer and these are often

custom, designer bottles. One sometimes wonders how many of

the premium wines are priced for the bottle or for the quality of

the wine. Therefore it remains important to taste the wine before

judging the quality.

Another possible reason for the increase in popularity could be

the realisation that rosé works particularly well with lighter foods, and given our healthier

lifestyles, it is feasible that we’d adjust our wines to suit our food choices.

Although many rosé wines are made to be enjoyed early, the more premium wines are

capable of ageing.

*With a 50% increase in growth*

*in the United States during*

*2019, rosé is a serious category*

*of wine.*

24 | WINE WISE SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINEWINEMAKING

Sweet winemaking

There are six ways of making sweet wines.

**Halting Fermentation**

You will recall that yeasts eat the sugar

in the grapes to create alcohol. If we

were to prevent the yeast from eating

all of the sugars, we would be left with

residual sugar (RS). How do we do that?

Fermentation plods along merrily at

15º C for white wines. By dropping the

temperature and chilling the wine, we

can halt fermentation at the desired sugar

level. The wine is then filtered to remove

all the yeasts. This is how premium sweet

wines are made.

Most yeasts are also killed by alcohol that

exceeds 16% ABV. Adding a grape spirit

at the desired sweetness level is another

way of stopping fermentation. But this can

drastically alter the way the wine tastes.

Sulfur Dioxide kills yeasts and inhibits

bacteria, preventing further fermentation.

However, SO2 is toxic in large doses and

some people are allergic to SO2

even in smaller legal doses. Thus,

this is not the best method of

creating a sweet wine.

DESSERT

WINE

**Noble Rot**

Some botrytised (affected by

noble rot) grapes are so sweet

that fermentation naturally

stops as the yeasts cannot

convert all the sugars.

***Botrytis cinerea*** is a

naturally occurring fungus

that pierces the skin of the

grape allowing the water to

evaporate and concentrate

the sugars, flavours, and

acids. Tokaji, Sauternes and

some German Rieslings are

examples of this premium

style of sweet wine.

**Drying Grapes on the Vine**

Otherwise known as ***passerillage***, this

happens naturally in dry and warm

conditions in the late summer and early

autumn. The grapes dry out and form

raisins on the vines. The wines are also

referred to as Late Harvest wines. These

wines have a dried fruit and tropical fruit

quality.

**Drying Grapes after Picking**

This process is called ***passito*** and is

famous in Italy. The healthy grapes are

picked and laid out to dry on straw mats.

As the water evaporates, the flavours,

sugars, and acids are concentrated. These

wines also have a raisiny quality.

**Freezing the Grapes**

Healthy grapes are left on the vine during

the winter months. The pulp turns to ice

in the freezing temperatures. The frozen

grapes are pressed leaving the ice behind

in the press and resulting in intensely

concentrated sugars and pure varietal

flavours. Germany produces ***Eiswein***, and

Canada produces **Ice wine**. This process

can be mimicked with refrigeration, but

the premium wines are those that are

made naturally.

**Adding Sweetener**

***Süssreserve***, the German name for

unfermented grape juice, can be added

to sweeten a wine after fermentation is

completed and just before bottling.

**Rectified Concentrated Grape Must**

(RCGM) can be added instead of

*süssreserve*. RCGM is usually done in bulk

wine production.

25 | WINE WISE SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINE**04. WINE STYLES**

Part of the magic of wine is the

array of different styles in which

it is produced. There is a wine

for every occasion. There is a

style to suit every palate. There

is a wine for everyone.

26 | WINE WISE SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINEWINE STYLES

SPARKLINg

wine

LIGHT BODIED WHITE

wine

ROSE

wine

FULL BODIED WHITE

wine

AROMATIC WHITE

wine

LIGHT BODIED red

wine

MEDIUM BODIED red

wine

FULL BODIED RED

wine

DESSERT

WINE

27 | WINE WISE SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINEWINE STYLES

Part of the magic of wine is the array of different styles in which it is produced. There is a

wine for every occasion. There is a style to suit every palate. There is a wine for everyone.

Wines can be divided into nine styles. Each of these styles can be produced at different

sweetness levels - from bone dry to off-dry, semi-sweet, all the way through to lusciously

sweet. Let’s start with the sweetness levels.

**Dry < 3g/litre**

Off-dry 5 - 9 g/litre

Semi-sweet 10 - 45 g/litre

Sweet > 45g/litre

1

0 2 3 4

Interestingly, dry wine always contains

some sugar, usually 1 gram or more. Most

people cannot detect sweetness below 4

to 5 g/litre. It is also important to note that

sugar alone does not define sweetness.

Sweetness is a function of how much

acidity is in the wine. Take the example of

Coca Cola with its 106 g/litre where the

pH of 2.3 mitigates the sweetness.

Lower acidity with more sugar will taste

soft and soupy.

**Acidic Neutral Basic**

5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14

Battery

Acid

Lemon

Juice

Wine Normal

Rainwater

Distilled

Water

Baking

Soda

Soft

Soap

Ammonia Lye

Wines like Riesling and Chenin Blanc,

with their naturally high acidity, can take

more sugar. Think of it as a balancing act

between freshness, acidity, and sugar.

There is nothing wrong with liking sweet

styles of wine. Some of the greatest and

most long-lived wines in the world are

lusciously sweet. e.g. Sauternes, Vin de

Constance, Tokaji.

So when you next walk into a wine store,

how can you tell if a wine will be sweet

or not? Other than tasting the wine, you

can’t know for sure. But turning the bottle

around and reading the back label could

give you an indication of the sweetness

levels. We now know that alcohol is a

byproduct of yeast eating sugar. Less

alcohol could be an indicator that the

yeasts haven’t consumed all the grape

sugars i.e. residual sugar. High alcohol

in non-fortified wines is a good clue that

the wine is going to be dry, as the yeasts

would have consumed all the sugars.

This is not a foolproof method, as

winemakers are able to manipulate

alcohol, sugar, and acidity levels in the

winery. Tasting is still the best way to find

out.

**Sparkling wine**

e.g. Methode Cap Classique, Prosecco,

Charmat

**Light-bodied white wine**

e.g. Sauvignon Blanc, Pinot Gris

**Full-bodied white wine**

e.g. Chardonnay, Viognier

**Aromatic wine**

e.g. Riesling, Gewürztraminer

**Rosé wine**

E.g. Provence

**Light-bodied red wine**

E.g. Pinot Noir, Gamay

**Medium-bodied red wine**

E.g. Merlot, Grenache,

**Full-bodied red wine**

e.g. Cabernet Sauvignon, Malbec, Shiraz

**Dessert wine**

e.g. Tokaji, Vin de Constance, Port

28 | WINE WISE SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINE**05. SERVING TEMPERATURES**

Serving temperatures are

suggestions that winemakers

and producers assign to their

wines so that you are best

able to appreciate the aromas

and flavours that the wine has

to offer.

29 | WINE WISE SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINESERVING TEMPERATURES

6ºC - 10ºC 7ºC - 10ºC

10ºC - 13ºC

SPARKLING

wine

LIGHT

BODIED

WHITE

wine

ROSE

wine

FULL

BODIED

WHITE

wine

AROMATIC

WHITE

wine

15ºC-18ºC

13ºC 6ºC - 8ºC

LIGHT

BODIED

red

wine

MEDIUM

BODIED

red

wine

FULL

BODIED

RED

wine

DESSERT

wine

30 | WINE WISE SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINESERVING TEMPERATURES

Serving temperatures are suggestions that winemakers and producers assign to their

wines so that you are best able to appreciate the aromas and flavours that the wine has

to offer.

Know that, in general, white wines are often served too cold and red wines are

served too warm. If you think about the birthplace of wine, Europe, and its average

temperatures, you realise that room temperature in the heart of a South African summer

might not be the best way to enjoy red wine.

Without central heating, wines will be

warmer in summer and colder in winter.

If a wine is too cold, the tannins become

more apparent. This could be to the

benefit of a lighter red wine like Pinot

Noir but might not help an already

tannic full-bodied wine such as Cabernet

Sauvignon.

If a wine is too warm you will lose the

aromatics.

Light, peppery Syrah, Pinot Noir and

Cinsault are very pleasant when slightly

chilled.

Grand, powerful white wines like oaked

Chardonnay shouldn’t be killed with too

much cold.

TOP TIP!

Serve sub-par wine at 6º Celsius - no one

will notice it’s bad if you kill the wine with

cold!

Adding ice to wine is your personal

preference. It lowers the temperature but

be mindful that it can also dilute the wine.

**Sparkling wine**

Sparkling wine is best served between 6º

and 10º Celsius. If you’ve ever opened a

warm bottle of bubbly, you’ll remember

the explosion of bubbles that ensued.

Because of the low serving temperature,

sweeter sparkling wines can be very

palatable even if your preference is for

dryer wines.

**Light bodied white and rosé wines**

These should be served at a refreshing 7º

to 10º Celsius.

**Full bodied and aromatic white wines**

These wines that have more complex

aromas and flavours are best served

not too cold. 10º to 13º Celsius is

recommended.

**Light bodied red wine**

Wines like Pinot Noir and Cinsault can

be enjoyed at 13º Celsius - a perfect

excuse to keep drinking reds throughout

summer.

**Medium to full bodied red wines**

These are often served too warm and are

best enjoyed at 15º to 18º Celsius.

**Dessert wine**

The temperature is dependent on the

type of dessert wine you’re enjoying.

6º to 8º Celsius suits sweet and semi-

sweet wines. Port and some sherries

are best served at full-bodied red wine

temperatures.

31 | WINE WISE SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINE**06. LEARNING TO TASTE WINE**

Wine tasting is

a journey...

you’re not wrong -

it’s personal to you

32 | WINE WISE SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINELEARNING TO TASTE WINE

**anosmia**

noun

an· os· mia | \ a-ˈnäz-mē-ə

**Definition of anosmia**

:loss or impairment of the sense of smell

Everyone can taste unless

you’re anosmic.

So many people are

put off the experience

because they feel terrified

of tasting - you don’t need

to be. We can all taste

wine.

Wine is predicated on

a coded lexicon that is

no different to sports,

physics, or finance. We’ve

all been in a room where

experts are talking about

things that they understand in words that they only understand.

Don’t be put out by all the dialogue and narrative that’s, frankly, sometimes not very

welcoming. It’s not meant to be elitist or leave people behind...it’s that people who are

into wine get so excited that they can’t help themselves. Much like sitting around a table

with PhD scientists or if you worked at NASA and you talk at a level that no one else

understands.

You’re not wrong - it’s personal to you.

If you can learn to understand the building blocks in wine, you can learn to assess a

TOP TIP!

wine.

TANNIN ACIDITY

BODY

ALCOHOL

33 | WINE WISE SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINE

Wine tasting isLEARNING TO TASTE WINE

**ACIDITY** is like a lemon - to some people, this can be sour.

**TANNIN** is best pictured as a teabag steeped in hot

water. The longer you steep, the stronger the tannins that you feel on

your teeth, tongue and sides of your mouth. Tannins are compounds

that a red wine needs to age.

**BODY** is best thought of as evaluating the viscosity of skimmed milk versus

full cream milk versus yoghurt.

**ALCOHOL** - if it’s balanced you shouldn’t notice it.

But if it’s unbalanced, you’ll feel it burn.

Those are the building blocks of wine.

But what does it

smell like?

Smell is linked to memory. Taste is what

you smell (think of when you have a

cold and can’t taste anything when you

don’t have a sense of smell). Your mouth

confirms what you smell.

e.g. If you smell perfume from someone

that you liked a long time ago - when

you smell it again years later, you’ll

immediately think back to that person.

Smell is one of our strongest senses.

We hid away from dangerous animals

because we could smell them before we

could see them. Your sense of smell is

more powerful than you think it is. The

human has around 400 scent receptors. It

was thought that we could smell 10,000

different aromas when, in fact, the human

nose can detect at least one trillion

different odours.

Because smell is so linked to memory, be

mindful of this as you go about your day-

to-day life. The fruit and vegetable section

in your local grocery store can offer an

array of produce to purchase and ponder.

Fruit markets are even better as the

produce is stored at room temperatures,

releasing the scents into the environment.

What does it

taste like?

The human tongue can detect five unique

flavours.

Umami = MSG and marmite.

BITTER

SOUR

UMAMI

SALTY

SWEET

34 | WINE WISE SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINELEARNING TO TASTE WINE

primary

Aromas:

**from grapes**

FLORALS:

honeysuckle, rose, geranium

FRUITS:

Green (apple, pear, quince)

Citrus (lemon, orange)

Tropical (lychee, pineapple)

Red (cherry, strawberry,

plum)

Black (blackcurrant,

blackberry)

secondary

Aromas:

**from winemaking**

***easiest to spot in white***

***wines***

YEAST:

Bread, Toast, Cheese

MLF:

Butter, Cream

OAK:

Vanilla, Cloves, Coconut,

Smoke, Chocolate, Coffee

Tertiary

Aromas:

**from ageing**

(bottle or oak)

***mostly savoury***

WHITE WINE:

Dried Apricot, Marmalade,

Petrol, Ginger, Nutty, Honey

RED WINE:

Fig, Prune, Leather, Earth,

Mushroom, Game, Tobacco,

Meaty, Farmyard

Primary aromas are mostly made up of fruits, e.g. citrus, apple, pear, pineapple, berries

Secondary aromas are derived from winemaking techniques like malolactic

fermentation, lees stirring and oak, e.g. bread, butter, smoke, coffee, smoke

Tertiary aromas are found in wines that are older. In white wines, these might be dried

fruits, nuts, or honey. In red wines, they could also include dried fruits, as well as leather,

earth, mushrooms, game, or meat.

"Wine people get excited about

old wines. There’s no other

beverage that you can buy

and serve to your children and

grandchildren on your wedding

anniversary. You can drink it when

it’s young, and when it’s old."

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LOOK SMELL

TASTE THINK

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The process

Start with a tapered glass that will contain the aromas. A thin glass is nicer. Stemmed

glasses keep your fingerprints off the glass and will avoid warming the wine through

body heat.

WHITE WINE

**Swirl**

Give your glass a swirl.

It helps to rest the base

of your glass on a solid

surface (table or knee)

to control the movement

and avoid sloshing the

precious nectar all over

your white shirt. Swirling

will release some of the

aromas.

ROSE WINE

LEMON

AMBER BROWN

GOLD orange

pink salmon

RED WINE

**Observe**

A light-filled

room and white

background

are preferential

when tasting

wine for

assessment.

Look at the wine to make sure there

are no floating bits of cork, fruit flies, or

unintentional sediment. If the wine is

unfined and/or unfiltered, it may have

some hazy sediment. If the wine is older,

it could contain sediment. Both situations

are fine. The unfined wine will have extra

texture from the sediment. The aged wine

can be decanted to remove any larger

particles.

Does the wine have tears or legs?

These are slightly more viscous,

slow-moving drips that run down

the glass after swirling. They

could be an indication of higher

sugar levels or higher alcohol.

But it could also be indicative of a

dirty glass or residual dishwashing liquid.

Tears/legs are just glycerol and are not an

indication of quality.

37 | WINE WISE purple

ruby

What colour is the wine?

garnet tawny

Note that white wines get darker with age.

Red wines become lighter with age.

These colours provide further clues as

to the type of wine. Lemon-coloured

wines are often indicative of younger

wines. Gold could mean the wine has

seen skin contact or oak. Amber is usually

an excellent giveaway to extended skin

contact in white wines.

Purple and ruby often mean a younger

red wine with higher levels of tannin.

Garnet could indicate age or lighter-

bodied wine. Tawny is a sure sign of an

aged red wine.

Now think about the intensity of the

colour. Is it pale, medium or deeply

coloured? A pale red wine could be a

lighter-bodied wine like Pinot Noir.

**Smell**

SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINECassidy recommends

taking one sniff.

He feels that if you

keep smelling, you

won’t smell anything

more. I disagree and

rely on many quick

sniffs throughout the

tasting to latch onto

the fleeting aromas.

Think about what the aromas remind you

of. This is part process and part time. Try to

connect the vocabulary with what you know.

e.g. fynbos in South Africa.

Regardless of wine lexicons, linking what

you smell to cultural norms and things that

surround us cements a longer-lasting image

and memory of the wine.

It helps to divide what you smell into the

primary, secondary, and tertiary categories.

List the fruits or vegetables that you smell.

Lemon, grass, green peppers, and pineapple

will lead you to determining that the wine is a

Sauvignon Blanc.

Do you smell vanilla, butter, cheese, biscuits

and toast? You’d be right in assuming that the

wine has seen time in oak. The stronger the

scent, the higher the chance that this oak was

partially or completely new oak.

Are you smelling dried apricots, marmalade,

and honey? This could mean you have an

older wine, or it could also mean you’re

indulging in a sweet or dry wine made from

botrytised grapes.

You don’t have to swallow to know what’s

there. Breathing the air allows the back part of

your retronasal passage to also be affected.

A good way to gauge the intensity of a wine is

to measure how far away from your nose the

glass needs to be held before you’re able to

smell the wine. Chest level would be a wine

that has a pronounced and intense nose.

38 | WINE WISE LEARNING TO TASTE WINE

Needing to raise the glass to your chin would

mean a medium intensity. Having to hold the

glass right under your nostrils is a sign of a shy

or light nose.

**Taste**

Now go ahead

and take a sip.

Take a substantial

sip that you can

swish around in

your mouth and

coat all the areas

of your mouth.

Is the taste

powerful and

intense, or is subtle? Or is it medium? Do you

find the flavour boring or interesting?

Sometimes a floral or very fruity wine

can deceive us into thinking it is sweet.

Gewürztraminer and Albariño are two

examples that often confuse me. A good tip

is to take a sip and hold your nose closed.

Without the pretty aromas, your tongue will

tell you the truth.

Another great trick for measuring how acidic

a wine is is to take a little sip and then count

how long it takes for you to start salivating.

If need be, turn your head upside down and

hold your mouth open. If you start to salivate

immediately, it means the wine is high in

acidity. If it takes forever, and there’s no need

to close your mouth, it’s a low acid wine.

Somewhere in the middle - medium acidity.

If it is red wine, or a wine that has skin contact

or extended barrel maturation, you’ll want

to assess the tannins. Tannins can be felt in

different areas of the mouth. You can usually

sense tannins on the front of your teeth (run

your tongue over your front teeth...does it feel

furry?) as well as on your tongue. The best

description is still to compare it to a strong

cup of black tea. Does it dry out your mouth

instantly, or not so much?

SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINEHigh tannins usually mean a grape with

thick skins like Cabernet Sauvignon. Lower

tannins could indicate a Shiraz that hasn’t

been matured in new oak. Very low tannins

could be a Pinot Noir, or a fruity, easy-

drinking Grenache.

Think about the weight of the wine to

assess its body. Does it compare to

skimmed milk or yoghurt? Is it a wine that

you’d drink at the pool (light-bodied), a

wine you’d have at lunchtime (medium-

bodied) or a wine that requires a big heavy

steak dinner (full-bodied)?

Does the flavour line up with what you were

smelling? If you picked up on lemon and

yellow apples on the nose, is it repeated on

the palate?

And lastly, think about the finish. How long

does the flavour last? Does it change? Is it

simple or is it straightforward?

There’s one more question to ask yourself.

It is, undoubtedly, the most important

question - do you like the wine? Would you

buy it again? This really is all that matters.

But by assessing the wine - the structure,

the range of aromas, flavours, and the finish

- we can upgrade our tasting abilities and

better understand value for money.

**Evaluating quality - R200 versus R40**

Up to a certain point, you can taste a

difference. It’s also about scarcity and brand

value. Is a Rolls Royce so much nicer than a

BMW 7 series? If you had the money, you’d

buy the Rolls Royce, but it’s probably not R5

mil nicer.

The more you taste and learn about wine,

the more you’ll learn about quality levels. If

you want to drink the most expensive wines

in the world, it WILL be expensive because

there are people who want to drink those

wines. Supply and demand.

39 | WINE WISE LEARNING TO TASTE WINE

The more you taste, the more you try, the

more you can assess wines and calibrate

your palate.

The **B.L.I.C.** system is a quick and easy

way to measure the quality of a wine.

Irrespective of whether it’s a wine that’s

suited to your tastes and preferences,

or not. And irrespective of price. More

expensive does not necessarily mean

higher quality.

**Balance** is the most important factor to

Cassidy. A wine should not be too acidic

or too alcoholic. The best wines are those

that you don’t even think about because

everything is perfect. Visualise a sphere,

where everything is smooth, and nothing

juts out.

**Length** of the finish is important. There’s

nothing wrong with a wine with a short

finish that has you going back for another

sip immediately after swallowing. These

wines can be refreshing and fruity. They’re

often designed to be drunk early. But then

there are the wines where each sip lasts for

ages - each sip lasting long enough to slow

the pace of the evening.

**Intensity** - if a car is fast it mustn’t be fast

in just a straight line...it needs to be able

be fast around corners. Lots of oak, alcohol

and extraction can be boring...you can’t

have more than one sip. Intensity can have

flavour but it can also be light on its feet.

Think about Sauvignon Blanc - it’s not often

a complex wine, but it has intensity.

**Complexity** - do you keep going back to

the wine? Do you pick up a range of aromas

and flavours that tick boxes from the

primary, secondary, and tertiary categories?

Complex wines can evolve and change

over time. The most profound wines are the

wines you can spend the evening with and

that will change over time.

SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINELEARNING TO TASTE WINE

Taste with friends and people you like spending time with. Don’t

be embarrassed about your own preferences. We all have different

palates and preferences. The key is to have your own calibration.

What does best mean?

Why are we fixated with it? Think back to a beach day with a loved

one - sharing an average wine in a plastic cup. This memory can be

better than sharing an amazing wine in an incredible restaurant with

someone you dislike. Context is important.

Know the golden standard

Once you’ve tasted classic grape varieties, then you’ll know what the wine is trying to be. It will

be the baseline by which you judge the next wines by.

Practice, practice, practice

Wine practice is fun. Put in your 10,000 hours. Put in the graft. If you enjoy it, you’ll have a pretty

good idea of what you like.

Smell everything.

Build your own scent library and keep adding to it. Next time you know a dish contains

saffron, think about what that smells like to you and store the information in your head. Can't’

remember what nutmeg smells like? Go to your spice rack and reacquaint yourself with the

smell. And when it next rains, breathe deep, and absorb the smell of petrichor (the earthy scent

caused by rain falling on dry ground). The more you add to your memory bank, the more vivid

and fascinating wine will become to you.

Think about what you don’t like.

Try and think about why you don’t like a wine - it’ll be easier to know what you don’t like when

you next purchase a bottle.

Your palate will evolve over time.

You might like big powerful wines in the beginning and then move onto more elegant wines,

or vice versa.

40 | WINE WISE SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINE**04. FOOD AND WINE PAIRING**

As we’re learning, wine

very much revolves around

personal preferences. There

are general rules, plenty of

strict regulations, but also a

fair amount of trial and error

based on your own tastes.

Food and wine pairings are

no different.

41 | WINE WISE SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINE01.

Pair great wines with great food -

pair humbler wines with more

humble food.

04.

Match the intensity of the wine with

the intensity of the food - bold with

bold, delicate with delicate. Light to

medium-bodied white wines pair

best with lighter meats. Bold, full

bodied wines pair best with red

meat.

07.

Try fruiter wines with fruity foods e.g.

pork belly and apple sauce with

Gewürztraminer or Muscat.

42 | WINE WISE FOOD PAIRINGS

02.

Wine should be more acidic than

the food.

03.

Wine should be sweeter than your

dessert.

05.

Match your wine to the sauce, not

the meat.

06.

Complementary versus contrasting -

do you want to highlight the

contrasts or match the flavours? Red

wines make good complementary

pairings. White, rosé & sparkling

make good contrasting pairings.

08.

Sweet and salty are always a great

combination, so try Port with blue

cheese.

09.

Bold, tannic, and high acidity wines

can cut through fatty foods. e.g.

Cabernet Sauvignon with ribeye

steak. It's not tannic, but Sauvignon

Blanc is a good way to freshen your

palate when eating smoked salmon

or Chow Mein.

10.

Sparkling and rosé wines are the

most flexible and are able to pair

with a range of meals.

SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINEFULL BODY

RED WINES

BOLD

MEATS

MATCH THE

WINE TO THE

SAUCE

(not the meat)

**+**

43 | WINE WISE FOOD AND WINE PAIRINGS

LIGHT-MEDIUM

WHITE WINES

FISH &

CHICKEN

C

SPARKLING &

ROSÉ ARE

VERSATILE

SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINE**THE**

**WINES**

44 | WINE WISE SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINESAUVIGNON BLANC

**08. SAUVIGNON BLANC**

Sauvignon Blanc means

‘wild white’ in French.

The vines thrive in cooler

regions and are

moderate to vigorous

growers.

Doesn’t need a low yield.

Loses flavour if it overcrops,

but is okay to use machine

harvesting.

Medium to small sized berries

that are yellowish green in

colour with soft, thin skins.

The flesh is distinctively

grassy in flavour.

Prone to downy & powdery

mildew, botrytis, and frost

damage.

45 | WINE WISE SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINESAUVIGNON BLANC

Sauvignon Blanc

Grown in most of the world, Sauvignon Blanc performs well at low yields. If the growth

is too vigorous, it loses its aromatics which is a key part of its style. It can be machine

or hand-harvested which is an important factor if you consider New Zealand doesn’t

have enough affordable manual labour, with the majority of their grapes being machine

harvested. Whilst South Africa, in contrast, makes use of mainly hand harvesting as

labour is, regrettably, affordable and plentiful.

HIGH

LOW

D GRAPE VARIETIES

Together with the variety being

prone to mildew, Sauvignon Blanc

requires some attention in the

340,000 hectares

vineyards.

tares

0 hectares

res

There is something whistle-clean

about this grape - the clarity of

style, and obvious characteristics

make these wines very easily

distinguishable.

0 hectares

ares

000 hectares

1,000 hectares

hectares

c - 111,005 hectares

46 | WINE WISE MOST PLANTED GRAPE VARIETIES

Cabernet Sauvignon - 340,000 hectares

Merlot - 266,000 hectares

Tempranillo - 231,000 hectares

Airén - 218 000 hectares

Chardonnay - 211,000 hectares

Syrah - 190,000 hectares

Grenache Noir - 163,000 hectares

Sauvignon Blanc - 121,000 hectares

Pinot Noir - 115,000 hectares

Trebbiano / Ugni Blanc - 111,005 hectares

SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINENORTH ISLAND

New Zealand

NZ a good case study having started fairly late. Their first

bottling of Sauvignon Blanc was produced in 1979. It

accounts for nearly 90% of New Zealand’s exports.

It is produced in a style that hadn’t been seen before

- fresh, zesty, with in-your-face pungent and tropical

aromas. New Zealand came out swinging with a

great white wine in a sea of crisp, dry, neutral

wines around the world without any redeeming

characteristics.

Cloudy Bay is arguably the most well-

known brand that set the standard. It was

a commercial wine that stole the market

from beer drinkers, whisky drinkers

and other categories. It was started

in 1984 and has since been

bought by the LVMH group.

**Marlborough**, on the

South Island, produces

80% of New Zealand’s

Sauvignon Blanc and

has set the benchmark

with its pungently

aromatic wines

with their distinctive

gooseberry aromas and flavours.

SOUTH ISLAND

80%

MARLBOROUGH

New Zealand

Sauvignon

Blanc

New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc wines tend to be

unoaked, combining delicious, tropical fruit flavours with

lively, fresh tasting acidity and a directness that makes

them especially satisfying.

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The Loire Valley

Like most wines, Sauvignon Blanc’s home is in France with a long history that can be traced

to the 18th century. Evidence suggests that the grape originated along the Loire River in

northwest France.

In France, wines are best known by the place where they

are grown rather than the grape varietal.

**Pouilly Fumé** and **Sancerre** are the two regions that

excel at Sauvignon Blanc, making discreet, aristocratic,

non-showy styles of wine. The wines are not bright or

zesty, nor are they loud. Instead, they are much more

elegant and understated, with a ‘come hither’ approach

rather than shouting from the rooftops.

CENTRE LOIRE

POUILLY-FUME

SANCERRE

The cool climate in the Loire can prevent the

grapes from fully ripening and developing

the sugars necessary to balance the natural

acidity. During cooler vintages, the wines can

be lighter in colour, less fruity, and with more

pronounced mineral (like sucking on a river

pebble or stone) notes.

‘Fumé’ comes from the silex flint interspersed

with the limestone in the area (can give a smoky

gunflint note) OR from the early morning fog

created by the Loire river.

loire

Sauvignon

Blanc Loire Valley styles are generally drier, slower maturing,

more restrained and austere, with a mineral note. They

can also be oaked. You might find that you have to

think about it them as they don’t jump out of the glass.

48 | WINE WISE SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINEgironde estuary

BOURG AND BLAYE

Bordeaux

Bordeaux Sauvignon

Blanc works on its own,

but it can also be an

incredible team player.

ENTRE-DEUX-MERS

dordogne

river

Some of the most famous dessert wines

in the world come from **Sauternes**

and **Barsac**, where the grape is

blended with Semillon to make

GRAVES

lusciously sweet, complex wines.

These sweet wines are made

barsac

from botrytised grapes and are

aged in oak. They are capable

SAUTERNES

of ageing for hundreds of years.

The addition of Sauvignon Blanc provides freshness and acidity to the blend.

garonne

river

The great thing about wine is that the rules always have counterexamples. Sauvignon

Blanc generally works best when it’s tank fermented and bottled early to

provide the zesty, limey, bright fruit character. But at the very top end it

can also work well with oak.

The famous **Graves** and **Pessac-Léognan** regions on the left

bank of the Gironde Estuary are known for employing lees

stirring, malolactic fermentation, with some of the greatest

wines being matured in oak. These are some of the most

exciting Sauvignon Blanc based wines that are blended with

Semillon to create powerful, full-bodied styles.

Barsac & Sauternes produce luscious wines with the

perfect balance of sweetness and acidity. They are often

characterised by apricots, peaches, honey, as well as

nutty notes from the oak.

Graves and Pessac-Léognan produce dry wines with rich

and varied notes that include blossoms, peaches, citrus,

acacia and hazelnut from frequent use of oak.

BORDEAUX

BORDEAUX

Sauvignon

Sauvignon

Blanc

Blanc

49 | WINE WISE SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINESAUVIGNON BLANC

Chile

elqui

limari

With the Atacama Desert in the north and

Antarctica to the south, Chile encompasses

every climate type on earth.

The Humboldt current of the Pacific

Ocean brings sea fogs and breezes that,

where the mountains are low enough,

move inland, bringing

welcome relief for the

ripening grapes.

CASABLANCA

SAN ANTONIO

The coolest regions are found in the

north, where this oceanic influence is at

its greatest.

The two valleys of **Elqui** and **Limarí**, with their

limestone soils, produce a

Sauvignon Blanc that is more

akin to the Loire Valley.

Cool nighttime temperatures

help retain the marked

acidity in the wines.

ACONCAGUA

santiago

Chile is the only major wine producing country in

the world unaffected by phylloxera

CHILEAN

Sauvignon

Blanc

Chilean Sauvignon Blancs are refreshing & crisp with

intense aromas of gooseberry & elderflower They have

a style that is similar to South Africa - somewhere

between France and New Zealand, but with less

intensity and passion fruit than NZ.

50 | WINE WISE SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINESouth Africa

The best regions in South Africa are

those cooled by the oceans. For

that reason, **Durbanville** and

**Constantia**, with their proximity

to the breezes, make some of

the most exciting Sauvignon

Blanc in the country.

durbanville

constantia

stellenbosch

**Elgin** is also known for quality

Sauvignon Blanc. Here, the vines are

cooled by the altitude.

elgin

Both the ocean breezes and altitude give the variety freshness and aroma. There is often

too much heat in areas like Stellenbosch and the Swartland to retain those qualities,

along with the grape’s signature high acidity.

50% of white wine that is varietally labelled in South Africa is

Sauvignon Blanc - an undoubtedly popular choice.

10,5%

Sauvignon Blanc is the 3rd most planted

white grape, after Chenin Blanc, at 10,5%

of the total vineyard plantings

It is unknown when the grape first

arrived in South Africa, but records show

that it was planted at Groot Constantia

by the late 1880’s

1880’

S

South Africa’s Sauvignon Blancs are some of the ripest,

in terms of fruit flavour, with vibrancy and acidity to

match. They have a more green and herbal quality.

The tropical fruit flavours, although not as tropical or

zesty as New Zealand, are matched with pungent,

elderflower aromas along with the grape’s distinctive

herbaceous quality.

SOUTH

AFRICAN

Sauvignon

Blanc

51 | WINE WISE SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINESAUVIGNON BLANC

Winemaking

Sauvignon Blanc is not overly complex, hence it being loved by wine brands. You grow

the grapes, you pick the grapes. You don’t have to concentrate vineyard efforts to get a

low yield, and the grapes can be picked by machine.

The grapes are placed in stainless steel. They can be fermented in oak, but it is difficult

to get it to work well with oak.

Most commercial styles are picked early and fermented in stainless steel. You

press, add yeast, ferment, and you have wine. Then you rack and fine, and

finally bottle. Most Sauvignon Blanc is best drunk as young as possible.

Only the very best examples can age over time. Aged Sauvignon Blanc

gets more of the green, asparagus, herbal, tinned pea characteristics that

accentuate over time. In SA, probably less than 5% is suitable for ageing.

Don’t be afraid of screw caps - most Sauvignon Blanc is better under screwcap than

under cork.

52 | WINE WISE SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINETasting Profile

The key to Sauvignon Blanc is that it has high acidity. We talk about balance all the

time. Remember, it’s all about your perception of acidity. If you aren’t used to acidity

in the foods that you eat, you might find it sour. But there’s a brightness, freshness,

and a piercing character that runs through a wine. It is pungently aromatic and zesty in

character.

Typical aromas are **asparagus, kiwi, lemon, lime, peas, passion fruit, gooseberry,**

**nettle, and freshly mown lawn**.

The alcohol doesn’t tend to be north of 14%.

The methoxypyrazines chemicals give you the green, herbaceous, capsicum and

blackcurrant leaf character. Some people love it, some find it too grassy and herbal.

asparagus kiwi lemon

lime peas passion fruit

gooseberry

53 | WINE WISE nettle freshly cut grass

SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINESAUVIGNON BLANC

Food pairings

Sauvignon Blanc is par excellence the wine that is synonymous with alfresco dining...

with ice cubes! You can drink it quickly. It’s the acidity that makes you want to have

another refreshing glass at the bar. It’s crispy. It’s clean. It’s unadulterated. It’s bright and

fun without being complicated. And that’s what makes you want to have another glass.

Sauvignon Blanc works well with green salad dressed in vinaigrette. Asparagus drizzled

in olive oil and a squeeze of lemon juice is also delicious. Goat cheese is the classic

pairing. That's because the acidity in the wine is able to stand up to the acidity in all

these dishes. It can also counterbalance the richness of smoked fish.

If you're not spreading your goat cheese on a cracker, then try baking a few goat cheese

tartlets with caramelised onions. While we've got the oven on, whip up a quick bacon

and leek quiche. If you have the skills, a cheese soufflé would be perfect.

Repeat after me: Sauvignon Blanc is made for seafood. Shellfish, grilled fish, smoked

salmon, yellowtail, goujons, hake and chips and calamari. No, I haven't forgotten

about oysters. Those creamy, minerally pops of goodness love being paired with the

brightness of Sauvignon Blanc. Think of the wine as the drizzle of lemon that you'd

normally squirt over your oyster.

So you prefer your food to be cooked? No problem. Sauvignon Blanc is good with

white meats like pork and chicken. Also think about warm Mediterranean countries

with their tapas-styled meals, countries like Greece and Mexico. Remember how you

add balsamic vinegar to your feta salad? What's the best way to finish off your tacos

and guacamole? A squeeze of lime. Making those connections between the high acids

that you dress your food in, and the similarity in acid levels of Sauvignon Blanc, will

open up a world of food pairings.

Or you could just drink it on its own...with a block of ice!

54 | WINE WISE SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINECABERNET SAUVIGNON

**09. CABERNET SAUVIGNON**

Sauvignon Blanc X Cabernet

Franc = Cabernet Sauvignon,

an accidental crossing that

happened in the 17th century

Very vigorous grower

producing hard wood,

but ripens slowly.

Dark green, medium

sized, 5 lobed

overlapping leaves

Late ripening grapes so

it needs a warm climate.

Small, round black berries with

tough thick skins (colour +

tannins). Large number of seeds

(high in phenols). Firm flesh that

tastes grassy.

Works well with a variety of soils

(prefers gravel, but does well on

volcanic, loam, sandy, clay, granite).

Ideally well drained & low-fertile soils.

Popular crossbreeding

partner - with around 80 kids.

Sensitive to oidium

& downy mildew.

55 | WINE WISE SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINECABERNET SAUVIGNON

Cabernet Sauvignon

It’s hard to over-emphasise the important influence that Cabernet Sauvignon has

in the wine industry. From both a business-to-business and business-to-consumer

perspective, Cabernet really is an incredibly important grape variety.

HIGH

LOW

It’s the most planted grape in the world because it’s the easiest to sell, the most

accepted, and it’s the gold standard for wine.

Cabernet Sauvignon is a cross between Cabernet Franc and Sauvignon Blanc. It is a

late-ripening cultivar that needs a warm climate to fully ripen. Cabernet Sauvignon

works well on a variety of soils, but it does best in gravel (arguably the absolute best)

as well as volcanic, loam, sandy, and clay soils

The key things to remember about Cabernet Sauvignon is that it’s always dark in

colour - thanks to its high levels of anthocyanins and high polyphenols in the thick

skins and numerous seeds. The wine is

always tannic, always high acidity and

MOST PLANTED GRAPE VARIETIES

always full-bodied.

Cabernet Sauvignon - 340,000 hectares

It is not an elegant ballerina. It is a

powerful, muscular, superhero type of

wine.

Merlot - 266,000 hectares

Tempranillo - 231,000 hectares

Airén - 218 000 hectares

When working with Cabernet (other than a

rosé), it’s difficult to make something that

isn’t dry, tannic, powerful, and assertive.

But these properties give it a great ability

to age and express where it’s made. It can

tell you exactly where it comes from. And it

works just as well on its own as it does in a

blend.

Chardonnay - 211,000 hectares

Syrah - 190,000 hectares

Grenache Noir - 163,000 hectares

Sauvignon Blanc - 121,000 hectares

Pinot Noir - 115,000 hectares

Trebbiano / Ugni Blanc - 111,005 hectares

56 | WINE WISE SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINEgironde estuary

BOURG AND BLAYE

Bordeaux

It all starts in the town of **Bordeaux**

where the **Dordogne River** and

**Garonne River** join to form the

**Gironde Estuary** that flows into

the Atlantic Ocean. This estuary

and the large area of Entre-Deux-Mers

divide Bordeaux into the **Left Bank** and

**Right Bank**.

MEDOC

LIBOURNAIS

dordogne

river

GRAVES

Left Bank wines are dominated

by Cabernet Sauvignon as these vineyards are

mostly gravel. Whilst the Right Bank has Merlot

that is able to ripen in the predominantly clay soils.

garonne

river

Bordeaux has a history of blending their wines. This began as

insurance against their tricky maritime climate. To prevent an entire crop being ruined by

the rain, they also planted Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Petit Verdot, Malbec, and Carménère

alongside Cabernet Sauvignon. Cabernet Sauvignon ripens later, so grapes like Merlot,

which ripen earlier, became an insurance policy against a difficult year.

(Climate change means that this has evolved.)

It has now also become a stylistic choice. Adding Merlot to the blend

softens the tannic, high acidity of Cabernet while lending a plush and

velvety feel.

Note that you won’t find any mention of grape varieties on the

labels. This is an easy distinction between Old World and New

World labelling. The only way to know what to expect is to learn

the appellations, otherwise known as AOC’s (*appellation d’origine*

*contrôlée*).

Bordeaux Cabernet Sauvignon can range from iron filings

to majestic cedar, pencil shavings complexity.

In a tough, difficult harvest year it’s like rusty nails and iron

filings. But the greatest examples of Bordeaux just smell

expensive - like walking into a beautiful dining room with

really fancy leather sofas, cigar box, finely woven suits. It

smells expensive and it doesn’t smell like grapes.

BORDEAUX

Rouge

57 | WINE WISE SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINENapa Valley

Cabernet Sauvignon accounts for 4%

of the total production

of Californian wines.

It is 1/6 of the size of

Bordeaux. **Napa Valley**

has a strong domestic

brand with plenty of

Direct to Consumer

(DTC) business with

wealthy Californians

who want to drink premium domestic

U.S. wines. The price of grapes in Napa

currently ranges from $7,800 up to

$50,000 per ton [2020], making these

some of the most expensive grapes in

the world.

Washington

Cabernet Sauvignon

thrives in **Washington**

and, in fact, could possibly

be called Washington’s

signature grape. First

planted in the 1940s, Washington

crushed more than 64,000 tons in 2018.

The oldest working vines at Otis Vineyard

in the Yakima Valley date to 1956.

Canada

The large lakes

in Canada help

moderate the

temperatures,

allowing Cabernet

Sauvignon to

ripen in **British**

**Columbia**.

Cabernet Sauvignon does particularly

well in the **Okanagan Valley** in British

Columbia but is also grown in **Ontario**.

58 | WINE WISE CABERNET SAUVIGNON

Canadian Cabernet is usually sold

under its varietal name and is often

blended with Merlot or Cabernet Franc.

In Canada, Cabernet Franc, the parent

grape, is more successful.

Argentina

Despite Malbec still being

the most grown grape

in Argentina, Cabernet

Sauvignon accounts for

7.2% of total vine plantings.

Argentinian Cabernet offers

great value for money. The

vines are often grown at

high altitudes with 77%

of Cabernet being found

in **Mendoza**, at between 700m and

950m above sea level. The **Uco Valley**

vineyards are planted between 1000m

to 1500m asl. And **Cafayate** in **Salta** is

planted at an astonishing 1750m above

sea level! The grape is successful as

either a single varietal or in blends.

Australia

Cabernet

Sauvignon dates

to the mid 1800’s

in Australia. Famed

for some of the

world’s oldest

vines, including

those of Penfolds’

Block 42 in **Barossa**, planted in 1885.

The grape is successful as either a single

varietal or the dominant grape in blends

such as Cab Shiraz. **Coonawarra** and

**Margaret River** are the most successful

regions for Cabernet.

SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINESouth Africa

Cabernet Sauvignon is South

swartland

Africa’s most planted red

grape variety. It is now used in

paarl

single varietal wines, as well as in

blends. But the famous SA blends of the past

were traditionally often blended with Cinsault

or Shiraz (and who knows what other

grapes) to soften the tannins.

stellenbosch

The addition of a minimum of 30%

and maximum of 70% Pinotage makes it a Cape Blend

ROBERTSON

(dictated by competition rules, but not a legislated, or

registered style of winemaking according to SAWIS). When blended with Merlot,

Cabernet Franc, Petit Verdot, or Malbec it is called a Bordeaux-style blend.

**Stellenbosch**, **Paarl** and **Robertson** are where it does

extremely well in SA. The **Swartland**, to a lesser

extent, although there are significant plantings.

11%

Cabernet is the most planted red grape in

SA with 11% of the total vine plantings in

South Africa.

The exact date is unsure, but Cabernet probably

arrived in SA two centuries ago. It has been

associated with premium single variety wines

since the 1920’s.

1920’

S

SOUTH

South African Cabernet Sauvignon straddles the border

between Old World and New World. The fruit is ripe and

fruity, without being jammy.

Each region offers their own variation based on soils and

climate. A typical Stellenbosch Cabernet shows plum,

mulberry, blackberry, cassis, chocolate and cigar box from

the inevitable new oak.

AFRICAN

Cabernet

Sauvignon

59 | WINE WISE SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINECABERNET SAUVIGNON

Winemaking

Cabernet Sauvignon is a super vigorous growing vine, so you have to cut it down

because it does better at lower yields. By forcing the vineyard to produce fewer

grapes, you are able to harvest a higher quality grape.

Maceration is important as the grape’s natural thick skins, high acid,

and high tannins need to be extracted. Determining how long you

allow the grapes to macerate and at what temperature are key

factors to the style of wine you will produce. You will naturally get a

deep and dark wine, but the longer you leave the grapes on their

skins, and the higher the temperature you ferment at, and whether

you choose to do punch-downs or pump-overs, all these factors will

determine the colour and flavour.

It is possible to ferment in stainless steel or concrete for a fresher and

more fruit-forward style. But, ultimately, new oak is synonymous with

Cabernet Sauvignon. The grape loves new French or American Oak.

Like Chardonnay, the oak and the grape have an incredible marriage.

Cabernet is one of the few grapes that can handle a large amount

of oak for a long period of time. The oak melds with the grape and

smooths out the harsh tannins.

After 10, 20 or 30 years in bottle, the oak and wine are so seamless that they become

part of each other.

Because of the natural polyphenols, anthocyanins, tannins,

and acidity, it’s best to leave Cabernet wines to sit for a

longer period of time as they generally need time to come

around in the bottle. Great Cabs need at least five years in

bottle to really start strutting their stuff.

60 | WINE WISE SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINECABERNET SAUVIGNON

Tasting profile

Cabernet Sauvignon will always be high in tannins. They are necessary to provide

enough backbone, structure, and harmony to the wine. Tannins also help the wine age

for decades.

You’ll notice the tannins as a dryness and mouth-puckering quality that is felt on your

gums. Watch out for green, austere, astringent, or bitter tannins - none of these are a

good thing. Rather look for tannins that are ripe. When you eat meat, mushrooms, or

heavy food dishes, the tannins will dissolve in your mouth, and you won’t even know

that they’re there. Don’t be afraid of the tannins, focus instead on how balanced they

are.

Cabernet Sauvignon will always have high tannins, high acidity, and it will always be

full-bodied and will almost always be dry. The alcohol will usually be 13,5% or higher.

Look for aromas and flavours of **blackcurrant**, **cassis**, **plums**, and **black cherries**.

They’ll also often show herbaceous notes (**green pepper**) from the high levels of

methoxypyrazines. With the oak coming through as **vanilla**, **spices**, **mocha**, **cigar box**,

and **smoke**.

high tannin

blackcurrant plum black cherry

cassis

mint

green pepper

earth

VANILLA cloves

baking spices

61 | WINE WISE mocha PENCIL SHAVINGS CIGAR BOX

smoke

SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINECABERNET SAUVIGNON

Food and wine pairings

The food world is your oyster when drinking Cabernet. Though, if we're being honest,

oysters wouldn't make a great pairing!

Cabernet Sauvignon and red meat are made for each other. The high tannins and high

acidity in Cabernet help break down the proteins in the red meat. And the red meat

seems to tame the tannins in the wine.

Try your Cab with a steak served with a peppercorn sauce. The peppercorn will marry

well with the cloves and smoke of the wine. As does chargrilled meat like braaivleis.

Sometimes you just want a good juicy burger - that doesn't mean you can't have one

alongside your fancy bottle of Cab that costs triple the price.

Braised beef dishes like short ribs, lamb chops, or a lamb roast are classic family meals

that work well with the wine. And when you're relaxing on the couch in front of the tv,

could anything be more lekker than a bowl of salty biltong? I quite like kudu biltong

because the gamey flavours add more complexity.

Whilst we're speaking of game - you have to try venison, especially when it's cooked

in red wine. Ostrich drizzled in a red wine reduction on a bed of herbed mash. Rich,

dark sauces like red wine reductions or peppercorn sauce will always do well with a

Cabernet Sauvignon.

Other than red meat, consider these food options:

Roasted mushrooms and vegetables, veggie Lasagna or moussaka are all able to hold

their own against the power of a big Cabernet.

As far as the cheese course goes, harder cheeses like cheddar are wonderful.

Dessert anyone? Chocolate! But with the caveat that it’s proper dark chocolate that's

made with bitter cacao. Dark chocolate ganache, a chocolate torte, or just a slab of

high-quality dark chocolate will do just fine. If it’s commercial sweet, milk chocolate...

you’re better off having a fortified wine.

62 | WINE WISE SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINECHARDONNAY

**10. CHARDONNAY**

Relatively easy, and hardy

to grow. Has a longer

ripening season.

Forgiving in both vineyard

(and winery) but tough to

get really great.

Grows in a broad variety

of climates, but tends to

lose acidity quickly if the

site is too warm.

Gouais Blanc x Pinot

= Chardonnay

Hardy & relatively

disease resistant, but

is prone to spring

frost as it buds early.

Does particularly well

on limestone soil. Also

on kimmeridgian clay

eg. Chablis.

Small, round yellow

to amber (when

ripe) berries.

63 | WINE WISE SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINECHARDONNAY

Chardonnay

Chardonnay is the world’s most popular white grape, beaten only in number by Airén,

a bulk variety grown in Spain. It is a chameleon of a grape in the vineyard and is easily

grown anywhere and everywhere, though it prefers limestone more than anything else.

MOST PLANTED GRAPE VARIETIES

Cabernet Sauvignon - 340,000 hectares

Merlot - 266,000 hectares

empranillo - 231,000 hectares

Airén - 218 000 hectares

Chardonnay - 211,000 hectares

Syrah - 190,000 hectares

Grenache Noir - 163,000 hectares

Sauvignon Blanc - 121,000 hectares

Pinot Noir - 115,000 hectares

For a young viticulturist or winemaker

just coming out of school, this relatively

rebbiano / Ugni Blanc - 111,005 hectares

disease-resistant grape that doesn’t

need much attention in the vines, will get

them an acceptable crop that will make

reasonably good wine.

MOST PLANTED GRAPE VARIETIES

It makes a broad variety of wine styles, in

a manner best described as chameleon.

Cabernet Sauvignon - 340,000 hectares

Two interesting things:

Merlot - 266,000 hectares

1. It is the grape variety that took the

empranillo - 231,000 hectares

white wine world away from knowing

Airén - 218 000 hectares

wines by the name of the place

that they came from e.g. Chablis or

Chardonnay - 211,000 hectares

Corton Charlemagne or Meursault in

Burgundy, to recognising the wines

Syrah - 190,000 hectares

by the grape.

Grenache Noir - 163,000 hectares

2. It was the grape variety that

Sauvignon Blanc - 121,000 hectares

introduced the globe to the New

Pinot Noir - 115,000 hectares

World in the late 1970’s.

rebbiano / Ugni Blanc - 111,005 hectares

At the same time, there was also an outcry

out against Chardonnay with the acronym

64 | WINE WISE HIGH

LOW

MOST PLANTED GRAPE VARIETIES

Cabernet Sauvignon - 340,000 hectares

Merlot - 266,000 hectares

Tempranillo - 231,000 hectares

Airén - 218 000 hectares

Chardonnay - 211,000 hectares

Syrah - 190,000 hectares

Grenache Noir - 163,000 hectares

Sauvignon Blanc - 121,000 hectares

Pinot Noir - 115,000 hectares

‘ABC’ (anything but Chardonnay) often

used by those with negative reactions to

Trebbiano / Ugni Blanc - 111,005 hectares

Chardonnays that were very oaky, very

obvious, very sweet, and rich wines that

were mega-successful commercially.

MOST PLANTED GRAPE VARIETIES

Cabernet Sauvignon - 340,000 hectares

Merlot - 266,000 hectares

Tempranillo - 231,000 hectares

Airén - 218 000 hectares

Chardonnay - 211,000 hectares

Syrah - 190,000 hectares

Grenache Noir - 163,000 hectares

Sauvignon Blanc - 121,000 hectares

Pinot Noir - 115,000 hectares

Trebbiano / Ugni Blanc - 111,005 hectares

SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINECHAMPAGNE

LOIRE

CHABLIS

Burgundy

RHÔNE

Chardonnay’s home is

**Burgundy** in central eastern

France.

BORDEAUX

Burgundy is complicated, consisting of

tiny villages where 150-hectare plots of

land are subdivided into Grand Cru (1 - 2

% of production), Premier Cru (10%), and

Commune or Village (37%) wines. The

rest fall under a regional classification of

Bourgogne AC.

Essentially, when you win the lottery or have

an IPO, you spend your money on Grand Cru

Chardonnay.

COTE DE NUITS

COTE DE BEAUNE

COTE CHALONNAISE

MACONNAIS

GRAND CRU (1-2%)

PREMIER CRU (10%)

VILLAGE (37%)

REGIONAL (52%)

**Chablis,** at the top of

Burgundy, makes the most

austere type of Chardonnay

that has steely, briny,

saline, and oyster shell

characteristics that cannot

be replicated anywhere

else in the world. It’s the

northernmost region of

Burgundy, pretty close to **Champagne,** where Chardonnay is also grown for sparkling

wines. They suffer from spring frosts, and harvests can vary.

Chablis has Grand Cru, Premier Cru, and Village level wines.

The magic of Chablis lies in the Kimmeridgian clay made of fossilised oyster shells that

are in the soils. The classic style of Chablis, when done very well, is best imagined as

going to a mountain stream, picking up a river pebble and putting it in your mouth.

Pebbly, stony, dry and austere make for real refreshment value that makes you want to

drink another glass. It is the closest thing to water, in the very best sense, but with flavour!

65 | WINE WISE SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINECHARDONNAY

The most famous, powerful, seductive, lose-your-mind-as-well-as-your-bank-account

wines comes from the three famous villages in the **Côte de Beaune**: **Meursault**,

**Puligny-Montrachet** and **Chassagne-Montrachet**, and their seven Grand Crus.

These great oaked Grand Cru wines have an ability to wear oak in a way that gives the

wines richness. But the oak doesn’t sit on top of the wine. Instead, there is an amazing

sandwich character in which the wine and the oak go together.

At their best, these oaked wines are good for 10 to 20 years. Cassidy describes them

as imagining the most exquisite bit of praline or burnt butter that has richness and

weight without being heavy or ponderous. They are magical wines, but they are crazily

expensive wines.

Further down south you have the **Mâconnais** and **Côte Chalonnaise**. These are

commercial examples of Chardonnays that are good without being overblown or

tropical. They’re also much less expensive.

Côte Chalonnaise plant their vineyards at a higher elevation, which results in a later and

less reliable harvest. There are no Grand Crus in Côte Chalonnaise.

The most important appellations in the Mâconnais are

**Pouilly-Fuissé** and **Macon**. Mâconnais is the furthest south

which means warmer weather with riper fruits. Pouilly-Fuissé

can produce full-bodied wines with tropical fruits. Macon

is known for large volume, unoaked wines at good prices.

white

burgundy

Chablis make the most austere types of Chardonnay that

are steely, briny and saline. Look for lime and oyster

shell in these unoaked wines.

Côte de Beaune is the crème de la crème of Burgundy.

Think about the most exquisite bit of praline, truffles,

vanilla, ripe yellow apples and tropical fruits...it has

richness and weight without being heavy or ponderous.

Mâconnais wines are simpler, usually unoaked with notes

of riper fruits, florals and sometimes nuts when oaked.

66 | WINE WISE SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINEUSA

**California** makes

use of all the winemaking techniques

(lees, MLF, oak) and are typically riper,

heavier oaked style. Historically, the

most powerful, richest, full-bodied

Chardonnays from the New World

typically came from California. Though,

this is changing as there is a global shift

from ‘butter bombs’ to wines made with

little to no oak. **Oregon** has a climate

similar to Burgundy’s, with cooler

temperatures that equal less ripe fruits.

They make exciting New World style

Chardonnay that is similar to those found

in South Africa. **Washington** makes

Chardonnay wines in a style somewhere

between California and Oregon.

Australia

Chardonnay first came to

Australia in the 1920’s. **Margaret**

**River** with its warm, maritime climate

makes a distinctive style that shows dusty,

lemon sherbet, cut pear, dried pear,

and fig flavours. **Adelaide Hills** has a

cool climate that makes more elegant,

refined, mineral, and crisp wines with

good acidity. Good quality wines are also

found in **Yarra Valley** and **Mornington**

**Peninsula**. **Tasmania** has a maritime

climate and, as one of the coolest regions

in Australia, features wines high in acidity.

New Zealand

Interestingly, Chardonnay was

the most planted grape in New

Zealand from 1990 until 2002,

when Sauvignon Blanc took over. It is

grown in **Gisborne** and **Marlborough**.

67 | WINE WISE CHARDONNAY

Argentina

Chardonnay arrived in the

Americas in the 17th century.

In Argentina, it is the second

most planted white grape after

Torrontés. The high-altitude

vineyards of **Uco Valley** make

Chardonnay wines that are a unique

blend of Old and New World.

Chile

Chardonnay is well-adapted to the

cool climate regions of Chile such

as **Casablanca**, **San Antonio**, and

**Aconcagua**. Chilean Chardonnays

have an obvious pear and melon

character. **Limarí** Chardonnay has

a distinct minerality due to the

calcareous soils of the region as well

as ocean breezes.

Italy

For a long time,

Chardonnay was confused

for Pinot Blanc in Italy.

The two grapes are often

interplanted and blended in wines.

Chardonnay is Italy’s fourth most planted

white grape (2015). Most Chardonnay

plantings are found in the northern

regions of Italy. **Friuli** in northeastern Italy

makes great Chardonnay that is often

blended with Pinot Blanc. The grape was

granted its own DOC (*Denominazione di*

*origine controllata*) classification in **Alto**

**Adige**, in northern Italy, in 1984.

SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINESouth Africa

Chardonnay is a more recent newcomer

compared to Chenin,

Colombard and Semillon.

Over 1,000 hectares are

planted in Robertson, Paarl, and

Stellenbosch each. Plenty of

this goes into commercial white

wines as well as the distillation

market.

paarl

constantia

stellenbosch

FRANSCHHOEK

elgin

hermanus

walker bay

In terms of quality, cool regions like **Walker Bay**, **Hemel-en-Aarde Valley**, **Elgin**, and

**Constantia** produce world-class wines. Foothills and higher-lying ground cooled by

altitude and sea breezes allow areas like **Stellenbosch**, **Paarl**, and **Franschhoek** to also

produce quality wines.

If you were blindfolded and asked to compare South African oaked Chardonnays,

they compare very well to some of the world’s finest but at a lower price.

South Africa is making great oaked Chardonnay!

7,3%

At 7,3% of total grape plantings, Chardonnay is

the 4th most planted white grape after Chenin

Blanc, Colombard and Sauvignon Blanc

Frustrated by the red tape in the 70’s & 80’s, the first

vines were ‘smuggled in suitcases’ but it turned out

to be Auxerrois Blanc. Danie de Wet of De Wetshof

Estate was one of the pioneers of the grape.

South African Chardonnays range in styles based on the

winemaking techniques employed. From leaner, fruit

forward unoaked styles that show florals, green apple,

citrus and pear, to riper fruits like yellow apples,

pineapple and mango.

Creamy, rich, oaked examples offer tropical fruits,

butterscotch, vanilla, lemon curd, baked apple cloves

and coconut.

SOUTH

AFRICAN

Chardonnay

68 | WINE WISE SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINECHARDONNAY

Winemaking

In terms of the winemaking, you can make it like a stainless steel

Sauvignon Blanc - pick the grapes when you decide it’s the right time,

chuck it into a steel tank, and you’ll get a relatively neutral, unoaked,

simple commercial wine.

Where it gets interesting, and where decision making in

terms of winemaking comes into play, is where it’s fermented - barrel

vs steel vs. old oak, ageing in oak, what type of oak. Really good

Chardonnay can take 30-50%, sometimes even 100% new oak.

It works really well with French oak (not so much American). The key is

to get it to work at the highest level - where the oak and the wine meld

into each other and you don’t know where the wine ends and the oak starts. That’s

tough to get right.

Malolactic fermentation/conversion - the softening of malic acid that

you get from high acid grape varieties into lactic acid - can happen

naturally or aided by the winemaker. If done naturally, it brings a

character called diacetyl which means the wine smells of yoghurt.

Let’s not forget lees (dead yeast cells that both protect and nourish the wine giving it a

great mid-palate feel).

It is indicative of its terroir - it’s a grape that wears makeup really well. Oak is a

‘makeup’ in wine. Like makeup on a person, oak can be done badly or it can be done

well. Chardonnay does makeup better than any other variety.

Chardonnay is a workhorse in the vineyard - it doesn’t need a low yield to be able to

grow well.

If all of this is done badly, you get vanilla, soft, soupy, desiccated coconut, obvious

wines. If it’s done well, the seasoning is like a great steak that gives it an extra

lift without being obviously oaky. The key thing with making Chardonnay is the

relationship with oak and lees. The raw materials will always be important, but the

hand of the Chardonnay winemaker is more important than in any other grape variety.

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Tasting Profile

Chardonnay can make classic, mineral blanc de blanc (white from white), assertive, high

acid, classic aperitif, high-quality champagne. It can also make a very briny, oyster shell

austere Chablis, which is the northernmost region where a Chardonnay can grow. It can

range from a very steely mineral style to a full-bodied, rich, tropical, hedonistic, deep,

powerful, compelling and flavourful wine from a top Burgundian, Australian or South

African producer. It can be a wine where oak is very much part of its DNA. It can also

work in a late-harvest, botrytis-affected wine. It’s a chameleon that can do plenty.

In terms of taste, it has a broad palate feel - if you think of Sauvignon Blanc being quite

linear and direct, Chardonnay is more of a textured wine. It has more richness. It usually

has high alcohol, though you can have it at 12.5%. But it generally tends to work better

at 13 - 13.5%.

It is not especially aromatic on its own - nowhere as aromatic as Sauvignon Blanc or

Viognier that both jump out of the glass at you. Chardonnay is usually medium to full-

bodied and available in a wide variety of styles. From Chablis wines that are **chalky**,

**lean**, **mineral**, **saline**, almost salty notes on the **apple** and **pear** spectrum. All the way to

**tropical**, **tinned pineapple**, **piña colada**, **peach**, **melon**, coconut and toffee characters

that are pungent, broad textured and make big-shouldered wines.

It can also be fairly anonymous and bland at a commercial level.

Top-end chardonnay should last 10 - 20 years.

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melon butter 71 | WINE WISE CHARDONNAY

apples pear

lime

pineapple

COCONUT

toffee

almonds

hazelnuts

toast VANILLA

baking spices

SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINECHARDONNAY

Food Pairings

Young, unoaked wines from cooler climates go exceptionally well with fish. Chablis

pairs well with oysters. Intense wines can pair with raw fish like sushi or ceviche.

Prawns, steamed or grilled fish, chicken, pasta, spring vegetables and creamy

vegetable soups are all fantastic with a lighter wine.

Fruity, unoaked or lightly oaked wines are better suited to cooked meals that are

slightly richer. Dishes like fish pie, fish cakes, grilled salmon, chicken or pork. Pasta

in a creamy sauce or mild curries are lovely pairings. Salads with peach, mango and

macadamia nuts makes for a fresh, vegan option.

Full bodied wines that have been aged in oak are able to stand up to even richer

dishes like eggs Benedict or steak béarnaise. Red peppers, corn, butternut and

pumpkin are fantastic with a fuller bodied Chardonnay.

Mature, barrel fermented Chardonnay wines pair best with foods like grilled, seared or

roasted shellfish. Roast chicken, wild mushrooms and truffles (or a combination of all

three) will also go well with a bigger wine. Dishes with hazelnut could align with similar

oaked notes in the wine.

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**11. SYRAH / SHIRAZ**

Origin myths include:

the Middle East (Shiraz &

Persia), Roman importation

into Gaul, Syracuse (Sicily),

and Syrah Island, Greece.

Good growing vigour,

moderate production, late

budding and mid-season

ripening.

Loses aroma and acidity

when yields increase.

Dull green, large leaves

that are 3 to 5-lobed.

Medium small, oval,

blue black (high levels

of anthocyanins)

berries that tend to

shrivel when ripe.

Fairly resistant to disease.

Responds well to oak

maturation when the

grapes are very ripe.

Thin skins, but

tough with juicy

flesh.

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Syrah / Shiraz

The name Syrah refers to the traditional Rhône style wines with their more restrained

fruit. The wine is referred to as Shiraz for the more modern New World. The name

Shiraz is thought to originate from Persia, where there is a village called Shiraz, making

this the older name even though it’s associated with the New World. Shiraz usually

implies a more powerful, richer, plusher style with riper berries, higher alcohol, and

more upfront fruit. The dichotomy isn’t necessarily useful anymore. There was a time

MOST PLANTED GRAPE VARIETIES

when Shiraz was always big and bold. But there are plenty of Shirazes now that are

much lighter.

Cabernet Sauvignon - 340,000 hectares

Merlot - 266,000 hectares

Tempranillo - 231,000 hectares

Airén - 218 000 hectares

HIGH

LOW

Chardonnay - 211,000 hectares

Syrah - 190,000 hectares

Grenache Noir - 163,000 hectares

Sauvignon Blanc - 121,000 hectares

Pinot Noir - 115,000 hectares

Trebbiano / Ugni Blanc - 111,005 hectares

Shiraz is the fourth most planted red grape in the world. The grape can adapt to

a range of climates and can thrive in the hot Barossa Valley in Australia (ripe, full

flavoured wines), as well as in the cooler

Northern Rhône (leaner, floral, more

elegant). It’s made in a range of styles,

from medium to full-bodied.

Compared to Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah

doesn’t have the same tannin or acidity

as Cabernet. It is not as full bodied or

as dense. Rotundone is a chemical that

smells like pepper - it’s found in the oils

of black pepper, rosemary, basil, and is

synonymous with Syrah / Shiraz.

The key notes to Syrah / Shiraz are

pepper, black fruits, savoury (meaty,

bacon fat) and dark chocolate (in

Barossa styles).

MOST PLANTED GRAPE VARIETIES

Cabernet Sauvignon - 340,000 hectares

Merlot - 266,000 hectares

Tempranillo - 231,000 hectares

Airén - 218 000 hectares

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Trebbiano / Ugni Blanc - 111,005 hectares

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Rhône

rhone riverCHAMPAGNE

LOIRE

BURGUNDY

cote rotie

BORDEAUX

condrieu

The home of Syrah is the

**Northern Rhône**, about

a three-hour drive from Burgundy.

Northern Rhône is not as warm as the

south of France.

saint-joseph

hermitage

cornas crozes-hermitage

saint-peray

**Côte Rotie** can be found at

cotes-du-rhone

the very top, with soils that are

mostly granite. Only red wines are

produced here, and these wines are

perfumed and filled with finesse.

Just below is **Condrieu**, an

appellation that makes only

white wines from the

Viognier grape

cotes-du-rhone

village

cotes-du-rhone

chateauneuf-du-pape

Côte Rotie, along with **Hermitage**, is the

home of Syrah. The hill of Hermitage, which

is further south and on the opposite side of

the Rhône River, has much more powerful

wines as a result of the schist soils.

**Cornas** and **Saint-Joseph** are two appellations that also make

very good examples of Syrah. **Côtes du Rhône** wines tend to be

mostly Grenache but there is also Syrah.

Northern Rhône Syrah has much more restraint with

black fruits, violets, black pepper, olive tapenade, fynbos

(a wild herb character). They have a lovely finesse and a

real elegance. As they get older, they become much

more perfumed with more old, worn leather. They are the

most elegant style of Syrah

rhone

Syrah

75 | WINE WISE SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINESYRAH / SHIRAZ

The Northern Rhône vineyards are planted along the steep and narrow slopes of the

Rhône River, with the best vineyards facing south for the best exposure to sunlight.

Planting the vines in the lateral valleys shields them from the Mistral, a

fierce and cold wind that can damage the vines. The vines are planted

on individual stakes, sometimes in teepee structures, to protect them

from this wind.

Northern Rhône Syrah is reasonably deep in colour with medium

tannins. The wines offer notes of black fruits, olive tapenade, and spices like black

pepper. Fynbos (or Mediterranean herbs in France) give the wines a wild herbal

character. There is a lovely finesse to these wines, along with a real elegance. As they get

older, they become much more perfumed and you get much more of the worn leather

notes. These are the most elegant styles of Syrah.

**Chateauneuf-du-Pape** in the **Southern Rhône** famously allows up to thirteen grapes

to be blended into their wines. Some of the grapes have mutations that are also

allowed but not counted in our list of thirteen. These grapes are:

Grenache +mutations Syrah Mourvedre Cinsault

Vaccarese Counoise Muscardin Terret +mutations

Picpoul + mutations Clairette + mutations

Roussanne Bourboulenc Picardan

Syrah adds colour and tannins to these blends.

In the Southern Rhône, the landscape is much flatter and wider. The weather is also

much warmer. However, with no valleys to break the flow of the wind, the Mistral can

reach incredible speeds that have been known to blow a grown man off his feet. A

unique feature of this region are large round rocks called *galets*.

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valley

Australia

Shiraz is Australia’s best known and

most widely planted variety. It was

first planted in the late 1700s. It is

grown virtually all over Australia but

thrives in moderate to warm climate

areas. It is also made in various styles

depending on the producer.

The grape is often blended with

Grenache or Cabernet Sauvignon, e.g.

Grenache + Mourvèdre + Shiraz (GSM).

It’s also trendy to co-ferment with

Viognier (as it is in the northern Rhône).

**Barossa Valley** has some of the oldest

and best-known vineyards that are

famed for their full-bodied, richly textured

wines with blackberry, pepper, and spice

characters

clare valley

mcclaren vale

Barossa and **McClaren Vale** make high

octane, chocolatey, high alcohol, bold wines

that are often matured in American or French Oak. These are great

wines that will age for a long period of time. But winemaking has

evolved, and the caricature style of a big Barossa Shiraz at 16% ABV

isn’t always the case anymore.

heathcote

barossa valley

eden valley

Winemaking has evolved, and not all Australian wines are

made in the same bold, high octane, chocolatey, high

alcohol style anymore. But they are still synonymous with

far more meaty, chocolatey, leathery wines that are

powerful and full bodied.

australian

Shiraz

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Spain

Spain has increased their plantings from 4,000 hectares

in 1990 to more than 20,000 ha. It is now their seventh

most planted red grape. It is mainly planted inland in

**La Mancha** and **Toro**, as well as in the Mediterranean

regions of **Priorat** and **Montsant** in **Catalunya** on the

east coast, and **Yecla** further south. Spain makes a very

different style of Syrah, compared to Rhône or Australian Shiraz. Spanish Syrah is

normally full-bodied and high in alcohol. It is also often used as a blending grape with

Garnacha (Spanish for Grenache) for commercial wines.

Argentina

When you think of Argentina, you probably only think of Malbec

and Torrontés (their aromatic white grape). But with 12,000

hectares, the Shiraz grape makes up 10.3% of the country’s red

grape plantings. It was historically used in blends but has been

made as a single varietal wine for the last decade. Syrah is well-

adapted to the insulated regions, with the most plantings in

**Mendoza** and **San Juan**. Colder regions, like the **Uco Valley** in

**Mendoza**, produce well-structured wines suitable for ageing. The

warmer regions are more fruit forward with textures and aromas

that range from floral when young, to spicy after oak and bottle

ageing.

78 | WINE WISE SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINESouth Africa

South Africa has the fourth

biggest plantings of Syrah in

the world, making up 10% of

total vine plantings in South

Africa.

swartland

paarl

The first bottling of Shiraz was a single

varietal for Bellingham in 1957.

stellenbosch

Between 1992 and 2016, plantings

ELGIN

increased from 900 hectares to 10,000 hectares,

making it the second most planted red variety in our country. It does particularly well

in **Stellenbosch** and the **Swartland**.

The best South African Shirazes stand toe to toe with any wines in the world, including

those in Côte Rotie, along with Hermitage. There are more single varietal bottles of

Shiraz than any other varietal wine in South Africa, but is also blended with other

Rhône and Southern French varieties like Grenache and Mourvèdre.

10%

Syrah is the second most planted red grape at

10% of the total vine plantings in South Africa

The first confirmed Shiraz vineyards were

planted in Groot Constantia towards the

end of the 1890s

1890’

S

SOUTH

AFRICAN

Shiraz

The cooler and higher altitude regions produce leaner

wines that are more elegant and peppery.

Warmer areas make full-bodied, richer and riper wines

with blackberry notes.

79 | WINE WISE SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINESYRAH / SHIRAZ

Winemaking

Syrah tends to do better in older vineyards. It grows well on a variety of soils, but schist

and granite are best. You can use the stems or just the berries when making the wines,

and it’s becoming more popular to use the stems for added complexity.

Traditionally, a long maceration is performed, with up to three years of barrel ageing.

Longer oak ageing suits riper grapes. **Carbonic maceration** can be used for less

expensive wines, resulting in fruity, light and fresh wines. However, there is a risk of

bubblegum flavours and aromas.

Tannin management is important, i.e. picking at the right time to ensure optimal levels

of acidity and ripeness. Cold soaking before maceration aids in extracting colour but

not tannins, along with fermenting at lower temperatures and careful pump-overs.

Syrah also benefits from a little time in the bottle before being released.

80 | WINE WISE SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINESYRAH / SHIRAZ

Tasting Profile

The key notes to Syrah / Shiraz are **black pepper** and black fruits like **blackberries**,

**blackcurrants**, **black cherries**, and **plums**. Look for floral notes, like **violets** or **lilies**,

as well as savoury notes, such as **black olive tapenade** or **bacon fat**. Bigger, riper

styles could show **dark chocolate**. When oaked, you may pick up additional notes of

**vanilla**, **cloves**, **tobacco** and **liquorice**.

BLACKBERRY blackcurrant plum black cherry violets

PEPPER BLACK OLIVES BACON

VANILLA

cloves COCOA

TOBACCO LIQUORICE

81 | WINE WISE SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINESYRAH / SHIRAZ

Food Pairings

The thing about Syrah, for me, is the savoury, meaty characteristics along with the

black pepper and olives. Once you throw in the potential bacon fat, it almost feels

like a meal in a glass. Use those savoury elements to your advantage, and pair it with

smoky, richer, more intense foods.

Grilled aubergine drizzled with a balsamic vinegar reduction, crumbled blue cheese or

feta, and solid cracking of black pepper

Ratatouille with its layers of flavourful nightshades laid out in the prettiest pattern (or

not, no pressure)

Grilled winter veggies that are the most comforting meal in the colder months

Vegetable pastas in a rich and creamy sauce (don't forget that hit of black pepper)

Aged gouda, cheddar, or an intense blue cheese. Why not throw all three on a cheese

platter along with a deck of crackers, a bowl of olives, and a few slices of charcuterie if

you're feeling fancy?

Of course, all the savoury meatiness in Shiraz will go well with braaivleis that's been

soaking up a smoky marinade. The acidity of the wine will cut through fatty grilled

meats, such as pork ribs and sausages, as well as complement their spices.

Classic Sunday roast beef with a pepper sauce is begging to be washed down with

Shiraz.

Don't forget to add a glass of the wine to a beef or oxtail stew with smoky spice & chili.

I most enjoy Shiraz with seared kudu or venison rolled in a black pepper coating. One

of my go-to's is an ostrich burger topped with a slab of melting brie and restrained

dollop of raspberry jam. The wine echoes the gaminess in the ostrich, cuts through the

richness of the brie, and marries with the fruitiness of the jam.

Bobotie is an all-time, local classic that pairs particularly well with Shiraz because of

the spices.

82 | WINE WISE SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINECHENIN BLANC

**12. CHENIN BLANC**

Used to be called Chènere, but

the name was changed in the

15th century to Chenin Blanc

(after Mont Chenin, a mountain

in the region).

Early budding and

mid ripening.

Medium sized, round,

dark green leaves with 3

to 5 lobes.

Vigorous growth when

grown on its own roots

in medium to fine

textured soil - but

does well on a variety

of soils.

Susceptible to botrytis,

sour rot, powdery mildew

and downy mildew. Early

budding makes it

vulnerable to Spring frost.

83 | WINE WISE Medium sized, oval shaped,

yellow green berries with

thick skins (phenols) and

juicy flesh.

SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINECHENIN BLANC

Chenin Blanc

Chenin Blanc is the most versatile grape in the world, able to produce a wide range

of styles. In many ways, it is similar to Riesling, in terms of its versatility (barring oak

and distillation). It works equally well, oaked or unoaked, and ranges from moderate

to high alcohol. From bone dry, mineral and racy; to honey-sweet, late picked and

botrytised honeyed examples. Still or sparkling.

HIGH

LOW

Though not as overly aromatic as

Riesling, its natural thick skin means it

is not only prone to botrytis, but there

is more of a natural phenolic ‘bite’

to the wine (think of it as white wine

tannin). The wine is more cerebral

than hedonistic and requires more

involvement and process on the part

of the consumer, particularly with the

premium examples.

Grab the big glasses, spend more time

swirling, and take your time with these

wines. They can easily stay fresh for 24

to 36 hours once opened. You can even

decant them. And be sure not to serve

them too cold.

Chenin Blanc’s calling card is its

assertive acidity and the way that it is

woven through the wine. That acidity is

84 | WINE WISE always prevalent and forms the spine

of the wine. It really needs time for the

acidity to be fully integrated into the

wine as the aromas develop over time

(the acidity never softens analytically,

but its taste perceptions change as the

overall aromas of the wine become more

tertiary). In the case of top SA Chenin,

eight to 10 years is the optimal age,

although the finest examples can last

much longer.

Chenin is also known as **Steen** (South

Africa) and **Pineau de la Loire** (France).

Tip: Look out for regional naming on

French wine labels: **Vouvray**, **Quarts de**

**Chaume,** **Bonnezeaux**, **Savennières**

SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINECHENIN BLANC

Loire Valley

The Loire Valley is the home of Chenin Blanc and accounts for

90% of the surface area of all the Chenin Blanc planted in France.

It contributes to 28% of the surface area cultivated worldwide.

ANJOU-SAUMUR

CHAMPAGNE

LOIRE

BURGUNDY

RHÔNE

BORDEAUX

TOURAINE

Chenin is the fourth most planted white grape in France. It is produced in

**Vouvray**, **Anjou**, **Saumur**, **Savennières** and **Coteaux du Layon**. Often

there is a little bit of residual sugar in the wines from Loire. Vouvray has

a style called *tendre*, which can have anything up to 15 grams of RS.

Anjou too. Dry styles are made in villages, such as **Saumur Champigny,**

Savennières and **Jasnières**. Coteaux du Layon, Bonnezeaux, Quarts de

Chaume are all botrytis or late harvest sweet styles.

Chenin is produced in Vouvray (often with RS), Anjou, Saumur,

Savennières and Coteaux du Layon

Sparkling wines made in the traditional method are called

Crémant e.g. Crémant de Loire

loire

Chenin

Blanc

Loire Chenin, compared to SA Chenin, has much more

of a bruised yellow apple, wet wool, straw and hay

character. It’s much less overly fruity. Being a pretty cool

climate, they struggle to get grapes to ripen. In difficult

vintages, the wines have a strong green, harsh malic

acidity - these more acidic wines can be used to make

sparkling wines called Crémant de Loire.

85 | WINE WISE SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINECHENIN BLANC

America

Chenin Blanc was considered the ‘workhorse’ of California

as they used the high acidity to boost white wine blends.

In the 1970s and 1980s, there were 16,187 hectares of

plantings in the **Central Valley**, California. Since the

arrival of Chardonnay, the number has dropped to just over 2,000 hectares. Despite

the reduction in the number of vines, 85% are deemed either mature or old vines. As

a result, we’re seeing a new wave of independent producers in the **Sierra Foothills**,

**Mendocino**, **Santa Barbara** and Central Valley, who are looking to create a more

fresh, mineral style similar to that of the Loire Valley.

Argentina

With 1830 hectares planted, Chenin Blanc makes up less than 1% of the total

grape production in Argentina. The grape has adapted well to the climate, but

the bulk of it is used for sparkling wine. Chenin Blanc has a great affinity for

sparkling wine because of its natural high acidity.

Australia

Chenin Blanc is planted in almost all of the wine regions but is

concentrated in Margaret River in Western Australia. It is usually

blended with Chardonnay, Sémillon, and Sauvignon Blanc for

mass-produced wines.

New Zealand

Chenin Blanc was traditionally blended with Müller-Thurgau to produce

bulk, low quality blends. The grape was mostly planted on the North Island

but has been largely overtaken by Sauvignon Blanc.

Other

The grape is also grown in Brazil, Canada, India, Israel, Mexico, Spain, Thailand and

Uruguay, but these are not commercially relevant.

86 | WINE WISE SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINEOLIFANTS RIVER

South

Africa

swartland

paarl

“Steendruiven” was quite

possibly one of the first grapes

pressed in 1659, the year that wine

was first made in South Africa, having been

introduced to the Cape in 1655 by Jan

van Riebeeck and the VOC (Dutch

East India Company).

BREEDEKLOOF

worcester

Chenin Blanc was referred to as Steen and was believed to be indigenous to South Africa

until 1963 when Professor C.J. Orffer confirmed Steen’s match to Chenin Blanc. The name

Steen is thought to have been used by Governor Simon van der Stel as he believed the

grape to have originated in Germany, based on the quality, i.e., Stein. It is also thought to

be a translation from the Afrikaans ‘*hoeksteen*’, indicating that Chenin is the ‘cornerstone’

of the SA wine industry.

South Africa is the world leader, producing 53% of all Chenin Blanc

made around the globe, despite a decline in production (bearing in

mind that most replantings in SA started in 1997). It is the most planted

grape in SA at 18.6% of total vine plantings.

The Old Vine Project celebrates vines that are 35+ years old. Chenin is

the varietal featuring the oldest vines, with more than 6,000 hectares

being 20 years or older.

The bulk of Chenin Blanc comes from **Olifants River,** followed

by **Breedekloof** and **Worcester**. These tend to be used for mass,

inexpensive, commercial wines, as well as brandy production.

**Swartland**, **Paarl**, and **Stellenbosch** have some very old and

interesting bush vines, which make exceptional examples.

South African Chenin Blanc displays a range of fruits

such as apple, quince, melon, apricot, guava and

pineapple. It often has a floral quality reminiscent of

honeysuckle. Chenin always has natural high acidity that

makes for fresh and crisp wines.

The addition of oak and lees can add complexity and a

richer mouth feel, often adding notes of honey, nuts,

toffee and toast.

SOUTH

AFRICAN

Chenin Blanc

87 | WINE WISE SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINECHENIN BLANC

Winemaking

The percentage of new French oak barrel + use of lees gets you closer to the oaked

Chardonnay expression. Tropicality is dependent on when you pick the grapes.

Stainless steel tanks + bottled early = commercial, fruit-forward, easy-drinking style.

Old oak + reductive = mineral, austere, tighter more lean examples (that need time)

Making a commercial Chenin Blanc is fairly straightforward. The grapes can be picked

by hand or by machine. We add a cultured yeast out of a bag, use stainless steel,

ferment until dry, or leave a bit of residual sugar and bottle early for a fruit-forward,

easy drinking style of wine that is often sealed with a screw cap.

The style of wine is dictated by when you pick the grapes picking earlier gives you

a leaner and more mineral style, whilst picking riper will give you more sugar and

phenolic characters. There are still styles of wines that use a percentage of new French

oak (fermentation and barrel ageing) along with a fair amount of lees work. About15

years ago, people were trying to put Chenin into Chardonnay clothes to make a very

expensive Chenin. And you still get plenty of that style of Chenin Blanc in South Africa

- high alcohol, quite ripe, quite rich, quite leesy, and quite oaky. Sometimes you can

even mistake it for Chardonnay, except that it has more acidity.

The style that is increasingly prevalent at the very top end of winemaking is to make

wine much more reductively. The wines are left for longer periods on their lees so that

the dead yeast cells can impart interesting flavours to the wine. They are bottled after

substantial time spent in old oak barrels. This creates a more mineral, austere, tighter

and leaner example of the wine. These are wines that demand time...and they are

expensive. These are the best examples of Chenin Blanc and are priced accordingly.

Winemakers are also experimenting with using concrete eggs and amphora.

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Tasting Profile

The Old World wines, with their cooler climates, are high acid examples that sit on the

**quince**, **apples**, and **pear** spectrum. As you increase in temperature and ripeness, you

move into notes of **honeysuckle**, **ginger**, **melon**, and **pineapple**.

Chenin often has **honey** and **hay** characters. **Toffee** and **mango** are a function of

grape ripeness. **Vanilla** and **toast** are linked to oak and lees. **Almond**, **hazelnut**, and

toast are derived from oak. As you get into the sweeter styles, you get much more of

the **marzipan**, **mango**, **ginger** and **lemon curd** notes.

There is a truly broad variety of styles to Chenin Blanc.

quince

apples pear Honey

honeysuckle GINGER mango

melon

pineapple

toffee

almonds

hazelnuts

toast VANILLA

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Food Pairings

Chenin Blanc is super versatile with food. The sweeter styles go very well with spicier

food. Top examples of botrytis wines should be treated like other sweet wines, where

they can hold their own against pungent cheeses and sweet desserts. But also try a

nice hard cheese or blue cheese on its own, or with a plate of nuts, fruit, and raisins.

The more serious examples of Chenin Blanc can be drunk with anything as the acidity

will match a wide variety of foods without becoming cloying. The wine has a real

freshness to it that lends itself to seafood and a variety of meals.

More fun wines can be drunk with a wide variety of fruits. More serious wines pair

best with more serious foods - richer fish dishes and roast chicken. Roast chicken is a

wonderful go-to for any good bottle of wine. It’s the ultimate food and wine combo.

YOUNG, FRUITY & ZESTY

Vegetable dishes

and salads,

especially when

they include apple

or pear

All the seafoods,

including oysters

Fish and chips

Sushi

Avocado

Asparagus and

peas

Light seafood pasta

and risotto

MEDIUM-BODIED or

OLD VINE

Fishcakes

Scallops

Quiches, frittata

and omelettes

Onion tart

Mild cheeses like

brie that’s not too

ripe

RICH BARREL AGED

Rich fish dishes

Fish pies

Creamy sauces on

anything

Chicken livers

Roast vegetables

like parsnips and

sweet potatoes and

butternut

Roast pork belly

with apple sauce

Roast chicken

SOME SWEETNESS

Spicy foods like

Cape Malay curries

or other mildly

spiced, but fruity,

curries

Asian food like

salads and stir fries

SWEET WINES

Rich and pungent

cheeses

Apple or pear tarts

Pear and apricot

desserts like peach

cobbler

90 | WINE WISE SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINE**13. PINOTAGE**

Cross between Pinot Noir X

Cinsault developed for the

classic Pinot Noir taste with

easy-to-grow Cinsault

characteristics.

Medium sized to relatively

big, dark green, oblong

with five lobes.

Moderate to good vigour,

early ripening.

91 | WINE WISE PINOTAGE

Early ripening, small

oval dark blue-black

berries with sticky

thick skins and soft

and juicy flesh.

Small to medium bunches

that are cylindrical, wide &

compact.

Not susceptible to powdery

mildew, but it is less

resistant to botrytis (most

problems are moot as it

ripens early).

SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINEPINOTAGE

Pinotage

97 97th th

Ranking 97th on the list of grapes planted around the world, Pinotage

is without a doubt South Africa’s national grape. A cross between

Pinot Noir and Cinsaut (then known as Hermitage in SA), it was

created in 1925 by Abraham Izak Perold, who was the first professor

of viticulture at Stellenbosch University. His aim was to create a more

robust Pinot Noir that offered the best characteristics of Pinot with the

more dependable traits of Cinsault.

The grape has been maligned with a reputation of ‘rubbery tyre’ and acetone notes in

some commercial wines. And along with a history of insipid wine production prior to

1994 (when the South African Co-Operative Wine Growers Association emphasised

quantity over quality), the grape has struggled to overcome its ‘bad rap’ for some.

The general characteristics are a dry, full-bodied, high tannin wine with both dark and

red fruit but, it can be made in a variety of styles - both single varietal and blends. The

way the grape is grown, choice of rootstock, and winemaking decisions all play a role

in the style of wine being made.

The three styles of Pinotage that are most noticeable are:

• Lighter, fresher, easy drinking styles that show red fruits and can have similarities to

the parent grapes

• Fuller-bodied wines where judicious use of oak creates rich, smoky, concentrated,

spiced red and black berries that have more subtle chocolate and coffee notes

• Commercial wines that make deliberate use of toasted oak staves to produce

pronounced chocolate or coffee aromas.

HIGH

LOW

Pinotage is grown in Australia, Brazil, Canada, Germany, Israel, New Zealand, United

States, and Zimbabwe. But South Africa is where the grape originated, and where the

largest volumes and most meaningful wines are produced.

92 | WINE WISE SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINESouth Africa

The vines were initially

swartland

referred to as “Perold’s

Hermitage x Pinot”. The

paarl

name Herminoire was also

considered. The first grapes

were grown at Elsenburg Agricultural

College, and the first Pinotage wines

were made here in 1941. The first

stellenbosch

Pinotage wine was made at Elsenburg

in 1941.The first commercial vines were

planted at either Myrtle Cove near Sir Lowry’s Pass or

Muratie in Stellenbosch.

BREEDEKLOOF

Kanonkop also planted the vines in 1941. Bellevue Pinotage brought recognition to

the grape when it was named the General Smuts Trophy Winner at the Cape Wine

Show in 1959. In 1961, the Kanonkop Estate Pinotage won the same award. But it was

only in 1961 that the name Pinotage first appeared on the label – to market the 1959

Bellevue Estate Pinotage, branded under Lanzerac.

Pinotage is the third most planted red grape in South Africa. It makes

up 7.2% of all the South African vine plantings, coming in before

Merlot and behind Shiraz. Paarl, Swartland and Stellenbosch all have

close to 2,000 hectares each, followed by Robertson at 875 hectares.

Stellenbosch Farmer’s Winery were the first to

use the name Pinotage on a label in 1961, to

market the 1959 champion Pinotage of

Bellevue Estate under the Lanzerac brand.

1961

The 3 most noticeable styles of Pinotage are:

• Lighter, fresher, easy drinking styles that show red fruits.

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rich, smoky, concentrated, spiced red and black berries

that have more subtle chocolate and coffee notes

• Commercial wines that make deliberate use of toasted

oak staves to produce pronounced chocolate or coffee

aromas.

SOUTH

AFRICAN

Pinotage

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Winemaking

Pinotage has the capacity to produce high yields that need to be controlled. This

can be done through water stress or bunch thinning. The vines tend to grow upright,

so they do well as a bush vine. Older fruit is always considered to have more

concentrated flavour.

The cause of the burnt rubber character has never been pinpointed. But Stellenbosch

University has done plenty of research, and it is thought that it could be a result of

microbial spoilage. Picking in the heat of summer allows for a high microbial load

that is then brought into the cellar. And if not treated correctly through basic cellar

hygiene, these bad bacteria can start to take over. The burnt rubber is most likely a

combination of bad grapes along with poor winemaking. Avoiding the heat of the

summer and not waiting to pick too late helps to alleviate the burnt rubber issue as

well as mitigate the volatile acidity associated with the grape.

Pinotage ferments incredibly quickly in the winery, resulting in the danger of over

extraction of tannins and excessive banana flavours. Longer, cooler fermentations,

along with short and frequent pump-overs that are gentler than punch-down, pull out

all the best of the flavours, without too much of the tannin. Pinotage plays well with

oak and can help to restrain the tannins.

The majority of the top rated Pinotages in South Africa are usually single varietal and

not blends.

The Cape Blend is not a legislated, or registered style of winemaking according to

SAWIS (South African Wine Industry Information and Systems). Rather, the minimum

30% and maximum 70% Pinotage guidelines are competition rules when submitting a

wine for awards.

The beauty of Pinotage, Syrah, and Pinot Noir is that, unlike Bordeaux varieties, they

don’t show green methoxypyrazine characteristics.

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Tasting Profile

What to expect from your glass of Pinotage? It all depends on the style you’re sipping.

Look for **red berries**, **black berries**, **plums**, **cherries**, and **fig**. **Banana** is also a

common marker in wines that are more extracted. **Hoisin**, **bacon**, **leather**, and **smoke**

are beautiful descriptors that I often associate with my favourite Pinotage wines - these

remind me of older, funky Pinot Noirs. **Smoke**, **tobacco**, **chocolate**, and **coffee** are

indications of oak.

Look for wines where these oak notes are more integrated and less jarring - they

should give the wine structure and depth to make an interesting and complex wine,

rather than become the standout feature.

plum blackberry RASPberry

black cherry

fig banana hoisin sauce

bacon leather

tar

smoke

coffee

95 | WINE WISE tobacco

chocolate

SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINEPINOTAGE

Food Pairings

Pinotage works incredibly well with a variety of food and should be considered when

eating spicier foods that are often difficult to pair with wines.

As much as Pinotage is not Pinot Noir or Cinsault, the wine often works well with

similar pairing dishes. Duck works well with Pinot Noir and Pinotage. Cinsault-inspired

Mediterranean pairings such as red peppers and aubergines suit Pinotage too.

Perhaps I'm just obsessed with Moussaka, but the smoky, creamy aubergine bake is

delicious with Pinotage. As are grilled mushrooms with their umami overload. Dark

leafy greens dressed in olive oil, garlic, roasted walnuts, and finished with a sprinkle of

high- quality sea salt could sing alongside the wine.

Pizza with your favourite toppings (I'm a plain jane margherita with extra cheese) just

does so well with any high acid wine. It's the tomato sauce playing with the acid in the

wine that makes this a classic.

And while we're speaking of cheese - Pinotage can hold its own against a solid hunk

of mature cheddar. The richness of quiche and lasagna sometimes needs a palate-

freshening high acidity wine.

Asian foods, made with teriyaki sauce and plum sauce, align with the umami notes

that so many Pinotage wines exhibit. Hoisin is a note that I often pick up in Pinotage.

Aligning those aromas and flavours with Asian meals highlights them in both the wine

and the food.

Braaivleis and potjies paired with Pinotage is like freshly baked bread and butter. They

belong together. I can't think of a more patriotic meal right now.

Slow-cooked meats, such as lamb shanks or pulled pork or oxtail stew, are easy

choices because they're so delicious.

Pinotage is my go-to choice with venison pies and ostrich steaks served with a plum

sauce.

But my all-time favourite Pinotage pairing has to be Indian dishes, such as biryani and

curries. It's the intricate spices that create depth and add depth to the Pinotage. And

when you have fruity, lighter wine, it can soothe the heat in the dishes.

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96 | WINE WISE SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINE**14. SPARKLING WINE**

We humans are undoubtedly

fascinated by a little fizz in our

wines.

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GENTLE PRESSING FOR A dry,

high acid, low alcohol,

neutral base wine

still base wine may go

through MLF, oaking,

blending

BOTTLES FILLED

with base wine

**YEAST**

lees is removed by

riddling

laid to rest horizontally

For slow fermentation IN

cool cellar

Liqueur de tirage

& sealed with

crown cork

WINE IN BOTTLE

NECK IS FROZEN

crown cap releaseD & C02

ejects the sediment

liqueur d’expedition

(or dosage) is added

corked secured with a museleT AND BOTTLES

ARE AGED

98 | WINE WISE SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINESPARKLING WINE

**YEAST**

Sparkling Wine

We humans are undoubtedly fascinated by a little fizz in our wines. Entire books have

been dedicated to the marvel that is sparkling wine. We shall be covering the very

basics of the 5 methods of sparkling wine production.

***Méthode traditionnelle or Traditional Method***

Known as Methode Cap Classique in South Africa, the key difference that sets méthode

traditionnelle apart from all other methods of sparkling winemaking is that the second

fermentation occurs in the SAME bottle in which it is sold.

**Base wine**

We start with a dry, high acidity, neutral

flavour base wine that may or may

not have gone through malolactic

fermentation and/or maturation in oak.

**Blending**

The winemaker can then

blend wines for style,

balance, and complexity.

In Champagne, with

its erratic weather,

blending is essential

to making the wine.

NV stands for Non-

Vintage and is a blend

that includes wines

from previous vintages.

Blending also allows the

producer to make a consistent ‘house’

style of wine.

***Liqueur de tirage***

The wine, blended or not, is then added

to the bottle. A *liqueur de tirage* (a blend

of wine, sugar, yeast, yeast nutrients, and

clarifying agents) is added to the bottle

and sealed with a crown cap. This will

allow for second fermentation inside the

bottle.

**Autolysis**

Once the second

fermentation is

complete, the yeast

dies and forms lees.

Over time, the lees will

break down and release

chemical compounds

into the wine. This

process is known as Yeast Autolysis

and contributes flavours such as bread,

biscuit, brioche, and toast. This Yeast

Autolysis happens over four to five years,

but can last up to 10 years. The longer

the wine spends on the lees, the more

pronounced the flavours.

**Riddling**

The wine is then

riddled and disgorged.

Traditionally, riddling

was done by hand.

The bottles are placed

horizontally inside an

A-frame stand called a

*pupitre*. Each day, the

stand is slowly raised, moving the bottles

from a horizontal position to an upright

position whilst being given a gentle shake

and twist. The sediment slides into the

neck of the bottle.

**Second Fermentation**

The bottles are then stacked on

their sides in a cool cellar for a slow

fermentation. The CO2 that is generated

is dissolved and creates the sparkle.

Riddling is now done by machine, but

many premium wineries still use the

traditional pupitre, which is labour

intensive.

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A cork is inserted, and a *muselet* or wire

cage is placed over the cork for added

security.

The sealed bottle can be kept

for a few months to allow

the ***liqueur d’expedition*** to

integrate with the wine. Most

sparkling wines are ready

to drink on release, but the

premium wines will benefit from

further ageing in bottle.

**Disgorging**

The upturned bottles are then

placed in a cold solution that

freezes the neck of the bottle

along with the sediment. When

the bottles are set right side up,

the crown cap is removed, and the

CO2 ejects the sediment.

**Dosage**

A ***liqueur d’expedition*** (mixture of wine

and sugar added as a dosage) is used

to top off the bottle. This is called the

dosage and it can vary in sweetness,

which will adjust the overall sweetness of

the sparkling wine.

**Transfer Method**

This is an adaptation of the Traditional Method that avoids

riddling or disgorging. The methods are the same up until the

process of riddling, at which point the wines are disgorged

into a sealed pressurised tank. The liqueur d’expedition is

added to the tank, and the wine is rebottled into a NEW bottle.

This method makes good quality wines that are easy on the

wallet as they avoid the complex process of riddling and

disgorgement.

disgorged into

pressurised tank

***Charmat* or Tank Method**

The main difference between the Traditional Method and Tank Method is that the

second fermentation happens in a tank and not in the bottle. The *liqueur de tirage* is

added to the base wine, which has usually been fermented in stainless steel to retain the

fruit flavours and freshness, and then the mixture is put into a stainless steel pressurised

tank. This process usually takes between one and six weeks. There is no riddling. The

bulk wine is filtered to remove the lees, the *liqueur d’expedition* is added, and the wine

is bottled under pressure.

With far less time and

labour involved, these

wines cost less to make.

The tank method is

excellent for retaining the

varietal characteristics of

aromatic wines like Muscat,

BASE WINE

ferme

gorged into

Riesling, or for the fruitier

new

base wine +

2nd fermentation

BEGINS

surised tank

style of Prosecco.

bottle dosage + bottling

pause

liqueur de

FERMENTATION

through

tirage

a few

new

bottle

100 | WINE WISE SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINESPARKLING WINE

disgorged into

new

base wine +

2nd fermentation

pressurised tank

***Méthode Ancestrale or Pétillant-Naturelle***

bottle dosage + bot

liqueur de

Méthode Ancestrale is the original method for making sparkling wines. It differs from

tirage

the Traditional method in that there is no second fermentation. The fermentation of the

wine is paused midway by chilling and filtering the wine. The wine is then bottled, and

fermentation completes inside the bottle, resulting in CO2. Once the desired amount

of CO2 is reached, the wine is chilled, riddled, and disgorged as per the traditional

method. However, no *liqueuer de expedition* is added.

BASE WINE

BEGINS

FERMENTATION

fermentation is

paused halfway

through & chilled for

a few months

BOTTLES FILLED

& fermentation

continues

bottles are riddled

& disgorged

NO dosage added!

**Carbonation**

Carbonation is by far the easiest method to explain. CO2 is added to a

finished wine that could be dry, or sweet, or somewhere in between. My

friend circle has always joked about MSS - Methode Sodastream! It’s a fun, if

unnecessary, way to liven up a sub-par white wine.

HOW TO OPEN A BOTTLE OF SPARKLING WINE CORRECTLY

Remove the foil

1

4

Twist the bottle, not the cork!

Remove or loosen the

muselet (wire cage) while

holding the cork firmly in

place (allegedly 6 quick

turns of the wrist, or 3 full

circles will do)

Hold the bottle at a

45º angle

2

5

Aim for the softest ‘pffft’

and not a car backfiring!

3

6

Enjoy!

101 | WINE WISE SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINE**15. FORTIFIED WINES**

Sherry

Port

Fortified Muscats

& Jerepigo

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The name Sherry can only be used when the

wines are matured in Jerez de la Frontera,

Sanlucar de Barrameda and El Puerto de

Santa Maria, which are all towns in Spain.

Only three grapes are permitted to

make Sherry in Spain. **Palomino** grapes

have the majority of plantings. They

are naturally low in acidity, have neutral

flavours, and are used to make dry wines

in Jerez. **Pedro Ximénez** (PX) grapes have

very little varietal flavour. The thin skins

allow the grapes to be dried by the sun,

making excellent sweet wines. **Muscat of**

**Alexandria** is grown in small quantities

and is used to make sweet wines.

Sherry can be divided into wines made

through **biological ageing,** those made

through **oxidative ageing**, and a blend of

the two.

The wines start off as white wines

that are fermented in stainless steel

at higher temperatures than usual to

create a neutral wine. The wines are

then categorised for either biological

or oxidative ageing depending on the

flavour characteristics of the base wine

and then sent to a **sobretabla** where they

are fortified with 96% ABV neutral spirits

and kept in this nursery before being

added to the solera system.

**Biological ageing**

The wines for biologically aged wines

are fortified to between 15% to 15.5%

ABV as this is the ideal environment

for flor to flourish. Flor is made up of

a number of yeast strains that feed off

of the alcohol, nutrients in wine, and

oxygen in the atmosphere to form CO2

and **acetaldehyde**. Acetaldehyde gives

biologically aged sherry its unique nutty,

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JEREZ

almond, saline, and lemon peel flavours.

It is found as a thick layer on the surface

of the wine, which also protects the wine

from oxidation. The barrels in the solera

are never fully topped up, allowing the

flor to feast on the wine, its nutrients and

oxygen.

**Oxidative ageing**

Wines for oxidative ageing are fortified to

17% ABV as this prevents any flor growth.

Oloroso, PX, and some Muscat Sherries

are aged oxidatively. Amontillado is aged

oxidatively after a period of biological

ageing. These Sherries can be aged for

more than 30 years.

**Solera System**

Sherry is aged in large, old oak barrels

called **butts**, which don’t impart any oak

flavour into the wines. Each level of aged

wines is called a **criadera**. Solera refers

to the final and oldest butt that the Sherry

is drawn from and bottled. The amount

of wine drawn from the Solera level

is replaced by younger wine from the

previous level. And in turn, that younger

level is topped up with an even fresher

wine. The youngest wine is added from

the nursery. Solera systems can contain

between three to thirteen criaderas.

Despite the handy graphic, these

criaderas are usually kept in separate

buildings to protect against losing the

entire Solera system.

SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINEFORTIFIED WINES

**Base Wine**

Film-forming yeast called

flor will have already

started growing on the

surface of the base wines

**Nursery**

Base wines are transferred

to the nursery

**Solera**

Sherry is bottled from the

bottom row. Each quantity that

is removed from the bottom

row will be topped up with

wines from the row above.

The top row of the Solera is

topped up with nursery wines

The barrels are called butts,

and are only partly filled to

allow flor to grow

Wines are gradually removed from the bottom row for

bottling but are ALWAYS topped up from the row above.

Sherry can be dry or sweet:

**Dry Styles**

Fino + Manzanilla + Oloroso + Amontillado

+ Palo Cortado

**Naturally Sweet**

Pedro Ximénez

**Sweetened**

Pale Cream + Medium + Cream

Fino and Manzanilla Sherries are only aged

biologically. Oloroso sherries are aged

oxidatively. Amontillado is aged oxidatively

after a period of biological ageing. Pedro

Ximenez and Muscat sherries are sweet

wines that are aged oxidatively. Pale

Cream sherries must undergo a period of

biological ageing before being sweetened

with PX. Medium Sherries must have both

biological and oxidative properties. Cream

Sherries are only oxidative.

104 | WINE WISE There are four categories for aged sherries:

**VORS**: Vinum Optimum Rare Signatum

(Very old rare Sherry) - at least 30 years

old

**VOS**: Vinum Optimum Signatum (Very old

Sherry) - at least 20 years old

**12 years**: applies to whole Solera system

(flexible)

**15 years**: applies to whole Solera system

(flexible)

Only Amontillado, Palo Cortado, Oloroso

and PX can qualify for age-indicated status!

**Sherry-style wines are named Pale Dry,**

**Medium or Cream, etc., when made in**

**South Africa. We essentially drop the**

**word Sherry. They are mostly made**

**from Chenin Blanc, though some are**

**made from Palomino grapes.**

SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINEPORTO

DOURO

RIVER

Port

Only wines made in the twin coastal cities of Porto and Vila

Nova de Gaia on opposite sides of the mouth of the river

Douro can be called Port.

Port was created when wines were

shipped from Oporto in Portugal to

England. The wines were strengthened

(or fortified) with spirit on their journeys

to act as a preservative.

The best-known red varieties include the

Touriga Francesa, Touriga Nacional, Tinta

Roriz, Tinta Barroca, Tinta Amarela, and

Tinto Cão, but in total there are around 30

types of Port grapes. Most of these grape

varieties have small thick-skinned berries

that produce dense concentrated must

(grape juice) needed to make Port. Whilst

the grapes are planted separately, they are

normally fermented together.

Traditionally, the grapes were placed in wide,

thigh high tanks called lagares where large

teams of workers would tread

the grapes by foot for three

to four hours. Foot treading

is the gentlest as well as most

complete extraction method.

It is costly and no longer

widely used other than by

premium producers.

Fermentation is stopped by fortification once

the alcohol reaches 5-9% abv to create a

sweet wine. Fermentation typically lasts 24 to

36 hours. This is done by adding aguardente

(white spirit at 77% ABV) that leaves 100g/l

RS and alcohol of around 19% ABV.

Port style wines are called Ruby or Tawny etc

(without the word Port) when made in South

Africa. In South Africa, they are mainly made

in Calitzdorp and the Klein Karoo where

the climate is hot and arid, not dissimilar to

the Douro and suited to Portuguese styled

varietals.

105 | WINE WISE Ageing depends on the style being

produced: vintage wines are aged in bottles,

and tawny wines are aged in 500L used oak

casks called a pipas or pipes. Ruby Ports are

generally transported downstream to the

cooler coastal town of Vila Nova de Gaia

for maturation. Some Tawny Ports are sent

upriver, where the temps are higher and will

result in faster aging and colour loss.

**Ruby Ports** are deeply coloured with mostly

primary fruits. They are aged for a short

period in stainless steel or large oak barrels.

These wines have less complexity, tannins,

and flavour concentration. They are ready to

drink and don’t benefit from bottle age.

**Tawny Ports** show browning from long

oxidative maturation in barrels called

pipas. With age, they will turn garnet, and

eventually brown. Age will also produce

raisin, walnut, coffee, caramel, and chocolate

flavours. These wines are ready to drink and

don’t benefit from bottle age.

**Reserve / Reserva** are Ruby and Tawny

Ports of higher quality. Reserve Tawny must

be wood aged for a minimum of six years.

**Late Bottled Vintage (LBV)** are vintage ports

aged in large oak barrels for between four

and six years before they’re bottled. They are

ready to drink and don’t benefit from bottle

age.

SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINEFORTIFIED WINES

**Tawny with indication of age wines** spend

long periods of oxidative maturation in

pipes. They can be labelled 10, 20, 30 or 40

years old, and the label must include the

year it was bottled as they lose freshness

after bottling. The best versions are complex

and concentrated.

**Vintage Port** needs to be registered when

the producer plans on releasing a Vintage

Port. They must be bottled at least three

years after harvest. They are the most

complex, concentrated and tannic of the Port

wines and can bottle age for decades, often

needing decanting because of the sediment.

Vintage Ports are produced roughly three

times a decade.

**Port style wines are called Ruby**

**or Tawny (without the word Port)**

**when made in South Africa. In**

**South Africa, they are mainly made**

**in Calitzdorp, and the Klein Karoo,**

**where the climate is hot and arid, not**

**dissimilar to the Douro and suited to**

**Portuguese styled varietals.**

Fortified Muscats & Jerepigo

Muscat is used to make fortified wines around the world. There are many different grape

varieties called Muscat. They’re all lower in acidity and show aromas of orange blossoms,

rose, and grape. Muscat is one of very few grapes where the wines smell like grapes!

**Unaged Muscat** wines are golden in

colour and floral and aromatic. They are

made from ripe, healthy grapes that are

often left in contact with the skins after

crushing to maximise their aromatics and

add richness. Fermentation is stopped, and

96% ABV grape spirit is added to make the

wine sweet. These wines aim to preserve

the aromatic characters and primary fruit

aromas.

**Fully Developed Aged Muscat** can be

amber to brown in colour. Some producers

might wait for the grapes to raisinate on

the vines to make a more luscious wine.

Fermentation takes place on the skins

before it is halted by fortifying with grape

spirit. These wines are then aged oxidatively

in old, large wood vessels that won’t

impart any flavours (sometimes in warm

environments). The wines develop oxidative

aromas.

**Jerepigo** wines are made by adding neutral

grape spirit to freshly harvested juice at

the start of fermentation. The spirits halt

fermentation allowing the aromatics of the

grape to be retained. Fortifying results in a

17% to 20% ABV wine. The wines are usually

aged in large old vats for years before

bottling. Jerepigo can be made from any

grape. They are high alcohol, full-bodied,

sweet wines (at least 160 grams/litre of

residual sugar) that retain their fresh grape

flavours.

Muscadel grapes, thought to be one of the

original four grapes planted by Jan van

Riebeeck in South Africa, can be made in the

vin doux naturel style (where brandy spirit is

added to the wine at some point before the

end of fermentation). It can also be made

in the Jerepigo style (spirit is added before

fermentation starts)

In South Africa, we often refer to the

Muscat d’Alexandrie grape as Hanepoot.

Both grapes are part of the Muscat family

that display floral, musk, rose, lychee,

grape, orange rind, and sweet stone fruit

characters. Their aromatics make them ideal

for fortified wines.

106 | WINE WISE SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINEGLOSSARY

**16. GLOSSARY**

**ABC**: Anything but Chardonnay - a term that

describes a dislike of chardonnay - originated

as a reaction to the 'butter bomb', heavily

oaked styles

**ABV**: abbreviation of alcohol by volume,

required by law to be listed on the wine label

**Acidity**: all grapes have acidity that gives

liveliness and crispness to a wine and

activates your salivary glands - a wine with

low acid can be described as flabby.

**Aeration**: deliberately adding oxygen to

soften a wine

**Ageing**: or maturation - takes place in the

winery where wine is kept in barrels, vats,

tanks, and bottles to evolve them to their

desired level.

**Alcohol**: xethanol (ethyl alcohol), the product

of fermentation of sugars by yeast

**Angular**: think of a triangle in your mouth

- these wines are usually acidic and hit your

mouth in specific places with high impact

**Anosmia**: the loss of smell

**Aperitif**: an alcoholic beverage served before

a meal to whet your appetite. e.g.champagne

or Sherry

**Appellation**: a geographically delineated

wine region

**Aroma**: the smell of wine, especially young

wines where it refers to the primary notes

**Anthocyanins**: the red pigments found

in grape skins that are responsible for the

colour of wine - they are polyphenols with

antioxidant properties

**AOC**: abbreviation for Appellation d'Origine

Contrôlée, (Appellation of controlled origin),

specified under French law. The laws specify

and delimit the geography from which a

particular wine (or other food product) may

originate and methods by which it may be

made

**Astringent**: harsh, bitter and drying

sensations caused by high levels of tannins

**Balance**: a wine that has harmonious levels

of sugars, tannins, alcohol, and acids

**Blanc de blancs**: a term for describing white

wines made from white grapes and most

commonly found on sparkling wine labels

**Blanc de noirs**: a term used to describe

white wines made from red grapes and

mostly used on sparkling wine labels

**Botrytis**: A fungal disease caused by Botrytis

Cinerea that can be both negative (grey rot)

or positive (noble rot). Noble rot pierces the

skin of the grapes causing dehydration that

concentrates the flavours, sugars, and acidity.

These make the greatest sweet wines, but

can also make dry wines with typical botrytis

notes of marmalade, honey, apricot etc.

**Body**: a sense of the weight and fullness of

the wine in your mouth

**Breathe**: exposing wine to oxygen to

improve its flavours

**Brut**: a French term for dry champagne or

sparkling wine

**Cooper (cooperage)**: a cooper is a

craftsman who makes and repairs wine barrels

**Complex**: wines that show a number of

aromas and flavours

**Corked**: or cork taint - a wine fault caused by

TCA (trichloroanisole) from the cork, making

the wine smell like wet cardboard or mould

**Cuvée**: in Champagne this means a blended

batch of wine. In other regions, it has no

official meaning but generally denotes a

proprietary blend by the winery.

**Decant**: to pour a wine out of the bottle and

into another vessel to aerate a younger wine,

and/or remove sediment from an older wine

or vintage Port.

**Demi-sec**: French word meaning half-dry - it

is used to describe a sweet sparkling wine

**Disgorgement**: the winemaking process of

removing lees from champagne that makes

the wine clearer.

**Fermentation**: conversion of grape sugars

to alcohol by yeast

**Fining**: adding egg whites, gelatin, isinglass

and other materials to add in the clarity of

the wine

**Finish**: the textures and flavours that linger

in your mouth after swallowing

**Fortified Wine**: Adding further alcohol,

usually neutral brandy spirits, to a wine. e.g.,

Sherry, Port, Madeira, Jerepigo

**Full-bodied**: a wine high in alcohol and

flavours and possibly tannins

**Grand Cru**: French word meaning Great

Growth - it is the highest possible ranking

given to chosen vineyards within an AOC

**Hectare**: a metric measurement unit equal

to 10,000 square meters (100 meters by 100

meters square) or 2.47 acres

**Herbaceous**: aromas and flavours of fresh

herbs E.g. rosemary, fynbos and basil

**Ice Wine**: Ice Wine in Canada, Eiswein in

Germany. These are wines made from frozen

grapes. The water is frozen in the grapes and

is left behind in the press, concentrating the

sugar, acidity, and flavours of the wine.

**Late Harvest**: refers to grapes left to hang on

the vine for longer ,resulting in higher sugar

levels - they are used for sweet or dessert

wines.

**Lees**: sediment made up of dead yeast cells,

grape pulp, seeds, and other grape material

**Maceration**: mostly used in red winemaking

- the grape skins, seeds, pulp and stems are

steeped in the must to extract colour, tannin

and flavour.

**Magnum**: large-format wine bottle

containing double the quantity of a standard

bottle

**Malic acid**: one of the three main acids

found in grapes. Malic acid tastes tarts and is

found naturally in apples, plums, cherries, etc.

**Malolactic fermentation**: a secondary

process that occurs after alcoholic

fermentation where lactic bacteria transform

harsh malic acids into smooth, lactic acids. The

wines have a buttery, creamy quality.

**Méthode Traditionnelle**: the traditional

method for producing quality sparkling wines

used in Champagne, France, and all around

the world. The second fermentation occurs in

the bottle. Also known as Método tradicional

in Spanish, Metodo Classico in Italian,

Methode Cap Classique in South Africa,

and Crémant in other regions of France and

Luxembourg.

**Minerality**: a descriptor for the mineral

quality in a wine that isn't edible. E.g. wet

stone, petrichor, clay flint

**Must**: the unfermented juice of crushed

grapes that can include pulp and seeds

**Negociant**: French word for a wholesale

merchant, blender, or shipper of wine

**New World**: Generally speaking, these are

wine-making countries outside of Europe -

often these countries have Old World heritage

e.g. South Africa, Argentina

107 | WINE WISE SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINE**Non-Vintage**: The wine is a blend of grapes

from at least two different vintage years. Most

commonly seen in sparkling wines

**Nose**: term used to describe how wine smells

**Oak/Oaky**: smells and flavours of vanilla,

baking spices, coconut or cocoa caused by

barrel ageing

**Oenology**: the science of wine and

winemaking

**Off-Dry**: A description for a wine that has

some residual sugar and tastes slightly sweet.

**Old World**: Countries with a long history of

winemaking, usually from Europe, but can

include the Middle Eastern and North Africa.

**Organic:** Wines made from grapes grown

without the use of chemical fertilizers,

pesticides, or herbicides. An organic wine

must be made from organically grown grapes.

**Oxidation**: when wine is exposed to air it

undergoes a chemical change.

**Pétillant**: Light effervescence sometimes

found in non-sparkling wines, caused by

leftover CO2. It is called frizzante in Italy.

**Phenolics**: also called polyphenols or

tannins, these are naturally occurring

compounds that contribute colour, flavour,

and tannin to wine

**Phylloxera**: a microscopic insect that kills

grapevines by attacking their roots

**Pomace**: the skins, seeds and stems left

behind after pressing. In France it can be

distilled into a brandy known as Marc. In Italy

it is distilled into Grappa.

**Premier Cru**: First Growth in French. In

Bordeaux these are wineries with the highest

classification. In Burgundy, this is the second

highest classification after Grand Cru.

**Press Fractions**: when making wine, the

juice must be separated from the must.

Initially, there will free run juice that flows

naturally from the grapes. Thereafter, pressure

is added to extract further juice. This pressing

extracts extra flavour as well as tannins.

Winemakers may separate the different

parcels of free run and pressed wines,

blending them together at the end to make a

balanced wine.

**Racking**: the process of transferring the wine

from one vessel to another in the winery. This

is done to remove sediment and also adds

oxygen to the wine.

**Reserve / Reserva**: This word has no

official meaning in the New World and

usually denotes a higher quality wine. In Italy,

Portugal, and Italy, the term is governed and

can only be used after a wine has been aged for

a legislated period of time in barrel and bottle.

108 | WINE WISE **Reduction**: a term that means the opposite

of oxidation. When wine is protected from

oxygen in all areas of the winemaking

process, it can become reduced where the

chemical compounds can display bad odours.

**Sec**: French word for Dry

**Sediment**: tiny particles gather at the

bottom of the tank or barrel during the

winemaking process. These are usually

removed by racking and/or filtering and/or

fining. Tannins and natural compounds form

grainy deposits over time and settle along

the side or bottom of the bottle. Decanting is

used to remove the sediment in the bottle.

**Simple**: a wine that is not complex and

does not show varying levels of aromas and

flavours. Most wines are simple, with only the

best displaying complexity.

**Sommelier**:A wine professional working in

the hospitality industry (usually a restaurant)

who has in-depth knowledge of wine.

**Sound**: a way of describing a wine without

any obvious flaws. Any wine made properly

should be sound, therefore it is not used as

praise, despite being a positive term.

**Spumante**: The Italian term for sparkling

wine. Frizzante is the term for a lightly

effervescent Italian wine.

**Structure**: refers to the framework of wine -

alcohol, acidity, tannins, fruit and glycerin.

**Sulfites**: SO2 is a common preservative used

in winemaking for antioxidant and antiseptic

purposes.Sulfites protect the wine’s flavours

from being oxidized and prevents spoilage

organisms from developing. They also occur

naturally, therefore all wines contain sulfur.

**Sweet**: wines with perceptible sugar

noticeable on the nose and in the mouth

**Tannins**: Phenolic compounds found in the

skins and stems of grapes (most red). They

add structure to a wine and can be felt as a

bitter, dry and puckery sensation on the teeth

and tongue. Tannins have no smell or taste.

**Tartaric acid**: the principal acid in grapes

that adds flavour and allows ageing.

**Terroir**: French term meaning soil, but that

is used to describe the combination of the

various growing conditions in a vineyard,

including the climate, soil composition,

exposure (direction it’s facing), topography

(angle and position on a slope or plain),

proximity to a body of water, and altitude. In

France, this also includes traditional customs

and regulations for various appellations.

**Typicity**: a term that describes how well a

wine expresses the characteristics inherent to

the variety of the grape.

GLOSSARY

**Ullage**: The space between the wine and

the top of the barrel or bottom of the cork. In

older wines, ullage can be a way of gauging

the soundness of the wine as wine evaporates

through the cork over time and allows oxygen in.

**Varieta**l: Describes a wine made from a

single grape variety (or predominantly from

one grape variety), as opposed to a blend.

It can also refer to a typical character in a

grape variety, e.g., black pepper in Syrah,

gooseberry in Sauvignon Blanc.

**Vegetal**: description of fresh or cooked

vegetables aromas or flavours of the wine,

e.g., green peppers, grass, and asparagus

**Veraison**: originally a French word but now

used in English - it designates the time of

year when grape’s change colour and build

sugar. It is the start of grape ripening. White

grapes change from green to translucent

yellow. Red grapes change from green to

pink, red, or black

**Viniculture**: the whole business of

wine production that includes viticulture,

winemaking, marketing and sales

**Vinification**: the process of turning grapes

into wine

**Vintage**: refers to the picking or harvest

process each year. The year the grapes were

picked is the year/vintage that appears on the

bottle label.

**Viticulture**: the study of specifically

growing grapevines - not to be confused with

viniculture

**Vitis vinifera**: the species of grape that

comprises the majority of the world’s wine

grapes

**Volatile Acidity** (VA): A wine is considered

volatile when there are excessive amounts of

volatile acids. All wines contain VA, but higher

levels of acetic acid and ethyl acetate produce

unpleasant vinegar and nail varnish aromas.

**Yeasts**: yeasts are microorganisms

responsible for converting sugar into alcohol

and carbon dioxide. They occur naturally on

the grape skin (natural/wild/ambient) or can

be created commercially in laboratories.

**Yield**: the productivity of a vineyard or wine

estate. In the U.S., it is referred to as tons per

acre. In South America, Australia, South Africa

and Europe it is referred to as hectolitres per

hectare.

**Young**: an immature wine that is usually

bottled and sold within a year of its vintage

and is meant to be consumed 'young' to

enjoy their fresh flavours. In age-worthy

wines, it can also mean an undeveloped wine

that is not yet ready to be enjoyed.

SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINETasting Descriptors

**Primary Aroma and Flavour Examples**

**Florals:** honeysuckle, chamomile, elderflower, geranium, blossoms, rose, violet, lily,

acacia, lavender, hibuscus

**Green Fruits:** apple, gooseberry, pear, quince, grape

**Citrus Fruits:** lemon, lime, orange, grapefruit, lemon, lime (think about whether it’s the

juice or the zest)

**Stone Fruits:** apricot, peach, nectarine

**Tropical Fruits:** pineapple, passion fruit, mango, litchi, melon, guava

**Red Fruits:** strawberry, red cherry, red plum, raspberry, cranberry, pomegranate

**Black Fruit:** mulberry, blackberry, black cherry, black plum blackcurrant, blueberry

**Dried/Cooked Fruits:** prune, raisin, fig, baked or stewed fruit, jam, date, fruit cake

**Noble Rot:** beeswax, ginger, saffron

**Herbaceous:** green pepper, grass, tomato leaf, asparagus

**Herbal:** eucalyptus, mint, fennel, dill, medicinal

**Spice:** pepper, liquorice, cinnamon, anise, cardamom

**Minerality:** flint, wet stones, wet wool, clay, pencil shavings, iron, chalk

**Secondary Aroma and Flavour Examples**

**Yeast (lees and/or autolysis):** biscuit, bread, toast, pastry, brioche, sourdough

**MLF:** butter, cheese, cream

**Oak:** vanilla, cloves, nutmeg, coconut, butterscotch, toast, chocolate, coffee, cedar,

charred wood, smoke, cigar box

**Tertiary Aroma and Flavour Examples**

**Oxidation:** almond, hazelnut, cocoa, coffee, toffee, caramel

**Fruit Development:** dried fruit, marmalade, dried apricot, dried banana (white wines) /

fig, prune, tar, dried red or black berry, cooked red or black berry (red wines)

**Bottle Age (white wines):** petrol, kerosene, wax, cinnamon, ginger, nutmeg, toast, nuts,

hay, honey, mushroom

**Bottle Age (red wines):** forest floor, wet leaves, earth, mushroom, leather, game,

tobacco, savoury, meaty, barnyard**Observation Tip:**

If you can see your fingernails through the wine = pale

If you can see your fingers = medium

If you can’t see anything = dark

Tears/legs could indicated alcohol or sugar

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nuts, hay, honey, mushroom (white wines)

**Bottle Age:** forest floor, wet leaves, earth, mushroom, leather, game,

tobacco, savoury, meaty, barnyard (red wines)

**DATE: REGION:**

**NAME OF WINE:**

Producer / Name / Grape Variety / Vintage

**OBSERVE:**

Pale Medium Deep

**WHITE**

LEMON-GREEN LEMON GOLD AMBER LEMON

**ROSÉ**

PINK SALMON ORANGE

**RED**

PURPLE RUBY GARNET TAWNY BROWN

**SMELL:**

**INTENSITY**

LIGHT MEDIUM PRONOUNCED

**DESCRIPTION**

**TASTE:**

**SWEETNESS**

DRY OFF-DRY MED-SWEET SWEET LUSCIOUS

LOW MEDIUM HIGH

**ACIDITY BODY**

LOW MEDIUM HIGH

**TANNIN ALCOHOL**

LIGHT MEDIUM PRONOUNCED

**INTENSITY FINISH**

**DESCRIPTION**

LIGHT MEDIUM FULL

LOW MEDIUM HIGH

SHORT MEDIUM LONG

**CONCLUSION:**

[rate the wine 0, ½, or 1]

**COMMENTS**

Balance Length Intensity ComplexityGLOSSARY

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References:Pages 40, 50, 58 and 68 most planted grape varieties from www.forbes.com ; Pages 45,

53, 62, 73, 81 and 87 vine planting statistics from www.sawis.co.za

111 | WINE WISE SOME OF THE STUFF YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT WINE

Wine production:

A global overview

Prepared by:

Sally Easton DipWSET, MW

for WSET AlumniA global overview

One of the challenges of wine production is

matching production to consumption in order

to minimise both oversupply, which causes

downward pressure on prices, and shortage,

which causes price increases.

Two broad factors influence this challenge.

Firstly wine is an agricultural product. As such,

grape production is subject to weather variation

and more gradual climate change causing

large annual differences in production.

Secondly, wine must be made from fresh

grapes or must, which means there is only

one opportunity each year to make wine,

and as mentioned above, annual weather

fluctuations have the potential to significantly

affect the volume, and indeed the quality,

of wine produced.

Keeping the balance

Linking sales forecasts (consumption) with

weather forecasts (production) makes for an

unpredictable combination. For many years

there has been an excess of production over

consumption. This was one of the reasons for

the European Union (EU) wine sector reform,

implemented between 2008 and 2011, which

aimed to uproot 175,000 hectares (ha), 5 per

cent, of Europe’s vineyard area – to bring

supply back into better balance with demand,

partially caused by a generational decline in

consumption in the top consuming countries.

This was important because in the latter part

of the 20th century, Europe was home to

around 70 per cent of the global vineyard.

Wine & Spirit Education Trust Wine Production: A Global Overview

2Vineyard area

Vineyard area is the starting point for building

a picture of global wine production. That said,

grapes are grown for purposes other than

wine, notably for table (eating) grapes, and

for dried (raisins) grapes, so vineyard area

data does not necessarily equate to wine

grape vineyard area.

2000

World total area:

7,847,000 ha

Total world vineyard area, all uses (table grapes, raisins, wine grapes), and share by continent (hectares)

2005

World total area:

7,770,000 ha

2%

5%

12%

22%

Oceania 2%

Africa 4%

Americas 12%

Asia 19%

2010

World total area:

7,526,000 ha

3%

5%

13%

22%

Europe 63%

61%

57%

See appendix for dataset

Wine & Spirit Education Trust Wine Production: A Global Overview

2000

63%

54%

2014

By 2014, Europe

accounted for only 54

per cent of the world’s

vineyards, down from

63 per cent in 2000.

2012

World total area:

7,513,000 ha

2014

World total area:

7,573,000 ha

3%

5%

13%

23%

3%

5%

14%

24%

56%

54%

Source: OIV

3Countries with total vineyard areas over 100,000 hectares, ranked on 2014

1,500,000ha

1990

average from 1986

2000

2005 2010 2012 2014

1,250,000ha

Spain 1,038,000

1,000,000ha

China 799,000

France 792,000

750,000ha

Italy 690,000

500,000ha

Turkey 502,000

USA 425,000

250,000ha

Argentina 228,000

Portugal 224,000

Iran 223,000

Chile 211,000

Romania 192,000

Australia 154,000

Moldova n/a

South Africa 132,000

Greece 110,000

Germany 102,000

0ha

See appendix for dataset

Source: OIV

Wine & Spirit Education Trust Wine Production: A Global Overview

Global vineyard area reached a high point

in the late 1970s, averaging 10,213,000 ha in

the five years to 1980. It has steadily declined

since then and has been largely stable for the

past five years. This masks a changing face of

vineyard location, and wine production. As

Europe uproots, other countries are expanding.

In the late 1980s, Europe had a 70 per cent

share of the global vineyard area. It is now

heading towards a 50 per cent share. Part

of this shift is due to the effect of the EU

wine sector reform. Another part is the

rise of the new world wine industry.

It should be noted that all grapes in Iran, and

almost all those in Turkey are grown for fresh

table and dried grapes. Additionally, whilst

China overtook France in 2014 to house the

world’s second-largest vineyard area only

around 20 per cent of this area is used for

wine production. Such vineyard expansion

has helped Asia account for nearly a quarter

of the world’s vineyards.

By 2014, Europe accounted for only 54 per

cent of the world’s vineyards, down from 63

per cent in 2000.

Reading between the vines

Iran

0% China

20%

grapes used for wine production

4Wine production

Differences year to year can be sizeable. In

2012, global production was down 15.3mhl

on 2011. This equates to about the entire

production of Argentina “missing” from the

global market. In 2013, global production was

39.3 mhl more than in 2012. This amount is

equivalent to more than the entire production

of the third biggest producer in 2014 – Spain.

Significant annual global variations

2012 2013

-15.3mhl +39.3mhl

down from 2011

Equal to the entire

production of Argentina

up from 2012

More than the entire

production of Spain

Annual variation in global wine production (hectolitres)

average of

1986 to

2000 2001 2002 1990

2003 2004 2005 2006 2007 2008 2009 310,000,000hl

303,976,000

296,000,000

300,000,000hl

283,000,000

290,000,000hl

279,880,000

272,000,000

280,000,000hl

275,892,000

270,000,000hl

264,000,000

268,000,000 269,000,000

265,000,000

260,000,000hl

257,000,000

250,000,000hl

240,000,000hl

230,000,000hl

A large proportion of any annual difference

can sometimes be focused on a particular

country. This is unsurprising given that

weather is a more local phenomenon than

climate. This can create particular challenges

given that country of origin is one of the main

factors influencing consumer purchasing

patterns. For example, in 2010, cool and

damp weather in Germany saw harvest

volumes drop by around a quarter to a third.

Similarly, the 2012 vintage in Spain created

a huge anomaly for that country.

2010 See appendix for dataset

2011

2012

2013

Source: OIV

2014

291,000,000

270,000,000

264,439,000

267,000,000

251,700,000Top ten producing countries, ranked on 2014 (hectolitres)

60,000,000hl

2000 2005 2010 2012 2014

50,000,000hl

France 46,698,000

Italy 44,739,000

40,000,000hl

Spain 38,200,000

30,000,000hl

USA 22,300,000

20,000,000hl

10,000,000hl

Argentina 15,197,000

Australia 12,000,000

South Africa 11,316,000

China 11,178,000

Chile 10,500,000

Germany 9,334,000

0hl

See appendix for dataset

Source: OIV

Wine & Spirit Education Trust Wine Production: A Global Overview

The medium-term trend for declining or slowing

production in the top three producing countries

can be partly explained by the EU wine sector

reform uprooting scheme. Countering this

in some cases has been a restructuring of

vineyards, elements of which include more

efficient production and higher yields.

By splitting production of the top ten

countries in the previous chart into new and

old world countries, a clear shift in production

to the new world is evident:

Production of top ten countries,

split by old : new world

2000

Old World

160,705,000hl

New World

56,970,000hl (ex. China)

62,720,000hl (inc. China)

25%

3%

72%

2014

Old World

138,971,000hl

New World

71,313,000hl (ex. China)

82,491,000hl (inc. China)

32%

63%

5%

Between 2000 and 2014, absolute production

in these old world countries declined 14 per

cent whereas in the new world countries they

increased 25 per cent (excluding China) or 32

per cent (including China). Unsurprisingly, this

reflects the shifting pattern of the world’s

vineyard area.

6Top 20 most planted grape varieties for wine ranked by 2010

global share (hectares)

1990

2000

2,438,695ha

2,326,567ha

2010

2,533,819ha

Cabernet Sauvignon 290,091

Merlot 267,169

Airen 252,364

Tempranillo 232,561

Chardonnay 198,793

Syrah 185,568

Grenache 184,735

Sauvignon Blanc 110,138

Trebbiano Toscana 109,772

Pinot Noir 86,662

Mazuelo 80,178

Bobal 80,120

Sangiovese 77,709

Monastrell 69,850

Grasevina 61,200

Rkatsiteli 58,641

Cabernet Franc 53,599

Riesling 50,060

Pinot Grig/Grigio 43,563

Macabeo 41,046ha

See appendix for dataset Source: OIV

Wine & Spirit Education Trust Wine Production: A Global Overview

Grape varieties

The viticulturist’s choice of grape variety

is another of the main factors influencing

consumer purchasing patterns. Professor

Kym Anderson of the University of Adelaide

has collated data of vineyards used for wine

production. He calculated the global wine-

vineyard area to be 4.6 mha, in 2010.

His work done on grape varieties (used for

winemaking) shows interesting trends over

the first decade of the new millennium. Grape

varieties used for “Bordeaux blends” were

the mainstay of much of the new world’s

modern era of wine industry, i.e. the latter

part of the 20th century. It’s probably no

surprise to see real, continued, growth in

Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Cabernet

Franc in this first decade of the 21st century.

Perhaps more surprising is that in 1990 this

trio were not higher in the rankings: Cabernet

Sauvignon was ranked 8th, Merlot 7th and

Cabernet Franc 32nd.

More recent demand trends are those for

Sauvignon Blanc, Pinot Gris/Grigio, Tempranillo

and Syrah. These have seen rapid rises. In 1990,

Tempranillo ranked 24th with ‘just’ 47,429 ha;

this increased by nearly fivefold by 2010.

Syrah’s percentage rise since 1990 has been

even greater – nearly 430 per cent. The rise

of Pinot Gris/Grigio has been so recent that

individual planting figures were not available

in 1990. This grape variety’s vineyard area

has more than doubled in just ten years. And

Sauvignon Blanc is another Bordeaux variety,

so an obvious choice for new world countries

researching what grape varieties to plant.

It quickly took on a life, and style, of its

own in New Zealand.

The 15th most widely planted grape variety

in 2010 is Grasevina, also known as Laski

Rizling, Olasz Risling, Riesling Italico, and

Welschriesling . It is a staple of eastern

Europe and is the main white grape variety

of Croatia.

Top 20 share of global wine

grape vineyard

1990

Top 20

2,438,695ha

Other varieties

2,851,305ha

46% 54%

2000

Top 20

2,326,567ha

Other varieties

2,551,609ha

48% 52%

2010

Top 20

2,533,819ha

Other varieties

2,067,626ha

55% 45%

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Total world vineyard area, all uses (table grapes, raisins, wine grapes), and share

by continent (hectares) average of

2000 2005 2010 2012 2014

Countries with total vineyard areas over 100,000 hectares, ranked on 2014 (hectares)

1986 to 1990 2000 2005 2010 2012 2014

World total

vineyard area

(‘000 ha)

7,847 7,770 7526 7513 7573

1 Spain 1,506,000 1,174,000 1,180,000 1,082,000 1,018,000 1,038,000

2 China 143,000 260,000 438,600 539,000 570,000 799,000

3 France 996,000 917,000 894,900 818,000 800,000 792,000

Africa 4% 5% 5% 5% 5%

4 Italy 1,063,000 908,000 842,000 795,000 769,000 690,000

Americas 12% 12% 13% 13% 14%

5 Turkey 636,000 581,000 554,700 513,000 517,000 502,000

Asia 19% 22% 22% 23% 24%

6 USA 319,000 413,000 399,000 404,000 407,000 425,000

Europe 63% 61% 57% 56% 54%

7 Argentina 259,000 209,000 218,600 228,000 221,000 228,000

Oceania 2% 2% 3% 3% 3%

8 Portugal 282,000 261,000 248,000 243,000 239,000 224,000

100% 100% 100% 100% 100%

9 Iran 228,000 270,000 330,300 239,000 239,000 223,000

Source: OIV

10 Chile 124,000 174,000 193,000 200,000 205,000 211,000

11 Romania 244,000 248,000 217,000 204,000 205,000 192,000

12 Australia 59,000 140,000 167,000 170,000 169,000 154,000

13 Moldova N/A 130,000 148,000 146,000 142,000 N/A

14 South Africa 100,000 117,000 134,000 132,000 131,000 132,000

15 Greece 160,000 129,000 112,800 112,000 110,000 110,000

16 Germany 102,000 105,000 102,000 102,000 102,000 102,000

Source: OIV

Wine & Spirit Education Trust Wine Production: A Global Overview

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Annual variation in global wine production (hectolitres)

Year production (hl)

difference from

previous year

average of

1986 to 1990

303,976,000

2000 275,892,000

2001 265,000,000 -10,892,000

2002 257,000,000 -8,000,000

2003 264,000,000 7,000,000

2004 296,000,000 32,000,000

2005 279,880,000 -16,120,000

2006 283,000,000 3,120,000

2007 268,000,000 -15,000,000

2008 269,000,000 1,000,000

2009 272,000,000 3,000,000

2010 264,439,000 -7,561,000

2011 267,000,000 2,561,000

2012 251,700,000 -15,300,000

2013 291,000,000 39,300,000

2014 270,000,000 -21,000,000

Source: OIV

Wine & Spirit Education Trust Wine Production: A Global Overview

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Top ten producing countries, ranked on 2014 (hectolitres)

2000 2005 2010 2012 2014

1 France 57,541,000 52,105,000 45,704,000 42,243,000 46,698,000

2 Italy 51,620,000 50,566,000 48,575,000 40,060,000 44,739,000

3 Spain 41,692,000 37,808,000 36,093,000 29,665,000 38,200,000

4 USA 23,000,000 22,888,000 20,890,000 20,510,000 22,300,000

5 Argentina 12,538,000 15,222,000 16,250,000 11,778,000 15,197,000

6 Australia 8,064,000 14,301,000 11,240,000 11,554,000 12,000,000

7 South Africa 6,949,000 8,406,000 9,220,000 10,037,000 11,316,000

8 China 5,750,000 12,000,000 13,000,000 14,880,000 11,178,000

9 Chile 6,419,000 7,885,000 9,150,000 12,554,000 10,500,000

10 Germany 9,852,000 9,153,000 6,906,000 9,500,000 9,334,000

Source: OIV

Page 6

Production of top ten countries, split by old : new world

2000 old world 2000 new world 2014 old world 2014 new world

Hl, excl. China 160,705,000 56,970,000 138,971,000 71,313,000

% of top ten

production

72% 25% 63% 32%

Hl, incl. China 160,705,000 62,720,000 138,971,000 82,491,000

% of top ten

production

72% 28% 63% 37%

Source: OIV

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Top 20 most planted grape varieties for wine ranked by 2010 global share (hectares) Hectares in 1990 ranked in 1990

% share of global

wine vineyard 1990 hectares in 2000 ranked in 2000

% share of global

wine vineyard 2000 hectares 2010 ranked in 2010

Source: OIV

% share of global

wine vineyard 2010

Global total 5,290,000 100 4,878,176 100 4,601,445 100

Top 20 total 2,438,695 46 2,326,567 48 2,533,819 55

Cabernet Sauvignon 127,678 8 2.41 220,890 2 4.53 290,091 1 6.3

Merlot 154,752 7 2.93 211,967 4 4.35 267,169 2 5.81

Airen 476,396 1 9.01 387,978 1 7.95 252,364 3 5.48

Tempranillo 47,429 14 0.9 92,985 10 1.91 232,561 4 5.05

Chardonnay 69,282 13 1.31 145,344 5 2.98 198,793 5 4.32

Syrah 35,086 35 0.66 101,516 8 2.08 185,568 6 4.03

Grenache 282,997 2 5.35 213,987 3 4.39 184,735 7 4.01

Sauvignon Blanc 44,677 25 0.84 64,889 15 1.33 110,138 8 2.39

Trebbiano Toscana 207,442 5 3.92 136,572 6 2.8 109,772 9 2.39

Pinot Noir 41,539 30 0.79 60,099 16 1.23 86,662 10 1.88

Mazuelo 202,869 6 3.83 126,650 7 2.6 80,178 11 1.74

Bobal 106,149 10 2.01 100,128 9 2.05 80,120 12 1.74

Sangiovese 98,946 11 1.87 68,877 13 1.41 77,709 13 1.69

Monastrell 108,213 9 2.05 76,304 12 1.56 69,850 14 1.52

Grasevina 19,384 48 0.37 92,306 11 1.89 61,200 15 1.33

Rkatsiteli 280,569 3 5.3 67,354 14 1.38 58,641 16 1.27

Cabernet Franc 39,619 32 0.75 48,551 19 1 53,599 17 1.16

Riesling 52,164 21 0.99 43,166 23 0.88 50,060 18 1.09

Pinot Grig/Grigio N/A N/A N/A 18,879 44 0.39 43,563 19 0.95

Macabeo 43,504 26 0.82 48,125 21 0.99 41,046 20 0.89

Wine & Spirit Education Trust Wine Production: A Global Overview

10Statistical sources for this report:

Wine Basics

**What is wine?**

Wine is the fermented juice of grapes

Sugar + Yeast = Alcohol + Carbon Dioxide (CO²)

The sugar is in the grape juice and the yeast is present on the grape skins and in the air

Fermentation ends when the alcohol reaches around 15%

**Three major types of wine**

• Table wine: 8-15% alcohol

• Sparkling wine: 8-12% alcohol + CO²

• Fortified wine: 17-22% alcohol

(All wine fits into at least on of these categories)

(Table wine is all that concerns us today)

**New World vs. Old World**

New World wine regions (California, Australia, Chile) usually list the grape variety on the label

Old World wine regions (France, Italy, Spain) list the region, village or vineyard where the wine is

made, but usually not the grape

**What's a vintage?**

As grapes ripen, their acidity decreases while their sugar increases

Grapes are picked when they reach the sugar/acid ratio for the style of wine they’re to

produce

The “Vintage” is the year that the grapes were harvested

In the Southern Hemisphere, the seasons are reversed

Northern Hemisphere harvest is between August-November

Southern Hemisphere harvest as early as January-March

The Winemaking process

Freshly picked grapes are sorted

De-stemmed and crushed

Placed into a vat with (red) or without skins (white)

Fermentation occurs (4- 20 days)

Pressed

Barreled and aged

Filtered and bottled

**What kind of grapes make wine?**

The major wine grapes come from the species Vitis vinifera

Both old world (Europe) and new world (America) wine producers use Vitis vinifera

The Native American grape species (Vitis labrusca) is still grown in the U.S. but some describe

the wines as having a ‘foxy’ aroma and flavor

The White Wines of the World

There are about 50 major white grapes used for white wine

**The big three (from lightest to fullest):**

• Riesling

• Sauvignon Blanc

• Chardonnay

1Wine Basics

**Where do the big three grow?**

Riesling: Germany; Alsace, France; many New World regions (e.g. New York State)

Sauvignon Blanc: Loire Valley, France; Bordeaux, France; New Zealand; California

Chardonnay: Burgundy, France; California, Australia, Champagne, France

**The Red Wines of the World**

There are about 40 major red grapes used for red wine

The big three (from lightest to fullest):

• Pinot Noir

• Cabernet Sauvignon

• Syrah/Shiraz

**Where do the big three red grapes grow?**

Pinot Noir: Burgundy, France; California; Oregon; Champagne, France; New Zealand

Cabernet Sauvignon: Bordeaux, France; California; Chile

Syrah/Shiraz: Rhône, France; Australia

**Why is geography important?**

All major wine regions fall between 30 and 50° latitude, north and south of the equator

It is between these two bands where various “microclimates” are found which give the correct

balance between warm and cool, sun and rain, etc. for the production of fine wine

**Microclimate**

Or better put, *terroir*, is the environmental factor affecting the quality of grapes:

• Soil

• Slope

• Sun

• Wind

• Temperature

• Et cetera

When the *terroir*, grape variety, vintage and winemaking are in sync, great wines are the result

**The wines of the Old World**

France, Germany, Italy and Spain all have great white and red wine traditions

The new world wine regions have tried to mimic these wines, sometimes successfully, and

sometimes not

Each country has its own special regions where red and/or white wines are produced

**The white wines of France**

There are four major white-wine producing regions in France

• Alsace

• Loire

• Bordeaux

• Burgundy

**The white wine regions of France**

Alsace: Riesling, Gewurztraminer, Muscat, Pinot gris and Pinot blanc

Loire: Sauvignon Blanc, Chenin Blanc, and Melon

Bordeaux: Sémillon, Sauvignon Blanc

Burgundy: Chardonnay

2Wine Basics

**The white wines of Germany**

Riesling, Gewürztraminer, Müller-Thurgau and Silvaner

**The white wines of Italy and Spain**

Both Italy and Spain produce world class white wines but traditionally, white grapes are planted

in colder (more northern regions) while red grapes are planted in warmer (more southerly

regions)

Pinot Grigio and Rias Baixas are examples of world class wines from Italy and Spain respectively

**The red wines of France**

There are three major red-wine producing regions in France

• Bordeaux

• Burgundy

• Rhône

Bordeaux: Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet Franc

Burgundy: Pinot Noir

Rhône: Syrah, Grenache

**The red wines of Italy**

There are three major red-wine producing regions in Italy

• Piedmont

• Tuscany

• Veneto

Piedmont: Nebbiolo, Barbera, Dolcetto

Tuscany: Sangiovese

Veneto: Corvina, Molinara, Rondinella

**The red wines of Spain**

There are three major red-wine producing regions in Spain

• Rioja

• Ribera del Duero

• Cataluña

Rioja: Tempranillo, Garnacha

Ribera del Duero: Tempranillo (Tinto fino)

Cataluña: Cariñena

**European grapes in the New World**

As previously mentioned, learning the grapes grown in the wine region is the key to

understanding Old World wines

All of the above mentioned varietals have been attempted in the New World wine regions

The French varietals are by far the most important and have come to known as the

“international varietals”

**New World wine regions.**

• California, Oregon, Washington

• Australia, New Zealand

3Wine Basics

• Chile, Argentina

• South Africa

• Canada

These and other regions are gaining in popularity as they perfect their skills with the

“international grape varietals”

**“The Big Six”**

***Riesling:***

The classic white grape of Germany

To many, the greatest of white wines

Dry and full in Alsace

Often minerally, yellow/green apple, white peach, citrus and floral

***Sauvignon Blanc***

Crisp and Fresh

Gooseberry, Citrus, Grapefruit, Melon

Grassy, Asparagus

“Cats Pee”

***Chardonnay***

Classic white grape of Burgundy and Champagne

Full flavor and crisp acidity

Best in calcium rich soils

Lemon, green apple, melon skin

Often matured in oak; this adds toastiness, vanilla, and spice flavors

Another great transponder of place

***Pinot Noir***

Classic grape of red Burgundy and Champagne

The single variety of AOC Côte d’Or reds

Light in tannin

Raspberries, strawberries, red and black cherries

Can become quite earthy/barnyard/ exotic with age

Incredibly sensitive to *terroir*

***Cabernet Sauvignon***

Firm Structure

Aromas and flavors of…

Currants, Blackberries, Cassis

Olives, Anise, Herbs

***Syrah***

Known as Shiraz in Australia

Powerful and full-bodied

Aromas and flavors of…

Black pepper, Raspberry

Mulberry, Rubber, Liquorice, Chocolate

Leather and game when mature

4

Wine 101 Guide

CHAPTER 1 What Really is Wine?

CHAPTER 2 The 9 Styles of Wine

CHAPTER 3 Top 10 Types of Wine

CHAPTER 4 How to Taste Wine

CHAPTER 5 Wine Serving & Storing Tips

CHAPTER 6 Food and Wine Pairing Basics

CHAPTER 7 Wine Regions of the World

CHAPTER 8 Going Deeper: Climate & SoilsWhat is Wine?

Wine is an alcoholic beverage made with

fermented grapes.

Of course, you can ferment any fruit to make

wine. But legally speaking, if it’s labeled “wine”

then it must be made with grapes. Other fruit

wines must append the fruit type to the label

(e.g. “cranberry wine.”)

Once a year, grapes are harvested to make

wine. This is where we get the term “vintage.”

Each vintage is characterized by unique

growing conditions (rainfall, wind, frost, hail,

fires, etc) that ultimately affect how the wine

tastes. This is why you’ll find some vintages

preferrable to others.

It’s useful to note that a single vintage

can affect red and white wines somewhat

differently.

GROCERY STORE

GRAPES

WINE GRAPES

The grapes used for winemaking are not like

the ones you’ll find in the grocery store. Wine

grapes are smaller, sweeter, have thicker skins,

and contains seeds. These attributes give

wine its unique acquired taste.

What’s surprising is most wine is made from

grapes of a single species called Vitis vinifera.

This species originated in the Caucasus

Mountains of Eastern Europe. We’ve made

wine with this species for about 10,000 years.

Today, there are about 1,400 grape cultivars

used in commercial wine production. That said,

only about 100 of these varieties make up

75% of the world’s vineyards. This means some

wines you’ll discover are made with very rare

wine grapes.

WINE 101 GUIDE | WINE FOLLYLight-Bodied

Red

Rosé

Medium-Bodied

Red

Aromatic

White

Full-Bodied

Red

STYLES OF

WINE

Full-Bodied

White

Other &

Dessert

Light-Bodied

White

Sparkling

With so many options out there, how do you hone in on

your favorites? Well, as diverse as wine is, most wines

can be categorized into 9 styles. Once you try each of

the 9 styles, you’ll have a pretty good idea of what you

like and don’t like.

Consider this a homework assignment.

Taste at least one wine from each of the 9 styles over

the next month (or so) and take detailed, objective

notes. (Use the tasting method included in this guide!)

WINE 101 GUIDE | WINE FOLLYSPARKLING

WINE

LIGHT-BODIED WHITE

WINE

FULL-BODIED WHITE

WINE

Sparkling wines are char-

acterized by carbonation

caused from a second fer-

mentation. This gives bubbly

wines distinct yeasty and

bready aromas.

Sparkling wines come in all

styles (white, rosé, and red)

and sweetness levels. The

label terms “Brut,” “Extra

Brut,” and “Brut Nature” are

the most dry (e.g. not sweet.)

Light-bodied, easy-drinking

dry white wines may not

command high prices, but

are some of the most-sold

wines in the world (even if

red wines get more atten-

tion.)

Light whites have increased

acidity and thus, pair with

a wide array of cuisines.

Aromas range from sweet-

er stone fruits to savory,

herby, and peppery flavors.

Full-bodied white wines are

great wines for red wine

lovers because of their rich

smooth taste and subtle

creamy notes.

What makes white wines so

rich? Aging white wines in

oak barrels causes several

interactions to occur that

increase body. So, be sure

to look up the aging pro-

gram to ensure the wine

has had some barrel aging

(usually from 6–12 months.)

WHAT TO TRY

CAVA

CHAMPAGNE

CRÉMANT

CAP CLASSIQUE

PROSECCO

LAMBRUSCO

SEKT

AMERICAN SPARKLERS

WHAT TO TRY

PINOT GRIGIO (AKA PINOT GRIS)

SAUVIGNON BLANC

CHENIN BLANC

MUSCADET\*

ALBARIÑO

ASSYRTIKO

GARGANEGA (SOAVE)

GRÜNER VELTLINER

CHASSELAS

VERMENTINO

VERDICCHIO

VINHO VERDE

PICPOUL

\*French regional wine made with Melon

grapes.

WHAT TO TRY

CHARDONNAY

VIOGNIER

MARSANNE

ROUSSANNE

GRENACHE BLANC

SÉMILLON

AGED RIOJA BLANCO

WINE 101 GUIDE | WINE FOLLYAROMATIC WHITE WINE

Aromatic grapes include

some of oldest wine vari-

eties in the world. In fact,

Cleopatra was noted to

love of Muscat of Alexan-

dria–a rich, aromatic sweet

wine from Greece.

Expect explosive, perfumed

aromas that spring out of

the glass. Aromatic whites

are available in dry or sweet

styles, but often taste a

touch sweet because of

their sweet aromas.

ROSÉ WINE

Rosé is made by “dyeing”

the wine for a short time

with red grape skins. Rosé

first became popular in the

late 1700’s when French

Bordeaux wines imported

to England had a pale color

and were called Claret.

Nearly any red grape can

be made into rosé. Also, it’s

possible to blend in white

wines to add acidity and

complexity.

The world’s largest rosé re-

gion is Provence, France.

LIGHT-BODIED RED

WINE

Light-bodied red wines are

typified by their translucent

color, light tannin, increased

acidity, and delicate, floral-

herbal aromas.

Light-bodied red wines are

very versatile food wines –

they make a perfect match

with poultry.

This style is growing in

popularity given that it

pairs with a wide variety of

cuisines.

WHAT TO TRY

RIESLING

TORRONTÉS

MOSCATO\*

MUSKATELLER\*

MOSCATEL\*

GEWÜRZTRAMINER

MOSCHOFILERO

\*Various regional names for wines made

with Muscat Blanc grapes.

WHAT TO TRY

PROVENCE ROSÉ

SANGIOVESE ROSÉ

GARNACHA ROSÉ

PINOT NOIR ROSÉ

SYRAH ROSÉ

CABERNET FRANC ROSÉ

BEAUJOLAIS ROSÉ

WHITE ZINFANDEL (SWEET)

WHAT TO TRY

PINOT NOIR

GAMAY

BEAUJOLAIS\*

FRAPPATO

CINSAULT

NERELLO MASCALESE

SCHIAVA

ZWEIGELT

LAMBRUSCO\*\*

\*A French regional wine of 100% Gamay

\*\*Sparkling style

WINE 101 GUIDE | WINE FOLLYMEDIUM-BODIED RED

WINE

FULL-BODIED RED WINE

DESSERT / OTHER WINE

Not too light nor too heavy,

this is the “baby bear” red

wine style. There are a wide

array of choices (and thus,

flavors) in this red wine

category. Tannin is mod-

erate, and expect most to

have slightly higher acidity.

The aforementioned traits

make for a wine that can

pair with most foods (but

avoid super delicate dish-

es.) Additionally, many of

these wines have the struc-

ture to age well.

Full-bodied red wines are

the deepest, darkest, and

highest in tannin of the red

wines. Despite what you

might have heard about it,

tannin is what gives wine

antioxidant properties. Ad-

ditionally, it ensures many

of these wines will age for

decades.

Bold red wine pairs well

with fatty, umami-driven

foods because of their high

tannin. Truthfully though,

you might want to ditch

the food altogether – they

drink well solo.

In the 1800’s, sweet wines

were more popular than dry

wines. In fact, several of

the most exalted wines in

the world, from Sauternes

in Bordeaux to Tokaji Aszú

from Hungary, will age just

as long as bold red wines

(or longer!)

The dessert wine style is

actually a catchall for some

of the more rare wines of

the world. Each is made

with a unique method and

range from dry to sweet.

WHAT TO TRY

MERLOT

GRENACHE

SANGIOVESE

TEMPRANILLO

BARBERA

CABERNET FRANC

DOLCETTO

CARMÉNÈRE

BLAUFRÄNKISCH

VALPOLICELLA BLENDS

MENCÍA

MONTEPULCIANO

NEBBIOLO

XINOMAVRO

ZINFANDEL

WHAT TO TRY

CABERNET SAUVIGNON

SYRAH (AKA SHIRAZ)

BORDEAUX BLEND

MALBEC

MONASTRELL

NERO D’AVOLA

PETITE SIRAH

PETIT VERDOT

PINOTAGE

SAGRANTINO

TANNAT

TOURIGA NACIONAL

WHAT TO TRY

SHERRY

PORT

SAUTERNAIS

ICE WINE

MADEIRA

MARSALA

MOSCATEL DE SETÚBAL

VIN SANTO

MUSCAT OF ALEXANDRIA

WINE 101 GUIDE | WINE FOLLYThe Major Types of Wine

BY THE NUMBERS

Let’s zoom out a little to get perspective on what

grapes are at the top. The grapes included here are

the most planted varieties. They represent a large

portion of what’s available in the market.

Chances are, you might already be familiar with what’s

listed here. That said, there are a couple of unfamiliar

wine grapes included which are used primarily for

brandy (Cognac, etc) or balsamic vinegar production!

CABERNET SAUVIGNON

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CABERNET SAUVIGNON

Cabernet Sauvignon (“cab-err-nay saw-vin-yon”) is

the most planted wine variety in the world. Wines are

rich, red, and robust. This grape originated in France

around the region of Bordeaux.

FLAVORS

BLACK CHERRY, BLACK CURRANT, CEDAR, BAKING

SPICES, GRAPHITE

The rich flavor and high tannin content in Cabernet

Sauvignon make it a perfect partner to seasoned

grilled meats, peppery sauces, and dishes with high

flavor.

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MERLOT

(“murr-low”) Despite what some say, Merlot is actually

very closely related to Cabernet Sauvignon. Wines are

usually considered slightly more fruity than Cabernet

Sauvignon but can age just as long.

FLAVORS

CHERRY, PLUM, CHOCOLATE, BAY LEAF, VANILLA

Merlot tastes great alongside roasted dishes like

pork shoulder, broiled mushrooms, or braised short

ribs. Try complementing Merlot’s fruit flavors with

chimichurri sauce.

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WINE 101 GUIDE | WINE FOLLYS

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AIRÉN

Spain’s most widely planted grape is primarily used for

brandy. That said, a few producers have revitalized the

old, drought-resistant bush vines for winemaking. Still,

it’s quite hard to find outside of Spain.

FLAVORS

APPLE, PINEAPPLE, GRAPEFRUIT, BANANA, ROSE

Madrid-inspired tapas and warm weather.

TEMPRANILLO

Spain’s top variety, made famous by the region of Ri-

oja, where wines are classified by how long they age in

oak. A well-made Tempranillo will age over 20 years.

FLAVORS

CHERRY, DRIED FIG, CEDAR, TOBACCO, DILL

Bolder, aged Tempranillo wines pair nicely with

steak, gourmet burgers, and rack of lamb. Fresher

styles match well with Mexican street food and even

tomato dishes.

CHARDONNAY

Chardonnay originated from the Burgundy region of

France and produces a wide range of styles from bold,

buttery, oak-aged still wines to lean, Blanc de Blancs

sparkling wines.

FLAVORS

YELLOW APPLE, STARFRUIT, PINEAPPLE, VANILLA,

BUTTER, LEMON

If you keep spice and flavor intensity slightly lower

and choose dishes with creamy, buttery flavors then

you will be delighted. This is a wine worthy of lobster.

WINE 101 GUIDE | WINE FOLLYH

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THE MAJOR TYPES OF WINE

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SYRAH

Also known as Shiraz in Australia, this grape produces

boisterous, rich, and peppery reds. Syrah originated

close to the Northern Rhône of France.

FLAVORS

TART BLUEBERRY, BLACK PLUM, CHOCOLATE,

TOBACCO, GREEN PEPPERCORN

Darker meats and exotic spices bring out the fruit

notes of Syrah. Try it with lamb shawarma, gyros,

Asian five-spice pork, and even Indian tandoori meats.

GRENACHE

Also known as Garnacha in Spain, this grape produces

juicy, spice-driven, medium-bodied red wines with red

berry flavors and elevated alcohol. Evidence suggests

Grenache is originally of Spanish origin.

FLAVORS

STEWED STRAWBERRY, GRILLED PLUM, LEATHER,

DRIED HERBS, RUBY RED GRAPEFRUIT

The high intensity flavors of Grenache match well

with roasted meats and vegetables spiced with Asian

five-spice and cumin.

SAUVIGNON BLANC

A popular and unmistakable white that’s loved for its

“green” herbal flavors and sky high acidity. This French

origin grape turns out to be one of the parents of

Cabernet Sauvignon.

FLAVORS

GOOSEBERRY, HONEYDEW MELON, GRAPEFRUIT,

WHITE PEACH, PASSION FRUIT

A wonderful choice with herb-driven sauces over

chicken, tofu, or fish dishes. Try matching Sauvignon

Blanc with Thai and Vietnamese cuisine.

WINE 101 GUIDE | WINE FOLLYTHE MAJOR TYPES OF WINE

TREBBIANO TOSCANO

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TREBBIANO TOSCANO

(AKA UGNI BLANC)

Also known as Ugni Blanc in France, this grape is

primarily used in the production of Cognac, Armignac,

and balsamic vinegar in Italy.

FLAVORS

LEMON, HONEYDEW MELON, GOOSEBERRY, CRUSHED

ROCKS, LIME PEEL

As a dry white wine, Trebbiano pairs well with hard

Italian cheeses, seafood pastas, white pizza, roast

chicken, and pesto.

PINOT NOIR

The world’s most popular light-bodied red is loved for

its red fruit and spice flavors that are accentuated by

a long, smooth, soft-tannin finish.

FLAVORS

CHERRY, RASPBERRY, MUSHROOM, ALLSPICE,

HIBISCUS

A very versatile food pairing wine given it’s higher

acidity and lower tannin. Pinot Noir pairs particularly

well with duck, chicken, pork, and mushrooms.

Need information on a specific wine or

grape variety? Search our free infobase!

SEARCH GRAPE DATABASE

WINE 101 GUIDE | WINE FOLLYHow to Taste Wine

The single

most important

step towards

improving your

palate.

Active tasting is a

learned skill. This

method will give you

the framework to

improve your ability to

assess wine quality.

Practice makes per-

fect! Be sure to use

this method each time

LOOK

A visual inspection of the wine under

neutral lighting

SMELL

Identify aromas through orthonasal

olfaction (e.g. breathing through your

nose)

TASTE

Assess both the taste structure (sour,

bitter, sweet, etc) and flavors derived

from retronasal olfaction (e.g. breathing

with the back of your nose)

THINK

you taste a new wine.

Take a pause to solidify the taste profile

of the wine into your long term memory

WINE 101 GUIDE | WINE FOLLYHOW TO TASTE | STEP 1: LOOK

Hold a glass of wine over a white background

under neutral lighting and observe.

1. Identify the hue

2. Inspect intensity (how opaque is it?)

3. Check viscosity (watery or viscous?)

HUE

Here are some common hints you can look for

in the color and rim variation –

Often Nebbiolo and Grenache-based wines

will have a translucent garnet or orange

color on their rim, even in their youth.

Pinot Noir will often have a true-red or true-

ruby color, especially from cooler climates.

Malbec will often have a magenta-pink rim.

INTENSITY

How intense and opaque is the color in the

glass? Can you see sediment in the wine?

These are general clues that can help you

identify the variety and concentration of the

wine.

VISCOSITY

The tears that form on the side of the glass

(“wine legs”) can tell us if the wine has high

or low alcohol and/or high or low sugar. The

thicker and more viscous the legs, the more

alcohol or residual sugar in the wine.

VIEW “COLOR OF WINE” POSTER >

HELPFUL TIPS

As white wines age they oxidize and change

color, becoming deeper yellow. A fully oxidized

white wine is brown.

As red wines age, they lose color, becoming

more transparent and faded with a more

orange or tawny-colored rim.

If you see sediment in the wine, it’s not bad for

you! It’s just a sign of an unfiltered wine. Most

consider this a highly desirable trait.

Grab a glass and taste with Madeline P.

WATCH VIDEO >

WINE 101 GUIDE | WINE FOLLYHOW TO TASTE | STEP 2: SMELL

Aromas in wine can reveal almost everything

about a wine including grape variety(ies) used,

oak or aging regime, region, and even vintage.

A well-trained nose can pick out each of

these details. In fact, it’s one of the primary

challenges to becoming a Master Sommelier.

Your goal with this step is to isolate a wine’s

individual aromas so that you can use them

as clues to define what the wine is, how it was

made, and where it came from.

For example, knowing that the smell of

vanilla indicates a higher presence of vanillin

suggests the wine was likely aged in oak.

HELPFUL TIPS

Find Your Position Hold your glass right under

your nose and slowly move it away (while

sniffing) until you can pick out individual

aromas

Swirling Wine in your glass concentrates the

aromas and can help you pick out flavors more

easily

Overloaded? If your nose is overloaded, smell

your forearm. It helps reset your nose.

Tasting is generally more about the texture

than flavor, so pay attention to that first.

All aromas found in wine are derived from

chemical interactions between the grape juice,

the yeast fermentation, and the aging method.

GRAPE-DERIVED

AROMAS

PRIMARY

AROMAS

TERTIARY

AROMAS

SECONDARY

AROMAS

AGING & OAK

AROMAS

FERMENTATION

AROMAS

To simplify this incredibly complex

interrelationship (unless you’re studying

fermentation science), we can sort aromas into

three categories:

Primary Aromas are derived from the

interaction between the grape and yeast

and can include fruit, flower, and herb-like

flavors.

Secondary Aromas are derived primarily

from yeast and other microbes and may

include aromas like yeast, cheese, cream,

sourdough, or beer-like smells.

Tertiary Aromas are derived from aging

and oxidation (including aging in oak

barrels) and may include vanilla, maple,

browned butter, and nut-like aromas.

WINE 101 GUIDE | WINE FOLLYHOW TO TASTE | STEP 3: TASTE

When we taste we’re essentially

touching wine and sensing how it

feels.

Thus, a large part of the tasting portion is

dedicated to texture. This step ultimately

reveals a wine’s physical traits including

sweetness, acid level, tannin, and alcohol.

The moment you taste wine the

flavor evolves on your palate until

it’s no longer present.

Some wines will continue to deliver taste

sensations on your palate long after you’ve

swallowed.

VIEW WINE FLAVOR CHART >

Sweetness: The first thing to look for. Is the

wine sweet or is it dry? Most people taste

sweetness towards the front of the tongue

where they have the highest proportion of

tastebuds.

Acidity: How sour is the wine? Does it make

your mouth water? All wines lie on the acidic

side of the pH spectrum. A wine with a low

pH (e.g. high acidity) will cause your mouth to

salivate and tingle more than a wine with a

high pH.

Tannin: How astringent or mouth-drying is the

wine? This is a trait found is most red wines

and less so in white wines. You can feel tannins

on the middle and sides of your tongue as a

mouth-drying, bitter sensation. As negative as

these taste traits may sound, tannins in wine

are one of the few wine traits that are actually

good for you!

Alcohol: When you swallow, pay attention to

the warming sensation in your throat. This

is how most of us sense the alcohol level in

wine. High alcohol wines often have a burning

sensation and because of this are often

described as tasting “hot.”

Body: How “big” is the wine on your

palate? Does it fill your mouth with flavor and

richness or is it lean and lithe? While body is

not a scientific term, it can really help describe

what we like/dislike in wine.

Finish: What flavor or taste does the wine

finish with? Is it bitter? sweet? smoky? oily?

salty? It’s interesting to note that the finish

is one of the deciding factors behind what

consumers like.

Length: How long does it take until you can’t

taste the wine on your palate? Even a very

light-weight wine can have a long length.

Layers: Does the wine’s flavors and textures

change over the course of a single taste? If so,

the wine is “layered.”

WINE 101 GUIDE | WINE FOLLYHOW TO TASTE | STEP 4: THINK

Developing a highly tuned wine

palate takes time.

You can accelerate the process by thinking

carefully after tasting a new wine. The goal is

to pick out the key characteristics of a wine

in the way it looks, smells, and tastes. What

makes this wine different than others?

Your wine repertoire is as big as you choose to

make it.

By continually trying new wines, new vintages,

and new wine regions you’ll create a diverse

wine repertoire. What’s cool is that it really

doesn’t matter if you spend a lot or a little on

a bottle of wine. What’s more important is that

you’re actively tasting new wines.

BALANCE

Does the wine’s taste characteristics of

acidity, alcohol, and tannin work in balance

with one another? Or does the wine have a

trait that tends to dominate the others?

While balance is not necessarily an indicator

of quality, you’ll find many highly rated wines

are noted for being balanced.

COMPLEXITY

Does the wine have an endless number of

flavors and textures to identify? Or does the

wine only have one or two major flavors?

Generally speaking, wines with high complexity

are considered higher quality.

READING WINE RATINGS

Often times you’ll find a point-score

associated with a bottle of wine. The most

common rating scale is the 100-point system

(developed by Robert Parker). Additionally,

there is a 5-star system (used on Vivino) and a

20-point scale (more common in the UK).

A high rating doesn’t gaurantee that you’ll

love a wine. Instead, a good rating is a general

indication of quality within a style or a good

quality-to-price ratio.

Thus, make sure you like the style of wine first

before using ratings to hone in on a purchase

choice.

LEGENDARY

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AVERAGE

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100

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Keep track of

your tasting

notes with this

custom Wine

Tasting Journal.

VIEW

WINE 101 GUIDE | WINE FOLLYTips on Serving & Storing Wine

SPARKLING WINES

Serve “Ice Cold” (38–45 ºF / 3–7 ºC)

Store open 1–3 days\* (store in fridge)

LIGHT WHITE & ROSÉ WINES

Serve “Cold” (45–55 ºF / 7–13 ºC)

Store open 5–7 days\* (store in fridge)

FULL-BODIED WHITE WINES

Serve “Cold” (45–55 ºF / 7–13 ºC)

Store open 3–5 days\* (store in fridge)

RED WINES

Serve “Cellar Temp” (55–68 ºF / 13–20 ºC)

Store open 3–5 days\* (in cool, dark place)

Decant for at least 30 minutes

FORTIFIED & BOX WINES

Serve “Cellar Temp” (55–68 ºF / 13–20 ºC)

Store open 28 days\* (in cool, dark place)

Box Wines

\*Freshness varies, some wines last open longer.

WINE 101 GUIDE | WINE FOLLYCHOOSING GLASSWARE

SPARKLING WINES

FULL-BODIED

RED WINES

LIGHT WHITE

WINES

MEDIUM-BODIED

RED WINES

ROSÉ WINES

DRY SHERRY

DESSERT

WINES

AROMATIC

WHITE WINES

LIGHT-BODIED

RED WINES

FULL-BODIED

WHITE WINES

In a perfect world, you can have one glass for every style of wine. In a pragmatic world, owning 1–2 glass types is sufficient.

You can drink wine from whatever vessel you

want, be it a wine glass, coffee mug, mason jar,

or dixie cup! That said, certain glasses do work

better than others on certain wines.

Here are the major things to consider when

choosing glassware:

Most importantly, in order to sense the

different aromas in wine, you’ll need added

space in the glass above the liquid. You’ll find

that most quality glasses have increased

volume capacity ranging from about 11 to 22

ounces. (325 ml to 620 ml)

For most white wines, a slightly smaller bowled

glass with a smaller diameter opening is

preferred. Here’s how these two traits affect

aromas:

Preserves floral aromas

Maintains a cooler temperature

Better expresses acidity in wine

Delivers more concentrated aromas

Conversely, full-bodied white wines like oak-

aged Chardonnay, Viognier, White Rioja, and

orange wines are better with a larger bowl.

The choice of a red wine glass has a lot to

do with mitigating the bitterness of tannin

or spicy flavors to deliver a smoother tasting

wine. We’ve observed red wine glasses tend to

have a larger bowl shape and larger diameter

opening. Here are a few pointers:

A globe-shaped glass is ideal for more

aromatic, light-bodied red wines such as

Pinot Noir or Gamay.

A large glass with a wider diameter opening

is better for big, bold, red wines with high

tannin such as Cabernet Sauvignon.

A large glass with a smaller diameter

opening is generally better for spicy and

peppery red wines such as Syrah, Zinfandel,

or Sangiovese.

Related Study: In 2015, a study came out by

a Japanese group that developed a special

camera to record evaporating ethanol. The

study recorded the density and position of

ethanol vapors in different glass shapes.

The vapor patterns revealed that wine glasses

are the most effective at delivering aromatic

compounds to our noses.

WINE 101 GUIDE | WINE FOLLYFood & Wine Pairing Basics

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WINE

POSTERS >

Even though the science of flavor pairing is

complex, anyone can learn the fundamentals

and make great wine pairings.

The goal with a great pairing is to create

harmony between food and wine. The first

thing to do to achieve this is to start thinking

of wine more like an ingredient.

CONGRUENT PAIRING

A congruent pairing amplifies shared flavor

compounds found in both the wine and

the food. For example, Syrah and black

pepper have a shared compound called

rotundone. Thus, a pairing of Syrah with

peppered steak would be a good example of a

congruent pairing.

Buttered Popcorn and oaked Chardonnay

(both are “buttery”)

Barbecue Pork and Zinfandel (both have

rich, smokey, “spiced” flavors)

Bresaola and Chianti Classico (both have

meaty, earthy notes)

Beef Mushroom Lime Coconut

COMPLEMENTARY

PAIRING

Few shared compounds

CONGRUENT

PAIRING

Many shared compounds

CONTRASTING PAIRING

A contrasting pairing creates balance with

extreme opposites. In most cases, the wine

acts as a palate cleanser to the food. For

example, a rich, creamy, gooey, mac and

cheese can be contrasted by a high acidity

sparkling white wine.

Blue Cheese and Ruby Port (pungent and

creamy vs. sweet and bitter)

Pork Chop and Riesling (umami and rich vs.

sweet and acidic)

Maple Bacon and Champagne (sweet and

umami vs. sour and carbonated)

WINE 101 GUIDE | WINE FOLLYWine Regions of the World

Wine is made in 90+ countries around the world.

The wine belt. This map is far from accurate but does show general locations of where wine grapes grow.

ITALY

SANGIOVESE, MONTEPULCIANO, TREBBIANO TOSCANO,

BARBERA, PROSECCO, PINOT GRIGIO, NERO D’AVOLA,

VERMENTINO, NEBBIOLO

FRANCE

CHILE

CHILE’S UNIQUE VARIETY IS DEFINITELY CARMÉNÈRE.

CABERNET GROWS WELL HERE TOO

GERMANY

GERMANY IS MOST KNOWN FOR RIESLING AND SPARKLING

WINES

MERLOT, GRENACHE (AKA GARNACHA), CABERNET

SAUVIGNON, SYRAH, CARIGNAN, CHARDONNAY, CABERNET

FRANC, PINOT NOIR, GAMAY, AND SAUVIGNON BLANC

PORTUGAL

PORTUGAL HAS MANY AMAZING, LESSER KNOWN GRAPES

SPAIN

TEMPRANILLO, AIRÉN, MONASTRELL (AKA MOURVEDRE),

GARNACHA, VERDEJO, ALBARIÑO, CAVA

UNITED STATES

CHARDONNAY, CABERNET SAUVIGNON, MERLOT, PINOT NOIR,

SYRAH, ZINFANDEL

HUNGARY

HUNGARY IS A VERY OLD, CLASSIC WINE REGION OF THE

WORLD KNOWN FOR UNIQUE VARIETIES

BRAZIL

BRAZIL IS AN UP-AND-COMING WINE REGION OF THE WORLD

ARGENTINA

MALBEC, CABERNET SAUVIGNON, TORRONTÉS, SYRAH,

CHARDONNAY

GREECE

GREECE IS A VERY ANCIENT WINE REGION THAT SPECIALIZES

IN RARE INDIGENOUS VARIETIES

AUSTRALIA

SHIRAZ (AKA SYRAH), CHARDONNAY, CABERNET SAUVIGNON,

MERLOT, SAUVIGNON BLANC, MERLOT, SÉMILLON, PINOT NOIR,

RIESLING

NEW ZEALAND

KNOWN MOSTLY FOR SAUVIGNON BLANC AND A HIGH

PREVALENCE OF SUSTAINABLE AND ORGANIC WINES

WINE 101 GUIDE | WINE FOLLYGoing Deeper: Climate & Soils

The soil porticle size provides a clue towards the quality of a wine produced from a vineyard.

CLIMATE TYPES AND WINE

Beyond average temperature, climate takes

into account the weather patterns and

atmospheric conditions that can help – or hurt

– wine grapes. These factors include rainfall,

humidity, wind, frost, hail, and quality of

sunlight. Each attribute can affect everything

from a grape’s skin thickness (tannins!) to

whether or not grapes will mold before harvest.

Depending on who you talk to, there are

dozens of ways to classify climate: by

average temperature (warm/cool), by scale

(macroclimate, mesoclimate, microclimate),

or by general climate groups (Mediterranean,

Maritime, or Continental, etc).

In general, warmer climates allow grapes

to fully ripen and mature, developing

deep pigments, bold fruit flavors, greater

sweetness, and higher alcohol content. On

the flip side, cooler climates show a softer

side, accentuating white wines’ minerality,

maintaining juicy acidity, and ensuring a

delicate dance of flavors across the palate.

SOILS AND WINE

Soil type – including sand, clay, dirt, pebbles,

rocks, and dozens of combinations in between

– plays a big role in how vines grow and the

kinds of wine that they make.

Soil type determines the availability of

nutrients, water drainage, water retention, and

can even moderate temperature in a vine’s

immediate microclimate.

Far from the nutrient-rich potting soil you use

for house plants, grape vines actually perform

better when nutrients are scarce and roots

aren’t swampy.

In general, more sandy, grainy soils produce

wines with more aromatic intensity and more

delicate body.

Conversely, soils with more clay (and those

with additional limestone content!) tend to

produce wines with more body, tannin, and

stronger fruit flavors.

Learn more about how location, weather,

and soils affect different wines. READ MORE

WINE 101 GUIDE | WINE FOLLYWine Folly Resources

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OIV (International Organisation of Vine and Wine). www.oiv.int

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Available at: http://www.adelaide.edu.au/press/titles/winegrapes/winegrapes-ebook.pdf

Sally Easton MW September 1, 2015

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**Red Wines 🍇**

* **Barbera** pairs with tomato sauce and lasagna.
* **Barolo** pairs with beef and lamb.
* **Beaujolais** goes well with pork and tomatoes.
* **Cabernet Sauvignon** pairs with beef and lamb, and hard flavorful cheeses. You can also pair it with duck and roasted tomatoes. It's recommended with bearanaise sauce, mushroom sauce, or marinara sauce.
* **Chianti** is a good match for beef, tomato dishes, and cheese.
* **Merlot** pairs with simple dishes, beef, lamb, and pork. It's also recommended with roast chicken, pork loin, and charcuterie.
* **Nebbiolo** pairs with lamb.
* **Pinot Noir** is recommended with chicken, turkey, salmon, and soft rich cheeses. It also pairs with duck, roast chicken, and lamb.
* **Port** pairs well with soft rich cheeses and desserts.
* **Red Bordeaux** and **Red Burgundy** are both recommended with beef, lamb, and salmon.
* **Rioja** pairs well with lamb and tomatoes.
* **Sangiovese** and **Shiraz/Syrah** both pair with tomato sauce.
* **Zinfandel** pairs with beef, lamb, and spicy sausage. It's also recommended with spicy dishes and tomato sauce.

**White & Sparkling Wines 🥂**

* **Chablis** pairs well with oysters, green vegetables, and cheese.
* **Chardonnay** is a versatile wine that pairs with simple dishes, poultry, fish, cream sauce, green vegetables, and soft rich cheeses.
* **Gewürztraminer** pairs well with pork, shrimp, and Asian/Indian dishes.
* **Moscato** pairs with macadamia nuts and mascarpone cheese.
* **Muscat** is a good match for chocolate.
* **Pinot Grigio** pairs with BBQ dishes, salmon, shrimp, and soft rich cheeses.
* **Riesling** is recommended with pork, poultry, and spicy dishes. It also pairs with smoked turkey, crab, spicy meats, and cheeses like pepper jack and almonds.
* **Sauvignon Blanc** pairs well with shellfish, green vegetables, and cheese. It's also recommended with scallops, oysters, and lemon butter sauce.
* **Champagne** is a good pairing for caviar and spicy foods. It's also recommended with cheeses like parmesan and gouda.