

WINE OVERVIEW



FRANCE

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Closely review the syllabus for this wine level to determine just what items require your attention in each of the region/country overview documents.

France has enjoyed a long-standing reputation in the minds of wine drinkers, and is known to many as the source of the highest quality wines in the world. Whether one agrees with that assessment or not, France is unquestionably a major force, and is the spiritual home of many of the world's most popular varieties. France vies with only Spain and Italy in its area under vine, and these three countries battle annually for the title of largest volume producer. Many of the regions can claim a production history dating back to the Romans, and each individual region is steeped in its own historical traditions. Despite this, the French have also been global pioneers in the classification of wine, from the regional designations to the Cru system used in many regions to delineate quality of site.

As the global wine market has increased, the external demand for French wine has taken the place of the domestic market. Wine consumption in France is down as much as 40% from recent highs, due to the strengthening and enforcement of drunk-driving laws, increased availability of spirits, The Evin Law (prohibiting all advertising of alcohol), and simple generational preferences. While the upper tier of French wine, such as Classified Growth Bordeaux and Grand Cru Burgundy, have enjoyed continued overseas demand (largely from Asia, and especially from China), the rank-and-file producers have had to work much harder to find a competitive niche. The explosion of the Languedoc over the last 20 years has added a huge amount of export volume, making it more and more important for wineries and regions to produce quality and create demand.

One of the key concepts in French wine is the idea of "terroir", loosely translated as "sense of place". It is the notion that many factors impact the taste of the wine, and that the product should reflect the soil, the climate, the exposure, nearby vegetation, the air, and everything else surrounding the vineyard site.

Believers claim that this gives every French wine its own unique voice; detractors might claim that it has been a long time excuse for faulty winemaking. This idea of "terroir", and indeed the reputation of French wine in general, has been built on the best wines from the best regions. For a very long time, there have been producers who simply rode the coattails of the region, and regions that rode the coattails of the country. The global market is now such that a wine needs to stand on its own, and the educated, curious wine consumer is seeking out the wines that deliver interest and quality.

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FRENCH WINE LAW

A great many of the world's wine laws are modeled after the "Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée", or AOC, system that was created by the French in 1935. This system, which is run by an organization known as the INAO (Institut National des Appellations d'Origine), has set up designated production zones, grape varieties, and rules of production for each appellation. With the new EU regulations, all European wines are divided into two categories: Table wine and Quality Wine Produced in a Specific Region (QWPSR). There was also be a restructuring of the existing INAO classifications, completed in 2012.

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TABLE WINES

Vin de France. This replaces the old “Vin de Table” designation. Vin de Table allowed only the name of the producer and “Made in France”. The incoming Vin de France also allows the vintage year and the grape variety.

IGP (Indication Géographique Protégée). This essentially replaces the outgoing Vin de Pays designation. This will include a broad region such as the Languedoc or Herault, and require submission to a tasting panel. The regulations for IGP will be less strict than that of wines under the QWPSR category.

QWPSR

AOP (Appellation d’Origine Protégée). This is a replacement for the famous AOC, and will be the highest level of French Wine. Regulations for AOP may include geographic boundaries, yield limits, alcohol content, grape variety, and winemaking options.

It should be noted that the current VDQS (Vin Délimité de Qualité Supérieure) classification, which was considered to be something of a halfway zone between Vin de Pays and AOC, will no longer exist under the new system.

MAJOR VARIETALS OF FRANCE

REDS

Cabernet Sauvignon – The King of French grapes and a major component in the King of French Wines, Bordeaux. Full-bodied, intense, long-lived and powerful. Flavors are of dark berries, fig, and plums.

Merlot – The most common red varietal in Bordeaux; can run the gamut from light and astringent to brooding and deep. The best are full of dark red berry and supple tannins. The worst are little more than alcohol and dried cranberries. Grow throughout Southern France and a popular grape for Vin de Pays (now IGP).

Cabernet Franc – Still grown in important quantities in Bordeaux, where it adds structure and aromatics. Grown as a leading varietal in the Loire Valley, especially in the Anjou region of Chinon.

Petit Verdot – Less common now in Bordeaux than in years past, as more acreage is planted to Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot. Dark color, good extraction, and very intense.

Malbec – Almost gone now in Bordeaux, but still viable in the Southwest. The major component of Cahors.

Pinot Noir – Made all over France. Finicky and fickle, producing the very best and the very worst that France has to offer. Reaches incredible heights in the Côtes de Nuits in Burgundy, especially in the best Grand Cru vineyards. One of three varieties used in the production of Champagne. At its best, it is delicate, fragrant, subtly powerful, and ethereal. In the wrong hands or at the wrong site, it is light, acidic, and completely lacking of any redeeming qualities.

Gamay – Beaujolais, while part of Burgundy, grows the Gamay grape instead of Pinot Noir. Generally soft, fruity and quaffable, the best versions are much more powerful and complex, and represent some of the most under-rated wines in France.

Syrah – Synonymous with Shiraz, but almost never called that in France. Deep, dark, rich and powerful, this grape dominates the Northern Rhone Valley.



Cabernet Sauvignon



Petit Verdot

Grenache – The Southern Rhone counterpart to Syrah, although frequently blended there. Grenache exhibits the rustic, earthy qualities for which the Rhone is praised. Lighter in color than some other noble reds, but one of the most complex varietals on the planet.

Mourvedre – A classic blending grape over most of France, predominantly with Grenache in the Rhone. Darker of color and of fruit than Grenache, it lends density to the blend. Also the major grape in the red wines of Bandol, where the best have the weight of Bordeaux and the earthy complexities of the Rhone.

Carignan – Significant but minor blending component throughout the Southern Rhone, Southwest, and Languedoc. Dark black fruit, dark color, but rustic and uneven alone.

Cinsault – Significant but minor blending component throughout the southern Rhone, southwest, and Languedoc. Provides good yields even in hard vintages.

Pinot Meunier – One of the three grapes used in the production of Champagne, along with Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. Rarely seen bottled alone, or as a still wine.

WHITES

Chardonnay – Ubiquitous around the world, its spiritual home is here, in Burgundy. Dominant throughout Chablis, the Côte de Beaune, the Macon, and Côte Chalonnaise. Also a major grape for many Vin d’Pays producers. Full bodied but fairly neutral, Chardonnay reflects the region and the winemaking style of the producer. It has become the second most widely planted grape in the world, behind only Airén.

Sauvignon Blanc – One of two major whites in the Loire Valley, along with Chenin Blanc. Crisp, with firm acidity, it presents a distinct minerality in the Loire, where Sancerre and Pouilly-Fumé showcase the grape.

Riesling – Another popular international varietal, Riesling may be at its best and most distinct in Alsace. There it is frequently fermented fully dry, although syrupy sweet versions are produced in small quantities. Highly aromatic, weighty and intense.

Pinot Blanc – An aromatic varietal, seen most often in Alsace. Usually made dry, bright, and round.

Pinot Gris – Known in Italy as Pinot Grigio, the grape is a staple in Alsace, where it is also referred to as Tokay Pinot Gris. Lightly spicy, with solid minerality and plus weight.

Muscat – Fairly common in Alsace as a dry wine, Muscat also produces the classic dessert wine of the Rhone, as Muscat Beaume-de-Venise. Very aromatic, with natural richness and breadth.

Viognier – The classic white of Condrieu, in the Northern Rhone. This is perhaps the best area in the world for Viognier, where it has all the honeyed, floral aromatics, but can maintain vibrant acidity to counter the weight and richness. Also blended, in small amounts, with the regions Syrah, predominantly in the Côte Rôtie.

Semillon – A key component in white Bordeaux, where it is almost always blended with Sauvignon Blanc to add weight and depth.

Ugni Blanc – High yield variety that is used to produce a great quantity of pleasing quaffs around Gascogne and Southwest France. Light, bright and cheerful.

Muscadet – AKA Melon de Bourgogne, carries the coastal end of the Loire as Muscadet serve-et-maine, and is a likely underreported component in white Burgundy. Classic compliment to shellfish, but fairly neutral on its own. Frequently aged “sur-lie” to add complexity.

Chenin Blanc – Best known as Vouvray. Commonly exported as an off-dry to sweet wine, it produces some of the longest-lived whites in



Muscat

France when fermented dry by the best producers. Floral and bright, but with a round mouthfeel.

Colombard – High tonnage, non-descript grape used in many Vin de Table and Vin d’Pays wines.

Gewurztraminer – One of the most aromatic grapes. While this is usually found sweet in California,

REGIONS OF FRANCE

BORDEAUX

The region of Bordeaux is home to some of the most sought-after wines on earth. Prices of these wines, and many others in the region, rival those of any wine anywhere, driven by reputation and an emerging and wealthy Chinese market. The red grapes found here are Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Petit Verdot, and a small remaining bit of Malbec. The whites here are almost always blends of Sauvignon Blanc and Semilion. The gravel and sandy terrain located along the rivers provide the best situations for vineyards, and the best estates are found among the banks.

The majority of the demand and reputation of Bordeaux is centered on the “Classified Growths”, which are part of a system created in 1855 to determine the best chateaux in the Medoc (with one exception). This was based on the relative prices the wines commanded at the time. More than 50 properties were ranked, from First Growth to Fifth Growth. Since there were countless wines that were not classified at all, being included, even as Fifth Growth, was (and is) prestigious. Since 1855, the only changes made have been the addition of Cantemerle in 1856, the promotion of Mouton Rothschild from Second Growth to First Growth in 1973, and the removal of Third Growth Chateau Dubignon, which became part of another Third Growth estate, Chateau Malescot St-Exupery. Numerous estates have been renamed or split, with each maintaining its 1855 place. One notable quirk of the classification is that the place in the hierarchy is based not on the vineyards, but on the Chateau’s production, from wherever it may come. The five First Growths are Chateau Margaux, Chateau Lafite-Rothschild, Chateau Mouton Rothschild, Chateau Latour, and Chateau Haut-Brion.

“ **The region of Bordeaux is home to some of the most sought-after wines on earth.** ”

The region of Bordeaux is one of the country’s oldest producing regions, with records going back almost 2,000 years. The area is situated around the port city of Bordeaux, located on the West (left) bank of the Garonne River. North of the city, the Garonne joins the Dordogne to become the Gironde, which flows into the Atlantic. The sub-regions of Bordeaux are defined by these three rivers. Between the Dordogne and the Garonne lies the bulk region of Entre-du-mers, which figures very lightly. On the outside of those rivers, however, things are more interesting.



Vineyard of Bordeaux

The flagship of the region is the Medoc, the area on the west of the Garonne. This is what is known as the “Left Bank”, and is home to the most prominent properties in France. The heart of the Medoc is the Haut-Medoc, or “upper Medoc”. The areas outside of this core, once referred as the Bas-Medoc (lower Medoc), bristled at the implied lower quality level, and that area is now referred to simply as the Medoc. The Haut-Medoc consists of four major communes. From south to north; Margaux, St. Julien, Pauillac, and St. Estephe are home to all but one of the “Classified Growth” chateaux.

The East bank of the Dordogne (“The Right Bank”) hosts the famous regions of Pomerol and St. Emilion. The best producers here make some of the best Merlot-based wines in the world, and include the highly regarded Chateaux of Petrus, Le Pin, Ausone and Cheval Blanc. Many “Satellite” appellations surround these two flagships, including Laland-a-Pomerol and Fronsac. Cabernet Franc also has much more significance here than in other sub-regions.



On the West bank of the Garonne, and south of the city of Bordeaux, is Graves, home of Chateau Haut-Brion (which is located in Pessac-Leognan) and the world-class sweet wines of Sauternes. Haut-Brion is the only Chateau outside of the Medoc included in the Classification of 1855, and is in fact one of only five "First Growths" on that list. Sauternes, as well as the lesser known regions of Barsac and Cerons, are made from Sauvignon Blanc and Semilion grapes that have developed Botrytis Cinerea, or "Noble Rot", which acts as a desiccant, removing water and concentrating the remaining sugars.

Any discussion of the wines of France begins with Bordeaux. There is much to learn and understand about this region, and its importance to the history of the country cannot be overstated.

BURGUNDY

The broad region of Burgundy is actually quite a large area, from Chablis, near Champagne, in the North all the way down to Beaujolais, which is actually in the Department of the Rhone. The heart of the region lays in the middle, with the Chardonnay-heavy areas of the Macon and the Côte Chalonnaise sitting south of the Côte d'Or, the "Golden Slope" for which the region is so famed.

The Côte d'Or is quite small, only about 25 miles long and not much wider than a mile at points, but has had a massive impact on the world of wine. This is the home of Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, and some still claim that it produces the best of both anywhere in the world. It is also the most "terroir" driven region in all of wine. The Burgundians identify about 400 separate soil types in the area, and may differentiate many different sites in a single hectare. The concept of "Grand Cru" vineyards, or recognition of the best vineyard sites, is at its most dramatic here. Unlike Bordeaux, where the producer holds the classification, in Burgundy the vineyard is considered to be the most important, and all Grand Cru and Premier Cru sites will hold their own AOC (now AOP). As a result, Burgundy is home to more AOCs than any other region in France.

Many of the vineyards are tiny, and many also have had ownership splits throughout the generations. This has resulted in some vineyard-owners owning literally a row or two of vines in one small site, and as many

as 85 owners having a piece of a single vineyard. In turn, this spurred the emergence of the negociant; a middleman who accumulates enough production to bottle by purchasing small lots that would otherwise not be enough to produce commercially. A great many small owners sell all they are able to grow through these means, and the reputation of many negociants is quite high, especially for their Premier Cru and even Grand Cru bottlings.

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Chablis, in the far north, is closer to Champagne than to the rest of Burgundy. The soil here is limestone and clay based, with the best sites growing in Kimmeridgean soil, which is also heavy with fossilized oyster shells. A textbook Chablis will have a flinty, mineral driven feel, with less wood influence than the rest of Burgundian Chardonnay. Chablis is classified as AOC (AOP) Chablis, Chablis Premier Cru, or Chablis Grand Cru. There are only seven vineyards classified as Grand Cru, all side-by-side on one hillside. They are Bougros, Les Preuses, Vaudésir, Grenouilles, Valmur, les Clos and Blanchot. There is an eighth vineyard, le Moutonne, which being part of Les Preuses and Vaudésir, is entitled to claim Grand Cru status, although it is not officially listed as such.

Tucked below the southeast corner of Chablis are the emerging regions of Irancy (for Pinot Noir) and St. Bris (for the only Sauvignon Blanc allowed in Burgundy) are rarely found, but interesting.

The wines of the Macon and Côte Chalonnaise can run the gamut; from bland and boring (or worse) to some of the best values in Chardonnay (and Pinot Noir, in the Chalonnaise). The Macon is home to the highly regarded Pouilly-Fuissé and Vire-Clessé, as well as twenty plus other villages allowed to append their names to the broad “Macon” appellation. 90% or more of the Macon is planted to Chardonnay. The Côte Chalonnaise hosts Pinot-heavy Mercurey and Chardonnay-driven Montagny. Both these regions have a very high percentage of Premier-Cru vineyards.

Furthest south is Beaujolais. This is Gamay country, and can produce the best in the world, by almost any measurement. However, the production here is huge, more than all the rest of Burgundy combined, with the variance of quality one would expect. A vast ocean of Beaujolais is barely worth drinking, and the Beaujolais Nouveau bubble of the 1990’s drove the average quality down even further, as producers moved resources to supply the demand for the brand new, fruity and simple Nouveau, released shortly after harvest. With the bursting of that bubble and the passing of numerous scandals, one hopes for the return of high-quality production. There are ten “Cru Villages” that use the regional name instead of “Beaujolais” on the label. These villages or areas have the potential to produce wines of very high quality, sometimes even rivaling the Pinot Noir from the Côte de Nuits.

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CHAMPAGNE

Yes, Champagne is a place, not a style. Although many French regional names were pirated here in the US to promote cheap jug wine (think Burgundy and Chablis), nothing has caused more confusion among the buying public than the term "Champagne". Even today, the US makers of some very low quality products continue to use "Champagne" on the labels, although the EU has prohibited the practice. Thankfully, it is becoming more and more rare to find a conscientious sparkling wine producer anywhere in the world still using this intentionally misleading label term.

This very northern region sits at the limit (some would say past the limit) of possible viticulture. It is generally too cool to completely ripen even the Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Pinot Meunier grapes planted here. Most years the wines, if made normally, would be low in sugar, very high in acidity, and lacking color and balance. The presence of carbon dioxide in Champagne is actually a natural result of the climate. As the wines sat over the winter, the temperature would shut down fermentation, which restarted in the spring, often after the wines had been bottled. This common but unintentional carbonation caused havoc in the cellars of the Champenoise, and many of the contributions of Dom Perignon (who did not invent the process) were geared toward containing the inevitable bottle pressure.



Today the process created through generations of trial and error has made its way throughout the world, and almost all of the best sparkling wine in the world is made via the "Méthode Champenoise", although in deference to the region, most now use the term "Méthode Traditionelle".

Champagne has its own Cru classification; the villages are rated, nominally on a 100 point scale, but practically from 80% to 100%. As set up, vineyards were entitled to whatever percentage of the market price that that its village was rated. 100% rated sites therefore could charge more than 90% rated sites. Today there are 17 villages rated 100%, or Grand Cru. All are located in three regions; the Côte de Blancs (for Chardonnay), and the Valle de la Marne and Montagne de Reims (largely Pinot Noir and Pinot Meunier).

Most of the wines seen on store shelves and restaurant lists today are of the Non-Vintage variety. The producers commonly blend from several vintages to create "house style", that they can repeat year after year, ensure some continuity in this risky region. It is common for producers to skip vintages for some of their more prestigious cuvees.

As with Burgundy, many producers are buyers of grapes, and grow only a small percentage of their own production. There has been an emergence in the US of "Grower Champagnes", which are small producers who control their production from the ground up, and make small quantities of very high quality Champagnes, often from Grand Cru or Premier Cru (90-99% rated) vineyard sites.



ALSACE

Alsace is located on the German border west of Frankfurt, very near the great Riesling appellations of the Mosel. Accordingly, it produces some of the world's best Riesling, although most of it dry, as opposed to the sweeter version of Germany's Mosel and Rhinegau just to its east. Other aromatic varieties also thrive here; Pinot Blanc, Pinot Gris, Muscat and Gewurztraminer all are widely planted. There is very little red wine of note produced here.

Alsace is generally sunny and dry, being protected on the west by the Vosges Mountains, and the vineyards generally sit on the foothills overlooking the Rhine River beyond. There are many places along the north/south valley where one can find southern exposure, and many of the best "Grand Cru" vineyards can be found in these secondary valleys. The Grand Cru system in Alsace is relatively young, with the first vineyards so classified in 1975. More than 50 sites are now classified as Grand Cru in Alsace. There was no Vin d'Pays or Premier Cru appellation in Alsace.

There is also a significant, if small, production of late harvest wine in the region. Vendange Tardive (VT) wines are picked with a ripeness roughly equivalent to the German Auslese. Wines labeled "Sélection de Grains Nobles" (SGN) are from grapes affected by botrytis.

RHONE

The Rhone Valley may be thought of as at least two separate regions, the Northern Rhone and the Southern Rhone. The North is dominated by Syrah, while Grenache and Grenache blends rule the South. White wine production is more similar, with Marsanne, Rousanne, and Viognier found in both areas.

The Northern Rhone is made up of several well-known regions, and produces some of the most intense wines in France, despite being cooled by "le Mistral" wind, which blows cool and dry through the area. While only Cornas dictates that Syrah alone be used in its AOC production, in practice all the AOCs except Côte Rôtie (whose producers commonly blend in a small percentage of Viognier) follow this model. While the less frequently seen AOCs of St. Joseph and Croze-Hermitage have the ability to make very good wines, the Northern Rhone's best come from the Hermitage and Côte Rôtie AOCs. There are also two AOCs that permit only Viognier; Condrieu and the monopole AOC Chateau-Grillet.

The Southern Rhone, in addition to producing the vast majority of Côte du Rhone (most of the plantings in the North are permitted to use a better AOC), is the home of the famous Chateauneuf-du-Pape, so named due to its proximity to Avignon, which housed the Papacy in the fourteenth century. This appellation famously allows up to 13 different grapes to be used, eight red and five white. In practice, however, most are made from some combination of Grenache, Syrah, Mourvedre, Carignan and Cinsault. Other appellations of note for red wine are Gigondas and Vacqueyras. Tavel produces very pretty Rosé, and Muscat de Beaumes de Venise produces a famous fortified wine (vin doux naturel or VDN).

PROVENCE

South of the Rhone to Marseille, and east past Toulon, lies the region of Provence, famous for its light and the painters and other artists that it has drawn over the centuries. This Mediterranean area was home to Greeks and Roman settlements, and dates its winemaking history back to at least 600 BC. As with the similarly multicultural Languedoc, the area is planted to a wide variety of different grapes.

Although there are currently eight AOCs in Provence, by far the most famous is Bandol. The AOC rules dictate 50% of a blend must be Mourvedre, but most producers use a significantly higher percentage. The Rosé from Bandol has developed a reputation as one of the best in France, and indeed the Rosés from Provence in general have a very high reputation, producing light-colored but very complex wines.

Also of note is Cassis, a beautifully colorful seaside town that produces a small quantity of very complex white wine, made from a mix of Clairette, Marsanne, Ugni Blanc and Sauvignon Blanc. Much of this production is quaffed at one of the many harborside cafes, where they are the perfect accompaniment to the mussels and other shellfish that arrive daily in the many small fishing boats.

LOIRE

The Loire is a huge region, stretching from the coast west of Nantes more than halfway across France, nearly abutting Chablis in the east. Due to the scattered nature of the appellations within, especially as you go east, there is actually less acreage under vine than in Bordeaux. As one would expect from such a wide area, there are many distinct climates, soil types, exposures, and grape varieties along its length.



The four broad regions inside the Loire are:

- Pays Nantais on the coast, with mostly white wines that are classic accompaniments for seafood and shellfish. Muscadet Sevre-et-Maine is the most famous example, produced from the Melon de Bourgogne grape.
- Anjou-Saumur, next along the river, is somewhat of a mini-Loire, in that most of the grapes and styles of the Loire as a whole can be found in this one smaller area. Cabernet Franc is grown around Anjou, bottled both as Red and Rosé. Chenin Blanc runs the spectrum, from the fragrant dry wines of Savennieres to the Botrytised versions in the Côteaux de Layon, notably the AOCs of Quarts de Chaume and Bonnezeaux.
- Touraine, situated around the town of Tours, contains two of the most famous AOCs in the Loire. Chinon is the home of Cabernet Franc, and produces some of the highest quality found in France. Vouvray, long known for its sweet, cloying exports, is capable of turning out delicious, balanced, and extraordinarily long-lived versions from the underrated Chenin Blanc grape.
- Furthest east we get to Sauvignon Blanc country, and the AOCs of Sancerre and Pouilly-Fumé are renowned for their flinty, stony qualities. There is also some Pinot Noir here, mostly left over from the Duchy of Burgundy's long time control over the area.

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SOUTHWEST FRANCE

The Southwest of France contains a patchwork of largely unrelated regions, producing a wide variety of grapes and styles. From Bergerac in the North, which sits east of Bordeaux (and grows similar grapes), down through Gascony and south to Basque Country on the Spanish border, one can find almost any style of wine represented. There are a few regions of note:

- Bergerac, which straddles the Dordogne River east of Bordeaux, shows the influence of its more famous neighbor. Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Sauvignon Blanc and Semilion are all common here, and even the wines of Sauternes are mimicked, although in a much lighter style, in the AOC of Monbazillac.
- Following another of Bordeaux's rivers, the region of Cahors lays upstream on the Garonne. Here we find a remnant; Malbec, all but gone now in Bordeaux, has taken root here, and is locally known as Côt. A minimum of 70% Malbec, with Merlot and Tannat is also allowed.
- Madiran, in Gascony, is a red-wine-only AOC. The dominant grape here is Tannat, and the wines of Madiran are generally full bodied and intense. Although the current AOC regulations dictate 40-60% Tannat, with the remainder consisting largely of Cabernet Franc and Cabernet Sauvignon, it is not at all uncommon to see the wines being made with a much higher percentage of Tannat. Until the recent emergence of Uruguay, this was one of the few places in the world bottling wines from this powerful grape.
- At the very bottom of the country, in Berne and Basque country, are the minor, but interesting appellations of Jurançon and Irouléguay. Irouléguay grows similar red grapes to Madiran, although the wines generally are less dark and inky. Also allowed, however, is the production of white wine. The dominant grapes for white production in both Irouléguay and Jurançon are Gros Manseng and Petit Manseng. These are generally sweet, being harvested late, and have distinct tropical aromatics.

JURA/SAVOY

The eastern regions of Jura and Savoy are rarely seen, but their uniqueness merits mention. The Jura, almost on the Swiss border, produces two wines of note; Vin Jaune, made in a manner very similar to that of Sherry, and Vin de Paille, or Straw Wine, in which the grapes are laid out on straw mats to desiccate, resulting in concentrated sugars and a resulting sweet, viscous wine. The local Savagnin grape factors heavily in both styles.

The Savoy, if less distinctive in style, may have some of the most unique varietals in all of France. Almost everything grown here is a local grape. In this alpine region there is a small amount of Pinot Noir and Pinot Gris, but the bulk of the acreage is planted to grapes such as Jacquère, Altesse, Gringet and Mondeuse.

LANGUEDOC - ROUSSILLON

The broad area of Languedoc-Roussillon sits along the Mediterranean coast, just to the west of Marseille, and was planted around 500 BC, not long after those of neighboring Provence, making this region one of the oldest wine regions in the country. Similarly, the frequency in which the coastal Mediterranean was conquered and settled makes the region a mixing bowl of grape varieties and winemaking styles. Almost all the wines produced as regional wines are blends, sometimes of many varietals. There has been a movement over the last decade or two in the direction of varietal labeling, as international producers such as Mondavi and Gallo have marketed the cheap, high production wines to the American customer.

The region itself is massive, the largest in France, if not the world. Production is also very high, as many of the vines planted over the years were selected for their high yield and with little thought toward quality. For many, many years, the local products were blended with wines from the French-controlled Algeria, in order to bulk up the light, thin native product. It has only been recently that the vigneronns have attempted to reclaim the mantle of quality.

“ The region itself is massive, the largest in France, if not the world. Production is also very high, as many of the vines planted over the years were selected for their high yield and with little thought toward quality. ”



The soils in Roussillon are heavily laden with a rich, red clay.

The Vin de Pays d'Oc appellation covers the entire region, but with the move to higher quality, more distinctive wines has come a bewildering array of overlapping AOCs. Some, like Minervois, Corbieres, Fitou, and Saint-Chinian (all of which claim Carignan as the leading varietal) have remained unchanged though the years. Others have changed blend requirements, added sub-regions, changed borders, or in the case of Costieres de Nimes, been removed entirely from the Languedoc and added to the department of the Rhone. In most cases, one can assume that the grapes from Bordeaux, the Rhone, Burgundy (mostly Chardonnay), and Southwest France are viable varieties.

One notable AOC is Limoux, which claims to be the region that first produced sparkling wine. Crémant de Limoux is made with Chardonnay, Chenin Blanc, and the local Mauzac, and is fermented in the bottle in the "Méthode Traditionnelle". Blanquette de Limoux is Mauzac-based, and is considered to be closer to the original product created by the monks in the abbey of Saint-Hilaire, in 1531.

There is also a famous dessert wine made here. Banyuls AOC sits on the Spanish border, and is a Grenache based vin du naturel. It generally runs around 16% alcohol, and its barrels are often left out in the sun to promote maderization and color extraction.