



WINE GUIDE

FRENCH WINE HISTORY



French wine has its roots in ancient history. The ancient Greeks took their knowledge of wine from the Egyptians, for whom wine was of great importance. The Romans perfected the wine making skills of the ancient Greeks, adopted barrels and spread the vines across their empire. They planted vines along their routes, in the valley of Garonne, Rhone, Burgundy, the Loire Valley, Champagne and Alsace, with considerable production and export in other countries as well.

With the fall of the Roman Empire around the year 500, vines were to fall into oblivion, however the monks soon took over and further perfected winemaking techniques. In the 12th Century, Bordeaux found its place through the English importers.

More recently the nature of French wine was altered, first with the 1860's Phylloxera, and later through the guarantees of rigorous AOC standards.



FRENCH WINE BY REGION



Champagne

The name itself is used to denote sparkling wines created through particular production methods. This northern area has many small growers who produce great wine. The three grapes used are Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and significantly Pinot Meunier.



Chablis

Synonymous for white wine made from Chardonnay grapes, Chablis is part of Bourgogne, although further northeast. In the old times production was much higher than today. Chablis is a well known wine in the UK.



Loire Valley

The Loire, famous for its white wines, should be understood through the interesting grape varieties and traditions that have sprung up along the river from Nantes to Sancerre. The Loire produces the whole range: sweet wines, rosé, light reds and ageing red wines at fairly low prices.



Bordeaux

Bordeaux is a large, temperate region, known for its soil structure which is influenced by the Atlantic Ocean. Wines range from ordinary quality to some of the most expensive wines in the world. Its famous wines are classified by the different classification systems: Médoc, Graves, Saint-Émilion and the Crus Bourgeois. The majority of wine produced is red, grown from Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc and Petit Verdot. Sémillon and Sauvignon Blanc are used for white.



Southwest

This region has long been producing quality wines and is made up of many interesting sub-regions, Cahors, Fronton, Gaillac, Jurancon, Madiran.



Languedoc-Roussillon

This is a very hot wine growing region in the South, made up of Languedoc and Roussillon. Both areas have their own appellation, but the Vin de Pays d'OC are increasingly popular.



Alsace

Alsace, bordering Germany, is dominated by white grapes, with the exception of Pinot Noir. It is an AOC area where the grape can be displayed as the main description on the bottle, as in other countries. It is famous for its Gewurztraminer and Riesling wines, bottled in unique bottles.



Beaujolais

Beaujolais is characterised by its light and fruity wines from Gamay, with 'Beaujolais Nouveau' being sold in large quantities each year all over the world.



Provence

This is one of the oldest wine growing regions of France, known for the red wines of sunny and respected Bandol, and, more significantly in terms of area, the rosé wines of Provence itself.



Jura-Savoie

Jura is a wine region near Switzerland with a similar climate to Burgundy. It is most famous for its Vin Jaune, which can and needs to age incredibly long. Savoie produces mainly white wines, often to be drunk young. Savoie is located in the Alpine region and has many local grapes, such as Jacquère.



Bourgogne

Although equally as famous as Bordeaux, this fragmented area is much smaller, therefore with much lower production quantities. Pinot Noir is the dominant grape variety together with Chardonnay. The delicate aromas of Pinot Noir are often enjoyed from a specially shaped glass.



Rhone

The Rhone area is often divided into two regions, the north and the south, though both are red wine regions. The cooler north produces fine reds from Syrah, while the southern wines are often mixed with Grenache, Carignan, Cinsault and others, as often shown by the famous Chateauneuf-du-Pape.



Vin de Pays

Traditionally higher priced wines have been AOC wines, where the producers are clearly labelled. Vin de Pays wines can offer very good value, as they too must adhere to a specific location and certain grapes, however they are increasingly popular as they can be labelled by grape variety. Vin de Pays exist around these and all other regions of France, giving the winemaker flexibility. Vin de Table is the lowest classification, but can also bring value through undervalued wines, such as natural wines.



A WINEMAKER'S YEAR

Below is the yearly cycle of a French winemaker, showing the 'double-work' needed. The colour of the wine depends on the grape skins used. Therefore white grapes are usually used to make white wine, whereas red wine or rosé wine is made from red grapes. The colour is determined by the time that the grape juice is in contact with the skins, which also gives wine its tannins.

Jan- Feb

Vines in the vineyard are pruned to increase the quality of the coming year's harvest. The timing of the pruning will affect spring growth and early pruned vines are at risk of frost damage.

Mar- Apr

Beginning in March, buds will break at different times depending on location, weather and variety, after which the shoots will start to grow. Ploughing the vineyard will also take place in the early months of the year. A few months after initial bud break, the small clusters of unpollinated 'grapes' will emerge. Wine is moved from one container to another to separate it from its lees. Topping up will continue.

May- Jun

Flowering takes place in the early summer months, transforming the initial clusters into small grapes. Flowering is crucial in determining the year's growth. Warm, stable weather is hoped for during this period, as cold weather, frost and rain can cause low yields and complications. Winemakers can deal with frost by using heaters, but hail storms could be very severe in reducing the crop. Wines are bottled throughout the spring.

Jul- Aug

During the summer, the vineyards need to be taken care of and sprayed. As the grapes grow, shoots are pruned and need to be positioned to let air and sunlight into the grapes. During the growing process a "green-harvest" can be used to cut some grapes, reducing yield and increasing quality in the remaining grapes. Throughout the summer the grapes grow and as they ripen in August they change colour, this is called "veraison". While the grapes ripen, acids will decrease and sugar content will increase. The cellar is kept cool during the hot summer months and some wines can be racked again. Before the autumn harvest arrives, the wines in the cellar will need to be moved to make space for the new harvest.

Sep- Oct

As the harvest approaches, the winemakers watch the weather closely, hoping for dry weather, as rain or storms could destroy the harvest and cause complications such as fungal disease. The grapes are then picked based on physiological ripeness, sugar content, pH and acid level. The picking can be done manually or by machine, although manual harvesting has its advantages. The grapes are usually ripe to be picked between September and October depending on grape variety and weather. The difficult decision for the winemaker is whether to pick earlier before the grapes are at their ripest or to wait and risk bad weather leading up to harvest. The grapes are quickly transported to the winery. At this time all the required equipment needs to be clean and in place. As the grapes arrive in the winery, they are sorted, transferred to vats and the alcoholic fermentation process is started. (The winery may need to work around the clock). When the grapes have been placed in the vats, the skins need to be punched down 1-2 times a day. Maceration can be used to extract colour and tannins from the skins. A wine press is used to extract more juice from the grapes. Throughout the coming months the vintner needs to decide what type of wine will be made from the harvest.



Nov- Dec

Leaves change colour and unpicked grapes can stay on the vines unless they will be used to make sweet wine. The vines become dormant for the winter period. In the months leading up to winter the wines can be transferred to barrels, while the malolcatic process starts, converting malic acid into lactic acid, which is less sour. Similarly, as yeast can be added for primary fermentation, malolactic bacteria can be added, although the process would start naturally. These processes vary for white wines.







WINE TYPES

FRENCH RED WINE BRIEFLY

Colour

The colour changes much with age and also reflects the 'health' of the wine. Ideally it should be bright and clear, however sediment can be normal in old wine. Below are some examples of wine colour in red wines.

-  Thick skinned grapes such as Cabernet Sauvignon give intensely coloured wines. Examples could be Bordeaux or South of France.
-  Young wine or fruity, light reds. Typical for Beaujolais.
-  Pinot Noir grapes give a lighter colour, such as Burgundy.
-  Aged wine turns brown. A brown colour could denote a fault in a young wine.

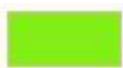



Smell

The smell should be clean and preferably intense. If not this could mean the wine is too young, too old or too cold.

FRENCH WHITE WINE BRIEFLY

Colour

Below are some examples of white wine colours and what they indicate.

-  Young wine or could be good acidity in a better wine
-  Young wine, or light, medium-bodied dry wine
-  Older, sweeter, or full-bodied with lots of flavour ('ready to drink')
-  Darker colours can signify a sweet wine such as a Sauternes

Smell

The smell of flowers and fresh fruit can signify a young wine and ripe fruit that is ready to drink.



Faults

If the wine smells of nail varnish, humid socks or has a musty smell, it could be spoiled. Some causes of faults include corked wine (contaminated), excess heat or dirty barrels in winemaking. If a wine is 'closed' or smells of cabbage, it might need 'to breathe'. An oxidized wine could turn brownish and lose its taste, while white wines can taste of coffee or resin. Excess use of sulphur can result in an unpleasant match-like smell, especially in white wines.

Organic Wine

The term 'Organic Wine' can be used to describe wines made using organically grown grapes. These wines are often identifiable from the label shown here. Truly Organic? The certification mainly applies to the grapes, not the winemakers techniques, additives used, or methods applied to transform the grapes into wine.

Natural Wine

Natural Wine is taking organic one step further, so wines which are made with the least possible use of technology, chemicals, or additives. The idea in natural wine is to let the grapes express themselves and their location. Therefore naturally these wines are 'only' produced by small growers and the already small winemakers have increased risks due to the non-manipulative ideology. This is the extreme case where one can truly see that wine is not a manufactured product. In the extreme case natural wines are made without any sulphur, although often it is added at bottling.

Biodynamic Wine

With Biodynamic wines the consumer can be sure that the winemaker is truly making organic wine. Biodynamics is an increasing trend in the wine world based on the philosophy of organic agriculture, where the farm is a whole organism and the growing is synchronized with nature and timed by stars. The use of compost and other natural products is emphasized, which should be better for nature as well as result in better tasting wines.



GRAPES

Tasting wines is the obvious enjoyment of wines and using words to describe all of the different flavours can be difficult. In tasting wines, people often refer to such factors as acidity, tannins, bitterness or sweetness. Further elements such as structure, complexity and balance are evaluated.

However tastes are ultimately a question of preference and the idea in this section is to remind consumers of the most common flavours associated with the grapes. For more accurate tastes of each wine, especially those attributed to wine-making techniques, please consult the wine-growers.

SERVING SUGGESTIONS

Wine Serving Temperature



Wine serving temperature is important in bringing out the best in the wine. Although the traditional rule is to serve white wine chilled and red wine at room temperature, it is worth being careful as to the type of wine and also what is meant by 'chilled' or 'room temperature', especially in today's heated homes.

In general, warmer wines will bring out more of the natural smell and colder wines will highlight the acidity. Structure and complexity will also be affected.

Examples by Style and Region

Sparkling wines and some sweet wines ('moelleux', 'liquoreux') can be served chilled, at 4-7 C

Half-dry white and sweeter whites can be served chilled, at 7-9 C

Alsace Riesling and Gewurztraminer, Loire sweet wines, Vin Doux Naturel, Champagne.

Dry white wines and Rosé 8-10 C

Bordeaux white, Chablis, Sancerre, and Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc grapes. South-East and Languedoc-Roussillon whites and rosé can be served at the colder end, at around 8 C

Light Fruity Reds, some White and Rosé 10-12 C

Beaujolais, Rhone white and Cotes de Provence rosé.

Medium Reds 14-16 C

Red wines of Burgundy, Rhone, Bourgueil, Chinon, Provence and Languedoc-Roussillon. Young Burgundy and Chinon could be served slightly cooler.

Full Reds 16-18 C

Older Bordeaux and some Rhone wines.

Older wines can be served slightly warmer, but not more than 20 C



FOOD PAIRING WITH FRENCH WINE

Fish

Grilled Fish: Dry white wine, rosé.

Fish: In general dry rich white wine. Chablis and Sancerre go well with white fish. A richer, sweeter wine can go well with fish in a creamy sauce; the sauce as well as the fish type is key. Darker fish can even go with a light red.



Smoked Fish: Aromatic wines, for example an Alsace Riesling.

Red Meats

Red Meat: Stronger red wine, with much tannin, although fruity wines are a match as well. Chinon, Bourgeil, Northern Cote du Rhone, or St-Estéphene Bordeaux. Cahors go well with roast beef. Alsace Riesling.



Lamb: More subtle, fruity red wine, for example Pessac-Léognan, Beaune, St-Joseph.

Game: Rich red wines, for example Pommard, Chateauneuf-du-Pape, Gevrey-Chambertin, Gigondas, Pauillac

White Meat

White Meat: Lighter, fruity reds such as Beaujolais, traditionally Chablis or Sauvignon Blanc



Other Foods

Barbecues in general: Rosé, Merlot.

Oysters: Muscadet, Chablis, Loire sparkling wines.

Foie Gras: Sauternes recently, in the old times Burgundy was served with foie gras.



Wine Pairing with French cheese

Pressed Cheese: Dry white wine or light red.

Goats Cheese: Sancerre, Pouilly Fumé or other Sauvignon Blanc.

Strong Cheese: Spicy white wine, for example Gewurztraminer or stronger red wines such as Chateauneuf-du-Pape or Cote-Rotie.





Soft Cheese: Acidic white wines work well with soft creamy cheese. Sauvignon Blanc or Pouilly Fumé.

Roquefort: Sweet white wine such as Sauternes.

When to drink

Young wines can taste better served before old wines, while white wine is commonly served before red wine. Burgundy, Beaujolais and Loire wines are often best served before Bordeaux, Languedoc or Cotes du Rhone (softer before stronger).