

Why now is a great time to buy (French) wine

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In all my unthinkably many years writing about wine, I cannot think of a better time to buy French wine. The reason is simple: the outstanding quality of 2005 reds and 2006 whites, the two vintages coming on to shelves now and likely to be the easiest to find over the coming months. I find it difficult to remember any other such example of a superlative red wine vintage's being followed by a thoroughly successful one for white wines. And 2005 is so wonderfully successful practically across the board in every French wine region and so homogeneous even among usually lesser quality wines, that I strongly suggest you make hay while this particularly glorious sun shines.

The 2006 whites seem to have the freshness that was lacking in some 2005 whites. The earlier-picked white wine grapes were presumably less affected by the September rains that caused rot problems just before the red wine harvest in many areas. The Loire 2006 whites seem to have been particularly successful and I was terribly impressed even by the humble **Waitrose Muscadet de Sèvre et Maine 2006** which sells for just £3.99 a bottle. It was made by Les Grands Chais de France's winemaker Serge de Bucy with input from my fellow Master of Wine Angela Muir and the same team have also come up with a particularly racy- yet- fruity **Champeloup Sauvignon de Touraine 2006** (£4.99 Waitrose only). The same retailer's **Saumur Blanc, Les Andides 2006**, also just £4.99, shows that the Loire's Chenin Blanc grapes did well in 2006 too – and Waitrose's **Saumur Rouge, Les Nivières 2005** also at £4.99 nicely proves my point about 2005 reds, even if their **Domaine de la Croix de Chaintres 2005 Saumur Champigny** from Filiatreau is worth the extra £3 a bottle.

Marks & Spencer have noticed a substantial increase in demand for Loire Sauvignon Blanc and have considerably increased their range. Best value by far is their **Sauvignon de Touraine 2006** from Jacky Marteau (whose Gamay reds are better than most). This Sauvignon Blanc at £5.99 has crackling green fruit flavours, real density of fruit and good tension – another good wine for drinking before meals or on a particularly hot day. M&S buyers have been snooping around the less well known appellations in the greater Sancerre/ Pouilly Fumé area – presumably hoping to find better value than these two famous names. I found their Quincy 2006 at £7.99 a little dilute but the **Château Gaillard 2006 Reuilly** is delicious and certainly worth £8.99 with its sleek build and fruit that spreads right across the palate.

Emmanuel Delaille, Le Vieux Clos 2006 Cheverny is an absolutely stunning white Loire bargain, especially if two bottles are bought at Majestic where the price comes down from £6.49 to £5.99 a bottle (the price at which Waitrose were selling the 2004 vintage of this wine two years ago). This Sauvignon, given ballast by a little Chardonnay, is excitingly smoky with great structure and real zest. It would make a lovely aperitif.

I have already raved about the quality of white bordeaux in 2006 and Waitrose can field a particularly keenly priced example at £6.49 in **Château St-Jean-des-Graves 2006 Bordeaux Blanc** made from hand-picked Sauvignon and Sémillon and heavily influenced by lees-stirring. As usual, what's good for Bordeaux is good for the next door region Bergerac. Luc de Conti, responsible for much of the revival of the wines of the Dordogne, should be proud of his **Cuvée des Conti 2006 Bergerac Blanc** (£7.04 Caves de Pyrène). It's based on Sémillon grapes (which here have real Sauvignon Blanc-like zest) but is given extra interest by its 20 per cent of Muscadelle, a grape which does particularly well, especially for sweet wines, in Bergerac. "From now on I'm going to put some Muscadelle in all my white wines," de Conti told me recently.

Another highly successful 2006 white containing Muscadelle as well as Sauvignon Blanc and Sémillon is Patricia Atkinson's **Clos d'Yvigne, Princesse de Clèves 2006 Bergerac Blanc** which seems to me underpriced at £6.99 chez Majestic. It has the most admirably satiny texture with really lovely, interesting fruit and a kick at the end that's almost like a sort of flirtatious picking up of a heel – perhaps the Muscadelle provides this?

One truly exceptional French white 2006 is unlike any other wine at the price, **Domaine Lafage, Cuvée Centenaire 2006 Côtes du Roussillon Blanc** which Waitrose is now selling at £6.99. It's based on hundred-year-old Grenache Blanc vines grown on the plains round Perpignan, has some Roussanne and Macabeu and is chock full of flavour. Some of it was even barrel fermented. This is the least expensive way I can think of to taste some of the excitement of the new generation of French Catalan dry whites. More sophisticated examples such as **Le Soula** and **Matassa** are well into double digit prices per bottle although **La Saoulette 2006** is the baby, unoaked version of Le Soula Blanc and great value at £70 a dozen in bond form A&B Vintners. Watch out too for a version beginning with T from The Wine Society coming soon.

As for reliable 2005 French reds, we are almost spoilt for choice. Even Tesco's own label southern Rhône are exceptional, and £5.99 seems a particularly ridiculous (ly low) price for **Tesco Finest Vacqueyras 2005** from Les Celliers de Beauregard which has all the spice and richness that typify this well-priced answer to Châteauneuf-du-Pape.

Marks & Spencer's own label **Crozes Hermitage 2005** at £7.99 from the admirable Cave de Tain also shows the exceptional combination of ripeness and balance that characterises this vintage. There's none of the burnt rubber and black pepper character that sometimes mar the perfume of an underripe northern Rhône Syrah. While there is no shortage of tannin, and this wine should keep going for at least another two or three years, it's the sumptuous savoury fruit that dominates a wine surely expressly made for drinking with roast beef.

But M&S's real red 2005 bargain is **Château du Parc 2005 Coteaux du Languedoc**, at £5.49 a sort of poor man's Bandol. Not only is this intriguing wine made of 40% Mourvèdre, the difficult-to-ripen grape of Bandol, plus Syrah and Grenache, it also comes from vines that have been organically cultivated since 1990.

Also from the Languedoc, although in this case very obviously dominated by the Syrah grapes responsible for the Crozes Hermitage, **Château de Camplazens, Syrah 2005 Vin de Pays d'Oc** is excellent value at £5.49 (if two bottles are bought) from Majestic. Its successor, the 2006, has just been voted best red Vin de Pays available in the UK but this 2005 has really direct jazzy appeal, no shortage of glossy, fully ripe Syrah character and is absolutely ready to gulp now.

Waitrose is moving on to 2005s in its lesser red bordeaux and grander red burgundy ranges. A particularly fine example of the latter is **Domaine de la Vougeraie, Les Petits Noizons 2005** Pommard at £31 from what is now a biodynamically cultivated estate, even if it no longer has Pascal Marchand at the helm. Towards the other end of the supermarket price range is the fairly priced and rather naughtily named claret **Château Le Pin 2005 Bordeaux Rouge** at £6.99. Not the world-famous Le Pin of Pomerol, this is a rather more humble wine based on Merlot and with no oak influence at all. Nevertheless the fruit is very mouth-filling and satisfying and the wine would be ideally suited to those who appreciate the appetising structure of a fully ripe red bordeaux. The alcohol level is 'just' 13 per cent.

For ratings of hundreds of 2005 French reds see [tasting notes](#).