

Burgundy

19 Aug 2008 by Jancis Robinson

In a nutshell: Small, expensive, infuriating, complicated region that delivers paradise in a bottle with increasing frequency.

Main grapes: Pinot Noir and some Gamay (red), Chardonnay and some Aligoté (white).

Burgundy is *Bourgogne* in French (the source of many a misunderstanding). Although for many people Burgundy/*Bourgogne* is synonymous with the heartland of this medieval kingdom, the **Côte d'Or**, greater Burgundy also encompasses the **Côte Chalonnaise** and the **Mâconnais** to the south and the quite distinct subregions of **Beaujolais** even further south (stretching almost into the suburbs of Lyons) and **Chablis**, the white wine district a good hour's drive north-west of Beaune, Burgundy's wine capital. With its gothic gables and steep, scalloped roofs, the town of Beaune is Burgundy's most obvious tourist attraction, but the heart of most wine villages still looks remarkably unchanged since the Middle Ages when the Dukes of Burgundy ran the region as a rich, self-governing state.

Unlike France's other famous wine region Bordeaux, Burgundy is still a land of peasant farmers. Today, thanks to the boom in fine wine sales that started in the 1970s, many of them are peasant farmers who eat in three-star restaurants and have a Mercedes in the garage, but their mentality is that of a smallholder - and some holdings are very small indeed. There could hardly be a greater contrast in social climate between Burgundy and Bordeaux, France's two premier wine regions. While most famous Bordeaux wine estates are large and centred on a grand château inhabited only rarely by their absentee owners, Burgundy's most famous vineyards are in the hands of the men who work them. They may have a peasant's wariness of outsiders, but to people they have come to know and trust they offer the true hand of friendship - and innumerable samplings. Land that qualifies for one of Burgundy's better appellations is so valuable that it rarely passes out of the family but is generally part of a complex inheritance system which requires all property to be shared equally among the children.

Until the second half of the 20th century, most of Burgundy's vine-growers would sell their grapes to the region's powerful merchants, or *négociants*, who could then assemble reasonable quantities of wine under each appellation to be sold under their own name. The late-20th-century fashion for demonstrable authenticity changed all this, however. Demand for domaine-bottled burgundy carrying the stamp of one grower-winemaker-bottler means that the consumer has the choice of the following sorts of wine, all possibly made from the same small vineyard:

1 A négociant-bottled blend of produce from several different growers, which can vary from the cynically dire to the extremely competent as, for example, with Bouchard Père et Fils, Joseph Drouhin, Louis Jadot, and a host of newer, much smaller enterprises, an increasing number of them owned by vine-growers themselves.

2 A négociant-bottled wine made exclusively from the négociant's own vineyards. This is an increasingly important phenomenon. Bouchard Père et Fils and Faiveley have particularly significant vineyard holdings of their own.

3 A domaine-bottled wine made by a vine-grower who also happens to be a good, sometimes excellent, winemaker.

4 A domaine-bottled wine made by a vine-grower who isn't terribly good at making wine.

5 An newish and increasingly important category - a wine made by a talented winemaker who owns his or her own vineyards but also buys in fruit from fellow growers. These are effectively small-scale négociants whose wines may be just as artisanally made as the finest domaine bottling.

See [Burgundy Wines](#) for more information on this region.