# France: introduction

20 Aug 2008 by Jancis Robinson

France has an extraordinary, and in many ways extremely difficult, position in the world of wine. To many of us, France is wine, and a certain sort of wine, not always the easiest to appreciate but often the most rewarding.

France makes more wine than any other country except Italy, which sometimes wins the race for quantity but only in certain quarters comes near in terms of quality. France supplies the benchmarks by which almost all wines are judged. This perfectly temperate and varied climate and landscape can supply wines of virtually every style. Its finest red bordeaux sets a standard for the world's Cabernet Sauvignons. The millions and millions of Chardonnay vines planted around the globe owe their existence to white burgundy - just as their Pinot Noir equivalents depend on someone's memory of a great red burgundy. The produce of the Champagne region in the north east provides a model for every single bottle of dry fizz, no matter where it is made. The Rhône valley supplies deep, rich reds while the Loire is better known for pinks and whites of all degrees of sweetness and fizziness. The vine dominates the Mediterranean hinterland in a swathe of vineyards across southern France which are capable of producing almost 10 per cent of the entire planet's wine output. Only Germany's wines ignore the French tradition. The French even produce their own answer to port (Banyuls) and sherry (vin jaune).

It has been difficult, however, for France to come to grips with the modern, fiercely competitive, tirelessly iconoclastic and innovative wine world. The problem is that the average French wine producer simply cannot understand any criticism of his (and most are male) wines. He is so imbued with the notion of terroir, the belief that his wine can be produced only from his patch of land, in a way enshrined in the all-important AC regulations (see below), and that he is really only a human instrument of the unique expression of that land, that he finds it difficult to understand the New World's unfettered winemakers, many of whom see man as the most important, controlling factor in wine production.

Complacency has slowed winemaking improvements in France, but the great change in French wine producers since the last generation is that virtually all of them now have some formal training and understanding of why, as well as how, they do what they do. And most of them now travel to other wine-producing countries as well, which must be a good thing for us all.

There is a broad difference in style between French wines and New World wines which reflects the relative reputations of the two. The French feel that they don't need to woo the wine drinker with obviously fruity wines designed to be drunk as soon as they are bottled. Instead, they tend to make wines for the medium and long term, in the restrained style of their forebears, so that the average French wine will probably take more effort to appreciate than its New World counterpart but may well repay that effort and will almost certainly last longer.

The French themselves see wine as an important part of their heritage, but are drinking less and less of it. The generation which took a daily litre of rough red for granted is rapidly being replaced by one to whom quality is much more important than quantity. Total wine sales in France are not helped either by the fact that the French have only rarely drunk wine without food - although they have an unusual fondness for sweet drinks such as port, sauternes and Muscats before meals.

See also Understanding French labels.