Understanding French labels

20 Aug 2008 by Jancis Robinson

AC, appellation contrôlée, France's principal and much-imitated quality designation system, devised to protect producers from imitators and to guarantee authenticity to consumers. More than a third of all French wine and all of its best wine is AC, sometimes called AOC or appellation d'origine contrôlée. For each appellation strict regulations control the area included, which grape varieties may be planted, how they should be pruned, maximum yields, when the harvest may begin, minimum grape ripeness levels and/or alcoholic strength, and even how the wine should be made. Superior appellations typically fit inside other, less rigorous ones, eg Pauillac is an area within the Médoc, which itself lies within the general Bordeaux appellation. Appellations are granted by, and their regulations administered by, the Paris-based INAO (Institut National des Appellations d'Origine).

cave means literally 'cellar' or 'winery' and is often used for a co-operative cellar, as in Cave des Vignerons de…

château, French for 'castle' but in a wine context it means a registered wine-producing property whose only building may be a shed or even a corner of a co-operative winery. Most common in Bordeaux.

clos, enclosing wall, often used in Burgundy for an enclosed vineyard.

côte(**s**) **de**, prefix usually denoting a superior wine. Like *coteaux* it literally means 'hillsides'.

cru, literally 'growth' or vineyard site. A cru classé is a Médoc or Graves property listed in the most famous wine classification of all. See Bordeaux for more details.

domaine, Burgundian name for the accumulated holdings of one grower. Thus a domaine-bottled wine is one bottled by the producer.

éleveur, one who looks after wine between fermentation and bottling.

grand cru is a widely used term but in Burgundy means one of the very finest vineyards.

mis(**e**) **en bouteille par**/**pour** means 'bottled by/for'. France's best wines are almost invariably bottled at the château (*au château*) or domaine. Co-ops are allowed to claim *mise en bouteille **du** château* for wines from specific vineyards.

premier cru(**1er cru**), another vague term but in Burgundy denotes superior vineyards just below grand cru status.

négociant, wholesale wine merchant or bottler.

récoltant, literally 'harvester', ie 'grower'.

supérieur, infrequently used and regulated suffix denoting a more alcoholic wine (and intended to indicate higher quality because riper grapes).

vigneron, 'vine-grower'.

villages, suffix usually denoting a superior wine because it comes from a more limited area, eg Beaujolais-Villages.

Vin, Vin de Table, VSIG or 'vin sans indication géographique', wine at its most basic.

vin de pays, superior Vin de Table wine with a stated geographical origin but made to less strict specifications than Appellation Contrôlée wines.

viticulteur, 'vine-grower'.