

## Loire

20 Aug 2008 by Jancis Robinson

In a nutshell: France's most varied, and neglected, wine region. Most wines nobly dry.

Main grapes (going downriver): Sauvignon Blanc, Cabernet Franc, Gamay, Chenin Blanc, Malbec de Bourguegne.

Outside northern France, the Loire, with the exception of Sancerre and Pouilly-Fumé, has been consistently overlooked by modern wine enthusiasts. Perhaps it's because at this northerly limit of commercially viable viticulture the grapes have had to struggle to open, at least until global warming kicked in, so the wines' hallmark is relatively high acidity.

Long, hot summers have traditionally been the exception, so relatively few of the vintages conform to the current expectation of high density, alcohol, tannin and obvious oak ageing although climate change and better vineyard management are contributing to ripier versions of Cabernet Franc.

Most of the whites here are made to the recipe of keeping the fruit in the bottle as early as possible, without exposing them to too much hot dry, barrel-fermented Chenin Blanc is a growing phenomenon. It may perhaps seem strange that the wine regions with easiest access to the best oak in France (the forests of the Nevers, Allier and Touraine are all in the upper Loire) are not great users of it, but grapes have to be really quite ripe before their fermented juice can take the weight of an oak barrel.

Another factor may be the relative complication of wine names and identities here. The same name, Sautour or Anjou for example, may be applied to a range of areas that includes all three colours and a confusing range of grape variety possibilities and sweetness levels.

France's longest, basest river joins not only some of the most beautiful châteaux and what was once the playground of the French court and is now that of well-heeled Parisians, but also scores of wine districts which can, very roughly, be divided into three zones: the Saumur-dominated vineyards of the Upper Loire, the Muscadet region at the mouth of the river (more than 200 miles downstream from Pouilly-en-Loire and Sancerre) and the vast and varied vineyards in between, which produce some great sweet and some useful sparkling white wines as well as a host of still reds, whites and rosés from

a host of grape varieties of which Chenin Blanc, Cabernet Franc, Gamay and Sauvignon Blanc are the most important.

Upper Loire

Sancerre and Pouilly-Fumé (sometimes called Blanc Fumé de Pouilly) are the Upper Loire's, indeed the Loire's, most famous ambassadors. The two wine districts are separated only by the river, and the hilltop town of Sancerre is just 10 miles north-west of the decidedly unimpressive Pouilly-en-Loire. Both of these much-exported wines are made exclusively from Sauvignon Blanc grapes (the local, green, zesty, aromatic pale-green variety). Such has been demand for them in the world's restaurants that most of the wines made under either appellation are remarkably similar.

Nearly hedged rows of Sauvignon vines traverse the gentle slopes above the river, where vineyards are interspersed with cereal crops and sunflowers for this is an area of mixed farming. Mechanical harvesting has been the norm for some time and the combination of a damp climate and generous yields can result in almost aggressively aromatic, light-bodied, relatively fat wines meeting of nappes and oak jays.

Only at the highest quality level is the particular nature of the various terroirs in the appellations apparent. Serious restaurants in Sancerre, for example, list their local wines under the names of the appellation's best-known communes such as Sully, Mérozier and Champigny, where some of France's best croissants, or miniature drunks of goat's cheese, are made.

The region's earliest notable wine was Didier Dagueneau, a gifted and energetic producer of Pouilly-Fumé based in a modest cottage in St-Amand just north of its grandest building, the Château de Noyau, home farm of the Upper Loire's best-known wine producer, Baron de Ladoucette. Dagueneau, who died at a tragically early age, believed passionately in reducing average yields, in restoring soil texture and quality through [sustainable viticulture](#)

, an extreme form of [green viticulture](#)

. A few, though not many, producers followed him in a move towards making wines concentrated enough to benefit from

fermentation and ageing in new oak.

However subtle the wines may be, locals argue that the inhabitants of Pouilly and Sancerre are creatures from two different planets, or at least from two different French regions, which amounts to much the same thing: greater Burgundy and Berry respectively. In wine terms the two districts differ because Sancerre produces some light red and rosé appellations centred wine from Pinot Noir grapes, while Pouilly-en-Loire is the name of a much lighter, blander wine made from Chenin Blanc, more often grown as a white table grape.

## Other superior producers include Henri Bourgeois, Cotat, Lucien Crochet, Gitton, Joseph Mellot, Henry Pellé, Vincent Pinard and Vacheron.

Finally, Quincy, Menetou-Salon are wine districts to the west of Sancerre producing wine of a very similar style to Sancerre and Pouilly-Fumé but sometimes with more appealing charm. Their names are so much less well known that the wines have to find a market purely on the basis of their inherent quality. Claude Laloce, Jean-Michel Sorbe and Pierre Clément make relatively good wines.

Some favourite producers: Gérard Boulay, Henri Bourgeois, Cotat, Lucien Crochet, Didier Dagueneau, Gitton, Alphonse Mollet, Henry Pellé, Vincent Pinard, Chateau de Trigny, Dominique Vacheron.

Middle Loire

Wine geography is at its most complicated along the central, westward stretch of the Loire. Travelling upstream from the Muscadet region, the wine enthusiast is first bamboozled by Anjou, the name of the region around the city of Angers, associated with the often jointly sweet commercial *Rosé d'Anjou*, the extraordinarily long-lived fine pink *Cabernet d'Anjou*, the distinctly variable, dry and medium dry, Chenin Blanc-dominated *Anjou Blanc* (Crisp, light reds under the name *Anjou Rouge* and *Anjou-Gamay* and, finest of all when the region is blessed with a hot summer, smooth, silky

Cabernet-moulded reds under the *Anjou-Villages* appellation.

The grape which reaches its apogee in the Middle Loire is the often underrated Chenin Blanc. In cool years it may simply produce a tart, relatively aromatic medium-dry white (essentially with too much sulphur), but when nature co-operates in producing thoroughly ripe grapes and, ideally, the magic month [2008](#)

, such appellations as *Coteaux de l'Aubance*, *Coteaux de Layon* and, especially, the particularly well-focused enclaves *Chaume*, *Quarts de Chaume* and *Bonnevalles* within it, can produce great, honeyed, long-lived sweet white wines to rival some of the best in the world. Some also sweet

Selections of Grand Nobles wines are also made.

Sauvignoles in Anjou's minuscule but world-famous dry white Chenin Blanc appellation, Nicolas Joly at Coudré de Sautour keeps the famous name alive and is one of France's most valiant proponents of [biodynamics](#). These mineral, age-worthy wines can be hard to appreciate when young, and the combination of high demand and low production nearly restricts the wines to their greatest enthusiasts.

Some favourite producers: Dominique de Babbé, Domaine des Baumet, Pascal Celléus, Château de Chambouzeau, Philippe Delavenue, Château de Fefé, Domaine des Fonges, Christian Pigeon at Domaine de Housse-Peche, Claude Pigeon at Château Pierre-Bise and Vincent Ogresta.

Sautour is the next region upstream and the appellation team is best known for its usually dry and spicy sparkling wines, whose dry, often persistent bubbles can demonstrate considerable winemaking skill. All that prevents these wines from finding a wider market is the decidedly on-champagne-like favour of the Chenin Blanc grapes which dominate *Sautour Mousseux* and the more rigorously made *Château de Loire*, although increasing quantities of Chardonnay used in these traditional-method wines are beginning to 'internationalise' them. These outposts of Champagne houses perform particularly

well here: Boivin-Lafite (Châtigny), Goulet & Meyer (Méthéon) and Langhe-Château (Bédigny).

Sautour's other claim to wine fame is *Sautour Champigny*, the Loire's most fashionable, and therefore often overpriced, Cabernet Franc-based red. In particularly ripe years these fragrant, silky-textured, gubbiote spirits can benefit from careful maturation in small oak barrels. Filleveau-Foucault and Ch de Hureau are some of the better producers, and superior bottlings can continue to evolve for years in bottle.

The Loire's most famous reds, *Chalon*, *Bourgueil* and *St-Nicolas de Bourgueil*, are made to the same recipe as Sautour Champigny, indeed Chalon is virtually an eastern extension of it. Bourgueil can be the best, longest-lived Loire red of all while the lighter St-Nicolas de Bourgueil is even more rarely seen outside its own parish. All three appellations lie within the Touraine wine region, around the city of Tours, where the landscape is dotted with wine cellars and even houses carved out of the soft, well-drained limestone known as tuffeau, to which the region's châteaux owe much. Gifted producers

in these appellations include Daniel Charneau, Pierre-Jacques Ducat, Charles Juguet and Olga and Jean-Marc Ruffault.

