

The idea of tackling France—the accents and the growing regions and the different vintages—can feel like a vast, unmanageable task for anyone who wants to start learning about wine. But even the most seasoned wine professionals sometimes mispronounce words, so you shouldn't worry. Today's guide will help you get a little more comfortable in the French section of your local wine shop.

French wines can be confusing because they rarely put the name of the grape on the bottle. Instead they put a controlled place name, appearing on the label as the "Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée." You will often see this abbreviated as AOC or, to get in line with EU terminology, AOP. The rules for winemaking and grape growing in each appellation have grown out of each region's long history.

Why put the place on the label instead of the name of the grape? Many people would say that it's because of the notion of terroir. Essentially, terroir is the wine's expression of the place from where it came. When winemakers speak about terroir, they're talking about a variety of things that influence the vine, including the type of soil it's growing in, the slope and elevation of the vineyard, as well as the climate and weather.

Though it's hard to make broad generalizations, you might find that French wines tend to focus less on fruit flavors than wines from newer growing regions in the New World. French wines might be described as earthy or mineral—which means they taste a little like dirt, chalk, or mushrooms.

Today we'll cover a few of the major regions that you should know.

Burgundy

When someone says "red Burgundy," they're talking about Pinot Noir. And when they say "white Burgundy", they mean Chardonnay. But as with most French wines, you won't see those grapes on the label, so it's worth getting to know a bit about the famous wine-growing regions of Burgundy: there's Chablis in the north, the Cote d'Or between Dijon and Lyon, Cote Chalonnaise, the Mâcon, and Beaujolais.

Most wines from Burgundy are split into four major tiers of quality. Regional wines (which are just labeled, say, Bourgogne Rouge, Bourgogne Blanc, or Cremant de Bourgogne) are at the base, made from grapes sourced anywhere in Burgundy. As the prestige goes up, you're getting grapes from a more and more specific area. Next up from regional wines are those specific to one village, then wines sourced from premier cru vineyards, and finally, the top classification is for wines from the most prestigious sites, called the grand cru vineyards.

The appellations in Burgundy are attached the piece of land, regardless of who is making the wine. Some pieces of land may have dozens of producers, with each winery owning a few rows of grape vines. How did Burgundy end up with this system? Well, it's all about the history. Monks have been farming this land for centuries, and noted which spots seemed best for growing grapes. The vineyards were split among multiple owners as generations went by because the Napoleonic code stipulated that a family's vineyards were split among their children, not inherited all together.

Chablis, the northernmost part of Burgundy, is famous for white wines made from chardonnay. If the label says Appellation Chablis Contrôlée, the wine will generally be fresh with a chalky, oyster shell-like minerality—many of these wines are not aged in oak barrels.

The Cote d'Or is made up of two main regions, Cote de Nuits in northern area, and Cote de Beaune in the south. Cote de Nuits is more known for its Pinot Noir and the Cote de Beaune is famed for its Chardonnay.

Moving south, you will find two regions that serve as excellent (and often more affordable) introductions to the wines of Burgundy: the Cote Chalonnaise and the Mâcon. You'll find great deals in Pinot Noir from Givry or Mercurey. For Chardonnay, look for Pouilly-Fuissé, St-Véran, or Rully.

Red wine in Burgundy is mostly about Pinot Noir, but there is one exception: Beaujolais. In this area, delicious red wines are made from the gamay grape. There's much more to these wines than the quickly-produced Beaujolais Nouveau meant for harvest celebrations; those cheap wines really don't represent the quality of the region on the whole. Wines from the ten 'crus' of Beaujolais are beloved among wine nerds and often a great bargain. There are ten crus, but some of the ones you'll see the most are Morgon, Fleurie, or Moulin-A-Vent.

Bordeaux

Wines from Bordeaux are almost always a blend of different grapes. If you're buying red wine, it might include Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Malbec, Cabernet Franc, and/or Petit Verdot. What's the dominant grape in the blend? It depends on where the bottle is from...

The region of Bordeaux is often divided into the Left Bank and the Right Bank. The area is split by the Gironde river, which has two smaller rivers, the Garonne and the Dordogne, feeding into it (picture an upside-down 'Y' shape.)

The Left Bank, on the west side, includes the Medoc and Haut Medoc (north of the city of Bordeaux) and Graves (south of the city). The famous villages of St. Estephe, Pauillac, St. Julien, and Margaux are all in the Haut Medoc. The Graves region to the south of the city includes Pessac-Leognan, home of the renowned Chateau Haut-Brion.

The blends for wines from the Left Bank are generally dominated by Cabernet Sauvignon, while blends from the Right Bank—the east side, which includes St. Emilion and Pomerol—are more focused on Merlot.

Between the two branches of the river-Y shape is a region called Entre Deux Mers, known for its white wines made from Sauvignon Blanc, Semillon, and Muscadelle.

You might have heard the terms 'first growth' or 'second growth' in relation to fancy wines from Bordeaux. These classifications come from a ranking system from way back in 1855, when the wine estates of the region were ranked in order of quality from 'first growth' to 'fifth growth'. 160 years later, some of the top wines are still truly mind-blowing...and expensive. Unlike in Burgundy, the classification in Bordeaux is based on the producer, not the specific piece of land where the grapes are grown.

Loire

The wine regions near the Loire River can be thought of in four sections: The Pays Nantais, Anjou-Saumur, Touraine, and the Central Vineyards.

Let's start at the ocean, shall we? The Pays Nantais (named for Nantes, the largest city in the area) is the closest to the Atlantic and famous for Muscadet, an oyster-loving white wine made from the Melon de Bourgogne grape. You're likely to see 'Sur Lie' on a good bottle of Muscadet—it means that the wine was left with the dead yeast cells, or lees, after fermentation. This adds a creamy, textural richness to the fresh, salty tang of the wine. (One thing to keep straight: Muscadet is definitely different from Muscat, an aromatic grape that is often made as an off-dry wine.)

Traveling east from the Pays Nantais, we come to the Anjou-Saumur and the Touraine. The white grape Chenin Blanc and the red Cabernet Franc are the most common here. We love the dry Chenin Blancs from Savennières, as well as both the dry and sweeter examples of the grape made in Vouvray. If you're looking for Cabernet Franc, seek out red wines from Chinon and Bourgueil. While also found in the Bordeaux blend, on its own, Cabernet Franc expresses itself with black cherry, herby green vegetables, and plenty of potting soil. You'll also find peppery, tangy, and bright Pineau d'Aunis in Anjou and Touraine.

The Central Vineyards are known mainly for their Sauvignon Blanc. The appellation of Sancerre is the most well-known and often the most expensive. Its neighbors can provide a great entry point with the same tart, sometimes grassy expression. Look for wines from the adjacent appellations of Menetou-Salon and Pouilly-Fumè, or the nearby Reuilly and Quincy.

Champagne

You might have heard before that you're not supposed to call every sparkling wine Champagne. It's only Champagne if it's from the region of Champagne. (And they actually make some still, non-bubbly wines there, too, though those aren't called Champagne, either.)

What makes Champagne special, beyond the region where the grapes are grown? The methode champenoise, also known as the traditional method. The basic idea of this labor-intensive process is as follows. Somewhat underripe grapes are first fermented to make a normal still wine with pretty low alcohol. This wine is bottled and then undergoes a second fermentation in the very same bottle that comes home with you from the store. A little yeast and sugar is added to each bottle of wine to get a second fermentation started. The bottle is usually closed with a crown cap (like a beer cap). The yeast converts the added sugar into alcohol, and since the bottle is capped, the carbon dioxide that is naturally produced is captured and remains in the wine as bubbles.

After this secondary fermentation, Champagne bottles have to go through a laborious process called riddling. Over the course of several weeks, the bottles are slowly, gradually turned and lowered until they are turned upside down. The goal is to get all of the dead yeast into the neck of the bottle so that it can be removed. Seeing a pattern with this leftover yeast? Lees add a lot to the resulting wine and Champagnes have to age with the yeast for at least a year before taking the next step.

When they're ready to go, the necks of the bottles are frozen and, in a moment of organized chaos called disgorgement, the crown cap on the bottle is popped off and the pressure that has built up in the wine pushes out the frozen yeast deposit. The bottle is topped off with some wine and sometimes sugar (the dosage) before being corked and sealed with a wire cage.

Since the grapes often struggle to ripen fully every year in the cool, northern environment, wines from Champagne are often non-vintage (NV), which means the bottle holds a blend of wines from different years. Champagne can also be from a single vintage, which is generally a very good year.

All this hard work means that Champagne is definitely pricey—often starting around \$40. You can also look for wines made from the traditional method in other areas of France, often for around \$20. One easy kind to spot is anything labeled 'Cremant.' These wines will come from other areas around France, such as Burgundy, Alsace, or the Loire.

You will see 'Premier Cru' and 'Grand Cru' on bottles of Champagne—this label applies to the entire village from which the grape comes, rather than specific vineyards.

Alsace

You'll find Alsace right on the German border of France. Over the last few hundred years, France and Germany have alternated possession of the area and a unique blend of each country's wine heritage remains. Unlike in most French regions, wines from Alsace most frequently do have the grape of the label. The most exalted grapes in the region, called noble grapes, are Riesling, Pinot Gris, Gewurztraminer, and Muscat. In Alsace, these wines are unusually intense and mineral, not the fresh-and-fruity wines you might expect from these grapes.

If you see 'Gentil' on a label of an Alsatian wine, it means the bottle holds a blend of the noble grapes (as well as up to 50% wine from other grapes). These blends can be a particularly good value. Alsatian examples of Pinot Blanc and Sylvaner are also delicious and are generally much cheaper than wines made from the noble grapes.

While most grapes grown in Alsace are white, Pinot Noir does make an appearance on its own as a red wine and in bubbly Cremant d'Alsace.

Rhône

You might have heard of Châteauneuf-du-Pape or Hermitage: those appellations are in the Rhône. The Rhône River starts up in the Alps and flows down through Valence and Avignon, ending in the Atlantic Ocean in the area near Marseille. The area is generally split into two main parts: the Northern Rhône and the Southern Rhône.

When you think Northern Rhône, think Syrah. The grape finds its most peppery, meaty expression on the steep hillsides that line the river. A good way to get into these wines is to try St. Joseph or Crozes-Hermitage, but even these can be a bit pricey. Some talented producers make wines under the humble Vin de Pays Collines Rhodaniennes, and these can be delicious and extremely affordable. You'll also see white wines made from Viognier grapes in this area.

The sunny Southern Rhone is all about the blend, with Grenache leading the charge. They're usually "GSM," shorthand for Grenache, Syrah, and Mourvèdre. Other grapes, such as Cinsault and Counoise, also make an appearance and in fact, thirteen different grapes are allowed in the blend for Châteauneuf-du-Pape. The white wines are often blends of Grenache Blanc, Marsanne, Roussanne, and Viognier, though a few other grapes are also allowed.

The Rhône wines you will most often see in a wine shop or on a wine list will say Côtes-du-Rhône on the label. These, too, are likely to be GSM blends, sometimes including Cinsault, Carignane, and Counoise. If you want to take one step up from the basic Côtes-du-Rhône wines, look for one of the 18 villages that are allowed to add their name to the label. (You'll often see Visan, Sablet, and Cairanne.) Gigondas, Vacqueyras, Beaumes-de-Venise, and Vinsobres often offer a bit more quality; they used to be under the Cotes-du-Rhone name, but have been elevated and now stand on their own as appellations.

Languedoc and Roussillon

Languedoc and Roussillon are two large regions that lie on the coast of the Mediterranean. Red and rosé wines from these areas are generally a blend of Carignan, Cinsault, Grenache, Syrah, Mourvèdre, with other indigenous and international varieties making an appearance. White wines are less common, but when you see them they are also usually blends that include Grenache Blanc, Marsanne, Roussanne, Muscat, and sometimes other grapes.

If you love the warm climate wines of California or Australia, these regions are a wonderful way to introduce yourself to France. The sunshine gives plenty of fruit flavor and body to the red wines from the AOCs of Côtes du Roussillon, St. Chinian, Minervois, and Languedoc (Languedoc is the general name for the region and a specific AOC, you still with me?). Roussillon is also known for its fortified sweet wine, made in spots like Rivesaltes, Maury, and Banyuls from a Grenache blend.

You might see 'Vin De Pays d'Oc' on a wine label from this region—it's a country wine classification that is one step up from table wine but without as many restrictions as Appellation Contrôlée wines. Good value alert!

Provence

When we think of Provence, we first think of rosé. They make a lot of it here, usually a blend of Grenache, Syrah, Cinsault, and Mourvèdre that pairs perfectly with sunshine and beach umbrellas. But there's more to Provence than just these lovely, dry pink wines: if you're looking for reds, look to Bandol. This region sits along the coast and produces mostly red wines from a blend dominated by Mourvèdre. Producers in Bandol also tend to make exceptional rosé wines from younger vines that aren't quite ready to be used in red wine.

There's More!

There are more grapes and regions in France than you probably have time to read about on your lunch break, but we hope we've given you a few handy basics. Got questions about the wines of France or any of the regions we've mentioned? Please share them in the comments below!

About the Author: Stacey Gibson is an Advanced Sommelier, practicing her craft at Olympic Provisions in Portland, Oregon. Follow her on Twitter @stacey_gib. Source: <http://drinks.seriousseats.com/2014/02/print/french-wine-for-beginners-what-is-burgundy-bordeaux-essential-wine-regions-grapes-in-france-basics.html>