

How to buy... Loire

The Loire Valley

The Loire is the longest river in France, stretching some 1,000km from its source in the south to the Atlantic coast a little west of Nantes. At times majestic, never more so than when overlooked by one of the many spectacular châteaux that lie close to its banks, it was in the past a vital trade waterway. Today, it is better known as a tourist destination. Throughout, the river has been a key factor in the production of wine, whether as a transport route, as a supply of water, for its cooling effects on the surrounding land, or for the mist that often lingers along parts of the valley and helps in the production of many of the fine sweet wines that the Loire Valley is famous for.



Joanna Locke MW
Loire wine buyer

Know your grapes

The geology and climate – the *terroir* – varies dramatically along the length of the Loire, and, as a result, so too does the choice of grapes planted and the style of wines produced.



The warmer fine grape makes some of the Loire's most distinctive reds

Red wines are in the minority but a combination of vastly improved husbandry over the last few years coupled with what looks increasingly to be the effects of climate change have made these wines more and more attractive. The main varieties are:

Gamay produces wines akin to Beaujolais in the south; in the Touraine, gamay generally has less overt fruit and a slightly earthy character which is not unattractive with food but some will find an acquired taste.

Cabernet franc One of Bordeaux's grapes is normally grown here as a single varietal. At its best it has a lovely fragrance and freshness with a good, gentle tannin structure, making it the ideal lunchtime red.

Pinot noir is the most delicate of the Loire's red grapes, producing excellent rosé as well as fine reds that can rival good village Burgundy (more Côte de Beaune than Côte de Nuits in style).



Berlyth affected chenin grapes are the secret behind the Loire's sweet wines

Whites are made principally from three single grape varieties:

Muscadet, or *melon de Bourgogne* as it is still sometimes called in France, dominates in the far west, producing fresh, dry, sappy wines that are at their best with seafood.

Chenin blanc covers much of the vineyard land around and between Angers and Tours, and is responsible for the Loire's sweet wines as well as some excellent – and quite varied – dry ones. Many develop greater finesse and

complexity with age, but chenin is a grape that requires patience and understanding as, more than any other variety, it can pass through a rather ungenerous "closed" phase, only to blossom again later. Something Noël Pinget of Domaine Huet likes to the unresponsive teenage years of our children.

Sauvignon blanc offers important volumes of good, everyday drinking in the Touraine region but produces its best examples in the Central Vineyards of Sancerre and Pouilly and its near neighbours; Menetou-Salon, Reuilly, and Quincy. Loire sauvignon is rarely oaked and is normally fresh, grassy, bone dry and lightly aromatic, making it the perfect wine to serve with fish.

In the List our Loire whites are arranged by grape variety, as this is so key to the style of the wine. If a particular grape is unfamiliar to you then it is worth trying an inexpensive or mid-priced example first and then moving up the quality scale if you find you like it. We try to give an indication of the style of the wine and occasionally a serving suggestion to help the unfamiliar navigate the selection. Our range of rosés is always more limited, so we do not list by grape variety, but do try to make sure we not only mention the grape but describe the style, or a suitable food match, too.

A marginal climate

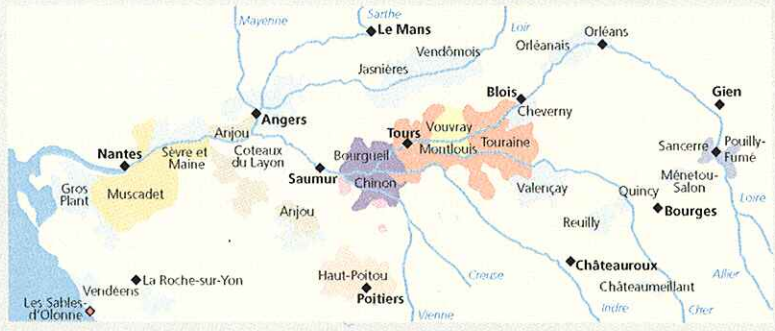
Other than the grape, two other key factors should influence your choice of Loire wines. Far and away the most important is the name of the producer. Buy from a trusted, ideally tried and tested source and you will not be disappointed in quality terms.



Producers Eric Noël (Pinget of Huet in Woëry, left) and Bernard Chéreau in Muscadet may experience more challenging vintages from time to time but quality standards for their own wines are so high that they simply would not look poor wine



The vineyards of St Nicolas de Bourgueil in the Touraine produce some of the Loire's greatest reds from the cabernet franc grape



View from the Gratiou & Meyer vineyards above Saumur

The other major influence in the Loire is the style and quality of the vintage. As one of France's most northerly wine producing regions, and even with the apparent effects of climate change, the Loire does suffer from the vagaries of the weather, which means that the quality and even more the style of the harvest can vary quite significantly. As a very rough rule of thumb, if we have poor spring and summer weather in the UK then chances are there will have been similarly poor weather in the Loire. On these occasions it is all the more important to stick to growers you trust, read whatever information you have easy access to in order to better inform your choice, and be prepared to adapt to sometimes significant shifts in style. 2005 and 2006 were warm, healthy vintages with ripe fruit and lower acidity, producing more approachable wines. 2007 marks a return to a much more typical, classically styled Loire vintage with wines that are lighter in body (and alcohol) and with much fresher acidity. If you are lucky you will enjoy both, but many will have a strong preference for one style over another.

Buying from a retailer you have confidence in is the natural extension of all this. The vast majority of the producers The Wine Society works with in the Loire are long term suppliers we trust and enjoy working with. We love to introduce new finds and rising stars from time to time (Frédéric Mabileau in St Nicolas de Bourgueil and Eric Morgat



Rising star Frédéric Mabileau

A gastronomic tour

It would be impossible to talk about the Loire and its wines without mentioning food. The wines are restrained in style and made to complement a meal. Generally speaking, if you are looking for an easy drinking sauvignon to drink on its own you may be better off with something from Chile or the South of France. Like so many regions of France, the Loire has its own gastronomic heritage and its wines provide superb and highly varied accompaniments to the changing menu the length of the valley.



In August we will be publishing an offer dedicated to the wines of the Loire, with a varied selection of wines ideal for summer drinking.

EXPLORATION WINES

Modern Spanish White

Wine buyer Pierre Mansour has recently taken over responsibility for buying Spanish wine. He was so excited by the discovery of this unusual Spanish white that he made an impassioned plea to be able to tell members about it in the news.



The town of Auzells

Auzells is a new wine from the tiny, recently revived *denominación* of Costers del Segre in Catalonia near the city of Lerida. The climate here is harsh, with winters dipping below freezing and summers exceeding 35°C. As a semi-desert, vine cultivation is only possible thanks to a network of irrigation canals which have taken over 50 years to render the land suitable for grapes.

Auzells is the brainchild of up and coming winemaker Tomàs Cusiné who, after working for 20 years with his family setting up leading estate Castell del Reimeu, wanted to embark on his own project. He works with vineyards on two sites at altitudes of 700-750 metres. There are many different aspects and soils in the vineyards leading Tomàs to work with an array of grape varieties. There are no less than nine in Auzells – an intriguing mix that results in a no less intriguing wine. Unoaked, it is fresh, whistle clean and a thoroughly modern Spanish aperitif-style wine. The grape mix, for those that are counting, is made up of 28% macabeu, 25% viognier, 19% sauvignon blanc, 14% chardonnay, 7% parellada, 2% müller thurgau, 2% muscat, 1.5% albariño and 1.5% riesling. The pure, mineral flavours lend themselves to oysters and shellfish as well as some of the more adventurous Mediterranean salads.



Auzells is the old Catalan word for black which are particularly common in the vineyards around Viladell where Tomàs is based. Viladell comes from Vila Auzells – now of little bearing the black on the label

Auzells, 2007 is available at the special introductory price of £8.50 a bottle instead of £10.95 until Sunday, 9th of August. Ref N-SP4641. One bottle per member at this price.

If you have any questions or comments about societynews, or would like to see something included, please e-mail: societynews@thewinesociety.com or write to: societynews, The Wine Society, Gunnels Wood Road, Stevenage, Hertfordshire, SG1 2BG