The SAGE Encyclopedia of Alcohol: Social, Cultural, and Historical Perspectives

Wines, French

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French wines have long been recognized as some of the best in the world and have held a preeminent position in the international market for centuries. France is also a global leader in terms of wine production, culture, and influence. Although this dominance is not as all-encompassing as it once was, few wine makers in the world today would deny the power, influence, and distinction of the great wines of Bordeaux, Burgundy, Champagne, and the Rhône valley. Although wine production in the Old World has been in decline, France is still the leader in wine production with 16 percent of the global market share, yielding 50.7 million hectoliters (hL) in 2011, or about 7 billion bottles. France also led the world in wine consumption with 30.2 million hL in 2011, just ahead of the United States and Italy, although this trend is unlikely to continue as the French are drinking less wine now than at any other time. The United Kingdom, the United States, and Germany are the main destinations for French wine exports, valued at $10.4 billion in 2012, although there is an emerging market for French luxury wines in Asia, notably China. However, in the contemporary international market, French wines are increasingly being viewed as inaccessible, old-fashioned and out of touch with modern drinkers. French wines are thus at a crossroads with their preeminence no longer assumed in an era of economic globalization and social change. Yet the rich history, tradition, and culture of French wine making cannot be ignored, such is its significance in the world heritage of wine.

History

It was the Greeks who first brought viticulture to France when they founded Massilia (Marseilles) about 600 B.C.E. Significant expansion occurred under the Romans when they arrived from the end of the 2nd century B.C.E. and continued with Caesar's conquest of Gaul in 51 B.C.E. The Romans improved winemaking techniques **[p. 1411 ↓]** to produce large quantities in order to export it to Italy, Britain, and the Rhine area. Traditionally planted alongside olives and figs, the vine was also initially cultivated along waterways to facilitate trade. The Rhône, Tarn, and Garonne rivers provided transport to important trading ports and networks. Viticulture spread along the Garonne valley, up the Rhône to Burgundy, the Loire valley, and then to the Champagne region and Alsace. By the 4th century C.E., vineyards in Roman Gaul were at their most extensive.

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As the Roman Empire disintegrated, France was overrun by Germanic invaders; the Visigoths, Burgundians, and the Franks all established kingdoms in Gaul. Although wine was an everyday part of life in the Mediterranean, in Paris and the north, it was a luxury item, and in many areas, vines were neglected and abandoned. Because of wine's spiritual and religious significance, monks in Burgundy had revived viticulture by 1000. Both monasteries and cathedrals often had their own vineyards and cellars, while monks had the time and organizational skills necessary for systematic improvement. In the medieval period, the Church came to be identified with wine, and for centuries, it owned many of the greatest vineyards in Burgundy and Champagne. Aquitaine, the region around Bordeaux, became an English duchy in 1152 and significantly developed its wine making in the following centuries to supply the English market. Merchants called it *claret*—the British still do—as it was a *clair*, or light, wine, the result of a short fermentation of about 48 hours.

In the early modern period, several important changes occurred in French viticulture and wine consumption. The English market for Bordeaux collapsed in the 15th century when Aquitaine returned to French control at the end of the Hundred Years' War but was in part replaced by demand from Flanders and the Baltic countries. Orléans, on the Loire river, rose to a position of prominence by supplying the home market of Paris and also English, Flemish, and Spanish ports. The wines of the Loire, notably those from Anjou and Tours, were exported through the city of Nantes and found their way to Ireland, Scotland, and the Baltic. The wines from the Côte d'Or had established a continental reputation by the 14th century, which was considerably enhanced in the 15th century by the acquisition of Flanders and Brabant by the Dukes of Burgundy. The prime internal market for wine in the 16th century was the burgeoning city of Paris. It was no longer the rich who exclusively drank wine; it had also become the standard beverage of the poor urban classes as well. There was, however, one important distinction—the rich could afford to drink wines of greater quality from further afield, while the poor consumed cheap, locally produced wines from the Ile-de-France. This divergence would only sharpen in the following period.

By the 18th century, French vineyards were extensive in order to meet the demand for wine by growing urban populations. Over the course of the century, producers in different parts of the country began to specialize in wine for two contrasting markets —high-quality wines for the rich, mostly in the Médoc (Bordeaux), Burgundy, and

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Champagne and low-quality, high-yielding wines for the mass market. This restructuring of French vineyards transpired after the historic winter of 1709, which destroyed many vines and left lasting memories in the whole country—it was so cold (minus 4 degrees F, 20 degrees C) that wine froze in the cellars. By the eve of the French Revolution, it is estimated that vineyards covered 3.7 million acres (3.7 million acres) in France and produced some 718 million gallons (27.2 million hL) of wine in 1788. War, revolution, and political turmoil did not stop the growth in French vineyards as they had spread to nearly 5 million acres (2 million hectares) and 1 billion gallons (38.9 million hL) in production by 1829. The introduction of the railroads fostered further expansion as vineyards reached close to 6.1 million acres (2.5 million hectares) in surface area and produced substantial harvests in the 1860s and 1870s. During these decades, seven harvests were between 1.3 and 1.5 billion gallons (50 and 60 million hL), three between 1.5 and 1.8 billion gallons (60 and 70 million hL), one (1869) more than 1.8 billion gallons (70 million hL), and in 1875, French vines yielded a record 2.2 billion gallons (84.5 million hL) of wine—the highest ever attained.

This golden age of production ended with a series of viticultural disasters, which affected both the quantity and quality of French wines. The first crisis occurred in the 1850s, when a powdery mildew, *Oidium*, reduced outputs, but this was combatted with sulphur dustings, and vineyards **[p. 1412 ↓]** recovered. It was during the recovery from *Oidium* that a much more serious vine condition was noticed: *Phylloxera vestatrix*, a tiny yellow aphid that kills vines by attacking their roots. From 1863 until about 1890, this devastating pest ravaged 6.2 million acres (2.5 million hectares) of vines in France, making no distinctions between the vineyards of humble peasants and those of the most famous châteaux. For many years no cure was found, and the very existence of the French wine industry was threatened. The turning point finally came in 1881, when it was agreed that the best solution was to graft French vines onto American rootstocks, which were *Phylloxera* resistant. The replanting of vineyards was a slow and costly procedure, with wealthy landowners leading the way ahead of small vine growers. The process lasted from the 1890s until the 1920s, by which time all of the vines cultivated in France had been grafted onto American rootstocks. Many were uncomfortable with the introduction of foreign rootstocks onto French soil as they believed it would affect wine quality—indeed, the importation of American rootstocks was banned in Burgundy

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until 1887. The solution to the *Phylloxera* crisis was eventually accepted but seriously tested a fundamental concept in French viticulture: *terroir.*

Terroir and the AOC System

Terroir is a quintessentially French term that is difficult to translate and much debated. It is generally used to describe the holistic combination of factors that make up a vineyard environment: soil, geology, climate, topography, and the rather mystic soul of the wine producer, in which knowledge has accumulated over generations. All of these factors assemble in unique combination in every vineyard in France and make up the distinct wine-style characteristics that supposedly cannot be duplicated elsewhere. Some in the New World doubt if terroir actually exists and claim it is a product of marketing and commercial interest. However, in France, it is taken as reality, and it underlies and defines the French Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée (AOC) system. This is the much-imitated and highly successful method of designating and controlling the all-important geographically based names of wines and also spirits such as Cognac, Armagnac, and Calvados as well as foodstuffs such as Roquefort cheese. It has been taken as a model for European Union wine legislation but is a much more reliable guide to France's best wines than other countries' more liberally applied systems. In 2012, AOC wines made up 48.9 percent of all French wine production in 357 officially recognized appellations; the rest of the production was either *vins de pays* or *vins de table.*

The AOC system evolved in the decades after the *Phylloxera* crisis and was based on the simple principle of geographic delimitation. It was also developed to combat adulteration and fraud and to protect France's most-famous geographic wine brands, like Champagne, whose producers had an interest in limiting the use of this name to themselves. In 1935, the Institut National des Appellations d'Origine (INAO) was created to draw up, administer, and regulate the granting of AOCs for more than 400 wines and spirits; it is based in Paris but run by regional committees and administrative centers. The INAO annually revises its list of AOCs with the following criteria: production area, vine varieties, ripeness and alcoholic strength, yields, viticulture, wine making, and distillation. In 1990, the INAO was given additional powers to fiercely defend the notion of controlled, geographically determined appellations and to protect them against imitation both in France and abroad.

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Not only does the INAO protect the quality of the wines produced, it also has redrawn or changed the boundaries of specific AOCs in recent years. In 2008, more than 40 Beaujolais communes lost the right to label their wines as Burgundy, while the production zone of Champagne was enlarged to meet growing demand in 2009. However, certain regions in France have begun to completely rethink (and to some extent abandon) the old AOC system and the concept of terrior and replace them with new marketing brands, which are based on grape varieties and geographic regions. The Languedoc-Roussillon region and its rebranding as a global viticultural area under the name of Sud de France is indicative of this trend.

Geography, Varieties, and Climate

France is a remarkably diverse country in terms of geography and climate, and as such, there are seven main wine regions within its borders. This is not counting the brandy-producing regions of Cognac and Armagnac. There are also about 100 **[p. 1413 ↓]** grape varieties grown, two-thirds of them with dark skins, but there is a growing reliance on international varieties, most of them of French origin. Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, and Cabernet Franc are the main grape varieties of Bordeaux, while Pinot Noir and Gamay dominate in Burgundy and Beaujolais. Pinot Noir is also extensively planted in Alsace and Champagne along with Meunier in the latter region. Cabernet Franc is the most popular red wine grape in the Loire Valley, while Grenache and Carignan top the vineyards of Provence. France's most important wine region in terms of quantity is Languedoc-Roussillon, where the Carignan grape is planted over 371,000 acres (150,000 hectares), making it France's most planted variety. Other important red wine varieties in Languedoc include Aramon, Grenache, Cinsault, Merlot, and Syrah. In terms of white grapes, the Ungi Blanc is the most prevalent as it serves as the base for making Cognac. The Chardonnay grape has become increasing popular not only where it has been traditionally planted, Burgundy and Champagne, but also more widely so that it has become the second-most popular white grape variety. Other notable whites are Sémillon in Bordeaux, Chenin Blanc in the Loire Valley, and GewürzTraminer and Riesling in Alsace.

France's geographical position is exceptional for growing a wide range of different styles of grapes with a good balance of sugar and acidity. Its wine regions are positioned

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between the latitudes of 42 and 49.5 degrees. Topography and climate are key factors in quality wine production. Many vineyards in France are planted on a slope or hillside to take advantage of extra sunlight. In the Mediterranean south, the climate can be depended upon to fully ripen grapes but at a slow enough pace so that they can develop an interesting array of flavor compounds. The influence of the Atlantic Gulf Stream tempers the relatively high latitudes of the west coast, while in the east, centuries of viticultural tradition have blended with the cooler continental climate to create the exceptional regions of Burgundy, Alsace, and Champagne, France's northern most vineyards. France's soil and geology also play a significant role in wine production as yields are related to the nutritive content of the soil. Traditionally, the ideal plot for wine growing is thought to be slopping, infertile, and well drained. The calcareous (derived from limestone) soils in the Mediterranean *garrigue* landscape are well known for high yields. France's most prestigious wine regions like the Médoc have underlying rock containing potassium feldspar, while the Côte d'Or is made up of limestone hills with illitic clay soils.

Tradition, Culture, and Identity

French winemaking techniques vary across the thousands of individual caves, but they all draw on centuries of traditional knowledge and oenological research. The world-renowned wine research centers at the Universities of Bordeaux, Dijon, and Montpellier are leaders in the field and have been offering diplomas in oenology for decades. One of the key processes in wine science that is often taken for granted in France is malolactic fermentation, much to the bewilderment of many in the New World. This is the natural conversion, in the presence of lactic bacteria, of stronger malic acid into weaker lactic acid and carbon dioxide. It is desirable in wines, which have excessive acidity, particularly red wines produced in cooler climates. Another important method that is fundamental to French wine making is barrel maturation, in which fermented wines are stored in wooden barrels to encourage clarification and stabilization of the wine and perhaps to impart a wood flavor to it. This is a common practice for superior-quality still wines of all colors and styles and is the ideal preparation for bottle aging. Oak barrels are renowned for affecting the color, flavor, tannin profile, and texture of

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the wine. It is no coincidence that France is the center of the world's cooperage, or barrelmaking, industry.

Although the number of barrels produced is lower than that of the United States, French oak barrels are much more important to the global wine industry. They are more expensive to make, as the logs are hand split rather than machine sawn, but the special qualities of French oak have ensured that barrels made from it continue to command a considerable premium. About half of the barrels and staves produced are exported to the United States, Australia, South America, South Africa, Italy, and Spain so that high-quality wines may be aged in new French oak.

[p. 1414 ↓] French wines are still powerful social, cultural, and economic symbols in a globalized marketplace. For the French, their wines are central to their identity; wine is not just another type of alcohol—it is an aspect of the French cultural exception. Drinking French wines is part of what it means to be French. Yet, during the last quarter of the 20th century, the number of French people who consumed wine every day fell from 50.7 percent in 1980 to just 20.7 percent in 2005. Annual per capita consumption has also witnessed a similar decline from around 360 pints (170 liters) per person per year on the eve of World War II to just 105 pints (50 liters) per year in 2012. It may be surprising, but from the 1990s, more mineral water was sold in France than wine. French consumers purchase most of their wines at supermarkets. AOC wines sales remained stable in volume but increased in value to $3.5 billion in 2012, while sales of table wine declined in both volume and value to $220 million. Despite the famous Judgment of Paris in 1976, where California wines beat those of Bordeaux in a blind tasting, French wines are still regarded as premium products and markers of social, cultural, and economic distinction. Some French wines are much more than simple beverages—they have attained the status of cultural artifacts. There are luxury, super-premium brands that sell for thousands of dollars a bottle. Thus, there is a dichotomy: fewer French people drink wine, and those who do drink less than they did in the past. At the same time, wine is a dominant, pervasive object in French cultural life, and its premium wines continue to command a luxury status both within France and around the world.

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See Also:

- Beaujolais
- Bordeaux
- Burgundy
- Cabernet Franc
- Cabernet Sauvignon
- Champagne
- Chardonnay
- Fine Dining
- LVMH Moët Hennessy
- Merlot
- Petite Sirah
- Pinot Noir
- Sauvignon Blanc
- Semillon
- Viognier
- Wine Connoisseurship
- Wine Tourism

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