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Journal

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Burgundy Makes for Bon Place to Start

By **Jim Hammond**

For the Journal

WINE COUNTRY: French wines— the topic could easily fill a weeklong wine course. That's because French wines are firmly entwined in the history of wine, making for a quality and variety that guarantee French wines are often the first choice for many when selecting wine for dinner.

Rather than go exhaustively into each wine region— and you would be exhausted— I like to focus on the more approachable and easier-to-obtain French wines.

The first thing to notice on a French wine label is that the region where the wine was made gets top billing. The region, then the town or chateau, are prominently displayed because the terroir is important to the French. Heck, it's even their word. Terroir, pronounced ter-wah, is the concept of soil, slope and climatic conditions. See, it's not as scary as you thought.

For example, the wines defined as Grand Cru command that classification because of where the grapes are grown and the reputation of the vintner.

However, the increasingly important designation Vins de Pays liberalized the Appellation d'Origine Controlée (AOC) rules to permit wines to be identified by the grape first and not the location. The AOC laws define what grapes grow in the region, the minimum alcohol percentage and the maximum amount of wine per acre. Roughly 35 percent of all French wines meet the criteria.

Rich in red, white

There are eight important wine regions within France, but we'll have space for one.

Past articles have covered the Champagne and Alsace regions, so let's move south to where the warmer climate complements the white and red wines of Burgundy. The very name Burgundy conjures the image of rich red wine, but the region is also known for its white wines made with the chardonnay grape.

The other principal grapes grown in Burgundy are pinot noir and the Gamay grape of which Beaujolais is made.

Although the name Burgundy has been borrowed for any number of red wines in other countries, always of lesser quality, a red Burgundy wine made from the pinot noir grape is a totally different experience. In fact, it was my first experience in drinking wine when I was on liberty in Hong Kong. This

was back in ... well, a long time ago.

My shipmates and I went to the Parisian Grill because it was the place to go. I ordered a Steak Diane, done flambé, of course. I selected a bottle of Paul Bouchard Charmes Chambertin Burgundy— I still remember the wine— and I was in heaven. Unfortunately, I came crashing back to Earth when I returned home to discover just how much a good bottle of Burgundy costs in the real world.

Shapely taste

The Burgundy bottle has a classic shape with a long gracefully tapered neck. Unlike the Bordeaux bottle with its steep sides to trap the deposits a wine leaves behind, the Burgundian pinot noir, with lesser skin contact and softer tannins, lets us savor every drop. You've probably noticed that most domestic pinot noir also favors this bottle shape. Except for the oddball white wine bottle shaped like a fish (I get it, this wine goes with seafood) most bottles follow the traditional Bordeaux or Burgundy shapes.

The heart of Burgundy is the Cote d'Or, which encompasses the Cote de Nuits and Cote de Beaune. In the northern most part of the Cote de Nuits lies the town of Dijon, known more for its mustard than its wine. The southern most part includes Nuits-St-Georges. The majority of Grand Cru wines come from the Cote de Nuits. The more southern Cote de Beaune boasts the benchmark for quality chardonnay, the meursault and Montrachet wines. There are more than 1,000 names and 110 appellations one must be familiar with to be a true Burgundy wine expert. No, I'm not even close.

Begin at the village

The Chablis area is some distance to the north and east of the Cote d'Or. Victimized by popularity, the name chablis was borrowed by some California wines in the 1960s, but they didn't compare with the quality of the French original. If you want to see a Frenchman bristle, serve him a glass of jug wine chablis and point to the label. There is no way he'll think it's a Grand Cru.

The quality rating system of Burgundy wines begins with those wines that identify the village, such as Gevrey-Chambertin, followed by the more expensive premier cru wines, such as Clos St-Jacques. The most expensive and prized are the Grand Crus, such as Charmes-Chambertin within the Gevrey-Chambertin area. You might have noticed that I started at the top of the quality pyramid when I chose my first red wine. Now each time I open a French Burgundy, I hope to recapture that elusive first taste of heaven in the glass. Salut!

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