

WINE News

We visit Alsace and the Loire Valley, two regions with crisp, focused wines that will brighten up your winter meals.



January 15, 2015 Features

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Keep it Simple

By Eric Story

I would have to say that the absolute best thing about the wines from Alsace and the Loire Valley just happens to be the pure simplicity of them. In most instances the wines are bottled as a single varietal, and often from a single plot or soil type. Ironically, it is this simplicity which gives them their great depth and pristine focus. Winemakers and

wine lovers alike look to these two regions for inspiration and for an understanding of how ages-old winemaking practices are making waves into the future. I've worked hard to find some fascinating wines and outstanding values from these historic regions. Let our experts Olivia Ragni, Sarah Covey, Mahon McGrath and I show you the way.

Loire Valley

Many French authors call the Loire Valley the true heart of France, even more than Paris. Starting in the east, you might find yourself in Sancerre, drinking the **2012 Henri Bourgeois "Jadis" Sancerre (\$48.99)**, from 50-year-old vines on the slope of the famed Monts Damne vineyard. With its rich power and mouthwatering finish, this is a wonderful wine. 95 points WE, 90 points ST. One of my favorite Loire red grapes is Gamay, and a winner is the **2012 Jean-Francois Merieau "Bois Jacou" Gamay de Touraine (\$15.99)**: 40 to 60-year-old vines from a single block, aged in tank for eight months before release. Pure and rich, it's a superb value.



Next we move west into Cabernet Franc country and the super cool **2011 Domaine de la Noblaie "Pierre de Tuf" Chinon* (\$24.99)**; fruit from vines planted before World War II macerates in a vat carved out of the limestone tufa back in the 15th century. Another new discovery is the **2011 Domaine Les Pins "Clos les Pins" Bourgueil (\$16.99)**. From the walled vineyard right outside the winery, this has nicely knit structure, finishing with sweet tannins, a pretty wine! 91 points WE. The living legend Jo Pithon brings it with the **2011 Pithon-Paille "Coteau des Treilles" Anjou Blanc (\$64.99)**. Salty, chalky, and concentrated, it's the most inspiring Chenin Blanc I've tasted of late. A stunning powerhouse of a wine. 94 points RP.

Alsace

If you've never had the opportunity to visit Alsace, put it on your list. Yes, it is picturesque and the food is on a level of its own. Even better, for such a small region there are an amazing number of wineries, and most do not make it into the U.S. On a recent visit to one of our favorite wineries there, we were introduced to the **Charles Baur "Emotion" Cremant d'Alsace Brut* (\$19.99)**. This is 90% Chardonnay and 10% Pinot Blanc, with zero dosage, a fantastic substitute for Champagne lovers on a budget. 90 points WE. Next, the latest stunner from them, the **2012 Charles Baur Eichberg Riesling**



Grand Cru* (\$24.99). Look for fresh grapefruit aromas, a silky palate, and enjoy with shellfish, chicken with light sauces, or as an aperitif with cheese. 92 points WE.

Celebrating their 400th anniversary of grape growing, another new name on our shelves is the **2013 Jean Baptiste Adam "les Natures" Gewürztraminer (\$22.99)**. This features exotic floral aromatics and a well-defined, balanced texture. Lovely Gewürz! Finally, there is the iconic Zind Humbrecht. I am in love with the **2012 Zind Humbrecht Muscat (\$24.99)**. Anytime you need the refreshing feeling of summer, drink this. Fruity and intense floral aromas but dry and delicate on the palate. Fantastic with salads and cheeses.

—Eric Story

Floating Down the Loire

By Mahon McGrath

I was once counseled by an acquaintance to consider the joys of floating downstream on the Fourth of July in an innertube with a can of cheap beer. Speaking as a San Franciscan, the likeliest scenario, if you are imagining water, inner tubes, drink, and the Fourth of July, is that someone is trying to save your life before the tide sucks you out the Golden Gate. Now that we are on the far side of the holidays, I find myself ready to luxuriate in the fantasy of a slow river float, and I choose the Loire. What might you drink on such a mind excursion? I'm so glad you asked!

For our first stop let's swing by Francois Crochet and Vincent Gaudry in Sancerre. The family's property encompasses thirty plots scattered between Bué, Sancerre, Crezancy, and Thauvenay, with the majority of vineyards on chalky limestone "caillottes" soil, and the remainder on chalky-clay "terres blanches." The **2013 François Crochet Sancerre (\$25.99)** begins with subtle hints of green plum and melon, before aromas of wet rocks and lemon juice set your mouth to watering. This is seemingly both sunny and cool. The palate starts with good intensity and breadth, before turning bracingly pure, and finishes with an echo of the stoniness first encountered.

For a Sancerre blanc from a different mold, let's visit Vincent Gaudry, who was certified Biodynamic in 2004. The **2011 Vincent Gaudry "L'Esprit de Rudolf" Sancerre (\$30.99)** is his homage to Rudolf Steiner, the wellspring of Biodynamic viticulture. Take a sniff and a sip, and you recognize that you are in the presence of an individualistic wine. The grapes for this cuvée come from an old vine parcel planted in flinty "silex" soil. Intriguingly, the wine is balanced between richness and verve; there's lime and fig, wet sand and almond milk, lemon blossom and hazelnut, all dancing in dialectic, the palpable tension never resolving.

Next stop, Montlouis-sur-Loire, and Le Rocher des Violettes! The **2012 Le Rocher des Violettes "Touche-Mitaine" Montlouis Sur Loire (\$18.99)** is sourced from 30-year-old Chenin Blanc vines. The overall aim is length and elegance over richness. If anyone finds any fat here, please send me a line. For those people who ask for a dry white, this is one of the driest whites this side of a manzanilla sherry. The crispest side of apple and pear mingle with honeyed blossom on the nose, but there's no mistaking the insistent slate-like depths of this knife-edged wine. While you won't lose your wallet or your life, you will herein find a thrill akin to a close brush with danger.

Drifting along, we now find ourselves in the prime red wine territory of Bourgueil, at Domaine de la Chevalerie, in the Caslot family since 1640. Today, Pierre Caslot, son Emmanuel, and daughter Stephanie continue the tradition. The **2010 Domaine de la Chevalerie "Bretèche" Bourgueil (\$26.99)** comes from a higher elevation, non-estate site of southwestern exposure, with limestone-clay soil. A wonderful beam of pure cassis, yoked to cracked pepper, lentil, and nori, starts things off. A round and supple palate is gently lifted by bright acidity, giving a crunchy, juicy dimension. A dried, dusty, spicy tinge garlands the pure fruit of this lightly tannic Cabernet Franc.

Across the river sits Chinon, which offers a totally different take on Cabernet Franc. The wines of Bordeaux fired Alliet's passion, and while the tastes and aromas of the **2011 Philippe Alliet "Vieilles Vignes" Chinon (\$29.99)** are still very much Chinon, stylistically the wine winks back over its shoulder at the source of its inspiration. Roast herbs, mineral, old leather, and soy sauce aromas emerge, then the wine skews to earth and spice on the palate; paprika and herb notes float on top of flavors of cherry and plum. Looking for a red that embodies the "not fruit" end of the wine continuum? Seek no more!



A little ways on, in Anjou, Tony Bainbridge captures "red lips" in a bottle. The **2013 Bainbridge and Cathcart "Cuvée Rouge aux Lèvres" Vin de France (\$19.99)** is a 100 percent Grolleau cuvée, from 85-year-old vines. This is red wine at its light-hearted, refreshing best. Tart, dark fruit, with spice and crushed geranium accents, a plush texture, powdery tannins, and a resolutely puckery, spice-tinged finish. It's somehow both juicy and thoroughly dry, slightly fizzy, and an outstanding value.

Lastly, Savennières, and Damien Laureau. You are forgiven if you want more than a little sip of the **2013 Damien Laureau "Les Petites Gorgées de Damien" Savennières (\$24.99)**. With both seductive body and plenty of cut, this is sharp! A core of sweet nuttiness, surrounded by citrus pith and rock, leads into a full texture, which swiftly turns to lemon juice and, yes, more aggressive minerality. What is that slow hiss? Uh-oh, my inner tube, and my reverie, is deflating. I'll never make it all the way to the Atlantic. Just as well, my feet and hands were pruning up, and that's more than enough wine for any afternoon.

OFF THE BEATEN PATH *Alsatian Wines to Shake Up 2015*

Separated physically from Germany by the river Rhine, and from most of France by the Vosges Mountains, depending on wars and political haggling, Alsace has sometimes been a part of Germany, and sometimes a part of France. The language, culture, food, and wine are reflective of this unique history. Today, over 90% of the wine made in Alsace is white, with sandstone, granite, limestone, clay, marl, alluvial and schist soils contributing a vibrant acidity and unique mineral expression to these distinct French wines. Unlike other wine regions, all of the wine made in Alsace is AOC-designated, ensuring consistent and high-quality winemaking. Next generation producers are taking advantage of the pleasant climate (the lowest rainfall and most abundant sunshine in France) and technological advances to bring their houses into the future. So committed are they to their history of creative winemaking, even the smallest growers produce at least six to eight different wines each year. With its timbered houses and blush-colored stone churches, Alsace is a charming, vibrant, and welcoming part of France worthy of armchair travel (or actual exploration!) in 2015. Santé!

Located in Eguisheim, Charles Baur was established in 1930, when Albert Baur purchased the farmhouse that currently houses the facilities of the estate. In 1948, his son Charles and daughter-in-law Anne began bottling and marketing the wine that the family was producing. Armand Baur took the reins in 1980 after earning a degree in enology, and now manages the organically-farmed estate in and around Eguisheim with his son, Arnaud, also an enology & viticulture graduate. Their Grand Cru parcels in Eichberg and Pfersigberg produce some of the most respected and admired wines in the region.



Alsace is well known for its aromatic varieties, and most houses produce a blend which is meant to be an accessible, entry-level, affordable white. “Edelzwicker” (literally “noble mixture”) or “Gentil” are terms you might find on such bottles.

Frequently, they are a field blend of Pinot Gris, Pinot Blanc, Riesling, Gewürztraminer, Sylvaner and/or Muscat. The **2012 Charles Baur Edelzwicker*** (\$11.99) is 50% Pinot Blanc, 40% Sylvaner, and 10% Gewürztraminer. Pear, honey, citrus, and sweet cream. Medium-plus acidity with a hint of sweetness in the clean finish. Looking to start learning about the wines of Alsace? This easy, accessible wine is the perfect place to begin.

Wolfberger Crémant d’Alsace Brut Rosé (\$21.99) Beyond the boundary of Champagne, you can find French fizz from 52 seemingly different appellations. Today, around 50% of all Crémant made in France comes from Alsace,



and 20% of those are made by the cooperative Wolfberger. Indeed, within France, Crémant d’Alsace is the number one most consumed sparkling wine. Rigorous quality rules mean that one can have confidence that no matter which bottle of Crémant d’Alsace one picks, it will be elegant and delicious. Wolfberger, based in Eguisheim, is a cooperative of 750 growers and is internationally recognized as a top producer of Crémant d’Alsace.

AOC Crémant D’Alsace dictates that the sparkling wine must undergo its second fermentation in the bottle, and must also spend a minimum of nine months on its lees. The Wolfberger is made of 100% Pinot Noir, the only red variety permitted in Alsatian Crémant. Cranberry, strawberry, and red cherry with medium-plus acidity and a fine, creamy mousse. Perfect for entertaining as an aperitif or with fish, chicken or cheeses.



2011 Marcel Deiss “Berckem” (\$36.99) Located in Bergheim, the Deiss family has been making wine since 1744. Current winemaker Jean-Michel Deiss cares for 26 hectares in nine communes, where he applies organic and biodynamic practices in viticulture and winemaking. As a result, each of his wines is a pure expression of varietal and site. Each vintage, Jean-Michel creates a special blend of 13 varieties from the commune of Berckem, an elegant and balanced wine. This starts with aromas of lychee, citrus, and wet rocks, with notes of jasmine and honeysuckle. This manages to achieve both a juicy freshness and considerable palate weight, with medium-plus acidity and a long finish. This wine would be outstanding with spicy Thai or Indian food. Warning: it might make you yearn for warmer temperatures, bright sunshine, laughing with friends, and being barefoot on a terrace edged with flowers!

—Sarah Covey

EXPLORE CHEVERNY *Through the Wines of Philippe Tessier*

The Loire Valley's vast geographical and climatic diversity makes it one of the most eclectic wine regions in the world. Unfortunately, it's a region often underrated by the modern consumer. Some wine lovers get stuck at Sancerre or Vouvray, failing to explore the more than 80 different appellations that provide opportunities for every palate and wallet.

One of my favorite appellations is Cheverny. While Cabernet Franc and Chenin Blanc tend to dominate in the Loire, winemakers in Cheverny often blend varieties like Pinot Noir, Gamay, and Côt (Malbec) for the reds, and Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, and Menu Pineau for the whites. Philippe Tessier is a small producer making both Cheverny Rouge and Blanc and the even more obscure Cour-Cheverny. His popularity has been growing each year, as have his prices, but his wines still provide an excellent value. I hope these tasting notes will encourage you to adventure into the unknown and explore the lesser known appellations of the Loire Valley.

The **2013 Philippe Tessier "Le Point du Jour" Cheverny Rouge (\$22.99)** consists of 70% Pinot Noir and 30% Gamay. There is a certain aromatic quality to this wine that I am constantly searching for in red wines. It's a quality I often have trouble describing, until a friend of

mine hit the nail on the head with his description. He explained that in French they say, "the little fruits of the forest," which nails it perfectly: the random nameless berries and fruits that grow on bushes, as well as the bramble, the flowers, the forest itself. It also has aromas of pine cones, bark, wet stone, rose petals and violets, but it doesn't end there. There are spices like cardamom, clove and thyme. It's light in body, with high acidity and just the right amount of tannins to hold its structure. On the palate there is plenty of crushed peppercorn, rosemary, and slate-like minerality. This is a glass of wine I never want to put down.

The **2013 Philippe Tessier Cheverny Blanc (\$18.99)** left us wondering why more winemakers don't use funky blends like this one. The Cheverny Blanc consists of Sauvignon Blanc blended with Chardonnay and Menu Pineau, and the result is spectacular. The key to this wine is its intense minerality. The aromas are that of sea salt, melon, apple, citrus fruits and wet stone. It is very bright and high in acidity, but with a resounding mid-palate weight making for a rounder wine. Nectarines, peaches, blood orange and lemon curd come across on the palate with a backbone of salinity, crushed slate, and herbs.

—Olivia Ragni

BIODYNAMIC ALSACE *The Champ and the Challenger*

Domaine Zind Humbrecht is possibly the best producer in Alsace, creating perfectly balanced, dry whites that are simply heavenly.

The Humbrecht family's involvement in wine can be traced back to the 1600s, and the vineyards have been Biodynamic since 2002. Olivier's wines are all about the aromatics, and the intensity of his **2011 Zind Humbrecht Pinot Blanc (\$21.99)** blew me away. The nose is full of honeysuckle, snowbell flowers, apricot and pears. The fruit continues on the palate when all of a sudden you're smacked with high acid, slate, wet stone, and a steely, long, dry, and satisfying finish. The **2012 Zind Humbrecht Riesling (\$24.99)** has aromas of beeswax, passionfruit, vanilla, and crushed stones. The palate has refreshing acidity, notes of pear and nectarine, with a crisp finish. 92 points *WE*, 90 points *WS*. While the **2012 Zind Humbrecht Gewürztraminer (\$24.99)** smells of pears, white peaches, lychee and snap peas, the fruit is accompanied by notes of white pepper, roses, clove, wet stone, and a hint of smoked meat. 91 points *WS*.



Bott-Geyl is an up and coming producer in Alsace. Winemaker Jean-Christophe Bott took the reins in 1993, shortly after he converted to Biodynamic farming. He is making incredibly terroir-driven wines. The **2011 Bott-Geyl "Les Éléments" Riesling (\$18.99)** is their introductory dry Riesling, and a steal for under \$20. The nose is bright with notes of lemon curd, lime zest and meringue. Enticing acidity, orange zest, white peaches, and a bit of salinity shine through the palate with a steely, spicy finish. Bott-Geyl also has some Grand Cru sites, such as Sonnenglanz, which is positioned to get even less rain than the rest of Alsace, which bodes well for Pinot Gris. If you're looking for something rich and decadent, the **2010 Bott-Geyl Sonnenglanz Pinot Gris Grand Cru (\$39.99)** is perfect. It has a beautiful golden hue, with apricot, orange marmalade and almond notes. It's surprisingly floral and with a hint of botrytis. It's full-bodied, medium-sweet and balanced with high acidity. Pairs perfectly with fruit tarts, cheeses, or enjoy on its own.

—Olivia Ragni

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