

WINES OF THE TIMES

Wine Bargains of the Loire Valley



Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

By ERIC ASIMOV
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AMONG the many wonderful, distinctive red wines in the world, those from the Loire Valley may well get the least respect in proportion to their superb quality.

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Tasting Report

The wine panel tasted 20 bottles from the Loire Valley in France. Click on each name in the list below to see its label, rating and more information.

It does little good to wonder why. That this has been true for many years, despite the occasional ravings of committed Loire lovers, breeds a certain fatalistic acceptance.

So let's concede that although we may speak warmly and openly here about the many reasons to love Loire reds, they will nonetheless remain our little secret. Regardless of the pleasure they offer, and the fact that they are relatively inexpensive, we need not worry that they will suddenly be in great demand. Not even the most curious newcomers are likely to cross the moat of public indifference to see what all the bargains are about.

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1. DOMAINE DE LA BUTTE

Domaine de la Butte Bourgueil
La Pied de la Butte ***

\$16
Beautifully balanced and easy to drink with flavors of raspberries, herbs and minerals.



Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Importer: Adventures in Wine, Daly City, Calif.

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2. CATHÉRIE & PIERRE BRETON

3. OLEK-MERY

4. BERNARD BAUDRY

5. DOMAINE DE LA CHANTELEUSERIE

6. PHILIPPE ALLIET

7. COULY-DUTHEIL

8. DOMAINE DE PALLUS

9. JEAN-MAURICE RAFFAULT

10. CHARLES JOGUET

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Tasting Coordinator: Bernard Kirsch

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which is what happens when winemakers who know better settle for harmless or incompetent.

In a quest of the good, the wine panel recently tasted 20 bottles from Chinon and Bourgueil. For the tasting, Florence Fabricant and I were joined by Raj Vaidya, head sommelier at Daniel, and Bernard Sun, beverage director for Jean-Georges Management.

Let me get the usual qualifications out of the way. A tasting of 20 bottles from a region like the Loire is by no means all-encompassing. It's a snapshot of what's available. Our favorites are all very good wines, but we do not suggest they are the best the region has to offer.

Their loss. Personally, I believe Loire reds are always a top choice regardless of the occasion. For large gatherings, I can think of no better combination of quality and value than gamays from the Touraine region. These wines, made from the same grape as Beaujolais, are lively and fresh yet with a mineral earthiness that makes them interesting.

Wines made from ct, as malbec is called along the Loire, are another good choice — my favorite malbecs all seem to come from the Loire, rather than from the regions that claim malbec as their own: Cahors in southwestern France, and Argentina.

I haven't even mentioned the odds and ends that sometimes wash up on these shores, a Loire [pinot noir](#), say; or a pineau d'Aunis, an ancient grape that can be exceptional; or the wonderful whites, or even the most significant red grape in the Loire, cabernet franc.

The Loire's most widely available reds are made from cabernet franc, including the best, most expensive and perhaps the longest-lived Loire reds, the Saumur-Champignys from Clos Rougeard. The Clos Rougeards are hard to find, though not impossible. But wines from Chinon and Bourgueil, the two biggest red wine appellations in the Touraine region of the Loire? No problem — unless you're looking for them on a restaurant wine list. Then they become scarce.

I've often thought that I could gauge certain wine lists by whether they include some good Loire reds. The wines are versatile with all sorts of foods, including, surprisingly, Asian cuisines. The key, of course, is whether they are good.

As with every other region, the Loire produces plenty of wines that are harmless, incompetent or just plain cynical,

It's generally easier to find Chinons than Bourgueils, and that was reflected in our lineup, which included 15 Chinons and just 5 Bourgueils. We arbitrarily did not include wines from the smaller appellation of St.-Nicolas-de-Bourgueil. We also sought out the most recent vintages, largely 2007 and 2006. Neither was considered a particularly good vintage, but we found plenty of enjoyable wines.

Those we liked best were lively, balanced, nuanced and complex, with the sort of lithe agility that makes them great with food. We tended to reject those that seemed to strive for power at the expense of a sense of place, or those that seemed out of balance.

Our favorite was a Bourgueil, the 2007 Domaine de la Butte, a fairly new domaine started by Jacky Blot, a vigneron who made his name with chenin blancs at Domaine de la Taille aux Loups in Montlouis. The Pied de la Butte cuvée, intended for early drinking, was savory and delicious, a kind of idealized version of the Bourgueils and Chinons that used to be the reds of choice in so many Paris bistros.



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Our No. 2 wine was also a Bourgueil, the '07 Nuits d'Ivresse from Cathérine and Pierre Breton, who make a range of excellent cabernet francs from several Loire appellations. I loved its freshness and earthy complexity. Its easy drinkability, perhaps, explains its name, Nuits d'Ivresse, or drunken nights. Nuits d'Ivresse is also noteworthy because it is made with only the tiniest amount of sulfur, a stabilizer, so it requires careful shipping and storage in cool conditions.

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Best Value \$22

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Nuits d'Ivresse 2007

Delicious smoky fruit, earth and mineral flavors, with herbal accents. (Louis/Dressner Selections, New York)

Olek-Mery Chinon Cuvée des Tireaux 2006

\$19

★★ ½ (Two and a Half Stars)

Fresh and lively with rich aromas and flavors of red fruits and earth. (Rosenthal Wine Merchant, New York)

Bernard Baudry Chinon Les Granges 2008

\$17

★★ ½ (Two and a Half Stars)

Funky and complex, with smoky, earthy fruit and herbal flavors.

(Louis/Dressner Selections)

Domaine de la Chanteleuserie Bourgueil

\$15

★★ (Two Stars)

Vieilles Vignes 2006

Jean-Maurice Raffault Chinon

\$26

★★ (Two Stars)

Clos des Capucins 2006

Complex flavors of fruit, tobacco and spice with a dollop of oak. (V.O.S. Selections, New York)

Charles Joguet Chinon

\$30

★★ (Two Stars)

Les Varennes du Grand Clos 2006

Rich and savory but a bit out of balance.

(Kermit Lynch Wine Merchant)

Straightforward yet enticing with sedate flavors of red fruit, spices and minerals. (Kermit Lynch Wine Merchant, Berkeley, Calif.)

Philippe Alliet Chinon Vieilles Vignes 2007

\$30

★★ (Two Stars)

Fresh and floral with forceful fruit and herbal flavors.

(Michael Skurnik Wines/A Daniel Johnnes Selection, Syosset, N.Y.)

Couly-Dutheil Chinon

\$18

★★ (Two Stars)

Baronnie Madeleine 2007

Rich and saturated with plummy fruit flavors.

(Frank-Lin International, San Jose, Calif.)

Domaine de Pallus Chinon

\$20

★★ (Two Stars)

Les Pensées de Paullus 2006

Rich texture, with floral aromas and rounded, powerful fruit flavors.

(The Rare Wine Company, Vineburg, Calif.)

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