

1. Introduction to France

France has a long history of wine, with large-scale vine growing being practised in the period of Roman Gaul, preceded by planting of wines in the Greek colony today called Marseille, and by wines having been brought in from Italy. Initially, vines were only planted in the south of the country; for example, in the first century CE in the Rhône valley and probably near to Bordeaux with its easy access to the sea for trading.

The major expansion of vineyards came later under Charlemagne (crowned Holy Roman Emperor in 800 CE) and then during the period of the monasteries after 1000 CE. The Middle Ages saw the establishment of important export markets in England, Scotland, Flanders and Holland, with the key markets developing because major rivers and the sea facilitated the movement of wine. Because of the difficulty of transporting wine overland, the capital, Paris, was supplied by vineyard areas close to it or on major rivers. These included vineyards very close to Paris (now abandoned), Auxerre and Chablis, and the vineyards of the Loire River.

The 17th to 19th centuries saw a huge expansion of exported wine, especially from Bordeaux, eventually leading to the classification system of 1855 (see [Key Developments in the History of Bordeaux](#)). The key development was the draining of the marshes in the Médoc by Dutch engineers in the 17th century. This provided extensive land suitable for viticulture due to the fast-draining, gravelly soils revealed by this work. Ports close to Bordeaux became the key trading channel for wine destined for the north of Europe and Paris.

However, the development of the Bordeaux region was then followed by a series of new challenges in the vineyards in the second half of 19th century: powdery mildew, downy mildew, black rot and phylloxera. The industry only fully recovered in the early 20th century as solutions were first found and then implemented on an industry-wide scale. During the phylloxera crisis, many displaced French wine makers settled in the French colony of Algeria and made wine to export to France, a trade which continued into the early 1970s (see further in South of France below).

In common with other European Union (EU) countries, France reduced its land under vine considerably through the impetus of the EU vine pull scheme. The total area under vine, including for table grapes and brandy, fell by one-third between 1970 and the early 2010s.¹



GRAPE GROWING

Climate

Due to the size of France, the varying climate will be dealt with under the individual regions, which will be dealt with in Chapters 2–10. The latitude of the grape growing regions ranges from 42–49° N and conditions vary markedly between, for example, northerly Atlantic-influenced Muscadet, continental Burgundy and Mediterranean Provence.

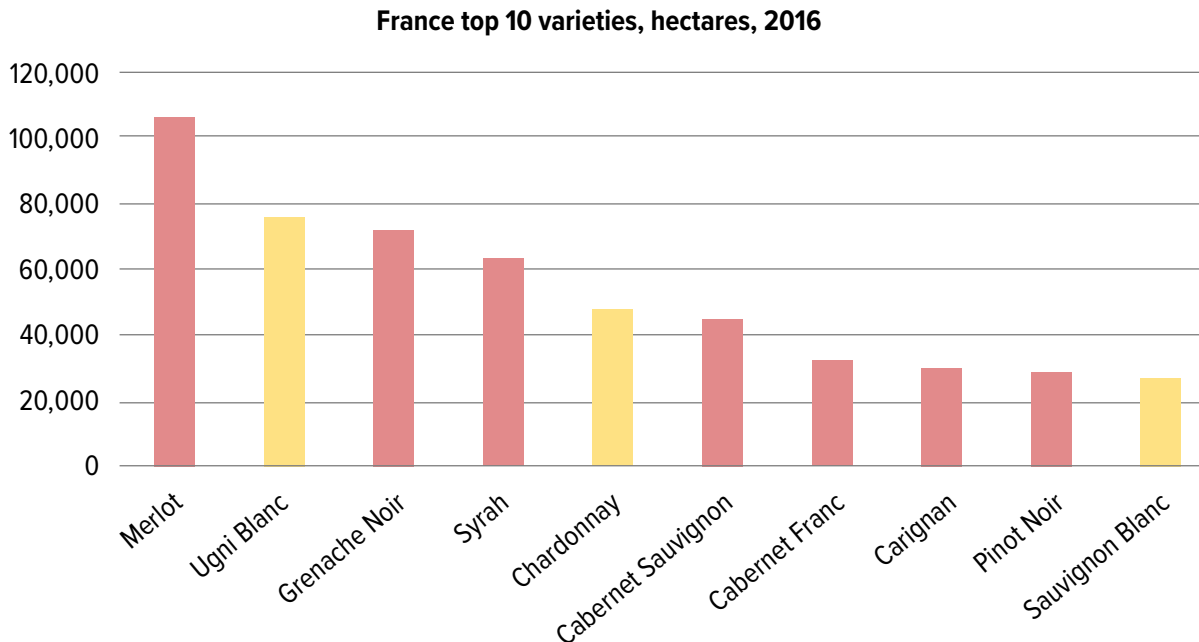
Vineyard management

With the exception of the continued use of bush vines in parts of the south of France, virtually all French vineyards are planted at high density with vines trained on trellises. The vines are often trained with the cane-replacement pruned Guyot system with vertical shoot positioning (VSP).

The number of hectares of organic grape growing has increased rapidly in the last decade. The number of hectares of vineyard certified organic and in conversion increased by 71 per cent between 2011 and 2019, which represented 14 per cent of the national vineyard in 2019.²

Grape varieties

France's grape varieties are strongly associated with its individual wine regions and will therefore be dealt with under the regions. The top 10 varieties are shown in the following chart. The popularity of Merlot reflects its dominance in Bordeaux and its planting for *Indication géographique protégée* (IGP) wines in Languedoc. The high figure for Ugni Blanc is due to it being grown for Cognac and Armagnac in south-west France.



Source: Anderson & Signe,³ note: these figures include grapes grown for wine and brandy.

WINEMAKING

With many different wine regions, there are few generalisations to be made about winemaking in France; therefore, winemaking will be mainly dealt with under the individual regions. Enrichment in the form of chaptalisation was invented in France and is much used in cooler regions, although less so in recent years due to a warmer climate and better canopy management. Maturation in barrels (small or large) has long been a standard part of French winemaking, supported by a large cooperage industry with a high reputation in France and around the world.

French winemaking is supported by a large scientific sector devoted to viticulture and vinification, including major institutions based in Bordeaux and Montpellier.

WINE LAW AND REGULATIONS

In the 20th century the French wine industry was shaped by INAO (founded 1935; originally the *Institut national des appellations d'origine*, now called the *Institut national de l'origine et de la qualité*). It oversaw the creation of the *Appellation d'origine contrôlée* (AOC) system, and from 2009 also included oversight of IGP wines. The AOCs embed a commitment to geographically defined appellations that also include detailed rules about methods of production (varieties allowed in an AOC, planting density, allowed training systems, maximum yields, minimum alcohol levels, required length of maturation of wine before release, earliest date the wine can be sold). This system is based on the idea of *terroir*.

Indication Géographique Protégée (IGP) wines typically come from larger areas than AOC wines (though, for example, Bordeaux AOC is very large), have fewer regulations and allow higher yields.

There are three levels of IGP:

- Regional IGPs, e.g. IGP Pays d'Oc
- Departmental IGPs, e.g. IGP Pays d'Hérault
- Small zone IGPs: e.g. IGP Collines Rhodaniennes

Due to the commercial success of varietally labelled wine from countries such as Australia, in 2009 France, along with the rest of the EU, agreed to allow the name of the grape variety to appear on the label alongside the name of the appellation (e.g. Bourgogne AOC Chardonnay). In addition, the simple 'wine' category without a geographical indication, called Vin de France, the successor to vin de table, can now carry the name of the variety or varieties and the vintage of the wine.

WINE BUSINESS

The average size of vineyard holdings in France is much higher than Italy or Spain (10.5 ha).⁴ Co-operatives continue to be very important for smaller growers. They process half of all AOP wine and 70 per cent of IGP wine.⁵

Wine consumption per capita has been in long term and fairly steep decline in France, with consumption now less than half the level of a century ago.⁶ Three-quarters of volume sales by producers in France are through small and medium-sized local companies or private label, meaning that the sector is highly fragmented. The largest company in 2017 was Castel Frères (12 per cent of total volume of sales), followed by Carrefour France and ITM Enterprises.⁷

France exports less wine than either Spain or Italy by volume, but is the world leader in terms of value by a significant margin (57 per cent more exported by value than Italy and nearly four times as much by value as Spain).⁸ France is also a large importer of wine, mainly at the inexpensive level. This continues to be a source of tension between French growers and those importing the wine, mainly from Spain.

References

- 1 Walters, D. 2016, *Imagine a world without Lafite ...*, BBR Blog (retrieved 30 September 2022)
- 2 *Le filière viticole bio*, Produire Bio, (retrieved 30 September 2022)
- 3 Anderson K. and Nelgen S., *Which Winegrape Varieties are Grown Where?* Revised edition 2020, University of Adelaide Press (retrieved 30 September 2022)
- 4 *Key variables on vineyard holdings*, Eurostat (retrieved 4 October 2022)
- 5 *Mieux connaître les Vignerons Coopérateurs*, La Coopération Agricole (retrieved 4 October 2022)
- 6 Holmes, A. J. and Anderson, K. 2017, *Convergence in national alcohol consumption patterns: New global indicators*. Journal of Wine Economics, 12(2), 117–148 (retrieved 4 October 2022)
- 7 *Wine in France*, *Euromonitor* report June 2018, subscription only
- 8 2021 data. *State of the Vitiviniculture World Market, June 2022*, OIV, p. 14 (retrieved 4 October 2022)