

The Loire Valley

The Loire is France's longest river. However, the most important vineyards of the Loire Valley only lie along the last few hundred kilometres of the river as it flows west towards the Atlantic. This is a very varied wine region that is made up of a large number of appellations. No one signature style is produced here; instead, there is an incredibly diverse range of white, red and rosé still wines.

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The Loire Valley can be loosely grouped into four sub-regions. From east to west they are the Central Vineyards, Touraine, Anjou-Saumur and Nantais. These are not appellations themselves and, furthermore, unlike most other French regions there is no regional generic appellation for the whole of the Loire. (Production of Rosé de Loire and Crémant de Loire is focused in Anjou and Saumur respectively.) There is, however, an IGP – Val de Loire – that covers the whole region. These wines are typically straightforward wines displaying freshness, a light body and simple fruit flavours.

CLIMATE AND GRAPE GROWING

The different sub-regions of the Loire Valley are subject to different climatic influences. Overall the climate is cool, but the Central Vineyards, which are well inland, have a continental climate whereas the Nantais region, with its coastal location, experiences a maritime climate. The vineyards of Anjou are slightly warmer and drier than might be expected given their proximity to the ocean. They are protected by the Mauges hills and certain vineyards there benefit from warm stony soils. By comparison Touraine, which is further inland, has a cooler, wetter climate and clay soils.

The vineyards lie at the northern limit for the production of the grape varieties grown, and variations in the weather patterns from year to year can mean that vintages differ widely. Fungal disease linked to high levels of rainfall can be a particular issue. As with many other cool climates the best vineyards tend to be those that experience the most sunshine and warmth. The most desirable locations are therefore those with a southerly aspect, generally on the mid-slope, and facing the river for extra heat and reflected light.

WHITE GRAPE VARIETIES AND WINE STYLES

Many grape varieties are permitted in the Loire. Only the most important local varieties are discussed here.

Sauvignon Blanc

Sauvignon Blanc is mainly grown in the Central Vineyards and Touraine. The Central Vineyards area has by far the smallest production of the four sub-regions, but it contains two of the most prestigious appellations for Sauvignon Blanc wines: **Sancerre** and **Pouilly-Fumé**. These vineyards are located on very chalky, well-drained stony soil. The wines from these regions tend to be dry

and high in acidity, with hints of green apple and wet stones. It is often said that those from Pouilly-Fumé have subtle smoky notes. Certain individual villages such as Chavignol, and vineyards such as Les Monts Damnés (both in Sancerre), have created high reputations for particularly expressive wines. Some of these wines are able to evolve in the bottle, although in most cases Sancerre and Pouilly-Fumé are not wines for ageing.

Winemaking techniques vary from producer to producer. Gentle pneumatic pressing and temperature-controlled stainless steel vats are used to create fresh, fruity wines. Certain producers ferment and mature their wines in old oak vessels and keep the wines on the lees to give them a broader texture. A few use new oak. Whether or not MLF takes place depends on the style of wine the producer wants to create, and is most likely to be encouraged in cooler vintages in order to lower the acidity of the wines.

To the west and south of Sancerre, Sauvignon Blanc is also produced from vineyards lying on the tributaries of the Loire. Here the most important appellation is **Menetou-Salon**, which provides a source of more moderately priced wines made in the same style as Sancerre and Pouilly-Fumé.

The majority of Sauvignon Blanc, however, comes from the Touraine region. Here, this grape is used to

One of the top vineyards in Sancerre. Note the well-drained chalky soil in the foreground and the section of vineyard in the background that has been cleared for replanting.



Chenin Blanc bush vines in Savennières.



better known for dry wines, that are often (but not always) matured in new oak.

Savennières and Coteaux du Layon are located towards the west of Anjou-Saumur. The relatively warm, dry climate here compared with that of Touraine leads to wines that are medium- to full-bodied, and less floral in style. **Savennières** produces full-bodied Chenin Blanc in a dry style. Air circulation around these well-exposed vineyards impedes the development of noble rot, but enables late-harvested Chenin Blanc grapes to be used for full-bodied, complex dry wines. The best wines are noted for their ability to evolve for decades in the bottle. **Coteaux du Layon** makes some of the most renowned sweet wines in the region. The appellation is located in the sheltered valley of the River Layon to the south of the Loire, where noble rot develops well. The two most favoured sites, Quarts de Chaume and Bonnezeaux, have their own appellations and rank among the world's greatest sweet wines.

Melon Blanc

This variety is sometimes referred to as Muscadet or Melon de Bourgogne. It ripens early and is frost-resistant, making it well suited to the cool climate.

The vast majority of Melon Blanc is grown in the Nantais region, which lies mainly to the south of the Loire as it reaches the Atlantic. The wines are generally known as Muscadet and are made in a number of different appellations, usually with Muscadet in their title. The appellation of **Muscadet** covers the widest area but the greatest production comes from the more highly regarded appellation of **Muscadet Sèvre et**

Maine. All wines from the Muscadet appellations are dry with medium alcohol (the maximum permitted alcoholic strength for the wines is 12% abv). Traditionally, the wines were fermented in large old oak vessels but now concrete or stainless steel vats are more common. The wines display high acidity, a light body and subtle green fruit flavours. They should be drunk young.

Muscadet (Sèvre et Maine) Sur Lie is a speciality from the area. The wine is bottled in the spring following the vintage, having spent the winter on its lees (*lie* is the French for lees). This lees contact gives the wines a richer texture. The wine is handled very little, to retain delicacy and freshness.

RED GRAPE VARIETIES AND WINE STYLES

Cabernet Franc

Cabernet Franc is well suited to the Loire as it flowers and ripens early. It is made in a range of styles, dependent on site climate and soil, as well as winemaking techniques. In Touraine, Cabernet Franc is grown in **Chinon** to the south of the Loire and **Bourgueil** and Saint-Nicolas-de-Bourgueil to the north. In all of these appellations light, fruity wines for early drinking tend to come from sandy soils, whereas fuller-bodied, more tannic versions come from south-facing slopes with limestone and clay soils. Some producers choose to mature their wines in oak, and the best wines have the capacity to evolve in bottle over many years.

To the west, Saumur and **Saumur-Champigny** also produce red wines from Cabernet Franc. Overall the wines here tend to be lighter in body and tannin than those from the Touraine appellations, but display juicy berry fruit and

sometimes floral notes. They tend to be best drunk young, particularly Saumur, and can often be served chilled. There are, however, a few producers making fuller-bodied styles that are capable of further ageing.

Other Black Varieties

Gamay is the second most planted black grape variety in the Loire and is mainly planted in Touraine and Anjou where it makes fruity, usually early drinking wines. A small amount of Pinot Noir is grown in the Central Vineyards. The best sites are usually reserved for Sauvignon Blanc, and so these red wines tend to be quite rare and generally light in style.

ROSÉ WINE STYLES

Rosé wines are mainly produced in Anjou-Saumur with significant amounts also made in Touraine and Sancerre. **Rosé de Loire** can be produced in both Anjou-Saumur and Touraine, but in practice it is mainly made in Anjou-

Saumur. It is always dry and must have a minimum of 30 per cent Cabernet Franc and/or Cabernet Sauvignon grapes in the blend. Anjou-Saumur has another two appellations for different styles of Rosé, of which the highest quality is **Cabernet d'Anjou**. This is always medium-sweet in style and is made from a blend of **Cabernet Franc** and **Cabernet Sauvignon**. **Rosé d'Anjou** is less sweet and is made predominantly of **Grolleau** (a local high yielding black grape) blended with Cabernet Franc and other local varieties. The rosé wines of Touraine can be made from a wide array of black grape varieties and are generally dry, fresh and fruity in style. Sancerre rosé must be made from Pinot Noir and is usually pale in colour, light in body and dry with delicate fruit flavours.

Rosé wines may be made either by direct pressing or a short maceration on the skins. They are usually fermented in inert, temperature-controlled vessels to retain fruit flavours.