11

France

It's hard not to feel intimidated by French wines. I get it. Looking at some French wine labels is an exercise in staring blankly. Château blah blah? Clos something-or-other? What the heck is a cru? Can I get a translator over here?

To be fair, the French convention of labeling wine by its region came about hundreds of years ago. Even as recently as the 1970s, American winemakers labeled their wines "Chablis" or "Burgundy" because that's what the public understood to be white and red wine, regardless of the actual grape contained therein. Unfortunately, that strategy leaves out the fact that red Bordeaux is typically a cabernet sauvignon-merlot blend, or that sancerre is made with sauvignon blanc in the Loire Valley. (Um, where?) The country's appellation system doesn't necessarily help much: in addition to the three broad, national appellations (reduced from four in 2012), many regions layer on their own ranking systems. We'll deal with those in the individual sections, but it's worth a quick look at the three national classifications:

Vin de France indicates a table wine and shows the grape(s) and vintage on the label. These are generally fairly simple wines for early drinking. The intermediate level is Indication Géographique Protégée, which indicates grape, vintage, and region on the label. The uppermost level is Appellation d'Origine Protégée (AOP), formerly Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée (AOC). Though the name changed, the very strict standards are the same. As such, these categories can serve as a rough guideline to quality. However, there is another fairly easy way to navigate a French wine label: the more specific the information, the better quality the wine is likely to be. A wine labeled "Bourgogne" (the broad region) will be more basic than a wine

labeled "Charmes-Chambertin" (a specific commune), which will be more interesting than the Bourgogne but less so than a wine with "Clos Vougeot" (a vineyard) on the label. Choosing a wine using this strategy is not fail-safe, but it's a good guideline to use for one not well versed in the ins and outs of Burgundy wines (or Bordeaux or, really, a lot of other regions, French or non). And with that, let's get to the many regions of this wine-prolific country.

What You Need to Know

These wines are hailed as some of the best in the world. However, they can also seem highly overrated if their style doesn't suit your palate.

Grapes

Cabernet sauvignon and merlot are the primary red grapes grown there. Cabernet franc, petit verdot, and malbec are grown in much smaller quantities. Single varietal red wines are rarely produced; most Bordeaux are blends of the above grapes. White wines from Bordeaux are made from sauvignon blanc and sémillon, also usually blended.

What to Look For

Bordeaux is divided by the Gironde River, and the best estates are lined along the left and right banks of the river, intuitively referred to as the "Left Bank" and "Right Bank."