

Southwest France

Background

- Covers the region of Aquitaine and Gascony, bordering Spain, the Atlantic Ocean, and Bordeaux¹
- Romans named this the “Land of Water”
- Today it is the Fifth largest wine region of France with over 16,000 hectares of vines and approximately 6,000 winemakers
- Historic competitor to Bordeaux
- Contains some of the largest plantings of indigenous varieties in all of Europe
- In some areas the average vineyard size is less than 10 hectares, a contrast to the industrial-sized plantings in the Languedoc
- The wines are a natural accompaniment to the gastronomic riches of France, including foie gras, duck confit, cassoulet and Roquefort cheese

History

- 1st century - Romans spread the vine northwest from their colony in Narbonne to Gaillac
- 11th century - Benedictine monks cultivated vineyards and promoted the wine trade, focusing on selling to pilgrims passing through the region on their way to St. James at Compostela over the Pyrénées in Galicia
- 12th century - A proxy battle between France and England is essentially waged here, with wine playing an important role
 - In 1152, Eleanor of Aquitaine married Henry Plantagenet who became king of England and acquired the area from the Loire to the Pyrenees
 - The port of Bordeaux was the primary trade route; however, its wines were weak and unreliable
 - Much better wines could be found in the high country or “Haut Pays”, where the climate was warmer and quality was more consistent; however, the area was controlled by the French crown
- Beginning in the 13th century, the “police des vins” began to drive down the market for wines seen as serious competitors to English-controlled Bordeaux²
 - Bordeaux levied a heavy tax on the Haut Pays vineyards, making the Bordelais wines much less expensive for consumers in the British Isles and Low Countries
 - Haut Pays wines could not be exported until all Bordeaux wines had been sold
 - A wealthy middle class emerged who enjoyed exemption from some taxes and free navigation on the Garonne
- 1337-1453 - Hundred Years War
 - France prevails and Bordeaux is surrendered

¹ Does not include Bordeaux or Cognac, or the region east of Toulouse, which is considered Languedoc-Roussillon.

² Serious upstream rivals were Bergerac, Monbazillac, Cotes de Duras, Cahors, Buzet, Fronton and Gaillac (around Bordeaux) and St-Mont, Madiran, Paherenc du Vic-Bilh, Jurançon, Béarn and Irouléguay, further afield in Basque Country

- The English look elsewhere to fulfill their need for wine, and a new clientele, the Dutch, move into the area
- The people of Aquitaine were used to considerable independence, but now found themselves under the authority of the king of France and a much reduced wine trade
- 17th century - the Dutch desire for sweet wines led the winemakers in Bergerac to create Monbazillac, which developed a great reputation in the 18th century
- 1858 - Phylloxera hits
- 1940s - Vignerons attempt to revitalize their image as Bordeaux's "poor neighbor"
- Today the region is divided into four "sub-regions," each with its own distinctive character, climate, and grapes: Bergerac & Dordogne River, Garonne & Tarn, Lot River, and Pyrénées

Climate

- Bergerac & Dordogne
 - Maritime climate with some continental influences
 - Less rainfall and warmer temperatures than Bordeaux
 - Humidity can bring Botrytis cinerea
 - Limestone soils, as well as sandy, gravelly clay soils known as *boulbènes*
- Garonne & Tarn
 - Dry, semi-continental climate with *boulbènes*
 - Increased elevations help to provide phenolic ripeness through increased sun exposure
- Lot River
 - Warm continental climate with a long growing season and less rainfall than Bordeaux
 - Strong winds reduce disease pressure, especially at the end of the growing season
 - Gravel and iron-rich limestone clays, which are known locally as "*rougiers*" due to their reddish color, are the signature soil type
- Pyrénées
 - The climate is generally warm and dry, but cooler than inland areas like Gaillac
 - The most common soils here are limestone-rich clays and silts, often studded with pebbles laced with iron and manganese oxide, which brings a reddish tinge to some vineyards
 - Vineyards in Pays Basque occupy steep slopes and foothills of the Pyrénées mountains, offering a variety of stone types, along with varying altitudes and aspects
 - The hillside slopes are typically rich in sandstone and Jurassic limestone
 - The mountains provide a rain shadow from the more maritime climate here
 - The mountains also bring winds, called "*Le Foehn*", that add to the variety of microclimates in the valleys below

Grapes

- Bergerac & Dordogne
 - White
 - Sauvignon Blanc
 - Ugni Blanc
 - Sémillon
 - Chenin Blanc
 - Muscadelle
 - Ondenc
 - Red
 - Cabernet Sauvignon
 - Cabernet Franc
 - Merlot
 - Malbec (“Auxerrois” or “Côt”)
 - Native to the province of Quercy
 - Known as the base for the “black wines of Cahors”, often used to supplement the weak claret produced in Bordeaux prior to the 18th century
 - Mid-season ripener that can have trouble achieving optimal ripeness in maritime climates
 - Flavors lean towards meaty, rustic and tannic
 - Mérille³
- Garonne & Tarn
 - White
 - Mauzac Blanc
 - Signature of Gaillac region
 - Prefers limestone soils
 - Used to make dry, sweet, and sparkling wines
 - Honeyed, green apple on the nose with high acidity
 - Len de L’el
 - Another local variety of Gaillac
 - May be used to make dry or sweet white wines with floral and citrus character
 - Mauzac Rose
 - Saint Côme (“Rousselou”)
 - Red
 - Négrette
 - Principle variety in the vineyards north of Toulouse, including Fronton
 - From the local dialect negre, meaning black
 - Well-suited to boulbènes soils
 - Makes supple and perfumed reds with moderate acidity that are best consumed young: Sometimes called the “Beaujolais of Toulouse”

³ Nearing extinction

- Cabernet Sauvignon
- Cabernet Franc
- Syrah
- Malbec
- Gamay
- Cinsault
- Tannat
 - First mentioned in Madiran, its most likely origin
 - Deeply colored, tannic grapes with marked acidity
 - Makes for powerful and ageworthy wines
 - Microoxygenation was developed in Madiran to help soften the intense astringency of the grape
- Fer Servadou
 - The signature of Marcillac
 - A dark-skinned grape variety often referred to as “Fer”, which may be a translation of the French word for iron, a reference to its hardiness, or from the Latin “ferus” meaning wild
 - Recent DNA testing places it in the Carmenet family
 - Almost wiped out during phylloxera
 - Red current, fig and pepper are signature notes along with firm tannins
 - Favors stony, iron-rich soils
- Mérille
- Jurançon Noir
- Abouriou⁴
- Prunelard⁵
- Mouyssagués⁶
- Lot River
 - Red
 - Malbec
 - Merlot
 - Tannat
 - Gamay
 - Fer Servadou
 - Prunelard⁷
- Pyrénées
 - White
 - Camaralet⁸
 - Gros Manseng

⁴ Nearing extinction

⁵ Parent-sibling relationship with Malbec

⁶ Nearing extinction

⁷ A native grape of Gaillac slowly being nursed back from near extinction; it is not currently permitted in any appellation wine

⁸ Low fertility threatens the future viability of this grape used to make full-bodied, aromatic white wines

- Petit Manseng
- Lauzet⁹
- Arrufiac
- Raffiat¹⁰
- Courbu
- Clairette Blanche
- Baroque
- Red
 - Tannat
 - Fer Servadou (known as “Pinenc” here)
 - Manseng Noir
 - Courbu Noir

Wine Styles

- Bergerac & Dordogne
 - Bergerac - Bordeaux-style red blends
 - Montravel - Bordeaux-style red and white blends
 - Pécharment - Bordeaux-style red blends made in a bold style
 - Rosette - Sweet wines from Sauvignon Blanc, Semillon and Muscadelle
 - Monbazillac - Sweet wines from Sauvignon Blanc, Semillon and Muscadelle
- Garonne & Tarn
 - Fronton - mostly rustic red wines plus rosé from Négrette and complementary varieties Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Syrah, Fer Servadou, Malbec Gamay, Cinsaut and Mérille
 - Gaillac - Red and rosé blends from Duras, Fer Servadou and Syrah; Gamay in a Beaujolais-style; white blends from Len de l'El, Mauzac, Muscadelle, Ondenc, and Sauvignon Blanc; sparkling wines from Mauzac; sweet wines from Len de l'El and Ondenc
- Lot River
 - Cahors - Deeply saturated and savory reds from Malbec
 - Marcillac - Rustic reds from Fer Servadou
- Pyrénées
 - Madiran - Barrel-aged Tannat
 - Irouléguy - Tannins red wines and full-bodied white wines, along with deeply-colored rosés

⁹ Nearing extinction

¹⁰ Only 22 acres left in the world (principle variety in Béarn AOP)

Regions

- Vin de Pays de Côtes de Gascogne
 - One of the most exported white wines of France
 - Geographically it shares the same area as Armagnac AOP
 - White wines from Courbu, Gros Manseng, Colombard, Arrufiac along with Sauvignon Blanc and Chardonnay
 - Red varieties make up less than 10 percent of production and include Tannat, Malbec, and Cabernet Sauvignon
- Fronton AOP
 - 85% red wines plus rosé
 - The vineyard area lies around the town of the same name, just to the north of Toulouse, and along the Tarn River
 - Negrette is the main grape and must comprise 50% of any blend
 - It thrives in this dry, semi-continental climate
 - Boulbène soils
 - Other permitted varieties are Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Syrah, Fer Servadou, Malbec, Gamay, Cinsault and Mérille
- Cahors AOP
 - Located equidistant from the Atlantic coast and the Mediterranean, creating continental, maritime and Mediterranean climatic influences
 - The Lot River encircles part of the town of Cahors, and vineyards are spread along its riverbanks
 - Limestone and gravel soils
 - Inky black in color, the wine is tinged with savory and herbaceous notes
 - Malbec must make up a minimum of 70%
 - May be supplemented with 30% Merlot or Tannat
 - This is the only red wine appellation in the South West that does not Relationship to Bordeaux
- Madiran AOP
 - Sits in the foothills of the Pyrenees before the Landes, the forested plain south of Bordeaux, and next to the Adour River
 - The climate is generally warm and dry, necessary to bring Tannat, its main grape, to full ripeness
 - Mainly limestone and silt soils, along with iron and manganese oxide pebbles that give a red hue to vineyards
 - Tannat must be 60-80% of any blend, but is usually 100%
 - Permitted varieties include Cab Sauv and Cab Franc (also known as Bouchy) and Fer Savadou (known here as Pinenc)
 - Typical style is for 24 months aging in new oak barrels
- Irouléguay AOP
 - The “Basque” version of Madiran
 - Faces the Pyrénées, with the best vineyards on the lower, south-facing slopes
 - Soils are sandstone and Jurassic limestone

- Mostly maritime climate with brisk northerly winds
- Tannat¹¹ and Cabernet Franc are the main grapes

¹¹ This is the source for Tannat in Uruguay