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An Introduction to French Wines



They are fabulously diverse. They brim with romance and sex appeal. They are regarded the world over as benchmarks of flavor. So why can French wines seem slightly intimidating? The truth is, French wines are complicated, in part because of their stunning variety. But in the end, that's also one of their fantastic pluses. You'll never run out of great French wines to try, which means learning about them can easily become a lifelong pleasure.

In France, "terroir" (which means the land itself, the composition of the soil) is all-important, which means there is considerable emphasis on where the grapes of any given wine are grown. In fact, one good rule of thumb is that French wines often bear the name of the region or village in which they were produced, a practice that can be confusing to anyone accustomed to seeing wines

identified by grape. Almost all red wines from Burgundy, for example, are made using Pinot Noir grapes, yet one will rarely find these words on bottle labels.

After Champagne, the most famous French wines that arrive on U.S. shores come from five regions: Bordeaux, the Loire Valley, Burgundy, Alsace, and the Rhone Valley. Certain grapes and wines are associated with each region. Although these generalizations have their exceptions, they are useful to know when you're scanning labels.

The Loire, near the Atlantic coast, is known for crisp white wines made largely from Sauvignon Blanc or Chenin Blanc grapes. These are prime partners for oysters on the half shell.

This Month's Picks

Loire Valley: The note of tropical fruit and the ripe intensity of Domaine des Baumard's Savennieres Clos du Papillon (2002, \$30) make this expression of the Chenin Blanc grape seem more like Sauvignon Blanc. Its dry, flinty finish makes it a nice table mate for lighter savory dishes, such as an herb frittata or an arugula and green-bean salad.