

In Love with the Loire
The back story on seductive French wines

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YELLOW flowers called colza dot the wine trails and hug the glistening Loire River, which winds its way through France's third largest wine-producing region. Châteaux once inhabited by nobility are carved from the white tuffeau limestone that has underlied the great vineyards for 2,000 years. Up until the 19th century, quarriers extracted the soft stone by torch or candlelight.

And then, there are the wines: Fresh, elegant and so accessible, a wine lover may be inclined to keep them and this lucrative region a secret. Not me. I'm here to share.

Perhaps more so than even Bordeaux, the Loire Valley always has intrigued me as a destination for world-class wine. Not only does the region produce the most sparkling wine outside of Champagne, but when the good people of France order wine in restaurants, it is most often from the Loire Valley. Consistently, winemakers in this region practice sustainability, or agriculture raisonnee, to craft high-quality, no-fuss food wines made from chenin blanc and Cabernet Franc. Both varietals, in my opinion, should receive more attention in the United States. They are delightful to drink, affordable and come in the full spectrum of styles, from bone dry and sparkling to sweet.

Last month, my boyfriend and I took a weekend out of our Paris vacation to visit the Loire Valley. We hopped a Rail Europe train to Tours, located in the heart of the Valley and just two hours south of Paris. Charming and centrally located, Tours is the birthplace of novelist Honore de Balzac (who comes up often in this valley) and served as a good starting point to the picturesque towns and viticultural areas Saumur, Vouvray, Touraine and Bourgueil we would visit. Our route also provided optimal views of the Loire, the longest river in France and Europe's last truly wild river. It served as a constant companion on our tasting route.

A dedication to Vouvray

Among our favorites was a visit with Gilles Feray, the proprietor at Château de Moncontour in the AOC (Appellations d'Origine Contrôlées) Vouvray, which is east of Tours and produces some of my favorite floral white wines. Vouvray, the largest white wine appellation of the Anjou-Saumur-Touraine region, is made exclusively from chenin blanc, which has been grown in the region since the fourth century.

Before a tasting, Feray, dapper and easy to talk with, took a moment to walk us through his family's estate vineyard, perched above the 15th century castle inhabited by his parents, who bought the property in 1994. Feray's daughters, Chloe and Garance, were playing in front of the grand home with their dogs, Bacchus, Oscar and Anakin, as we

made our way up the winding driveway and passed the California Sequoia trees planted on the property in the early 19th century. The girls greeted us, giggled and went on their way.

Like most châteaux in this historic region, Moncontour has a storied past. It belonged to King Charles the Seventh of France, who built it in the 15th century for his mistress. In 1789, Moncontour burned down in the French Revolution and was not resurrected until 1846, when Balzac tried to acquire it for his future wife. He did not succeed he was a gifted novelist, not a wise businessman, Feray told us but the family pays homage to him with their Cuvee Predilection, a sparkling Vouvray with refreshing apricot flavors and a hint of toast.

That said, Moncontour is not stuck in the past. Hardly. When the Feray family took over the property, Gilles Feray insisted on replanting almost all existing vines over to chenin blanc, which thrives in the siliceous-clay and limestone-clay soils. The winery operates on gravity and the grapes for some cuvées are pressed as whole clusters. Of the chateau's 60,000 case production, more than half is dedicated to sparkling wines. And it's easy to see why.

For starters, the cool climate in Vouvray ensures optimal acidity, he explained, which is balanced by the fruity character of chenin blanc, and the mineral qualities imparted by the soil. In sparkling wines, the minerals are even more pronounced. Also, excavations left from building castles and palaces across the Loire Valley resulted in hundreds of miles of underground tunnels, or ready-made cellars perfect for aging sparkling wines.

And don't underestimate the Loire river's role in the process. It provides humidity in the morning that keeps the vines cool until the sun covers them with warmth into the late afternoon, Gilles explained. In Moncontour's unquestionably elegant 2006 Cuvee Predilection Grande Reserve Du Domaine, a dry honey finish lingered on my palate for a good two minutes. I also loved the Cremant de Loire, a bright brut with aromas of cooked strawberries and flavors of watermelon.

A stop in Saumur

The following day, we headed to Saumur, a breathtakingly beautiful city located between Angers and Tours that is dominated by one of the most famous castles in France. For centuries, the area around Saumur provided stone for most of the great châteaux of the Loire Valley (as well as for Westminster Abbey in England) not to mention those limestone caves.

At Saumur's Ackerman-Remy Pannier, the largest producer in the Loire Valley, the underground limestone quarries are four miles deep and have been housing sparkling wines longer than anywhere in the region. That is because the winery's founder, Jean-Baptiste Ackerman, was the first to discover the "méthode traditionnelle" in Saumur in 1811. For 40 years, he was the only producer of sparkling wine in the entire Loire Valley.

While the sparklings were lovely, the still wines of this château have stayed with me. Ackerman-Remy Pannier has multiple labels and exports nearly half of its 2 million cases, so you should be able to find these wines locally and online. I fell hard for the 2007 Vallée des Jardins Muscadet Sèvre-et-Maine Sur Lie, a beautiful white wine for fish because of its white flower aromas and mouth-cleansing acidity and citrus flavors.

Among my favorites of the wines I tasted in the Loire Valley was the 2007 Remy Pannier Vallée Des Jardins Rosé d'Anjou, an elegant rose made from Cabernet Franc, Gamay, and Grolleau Gris, an indigenous grape found primarily in the Loire Valley. The wine had that light salmon color indicative of French roses, not to mention the aromas of strawberries and raspberries and a balanced acidity that makes them ideal for any food.

Boutique wines in Bourgueil

Eager to discover the famous red wine of this valley, we ended our visit on the unadorned estate of Amirault Yannick and his family domain, Pavillon du Grand Clos, in Bourgueil. This triangular region on the north bank of the Loire, which includes St. Nicolas de Bourgueil, features three distinct kinds of soil that produce different styles of the floral, berry-rich Cabernet Franc.

Amirault, who took over the business from his grandfather in 1977, is a pensive, philosophical winemaker. He is vocal about the globalized winemaking style (it troubles him). "A good winemaker should make a wine that he loves, not a wine that's in fashion," he says. In the tasting room, he told a great story about his 2006 Les Quartiers, a Cabernet Franc that, when released, showed bigger fruit and higher alcohol than his wines usually do. The Wine Spectator gave it a 92. Amirault's take on the wine? "When I first tasted this wine, I didn't like it because I didn't recognize myself in it," he said.

These days, he farms a total of 46 acres and painstakingly works to reflect the different terroir of the low-yielding vineyards that produce his artisan wines. Grapes from the sandy, alluvial-soil vineyards produce light and fruity wines such as the domain's La Mine. Those that come from the south-facing hillsides, where the soil has more clay and limestone, yield rich, earthy and age-worthy wines.

Together with his son, Benedict, Yannick harvests by hand, and, after years of farming without fertilizers and herbicides, is pursuing organic certification. Yannick hasn't filtered a red wine in 12 years and has used indigenous yeasts for almost as long. Like the majority of the wines I sampled during my short visit to the Loire Valley, this purity was reflected in the glass.

The limestone shined through the mineral 2005 Les Quartiers, which nearly hypnotized me with its violet aromas and meat flavors. With a single sip of that wine, I was reminded of all I would miss about this abundant valley: The magical châteaux carved out of that very limestone, and the watchful, temperate influence of the Loire.

If you go

When: Like California wine country, the best time to visit the Loire Valley is from April (when everything's blooming) to September (right before harvest). To plan a route and learn more about the 68 AOCs (Appellations d'Origine Contrôlées), visit www.loirevalleywine.com.

Special events: During the first weekend of September, winemakers guide visitors on walks along the seven wine trails with breaks for meals, wine tastings and cellar visits. For more information, visit www.vinsdeloire.fr/en_EN/.

Getting there: You can hop a Rail Europe train from Paris, but I recommend you rent a car and drive the two hours because taxis are scarce once you arrive in the Loire Valley. Remember, most rental car companies in Europe stock very few automatics. So book early if you need one.

Language: Speak some French. Tasting room attendants and some winemakers speak English but if you want to talk wine, it's best to brush up or bring a translator.

The wines

2006 Chteau Moncontour Cuvee Predilection Grande Reserve Du Domaine: Harvested manually, this Cuvee is made from the estate's best vines. Off-dry with a fine mousse and aromas and flavors of apricot and honey. www.snooth.com.

2007 Remy Pannier Vall e Des Jardins Ros d'Anjou: A classic, dry French rose, it is made from Cabernet Franc, Gamay, and Grolleau Gris. Light salmon color with aromas and flavors of strawberries and raspberries. Great acidity. www.wine.com.

2007 Vall e des Jardins Muscadet S vre-et-Maine Sur Lie: White flower aromas, mouth-cleansing acidity and citrus on the palate make this ideal for fish. www.wine.com.

2005 Yannick Amirault Bourgueil Les Quartiers 2005: A Cabernet Franc reflective of Bourgueil's limestone vineyards. It is meaty with dark berry fruits and a balanced finish. www.caveprivee.com.