

Plus ça change...?



From classic cuvées to modern organic pet’ nats, France is still at the top of its game when it comes to producing wine. Thanks to the volume-driven nature of British supermarkets, many smaller winemakers are increasingly turning to the UK’s independent retail sector as a selling platform.

By **Tanwen Dawn-Hiscox**

IT’S HARD TO talk about wine without mentioning France. Our Continental neighbour has long produced some of the world’s best-known bottles, be they the fine wines of Champagne, the Grand Crus of Bordeaux, or the high-volume rosés of the Côtes de Provence.

These are now supplemented by a new gang of natural, organic, biodynamic producers, showing that France has something for everyone.

That includes the UK’s independent retail sector, into which smaller French winemakers are hoping to sell their wares, eager to avoid the volume-driven environment of the supermarkets.

Here in the UK, we get a lot of our fine wine (and plonk) from across the pond. According to data collected by Business France, our neighbour is by far our most significant supplier, in terms of value. (It is the third, after Italy and Australia, if we’re talking volumes.)

This is why the independent sector is the first port of call for many French wine producers, according to Daniel Lambert, a wine importer whose eponymous company supplies retail, wholesale and on-trade.

“In the majority of independent shops, where retailers and their customers like to think in terms of quality not quantity, at least 50% of the range will be French,” he tells *FFD*. “People who are interested in wine or have some knowledge of wines go there to find them.”

There’s good reason for this. Not only is it geographically well-placed to sell in the UK, France has a reputation for making great wine and, as Thibault Lavergne, director of Wine Story says, Brits are suckers for a brand.

“When I say brands, it’s not just companies, it’s the general idea of brands, particular



More and more French wines are breaking from tradition



WINES OF FRANCE

Looking to stock something other than a Chablis or a Saint-Émilion? These alternatives will liven up your shelves without taking your customers too far out of their comfort zones.

Chenin Sec Le Colombier 2021

Chateau de La Calonniere, Loire Valley, in Organic conversion

This 100% Chenin Blanc has been hand harvested and aged for three months on lees. Thanks to listings from South Africa, people are quite familiar with Chenin Blanc. It’s dry and crisp, with notes of orchard fruits and citrus, making it easy to recommend with fish and chips, chicken or seafood. It would be nicely placed next to the fish counter.

RRP: £19-£22



Viognier “Granit” IGP Collines Rhodaniennes 2020

Domaine Jean-Francois Jacouton, Saint-Joseph, Northern Rhône Valley

When producing this 100% Viognier, whose grapes are grown at 350 meters of altitude, half of the wine is aged 8 months in barrels on fine lees. The granite soil (hence the name of the Cuvée) lends a mineral edge, and although it only qualifies for the humble IGP appellation of ‘Vin de Pays’, its out & out quality puts it in a very similar league to many Condrieu wines. It has notes of exotic fruit like banana and pineapple, and is buttery on the palate. It has a lighter body than many Rhône Viogniers but doesn’t sacrifice on flavour.

RRP: £25-£29



appellations, or grapes,” he says, like Sancerre, or Gewurztraminer.

At the same time, between the hyper-regional appellations and lesser-known grape varieties, the division in France’s offering makes it trickier for smaller vineyards to penetrate the British market – especially compared to Australian or South African producers.

That’s why on-trade and independent retail are so significant in selling French wine, Lavergne says.

“Because when you can have a sommelier who takes time to explain French wines to the end consumer, that makes a difference. That’s why in independent shops, if their staff have the training, they can explain particular wines.”

More than anything, French wine is still known for the classic, prestigious and sought-after wines, explaining that their import value remains greater than high-volume producers.



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But the French tradition’s rules, regulations, and complicated labels make it a nebulous world to navigate, and it isn’t necessarily doing all it can to keep up with the competition.

“French producers have a very insular view of what’s happening – not just in their own region but on a global basis,” says Lambert.

“If you’re a producer in Beaujolais, you’re only really interested in what’s happening in Fleurie or Brouilly or Saint-Amour. You have no idea what’s going on in the Loire Valley or Bordeaux, and you don’t care for that matter. But you should care. Obviously, if you’re a consumer in the UK and you’ve got £20 to spend on a bottle of wine, you’ve got the world

£832m

The total value of French wine sold off-trade in the UK in 2022

Source: Business France

to choose from.

“Yes, in the UK, you’ve got a 50% share within the independent sector, which is a very powerful place to be, but it is being eroded by the rest of the world as more styles come through and more replications come through from other parts of the world, like Canada, South America and Australia.”

With the UK being a wine industry that is completely open to any country of production, he says, “there’s always going to be someone who can offer you that Beaujolais in the same varietal – as in Gamay – at a better price point and a better style than the classic example of it.”

Thankfully, not all French wine is so steeped in tradition that it is unable to change. Switching up the offering is a new wave of producers.

“You can see this evolution on labels, which are more and more funky, and flavours are changing. More and more French wines are breaking from tradition,” says Lavergne, particularly with the new movement of natural wine.

“It’s a very important part of production in France today and for the UK independent market, there are more and more organic,

natural, biodynamic wines.”

“French wine can be on both sides: we have a traditional offer, but we also have more modern offers.”

While these might be limited to city-based trendy hotspots for now, they are creeping into delis and farm shops around the country, and could yet enjoy more success still.

There’s no point in burying our heads in the sand, though. The issues affecting UK trade are having an impact on these exchanges. There are post-Brexit complications and wider supply chain issues – some of them resulting from the war in Ukraine, which formerly supplied much of the European wine industry’s raw materials, including glass, carboard and foil caps – that can’t be ignored.

“Things have been made more difficult, and a lot more expensive, and that’s still the case today,” says Lambert.

But even accounting for all of the above, wine sales are still going strong in the UK. According to Mintel’s Still, Sparkling and Fortified Wine Market Report, the UK wine market size was estimated at £14bn in 2022, up 7% since 2017.

“French wine will always do well in the UK”, adds Lambert, “because it’s so entrenched in British culture. Nobody is going to stop drinking Champagne tomorrow, or Claret, or Burgundy. All of these classic regions will always perform. Yes, it will be more expensive because of Brexit, and the Deposit Return Scheme, and everything else.”

“But overall, is French wine going to continue to have a success story here? Of course it is.”

Business France is a trade organisation representing the interests of French businesses abroad. Retailers seeking more information should visit businessfrance.fr/en/home

WINES OF FRANCE

Petit Jammes Malbec de Cahors 2020
Chateau de Pech de Jammes, Southwest France

This 100% Malbec will be a popular listing as British consumers know this grape, mainly from Argentina.

Within those who travelled to France in the 80s and 90s, Cahors is quite well known, as they will have brought it back from caves coopératives and know the name of the appellation.

It is heady with fresh black fruits, floral and herbaceous. Neither cheap nor entry level, it is the second wine of a Cru which is a bit more expensive.

RRP: £20-£25



Pinot Noir “Buis D’Aps” rouge IGP

Ardèche 2021, Northern Rhone Valley

100% Pinot Noir. Another popular grape with consumers, this time grown in Buis d’Aps, a small locality near Alba la Romaine, on the hillsides with a clay-limestone terroir. An ideal place to grow Pinot Noir, producing fresh, fruit forward wines.

RRP: £14-£17

Available at winestory.co.uk

