

## TRAVEL

# France: Capturing a legend

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Pinot noir and chardonnay make up the vast majority of Burgundy's wine. Photo / Thinkstock

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Among Burgundy's mosaic of modest vine plots, one may produce dense and silky wine; another just a few metres away may make something more fruity and feminine, Caroline Berdon discovers.

It's a searing July day in the middle of France and, being hundreds of kilometres from the nearest beach, I've found the perfect place for relief - a cool cellar in the soil's chalky depths, where there happens to sit some of the country's best wine.

Above our heads is the quaint Burgundy village of Meursault, with its ancient stone-walled houses, winding lanes and small, lively square, where a handful of locals are enjoying coffee in cafes or doing what the French do enviably well - "flaneuring", or sauntering about blissfully with seemingly little purpose.

Meursault sits on Burgundy's Route des Grands Crus (roughly "road of the great wines").

Just down the road lie the vines of Chevalier-Montrachet, which many believe produce the best white wine in the world, and the beautiful wine trade capital of Beaune.

On the other side of town are the prized vineyards of Vougeot, Gevrey-Chambertin and Romanee-Conti, which produces the world's most expensive wine. In 1780 the Archbishop of Paris famously declared it to be "velvet and satin in bottles". Today each one fetches between €457-€915 (NZ\$717-\$1436).

Pinot noir and chardonnay make up the vast majority of Burgundy's wine. These grapes love the chalky, limestone soil here, a remnant from the region's time as a Jurassic seabed some 150 million years ago.

Meursault is famous for delectable, buttery chardonnays. And down here in our dark cellar, vigneron Alain Bizouard, whose family has been making wine on the Domaine Coche-Bizouard for generations, has laid out 12 bottles for us to try. They are smooth, light and, yes, deliciously buttery.

Given that the wines were mostly from the same year, all made from chardonnay grapes by the same winegrower, they all taste remarkably different. This is what our English wine guide Tracy Thurling, who has lived in Burgundy for 12 years and has an incredible knowledge of the local wine industry, describes as the "mystery of Burgundy".

It's what the Burgundians themselves call "terroir" - the legendary French term used to describe the unique chemistry between the soil, the geology, the climate and the humans who have worked the land.

"It takes us centuries to understand our soil and work with it," explains the vigneron.

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I am reminded of a quote I have come across a few times during my time in Burgundy by Antoine de Saint-Exupery, author of *The Little Prince*.

"We do not inherit the land from our ancestors; we borrow it from our children."

This seems to encapsulate the way things are done here. Burgundy is a place where knowledge is cultivated, where workers allow the soil to breathe and grow so both can be passed onto the generations who follow, as has been done for centuries.

History and tradition seeps through every stone wall, every chateau, every twisting vine. The Romans first made wine here in the second century. By the eleventh, the monks had noticed how different soils were producing different wine so calved up the land into plots to reflect this.

Their judgment was bang on. When the National Institute of Appellations d'Origine came along at the beginning of last century to organise the plots into the appellations of Grands Crus (the best), Premiers Crus, villages and regional AOCs (Appellations d'Origine Controlee - the tippie), they didn't need to change a thing. And so the legend of terroir lives on.

Ask a Burgundian about Bordeaux and he or she will delight in telling you about its flashy exuberance, crass commerciality, inferior, less diverse wines, and its failure to protect its small producers.

The Burgundy vineyard is, on average, 2.5 times smaller than that in Bordeaux, yet there are 98 appellations in Burgundy, compared to just 57 in Bordeaux.

In the legendary Clos de Vougeot in Burgundy's Cote de Nuits, for example, 81 owners currently share the 50 hectares of land and they all work the land in their own way.

Thurling explains that because many of the plots are so small in Burgundy and the terroir varies so greatly, it is difficult to achieve economies of scale here.

"So Burgundy is often not of interest to the more commercially minded producers," she says.

Until this summer, it seems.

In August an unnamed Chinese casino magnate from Macao bought 12th-century Chateau de Gevrey-Chambertin and its two-hectare vineyard for 8 million euros. Furious local winegrowers are now pushing for state intervention to keep their plots for the French.

It is the first Burgundy chateau to fall into Chinese hands. (In Bordeaux, the Chinese started buying up chateaux in 2008. They now own 20.)

I wonder what Saint-Exupery would make of all this. Today's children who will tend Burgundy's plots tomorrow may well include some outsiders.

This is one excellent reason to visit Burgundy now. The other is that sizzling sun that has been beating down on the vines over the late northern summer. After a worryingly cold, wet and miserable spring, the extremely hot later months have left experts describing the 2012 vintage as a true classic.

## IF YOU GO

### GETTING THERE:

A number of airlines fly between Auckland and Paris, including Air New Zealand, Qantas and Emirates. From Paris, a TGV will get you to Dijon (Burgundy's capital) or Le Creusot (within half an hour's drive of the vineyards) in under two hours. For more information, see [raileurope.co.nz](http://raileurope.co.nz).

### STAYING THERE:

English-speaking ABC Bourgogne rents out a variety of stunning holiday homes in the region, some located in the heart of Burgundy's vines.

There are a number of beautiful hosted guest houses, or "chambre d'hotels", dotted throughout the region that offer bed and breakfast and often dinner. One of the best, which is situated just a few minutes drive from the vines, is Chateau de Digoine, with its own 13th-century chateau on the grounds.

### PLAYING THERE:

Because many of the cellar doors along Burgundy's Route des Grands Crus (which takes in the Cote de Nuits and Cote de Beaune) are reasonably close, many visitors opt to rent bikes and get about independently. This is certainly the best way to take in the beautiful Burgundy countryside.

But if you want to penetrate a little further and visit some of Burgundy's many private estates and artisanal producers, a well-connected guide is essential. English guide Tracy Thurling customises private tours for all durations, budgets and interests; see [burgundybyrequest.com](http://burgundybyrequest.com).

The Domaine Coche-Bizouard is at 5 Rue de Mazeray, Meursault. See [coche-bizouard.com](http://coche-bizouard.com).

Beaune's famous wine auction takes place on the third Sunday in November amid a three-day festival devoted to the food and wine of Burgundy called Les Trois Glorieuses. It's a fantastic time to visit. Book accommodation early.

- AAP

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