



# The International Wine Review

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## Report #22: Grapes and Wines of the Western Loire

### Introduction



With its fairyland chateaux and mild climate, the Loire Valley is one of France's most popular tourist destinations. It is also the source of some of France's most unique and food friendly wines

from Chinon, Muscadet, Vouvray and other appellations. Yet, the wines of the Loire Valley remain a well-kept secret to many consumers. With 87 different appellations, numerous varietals and wine styles, a multitude of small producers, and large vintage variations, getting to know the wines of the Loire is a daunting undertaking. But the wines are definitely worth the effort. In this globalized world where wines are increasingly homogeneous, the Loire offers terroir-driven wines made by some of the world's most talented winemakers. The objective of this report is to introduce readers to the Loire and its wines.

This report is a sequel to Report # 17 *Sauvignon of the Loire*. While that report focused on the Sauvignon Blancs of the Centre-Loire, including Pouilly Fumé, Sancerre, and Menetou-Salon, this report focuses on the rest of the Loire, running from Touraine to the Atlantic Ocean. This is a region of white wines made primarily from Chenin Blanc and Melon de Bourgogne and red wines made mostly from Cabernet Franc, Gamay, and Malbec. While the Loire produces many types of wines, the focus of this report is on dry and off-dry table wines. The lively sparkling wines and rich and unctuous dessert wines of the Loire are left for a future report.

The report begins with an overview of the Loire Valley, its geography, climate, soils and viticulture. We then turn to an examination of the region's appellation system with all of its complexities. In the following section, we focus on the key grapes of the Loire and the wines being produced from these grapes in the main appellations. We also identify many of the key producers of various varietals and the top wines from our extensive tastings. Following our discussion of the

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wines, we turn our attention to the pairing of wine and food, focusing on the traditional dishes of the Loire Valley and the wines that best accompany them.

For this report we tasted more than 175 wines, which are reviewed with tasting notes and ratings in the final section. It has been a few years since we traveled through the Loire, and preparing this report served to re-introduce us to the wide variety of wines being produced throughout the region. We were most pleasantly surprised to find mineral-laden, crisp Muscadet of rich orchard fruit; beautifully balanced, rich Chenin Blanc from Vouvray, Montlouis, and Anjou; and fresh, ready to drink Cabernet Franc of considerable depth and finesse from Chinon, Bourgueil, and Saumur-Champigny. Equally pleasant was the discovery that many of our top-rated wines are priced very reasonably.

## Acknowledgements

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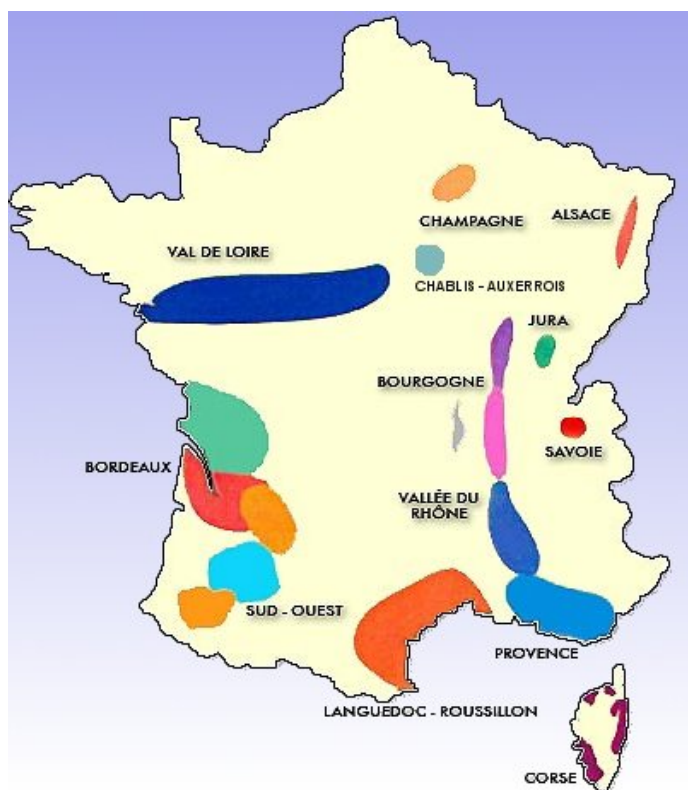
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## Geography, Climate and Soils

The terroir of the Loire contributes greatly to the uniqueness of its wines. Most vineyards are located either on or near the Loire River or one of its many tributaries. The northerly latitude (47°) of the Loire means grapes develop less sugar, and thus alcohol, than they do in more southerly climates and also ensures a high level of acidity. Unlike Mediterranean climates, the Loire can be quite cool with frequent rain and humidity during the growing season, creating problems with mildew but also contributing botrytis to the grapes destined for sweet wines. Uncertain weather also results in large vintage variations. The soils have a large limestone component in the east and schist, slate and granite in the west. All of these factors, combined with the experimental character of the Loire winemaker, translate to unique, low alcohol wines with good acidity and balance. These are food wines *par excellence*.



## Geography

The Loire River is the longest in France, running northwest from its source in the Ardèche through the Centre-Loire, home to Sancerre and Pouilly-Fumé, to Orléans where it takes a sharp turn west towards the Atlantic (see the detailed map in Annex I). This western portion of the Loire, roughly between Blois in the east and Nantes on the Atlantic is home to four distinct wine regions: Touraine (the area around the city of Tours), Saumur (south of the city of Saumur), Anjou (the area south and southeast of the city