

# Valley of varietals

Think no one wine region can meet all your needs? The Loire may change your mind, writes MICK O'CONNELL



Our first stop in Nantes is always Les Bouteilles, a simple bistro in the heart of the city. The man who serves us is the owner, and the French version of “computer says no” - the Gallic shrug - is in full swing.

But that feeling that you are putting someone out by giving them your money, usually the biggest turn-off in service, is part of the charm here. It becomes almost a game.

The wine list is fantastic and exceptional value. Whatever vintage you ask for, the Gallic shrug will suggest “that isn’t quite ready to drink now”, or “surely you should try the 2013 instead, it’s much more open”. So like the best poker player you begin to bluff, suggesting what you don’t want in order to get what you do. Cat and mouse, French style.

Nantes is the city in the mouth of France’s longest river, the Loire. Here the river meets the Atlantic ocean, which from a wine perspective brings all the maritime cooling influence to the region. Les Bouteilles was first introduced to me when I visited the region to help with pruning vines in Muscadet.

A team of us used the curative Poussard method of slow pruning with the aim of rejuvenating two hectares of old vine melon de Bourgogne destined for our friend Christelle Guibert’s fantastic Terre de Gneiss Muscadet. We worked hard during the day but made sure to experience the region’s wines and gastronomy in all their glory each evening.

The Loire starts in the Massif Central and drains over a fifth of France’s land. It runs through the important wine villages of Sancerre, Pouilly-sur-Loire, Vouvray, Saumur and a host of others. It offers everything to the wine nerd - sparkling, sweet, whites, pinks, reds and even oranges.

There is huge variety in terms of the grape varieties available; sauvignon blanc, chenin blanc, melon de Bourgogne, cabernet franc, gamay, pineau d’Aunis, malbec (known as c t here) and grolleau (responsible for much of the rustic ros ).

The Loire is the home of sauvignon blanc and while New Zealand may have stolen a march on the region, it is still where some of the world’s finest examples hail from. O’Brien’s Secrets de Sophie from the

Bougrier family offers a mineral, vibrant take on the Touraine region; it’s normally €19, but the thrifty can find it on promotion from time to time.

The most famous villages are that of Sancerre and Pouilly-sur-Loire; the fum  tacked onto the latter points to the flinty, smoky, mineral notes of the area. Sancerre tends to be more subtle and delicate, light years away from the all-up-front style of Marlborough. Collectors and those looking to spoil themselves should look out for the wines of Dagueneau and Cotat, examples that are stunning with age.

The inspiration behind this article came from a glass of Domaine Huet’s dry Vouvray. This is chenin blanc at its finest; textured but with a refreshing element that means you need to go back glass after glass. Also worth seeking out are the wines of Domaine Guiberteau in Terroirs in Donnybrook, Dublin 4.

Chenin blanc is also at the heart of the excellent sparkling and sweet wines of the Loire. For cr mant, seek out Chateau Moncontour Vouvray Brut and Langlois-Chateau as excellent Champagne alternatives. And if you need an early Christmas gift idea for me, 64 Wine in Glashule has a 1959 sweet Vouvray from Huet that will do nicely.

Cabernet franc is the mainstay of red production, with names such as Saumur-Champigny, Chinon and St Nicolas De Bourgueil. These are reds that have a bright and tart red berry fruit aroma, and a classic herbal edge. They’re a delight to drink slightly chilled to bring up the refreshment levels.

Thierry Germain and Yannick Amirault are two fantastic producers that represent amazing value (find them in Green Man Wines in Terenure in Dublin), or splurge and blow the budget on Clos Rougeard, the great red of the region.

Pineau d’Aunis is a red grape that is produced in tiny quantities in the Loire. The only case of wine I’ve ever bought while still sitting at a restaurant table was poured for me by Cathryn Bell, the former sommelier at Aimsir. You won’t be surprised to hear that from a food and service perspective, it was the complete opposite of Les Bouteilles - but the wine was fantastic. **FW**

## WINE RATINGS

This is the international marking system for wine ratings, a 100-point scale which works on a percentile, rather than a percentage, scale.

**95-100:**  
exceptional, of world-class  
quality

**90-94:**  
very good quality

**88-89:**  
average, but lacks  
greatness

**85-87:**  
average to modest

**80-84:**  
below average

**70-79:**  
poor

**BELOW 70:**  
unacceptable quality



**FOURNIER SANCERRE LES BELLES VIGNES**

€36 from *Baggot Street Wines, D-Six Wines and Sweeney's D3* (91)

A blend of sauvignon blanc grapes grown on the three soil types of the region - Caillottes, Silex and Terres Blanches - this is a true all-rounder. Fine and precise with lemon and white flowers, it has more richness than some of its peers from lees ageing.

**2 DOMAINE FIGEAT POUILLY FUMÉ L'HÉRITAGE**

€27 from *Neighbourhood Wine and wineonline.ie* (90)

This would be a great introduction to the wines of Pouilly Fumé, with its classic reductive gunflint aroma mingling with Meyer lemon and subtle stone fruit. It's made on one of the oldest estates in the region, where Anne-Sophie Figeat is bringing innovation to a traditional set-up.

**3 DOMAINE DES SABLES VERT SAUMUR BLANC**

€25 from *Baggot Street Wines and wineonline.ie* (91)

Chenin blanc can be exceptional value, and this is a wine that is both complex and refreshing while remaining, importantly, fun. The domaine is mostly planted with cabernet franc, with its "glouglou" also worth seeking out.



**4 DOMAINE HUET LE MONT VOUVRAY SEC**

€55 from *Mitchell & Son, 64 Wine and Neighbourhood Wine* (95)

This is a world class, benchmark dry white - if it was from Burgundy it would be an undoubted Grand Cru and easily twice the price. Waxy and textured with orchard fruit and a zippy backbone, it's a delight.

**5 DOMAINE DE BELLIVÈRE ROUGE-GORGE PINEAU D'AUNIS**

€43 from *Green Man Wines, Mitchell & Son and siyps.com* (93)

The only wine I've bought a case of while still at a restaurant table, this is a brilliant, unique style of red. Cracked black pepper, lavender, raspberry, green strawberry, blackcurrant, all on a mid-weight frame, it's perfect for lovers of perfumed syrah or Beaujolais.

**6 DOMAINE DES ROCHES, NEUVES THIERRY GERMAIN, SAUMUR-CHAMPIGNY**

€27 from *Green Man Wines, Whelehans and Le Caveau* (92)

Every time I drink this wine I am reminded that I don't drink enough cab franc. Crunchy, bright with raspberry and tart blackcurrant, this is vibrant and floral and performs brilliantly chilled for extra refreshment. Fantastic value.