

What is Burgundy Wine?

White Burgundy, Red Burgundy, Beaujolais and More

By Stacy Slinkard, About.com Guide

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The highly regarded wine region of [Burgundy](#) ("Bourgogne" in French and on bottle labels) has welcomed oenophiles for centuries. Situated along the Saone River in the east-central portion of [France](#), Burgundy stretches about 100 miles from top (near the city of Dijon) to bottom (just north of Lyon), bringing close to 60,000 acres under vine in the region's famous chalky, mineral-laden soils. Despite often unpredictable weather patterns, relatively small overall production numbers, and somewhat limited availability worldwide, Burgundy evokes an almost mystical following.



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Burgundy is all about place. Like most [French wine regions](#), the place name takes label priority over grape names. The names of appellations, communes, domaines and the like dominate the label, with little to no label regard for the key grapes contained within. While producer, negociant, and regional place names on bottle labels can be confusing for those that don't speak French, keep in mind that Burgundy is built on two grapes: [Chardonnay](#) and [Pinot Noir](#). French AOC law dictates that all white Burgundy (aka "Bourgogne Blanc") must be made from the Chardonnay grape and likewise all red Burgundy (aka "Bourgogne Rouge") are crafted from Pinot Noir grapes, with the fresh-fruited exception being Beaujolais made from the light-hearted [Gamay](#) grape in the very south of Burgundy.

Burgundy's Wine Regions:

While Burgundy may be smaller in size, especially when compared to its equally celebrated neighbor, Bordeaux, the region's influence, impact, and overall

importance on the international wine stage is substantial. Burgundy can be boiled down into five key growing regions or districts to know: Chablis, Côte Chalonnaise, Mâconnais, Côte de Nuits and Côte de Beaune (these last two are collectively referred to as the Côte d'Or, meaning golden slope for the region's fall foliage, and represent the most famous wine region of Burgundy). The wines of Burgundy maintain an impressive reputation for giving significant voice to the region's exceptional terroir. Elegant, subtle, complex, earth-driven, and filled with finesse, the wines of Burgundy maintain the prestigious paradigm and revered model for classic Chardonnay and Pinot Noir the world over.

Chablis: Most famous for lively, mineral-driven, bone-dry Chardonnay, Burgundy's most northern region of [Chablis](#) cultivates Chardonnay vines on limestone rich soil structures. The wines themselves are often referred to simply as "Chablis" around the globe or locally as "Beaunois" a Burgundian term for Chardonnay. It should be noted that Chablis also has its own wine classification system, set apart from the rest of Burgundy. In short, Petit Chablis designated wines come from in and around Chablis, though Chablis is the label designate we're most familiar with on wine shop shelves, offering a bit more depth than the Petit Chablis. Premier Cru Chablis ups the elegance and price thanks in part to specific vineyard locations that are built upon a unique limestone substructure. Grand Cru Chablis, hail from the region's top vineyards that enjoy steep, south facing slopes and often extended oak aging.

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offering white wines with plenty of apple and peach, some tropical nuances and citrus notes along with fresh, vibrant acidity.

Côte de Nuits: Named for the town of Nuits-Saint-Georges, the Côte de Nuits produces world class, iconic Pinot Noir with over 20 Grand Cru vineyards. The big name vineyards of Romanée-Conti, Chambertin, and Musigny just to name a few are all found in the Côte de Nuits. The top of the Pinot Noir line from Burgundy is found here, with wines worthy of aging for decades and prices carrying four and five digits for the crème de la crème.

Côte de Beaune: South of Côte de Nuits and making up the other half of the Côte d'Or, the Côte de Beaune enjoys a 70/30 split of reds to whites. However, it's typically the white wines (again exclusively from Chardonnay grapes) that make their mark with rich aromas, fuller bodies, and earthy herbal undertones overlaid by ripe pear and apple character. The wines from the Côte de Beaune deliver significant quality without busting the budget. Keep an eye out for wines from Chassagne-Montrachet, Meursault, Pommard, Volnay, and Puligny Montrachet (all village names).

Burgundy's Wine Classifications

When it comes to rolling with mid-tier to high-end Burgundian wines, the regions complex classification system will begin to play a critical role. Essentially there are four quality levels that apply to all AOC Burgundy wines (with a completely separate classification system running the wines of Chablis). Location, location, location - it plays the vital role in determining where the wines of Burgundy fall on the classification scale. The higher priced, esteemed vineyard estates or "neighborhoods", if you will, top the classification at the Grand Cru and Premier Cru levels. While everyday Burgundian wines may be sourced from a larger geographical perimeter, where vineyards from the entire region of Burgundy may contribute to the juice of the regional, base level wines. Simply stated, the better the vineyard, the better the wine and the higher the rank (and price).

Regional Wines - Like it sounds, the regional wine classification forms the base of Burgundy's classification pyramid, representing right around 50% of the region-wide wines. It should be noted that somewhere between regional wines and village wines, there is a sort of "catch all" district rank that is more defined than the region of Burgundy, but not all found from a single village. Essentially, when a few larger regional districts are tied together because of similar quality they may be named as such. Côte de Beaune-Villages is one such example, indicating that the wine is made from grapes that come from one or more villages in the region of Côte de Beaune.

Village Appellations - Weighing in with right around 38% of Burgundy's wine production, these wines carry specific village or town names on the labels, indicating that the grapes are grown in a specific vineyard village location and not sourced from all of Burgundy. Pommard is a village name that you might see on a bottle label, communicating that all of the grapes were sourced from the village of Pommard in the Burgundian region of Côte de Beaune.

Premier Cru - Climbing the classification ladder to the upper echelons of Burgundy's best wines with 10% of the production, Premier Cru means "First Growth" and refers to wines that have been grown in small, legal AOC defined and well reputed vineyards to spotlight esteemed terroir. Labels often carry the designate "1er Cru" an abbreviation for Premier Cru. These wines are perfect when it's time to splurge, they typically start in the \$60 range on the low end and work well into the \$100+ price point fairly quickly.



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Grand Cru - Representing the top 1% of Burgundy's best wine offerings, with just over 30 vineyards ranked Grand Cru in the Côte d'Or, the Grand Cru wines command international attention. The most famous Grand Cru from Burgundy is undoubtedly Domaine de la Romanée-Conti which can easily ask \$12,000-\$15,000 per bottle on auction sites.

Burgundy's Wine History:

With evidence of vines planted by the Celts before 200 B.C. and Roman soldiers growing grapes dating back to the first century, Burgundy was recognized early on as premier real estate for growing grapes. Yet, like many burgeoning European wine regions, it was the Medieval monasteries that deserve primary credit for cultivating the region's scholastic vineyards through the Middle Ages. Experimenting with grapes and land locations, and quickly recognizing Burgundy's epic influence, the dominating force of the regional [terroir](#), the Benedictine and Cistercian monks served to identify and define the most ambitious vineyard locations of the region, which were destined to become some of the wine world's most prized grape growing land possessions. While honing viticultural techniques and traditions, the combined efforts of Benedictine and Cistercian monks laid much of the groundwork for Burgundy's wine scene.

It wasn't until the French Revolution that the ownership of Burgundy's vineyards transferred from the church and aristocratic circles to individuals in segmented blocks of land. The regions vineyards were further fragmented when Napoleon sliced and diced the vineyards by instituting that all inherited land must be divided equally among heirs. To this day it is not unusual to find a 120 acre vineyard owned by 80 growers, with as little as several rows of vines under the ownership of a single grower. This fragmented system has made the role of the négociant (a collective house that buys regional wines typically by the barrel to blend with other wines from the same region or appellation) extremely important.

Buying Burgundy's Bargain Wine

Remember that you won't find "Chardonnay" on the label of a Burgundy wine bottle, so you're looking for specific Chardonnay-producing regions, village, or estates (aka "domaines") names on the bottle. Northern Chablis and Pouilly-Fuisse are two Chardonnay dominant Burgundy regions that offer a solid primer on what white Burgundy is all about, as are the floral and fruity nature of the Macon-Villages. Similarly, Côte de Nuits and Côte de Beaune on a bottle label will point you in the right direction for Pinot Noir, along with the relative Pinot values from Côte Chalonnaise.

Best Value Burgundy Producers to Try: Bouchard Aine & Fils, Domaine Christian Moreau Pere & Fils, Domaine Faiveley, JJ Vincent, Joseph Drouhin, Louis Jadot, Louis Latour, Olivier Leflaive

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