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MENTION the Loire to most Australian wine drinkers and if you are lucky a few may say muscadet or vovray, and some may mention sancerre and/or chenin blanc, but that is about it. It is akin to asking American drinkers about the Barossa, to which the reply would be, shiraz, whereas in both cases there is so much more on offer than just the afore mentioned.

Recently I had the opportunity to visit the beautiful Loire Valley with a trip to the regional capital Nantes. Here with typical French clarity the complicated and confusing system of region/quality controls that they use, were explained and “simplified”. Therefore this article will endeavour to clarify, to some extent, this complex situation.

So let’s kick off with the fact that the lush Loire Valley has around 57,200ha of vines (Barossa - 10,350ha) run by around 6200 grape growers and includes only 16 wine

co-operatives. I say “only”, because in most regions in Europe co-ops are a big thing, making wine from the grapes grown by hundreds of small grape growers. The Loire Valley is the third largest vineyard region in France. There are four main different wine growing regions within the officially designated “Loire Valley”. From west to east they are, Nantes, Anjou-Saumur, Touraine and Centre-Loire. Each has a number of AOP (Appellation Origine Protegee) or IGP (Indication Geographique Protegee) adding up to a total of 51 across the valley - and they are currently working on increasing this number by a few more. So in reality it is more like the equivalent of looking at a wine producing country than just a single region. It would take quite a thick book to explain this complex tapestry of wine with all its different rules and regulations. The aim here is to make it a bit simpler to understand and appreciate.

The Loire’s production is currently split into 41 per cent white wine, 24 per cent rosé, 21 per cent red wine and 14 per cent sparkling. Of this 20 per cent is exported and the rest sold domestically. They are trying to increase export sales because France is drinking less wine each year.

This reduction in consumption is in part due to the migration of people from rural areas to cities. In the rural areas wine has always been an integral part of most meals, whereas in the cities, it is not. City dwellers are much more casual wine drinkers due to their more frenetic lifestyle. In addition there is a considerable anti-alcohol push happening in France. The current per capita wine consumption in France of 42.5 litres, while not the highest in the world (that honour goes to the Vatican City) is still huge in global terms, especially when compared to Australia’s 9.7 litres per capita.

France’s main export market is the USA

A Loire unto themselves

From the outside, France's Loire Valley is ruled by a complex range of regulations.



Above: Saumur castle and Loire River, Loire Valley, France. Saumur Castle was built in the tenth century and rebuilt in the late twelfth century. It is now owned by the city and is one of the most famous castles of the Loire Valley.

followed by the UK (subject to Brexit), Canada and the Netherlands. The two target markets they are focusing on are China and Australia, with Australia currently accounting for 4 per cent of their exports.

OK, so down to exploring and understanding the Valley. Starting in the west with the first region, Nantes. This is the most maritime of the Valley's regions and they call themselves "coastal winegrowers" due to the strong influence of the Atlantic Ocean on their area. Nantes has seven AOP and is the home of the world-renowned, muscadet wines, made predominantly from melon and a small amount of rolle blanc. A fascinating microcosm of this region is the "Muscadet Crus Communaux", of which there are 10. There are about 100 winegrowers who cultivate around 200ha across these "10" Crus Communaux. What makes them stand out and have their own Crus Communaux is the fact that all of their

muscadet comes from low yielding, usually very old vines, has spent at least 18 months on lees ("sur lies"), and up to 24 months on lees, sometimes even longer. All the wines are aged in underground concrete tanks, where the ground temperature is constant all year round. There is no oak barrel maturation within the Cru. The quality that comes from the attention to detail that is given to these wines was evident in a tasting of three wines from each of the 10 Cru that was conducted at an oyster farm. The youngest current release wine was 2015, while the oldest was 2010. Each wine had its own individual character such as the Domaine du Moulin Camus 2012 from the "Vallet" Cru. This is a superb wine which had been matured on lees for 30 months, has masses of complexity, smoothness and yet still has the steely backbone that characterises great Muscadet Sur-Lies. Although already seven

years old, this wine will easily age for up to a decade more. Another fascinating wine was the Vignerons du Pallet "Jubilation" 2014, from the "Le Pallet" Cru. A smashing wine from a co-op of 10 small independent producers who each produce their own wine, which is then blended together to make up the co-op's final wine. Another interesting thing about this minute, superb quality co-op is that the producers did not form the co-op until after their region had received its Crus Communaux accreditation in 2007. The Nantes region is also home to the quaint Italian-styled town of Clisson, and its spectacular castle which started life as a fortress in the 11th century. It was extended over the next few centuries to become a massive and imposing centre of local power. Sadly, it was burned to the ground by the Republicans during the French revolution. It is said that the ruins smouldered for a

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month. However, today the ruins are still awe inspiring. Just north east of Clisson, in La Regrippiere, I visited the one outpost of modernity at Les Freres Couillaud Chateau -La Ragotiere where they were bottling their excellent white wines under screw cap. Some of their wines are available in Australia from www.winegoblet.com.au.

Travelling east, the next region is Anjou-Saumur with its 21 AOP and IGP. It should really be classified as two separate regions because they are quite different from each other. In Saumur they make it simple, in that all their red wines are made from cabernet franc. Here it makes delicious, juicy, fruity wines that are great to enjoy while young, such as the divine Domaine Saint Landor 2016. An absolutely cracking cabernet franc. Equally, most of the region's red wines will cellar well to produce very elegant, silky-smooth wines with fantastic flavours, like the Chateau Fouquet Les Douzes Futs 2011 which is still remarkably fresh and young for an eight-year-old. By contrast, in Anjou there are 27 different products allowed across a number of

different varieties. Half the production in Anjou is dedicated to rosé with the Rosé d'Anjou being made predominantly from grolleau and with some cabernet franc. The slightly sweet, Cabernet d'Anjou Rosé, is made from cabernet sauvignon. A good example of this style is the Robert et Marcel Vive la Loire 2018 Rosé d'Anjou, which is silky-smooth, very tasty and is available in Australia from

www.bacchuswinemerchant.com.au. Gamay and pinot noir are also thrown in to the varietal mix for the rosé wines from other parts of Anjou.

For the white wines of this region, there is one of the AOP that really stands out - Savennieres where the wines are made from chenin blanc. The wines from the 18 producers involved with the tasting I attended were all very good, tasty white wines. A couple of the exceptional wines for me were the Domaine Ogereau Savennieres 'L'Enthousiasme 2016 which was lively, well-balanced with a nice, refreshingly crisp finish. Whereas the Chateau de la Soucherie Clos des Perrieres Savennieres 2015 was well-rounded, elegant and silky-smooth.

The region's red wines are mainly made from cabernet franc and are juicy, lively and very easy drinking.

The Touraine region, which is centred on the town of Tours, has 18 AOP and IGP of which Vouvray, Chinon and Cremant de Loire are the best known. Their production is made up of 36 per cent red wine, followed by 35 per cent white wine, 16 per cent sparkling

and 13 per cent rosé. The area has 1600 winegrowers and 11 co-ops, and they sell around 59 million bottles of wine a year. In 2017 growers in this region suffered up to 50 per cent losses due to the disastrous weather. Luckily the 2018 vintage was much kinder.

The whites from Vouvray are almost exclusively made from chenin blanc and with over 2000ha planted, it is the largest chenin blanc growing region in France. This versatile white variety is used to make wines ranging from methode champenoise sparkling wines, such as the brilliant, bone dry, Vouvray Fines Bulles Domaine Gilles Gaudron 2015 'Symphonie' which has no dosage at all. Then through to dry, still wines like the magnificently delicious Domaine du Margalleau 2015 Vouvray and the lively, vibrant, Chateau Moncontour 2018 Vouvray Sec, and to semi-sweet wines right up to intensely sweet, botrytis affected dessert wines and the occasional fortified wine.

In the Touraine region most of the red wine is made from cabernet franc with some gamay. They produce lively, juicy, ready to drink wines, and more excitingly an increasing number of growers are producing excellent wines from cot. Cot is what the French call malbec. These wines are quite different to the malbec from Cahors which is its ancestral home. Here the malbec is purple in colour rather than the almost black in Cahors. It makes gorgeous, lively, alluring wines which are either straight varietal or with a smidge of cabernet franc added. Some of the wines are unoaked, while many have seen a short time on oak. All the examples tasted were very good, attractive wines with a few stand-outs such as the Xavier Frissant - La Griffé d'Isa 2016. This wine is made from 100 per cent malbec, is oak matured, has fragrant, floral aromatics, fabulous purity of fruit and great structure. A superb wine in the bigger style. Whereas the Domaine de Chapitre Brin d'epice 2017 is an excellent example of the lighter, brighter version of malbec - juicy, delicious and tight on the finish. The only negative for these excellent wines is that the region insists on promoting them as cot, which most wine drinkers around the world have not heard of, rather than promoting them as an alternative malbec to the Argentine



Previous page: Bottles at Muscadet Crus Communaux tasting. *Top:* Vineyard Chateau de La Roche Aux Moines. *Middle:* Exterior of castle Chateau de Clisson. *Bottom:* Tasting of Cote de Loire Blanc & Anjou Rose in Nantes.

style. So, instead of piggy-backing on to the success of Argentine malbec, they are going to try to persuade the whole world to drink their unknown cot.

The Chinon AOC is predominantly reds and rosé with very little white wine produced. The reds are almost entirely cabernet franc, however, they are allowed to add up to 10 per cent cabernet sauvignon to their wines.

While not included in this visit, the final region of the Loire Valley is the Centre-Loire with its 14 AOP and IGP of which Sancerre is by far the best known. Other “known” areas in this region include Pouilly-Fume, Pouilly-sur-Loire and Quincy. Not surprisingly, 82 per cent of the region’s production is white wine made predominantly from chenin blanc. It is from here that chenin’s reputation as a high quality, versatile variety originated.

The long and the short of it is that the vintners of the Loire Valley have over the last few years focused much more on quality and sustainability than in the volume of production. The number of organic growers is rising steadily and there is a real passion for biodynamics in the Valley.

While the Loire Valley is very complex and somewhat confusing having more AOP and IGP than Australia has wine growing regions, their wines are delightful, fresh, vibrant and ready to be enjoyed young, especially with seafood. Yet many of them, red, white and even sparkling have the capacity to age well over prolonged periods, as proven by the 1989 and 1976 Muscadet Sevre et Maine Sur Lie served at one of the superb seafood dinners I sampled.

So if by any chance you are visiting France in the near future, I recommend finding a way to fit in a visit to the Loire. A comfortable three-hour TVG (high speed train) ride from Paris, this area has magnificent scenery. I saw more green there in three days that I had seen in Australia in the last three months. The seafood is sensational, fresh out of the Atlantic Ocean, and the wines are a perfect match.

If not, then I suggest that you go and explore your local bottle shop to see which of the gems from this exciting and dynamic wine region they have in stock. Like everywhere else in the wine world, some wines are better than others, however you can be quite confident that any bottle you pick up that says “Loire Valley” on the label will be good, interesting drinking.