

# Lorraine Miceli DeMajo explains

## HOW TO READ

“*Early wine labels show the minimum of detail – perhaps no more than the name of the village from which the wine came.*”

Over the past few years more importance has been given and as wine laws have been introduced in different countries to safeguard consumer interests, labels have become more informative, with New World wine labels being more consumer friendly than Old World ones and most with back labels describing the origin of the wine, how it was made, as well as giving a tasting note and food pairing.

The most important things to look out for when reading a wine label are:

- The grape variety or appellation
- Country or region
- Producer, bottler or importer
- Alcoholic degree
- Vintage

**GRAPE VARIETY OR APPELLATION** gives the bulk of the information about the body and complexity of the wine. For example, Cabernet Sauvignon and Nebbiolo are full-bodied, intense and tannic. Pinot Noir on the other hand, has a thin skin, and so is not as full bodied and tannic as the above. The



## A WINE LABEL

### Optional information

- 1 COLOUR
- 2 VINTAGE  
(Except for Vin de Table, not allowed)
- 3 NAME OF THE WINE  
(Chateau, Domaine, Brand)
- 4 REGION OF PRODUCTION

### Legal information

- 5 CATEGORY: AOC, VIN DE PAYS, VINE DE TABLE
- 6 BOTTLE CAPACITY
- 7 NAME & ADDRESS OF THE BOTTLER
- 8 ALCOHOL CONTENT
- 9 PRODUCING COUNTRY

### ALLERGEN WARNINGS

New World countries especially New Zealand and Australia have labeling regulations that require a producer to state the use of egg whites, milk or isinglass if used in the fining and clarifying process of the wine. The United States is also considering

similar requirements. Wine labels from the member states of the European Union, as of 30th June 2012 must also declare whether the wine was treated with casein and ovalbumin, derived from milk and egg respectively, used as fining agents in winemaking. Another allergen that is required to be stated on the label is sulphur, as this can cause serious

allergic reactions in some people. Sulphur is important to grape growers as well as oenologists as it is used as a preservative in all stages of the winemaking process, but should be used with caution, hence “this wine contains sulphites” as is frequently seen on a wine label.



*“The size of the region stated on the label, gives an indication of the quality of the wine.”*

Italian San Giovese variety is known to produce wines with high acidity and sour cherry flavours which pair beautifully with the extensive use of olive oil and tomatoes in the Italian cuisine.

Many European wines, in particular French ones are described by appellation rather than by grape variety. Appellation essentially means place of origin. In order to qualify, the wine must be made from certain types of grapes e.g., Pauillac in Bordeaux is predominantly composed of Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot whilst Chablis is composed of Chardonnay and Sancerre of Sauvignon Blanc.

**REGION**

Region describes the wine's expected style, intensity or flavour. Bordeaux wines are often more tannic and acidic and age better due to their cooler climate, rich soil and respect to appellation norms. On the other hand, a South Australian Barossa Valley Shiraz wine, comes from a hotter climate with less vintage variation and usually has more concentration with eucalyptus aromas and sweet spice coming from the grape variety, terroir, barrels used and vinification practices.

This may take the form of a generic statement like South Australia or be more specific – Barossa / Eden Valley, or even down to identifying the specific vineyard, such as Chateau Ste Michelle

Cold Creek Vineyard Merlot.

**PRODUCER / VINEYARD**

These tell you most about the wine quality and its expected consistency. Is it a Bordeaux Premier Cru, Cru Bourgeois or Petit Château? Is it a Vin de Pays, or a wine made by a négociant? Use a reliable guide or the internet for information about the wine, its ageing potential and suggestions for food pairing.

**ALCOHOL LEVEL**

The alcohol level statement gives an idea of the body and viscosity of the wine. As a general rule that the higher the alcohol, the hotter the region. Too much alcohol in a wine the wine tends to unbalance it.

When pairing wines to specific foods, it's a good idea to consider their alcohol level. Light shell fish is better paired with a low alcohol Muscadet from the Loire than a fuller bodied New World Chardonnay which would be better off with a heavier fish like salmon or tuna

**VINTAGE**

Most wines have a vintage stated on the label unless they are table wines (which, under EU law are not required to do so). This is the year in which the grapes are harvested.

Most wines are best consumed while they are young and fresh, and should not be aged. For a few prestigious, age-worthy wines, vintages make a huge difference. For example, the price and quality of a 1990 wine from a good Bordeaux estate will be much higher than that of their 1991, because this was an outstanding year with almost perfect weather; 1991 was a relatively poor one.

Seasons in the northern and southern hemispheres are inverted relative to each other. Wines from a given vintage will be made from grapes harvested in February, March or April (southern hemisphere) and August, September or October (northern hemisphere). As a result, Southern Hemisphere wines will be half a year older than Northern ones from the same vintage. This can make a difference for wines that are made to be consumed as young and fresh as possible, such as rose wines and fruity un-oaked whites. ●



**Lorraine Miceli DeMajo, A.I.W.S.** is a working mother of two, advises clients on wine lists, organises wine tastings,

and chooses wine we will consume. She likes to garden and entertain and even finds the energy to voluntry work.

## Classifications

### FRENCH WINES

AC OR AOC is the highest level possible that a French wine can attain with strict regulations regarding areas of production, grape varieties, viticultural practices, maximum yields, vinification and alcoholic degree, which must be achieved without chaptalisation. The word "Origine" is often replaced by the name of the place of origin of the wine. Eg. Appellation Bordeaux controlee.

VDQS classification is always evolving as since its inception, many VDQS wines have been promoted. The laws cover the same ground as for AC wines but are generally less stringent on yields and grape varieties.

VIN DE PAYS – VDP is a French expression meaning "country wine" though recognises and encourages the production of wines that are distinctly superior to basic Vin d' table.

VINS DE TABLE classification covers about 40% of wine produced in France. Vins de table can be produced anywhere in the country with no restriction as to grape variety, though chaptalisation is forbidden. No region, grape variety or vintage may be stated. Price is usually based on alcoholic strength.

### ITALIAN WINES

DENOMINAZIONE DI ORIGINE CONTROLLATA E GARANTITA – DOCG is a legal category for its highest quality wines. The express purpose of this category was to identify wines which are "guaranteed" (the G), and not just "controlled".

DOC was first designation to be introduced and specifies geographical zone, grape varieties, yields etc., There are now more than 300 geographical entities entitled to their own DOC.

IGT stands for Indicazione Geografica Tipica. This classification came about because some of Italy's best wines were being sold as table wine which technically, are not allowed to show a vintage, variety or name of estate on the label. Super Tuscans fall into this category.

VINO DA TAVOLA is a large but declining segment of the market, partly as a result of EU policies to reduce the so-called wine lake and partly because many of the better wines have been reclassified at a higher level.



## GENERAL TERMS ALSO USED ON WINE LABELS

**CUVEE:** A blend. This is often part of a brand name.

**OAK-AGED:** the wine has been aged in oak vessels, of any size, which could be new or old.

**AGED IN NEW BARRIQUES:** This wine has been aged in small (225 litre) oak barrels. New barrels will add lots of oak flavours and complexity to the wine.

**BARREL-FERMENTED** (for whites only): Fermenting the wine in oak results in a better integration of oak flavours in the wine, but it is more labour intensive than simply ageing in oak, and therefore more expensive.

**OAKED:** oak flavours have been added using chips, staves or barrels. Not used for premium wines.

**UNFINED / UNFILTERED:** In order not to alter the wines character, it has not been filtered before bottling, so it may not be perfectly bright, and may throw a big deposit in bottle.

**ORGANIC:** The grapes were grown without using synthetic chemical treatments.

**BOTRYTIS / NOBLE:** Indicates a sweet wine made from shriveled grapes affected with noble rot.

**VIELLES VIGNES:** Old vines normally over 40-50 years, these vines give less bunches of grapes but with more concentration, thus producing wine with more complexity.

**WINERY:** Estate, Chateau, Domaine, Weingut, Bodega etc.,

**ESTATE BOTTLED / MIS EN BOUTEILLE AU CHATEAU / DOMAINE / A LA PROPRIETE / GUTSABFULLUNG:** This means that the grapes have been grown on the estate and the wines bottled there too. ●