



# Loire

you

# EXPERIENCED?

Direct Press

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# The heart of France is the

Loire Valley. Some may disagree, but it's impossible to ignore the ways it is both a literal center and a keystone to the country, as well as being known as "France's Garden." The river, deemed the "last wild river" because it's not dammed, was a historic cultural divider between the north and south of France. Occitan was spoken south of the Loire; Old French — what eventually became the official French language — was spoken north of the river. The Loire was also the scene of the beginning of modern France: Joan of Arc was led by visions of angels to the Castle of Chinon, where she convinced Charles VII to fight off the English occupiers.

For wine purposes, the Loire River was one of the most important transportation routes in Europe, and it helped spread Loire wines all over the world. Going west, Loire wines sailed to England and the rest of the world through Nantes and the ports on the Atlantic Ocean. Going east, Loire wines quenched the thirsty populace of Paris.

If I was forced to only drink wines from one region, I wouldn't hesitate. Bracing, mineral whites from Muscadet; complex, tannic Cabernet Franc from Bourgueil; quaffable, irreverent glou-glou made from Gamay, Grolleau, or Pineau d'Aunis; age-worthy Chenin with a touch of sweetness — the Loire covers a lot of ground and rarely gets boring. It's long been one of my favorite regions because of this huge range of styles.

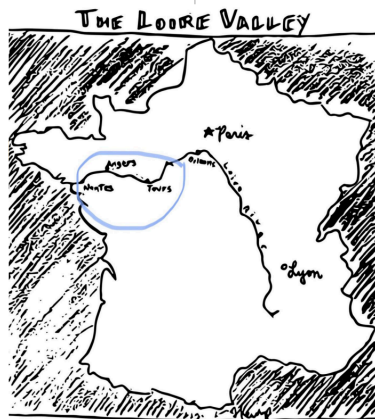
The Loire River is the longest in France, at 630 miles long, so we're only covering the western Loire this month, where the majority of the region's wines are made (sorry, no Sancerre this time). The large area from Nantes to Tours has more soil types, microclimates, and grape varieties than any other region in France. By contrast, Bordeaux is far bigger and far more monolithic in terms of its offerings. Why is that? I'm not sure exactly, but perhaps because Loire in the modern age never had the aristocratic appeal of Bordeaux or Burgundy, it allowed for more experimentation and freedom. With big money comes big expectations, and the Loire never had the kind of capital that Bordeaux or Champagne did.

Though Loire wines were associated with royals in the Middle Ages, by the middle of the 19th century they were far more associated with the middle class. Shopkeepers, merchants, bookkeepers, tradesmen, and other bourgeoisie in Paris couldn't regularly afford the finest wines, but they refused to drink the acrid swill that working classes slurped down from vineyards surrounding the city. The Loire offered them a level of quality and value not found elsewhere, and the region grew alongside the expanding middle class after the Revolution.

This also partially explains the higher percentage of small, family-owned farms and wineries that still exist in the region, making it accessible for younger, independent growers and those pursuing natural viticulture. So it's no wonder the Loire feels like one of the most vibrant, flourishing wine locales in France. Nowhere else have I seen the hardcore natties working right next to the stewards of tradition more harmoniously. I also wonder if this is because much of the Loire had to fight for its status over the past 40 years in a way that Bordeaux and Burgundy did not. In many cases, the path to a better reputation was not through better marketing but through better farming.

In addition to its relative affordability, the Loire Valley's proximity to Paris has been a huge help in making it one of the regions most identified with natural wine. It's an easy trek for international travelers going to natural wine fairs like Le Dive Bouteille and its peripheral tastings. There's an entrancing mix of history and scrappy possibility in the Loire that is hard to describe. Despite the castles and chateaux that bring in tourists, it's the kind of place that draws you in with more humble pleasures. During my visits, I've slept in anarchist communal housing with no heat in February and wandered around 40-degree caves tasting chilly, just-bottled, funky wines. I've trudged through muddy, half-frozen vineyards in the rain, warmed my hands over trash cans of burning wood crates, and spoken only occasionally in laughable French, and I would do it again in a heartbeat. The best butter and paté I've ever had was in the Loire, and the bottles of wine that disappear in five minutes are not bad either. But what really draws you in is the sense that you, too, could build something there in the damp dirt. You could get your hands dirty in the Loire and make something, and though you might be a little isolated, eventually people would come looking for the same thing. They'd find you there, ready with a clean(ish) glass of wine and open arms..

Santé  
Jonathan Kemp



## **La Grange aux Belles 'Moyens du Bord' Chenin Blanc 2023**

**Anjou • Loire • France**

*Press 4 Mix/White*

La Grange aux Belles was founded in 2004 by Marc Houtin in Anjou and was shortly joined by his friends Julien Bresteau and G erald Peau. They work organically without any synthetic pesticides or herbicides in the vineyard or in the cellar, with no additives in the cellar. Minimal sulfur is added when needed.

They work 15 hectares around AOC Coteaux de l'Aubance that is known for its black Schist bedrock rather than the white chalky parts of Anjou. Their vines are relatively old, ranging from 45-80+ years old. They have all spontaneous fermentation with native yeasts, and all the white wines see barrel fermentation.

La Grange aux Belles are some of my favorite wines to come in every year. Their 'Le Vin de Jardin' is a summer classic at this point. Their Chenin's are always some of the best in any price point. The 'Moyens du Bord' has all of the characteristics of Chenin that I love. Aromas of orchard fruit, a hint of flint & spice, marmalade, almond, marzipan, lanolin and a generous palate echoing the nose with a hint of bergamot, great length, and breadth. Pair with your favorite sheep's cheese. *Jeremy Hernandez*

## **Domaine de La Parentiere Muscadet Vieilles Vignes 2022**

**Muscadet • Loire • France**

*Press 4 Mix/White*

There are few better regions than Muscadet for expressing the quality known as "minerality" that is so often sought after. Michel and Guillaume M nager of Domaine de la Parenti re have a special type of soil called gabbro that makes their Muscadets some of the most "mineral" of any that I've come across. Gabbro is a volcanic type of soil sometimes called "black granite" but it is most similar to basalt, if a little coarser. With 40 years of organic farming to further enhance the expressiveness of their vines, this Parenti re Muscadet is sizzling with stony savory energy. It's like squeezing a lemon on a boulder and licking it. Ripping acid, dazzling overtones, and salty, dusty lees notes make this an invigorating, exciting wine that can't be beat for the price. *Jonathan Kemp*

## **Domaine de la Chevalerie 'Galichets' Bourgueil 2017**

**Bourgueil • Loire • France**

*Press 4 Mix/Red*

The Caslot family of Domaine de la Chevalerie are noted for their warmth and hospitality in a region that is pretty friendly to begin with. Their vines have been certified Biodynamic since 2012 but were organic for many, many years before that. They still represent an astounding value, with Cabernet Franc that earnestly expresses subtle differences in soil types.

Galichets is a parcel of vines averaging 60 years of age, mostly on deeper soils intermixed with alternating layers of sand, gravel, silex, and clay. They have enough structure and heft to gain complexity with bottle age, but they remain humble and understated. This only adds to the beauty and profundity, in my opinion. Wines with this much nuance and mystery are just not found at this price. It speaks to the Loire's enduring charms for those in the know and to the hard work of the minority of growers who have turned near-backwater appellations like Bourgueil into some of the most interesting in the world for studious wine lovers.

Upon first opening this wine I was greeted with the familiar aroma of pop-rocks as a sense memory. This speaks to me for most of the red wines I gravitate towards. Something bright, lively, fruit forward, with integrated tannins. This wine has it all plus a bit more complexity. After the initial wave of fruit jumped at me I started to pick up blueberry jam and white pepper on the nose. On the palate I tasted bright purple fruit similar to a ripe plum in summer, followed by a bit of dried rose or lilac, and finishing with a bit of a savory note reminiscent of a nice onion or shallot. Overall this wine would go great with grilled eggplant, Mediterranean fare, a substantial herbaceous salad and lighter red meat preparations.

*Jonathan Kemp & Jeremy Hernandez*



*The Caslot family*

## Gout a Goutte 'Gaga de Toi Rouge' 2022

**Coteaux du Loir • Loire • France**

*Press 4 Mix/Red*

Gout a Goutte is a small negociant project started by Ariane Lesné to supplement her primary production and label, Domaine de Montrieux, in lean years. She is located in the Côteaux du Vendômois north of Tours. Ariane had a long career in wine retail between France and the UK before learning how to make wine in Burgundy. After tasting a bottle of Emile Heredia's Pineau d'Aunis 'Verre des Poets' she decided to start making her own wine and as luck would have it Emile was selling the estate and Ariane did not hesitate to purchase the famed domaine.

'Gaga de Toi Rouge 2022' is an equal blend of Gamay, Pinot Noir, and Pineau d'Aunis, with the Aunis being estate grown. This is a fun punchy wine with hints of hibiscus, sumac, white pepper, and herbaceousness. It has a bit of texture and grip that we expect from Aunis, but it wears its complexity well and is a food friendly crowd pleaser. *Jeremy Hernandez*



*Ariané Lesné*

## **Domaine Guion 'Cuvee des Deux Monts' Bourgueil 2019**

**Bourgueil • Loire • France**

*Press 4 Red*

If you prefer your wine with a backstory, Domaine Guion's is particularly romantic. Situated in Loire's Bourgueil appellation alongside other staff-favorite producers like Catherine and Pierre Breton, the Guion family made the prescient decision to transition to organic farming in 1965, becoming one of the first domaines in France to be fully certified. Their 8.5 hectares — now managed by son Stéphane — are still hand-harvested and became Demeter-certified biodynamic in 2021. Even today, the wines age in a large cave that once functioned as a World War II Resistance hideout.

The estate has a reputation for age-worthy reds, but the “Cuvee des Deux Monts” is particularly special. Grown from grapes at the top of two vineyard parcels (and named for the mountain peaks behind the vines), it's only produced in vintages that Stéphane considers exceptional.

You can really taste the painstakingly maintained clay and limestone soil in this complex and almost chewy wine, which hits the palate with grippy tannins and a cranberry-like acidity. I found notes of crushed red pepper, blackberry, loamy soil and dried lavender and sage, but it has a lingering framboise finish that's hard to beat.

This wine has great aging potential and some time in the cellar (or a good, long decant) will help its many facets fully integrate. Our manager, Jonathan, tried the 2009 vintage alongside a 1983 Chateau Latour and thought it more than held its own. That's a ringing endorsement if I've ever heard one, especially for a bottle that sells for something like 20 times less than the Bordeaux.

*Kate Masters*

## **Domaine des Gâtz 'Antipode' Red 2021**

**Coteaux d'Ancenis • Loire • France**

*Press 4 Red*

This is a new project that again speaks to the relative access for the younger generation of winemakers in the Loire. In this case, Maxime Petit and Alexis Frenkel, childhood friends, were able to take over four hectares from Jacques Carroget of Domaine de la Paonnerie. Carroget was an early adopter of organic and Biodynamic practices and has since pushed for the Vin méthode Nature label, the first in France to denote natural winemaking.

For their part, Maxime and Alexis have managed to get the recently launched “Vins Naturels” zero sulfur designation on their wines. “Antipode” comes from 70 year-old Gamay vines planted on schist and has the nervier tension that is more typical of the Coteaux d’Ancenis, which is in the Loire Valley’s most western reaches, closer to Nantes and the Atlantic Ocean. 3 weeks of semi-carbonic maceration in fiberglass tank, and another 6 months in fiberglass before bottling. It’s a crunchy wine with notes of beets, cranberries, blackberries, and sassafras. The mouthwatering, dark fruit is matched with deep, meaty, iron notes and a feral, savage attitude. *Jonathan Kemp*

## **Hervé Villemade Cour-Cheverny ‘Les Chataigniers’ 2020**

**Cour-Cheverny • Loire • France**

*Press 4 White*

Hervé Villemade’s path to organic farming and zero sulfur wines was inspired by discovering Marcel Lapierre and Tue Boeuf’s wines; and that he had an allergy to sulfur. To make sulfur-free wines he needed his grapes to be super healthy, so he converted his family’s vineyards to organic methods in 2000. Since then he’s developed a reputation for making some of the most reliably delicious, affordable natural wines in the Loire Valley.



*Hervé Villemade*



Many are familiar with Hervé's slammin'ly delicious liter of Gamay called "Bovin" with a cartoon cow on the label — but he also makes some very profound wines that manage to retain a playful, warm-hearted countenance. Such is the case with the "Les Chataigniers," one of his Cour-Cheverny bottlings. Cour-Cheverny by law must be 100% Romorantin, making it one of the more obscure appellations in France. Romorantin, to me, mixes elements of Chenin's honeyed complexity with the spicy power of Timorasso or Savagnin. This can be tricky to reign in, but Villemade's touch makes this graceful where others can be hot and unwieldy. Here, notes of honeysuckle, salty preserved lemon, nutmeg, and ginger sit on top of healthy, plush fruit. Pair with roast chicken, cod with beurre blanc, grilled asparagus, or dishes that lean richer, heartier, and more complex. *Jonathan Kemp*

## **Manoir de la Tete Rouge Tete d'Ange Blanc 2021**

**Saumur • Loire • France**

*Press 4 White*

Manoir de la Tete Rouge is less known than some other Loire producers in the natural world, but the estate has existed since 1649. Guillaume Reynouard took over in 1995 and converted to organic certification in 1998, then to biodynamic in 2010. He now works 18 hectares of vines in Puy Notre Dame. He takes his farming and embrace of natural peasant wines to a philosophical level. His "Tete d'Ange" Blanc is 100% on clay and limestone. Understated, it walks a fine line between the leaner, mineral expression of Chenin and the more opulent side of things. Rosewater, lily, and floral notes with orange peel and fresh, filigreed overtones. <10ppm sulfur, no fining or filtering. Vegan friendly. *Jonathan Kemp*



*Guillaume Reynouard*

## **Thierry Germain L'Insolite Blanc 2021**

**Saumur • Loire • France**

*Press 2*

Thierry Germain moved to Saumur in the Loire in the early 1990's from Bordeaux and focuses primarily on Chenin Blanc and Cabernet Franc. Thierry was heavily influenced by Loire luminary Charly Foucault of Clos Rougeard and converted his entire domaine to biodynamic viticulture.

The Chenin Blanc for the 'L'Insolite' is fermented for 2 months in large wooden foudre and aged for 12 months on fine lees in foudre as well. Saumur consistently produces my favorite Chenin's and Thierry's are no exception. The 'L'Insolite' smells of honeyed orchard fruit with a hint of spice and the palate echoes with honeycomb, lanolin, orchard fruit, fennel like herbs, and is fleshy and vibrant.

*Jeremy Hernandez*



*Thierry Germain*

## **Catherine and Pierre Breton Bourgueil 'Clos Senechal' 2019** **Bourgueil • Loire • France**

*Press 2*

Catherine and Pierre Breton have been worldwide pied pipers for natural wine for some time now, being certified organic in 1991, and using Biodynamic practices since 1994. Their dedication is all the more notable being in Bourgueil, which is not an easy place to work. Disease pressure, frost, and hail are constant threats, and yet they have been delivering age-worthy, joyful wines for decades. That is not possible without raw physical exertion and an intense work ethic. Their daughter and son, France and Paul, have now taken over much of the work there.

Catherine and Pierre Breton's amazing library releases are not to be missed, though they are nearing the end of their cellar reserves. I have had wines from them with 20 years of age that are some of the most memorable of my life—the 2002 Beaumont at my wedding was unforgettable for many reasons.

The Clos Sénéchal is one of the Breton's top vineyard sites, on the hill above Galichets. The soils are clay atop Bourgueil's hallmark limestone tuffeaux, and the Cabernet Franc vines are 30-45-years-old. The sunny hillside produces wines of elegance and structure. The 2019 is aromatically complex, with brambly berries, plum skin, purple floral notes and white pepper; on the palate, the wine shows red plum flesh, kirsch, and sour black cherry around a deeply mineral, almost chalky core. There's plenty of structure here that will reward aging, but the wine, while initially quite dense, unfolds very nicely with some time open. A true friend for autumn and winter feasts or any sort of rustic French fare. *Jonathan Kemp & Ben Fletcher*



*The Bretons*



**OCTOBER 2024**

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