



FRANCE UNPLUGGED



HOW THE NEW 'VIN DE FRANCE' CATEGORY IS REVOLUTIONIZING THE FUTURE OF FRENCH WINE IN AMERICA

BY KRISTEN BIELER

For most wine-producing nations, it's easier to sell value-priced wines abroad than it is to drum up demand for luxury bottlings. France, however, suffers from the opposite problem. "At the high-end French wines are the most respected in the world, but at the low-end we have lost ground totally," says Bertrand Girard, President, Val d'Orbieu, the largest still-wine cooperative in France. "Why? Because we are not making the right wines for this market. Complexity and diversity are our strengths, but for entry-level drinkers, French wines are difficult to navigate."

The Vin de France category aims to change this. "Vin de France is a new paradigm for French wine with the express purpose of regaining market share in the international marketplace," Girard explains.

For a country so steeped in tradition, the category's implications are quite significant: Under the Vin de France guidelines, produc-

ers for the first time are permitted to blend grapes from different regions. Growers also are now able to cultivate grape varieties previously unauthorized in their region. "A lot of growers are frustrated with the AOC regulations which impose a very strict idea of terroir and tradition," says Bruno Kessler, President of Anivin de France, a French trade organization dedicated to promoting the new category. So far, the Vin de France group has 766 members, 400 of which are independent growers who bottle their own wines.

FRENCH WINE FOR THE AMERICAN PALATE

The Vin de France category was officially created in 2009 and took off immediately. According to Valérie Pajotin, Managing Director, Anivin de France, the Vin de France category already accounts for 25% of still wine exports out of France. However, until an Alcohol and Tobacco Tax & Trade Bureau (TTB) ruling late last year, Vin de France wines imported to the U.S. weren't allowed to bear

a vintage date. So while bulk shipments of Vin de France wine into the American market have been rapidly increasing, the category's real potential will only now be realized, Kessler believes.

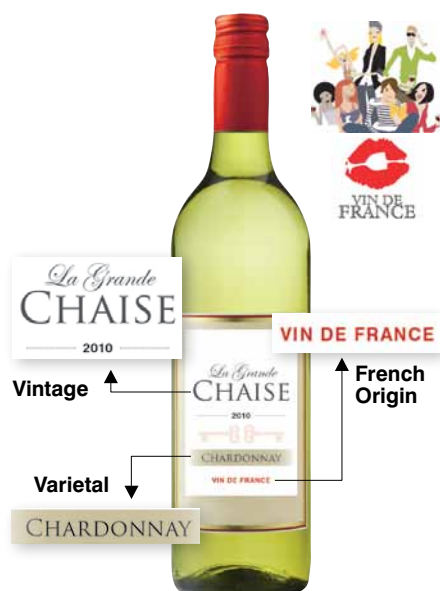
A fast-growing number of French producers are seizing the opportunity to create wines like their New World counterparts. Sacha Lichine, the man behind Provence's elite Château d'Esclans label, is debuting a white, red and rosé under an eponymous label (each \$12.99 SRP). "The potential of the *assemblage* is incredible," he asserts. "The ability to blend from different regions allows me to create wines of greater complexity."

Another benefit is vintage consistency, says Laurent Delaunay, President of Burgundy-based Badet Clément & Co., which is introducing brands Pâtisserie du Vin and La Belle Angèle. "I am able to blend Syrah from the Southwest which imparts acidity and freshness with Syrah from Languedoc for fruit character and Syrah from Rhône for earthiness and texture." He describes Pâtisserie as a "concept brand" like Cupcake Vineyards or Ménage à Trois. Past attempts to create brands like these in France (such as Red Bicyclette and Pinot Evil) were constrained by the old blending rules, so they didn't really stand a chance next to similarly priced, New World-styled wines, says Kessler. "They weren't matching up with the American palate."

VARIETY VS. ORIGIN

The marketplace is already responding well to new Vin de France wines, says Richard Genova, President of Vintage Epicure,

VIN DE FRANCE AT A GLANCE



- Officially created in 2009
- Strong brands with competitive pricing and simple labels indicating vintage, varietal and French origin
- Grapes can come from any region of France; no restrictions on blending
- The Vin de France category now comprises 25% of French wine exports, and sales have quadrupled in three years
- The U.S. currently represents 4% of Vin de France market share abroad, primarily because TTB limited vintage-dated imports until 2012; the figure is certain to rise as new brands are introduced

which represents Val d'Orbieu in the U.S. Their Réserve St. Martin brand has been taking full advantage of the new winemaking freedoms to craft wines that Genova describes as "a bit more yummy" than before. One of Genova's largest customers, the 100-store giant Total Wine, reported a 25% jump in Réserve St. Martin Chardonnay. "It gives the chef in the winery access to a greater array of ingredients," he explains.

While place and terroir are fundamental to French wine historically, the international consumer shops by variety. "Where a wine comes from is not that important to the value wine shopper today," believes Genova. "The consumer is flexible—they are happy to buy a Chardonnay from Chile, Spain, California or France. France is now able to compete for the New World consumer, who is a varietal consumer above all else." While it is designed for the value tier, it won't be long before some luxury wine producers take advantage of the looser Vin de France laws to produce wines outside of the restrictive regional laws.

There remains some confusion in the marketplace, and Kessler doesn't expect that to disappear overnight. He fields a lot of questions from the trade—such as "Is Vin de France a place to dump Vin de Pays wine that won't sell?"—but he explains that this is something completely different: "We are not trying to be anyone else or copy the wines of other countries. We are proud to be French and proud of our AOC system which made us what we are. Vin de France represents a new way of producing wine in France with the international consumer in mind." ■

VIN DE FRANCE: BENDING THE MOLD

 <p>TUSOCK JUMPER Chardonnay grapes from different parts of France; 1/3 barrel fermented, 2/3 stainless steel</p>	 <p>PÂTISSERIE Chardonnay-Muscat combo; draws inspiration from the <i>tarte tatin</i> (French apple tart)</p>	 <p>LA PETITE PERRIÈRE Loire specialist Saget's ultra-fresh Sauv Blanc shows peach and melon</p>	 <p>LES ALLIÉS Long maceration yields an aromatic, ripe and velvety-smooth Cabernet Sauvignon</p>	 <p>PETITE EDITION Three distinct vineyards were tapped for this balanced small-production Grenache</p>	 <p>SACHA LICHINE This epitomizes the new blending freedom by melding Grenache, Syrah & Merlot</p>
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