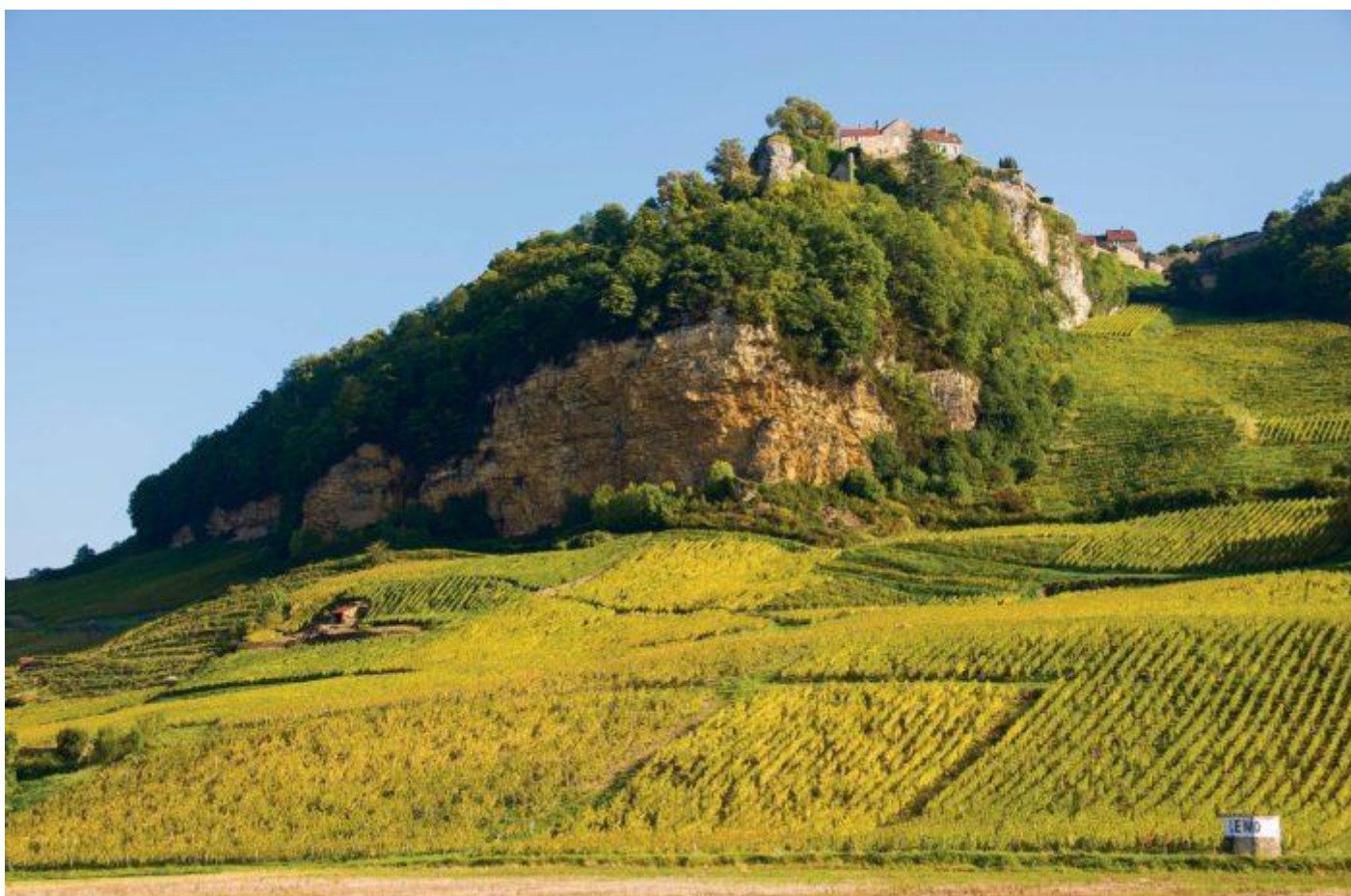


# Discover France's Lesser-Known, Value Pinot Noir Regions

*Burgundy has been the model for a long time, but that's all about to change. Winemakers in regions like the Loire Valley, Jura and beyond are using their unique understanding of the climate and terroir to produce high-quality and high-value Pinot Noir.*

BY LAUREN BUZZEO, ANNE KREBIEHL, MW, AND ROGER VOSS

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*Vineyards in the Jura region of France / Photo by Gavin Duley / Shutterstock*

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Winemakers often consider Pinot Noir to be the holy grail of grapes, despite it being one of the most fickle for consumers.

It's among the hardest varieties for vintners to handle and by far the most difficult to turn into great wine. For consumers, when it comes to selecting a bottle, region recognition is often not enough. Names of producers are just as important to understand what style and expression to expect, more so than for any other grape.



That's the reputation, anyway, and it all stems from Burgundy. The French region has been the grape's home since at least the 14th century, but probably much earlier. It's the place where the greatest examples of Pinot Noir are made, like grand cru and premier cru wines from the Côte de Nuits, and Burgundy has remained the model for producers across the globe.

It's time for that to change.

Other regions have been producing great Pinot Noir, especially as winemakers better understand its sensitive nature and needs in climate and terroir. And in France, Pinot Noir for still wines has grown in importance in many places: from the Loire, Jura and Alsace in the north, where it's been grown since the Middle Ages, to its more recent appearance in Languedoc to the south.

As Burgundy prices become more and more stratospheric, now is a good time to explore the high-quality, high-value Pinot Noir from the rest of France. Here's a celebration of the grape from regions that represent it well, and the top bottlings to seek out. —Roger Voss



*Vineyards near to the Château de Chinon, Indre-et-Loire, Loire Valley, France / Photo by Julian Elliott / Robert Harding / Alamy*

## Loire

For many years, Pinot Noir in the Loire was synonymous with rosé. There were a couple of producers who made exceptional red wines, but their success was, in part, because they were so unusual.

The main reason for the lack of red bottlings was the climate. While the primary Loire Pinot Noir regions of Sancerre, Menetou-Salon and Reuilly are just to the west of Burgundy and not much farther north, the weather is generally cooler and damper, with a more oceanic climate than continental Burgundy.

Climate change has begun to affect that. Before 1990, Sancerre was definitely cooler than Burgundy, perfect for white wines made from Sauvignon Blanc. Today, however, it can be warmer than its easterly neighbor in some years, which has improved the grape's ripening potential.

Producers can now make red wines with confidence, and many are startlingly good. Some, like the Domaine Vacheron, Domaine Pascal Jolivet and Domaine Alphonse Mellot in Sancerre, and Domaine de Châtenoy in Menetou-Salon, have a style both more mineral and more crisp than Burgundy. But they also possess an intensity of red fruits and depth of color new to the Loire.

Others are following suit, seeking the right terroir for Pinot Noir—a mix of clay and chalk and warmer parcels. The producers here talk of terroir much like their colleagues to the east.

The Loire's Pinot Noir regions will always be white-wine dominant, but buy the red wines for their immediate pleasure, or cellar a few of the top bottles to experience their surprising ageability of 10–15 years. —R.V.

**Alphonse Mellot 2014 En Grands Champs (Sancerre); \$112, 94 points.** From old vines planted in a single vineyard, this is a spectacular red. It has the crisp acidity of the cool-climate Sancerre, but it also has the weight and ripeness of a fine Burgundy. The wood aging has left a spicy toasty edge to the beautiful cherry fruits and acidity. It could age for another year to be at its best. Drink from 2019. Elite Wines Import. **Cellar Selection.**

**Domaine Vacheron 2015 Sancerre; \$40, 92 points.** Expanding on their fathers' legacies, the cousins Jean-Laurent and Jean-Dominique Vacheron have a deserving reputation for their almost-Burgundian Sancerre. This latest vintage, packed with both fruit and structure, shows why. It is ripe with red cherries and dark plums laced with acidity. The wine is full of great ripe fruit and generous tannins. Drink from 2018. European Cellars.

**Domaine de l'Hermitage 2015 Les Pierres Chaudes (Menetou-Salon); \$20, 90 points.** This is a smooth wine with soft tannins cushioned by generous fruits. Its red-cherry acidity gives the lightest stalky edge and will allow the wine to age further. The partial barrel aging has added spice. Drink this fine wine from 2019. Baron Francois Ltd. **Editors' Choice.**





*Photo by Massimo Santi / Shutterstock*

## Alsace

Pinot Noir has been at home in Alsace since at least the Middle Ages. That shouldn't come as a surprise when you consider the temperate, sunny climate in northeastern France and the region's east- and southeast-facing slopes.

For a long time, Pinot Noir took a back seat. Initially, it was not considered a grand cru variety, and thus, wasn't necessarily planted in the best sites. Even today, it's Alsace's only red grape and accounts for just 10% of plantings in the region famed almost entirely for its unique white wines.

But Pinot Noir from grand cru sites is finally being recognized. The grape's champions planted it in great sites, lowered yields and showed its true potential. Although they're still being formalized and await approval, the Grands Crus of Vorbourg, Hengst and Kirchberg de Barr are likely to become the first Alsace Grands Crus for Pinot Noir.

Basic Alsace Pinot Noir has a rustic charm of its own. Many vignerons still make unoaked, entirely fruit-driven versions for immediate enjoyment and high accessibility. These work well chilled and are light-bodied wines ideal for charcuterie or a picnic.

More ambitious producers craft elegant, noteworthy Pinot Noirs that can age and develop. In better years, they achieve aromatic depth without too much alcohol. Only a few are made in a truly international, barrique-aged style, and the best uphold their unique Alsace character of savoriness, vivid freshness and ethereal, earthy beauty. It's definitely a region to watch. —Anne Krebiehl, MW



**Domaine Ostertag 2016 Fronholz Pinot Noir (Alsace); \$62, 93 points.** A closed nose offers a hint of cherry. The palate follows with a balance of pure cherry, firm tannin and bright freshness graced with a touch of dark peony. This is understated, light-bodied but wonderfully elegant and has a habit of growing on you slowly and stealthily. This has a long and lovely resonance. Kermit Lynch Wine Merchant.

**René Muré 2016 Clos St Landelin Pinot Noir (Alsace); \$75, 93 points.** A beautifully pure topnote of black cherry sings on the nose, followed by peony and cinnamon. The palate is luminous in a dark cherry flavor. This wine is profound and concentrated but nothing weighs it down. Drink 2018–2028. Drink now through 2028. Gargouille Collection.

**Trimbach 2015 Personnelle Réserve Pinot Noir (Alsace); \$54, 93 points.** Very pure notes of red cherry fill the nose. The same pure fruit is framed by bright, luminous freshness on the palate, which echoes in flavors of cherry, pepper and licorice. An aromatic, fresh and vivid Pinot made with a light touch. Esprit du Vin.



*A Walker in Herault Valley, Languedoc, France / Photo by David Noton / Alamy*

## Languedoc-Roussillon

It's no surprise that France's biggest wine region, Languedoc-Roussillon, produces Pinot Noir. It seems that just about any grape variety can find a suitable home somewhere in the vast region, thanks to its varied terroirs and even-keeled, moderate Mediterranean climate

Most Pinot Noir produced in Languedoc-Roussillon is bottled under the Indication Géographique Protégée (IGP) Pays d'Oc appellation, formerly called Vin de Pays d'Oc.

Pays d'Oc, composed of the Hérault, Aude, Gard and Pyrénées-Orientales departments, is the largest region for French IGP wines, producing 78% of the country's IGP selections. It accounts for 16% of all French wine and a shocking 93% of the country's varietal bottlings. There are 58 authorized grape varieties for Pays d'Oc production, and that includes Pinot Noir, the fourth-most-grown red grape in the region.

These wines are often direct, approachable and priced at \$10–15 on average. They express overt, ripe red- and black-fruit aromas and flavors, thanks to the region's warm climate, though they are typically balanced by just enough acidity to keep the palate fresh and inviting. Generally not overdone or overly complex, these Pinots offer straightforward profiles and pleasant, easy-drinking natures.

Beyond Pays d'Oc selections, high-quality Pinot Noir does exceptionally well in the Aude department, especially around the Appellation d'Origine Protégée (AOP) of Limoux.

This is the westernmost appellation in the Languedoc, as well as the highest and coolest, which makes it a friendly spot for Pinot Noir.

Crémant de Limoux is regulated to see small additions of Pinot Noir in the sparkling wines, but red wines from the AOP are not approved to be made from the grape, and so they will typically carry an alternate Aude-based appellation instead, like Haute Vallée de l'Aude. Though rich and fuller bodied than one might anticipate from Old World Pinot Noir, these wines call for thought and attention, and usually command a higher price tag for their high quality and small production sizes. —*Lauren Buzzeo*

**Gérard Bertrand 2015 Aigle Royal Pinot Noir (Haute Vallée de l'Aude); \$80, 91 points.** This wine is powerful and concentrated, with abundant notes of blackberries, black cherry and currant that are hit by ample doses of garrigue and baking spice. The palate is plush and velvety, with medium acidity to lift the ripe fruit tones. Notes of black tea, menthol, licorice and toasted cocoa nib ride out the lingering finish. Drink 2020–2025. USA Wine West.

**Domaine de la Métairie d'Alon 2015 Solaire Single Vineyard Pinot Noir (Haute Vallée de l'Aude); \$30, 90 points.** This organic single-vineyard wine comes from the lieu-dit of Solaire. It opens with pronounced aromas of purple flowers, bay and licorice that frame the ripe black-fruit tones of plum, cherry and raspberry sauce. Rich and generous, it boasts a plush texture, structured tannins and ample acidity, with enduring notes of sweet spice, toasted oak and licorice root on the close. Drink 2019–2023. Maritime Wine Trading Collective.

**Les Domaines Auriol Claude Vialade 2016 Made with Organic Grapes Elegantly French Pinot Noir (Pays d'Oc); \$10, 88 points.** This leads with inviting scents of garrigue, red currant and wild strawberry. A pleasant thread of orange zest weaves throughout, lending freshness and vibrancy to the fruit-forward palate. The tannins are fine and the finish is dry, with a final dusting of sweet spice on the close. Monsieur Touton Selection, Ltd. **Best Buy.**





## *The Refreshing Variety of the New Loire Valley*

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### Other Regions

The Jura's red wines can be made from Pinot Noir as an alternative to the local Poulsard and Trousseau varieties, and the grape's ability to thrive here should be expected: On a clear day, you can see the slope of the Côte d'Or of Burgundy from the Jura, and some similarities can be drawn between the regions.

Pinot Noir has been in the Jura since cuttings were first brought across the Saône valley from Burgundy during the Middle Ages. The region's style is perfumed and crisper than Burgundy bottlings, a reflection of a cooler climate with sharp winters and shorter summers.

Traditionally, the grape was blended with Poulsard and Trousseau, but now it's also used to produce entirely varietal wines.

Pinot Noir is also found in the Vin de France category, which are wines that use grapes from anywhere in the country. Made by producers throughout France, from the Loire to Languedoc and even Corsica, many are from established brands within the winery's region of origin. Though they may bear the name of the parent estate, they're often given a unique brand identity.

Perhaps not surprisingly, Burgundy-based producers make some of the best Vin de France Pinot Noirs. The style can vary widely with more or less varietal character, but the price tags are very competitive, around \$12–15. —R.V.

**L. Tramier & Fils 2016 Tramier Pinot Noir (Vin de France); \$10, 88 points.** This sophisticated and stylish Pinot Noir from the south of France was made a Burgundy producer. It has fine tannins, juicy red cherry-driven acidity and a warm, ripe aftertaste. Vitis Imports. **Best Buy.**

**Domaine Rolet Père et Fils 2009 Rouge Tradition (Arbois); \$24, 87 points.** Completely mature, this lightly wood-aged wine has a smooth, mushroom and red fruit flavor. A touch of tannin gives dryness and delicious, refreshing acidity as an aftertaste. Drink now. DB Wine Selection.

**Patriarche Père et Fils 2015 Pinot Noir (Vin de France); \$10, 87 points.** The Burgundy-based producer has made a fresh, cherry-flavored wine that is identifiably Pinot Noir. It has soft tannins and a dry core, yet is dominated by red fruit and acidity on the finish. Drink now. Barton & Guestier USA. **Best Buy.**

### Pinot's Sparkling Spirit

There's more Pinot Noir in Champagne than Burgundy. It's the essential partner of Chardonnay and Pinot Meunier in the classic blends of the region. Occasionally, Pinot Noir can form the entire base wine of a Champagne.

The classic blend, and especially blends from Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, are repeated in many other French traditional-method sparkling wines. You can find Pinot Noir in blends from Saumur in the Loire and Châtillon-en-Diois in the Drôme Valley. In Limoux, it can be up to 10%

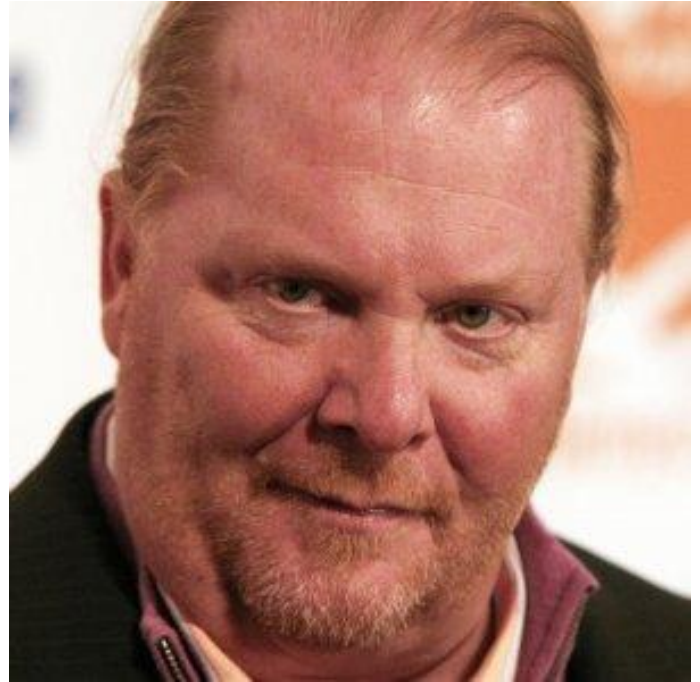
of a blend in Crémant de Limoux. And back in its homeland, it also appears as a part of the blend of Crémant de Bourgogne, some of which have an impressive likeness to Champagne.

Why is Pinot Noir so vital to these bottlings? Generally speaking, sparklers are cool-climate wines, or the grapes are picked underripe to offer enough acidity to provide balance. Pinot Noir is the greatest cool-climate red grape. And perhaps there's a bit of competition. What sparkling wine producer doesn't want to be compared to Champagne? –R.V.

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