

## How to read a French wine label

### French Wine Label Information

France is the largest producer of fine wine in the world. Each French region is different from the next, not only in its 'terroir' but in the history and style of the wines it produces. Often, this uniqueness is reflected on **French wine labels** as every region has its own particular set of appellations, classifications and labeling rules ?all controlled by regional and national wines laws, as well as those enforced by the European Union. Please take a look at the individual wine label information for Bordeaux, Burgundy, Alsace and Champagne.

### Bordeaux Wine Label Information

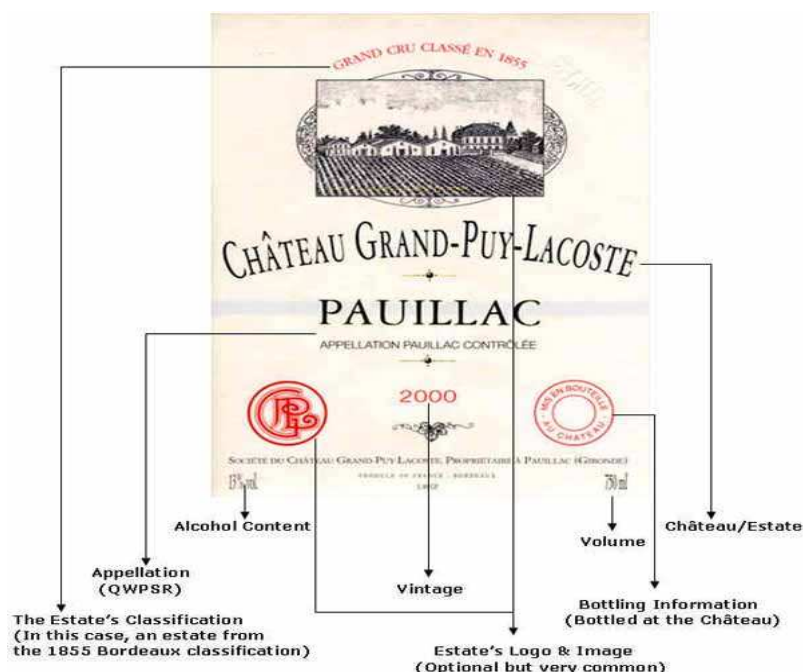
The *Bordeaux region* in France is unique in its wine laws, which have evolved for centuries making it the most classified wine region of the world. The most famous classification is the one which came into being in 1855 and was subsequently known as the 'Classed Growths', taking in Médoc, one wine from Graves and the sweet wines of Sauternes-Barsac. According to this, the chateaux or estates were classified into five tiers based on the relative quality of their wines as expressed by the prices at that time.

Some other notable classifications within the region are those of the 1955 Official Classification of Saint-Emilion, the 1959 Official Classification of Graves and the Cru Bourgeois classification, which has been the subject of many amendments.

Although a broad knowledge of the classification system is helpful in understanding a typical **Bordeaux wine label**, the following information will always be included. Please see the image below for an example.

- Name of the estate (Chateau Grand-Puy-Lacoste in the example below)
- Estate's classification (the label may or may not display the actual level of the classification)
- Appellation (in Bordeaux's case, the appellation will often indicate the type of the wine and the grapes used)
- Bottling information (whether or not the wine is bottled at the chateau)
- Vintage
- Alcohol content
- Volume.

Please see the illustration below for a quality *wine label from Bordeaux*. You may find it helpful to compare the label information to that listed above.



## Burgundy Wine Label Information

Unlike Bordeaux, many Burgundy wine labels display a particular vineyard name along with their quality designation, and the appellation under which they were produced.

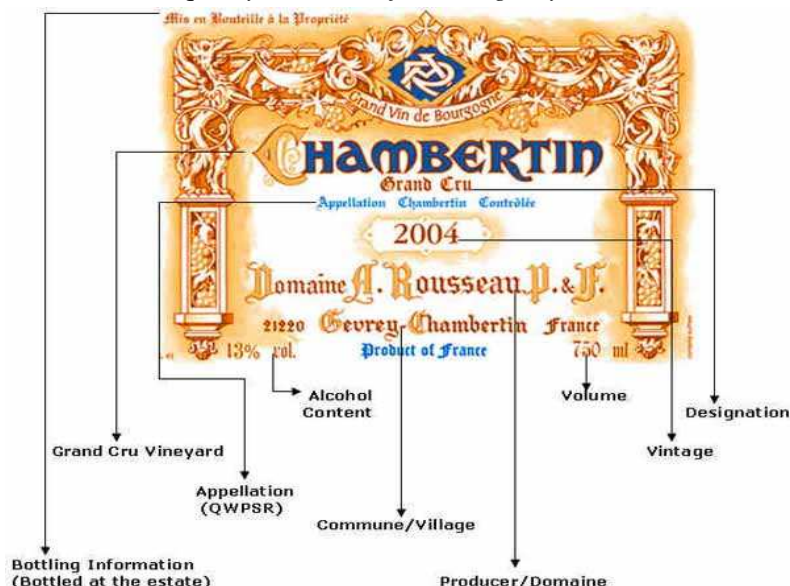
The vineyards of Burgundy are officially classified by the INAO, the French government organization responsible for the country's appellation system. Each site is ranked according to the quality of its terroir, and will fall into one of these categories:

- **Grand Cru:** These are the highest-quality wines, produced from a relatively small number of vineyard sites within the Cote d'Or and Chablis sub-regions.
- **Premier Cru:** These sites are not on a par with the Grand Crus but still are of high quality. *Premier Cru* wines are made under a communal appellation, but are permitted to state 'Premier Cru' to show their superior provenance.
- **Communal or village appellation:** These wines are produced from grapes grown in vineyards of supposedly lesser quality than Grand Crus and Premier Crus. The grapes may come from a single vineyard site or several. The appellation title will state simply the name of the village, e.g. 'Gevrey-Chambertin' or 'Puligny-Montrachet'.
- **Regional appellation:** These are wines produced from a much wider 'regional' catchment area than a single vineyard or village. The Bourgogne appellation is the widest, covering all of Burgundy and even some land beyond. The labels may state simply *Bourgogne*, or give sub-regional appellations such as Bourgogne Hautes-Cotes de Nuits.

Beaujolais, which is sometimes considered a part of Burgundy, has its own classification system. Its finest wines come from ten villages known as the Beaujolais 'Crus', with each one imparting its own character to the wines.

The other two appellations appearing on Beaujolais wine labels are *Beaujolais* and *Beaujolais-Villages*, the former covering the whole Beaujolais region, the latter a specific sub-section of the finer land.

Please see the illustration below for a *quality-wine label from Burgundy*.



## Alsace Wine Label Information

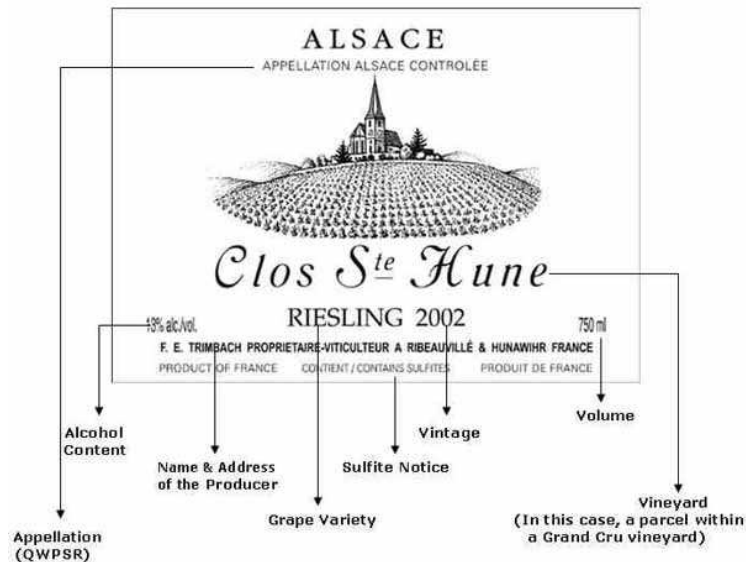
Unlike most other French wine regions, **Alsace wine labels** almost always display the grape variety. However, under appellation rules, if a grape variety is stated, the wine must be made entirely from that variety.

Alsace wines are produced and labeled under the following Appellation d'Origin Protégée (AOP):

- **Alsace AOC:** The majority of Alsace wines are produced under this umbrella appellation and unlike other French regions, there are no sub-appellations. A label may display a vineyard name (as in Burgundy), but the appellation will still say 'Appellation Alsace Contrôlée'.
- **Alsace Grand Cru:** These are the highest-quality wines produced by 51 designated vineyards. The labels will display the vineyard as well as the term 'Alsace Grand Cru'. Only the noble Alsace grape varieties are allowed, namely Riesling, Muscat, Pinot Gris and Geweztraminer.

- **Vendange Tardive and Sélection de Grains Nobles:** These are exclusive terms for Alsace wines made from noble grapes harvested late in the season. Vendange Tardive means 'late harvest' and the wines are sweeter than normal. Labels showing Sélection de Grains Nobles mean the wine has been made from individually picked berries affected by botrytis and is intensely rich and sweet.
- **Edelzwicker:** This term normally means an inexpensive blend of Alsatian grapes.
- **Crémant d'Alsace AOP:** An appellation used for sparkling wines made within the region using the traditional method.

For a typical *Alsace wine label*, see the illustration below.



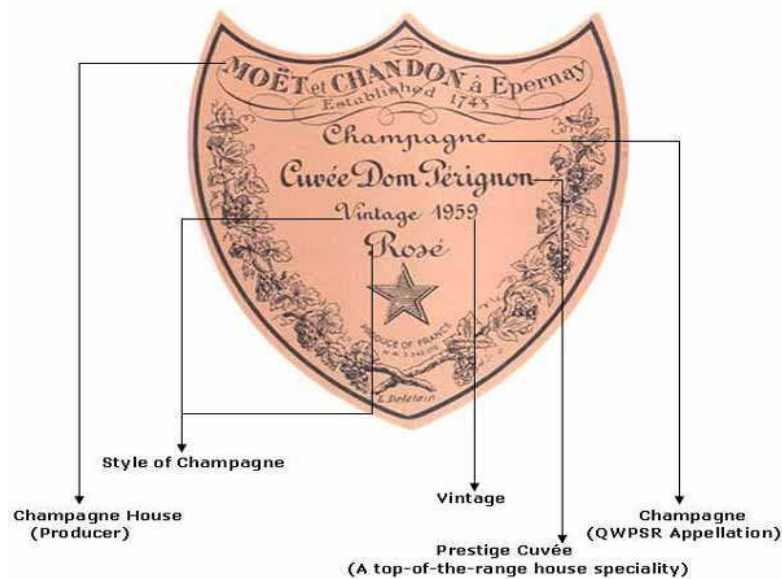
### Champagne Label Information

Champagne labeling laws differ from other parts of France because the entire region falls under a single AOC (AOP, the official EU equivalent) the protected term 'Champagne' and the wines are categorized according to styles rather than designations. Here, the status of the producer is more important than the vineyard site. To distinguish between the numerous different styles, **Champagne labels** use a range of terms as described below.

- **Level of sweetness:**
  - Ultra Brut -Bone dry or very dry
  - Brut -Dry
  - Sec -Literally dry but has higher sugar level than Brut
  - Demi-sec -Medium dry
  - Doux -Sweet
- **Non-vintage:** A Champagne made from a blend of wines from different years. Some Champagne houses may use up to hundred reserve wines from previous years to produce a consistent house style.
- **Vintage:** A Champagne made from a single year's harvest. The label must show the year of the harvest.
- **Blanc de Blancs:** This term means that the Champagne has been produced entirely from white grapes in other words, Chardonnay.
- **Blanc de Noirs:** Refers to Champagne made from black grape varieties (Pinot Noir and Pinot Meunier).
- **Rosé:** This is often made by blending a little red wine with the whites.
- **Grande Marque:** Means 'Great Brand'. A producer may use this term but according to AOC rules it does not guarantee quality or any particular style.
- **Cuvée de Prestige:** These are the top-of-the-range releases from the Champagne houses and may come with a vintage on the label.
- **Marque d'Acheteur:** Means 'Buyer's Own Brand'. These are often seen on Champagnes sold within retail or supermarket chains, which sell them using their own brand names.

Apart from these, there are other non-mandatory terms that may appear on a label, specifying the type of Champagne producer, maturation time, etc.

Please see the illustration below for a typical *Champagne label*.



To understand a *French wine label*, it is important to have a basic understanding of the classification systems and terminology currently used in France's wine industry.

### French wine classification

- **AOC (Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée):** An AOC classification acts as a consumer guarantee that a wine is of a particular quality and, generally, of a particular style. It also states that the wine has been made in a designated area, in accordance with local wine production laws and regulations. All AOC appellation titles are derived from the place in which the wines are made, although the degree of geographical specificity varies greatly.
- **Grand Cru** is the highest-possible classification for a French wine. It is used in two distinct ways, relating either to the winery itself (as in the 1855 Classification of Medoc and Graves) or the land from which the wine comes (as in Burgundy's *Cote d'Or* district). The latter system has been more widely adopted across France, not just in Burgundy but in Champagne, Alsace, Languedoc-Roussillon and the Loire Valley.
- **Premier Cru** is also used in two ways: to denote the highest tier *within* an existing Grand Cru classification (such as the *Premier Grand Cru Classes* of Medoc and Saint-Emilion) and to denote land of superior quality, but which falls short of Grand Cru status.
- **AOP (Appellation d'Origine Protégée):** the Europe-wide equivalent of the French national-level AOC.
- **VDQS (Vin Delimité de Qualité Supérieure):** This level is seen as a stepping stone for appellations seeking promotion to AOC/AOP status. VDQS titles represent less than 1% of France's total wine production and change often, so it is rare to see VDQS on a wine label. The category has been removed from France's wine quality hierarchy, as of the 2011 vintage.
- **VDP (Vin de Pays) means 'Wine of the Land' or 'Country Wine'.** This classification is below VDQS but above 'Vin de Table', and was introduced in the 1970s. It covers about one quarter of French wine, the majority of which is intended for the domestic market. **IGP (Indication Géographique Protégée):** the Europe-wide equivalent of the French national-level VDP.
- **VDT (Vin de Table):** 'Table Wine' the lowest category of French wine. The least regulated of all the quality levels, VDT wines can be made anywhere in France. VDT wine labels have no official statement about region, vintage or grape varieties. Very little wine is now sold under the VDT title since the development of the VDP category.

## French Wine Label Terms

Blanc	White
Brut	Dry
Cave	Wine cellar
Chateau	An estate. Literally, 'castle', but mostly refers to large country houses
Cooperative	A co-operative or, more likely, a syndicate of wine growers
Cote/Coteaux	Slope of a hill/hillsides
Cremant	A style of sparkling wine other than Champagne
Cru	Literally, 'growth'. Denotes status of a vineyard.
Cru Classe	Classified vineyard
Demi-sec	Medium-dry
Domaine	Estate
Doux	Sweet
Grand cru	Literally, 'great growth'. Highest-quality wines.
Methode Traditionnelle	Traditional method of sparkling winemaking, same as used for Champagne
Millesime	The vintage of a wine
Mise en Bouteille au Chateau/Domaine/a la propriete	Estate-bottled. Sometimes MC in short for Bordeaux wines.
Negociant	A merchant who buys grapes, juice or wine from growers and sells the wines under his own label
Premier Cru	First growth
Proprietaire	Estate or vineyard owner
Recoltant	A grape grower. Sometimes also means a person who harvests the grapes.
Recolte	Harvest or vintage
Rouge	Red
Selection de Grains Nobles	A sweet style of wine made in Alsace from grapes affected by noble rot (botrytis)
Superieur	A wine with higher alcohol content
Vendange	Harvest
Vendange Tardive	Late harvest. A style of wine originally from Alsace but now used in various French wine regions.
Vieilles Vignes	Old vines
Vigneron/Viticulteur	Vine grower/grape grower
Vignoble	Vineyard
Vin	Wine