

A scenic view of a French village with a church and vineyards. The church has a tall, thin spire. The vineyards are terraced and cover the hillsides. The sky is blue with some clouds.

Affordable France

By Tim Edwards

France remains the benchmark for many varietals. However, in this global wine era, in some ways it is in the shadow of the current darling regions of wine marketers and pundits. As a marketer, it is much easier to show something new than to keep a very well established brand or region fresh and exciting. French vigneron go outside of their homeland to work with fruit in new frontiers all over the world. They seek to understand the economies of the new region and to understand the possibilities of what can be accomplished in another type of landscape.

France has not lost its individualism or potential for quality, but in general, France did become stagnant and took their place in the wine world somewhat for granted. There was a trend to pursue yields over quality, and plant varietals in areas that were not ideal. There are producers that stayed on course and made decisions based on quality. At the same time, the caliber of the wine in the rest of the world has risen and the competition for the world's wine dollars is serious. The question is, what is France doing about this situation?

First, the overall quality of French wine has increased as well. Before, with very little competition, yields were high and quality was inconsistent. Now France has risen to a new level and has become a source for many bargain wines.

France has the basic raw materials and infrastructure to make great wines affordable. First, they have lovely limestone in various concentrations throughout the country, and ancient sea beds risen from the ocean to form amazing soils. Decomposed granite, ancient volcanic bases, and some of the widest spread alluvial soils on the planet make for ideal growing conditions. For climate, France has the blazing sun in the south to the more moderate northern areas which give potential area to ripen many different varietals to the extent that they can make a world class wine.

Next consider the vines spread throughout the various regions. There are many acres of vines that are 25, 50 or even 90 years old. Just like humans, vines become more complex and interesting as they get older.

As in many industries the people can make the greatest difference. Many families have been in the wine business much longer than our country has been in existence. Knowledge, and insight about the region or their property have been passed down by generations. There is an added benefit of the vineyards being in the same family and being inherited without the financial burden of a mortgage, which allows focus into making great wines.

Many of the current generation of French Vignerons have studied abroad and have returned home to give the vineyards needed attention, purchased updated equipment, and to renovate the family winery. They are adapting technology in the winery as far as regulating temperatures during fermentation and aging more strictly, keeping their work areas spotless, and producing wines that are technically solid. This has made French wines more focused and precise about showing the varietals' character while displaying the characteristics of the terroir.

New world wines have made their mark on the industry. There are, however, many wineries charging more for a first release from vineyards that are 3-4 years old than estates making far more interesting wines with vineyards over 50 years old! In addition, many of the estates of France have had a great reputation that has endured in Europe and the globe for decades or centuries.

So now, more than ever, is the time to drink what our parents and great grandparents knew to be the finest wine in the world. Vive la France!