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A small selection of cookery breaks based behind the scenes of hotel kitchens in Normandy and Provence. Also gourmet weekends in northern France.

● **Orpheus & Bacchus**

020 8950 2220,

www.orpheusandbacchus.com

Small programme of wine, food and music events on an estate near Bordeaux.

● **Sherpa**

020 8577 2717,

www.sherpa-walking-holidays.co.uk

A walking specialist with an interesting self-guided trail through the Alsace, including the vineyards and the foothills of the Vosges mountains, with opportunities to sample Sylvaner, Riesling, Gewürztraminer and Pinot Blanc at "caves" along the route.

● **Travelscene**

020 8424 9648,

www.travelscene.co.uk

"Gastronomic getaways" offered in many parts of France.

● **Wessex Wine Holidays**

01752 846880,

www.wineholidays.com

Escorted coach tours, led by wine writer Stephen Barrett, to Chablis, Burgundy and Sancerre and to the Languedoc.

● **Winetrails**

01306 712111,

www.winetrails.co.uk

Walking and cycling holidays with tastings – some guided, some independent. Regions visited include Burgundy, Bordeaux, the Loire, Champagne, the Rhône and Provence. New for this year is a self-guided cycling tour of Calvados (in Normandy), which includes tastings at local producers. Also tailor-made self-drive trips.

Renowned wine expert Robert Joseph celebrates France's unsung heroes

Compared with our neighbours on the European mainland, we are an unadventurous bunch when it comes to buying wine beyond our own frontiers. Drive through almost any wine region during the summer and you'll see cars with German, Dutch and Swiss number plates parked outside winegrowers' cellars, their axles groaning beneath the weight of freshly-bought bottles.

Our Gallic sprees are far more likely to be undertaken in Calais, in supermarkets or discount stores where there's no risk of having to dust off our schoolroom French. But, as anyone who's tried both has discovered, piling bottles into a trolley beneath the fluorescent lights of a Carrefour hypermarché can never begin to compete with the experience of spending half an hour with the man or woman who made the wine and being surrounded by the vineyards in which the grapes were grown and the vats and barrels in which the juice was fermented and matured.

Buying at the cellar door is like purchasing a painting direct from the artist in their studio. Suddenly, what might otherwise be simply an enjoyable red or white uncorked for dinner gains a context and a history. With any luck you'll leave with advice on how and when it should be drunk and, possibly, even a recipe for a

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traditional local dish to serve it with.

So, where to go? There are the obvious parts of Burgundy, Bordeaux and other well-known areas. But that won't guarantee quality and may mean you pay too much for very ordinary wine. The French system allows poor producers in Chablis and St Emilion, for example, to charge higher prices than their often more talented and quality-conscious neighbours in areas with less prestige. This may be desperately unfair but it provides plenty of rich pickings for bargain-seekers who are prepared to leave their wine snobbery at home. Here is my selection of some of those lesser known appellations...

BURGUNDY

Mention Burgundy to most wine drinkers and they more than likely think of wines such as Nuits St Georges, Beaune and Chassagne Montrachet. The villages where these are made are undeniably a great place to go hunting for some of the region's finest efforts but the cost per bottle – though lower than in Britain – inevitably reflects global demand and fame.

Instead, head a few miles further down the road to St Aubin, a little wine-producing village surrounded by a patchwork of vineyards. Experienced Burgundy lovers have long sought out white wines from the Murgers Dents de Chien, one of the appellation's best vineyards, which owes its name to standing stones thought to resemble hounds' teeth.

The style of the hazelnutty wine here is very similar to that of Chassagne Montrachet and the vines of the two villages are separated in some places by nothing more than a narrow track. The gap in prices is far wider, however, and a St Aubin might cost half as much as some examples from its more illustrious neighbour. The reds can be good buys, too, but they tend to taste more rustic than the whites. My favourite producer is Gérard Thomas (0033 380 21 32 57, by appointment) whose 2001 Murgers would cost 11 euros (£7.70). Another cellar worth visiting is that of Hubert Lamy (0033 380 21 32 55) who, by appointment, will give you the chance to compare young wines from his St Aubin and Chassagne Montrachet vineyards.

BORDEAUX

There are almost as many varieties of Bordeaux as there are of Heinz. But it is in areas like this that some of the greatest efforts are being made by get-ahead younger producers.

In Lalande de Pomerol, up in the hills above Pomerol and St Emilion, there is a band of them who are striving to make wines that compete with the best châteaux in the region – even when, on occasion, they also own one of those châteaux themselves. Hubert de Bouard de Laforest, for example, is responsible for La Fleur de Bouard (0033 557 25 25 13) here and Château Angelus in St Emilion. The former wine would cost you 25-35 euros (£14.70-21.70) at the château (by appointment) while the latter might set you back at least 100 euros (£70) if you were to find one in a Bordeaux shop. Is the more exalted wine worth four times the price? Not, as a drink, certainly, but the cost of the Angelus does take account of the price you'd get if you were to resell it at auction.

LOIRE

Competition from New Zealand Sauvignon Blancs has encouraged producers who grow this variety in the

appellations of Sancerre and Pouilly Fumé to raise their game. Inevitably, quality has risen in the smaller, lesser-known communes here such as Reuilly. Pronounced Roy-ye and often confused with the slightly better-known Rully in Burgundy, this appellation is relatively unusual in producing white, red and various shades of pink. The white is gooseberryish, flinty and Sancerre-like, but about two thirds of the price. The red is made from the Pinot Noir but generally lacks the riper raspberry character of wines produced from this grape in Burgundy or the New World. The cooler climate here makes for more vibrant, peppery, wild-berry flavours that often take a few years to soften but are worth waiting for if you enjoy traditional French red wines.

My favourite Reuilly, though, is the rosé, usually made from a blend of the Pinot Noir and the pink-skinned Pinot Gris, or from the latter grape alone, which is sold as "gris" – grey. At its best, Reuilly Gris is one of the most delicately perfumed, pale-hued examples of this style, bringing together pears and roses. Sadly, it is now an endangered species as more producers switch to making red or white. Henri Beurdin (0033 248 51 30 78) offers one of the best whites (the 2002 would set you back 5 euros (£3.50) but the finest estate for gris and red is Claude Lafond (0033 2 54 49 22 17). Prices are from 6.40-7.60 euros (£4.60-5.40) per bottle.

SOUTH WEST

Pechamant, which is technically part of Bergerac but has its own appellation, is one of my favourite small appellations and one whose wines are all-too-often overlooked. Just to the north-east of Bergerac, its vines are planted on slopes overlooking the river Dordogne.

The grape varieties grown here are the same as for red Bordeaux, and the style very similar, though the iron content of the soil gives them a longevity that would be the envy of many a supposedly classier claret. Château Tiregand (0033 553 23 21 08) – a lovely old château, whose black-and-white photograph features on the 1940s-style label, and which was founded by Edward Tyregan, bastard son of the English king Henry III – is making better wine than ever. The 2001 is on offer at 8.75 euros (£6.00) and the château can be visited by appointment. Another producer I'd recommend is Château Terre Vieille (0033 5 53 57 35 07) where prices range from 7-11.50 euros (£5-8) and there is an exhibition of prehistoric artefacts discovered in its vineyards.

THE SOUTH

Provence is rosé country, right? Well, it's perfectly true that most of the wine produced in this part of France is pink but some of the most interesting stuff is deep red, white or port-like and fortified. The place to go searching for these is the four coastal communes of Banyuls sur Mer, Cerbere, Collioure and Port Vendres close to the Spanish border which together make up Banyuls and Collioure, the two southernmost appellations in France.

The former wine which comes in red, white, rosé and tawny is made from a blend of Grenache Noir or Blanc and local grapes and fortified with brandy and matured in much the same way as port. In France, this sweet, raisiny stuff is usually recommended as an accompaniment for chocolate. Collioure, produced in the same vineyards in the same colours but without fortification, can be delicious, rich and ripe wines. The red is much like a good Côtes du Rhone and can compete with Châteauneuf du Pape, while the creamy dry white has a spicy character of its own. There are lots of good producers here but Clos de Paulilles (0033 468 38 90 10) in Port Vendres stands out both for its wine quality and its restaurant overlooking the bay. Expect to pay 7-12 euros (£5-8.40) for Collioure and 12-15 euros (£8.40-10.50) for Banyuls.

TIPS ON CELLAR-DOOR SHOPPING

- Take note of good bottles in restaurants in the region – and ask for introductions to their producers.
- Telephone in advance if possible.
- Avoid impinging on the sacred hour of lunch.
- Taste before you buy.
- Be politely honest when asked what you think of a wine you've been served – perceptive comments often provoke the opening of older bottles.