

Barreled over by the many wines of France

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Last spring I was invited on a wine-lovers dream vacation - a tour of several major wine regions to barrel sample the latest vintage. The French believe the 2005 vintage could be the best in 40 years. As this is occurring now for the 2006 vintage (and is an annual event), I thought this experience is worth sharing.

Our first visit was to the Rhone Valley. Northern Rhone is mountainous and has steep vineyards. The primary red grape is Syrah, with bold, spicy and peppery notes. We visited Domaine Vernay and were treated to outstanding 2003 - 2005 vintages of Syrah. We had in-depth conversations concerning proper root stock height, techniques to force the roots to grow deep down into the soil, leaf purging, trellising the new shoots and the use of organic fertilizers. Grape growing, after all, is farming.

Next we traveled to the Chateauneuf-du-Pape region in Southern Rhone. We visited Chateau Domaine Berthert-Nayme, where the vineyards are literally covered with round, baseball-sized limestone from the nearby Rhone River. The friendly Chateau owners generously treated us to a sumptuous dinner.

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Heading west toward Bordeaux, we traveled to the Cahors region and visited the Clos Triguedina winery, whose wines have been used by President Chirac for state dinners. They make a wonderful red with 100 percent malbec grapes called Prince Probus, an elegant white dessert wine and a specialty wine using ancient wine-making method which dries the grapes in an oven before the fermentation process. This darkens the color, concentrates the flavors and is aptly named Black Wine.

For our second week, we traveled to Bordeaux, divided by the Gironde River into two major wine regions. The left bank includes the Medoc and Graves regions featuring cabernet sauvignon. The right bank is primarily the St. Emilion region which focuses on merlot.

We started our Bordeaux tour in St. Emilion at Chateau Cantenac. Other local wineries toured included Chateaus Ausone, Cheval Blanc and Angelus. Of these, I was struck by the sheer elegance and silky texture of Cheval Blanc and the layers of black fruit in Chateau Angelus' wine. These were two of my favorites.

To give us an overview of the 2005 Bordeaux vintage, we visited several leading wine wholesalers. As some tasting rooms had samples from literally hundreds of Chateaus (wineries), I asked the staff to please show me the top 20 in the room to narrow the field. You had to constantly use spit buckets to survive. In general, the 2005 vintage is big, tannic and has layers of fruit. It should prove to be a great vintage.



Bill Garlough toured several major wine regions in France.
submitted photo

We started our left bank tour in the Northern Medoc region and worked our way south. The appellations we covered included St. Estephe, Pauillac, St. Julien, Margaux, Graves, Pessac-Leognan and Sauternes. We visited from four to eight wineries per day. Probably our most impressive single day included Chateaus Latour, Lafite-Rothschild, Haut-Brion and Chateau d'Yquem. Without question, these are some of the best wines I have ever tasted.

The Chateaus themselves were magnificent and some were virtual works of art. I can better appreciate the sense of pride the French feel towards their wine industry, with its rich history and tradition. I was truly barreled over in France by their architecture, culture, cuisine, warm hospitality and the 2005 vintage. Magnificent!

As this trip covered wines ranging from Rhone's, dessert wines and Bordeauxs, their diversity does not allow for specific food pairings nor specific recommendations this month.

Please visit your local wine merchant and ask for their recommendations. The 2005 vintage is probably not yet available, but the 2000 and 2003 vintages were excellent. The only current vintage that is average/below average is the 2002 vintage.

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