



## Swirl, Sniff and Sip

"I can certainly see that you know your wine. Most of the guests who stay here wouldn't know the difference between Bordeaux and claret."

—Basil Fawltz

by CATHY NOLAN

Several reasons come to mind for taking wine appreciation classes in France, the country of reference for oenological activities. One, if you're unfamiliar with terms like *cépage*, *cru* and *millésime* (or, like John Cleese's Basil Fawltz, of the British television series "Fawlty Towers," unaware that Bordeaux and claret are synonymous), learning about wine empowers you. No more relying on condescending sommeliers or pretty pictures on labels to guide your choice of bottle—you take your wine-drinking destiny into your own hands.

Two, developing expertise elevates the entire pursuit—hedonism is cloaked in the guise of commendable self-improvement. A few *dégustations* with an expert and you're off, exploring Western civilization (winegrowing in France goes back to circa 600 BC) every time you swirl, sniff and sip. Soon, you too will become enough of an insider to wax poetic about the alchemy of *terroir* and intricacies of *appellation*, holding your own against pretentious wine snobs.

Lastly, you're advancing a noble cause, keeping wine's cultural diversity from be-

ing stomped by global MacDonaldisation (see Jonathan Nossiter's epic 2004 documentary film *Mondovino*). France boasts some 144,000 wineries, compared to 5,000 in the United States—impressive, but down from 250,000 only a few decades ago. Small traditional vineyards are an endangered species. It's the consumer with a discriminating palate, actively seeking pleasure among the myriad variations of the winemaker's craft, who supports wine as a living, artisanal product and helps safeguard an essential quality of French *savoir vivre*.

And then, of course, it's fun.

There are wine-tasting classes of all sorts throughout the country, where dedicated wine lovers will enthusiastically share their passion with you, whatever your level of expertise. Here's an arbitrary *dégustation* of some of the most interesting instruction.

### PARIS O Château

"You know how experts make those slurping sounds? I'll teach you that," O Château founder Olivier Magny, 27, gleefully promises his pupils at the start of

one of his user-friendly and highly recreational Saturday wine tastings, conducted in hip and witty English. Each participant emerges with a wine-for-beginners "cheat sheet" on the main topics covered—grape varieties, label deciphering, food-wine combinations and more—plus a suitably lyrical description of wines sampled. During a recent class, the fun-loving wine expert zeroed in on newlywed Eva from Chicago, tasting wine for practically the first time in her life: "A challenge!" The day's tasting zipped from Champagnes to Loire and Burgundy whites, then red Crozes-Hermitage, Haut Médoc, Cahors and Corbières, all impressive selections illustrating the unrivaled variety of French wine, said Magny, with Burgundy being "the best—I will not tolerate discussion on this point!"

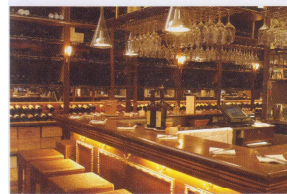
At the end, Eva dubiously pronounced one wine the "least icky." Magny brought out another sample, just for her. "Sauternes. Sweet." She slurped it up. Hallelujah! Another convert. Magny (who also works as a freelance sommelier at Hôtel de Crillon) stages a variety of vivid wine experiences, from simple *dégustations* to restaurant visits, customized theme events and tours. One caveat: Access to the Wine Loft tasting venue (which is also Magny's home) involves clambering up four flights of stairs—and getting down again after sampling several wines. How many depends on the formula: "Wine Two Three," three wines in one hour (€20); cheese and wine-tasting lunch with champagne, four wines, cheese and charcuterie (€65); or the Grand Seven, seven wines in two hours (€50). All the wines tasted are for sale on the premises. *The Wine Loft*, 100 rue de la Folie-Méricourt, 11e, Métro: Oberkampf, 01.44.73.97.80, [www.o-chateau.com](http://www.o-chateau.com)



Olivier Magny

### Musée du Vin

Also perfect for beginners, there is a complete viticultural show-and-tell at the Wine Museum, housed in medieval cellars once used by winemaking monks. Created in 1984 by the Conseil des Échansons, a distinguished brotherhood of wine buffs, it aims to promote the "best appellations of the French terroir." Once you've toured the exhibits (English audioguides available), your €8.90 entry ticket entitles you to a glass of wine. You can stick around for dinner—traditional dishes with appropriate wines—in the reasonably priced restaurant. And you can sign up for a Saturday afternoon "Initiation to Wine Tasting" in English. (Next sessions: November 17, December 15. Two hours, five wines, €45.) For additional options, the Échansons group offers its Château Labastidié in the southwest's Tarn Valley, where Gaillac wine is made; you can participate in an old-fashioned *vendange* (wine harvest) and attend wine school here. *5 square Charles-Dickens*, 16e, Métro: Passy, 01.43.25.63.26, [www.museeduvin.com](http://www.museeduvin.com)



### Legrand Filles et Fils

In the 1950s, grocer Lucien Legrand built a reputation as a wine talent scout, constantly seeking out "honest, sincere" and reasonably priced producers. The Legrand family sold out in 2000, but the emporium, with its original 19th-century accoutrements and indoor terrace in the splendid Galerie Vivienne, maintains its aura of Old World quality. Current owners Christian de Chateaueux and Gérard Sibourd-Baudry also carry on Legrand's mission to widen wine consumers' horizons, with the catalogue's 700 entries, ranging from the most renowned to new and emerging labels. Also offered: "L'École du Vin"—a series of three two-hour classes run by expert Alexis Delvaux, covering wine-tasting initiation, winegrowing and winemaking (€180). Five wines are tasted per session, held in the Espace Dégustation with its *vinothèque*, a "wine library" of

some 1,800 wines. On certain Tuesdays, Legrand invites a winemaker to present his wares—coming soon, Domaine Billaud Simon's Chablis and a special luxury evening with Dom Ruinart champagne (€90–€400). All sessions are held in French, but Legrand happily sets up tastings conducted in English on request. *1 rue de la Banque*, 2e, Métro: Bourse, 01.42.60.07.12, [www.caves-legrand.com](http://www.caves-legrand.com)

### De Vinis Illustribus

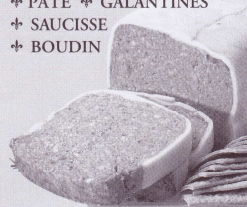
Owner Lionel Michelin gave up telecommunications to pursue his love of wine, preferably such sublime classics as Mouton Rothschild 1945 or Château Yquem 1921. His boutique near the Panthéon is itself a classic—the elegant, stone-walled shop was formerly the legendarily cluttered lair of Jean-Baptiste Besse, wine purveyor to Ernest Hemingway. Michelin's clients include collectors who hoard their great old vintages unopened, but that is not Michelin's own convivial style. On display like a big game hunter's trophies are empty bottles of memorable wines he's shared with other aficionados: "The wines I sell are meant for drinking. We do everything to ensure they're in perfect condition." Traditionally, he explains, French wines are made to age from five to 10 years at least, reaching their peak at 50: "A good 1959 is perfect now. The tannins are gone, but the fruit is still there, and such complexity—so much in the mouth at the same time—honey, almond, crème brûlée—it's like fireworks."

For beginners, he discourages starting with old wines: "You have to drink many other things before you can appreciate these. It's a journey." If you feel ready, Lionel and his equally dedicated partner Ghislaine Péjovic will gladly welcome you to a tasting (in English) in the shop's 17th-century cellars. There are three basic formulas, for eight people minimum: The "Wine Interlude"—one hour, two bottles with one old vintage, from €30 per person; a seated lunch—three wines, from €70 per person; and dinner—five wines, from €100. Plus endless possibilities for custom-designed thrills: "If you choose a bottle at €500 or €5,000, we'll open it," promises Lionel. Six clients recently polished off four bottles including a fabulous 1990 Cheval Blanc St-Émilion and paid €2,200 in total. But if you're in a group of 16 people tasting six more humble 1959 vintages, you'll pay a mere €260 per person, with dinner included.

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