

Books

The Wines of France: The Essential Guide for Savvy Shoppers

by Jacqueline Friedrich, 378 pages, Ten Speed Press, softcover, \$19.95 (2006).

As the subtitle of her book indicates, American expat and self-described “recovering lawyer” Jacqueline Friedrich intends *The Wines of France: The Essential Guide for Savvy Shoppers* to be both practical and self-sufficient. Her introduction to each growing region and her précis of each important appellation include virtually every fundamental bit of information that a reader needs in order to understand the bulk of the book, which is estate profiles, presented alphabetically by region from Alsace to the Southwest. Friedrich promotes this as “a portable guide” that you can bring to the table when dining in France. She highlights growers, styles, and trends that are currently fashionable there, particularly in certain Paris bistros, wine bars, and shops. Some of these selections are not readily available outside the French capital (she recom-



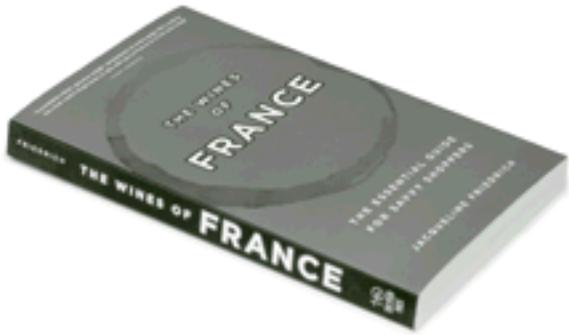
Jacqueline Friedrich

mends eight of its *cavistes*), and some can be found only in the producer’s cellar. So to call her book, as she does, “your very own personal shopper” is a bit misleading. That said, tantalizing readers with tales of obscure, and sometimes quirky, wines can be forgiven because Friedrich provides ample coverage of better-known and more readily available estates. She profiles, for example, the best-known, leading producers of Vouvray (Champalou, Chidaine, Foreau, Fouquet, Huet) while also covering a dozen others, five in detail. And in an era when the southern Rhône is in the international spotlight, it no longer seems exceptional that she mentions a dozen mostly well-known growers in the village of Gigondas, profiling seven. But how many readers have heard of the nearby Côtes du Vivarais (just west of the nougat-producing town of Montélimar) let alone its *vignerons*? Friedrich, with excellent judgment, calls attention to five of them and profiles three. (Yet she missed Alain Gallety, perhaps the most talented and proof that with Syrah this yet-obscure appellation can be a star.)

Friedrich’s unbuttoned style should encourage readers to believe that, as she puts it, “wine is not a closed, exclusive club” and “if I could learn, anyone can learn.” You only have to scan the first page of entries to find evidence of her enthusiastic, refreshingly vivid descriptions — “like lace tatted from steel wire,” “like a celestial honey made from chamomile and linden blossoms” — even if some metaphors, such as “waterfall,” are used often enough to lose their freshness. Beyond making intelligible the classic terminology of French wine, Friedrich cleverly and fearlessly coins a few expressions of her own. Her glossary of wine terms includes five that

she frequently employs to describe aromas and flavors and thinks might startle or perplex many readers: “quinine,” “lacy,” “pits,” “pee,” and “petrol.” Several others, including “wacko wines,” are utterly idiosyncratic but consistently used. Observers of today’s French wine scene, like this writer, will immediately grasp the meaning of “hypernatural” and wonder why they did not themselves come up with that expression to capture the reverence for nature’s rhythms, the commitment to minimal intervention, and the abhorrence for all things modern professed by an increasingly prominent fraction of growers who are at the root of this movement. Friedrich’s critiques of organic and biodynamic viticulture, favored by many of the growers she features, are adroit and sympathetic.

It’s worth reflecting that until recently a book such as this would have been implausible. A decade ago, Friedrich’s delightful and informative *Wine and Food Guide to the Loire* (out of print, but available through her website, www.jacquelinefriedrich.com) was useful principally to wine professionals or those traveling to the Loire. She gave little thought to whether or not the wines were available in Paris, much less the wider world. Today, a great surge of small, idealistic *vignerons* embody what Friedrich calls “a dramatic evolution toward quality”; restaurateurs and retailers (hardly just in Paris) pay much more scrutiny to the diversity of French *terroirs* and styles; and many more specialist importers operate in the English-speaking world than wine lovers or tradespeople alike could have imagined in their wildest dreams in 1990. (At least one import agent each in the US and UK focuses just on the Loire.)



Precisely due to the explosion of quality-conscious French wine estates, a field guide like this is bound to be judged in many quarters by which estates it includes and which it omits. It strikes me that Friedrich has missed very few indispensable properties, although in Bordeaux, where the field is crowded and wine traded as a commodity, she has understandably overlooked a number of reliably good and reasonably well-known châteaux. “I lowered the bar slightly in the case of very well known or widely distributed wines,” she admits. “But even those had to pass a ‘well, ok, I’ll drink it’ test.” The relative newcomer to French wine is in little danger of being misled by Friedrich’s omissions, while the experienced observer of the French wine scene (including this quarter-century veteran of the trade) is bound to spot unfamiliar producers whose wines — thanks to Friedrich’s frequently witty and intriguing descriptors — he or she will want to experience first hand.

The accounts of estates, in which I could spot very few inaccuracies, generally run from 50 to 150 words, including specific wine recommendations, addresses, phone numbers, and a rough indication of price in (sometimes hypothetical) US retail dollars. Detailed insights reveal Friedrich’s personal acquaintance with the growers and their full range of wines, something readers can by no means take for granted in guidebooks of this sort. Only a visitor to the domaine,

for example, would be familiar with a nobly sweet Pinot Gris from Schoffit so low in alcohol it isn’t legally wine, or mention Ghislaine and Jean-Hugues Goisot’s rare “Gondonne” bottling, aptly characterized as “creamy, layered, and lip-smacking.” Nor is anyone lacking experience likely to write of a wine, as Friedrich insightfully does of Jérôme Prévost’s Champagnes from the Meunier grape, that it “can be dominated by such strong and varied apple flavors that it tastes like cider,” or describe Henry Marrionet’s “Cépages Oubliés” as “made from the not entirely legal Gamay de Bouze.”

Friedrich’s comments on current vintages are pithy and accurate, and she wisely cautions readers against the prevailing tendency to oversimplify and overemphasize vintage ratings. Her own “system” for rating estates is blessedly simple: to be listed is to be recommended. One additional symbol denotes domaines of exceptional character, and another indicates estates on-the-rise. A concise “crib sheet” for each region recommends “must tries,” “best buys,” and “safe houses” — a smart way to extend the author’s proselytizing. Typical prescriptions: “If you doubt there’s such a thing as serious Muscadet ... try at least two of the following” and “If you are not yet in love with Alsace wines, do yourself a favor and try at least three wines from producers on the crib sheet.”

Friedrich is predictably generous and geographically wide-ranging in her entries for Burgundy as well as

for the Loire Valley, whose 68 appellations represent a significant portion of France’s entire vine acreage. She is weakest in the similarly large regions of Provence and Champagne, where many excellent wines are missing, including ones available in the US. It would have been good to see more frequent allusions to pairing wine and food. (Friedrich’s Loire guide devotes considerable space to local cuisine.) But to cover all of *la France viticole* in 378 pages is by itself a tall order, which she has admirably filled. *The Wines of France* is passionate, delightfully unpretentious, and extremely useful. For the price of a decent bottle of plain Burgundy, anyone who cares or is simply curious about French wines has solid reason to ante up. I only hope that this soft-cover will become so quickly dog-eared in the hands of so many readers that the author and publisher will feel compelled to issue periodic updates.

— David Schildknecht

Heston Blumenthal: In Search of Perfection

by Heston Blumenthal, 319 pages,
Bloomsbury, hardcover, \$34.95 (2006).

“Great chef cooks at home” books are nothing new, but such an offering from Heston Blumenthal, the talented deconstructionist-reconstructionist wunderkind of Britain’s three-Michelin-starred Fat Duck, cannot fail to be different. In *Heston Blumenthal: In Search of Perfection*, he chooses eight commonplace dishes, finds out what makes them work, and attempts to bring them to his idea of perfection without losing their essence. The dishes are Roast Chicken and Roast Potatoes, Pizza, Bangers and Mash, Steak, Spaghetti