Discovering the Loire's Hidden Wines

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The Loire is the longest river in France and is famous for its magnificent châteaux. Fairy-tale castles, and there are over 300, straddle the valley and attract thousands of visitors every year.

Whilst the region's vineyards are no doubt seen by these tourists, the Loire's wines remain relatively unknown, making for one of France's great wine discoveries just waiting to be explored.

There are some notable exceptions. It's quite likely that you'll have come across the names Sancerre, Poully-Fumé, and Muscadet on many a restaurant or hotel wine list. This trio of wine regions are some of the greatest wines to drink with seafood, with a clean, crisp, and citrusy nature that makes them natural partners.

We spoke to Gerald Duff, wine buyer for Rude Wines, about his quest to dig deeper into the hidden gems that the Loire's wines have to offer. As he explained, "There's a common conception that those 'big three' names is where the Loire's wines both start and end. And, if that's all you tasted from this fascinating region, I wouldn't blame you."

We asked Gerald what else we should be looking for. "Well, they're almost a victim of their own success, so well-known that poor old Muscadet has fallen out of fashion as a result. But did you know that the Loire probably has more variety of lighter-styled red wines than any other region in France?"

These are usually made from three grape varieties: Gamay, Pinot Noir, and Cabernet Franc. Indeed, the last, Cabernet Franc, when it encountered Cabernet Sauvignon (both red wine grapes remember), led to the emergence of Sauvignon Blanc, possibly the UK's favourite white wine.

So what else does the Loire's wines have to offer the curious wine drinker today?

What kind of red wines could you expect to find? Gerald was enthusiastic about his new discoveries. "There is a wealth of red wines which many people haven't come across which we've just imported. From organically-certified Chinon and Bourgueil, both of which will happily take to being chilled for 20-30 minutes before serving in the warmer months. Tannins are much lower than for most red wines, with a zippy, refreshing acidity making them the perfect summer wine."

And, we found out, Sancerre doesn't just mean a lean, crisp Sauvignon Blanc. "Not at all", Gerald told us, "we've taken on a rosé and a red too, both made from Pinot Noir, and when you think of what a comparable Burgundy wine would cost you, they're tremendous value."

He went on to explain that it's all a matter of looking a bit further afield than the usual suspects, something that, after four decades of wine trade experience, has become second nature for him.

Beyond the red wines which many of us would never have come across before, they've also found the Loire has some rosé wines just ideal for the warmer months. Again, these often use Gamay and Pinot Noir, but how many of us have heard of Grolleau? Hats off to anyone who's familiar with that Loire speciality.

It seems there's more to the Loire than the 'big three', as we found out. Time to take a few detours and uncover some of its more obscure French wine treasures.

Rude Wines are an independent online wine merchant who have set out to discover some of the world's 'off-the-beaten-track' wines. Stocking wines from countries as diverse as Peru, Uruguay, and Israel, as well as delving deeper into the more familiar wine territories.

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