

traveling the *Route des Grand Crus*



The sloping vineyards, charming villages, and medieval castles in France's Bourgogne region are a photographer's dream. But it is the Pinot Noir grape that has made the region — known as Burgundy to most Americans — the ultimate destination for wine lovers.

A few kilometers south of Burgundy's capital city of Dijon, unobtrusive signs appear indicating the road just off Route N74 is no ordinary wine trail but rather the *Route des Grand Crus*. The narrow road hugs the east-facing slope of the Côte d'Or limestone ridge and leads to some of the greatest names in Burgundy wines, including Chambertin, Clos de Vougeot, Romanée-Conti, and more.

Considered the heart of the wine-producing region, the Côte d'Or — or "slope of gold" — extends for 60 kilometers and is divided into two sections. The northern half, the Côte de Nuits, runs from Dijon to the community of Nuits-Saint-Georges and produces mostly red wine. The southern Côte de Beaune produces both reds and whites. Wines get their distinctive tastes and aromas from the different *terroirs*, especially soil and climate. In Burgundy, that means limestone.

"Without limestone, you can't produce good Burgundy," said winemaker Elohim Balest as he picked up a handful of rocky dirt. "And you must understand the soil to make good wine."

A young Frenchman who speaks fluent English, Elohim grew up in Nuits-Saint-Georges, an area with a long viticulture history that began with the Romans. In the early 1700s, the town's wines were recommended to King Louis XIV for their medicinal qualities, which turned out to be an 18th century marketing coup for Côte de Nuits wine merchants. Today, the earthy Burgundies are still among the world's most highly regarded wines, as well as some of the most expensive.

Burgundy's cool climate and chalky slopes create perfect growing conditions for the temperamental Pinot Noir grape. The degree of slope where grapes are grown makes a difference in how a wine tastes, but unpredictable weather, especially rain and hail, can be the biggest culprits as to whether or not a vintage will be good.

Elohim, who also operates a wine-tour company, plucked a grape from a Pinot Noir vine so his guests could experience a foreshadowing

of the 2012 vintage. I thought the sweet juice indicated the future wines will be exceptionally good. My guide, however, explained that more juice means diluted flavor.

"We've had rain all summer so we call this 'the year of the winemaker,' because it's going to take all of a winemaker's knowledge and talent to improve the quality of the wine," Elohim later told me. "The rain makes the grapes too juicy, and that is contrary to quality. We need the concentration."

Touring the *Route des Grand Crus* is different from tourist-driven U.S. wine trails. Most of the wineries are family-owned businesses and are not set up for drop-in tastings. Make appointments with the wineries you wish to visit, and you will find the winemakers friendly and willing to share their latest vintages. However, don't expect lots of different vintages to be opened. Burgundy produces far fewer bottles than other larger regions, such as Bordeaux, and demand for its elegant wines far exceeds supply. The 2011 harvest for all of Burgundy yielded only 207 million bottles, according to the *Bureau Interprofessionnel de Vins de Bourgogne*.

Understanding French wine appellations and classifications can be quite mystifying to even the most experienced oenophiles. In Burgundy, the basic classifications — *Grand Cru*, *Premier*, and *Village* — indicate just how valuable slopes are to the varietal. *Grand cru* wines come from vineyards grown high up on slopes where grapes get the most exposure to sun and the best drainage. *Premier cru* vines are in the middle or on less favorably exposed slopes although these vineyards are often protected from the elements by stone walls. *Village* wines are produced from the flat areas closer to the towns and villages, but don't ignore just how delicious they can be — especially when you drink Burgundy in Burgundy.

"To find the real taste of Burgundy, you must visit the smaller wineries," added Elohim. "We make wine to please ourselves."

Pinot Noir with Thanksgiving turkey? You bet!

Check out my favorite Turkey-Day wines on [facebook.com/writingwithstyle](https://www.facebook.com/writingwithstyle) or at www.maryannesantis.com.

