

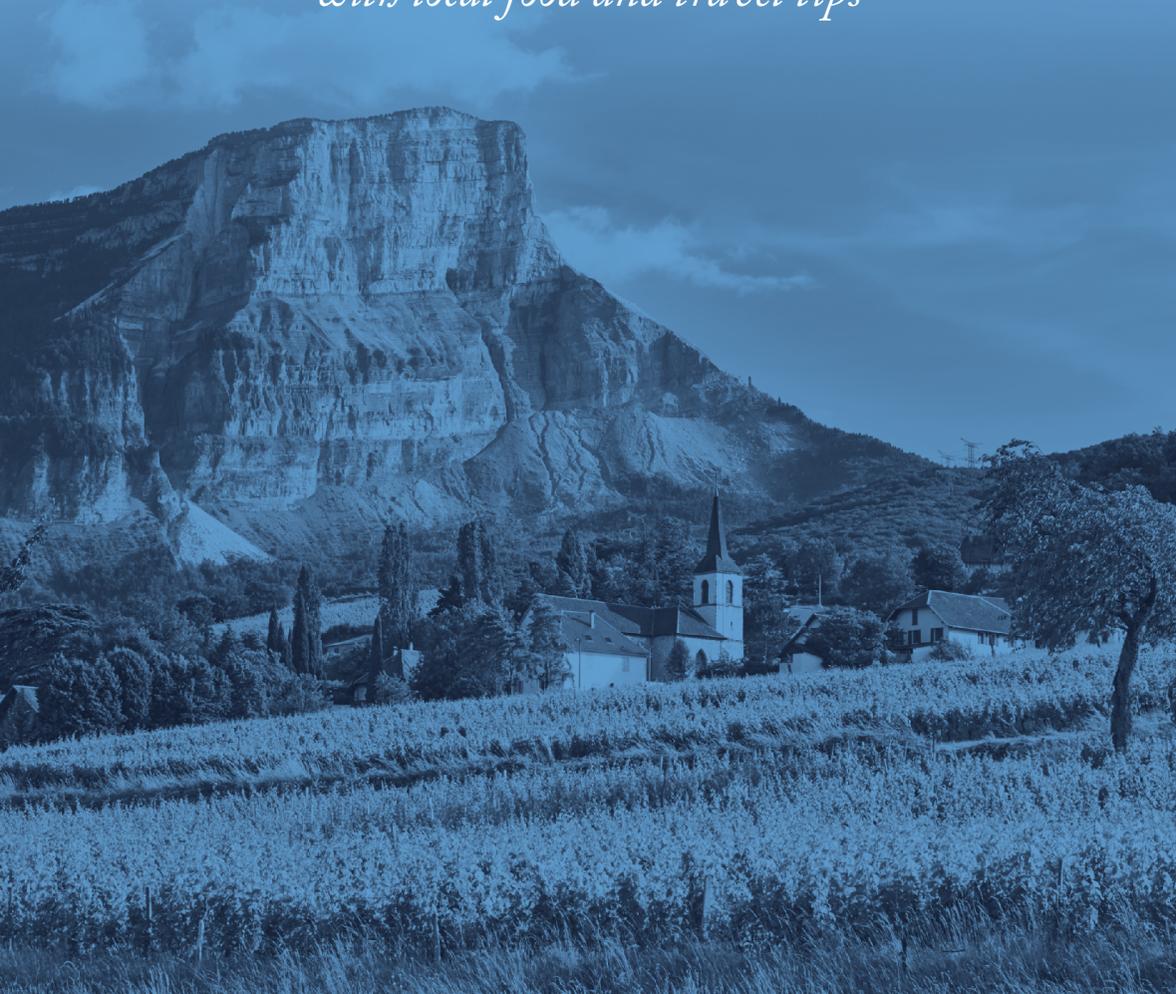
WINK LORCH

WINES

OF THE

FRENCH ALPS

*Savoie, Bugey and beyond
with local food and travel tips*



WINES OF THE FRENCH ALPS
BY WINK LORCH
SAMPLE CONTENTS AND CHAPTER

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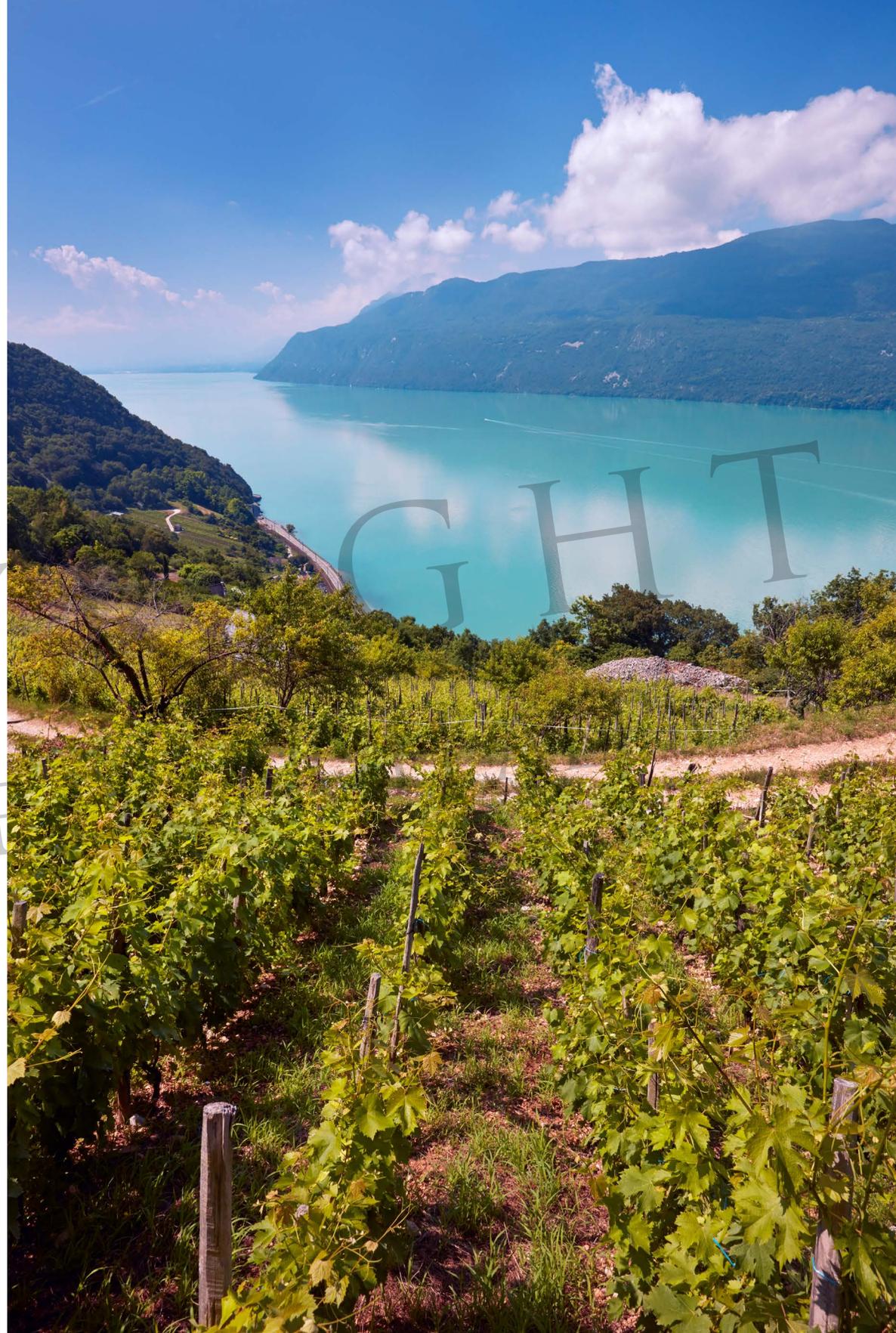
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A secret Mondeuse vineyard high above Lac de Bourget in Savoie.



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THE WINE REGIONS IN CONTEXT

'Savoie, Bugey and beyond' was never going to make a good book title, hence the more flexible *Wines of the French Alps*, but even this has involved some tough decision-making on which regions to include or exclude, and why. Geographically, the French Alps begin south of Lac Léman (Lake Geneva) on the Swiss border and continue south until they disappear into the Mediterranean near Nice. As can be seen from the map on the left, the wine regions covered in this book begin in the west with Bugey, which lies southwest of Geneva, and end with the areas of the Diois and Hautes-Alpes, around 150km from the Mediterranean as the crow flies. The most important wine region is Savoie, which stretches from Thonon-les-Bains on Lac Léman to south of Chambéry.

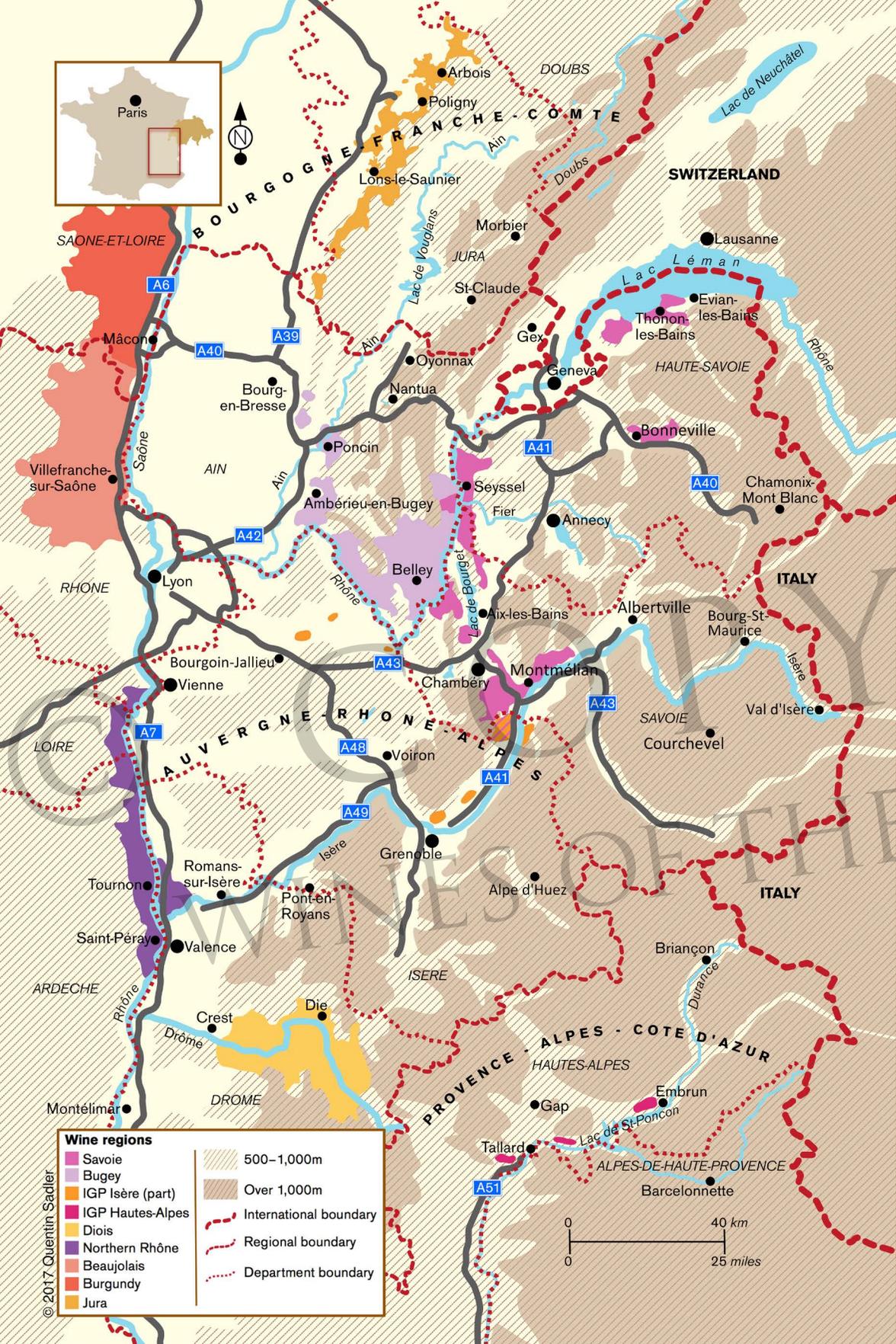
These Alpine regions are in the southern half of France, south of the watershed, where rivers run into the Mediterranean, rather than the North Sea. They are close to the magic latitude of 45°N, on which so many famous European wine regions lie.

In wine terms (and in food and tourist terms too), Savoie encompasses the two French departments of **Savoie** and **Haute-Savoie**. One term that you will read often in this book is Savoyard, which means of Savoie; it can apply to wine or other drinks, food, people or even the local dialect. The administrative capital of Haute-Savoie (literally Upper Savoie) is Annecy and that of Savoie is Chambéry. By far the greatest concentration of Savoie vineyards is within 35km of Chambéry.

The **Bugey** wine region lies between Lyon and Geneva in the department of **Ain**, east of its capital Bourg-en-Bresse. To the south of Savoie, **Isère** is a large department whose capital is Grenoble. The department stretches into the northern Rhône Valley wine region, but for the purposes of this book, it is the scattered, mainly recently revived, Alpine vineyard areas further east that are addressed.

South of Grenoble, the **Diois**, which is the regional term for the area around the town of Die, where Clairette de Die comes from, is in the **Drôme** department. And on roughly the same latitude over the mountains to the east is the **Hautes-Alpes** wine region, which is in the department of the same name, south and east of its capital town, Gap.

Left: The Alps stretch from south of Lac Léman towards the Mediterranean. The French Alpine wine regions lie south of the Jura and east of Beaujolais and the Rhône Valley wine regions, to the west of the Alps.





The Diois and Hautes-Alpes mark the beginning of the southern French Alps. Approaching either over a mountain pass from the north, one has a sense of a Provençal character creeping in to mix with the Alpine one. I decided that this latitude should be the southerly limit of this book, as when you head further south, the Provençal flavours in both food and wine begin to dominate over the Alpine ones. Hence, the wines of the IGP Alpes de Haute-Provence and AOC Pierrevet, along with the main Provençal appellations stretching south to Nice, belong in a book on the wines of Provence, not on the French Alps.

The departments of Savoie, Haute-Savoie, Ain, Isère and Drôme are all within the wealthy and tourist-frequented French political region of Rhône-Alpes, whose regional capital is Lyon. Hautes-Alpes is the northernmost and most remote department of the PACA region – Provence-Alpes-Côtes d'Azur – whose capital is Marseille.

The Chignin vineyards in Savoie lie on the foothills of the Bauges, part of the Prealps; in the background is the considerably higher Belledonne Alpine range of mountains. Harvest extends into early October in most years for the later-ripening varieties, Jacquère and Mondeuse. Winter snow tends to be short-lived.

The French Alpine vineyard regions

The total planted vineyard area in these Alpine regions is approximately 4,600ha; for comparison, less than one-third of that for the Alsace region. From these vineyards, a few hundred producers make about 35 million bottles of wine, which is less than 0.5% of the wine produced in France.

In terms of vineyard area, the region is split is as follows:

Savoie AOC: 46%

Bugey AOC: 10%

Diois AOC: 35%

IGPs of Savoie, Ain, Isère and Hautes-Alpes combined: 9%

In the mountains, the vine is often able to grow where no other crop can, and wine was once hugely important nourishment for the local mountain communities as well as a trading commodity. In the mid-19th century, when French vineyard plantings were at their peak, most of these regions had ten or more times as many plantings as today.

These Alpine regions all share an important aspect – they lie on limestone-based slopes that form the foothills of the mountains. These are the foothills of the Prealps – the lower-altitude mountain ranges that lie below the Alps themselves. In the case of Bugey and the western parts of Savoie, geographically the vineyards are on the slopes of the southern Jura Mountains which, geologically, are also termed as Prealps. Bugey has much more in common with Savoie than it does with Jura, sharing with Savoie many of its grape varieties, its modern vineyard evolution and wine styles, as well as, politically speaking, being part of the Rhône-Alpes region. However, those wine traders and wine lists that incorporate Bugey into Savoie do a disservice to both.

Covering such a substantial geographical area, it is no surprise that there are many



Domaine de Maupas is a rare individual vigneron in the AOC Châtillon-en-Diois. The vineyards are among the highest in France at around 600m altitude on the foothills of the Vercors mountains.

differences in climate, soil and aspect between these vineyard areas, but proximity to high mountains, the weather systems they create and the soils that they form provide the connection. Anyone who knows and loves mountains will tell you that not only is the scenery dramatic, but the weather is too: high rainfall with a significant risk of storms, sometimes hailstorms; surprisingly strong sunshine and extreme changeability at times. But mountain slopes can also offer protection from the worst of the storms and provide rocky soils in which only the vine can thrive. Other geographical influences that are important here include broad glacial valleys – with vineyards planted on the southern slopes – and beautiful Alpine lakes, a feature of both Savoie and Hautes-Alpes. The Rhône river is never far away, and many of its tributaries, including the Isère, the Drôme and the Durance, run close to the vineyards.

ALTITUDE: HOW HIGH DO GRAPES GROW?

The highest vineyards in the French Alps are not in Savoie, but in the Hautes-Alpes (the name means the Upper Alps). This is the only vineyard area that lies on the foothills of the Alps themselves rather than the Prealps. Here there are a very few vineyards that touch 1,000m; the majority are between 600m and 700m. In the Diois, the vineyards stretch from 250m up to 700m, the highest being in the small still wine appellation and village of Châtillon-en-Diois. In Savoie and Bugey there are very few vineyards above 500m. Using the altimeter

app on my phone in several different zones of Savoie and Bugey, I discovered that the top of the vineyard slopes was often about 400m. This altitude is similar to the Jura (where all the vineyards are between 250m and 450m), and indeed Alsace, and is only slightly higher than the best vineyards of the Côte d'Or in Burgundy. To write that Savoie vineyards are particularly high altitude is thus a myth. To write that they are in a mountain area, however, is completely correct and the mountain influence on the terroir is important.

A snapshot of the wines

Savoie and Bugey are by far the most important regions and the focus of this book. Isère and Hautes-Alpes are included too, because although both have tiny vineyards today, they are of increasing interest to lovers of unusual Alpine wines. The Diois is important in terms of quantity of wine produced and, in my view, shares the Alpine characteristics, but three-quarters of its production is of Clairette de Die from one single producer, Jaillance.

Below are the main appellation and grape names that appear on labels of wines of the French Alps; these should help you navigate the rest of the book. Part 2 of the book covers in detail for each region the terroir, the grapes and how they are grown, along with the wines and how they are made. Part 3 delves into each individual area and its wines, with profiles of the main producers.

Savoie appellations and wine styles: The regional appellation AOC Savoie covers white, red, rosé and sparkling wines and there

are 16 cru names for wines from specific geographical areas, the best known being Apremont, Chignin, Chignin-Bergeron, Arbin, Chautagne, Jongieux, Crépy and Ayze. AOC Roussette de Savoie is for still white wines from the Altesse variety and may be followed by one of four crus, including Frangy and Marestel. About two-thirds of the still wines are whites. AOC Seyssel is for still white wines and Méthode Traditionnelle sparkling wines. Sparkling wines are also made under the recent AOC Crémant de Savoie, but currently less than 10% of the total Savoie production is sparkling. The IGP Vin des Alpes covers the departments of Savoie and Haute-Savoie plus the commune of Seyssel in Ain, the wines often coming from historic vineyard areas not covered by the Savoie AOC.

Main Savoie grapes: For whites – Jacquère, Altesse, Bergeron (a synonym for Roussette), Chardonnay, Chasselas and Gringet.

The tasting room of Domaine Jean Vullien offers a typical wide range of AOC Savoie wines.



For reds – Mondeuse, Gamay, Pinot Noir and Persan. There are many more, mainly rare and indigenous, varieties.

Bugey appellations and wine styles: The regional appellation AOC Bugey covers white, red, rosé and sparkling wines with three crus, the most important of which is Cerdon, restricted to Méthode Ancestrale rosé sparkling wines. AOC Roussette du Bugey is for still white wines from the Altesse variety with two crus. Over 60% of Bugey's production is of sparkling wine (including Cerdon). About two-thirds of the still wines are whites. The IGP Coteaux de l'Ain covers mainly wines from historic vineyard areas not covered by the Bugey AOC.

Main Bugey grapes: For whites – Chardonnay, Altesse and Aligoté. For reds – Gamay, Pinot Noir and Mondeuse. For Bugey Cerdon – Gamay and Poulsard.

The landscape and buildings are almost Provençal in the Hautes-Alpes wine region, which lies in the foothills of the Ecrins mountains.



Isère appellations, wine styles and grapes: The IGP Isère covers two main vineyard zones, noted also on the label: Les Balmes Dauphinoises and Les Coteaux du Grésivaudan. A large variety of grapes from Savoie, Burgundy and Rhône are grown, along with several rare varieties, to produce mainly still wines of all three colours.

The Diois appellations, wine styles and main grapes: Two sparkling AOCs cover the whole area and represent more than 95% of production: by far the largest is AOC Clairette de Die, based on the Muscat Blanc à Petits Grains grape, with some Aligoté and Clairette, made using the Méthode Ancestrale; the second is AOC Crémant de Die (Clairette, Aligoté and Muscat), made using the Méthode Traditionnelle. Within the AOC Clairette de Die there is a rosé version (since 2017) made in the ancestral method, with some Gamay allowed, as well as a Brut version, based on Clairette and made in the traditional method. AOC

Coteaux de Die is a tiny regional appellation for Clairette still whites and AOC Châtillon-en-Diois covers red, rosé and white still wines for that specific area.

Hautes-Alpes appellation and grapes: A single IGP Hautes-Alpes covers the

scattered vineyards of the department. A large variety of internationally known varieties are grown, along with some rare indigenous varieties, notably the red Mollard grape. Mainly still wines of all three colours are made, along with some sparkling.

HOW TO GET THERE AND AROUND

The main air travel hubs for the French Alps are Lyon in France, and Geneva in Switzerland. There are also small airports with international flights, mainly in the winter ski season, in Grenoble and Chambéry. These four cities, along with Bourg-en-Bresse (for Bugey), Annecy (for Savoie), Valence (for the Diois) and Gap (for Hautes-Alpes) also have good train connections throughout France and internationally.

If you want to visit these vineyards independently, then a car is essential, with snow tyres fitted for the winter months. However, be aware that the extent of these French Alpine regions is more than 300km driving distance north to south (Thonon in Haute-Savoie to Gap in Hautes-Alpes), and 100–150km west to east. With so many scattered vineyard areas, even just within the Savoie wine region, the driving distances between wine producers can be substantial. And, off the motorway, be prepared to drive on slow, twisty and sometimes challenging mountain roads.

Bugey, Savoie and Isère wine regions are well served by motorways. On the A40, which runs from Mâcon to the Mont Blanc tunnel at Chamonix, you drive close to Bugey's Cerdon vineyards; beyond you can exit for the various isolated Haute-Savoie vineyard areas. The A40 links to various motorways running south: the

A42 towards Lyon allows easier access to the Bugey vineyards further south; the A41 runs from Geneva south to Annecy, Chambéry, and then past some isolated Isère vineyards to Grenoble. Near Chambéry, the A43 runs west to Lyon close to the other isolated Isère vineyards and east towards Albertville, along the Combe de Savoie valley, past some of the principal Savoie vineyards.

The A7 or Autoroute du Soleil, a key French motorway for holidaymakers travelling to the Mediterranean, goes past Valence, from where main roads take you southeast to the Diois vineyards. To visit the Hautes-Alpes from the north, the best way is from Grenoble, driving along the famous Route Napoléon main road. The A51 motorway runs alongside the Durance river from the south.



Most of the French Alps regions have some sort of wine route with signage in place.