

Basic wine guide:

Understanding common wine types





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The world of wine is a complex and overwhelming place. With regions all over the world, it can take a lot of drinking to learn your Bordeaux from your Burgundys.

While wine enthusiasm suffers from certain elitist stereotypes, for those who truly love viticulture, there is no greater pleasure than understanding the history and effort that has gone into a beloved bottle. That's why we've created this basic wine guide, so everyone can gain a deeper appreciation of the ancient art form - with less of the la-de-dah rubbish.

Whether you're just starting out, or you're studying for your WSET exam, this basic wine guide is the perfect accomplice for getting to know your grapes.

Broken up into six parts, each section will steer you through the basics of a specific wine or grape. We'll be covering six of the world's most important varieties:

1. Merlot
2. Cabernet Sauvignon
3. Pinot Noir
4. Syrah / Shiraz
5. Riesling
6. Sauvignon Blanc

We've got a lot to cover, so let's get started.

01.

Why have a little when
you could have Mer-lot?



- Second most planted grape in the world.
- France and South Africa's most popular grape.
- Often blended with Cabernet Sauvignon.
- Is one of the main components of one of the world's most expensive wines - Petrus. A bottle of which would set you back up to £4000.
- Faced an incredible drop in sales when the main character in the hit film, *Sideways*, spoke of his distaste of the grape in the early 2000s. Luckily, merlot sales have since recovered.
- Translates from French as 'young blackbird'. This is said to be due to the grape's blue-black appearance.



Premium merlot

Bordeaux is the home of the merlot grape. Blessed with and moderate climate and long warm autumns, Bordeaux is the perfect region for growing premium Merlot.

This prominent wine growing region is based around the Gironde estuary in Southern France. The left and right bank of this estuary are extremely important in the premium merlot industry, and many of the most prestigious Merlot vines are found on these banks in what used to be the riverbed.

Pssst, here's a drop of extra wisdom:

Did you know that growing vines on rocky land, such as a dried up riverbed, makes for brilliant grapes? Not only do rocks in the soil help vines anchor to the ground, but the rocks absorb sunlight and act as a hot plate for the vine. These lovely rocks capture the heat of the sunlight during the day, regulating the temperature of the soil and encouraging the grapes to ripen.



What to expect from premium Bordeaux Merlot:

- Medium to full-bodied
- High in tannin
- High in acidity
- Medium in alcohol level

Merlots grown in these prestigious vineyards often have a red fruit character - displaying notes of strawberry, berries and plum. However, they are often oak aged, and take on spicy, coffee-like qualities.

Click [here](#) to learn more about the quirky history of Bordeaux. found on these banks in what used to be the riverbed.

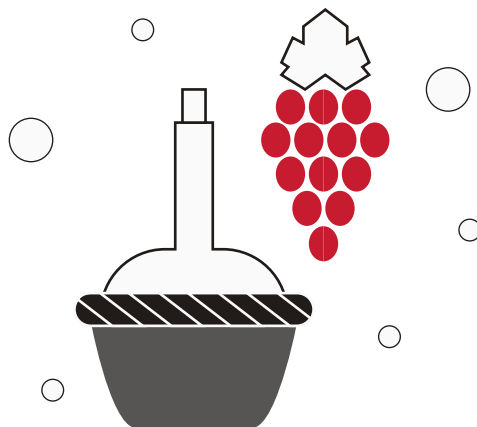
Merlot all over the world

Unlike it's extremely fussy cousin Pinot Noir, Merlot is a grape variety that grows in a range of climates. From the moderate temperatures of its hometown Bordeaux, to warmer climates such as **Mendoza** in Argentina and **Stellenbosch** in South Africa. These warmer climate Merlots are often:

- Full-bodied
- Have flavours of soft black fruit, fruitcake and oak
- Soft textures

Quality Merlots are popping up all over the globe. From New Zealand's Hawkes Bay, to our personal favourite [Romanian Merlot](#), created from winemaking legend, Aurelia Vişinescu. These cooler climate Merlots are:

- High in tannins and acidity
- Herbaceous
- Have flavours of tobacco, blackberry, with a very long cocoa finish



You had me at Merlot

"If anyone orders Merlot, I'm leaving"

Miles Raymond, Sideways

Merlot may not have been Miles' choice, but the versatile grape remains a firm global favourite. Here at Vincarta HQ, we enjoy a glass alongside a juicy chicken dish, or another lightly flavoured meat.

02.

Cabernet Cabaret:
A song and dance about
Cabernet Sauvignon

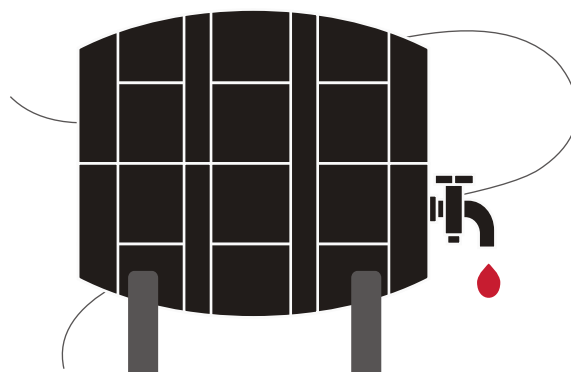


- It is grown in almost every wine producing region in the world, from climates in Canada's Okanagan region, to Beqaa Valley in Lebanon.
- In the 1980s, the Bulgarian wine industry was introduced to the international wine market because of the success of its Cabernet Sauvignon wines.
- For most of the 20th Century, it was the world's most widely planted premium red wine grape.
- It was surpassed by the rise in popularity of Merlot in the 1990s, but regained the title again in 2015.

The history of Cabernet Sauvignon

How the Cabernet Sauvignon originated has been, up until recently, an utter mystery.

It was rumoured to have ancient origins, perhaps even being the Biturica grape that was used to make many Roman wines.



We now know, thanks to research and DNA typing, conducted by UC Davis Department of Viticulture and Ecology, that **Cabernet Sauvignon was the illegitimate child of the Cabernet franc and the Sauvignon Blanc**. And, as we know, these vines are from Bordeaux. Rumour has it that this wine was the result of a chance crossing that occurred in the 17th Century.

The profile of the Cabernet Sauvignon

The Cabernet Sauvignon tends to be full-bodied with high tannins and consists of high acidity, which adds to the wines aging potential.

Flavour profile:

- In cooler regions, the Cabernet Sauvignon tends to produce **blackcurrant flavours**, and can often be accompanied by notes of green bell pepper, mint and cedar.
- In mild climates, blackcurrant notes are often paired with more **cherry and black olive notes**.
- In hot climates, the currant flavours can veer towards over ripe and even enter the **'jammy'** side of things.

It gets better with age

Cabernet Sauvignon is highly sought after because of its ability to age well in the bottle. In addition to softening some of their austere tannins, ageing can add new flavours and aromas to the wines' complexity. In fact, some Cabernet Sauvignon wines can still be approachable a few years after vintage.

Many premium Australian and Californian Cabernets will also need at least ten years to develop, though many are approachable after two to five years.

In South America, Cabernets have very pronounced fruit flavours when they are young, and the best made examples will maintain some of those flavours as they age. South African wines, however, typically require six to eight years of aging before they start to develop further flavours.



Pairing with food

The most important thing to know about food pairing is that the **Cabernet Sauvignon is a bold wine and will tend to overwhelm light dishes.**

Additionally, Cabernet Sauvignons with high alcohol levels do not pair well with spicy foods due to hotness levels of the capsaicin (a component found in chili peppers) present in spices. These spices are enhanced by the alcohol with the heat accentuating the bitterness of the tannins.

Fats and proteins reduce the tannins on the palate. When Cabernet Sauvignon is paired with steak or dishes with a heavy butter cream sauce, the tannins are neutralised, allowing the fruits of the wine to be more noticeable.

As the wine ages and the tannins lessen, subtle and less bitter dishes will pair better with Cabernet Sauvignon. However, always bear in mind that the different styles of Cabernet Sauvignon from different regions will influence how well the wine matches up with certain foods.

Life is a Cabernet, old chum

Cabernet Sauvignon is an internationally recognised grape that is grown in almost every wine producing region on the planet. It has a varied taste profile and ages better than Halle Berry. Try one from every climate and see which ticks your boxes.



03.

Pinot Noir – the most
finicky grape in the world?



- It's the tenth most planted grape in the world.
- The majority of Pinot Noir is grown in Burgundy, where the variety is thought to originate.
- Most – if not all – red Burgundy is made from Pinot Noir grapes.
- Pinot Noir is one of only seven approved varieties used in the production of champagne.
- It is one of the oldest varieties in existence, separated by only a few generations from wild grape vines.
- The most expensive bottle of wine ever sold – a 1945 Domaine de la Romanée-Conti, is a red Burgundy.
- Its name roughly translates to 'black pine', thanks to the pine-cone shaped bunches that the grapes grow in.
- Its quality can vary massively. Jancis Robinson reckons that, as a result of the grape's sensitivity to rot, Burgundy-based producers get an outstanding vintage every three years, and serious failures in between.

Classic Pinot Noir

There's no question that Burgundy is the traditional home of this incredibly temperamental grape variety. Its cool climate is ideal (or as ideal as it gets) for the thin-skinned grape, which is notoriously difficult to grow thanks to its susceptibility to rot and over-ripening. As Californian wine-titan André Tchelistcheff famously said:

'God made Cabernet Sauvignon. The devil made Pinot Noir.'

The region most famous for producing world-class Pinot Noir wines is Burgundy's Côte d'Or, a limestone-laden landscape home to the biggest names in Burgundy winemaking. Domaine de la Romanée-Conti, Henri Mayer, Domaine Leroy and Chambertin all produce wines in the area.



What to expect from premium Pinot Noir

- Lighter-bodied
- Low tannins
- Higher acidity

The most common tasting notes for Pinot Noir wines around the world are those of fresh red fruits in younger wines, and earthier, more mushroomy flavours as the wine ages. Old-world examples, like those found in Burgundy, will often be lighter in colour and feature more of those earthy notes, especially as they get older.

Pinot Noir around the world

Pinot Noir is sensitive to the *terroir* that it's grown in, so examples outside Burgundy can produce interesting and unexpected results. Thanks to its finicky nature, there aren't too many places where the grape can be successfully grown.



Oregon, Washington State and California's Russian River Valley produce great bottles in the USA, while producers in [Romania](#), New Zealand, Germany and Northern Italy have also successfully grown the variety.

New world Pinot Noirs in particular tend to be heavier on the 'juicier' side, consisting of sweeter raspberry and strawberry flavours. Complex examples like [Anima's 2014 Pinot Noir](#) blend this with those subtle earthy notes that old world bottles are so renowned for.

A wine worth waiting for

"I can count the number of great Cabernets I made at Beaulieu only by taking off my socks and shoes, but I can count the number of great Pinot Noirs on one hand with change left over."

- Andre Tchelistcheff

As you can see, Pinot Noir lives up to its reputation as the world's most challenging grape.

However, thanks to New World producers, there are plenty more fantastic Pinot Noir bottles on the market than there once was, so get out there and start tasting!

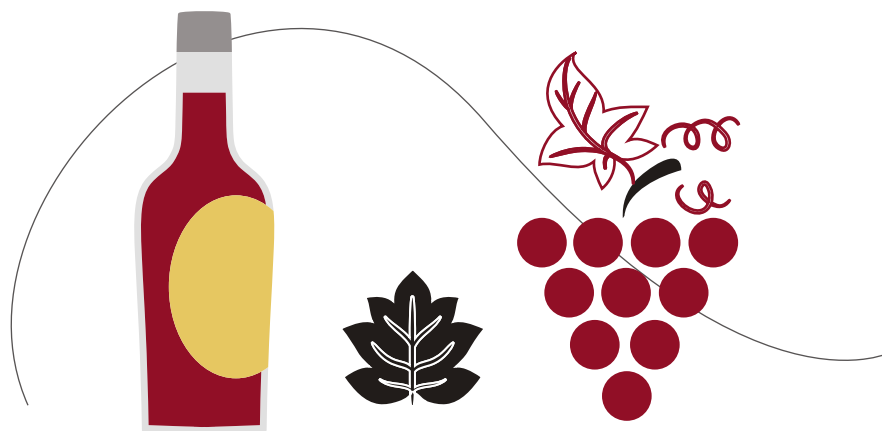
04.

Que Syrah Syrah!

(Whatever will be, will be)



- It's the sixth most-planted grape in the world.
- It is thought to originate in France's Rhône valley, where vintners still produce some of the best and most famous bottles of Syrah anywhere.
- Syrah is one of the hardiest grapes out there. It grows everywhere from Australia to Switzerland, and can produce a huge variety of regionally-influenced flavours as a result.
- It's called 'Syrah' when the wine comes from France, and 'Shiraz' when it's from Australia. These two countries represent the two ends of the spectrum when it comes to the wine's character, and there are plenty of variations in between.
- Its name – and the grape itself – was thought to have come from the Iranian city of Shiraz, but research has shown that the variety is as French as Brigitte Bardot.



Classic Syrah

The Rhône Valley is and always has been the home of classic Syrah wines. Its cooler climate (when compared to New World alternatives) produces grapes that take their time to ripen, thanks to their thick skin.

The flavours are subtler and earthier than their New World counterparts, but no less full-bodied and full-on. If you're a steak fan, this variety will pair beautifully.

What to expect from classic Syrah:

- Extremely dark in colour
- Full-bodied
- Medium to strong tannins
- Medium acidity

Common tasting notes for Old World Syrah wines involve dark fruits like blackberries, plums and blueberries, with a noticeably smoky and herbaceous edge.

Some wines have a spicy finish reminiscent of black pepper and even smoked meat. 'Pencil shavings' is also a common note for Syrah but not always present. Classic Syrah is earthier and less juicy, but incredibly full-bodied. As the wine ages, it reveals its musty side.

Shiraz and Syrah around the world

Though Rhône-based winemakers in famous regions like **Crozes-Hermitage** and **Côte-Rôtie** may disagree, the grape can be used to make fantastic wines around the world. Oz Clarke has asked whether it is ‘the most adaptable grape in the world’ thanks to its ability to grow everywhere from mountainous Swiss landscapes to hot, dry Australian climes.

Australian Shiraz takes those fruity notes from French Syrah and ramps them up as the grapes get riper in hotter temperatures. The results are often described as ‘jammy’, with notes of chocolate, toffee and syrup that are rounded out by spicy oak notes.



If we had to sum up these wines, we'd call them bombastic. Wines from Australia's **Barossa Valley** and **McLaren Vale** are the most famous examples.

Because the grape expresses itself differently around the world, there are some really interesting examples to be had. We love Romania's [2016 Anima Syrah](#) from Aurelia Vişinescu, which is a combination of old- and new-world character, and a testament to the grape's expression of place.



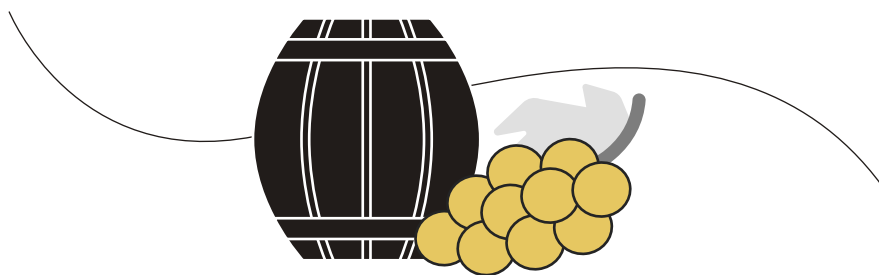
You say Syrah, I say Shiraz

We didn't have the space to mention all of the countries producing wines from Syrah grapes, because there are too many to name! But hopefully you are inspired to seek out bottles from around the world. You'll be rewarded with huge fruit flavours, spicy finishes and smoky depths.

05. Everything happens for a Riesling



- Riesling is uniquely expressive of the place where it grows. This is most evident in Alsace, where wildly varying geology means that two neighbouring vineyards produce very different wines.
- Origins date back as far as 1435.
- Unlike most white wines, Riesling benefits from ageing. When aged, it develops appealing smoky, honeyed and even petrol notes.
- Thanks to some very dismal examples in the 70s and 80s, people often think that all Riesling is off-dry or sweet. Most Riesling is dry, but if you give the good sweeter styles a try, you might fall in love.
- Riesling is the world's 20th most planted variety in terms of total acreage, but number one in Germany.
- As one of the world's most versatile grapes, Riesling can produce wines which are either gloriously sweet or bone dry and razor sharp.



Premium Riesling

Riesling is traditionally known as a cool climate grape, so it's no surprise that its most famous premium regions are located in Germany, Northern France and Austria.

The grape's characteristics differ greatly from site-to-site, but typically cool climate Rieslings have:

- Green fruit flavours
- Floral notes
- Hints of citrus
- High acidity
- Honey or toast flavours when aged
- Smoky 'petrol-like' aromas when aged
- Produced in dry, medium and sweet styles

Good Riesling pairs as well with hearty Germanic food as it does with fish and spicy Asian cuisine. It's a very food-friendly versatile wine.

Pssst, here's a drop of extra wisdom:

Did you know that there are a few different ways to create sweet wine? Most commonly grapes are harvested late, meaning they are riper and therefore sweeter. However, some premium sweet wines are purposely subjected to 'noble rot' in which a specific mould attacks healthy, ripe grapes and causes them to shrivel, concentrating the sugars.



Premium Riesling in Germany

Mosel is a prestigious region located on the border of Luxembourg. Situated on very steep slopes, it produces Germany's lightest bodied Rieslings. Nearby is the smaller region of Rheingau, which produces Rieslings with heavier bodies which are drier in style. Lastly, there is Pfalz, a southerly region which produces off dry, medium bodied Rieslings. The differences go to show how much Riesling is influenced by its origin.

Premium Riesling in France

Riesling may just be best thing to come out of Germany bar Einstein and lederhosen, but one of the wine's most prestigious regions resides across the border in Alsace, France.

Alsace is located in the foothills of the Vosges Mountains, which shelters the vineyards from rain-bearing winds blowing across Northern France. The long, dry warm autumns in Alsace provide ideal conditions for dry medium-bodied Rieslings.



Riesling in Australia and New Zealand

There are some fabulous new world Rieslings on offer. Australia and New Zealand produce premium bottles, proving that Riesling is not solely a European grape.

These wines have a similar taste profile to the western European regions, but typically have more dominant stone fruit flavours, such as apricot and peach.

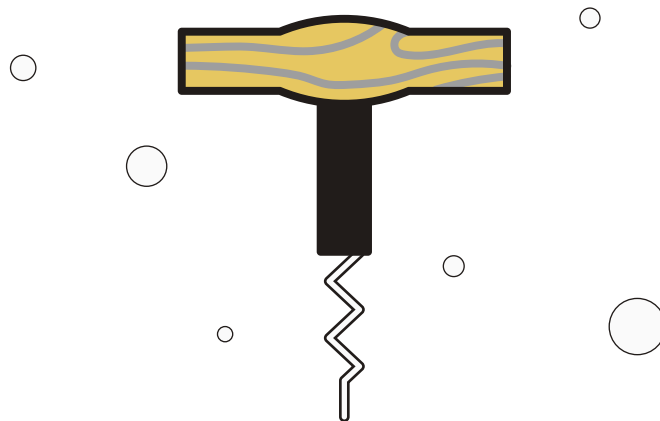
Vincarta's Riesling

Our super-premium [Silver Seal Riesling](#) is from Schloss Johannisberg, in the tiny region of Rheingau. It's one of the most famous winemakers in Germany, and one of only a handful that can put solely their name on the label rather than the region. We visited this region in 2016 and wrote about our experience [here](#).

We also have a limited quantity of Schloss Johannisberg [vintage, traditional-method Riesling sparkling wine](#) if you'd like to give it a try!

The rise of Riesling

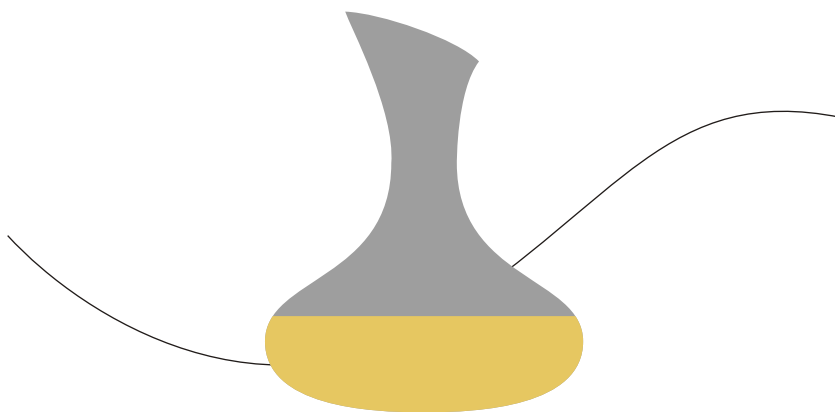
It's such a treat to share the delights of Riesling with other wine enthusiasts. After being overlooked and deemed unpopular for so long, we're glad this fantastic grape is finally getting the attention and resurgence it deserves. Pop some scallops in a pan and open a bottle of Germany's finest to celebrate.



06. Sauvignon Blanc



- The name roughly translates to 'wild white'.
- Sauvignon Blanc is produced across the globe, in both the old world (primarily France and Italy), as well as the new world (New Zealand, the USA, Chile).
- There are over 275,000 acres of Sauvignon Blanc planted worldwide.
- The wine has a unique, complex aroma that can include asparagus, green bell peppers, tomato stalks and, sometimes, a hint of cat's pee.
- It has its own day. The first Friday in May is officially International Sauvignon Blanc day. (So get a bottle chilling!)
- The wine pairs well with fish, goat cheese and, rather uniquely, sushi.



The classic, French Sauvignon Blanc

The primary region for most Sauvignon production, in terms of quantity and quality, is in Loire Valley in France. The valley's climate, limestone and mineral-rich soils provide the perfect habitat for the grape to ripen slowly. This allows for a perfect balance of sugars and acidity, so that the grape has the perfect aromas and tastes for the classic bottle of Sauvignon Blanc.

While the region is famed for its red wines, Bordeaux is also a home to Sauvignon Blanc, often blended with Sémillon, Pinot Gris and sometimes a bit of Muscadelle.

For example, our the [Château Martet Sainte Foy Bordeaux Blanc 2016](#) is a mix of 40% old vine Sémillons, 25% Sauvignon Blanc, 25% Sauvignon Gris and 10% Muscadelle. It perfectly showcases complex, brilliant aromas of a fine bottle of Sauvignon Blanc, but with its own twist.

What can you expect from premium Sauvignon Blanc?

The wine is highly aromatic and a gift in a blind tasting exam, due to a compound called pyrazines.

When tasting Sauvignon Blanc, you can expect to find:

- Tangy lemon and lime
- The characteristic green bell pepper, tomato stalk smell notes
- Sometimes, grass, asparagus and peas ('cat's pee')
- Green apple

New Zealand adopted Sauvignon Blanc and made it into a signature grape for the country's wine industry, producing more concentrated and fruitier styles compared with the (relatively) more elegant and restrained French styles.

It's not usually oaked, but you may come across an American Fumé Blanc style of Sauvignon Blanc which has a touch of oak to it.



Sauvignon Blanc on a global scale

The Sauvignon Blanc grape tends to bud late but ripen early, which can mean that the grape will thrive in warmer regions, so long as it's not subject to copious amounts of heat. In these overbearing temperatures, the wine can become dull and lack any of its signature flavours, and so global producers must either harvest their produce earlier or seek cooler climates.

But, with the right care and attention, it's not just France that can produce a fine bottle of Sauvignon Blanc. Chile, California, Australia and South Africa all successfully produce premium bottles of Sauvignon, too.

Into the wild white

Sauvignon is refreshing, aromatic and highly adaptable - and so it's no wonder it's such a popular grape. Whether you're enjoying it as part of a tempting blend, or as a sharp and tangy premium bottle, nothing beats a glass of Sauvignon Blanc on a warm evening.

Life after the basic wine guide

We've barely scratched the surface of all there is to know about these popular grapes – but that's the beauty of wine; there's always more to learn (check out our [blog](#) to read more). Nevertheless, hopefully this guide has shed some light and given you some confidence when next facing off a wine menu.

While wine is a libation soaked in culture, history and passion, it's important to remember not to take it too seriously. After all, there are no right answers in wine.

Our advice? Challenge your tastes and step outside your comfort zone by trying wines from all over the world. Check out the [vincarta store](#) as a good starting point. You never know when a new favourite may reveal itself to you.

