

Karen MacNeil, in her updated second edition of *The Wine Bible*, gives an excellent summary of the wine laws of France. The summary even includes the most recent changes that were brought upon the scene by the European Union. As a wine shopper, you will see the AOC designations on the labels as you browse the French Wine section of your favorite wine store. Looking for the AOC designation may slow you down a bit, but you will better understand what is going on inside that bottle of wine that you want to purchase. The two main categories of wine quality that we want to look at are VINS D'APPELLATION D'ORIGINE CONTROLEE AND VINS DE PAYS.

VINS D'APPELLATION D'ORIGINE CONTROLEE (AOC)

This AOC includes the finest wines of France, and each wine *must* abide by a strict set of regulations. These regulations include:

Area of Production: Each area is precisely defined. Only wines made from the vines growing within the borders of the appellation have the right to use the appellation.

Variety of Grape: Each area has permissible grape varieties, which may be used only in given proportions. If a producer makes wine from grapes other than those permitted he or she must forfeit the appellation.

Yields per Hectare: The basic yield per hectare allowed is set. (In some years it maybe increased.) In Bordeaux, for example, the yield permitted for red wine is 1452 gallons of wine for every 2.47 acres. The legal yield for white wine is slightly higher.

Vineyard Practices: How and when the vines can be pruned, the type of trellising system, and whether the use of irrigation is permitted are regulated. For some AOCs, even the start date of the harvest is specified.

Degree of Alcohol: All AOC wines have a required minimum level of alcohol, and some have

a maximum level.

Tasting and Analysis: All AOC wines must go through a chemical analysis and pass a taste test for typicality.

Varietal Labeling: All French wines may now put the grape variety on the label, but only if 85% of the wine constitutes the variety mentioned.

Ms. MacNeil goes on to explain that while these regulations appear to be pretty darn tough, a majority of French wine producers actually support them. WHY? Because by holding all variables constant, French wine producers are able to determine which vineyard plots consistently produce the greatest wines. In other words, since all producers make essentially the same kind of wine in essentially the same way from the same grapes grown in essentially the same manner, the only thing left that might account for quality differences is the exact plot of land where the grapes are grown.

VINS DE PAYS (VdP)

These are the wines referred to as country wines. They are defined by region. The rules for them are less strict than for AOC wines. Permissible yields are higher, and the rules concerning grape varieties are more flexible. Vins de Pays must carry the logo/stamp for the European Union Designation PGI, which stands for Protected Geographical Indication. For us as wine shoppers The Vins de Pays designation offers an opportunity to really learn about French wine because there is such a broad spectrum of this designation found all over France and in turn we hope that the wine ends up on the shelf of our favorite retailer. Also, within the designation you will find quality product. This is part of the fun of shopping. As an example, I found a Vins de Pays here in the US from the Chapoutier House; one of the best Wine organizations in all of France.

Now I am going to confuse the issue. The French Government, not too long ago (2009), announced that the long standing AOC system for wine is being replaced by a new quality ladder with the top quality level being called AOP (Appellation d'origins Protegee). The AOP concept is supposed to be adopted by all EU countries over the next few years. In an effort to diminish the confusion, the new system will be adopted on a gradual basis. It will be a couple of

years before you see many labels with the new designation because there are so many wines in the supply chain with the old labels. These wines will be allowed to arrive at market with the old AOC label.

WINESPEAK

Over the past five years you have seen that I often refer to Karen MacNeil and her *Wine Bible*. There is only one reason that I do so. It is because she is the best. She writes with passion, clarity, and humor. She is recognized worldwide in a very positive way. I highly recommend her book called *The Wine Bible*.

On the subject of Wine Laws, I presented them because wine is a passion of mine and I find that it's very easy to associate oneself with an industry that has such high standards and has no fear of letting the producers of the product know what those standards are. At the end of the day I see the regulations as protection of the product and the consumer.