

Five wines to toast the *terroir*

SINCE the 1970s, British journalist **SIMON WATKINSON** has made frequent trips across the Channel to buy French wine. In 1982, he discovered the beautiful Alsace region and its underrated wines, which were virtually unknown in England. A skilled home winemaker he also regularly visits the southern Rhone valley and Bordeaux to stock up on some good - and great-value - wines. Here he selects five wines, all for €10 or less, for *Connexion* readers.

AS the UK is the second largest importer of French wine - 15.9% of French exports - the British ignorance of French wine is surprising.

Many a British expat or tourist may have palpitations at the sight of unfamiliar wine bottles stacked high in the local French supermarket, especially when New World labels - the UK is the world's leading importer of Australian wine - are absent.

But while British drinkers favour the Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, Pinot Grigio, Cabernet Sauvignon, Shiraz, and Zinfandel (rosé) grape varieties, there are equivalent - and often significantly superior - French wines to delight the palate.

I quickly became disillusioned with the mass-marketed, inferior German and Italian wines available in British supermarkets in the early 1980s and started to discover more French wines with their own identity, or *terroir*.

And enjoying the local wines in moderation means you can do your bit for the national budget. With over 250,000 workers and providing almost 30% of France's agricultural employment, the wine industry provides a fillip to the struggling economy with an unemployment rate close to 11%.

So expand your Gallic wine knowledge and try, as a starting point, these five reliable and non-expensive wines.

And please let us know others you would recommend at news@connexionfrance.com

Crémant d'Alsace

ON A PAR with NV (non-vintage) champagne and a fraction of the price,

Crémant d'Alsace AOC (Appellation d'origine contrôlée) leads the pack of sparkling wines behind champagne. In 2009, some 31 million bottles of Crémant d'Alsace were sold, whereas a mere million bottles were produced in 1979.

Crémant d'Alsace is unsurprisingly, after champagne, the most consumed sparkling wine in France so it makes sense to follow the renowned French nose for great bubbly. These delightful white and rosé wines are perfect as an aperitif with smoked salmon blinis or with an afternoon tea with cake.

Many of the independent winemakers along the wonderfully scenic 90km Alsace wine road make their own crémant. But the crémants of Wolfberger, one of the largest producers of fizz in Alsace, are available in French supermarkets nationwide. Although Crémant d'Alsace will not keep as long as champagne, it is still exceptional value at €5 - €7 a bottle.



Montagne Saint-Émilion

SITUATED in the Libourne subregion on the right bank of the Dordogne, Montagne Saint-Émilion was granted AOC status in November 1936. The AOC designation is granted to the wines harvested on the land of the Montagne commune or in its hamlets, Parsac and Saint-Georges.

The Montagne-Saint-Émilion area produces well-rounded red wines from the Bordeaux grape varieties of Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, and Merlot, with Merlot being used most widely. Existing since 1600, the Château Corbin winery today turns out some truly magnificent oak-aged reds, which can be laid down for over a decade. Jacques Rambeaud, the 33-year-old innovative winemaker of this 23-hectare estate, prioritises quality and has replaced 15% of the estate's vines in the past seven years. He refuses to use insecticides and is working towards ISO 14001 certification, which underscores Château Corbin's commitment to environmentally-friendly practices.

Acclaimed wine critic Robert Parker rated the 2005 Château Corbin 88/100, describing it as a "deliciously fruity effort offering notes of herbs, black cherries, currants, and a judicious touch of toasty oak. This hedonistic, plush, medium to full-bodied, round, generous, savoury St-Émilion should drink nicely for 10-15 years".

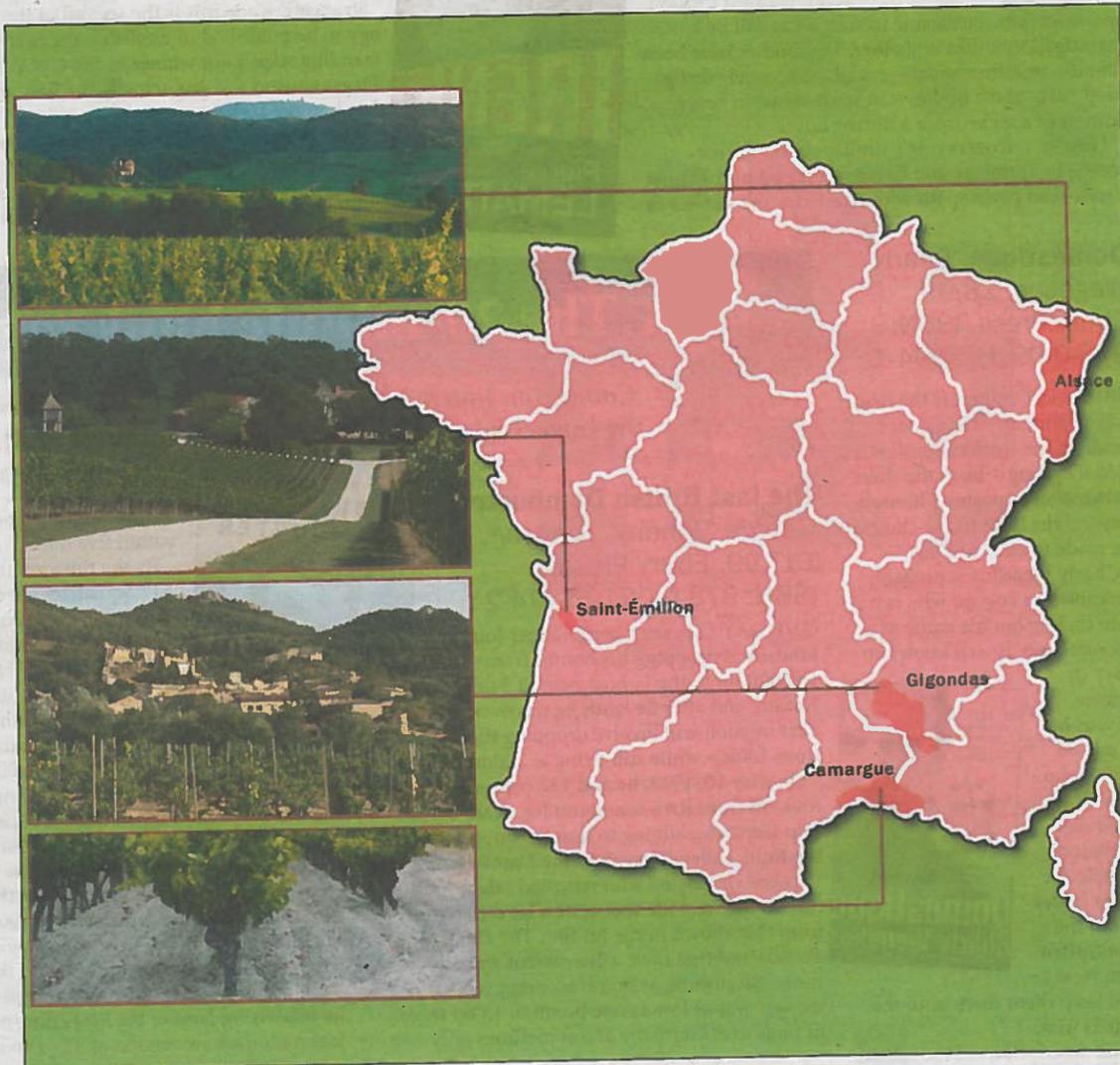
Many Montagne Saint-Émilion wines are a steal at around €9 a bottle. It is a perfect match to crusty French bread accompanied by a distinctive hard cheese, such as Comté Jura doux, or spread with the soft cheese Roulé à l'ail.

Alsace Gewurztraminer

THE pink grape traminer is the speciality of Alsace responsible for Gewurztraminer - one of the world's finest white wines.

A deep golden colour, Gewurztraminer is intensely perfumed with a breathtaking rose petal and lychee bouquet. Endowed with a low to medium acidity, this fruity wine can also be deceptively clean and dry.

It is best drunk by itself, as an aperitif,



with foie gras or a rich soft cheese, such as Munster, Gewurztraminer is also the ideal wine, along with Alsace Pinot Gris, to enjoy with lightly spiced Asian dishes.

Ranging in alcohol content from 12.5% to 14%, standard bottles of Gewurztraminer (costing from €6) can be laid down for 5-15 years, whereas Vendange Tardive (costing from €12 upwards due to the increased risks of late harvesting in winter) will mature for 8-25 years.

But Alsace wine is, somewhat bizarrely, underrated. Perhaps this is because consumers often think that the tall green slender Alsace wine bottles contain sweeter German wine.

One top Alsace winemaker attributes this lack of recognition to the region's unceremonious passing between France and Germany over the past 160 years.

Tragically, between 1871 and 1918 when Burgundy and Bordeaux wines were gaining global recognition, a German law prohibited Alsace winemakers from producing a quality product that would compete with German wine.

In his World Atlas of Wine, Hugh Johnson describes Alsace wine, which now enjoys a growing export market in China, as "the great adjunct to one of France's most splendid cuisines. Alsace gives the flowery-scented grapes of Germany the body and authority of such table wines as white Burgundy - proper accompaniments to strong and savoury food."

So it is not surprising that Robert Parker also eulogises over Alsace wine in his Wine Buyers Guide: "True connoisseurs of wine must find it appalling

that so many importers trip over each other trying to find yet another excessively priced, overcropped, generally insipid Italian Chardonnay or French red Burgundy, while ignoring the treasures of this fairy-tale viticultural area in the most beautiful wine-producing region of France."

Gigondas

RENOWNED as one of the world's prettiest wine villages, Gigondas nestles at the foot of the impressive Dentelles de Montmirail.

The Gigondas wine-producing area covers 1,229 hectares and is spread over the hills and valleys located solely within the commune of Gigondas.

Renowned for its high-alcohol content reds, Gigondas is made from the Grenache Noir, Syrah, Mourvèdre and Cinsault grape varieties. The cool microclimate, resulting from the mountain's shading of the morning sun, lengthens the maturation time of the grapes and results in these well-rounded, celebrated reds. A full-bodied intensity with smoky barbecue notes of Asian soy sauce, incense, black cherries, black currants and forest fruits is the hallmark of these stunning wines.

When young, the wines exude a wonderful bouquet of black cherry, strawberry, blackberry, blackcurrant and bil-

berry. But patience rewards and Gigondas' unique aromatic finish develops with age - the wines can keep for 50 years. It is best enjoyed in winter with a meaty stew or in summer with black pepper steak served with Dauphinoise potatoes and a fresh green salad. It costs from €10.

Listel Rosé - Sable de Camargue (Appellation Grain de Gris)

MADE from the grape varieties Syrah (70%), Cabernet Franc, Cabernet Sauvignon, Carignan Noir, Carignan Gris, Cinsault, Grenache Noir, Grenache Gris and Merlot, Listel Rosé has a delicate and light finesse peculiar to vines grown on this unique soil type.

The sandy soil in which the vines grow, Mediterranean climate and the protective hills nearby also give this wine a profound depth. Elegant and clean in the mouth, the bouquet of this superb 12.5% w may well evoke the aromas, sights and sounds of the Camargue countryside to those who have visited this region.

Priced at around just €4 a bottle, is great value and unsurprisingly very popular with the French. Ideal for quaffing on a warm summer evening it complements almost any dish.

