

The International Wine Review

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Report #50: The Wines of Chablis

Introduction



The Village of Beines in Chablis

The wines of Chablis are among the very finest in the world. They are produced from Chardonnay grapes grown in Burgundy on ancient maritime soils in unique terroirs or *climats*. Many of the wines are produced by small *vignerons* whose families have deep roots in the region dating back many generations, and who cultivate small vineyard parcels in several *climats*.

Chablis has a long, illustrious history, but it is only in recent decades that it has gained international recognition for the quality of its wines. This is due in large measure to the qualitative improvements introduced in the vineyards and cellars by many talented and passionate *vignerons*. At the same time, there is deep commitment to maintaining traditional practices that partly account for the uniqueness of the wines of Chablis.

Chablis is a relatively small growing area within Burgundy. Heavily influenced by its northerly, cool climate terroir of chalky soil created millions of years ago (when much of Europe was under water), Chablis wine is more similar to its Champagne and Sancerre neighbors than it is to the ripe, bold Chardonnays of Southern Burgundy or the

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New World. Like its neighbors that share the soils in the Kimmeridgian Chain, the wines of Chablis are characterized by their high acidity and varying degrees of steely mineral gunflint and oyster shell notes. However there are noteworthy differences among the wines of Chablis stemming from differences in terroir and styles of winemaking. These differences make the wines of Chablis a fascinating topic for this report.

Like other historic wine regions, Chablis has had its ups and downs. Burned by the Huegenots, confiscated in the Revolution, devastated by phylloxera, and bombed by the Nazis, the city and the region have not only survived but prospered. Today, Chablis' 5400 hectares (ha) of vines is

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about the size of Italy's Soave and half the size of California's Paso Robles wine region. But its fame is largely based on the 100ha hill of Grand Cru vineyards that sit opposite the town. This tiny area produces some of the world's most exquisite and geworthy white wines.

In this, our 50th report, we provide an in-depth look at Chablis and its wines. Our goal is to orient readers to this unique region, its wines, and most importantly, its producers. We begin with a brief history of Chablis, followed by a close look at the geography, soils and climate that make up Chablis. We then turn our attention to describing Chablis' different appellations: Petit Chablis, Chablis, Premier Cru and Grand Cru wines and the special characteristics of the major climats. This is followed by an overview of Chablis' vineyard management, recent vintages and wine-making practices. Because Chablis is such an outstanding food wine, we also offer recommendations on pairing the wines of Chablis with food, including the most popular cheeses served in Chablis. Lastly, for those readers who are planning to visit Chablis we offer a guide to some of the very finest restaurants in the commune of Chablis and surrounding towns.

The final section of the report includes profiles of the major producers of Chablis and our tasting notes and ratings for more than 300 wines, most of which were tasted during our visit to Chablis. We tasted wines in barrel and bottle, including numerous older vintages. Of course, we found the Premiers Crus and Grands Crus to be magnificent wines, quite unlike Chardonnay wines made anywhere else in the world. However, we were also pleasantly surprised by the numerous, distinctive Chablis and Petit Chablis wines available at very reasonable prices.

Most of the wines reviewed here are available in the U.S. market in both better restaurants and in fine wine retail stores¹. With over 100 producers and negociants making four appellations of Chardonnay-based wines from 47 different climats and 5400 hectares of vines, Chablis offers many choices. Hopefully, this report will help readers to better understand Chablis and begin a more extensive exploration of its wines. To help in this process, our top selections from the wines we tasted are listed on the following pages.

¹ The US is Chablis' 4th most important export market in terms of value and 6th in terms of volume. Exports to the US have been growing especially rapidly in recent years.

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