

Oxford Companion to Wine

appellation contrôlée

short for appellation d'origine contrôlée, is France's prototype **CONTROLLED APPELLATION**, her much-imitated system of designating and controlling her all-important geographically based names, not just of wines, but also of spirits such as cognac, armagnac, and calvados, as well as of many foods. This inherently protectionist system is administered by the **INAO**, a powerful Paris-based body which controls an increasing proportion of French wine production, an average of 53 per cent of it in the early 2000s.

History

France's role as a wine producer had been gravely affected by the viticultural devastation caused by **POWDERY MILDEW**, **DOWNY MILDEW**, and **PHYLLOXERA** in the second half of the 19th century (see **FRANCE**, history). Fine wines were available in much-reduced quantity, but the **LANGUEDOC** and **ALGERIA** had become vast factories for the production of very ordinary wine at very low prices. Laws passed in the first two decades of the 20th century were aimed at bringing an end to the **ADULTERATION AND FRAUD** that was by then widespread. These were based simply on the principle of geographical **DELIMITATION**, and specified particular areas within which certain wines had to be produced. Bordeaux, Banyuls, and Clairette de Die were among the first; disagreement about exactly which districts should be allowed to produce France's most famous sparkling wine led to riots (see **CHAMPAGNE**, history).

It rapidly became clear, however, that France's famous wines depended on more than geography. The wrong grape varieties and careless wine-making would not result in a suitable expression of these carefully delimited **TERROIRS**. By 1923, Baron le Roy, the most influential and well-connected producer of **CHÂTEAUNEUF-DU-PAPE**, was implementing in his part of the southern Rhône a much more detailed set of rules including not just geographical delimitation but a specification of permitted **VINE VARIETIES**, **PRUNING**, and vine-**TRAINING** methods, and minimum **ALCOHOLIC STRENGTH**.

The French appellation contrôlée system evolved into a national reality in the 1930s when economic depression, widespread cultivation of **HYBRIDS**, and a serious wine **SURPLUS** increased the incentive for wine merchants to indulge in nefarious blending. The producers of genuine Pommard, for example, had a very real interest in limiting the use of their name to themselves. In 1935 the INAO was created with the express mission of drawing up and enforcing specifications for individual AOCs, or ACs, which broadly followed the Châteauneuf prototype, and in principle banned hybrids from AC wine. The great majority of the appellation regulations for France's most famous wines and spirits are therefore dated 1936 or 1937, although they have been continuously revised since. The **VDQS** category for wines deemed just below AC status was created in 1949 and is also administered by the INAO.

The French system of categorizing wine, including its main plank appellation contrôlée, has been taken as a model for **EUROPEAN UNION** wine legislation, and AC is France's equivalent of what the European authorities consider a **QUALITY WINE**. The legal powers of the INAO, both within France and in its dealings with the EU and beyond, were strengthened substantially in 1990, when it took the conscious decision to try to build the future of French wine on the concept of geographical appellations (eschewing even the mention of vine varieties on the main label) and adopted the specific aim of preserving agricultural activity in certain zones. But in 2004, when France's wine exports were clearly in significant decline and domestic sales stagnant, this policy was dramatically modified to make French wine labels easier to understand and the wines themselves more competitive in the global market. The aim was to raise the average quality of AC wines and introduce some new regional **VIN DE PAYS** categories. The INAO continues to wage war on all misused **GENERIC** wine and spirit names but the supremacy of the AC system is no longer unchallenged orthodoxy.

The regulations, scope

The INAO's detailed texts of its nearly 500 wine appellation regulations are already voluminous and constantly revised, covering the following aspects for each appellation and VDQS.

Production area

All those communes allowed to produce the wine in question are listed, but within each of these communes only certain plots of land are deemed worthy, details of which are lodged with each commune's all-

important *mairie* or administrative centre. Vines grown elsewhere within the commune are normally entitled only to be sold as a less specific appellation, a **VIN DE PAYS** or **VIN DE TABLE**.

Vine varieties

The permitted grapes are specified in great detail, along with permitted maximum and minimum proportions. Many appellation regulations include long lists of half-forgotten but once-significant local varieties. White grape varieties are permitted to a certain extent in a number of red wine appellations.

Ripeness and alcoholic strength

Specific **MUST WEIGHTS** are generally cited for freshly picked grapes before any **CHAPTALIZATION**, generally given in g/l of sugar. A maximum **ALCOHOLIC STRENGTH** after any chaptalization, if allowed, is also usually specified.

Yields

or Aquileia del Friuli. Control of **YIELDS** is a fundamental tenet of the appellation contrôlée system, however sceptical some New World viticulturists are of the concept. The maximum yields cited in the regulations were almost routinely increased, however, by about 20 per cent throughout the 1970s and 1980s (see **PLC**). In 1993, the INAO announced its intention to curb yields (as the EU has done) but this has not been adopted with much noticeable enthusiasm.

This section usually includes information on a minimum **VINE AGE** allowed for appellation contrôlée production.

Viticulture

This usually specifies a minimum **VINE DENSITY**, the approved **PRUNING** regime down to the number of buds, and the permitted vine-**TRAINING SYSTEM**. In some southern appellations the (limited) extent to which **IRRIGATION** is allowed may be outlined.

Wine-making and distillation

This long section may well specify such aspects as compulsory **DESTEMMING**, method of **ROSÉ WINE-MAKING** (usually by **SAIGNÉE**), although there is generous use of the vague phrase *usages locaux*. Precise **DISTILLATION** techniques are usually specified for spirits.

Pros and cons

France's appellation contrôlée designation is in general a more reliable guide to the country's best wines than, for example, the **QBA** category of 'quality wines' in Germany, the liberally applied **DOC** designation in Italy and Portugal, and its **DO** counterpart in Spain (all of the last three modelled on the AC system). The French system is by no means perfect, however, and it remains to be seen whether the measures announced in 2004 to reserve appellation status to truly superior wines can possibly be effective. Policing remains a problem, and the Service de la Répression des Fraudes is probably understaffed. Contraventions of the regulations, particularly over-chaptalization, or chaptalization and **ACIDIFICATION** of the same wine, are difficult to detect (although a complex bureaucracy controls over-production). Misdemeanours are only very rarely publicized, and then usually only as a result of local politics.

A more serious disadvantage of the appellation contrôlée system is the extent to which it stifles experimentation. In dramatic contrast to the New World, vine-growers may plant only certain vine varieties. Those wishing to experiment have often been restricted to selling the wine not merely as a vin de pays, but as an anonymous, undated vin de table—or even forced to uproot the supposedly offending vines.

The appellation contrôlée regulations were drawn up not with a clean slate and a pencil devoted to the best possible options, but to legitimize the best current practices.

It is also fanciful to suggest that every wine produced within an appellation inevitably uniquely betrays its geographical provenance. Few blind tasters would unhesitatingly identify a Côtes du **MARMANDAIS**, for

example. And then there are the catch-all appellations such as **BORDEAUX AC**, **ALSACE**, and **CHAMPAGNE**, whose quality variation is simply frustrating.