

James The Sommelier – Premium Wines - France

'Wine honors the soul, so honor it with yours.'

Premium wines catch people with a sense of wonder and awe. To those who cannot possibly conceive of buying a bottle (which is probably most of us) they remain elusive and resigned to a place of distant imagination. Much like our Hollywood stars, premium wines are famous throughout their wine community existing as separate entities but which some people may never see in the flesh. We know they are out there, we are reminded of their presence every week, but they are secret, isolated characters reserving their company for those only closest to them.

To those of us who can buy bottles of premium wine they become the only option. Nothing quite captures us in the same way again. It becomes an obsession, the ultimate alcoholic experience, an addiction. Something within says 'It's a treat, not a habit' but it usually turns into an affliction where you live life waiting for that next bottle.

So, premium wines, a Hollywood parody. Possibly a rather inflated comparison but like all Hollywood stars in 'Hello' or 'OK' magazines, premium wines need to be known about. Who they are and what they are is useful information to have in case you do come upon one and, god forbid, fail to recognize it!

The Crème de la Crème - France

Bottles of wine change constantly but their regions stay the same. In this respect it would make more sense to highlight the premier regions rather than their varying produce. France, home to Bordeaux and Burgundy, produces the most famous premium wines. In Bordeaux, areas like Pomerol and St. Emilion produce consistently high quality wines with noticeable and very famous premium wines. The Haut-Medoc, including its southern tip, Margaux, Pauillac and St. Julian are to be noted also.

Burgundy, the 'stomach' of France, is bound to produce top quality wine as it probably has the most experience doing so. Chambertin (Cotes de Nuits) and Pommard (Cote de Beaune) both located in the infamous Cote d'Or have historic fame with the artiste Hilaire Belloc commenting 'I forget the name of the place; I forget the name of the girl; but the wine... was Chambertin.'

Just north of Burgundy sits the small site of Chablis owner of the most prestigious dry whites in the world. In the 1950s bad frost nearly wiped out all of Chablis but, with a true sense of justification, it was the world-renowned taste of the wine that saved it with a collective effort to rebuild the destruction.

However, these regions are not only producers of premium wines. Consumer wines, albeit at a very high standard, still come out of them, so what is it about the wines themselves that make them premium. What is it about their character and their taste that gives premium wines that distinction? Vintage, or the potential for aging, denotes their characters. With age, premium wines take on a more complex, vibrant, heavier body transforming them into different entities. Much like an academic scholar of note, Michael Foucault for example, with age comes experience and with experience comes more worth. As knowledge, ideas, opinions coagulated and formed greater, more substantial views in Foucault's mind, so a premium wine's smell and taste develops while it is aging. The end result is something more substantial, more significant than the norm.

And what is the effect on the taste and smell of this aging, I hear you ask? Well, on a premium wine from Bordeaux the nose and mouth succumb to a barrage of strength, a creamy and exquisite assault on the senses. Pomerol (making wines of up to 80% Merlot) produces an unbelievably smooth bottle, before 12 years of aging, without any tannin to speak of but, at the same time, without a sickening feeling of being overripe. St. Emilion is renowned for its solid tastiness in wines and usually with 1% more alcohol. At 8 years of age, wines from St. Emilion will be mouth-wateringly sweet and heavy.

Moving to Burgundy, the wines are, of course, lighter but just as irresistible after 10 years of aging. Premium wines from the Cote de Beaune, Pommard specifically, develop a medium body with savoury character. True to Pinot Noir's terroir-expressive nature, wines from the neighbouring region, Cotes de Nuits (Chambertin), have more stuffing and encapsulate the sappy richness of Pinot Noir and create the most classic of velvety of Burgundies.

Chablis, despite being a 'white' region, is still worthy of mention. Again, with around 10 years of aging, Chablis whites become hard but not harsh with a full-bodied taste of stones, minerals and green hay. This, combined with an indescribably pleasurable sourness develops a wine with a strong, richer, immortal body separating it eternally from its counterparts.

For more information about wine join our wine classes at That Little Wine Bar, 54 Chow Thye Road,
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