

PREMIUM

Loire Volcanique: The renaissance bubbling upstream

After decades in the doldrums, the vineyards of the Loire Volcanique in the heart of France are stirring once again. Jim Budd looks at what he thinks is one of the Loire Valley's most dynamic winemaking areas today.



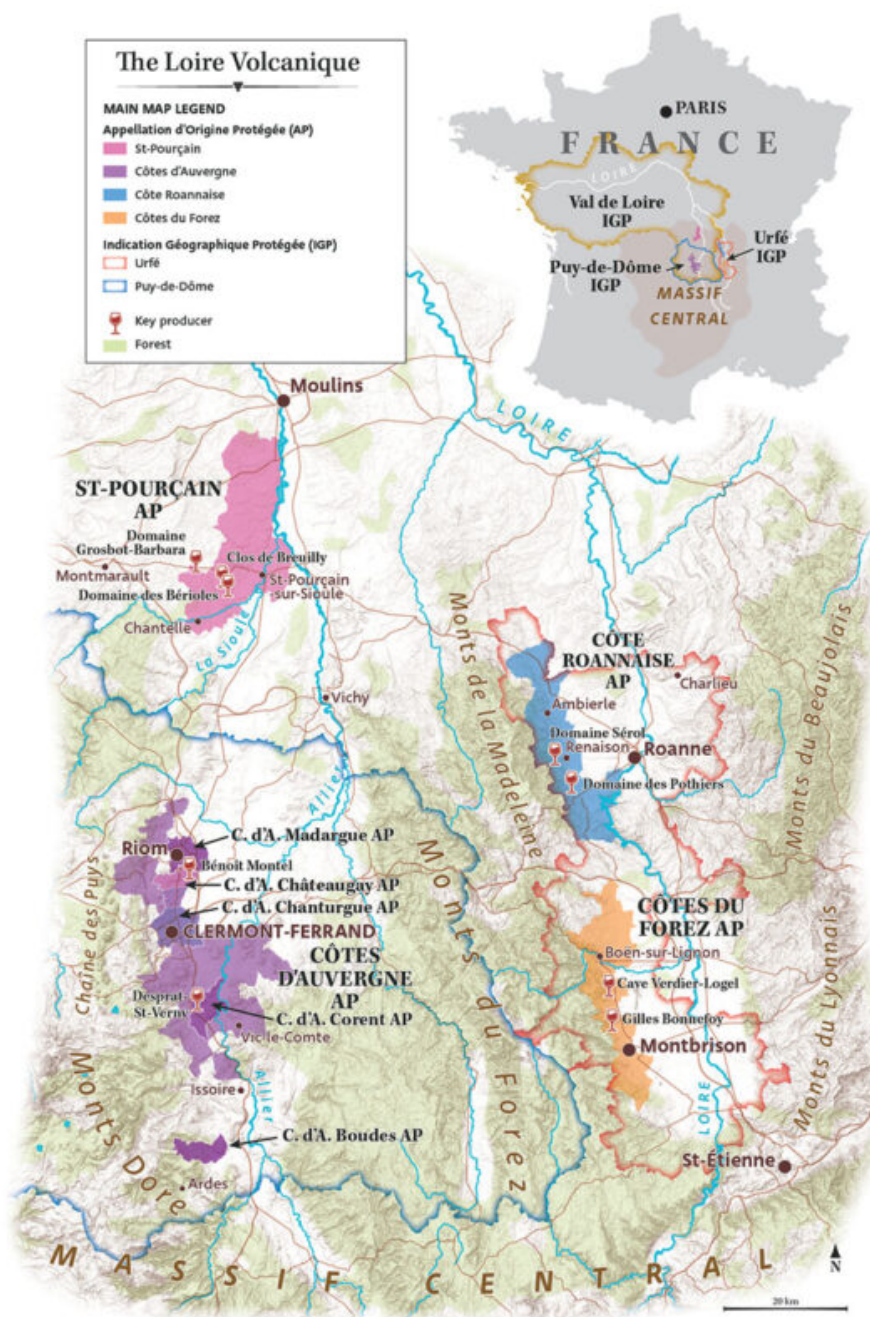
Jim Budd
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The Chaîne des Puys is a chain of extinct volcanoes located in the Auvergne, here with the Puy de Pariou in the foreground and Puy de Dôme in the background. Credit: Denis Pourcher

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Scroll down for notes and scores for 15 great Loire
Volcanique wines to try



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These range from delicious, easy-drinking, unoaked examples, to serious wines aged in oak – or, increasingly, in amphorae – that have the potential to develop and age well, from both long-established domaines and ambitious newcomers.

Rise and fall and rise again

Currently there are just 1,315ha planted in the whole of the Loire Volcanique area, but all four appellations were considerably larger in the 18th and 19th centuries.

The Côtes d'Auvergne in particular had very substantial vineyards at this time, profiting from the demise of the vineyards of the Midi, which were being consumed by phylloxera.

In the last decade of the 19th century, there were over 44,000ha of vines planted in the Puy-de-Dôme department. In Boudes, one of the five crus of the Côtes d'Auvergne, there are the remains of abandoned terraces on the steep hillside.

However, the four appellations eventually succumbed to phylloxera around the time of the First World War, and were subsequently impacted by rural depopulation, so this area sharply declined in importance.

Despite its small size, this region is now enjoying a renaissance, with a number of dynamic producers making very good, interesting wines under AP, IGP and Vin de France labels.

A painter's palette of grape varieties

The wines are made from a range of grape varieties, including Aligoté, Chardonnay, Chenin Blanc, Gamay, Pinot Gris and Noir, Riesling, Roussanne, Syrah, Tressallier and Viognier.

This wide range, quite different from those found in the other parts of the Loire, reflects just how far south Côtes du Forez and Auvergne are, with St-Pourçain and Côte Roannaise being slightly further north.

The southern-most villages are on the same latitude as Côte-Rotie, so it makes sense to plant Viognier, Roussanne and Syrah.

Red and rosé

Gamay is the dominant grape variety – Côte Roannaise and Côtes du Forez reds must be made from 100% Gamay. There are two local variants: Gamay St-Romain (Roannaise and Forez) and Gamay d'Auvergne (Côtes d'Auvergne).

Pinot Noir is allowed in Côtes d'Auvergne and St-Pourçain but never 100%. That said, very good 100% Pinot Noirs are available bottled as IGPs or Vin de France.

White

A very interesting range of white varieties are used – principally Chardonnay (Auvergne and St-Pourçain) and Tressallier, which is St-Pourçain's local grape variety.

In addition Aligoté, Chenin Blanc, Pinot Blanc and Gris, Riesling, Roussanne, Sauvignon Blanc and Viognier also feature.

Remnants of a volcanic past

As the name suggests, the region is known for its extinct volcanoes.

In the Côtes d'Auvergne area, the Puy-de-Dôme itself is the highest of the region's extinct volcanoes, and is notable for being a famous climb in the Tour de France cycle race.

In the Côtes du Forez, Château Sainte Anne is an ancient fortified castle which perches atop a volcanic peak, high above the village of Marcilly-le-Châtel, a site which dates back to the beginning of the 11th century. Cave Verdier-Logel has some of its vines here, on the steep slopes.

Many of the region's vines are planted on volcanic soils, especially granite and basalt. These soils help to give the wines their attractive freshness, which is further aided by the altitude of the vineyards.

Gilles Bonnefoy in the Côtes du Forez has some vines at 600m, while Domaine Sérol (Côte Roannaise) has a parcel at 500m. Thus wines made with Rhône varieties are often fresher than those from the Rhône Valley.

In contrast, the vineyards of Sancerre top out at around 300m.

Appellation facts

St-Pourçain: (600ha) The most northerly appellation in the Allier Valley, where it is joined by its tributary, the Sioule. **Reds:** Gamay and Pinot Noir. **Whites:** Chardonnay and Tressallier.

Côtes d'Auvergne: (350ha) This AP straddles the north and south of Clermont-Ferrand, with vines up to 550m in altitude. **Reds:** Gamay and Pinot Noir. **Whites:** Chardonnay. **Other:** Also some Syrah in IGP and Vin de France.

Côte Roannaise: (215ha) Spread across 14 communes on the eastern foothills of the Monts de la Madeleine, with vines up to 500m in altitude. **Reds and rosé:** Gamay.

Côtes du Forez: (150ha) The most southerly of the four appellations, with vineyards widely scattered on the foothills of Monts de Forez with vines up to 600m. The most southerly vineyards are south of Lyon and in line with Côte-Rotie and Vienne. **Reds and rosé:** Gamay.

Climate

The climate is semi-continental with dry, relatively brief cold winters in comparison to the rest of the Loire, followed by hot summers.

The region has both the lowest minimum average January temperatures and the highest maximum average summer temperatures, along with substantially more annual sunshine, than elsewhere in the Loire, according to Météo France.

Saint-Etienne enjoys 1,985 sunshine hours per annum – around 200 more than Nantes.

The region benefits from being in a rain shadow, and from the Föhn effect, whereby a warm, dry wind descends the leeward slopes of the mountains.

Sadly, frost is a perennial threat and 2021 saw severe damage, while violent summer hailstorms are also a problem.

Every time I visit this lovely, picturesque region I discover something exciting and new. Last year it was the dramatic Mont-Georges – a steeply sloping, terraced vineyard in St-Pourçain, a recent joint venture planted by a collection of three estates.

Previously it was the steep Bouthéran vineyard in the Côte Roannaise.

I am sure these remarkable sites would be famous if they were found in Burgundy or the Rhône.



Stéphane and Karine Sérol of Domaine Sérol in Côte Roannaise. Credit: Jim Budd

Green approach

Many of the leading domaines are either organic, biodynamic or both, and this is borne out by many of the wines that showed best in this tasting.

Unfortunately, all too often green credentials do not extend to bottle weight. Excessively heavy bottles are still favoured by too many producers, perhaps mistakenly seeking to give their wines extra prestige.

Of the 80 wines tasted, and the 15 featured here, overall the standard was impressive. The most consistent appellation was Côte Roannaise, with some excellent wines from AP, IGP and Vin de France bottlings.

The fascinating wines of the Loire Volcanique await you.

Top producers to know:

St-Pourçain

Clos de Breuilly – a recently established, high quality, ambitious domaine. 2020 was the first vintage.

Domaine des Bérioles – run by Jean Teissèdre, sister Sophie Roux and her husband Jérôme, this organic domaine is one of the best in the Upper Loire.

Domaine Grosbot-Barbara – Denis Barbara, the loose-limbed rock star of St-Pourçain, had the vision and determination to create the beautiful vineyard of Mont-Georges.

Côte Roannaise

Domaine Sérol – a model organic and biodynamic estate with vines up to 500m and an excellent range of wines, including a long-term partnership with the famous Troisgros family.

Domaine des Pothiers – now run by the dynamic Romain Paire who makes fine organic and biodynamic Côte Roannaise wines, including Riesling.

Côtes du Forez

Cave Verdier-Logel – the first serious independent producer here when the local cooperative was virtually the only producer in the area. It makes a fascinating range of wines including Riesling. Jacky Logel is one of the region's great characters.

Les Vins de la Madone, Gilles Bonnefoy – an excellent producer with some of the highest vines up to 600m, and biodynamic since 2009.

Côtes d'Auvergne

Benoît Montel – an excellent and consistent producer based in Riom just north of Clermont-Ferrand.

Desprat-Saint-Verny – a cooperative now owned and managed by the Desprat family. By far the largest Auvergne producer and a frequent medallist at the Decanter World Wine Awards.

15 Loire Volcanique wines to try



Benoît Montel, Bourrassol, Côtes d'Auvergne, Loire 2023

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This has a light golden colour with buttery aromas and a rich, concentrated, stone fruit character. There's a lovely seductive texture and a long finish, with enough acidity to avoid being cloying. It can be drunk young to enjoy the fresh fruit but also should have potential to age well....

Points 93



Vincent Giraudon, Quercus, Urfé, Loire, France 2022

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This Aligoté has attractive citrus aromas with a touch of vanilla, along with some butteriness from the oak. It is mouthfilling and quite richly textured before a long, refreshingly vibrant finish with marked acidity. It should age well. The Aligoté comes from a 0.65ha parcel planted on

Points 93

Domaine des Bérioles, Autochtone Tressallier, Val de Loire, Loire, France 2022

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Light golden coloured, this has ripe citrus notes with a hint of petrol, an attractive mouthfilling texture, vibrant fruit and a very long finish. This is a stylish, well-made wine with sufficient



concentration and ripe acidity to allow it to age well. It is made from 100% Tressallier, the local...

Points 92

Clos de Breuilly, Barnabooth, St-Pourçain, Loire, France 2022

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Light to medium plum coloured, Barnabooth has red fruit notes plus touches of toast. There's a lovely seductive, mouthfilling texture with the Pinot Noir character to the fore, a delicate ripe structure and a long refreshing finish. Very well balanced with ageing potential. This cuvée

Points 95



Domaine Désormière, Les Figollets, Côte Roannaise, Loire, France 2022

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Les Figollets has a deep, dense plum colour with persistent notes of black fruits including black cherry, rich in concentration and texture. This is a powerful, mouthfilling wine, with structure, ripe tannins and good length – impressive, with the potential to age. Les Figollets, from an east-

Points 94



Florent Thinon, Mayençat, Côte Roannaise, Loire, France 2022

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Mayençat has a dense, deep purple colour and is richly textured with a concentration of ripe black, spicy fruit and a touch of toast, attractive freshness in the long finish and without excess alcohol. From a south-facing parcel in the commune of Villefontaines in the south part of the Roannaise...

Points 94



Domaine des Pothiers, Clos du Puy, Côte Roannaise, Loire, France 2022

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This Gamay St-Romain has a mid-plum colour, red fruit notes with a touch of spice, a rich and seductive texture, good concentration of ripe fruit, seamless balance and a long, vibrant finish. Clos du Puy is an impressive, very well-made wine that can be drunk now but will keep a...

Points 93



Domaine Sérol, Chez Muron, Côte Roannaise, Loire, France 2022

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The mid-plum coloured Chez Muron has complex, rich aromas of red fruits. It is richly textured and concentrated, with ripe tannins, good length and delicious freshness – a mark of the Sérol wines. It can be drunk now but it's worth waiting as it may well improve further with another...

Points 93



Gilles Bonnefoy, Mémoire de Madone Gamay sur Volcan, Côtes du Forez, Loire, France 2023

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Mémoire de Madone has a youthful purple colour, dense in hue, and rich with black fruit aromas, especially black cherry. The palate is very concentrated, with a lovely rich mouthfilling texture: powerful and structured with a long finish. Can be drunk now but would be best kept at least for...

Points 93



Les Chemins de l'Arkose, Arkose Vieux Gamays, Côtes d'Auvergne, Loire, France 2022

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This old-vine Gamay has a deep plum colour with rich, spicy black fruit notes and an attractive, seductive texture thanks to well-integrated tannins. The vines are planted on a type of sedimentary sandstone called Arkose and date from 1940, with more added during the 1950s. The

Points 93



Domaine Vial, Bouthéran, Côte Roannaise, Loire, France 2023

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The mid-plum coloured Bouthéran has ripe black fruit notes, especially blackberry and black cherry. It is richly and seductively textured with concentration and length, and a light but ripe structure. The Gamay St-Romain grapes come from mainly sand and granite soils planted on the

Points 93



Cave Verdier-Logel, La Volcanique, Côtes du Forez, Loire, France 2023

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La Volcanique has a dense, youthful, dark plum colour, with soft black fruit notes. It is richly textured with delicate acidity and structure, a long finish and the potential to gain complexity in bottle. The grapes come from vines on the steep slopes of Sainte-Anne, a volcanic peak that dominates...

Points 92



Desprat Saint-Verny, L'Impromptu, Côtes d'Auvergne, Loire, France 2023

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Mid-plum colour with rich, concentrated black fruits as well as liquorice and chocolate notes. A powerful wine with an attractive mouthfilling texture and lingering, vibrant finish – and a good match with substantial winter dishes. This Gamay is a selection of parcels of old vines, aged in

Points 92



Domaine de Bellevue, Vieilles Vignes Pinot Noir & Gamay, St-Pourçain, Loire, France 2022

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This Vieilles Vignes has rich black fruit aromas, a soft concentrated palate, seductive texture and chocolate notes. It has considerable structure and length with slightly drying tannins at present, so needs decanting now but may soften with further time in bottle; impressive ageing potential.

Points 92



Domaine Grosbot-Barbara, Les Maltotes, St-Pourçain, Loire, France 2022

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This has black fruit aromas and is rich and concentrated, yet still youthful. It needs time or food, due to its considerable structure with currently quite noticeable tannins. But it's well balanced and carries its 14.5% alcohol well. Potential to age, so the score could rise to 93. This Pinot...

Points 91



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