

10/02/20

2,456 views | Feb 10, 2020, 04:13am

## Volcanic Wines Explode In Central France



**Tom Mullen** Contributor @

Travel

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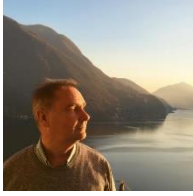
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Puy de Dôme volcano, Auvergne PIERRE SOISSONS

When people think of central France, few consider volcanoes. Yet geologically, the Auvergne region was—and may be again—a sizzling locale sculpted by spewing magma and spitting craters. Because volcanoes can create complex, mineral rich soils, vines that flourish over such once baking *terroir* can produce distinct and singular wine vintages.

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An effort is now underway to highlight the unique, volcanic related characteristics of wines from this region.

In January the first [Vinora World Volcanic Wine Fair](#) took place at the Vulcania theme park, northwest of the city of Clermont-Ferrand within the Auvergne. This focused on promoting regional wines, as well as on showcasing international vintages impacted by volcanic soils.



*Vineyard in the Auvergne, France - Arnaud Frich*

The creation of this Vinora wine fair was the brainchild of [Pierre Desprat](#)—a fifth generation wine producer (Desprat Saint-Verny) who now works with 60 regional vine growers in central France. Desprat is an Auvergne equivalent of Burgundy's Louis Jadot: he purchases grapes from small, select parcels to create wines with specific local identities. His impetus for Vinora came from learning about the escalating international interest in volcanic wines, as well as the

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2018 UNESCO designation of a strip of north-south dormant volcanoes—known as the [Chaîne des Puys](#)—as a World Heritage site.

Today In: [Lifestyle](#)

“Difference and diversity could be a real strength for the future of volcanic wines,” Desprat explained during the Vinora event.



*Vines older than 100 years in the Auvergne - RPress*

In his book [Volcanic Wines](#), master sommelier John Szabo, wrote, “...there is no such thing as ‘volcanic wine.’ There are, however, wines grown on volcanic soils.” He lists what can be common characteristics—including mouthwatering acidity and often savory characteristics (think minerality).

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If you consider France as a torso, Auvergne is located around the navel—a tad south of dead center. (Administratively, this and another region combined in 2016 to become ‘Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes’; yet many locals still refer to Auvergne as a distinct entity.)

In the early 1800’s the Auvergne was the third largest wine production region in France. By between about 1860 and 1890, Auvergne supplied the majority of wines that slaked the thirst of Parisian restaurant diners. These were shipped northward via the Allier river. Decline in production resulted from factors that included the ravages of the phylloxera louse (which wiped out two-thirds of regional vine production), the propagation of trains for transporting commercial goods (which allowed Parisians to purchase wines from alternate regions—such as Provence—at equally affordable prices), women abandoning vineyards during the First World War to provide other essential labor, and the growth of the Michelin tire company—which provided alternatives to vineyard toil by offering reliable wages and medical care.



*Auvergne landscape in January* -Tom Mullen

Pierre Desprat works with his daughter Léa—a similarly bright eyed, energetic and driven individual—who is their company export manager. After receiving her MBA in New York and working for an engineering company in Paris, Léa returned to the family business. She summarized the genesis of Vinora as moving rapidly from ‘idea to association to event.’

“Our idea was to create Vinora based on the volcanic typicity of wines,” she recalled. “I think that common to volcanic wines is minerality, a little bit of salt. Here we have very continental

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weather with cold winters. Our wines are naturally very well balanced. Vines are quite healthy because we are in the mountains, and there's not much disease.”



*Vineyards in the Auvergne - Arnaud Frich*

The French associate the Auvergne region with cheeses (Cantal, Saint Nectaire, Bleu d’Auvergne, Salers and Fourme d’Ambert) as well as politicians (think Valéry Giscard d’Estaing or Georges Pompidou). There is also a local world-renowned rugby team, distinct cheesy potatoes known as *truffade* and a museum that highlights the 52 B.C. ‘[battle of Gergovie](#)’ when troops of Celtic chief Vercingétorix defeated the Roman army of Julius Caesar. This sparsely populated, lush, rolling countryside is also known for volcanoes. Rich and complex geologic history here dates from hundreds of millions to some six thousand years ago—when the last regional volcano erupted.

While exploring local peaks and crags, [volcanologist Patrick Marcel](#) explained how volcanoes shaped this landscape.

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*Puy de Sancy volcanic peaks, Auvergne -Getty*

Some 350 million years ago, colliding subsurface tectonic plates created a mountain range, but those peaks eventually weathered and eroded away, leaving only an elevated land plateau. 35 million years ago, new forces buckled this region again, tugging it apart as a rift valley which then flooded with seawater. In time, sediments built up on this sea floor bed, volcanoes spewed again and a series of peaks emerged. These define what is now the north-south running Limagne fault line, just west of the city of Clermont-Ferrand. Between 95,000 and 6,000 years ago, a parallel series of ‘monogenic’ volcanoes—the Chaîne des Puys—rose parallel to, and west of, the Limagne fault. This chain of dormant peaks runs 20 miles long and 2.5 miles wide (32 by 4 kilometers).

The Auvergne also includes ‘inverse slopes.’ These are best characterized by an east-west chunk of terrain named Montagne de la Serre, located northeast of the lake town of Aydat. Three million years ago, molten magma flowed through a valley and then solidified. Over time, the surrounding clay-limestone peaks eroded away, leaving the tougher basaltic remnants of that flow to become the highest features in local terrain. In other words—what was once a valley transformed into a peak, hence its ‘inversion’ over time.

Such squiggles of complex geology are written in local soils, which can impact the taste of regional wines.

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*Clermont-Ferrand Cathedral Auvergne -Getty*

Wines from [five appellations](#) within the Auvergne (Madargue, Châteaugay, Chanturgue, Corent and Boudes) are made predominantly from Gamay, Pinot Noir and Chardonnay grapes. Some 90% of wines produced are red. Other grapes planted within the Auvergne include Syrah, Pinot Gris, Sauvignon Blanc and Gewürztraminer. Most of these wines are influenced by four rock/rock formation types associated with dormant local volcanoes. These are 'peperite,' basalt, pumice, and pozzolan.

To the north of the city Clermont-Ferrand, some 3,000 residents live in a commune named Châteauguy. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, wine production was so prevalent there that over 200 wine cellars were excavated under the plateau. Some include stone stairways leading up to a hilly road known as 'Rue des Caves,' or the street of cellars.

This region was once bombarded by fragments from a now vanished volcano (located where the Michelin tire testing course is now situated). Fragments spewed 25 miles (40 kilometers) into the sky before they rained down again. Today's remnants of that cataclysm include 'peperite'—not a rock, but a geological formation that includes shards of basalt within a clay-limestone matrix. Fragments can resemble black peppercorns, hence the name of the formation.

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*View from the Gergovie plateau -Tom Mullen*

The influence of peperite can be glaringly apparent on wines from Châteauguy. La Damas Noir Syrah from Pierre Goigoux includes peppery saline smoothness, while his Les Amandiers Rouge is a black peppery beauty. Peperite also appears to influence aromas on the Gamay/Pinot Noir blend from Domaine Auzolle—which are gritty and earthy. Some Domaine Miolanne wines are made from grapes grown further south on the Gergovie Plateau—also influenced by peperite. These include Ephémère Gamay, which has distinct (and attractive) petrol and pepper aromas.

Another 20 miles (35 kilometers) south, within the Cotes d’Auvergne general wine appellation, natural walls raising from the soil include pumice—feathery light rock that once blasted out of a volcano. Vines located here push through some 25 vertical feet (seven meters) of pumice soils. Associated wines include Domaine Miolanne Volcane Rouge—a 50/50 Gamay Pinot Noir blend that lacks distinct aromas but includes a taste with signature lightness.



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*Wall that includes pumice volcanic rocks south of Clermont-Ferrand -Tom Mullen*

Another 20 miles (35 kilometers) further south is the southernmost Auvergne appellation, clustered around the town of Boudes—itsself a huddle of orange colored homes. Some vineyards perch 1,900 to 2,300 feet (600 to 700 meters) above sea level on grounds coated with basalt—rich in iron and magnesium. These black rocks soak up solar radiation during the day and re-radiate this as warmth to vines each night. Such soils impact local wine aromas. Volcanick Chardonnay from Domaine Pélissier includes fine floral aromas; Nymphéa Pinot Noir from Domaine Sauvats has slick and hefty peppery aromas, while their Météor Gamay includes pungent acidic aromas.

After tasting dozens of Auvergne wines produced from vines grown on volcanic soils, a few observations can be made.

- These wines display a wide range of characteristics. For whites—from precise and flinty to wide mouthed and candy sweet; for reds—from fiery and textured to subtle but gorgeous Burgundian style beauties.
- Many of these wines have subdued, often virtually absent, aromas. This accords with the historical reputation of Auvergne wines as being well-balanced, but light.

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*Vineyard near Boudes -Tom Mullen*

- The taste of these wines is—generally—not showy, flamboyant or power driven, but relatively gentle and unobtrusive (think of a tame Beaujolais).
- Some wines include aromas and/or tastes that are peppery, spicy, salty, and which may include mildly discernible earthy/gritty textures—while also lush with fruit.
- Values are excellent. Local retail prices per bottle for these Auvergne wines generally range from 4.00 to 15.00 Euros (\$4.50 to \$17.00).

## **Tasting Notes.**

The first segment below includes outstanding wines (which would subjectively score 93 points and above on a 100-point scale); the subsequent section includes classic wines of solid quality (and value).

Prices are local (Auvergne) cellar retail prices (in Euros; also converted to U.S. dollar equivalents).

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*Vulcania center where the Vinora fair took place in Auvergne -Tom Mullen*

All wines include a ‘Value Scoring’ based on subjective tasting scores combined with local retail prices, formulated using [a proprietary algorithm](#). Value scores can be ‘Superlative (♫♫♫)’, ‘Excellent (♫♫)’ or ‘Good (♫).’

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## Outstanding Wines

[Desprat Saint-Verny](#). Chardonnay 809. 2019. €8.50/\$9.45 [Superlative Value 🎵🎵🎵]

Chardonnay and Muscat, cloned together on the vine and grown over clay-limestone soils. Fermented in stainless steel. Powerhouse aromas—a grapefruit/tropical fruit explosion. Sweetly inviting, saliva inducing surprise. Wow!

**Desprat Saint-Verny. Terre & Laves Chardonnay. 2018. €6.10/\$6.80 [Superlative Value 🎵🎵🎵]**

Includes a full floral and buttery nose, even though no oak is used. Beautiful in the mouth—a full meal that includes apples and oatmeal. A bargain.



*Pierre Desprat and daughter Léa of Desprat Saint-Verny wines- Tom Mullen*

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**Domaine de la Tour de Pierre. Magma Red. 2018. €8.00/\$8.90 [Superlative Value 🎵🎵🎵]**

This 100% Gamay wine is made from grapes that grow over basalt soils, and is matured both in tanks and also in two-year old barrels for up to nine months. Aromas of chocolate chips and lemon. Fiery red fruit and textured in the mouth. A juicy beauty.

**Domaine de la Tour de Pierre. Magma Chardonnay. 2018. €8.00/\$8.90 [Superlative Value 🎵🎵🎵]**

Grapes grow over arkose soils (deteriorated granite). The wine is aged in two-year-old barrels for 4 to 6 months. Brilliant aromas of white flowers and fruit.



*Winemaker Pierre Deshors of La Tour de Pierre - Tom Mullen*

**Domaine Sauvat. Nymphéa Pinot Noir. 2018. €10.00/\$11.10 [Excellent Value 🎵🎵]**

Wild yeast and oak fermented Pinot Noir. Strong and slick peppery nose and a hefty gorgeous Burgundian-like taste.

**Domaine Sauvat. Météor Gamay. 2018. €13.00/\$14.45 [Good Value 🎵]**

This foot-trod Gamay wine is fermented using wild yeast and matured in stainless steel tanks. Pungent and acidic aromas with a hint of raspberries.

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*Winemaker Annie Sauvat of Domaine Sauvat -Tom Mullen*

**Domaine Sauvat. Anthéus. 2018. €10.00/\$11.10 [Excellent Value 🎵🎵]**

This 100% Chardonnay is made from grapes that grow on clay-limestone soils. Wild yeasts are used to make this wine which includes huge aromas of grapefruit. In the mouth it is slightly smoky and oaky, though light.

**Domaine Gougis. Noces Volcaniques (white). 2017. €14.00/\$15.55**

Thirty-year-old Chardonnay grapes are grown over 75/25 basalt/clay-limestone soils and the wine is aged in non-new Burgundian barrels for 10 to 12 months. Delicate floral aromas and tastes with precise minerality; slightly salty and with a peppery snap in the mouth. A precision darling.

**Domaine Gougis. Puy de Joie. 2018. €14.00/\$15.55 [Good Value 🎵]**

Made primarily from Gamay with a little Pinot Noir from grapes grown over basaltic soils. Matured for 12 months in non-new oak. Indistinct aromas, full mouthed taste—think blueberries and chocolate.

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*Winemaker Jean-Baptiste Gougis of Auvergne - Tom Mullen*

**Domaine Pélissier. Vieilles Vignes Cuvée Prestige. €9.50/\$10.55 [Excellent Value 🎵🎵]**

This 70/30 Gamay/Pinot Noir is made from old vines grown in the southern Boudes region on volcanic soils. Grown on multi-level slopes, fermented whole cluster and aged for 18 months in Tronçais oak. This is a slim Beaujolais style wine with a well-balanced, velvety, meaty streak.

**Les Detours de Pierre. Pinot CCHIO. 2018. €7.50/\$8.35 [Superlative Value 🎵🎵🎵]**

Pinot Noir. Aromas that include salt, sultanas and raspberries. Taste that is peppery and balanced, easily approachable and enjoyable.

**Heritage Volcanic. Chardonnay. 2019. €12.60/\$13.99 [Good Value 🎵]**

Matured in stainless steel and 20% in barrels on fine lees. Crisp tropical fruits on the nose, bright and fresh as a Sauvignon Blanc. Lime and kiwi fruits in the mouth.

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*Winemaker Etienne Rachez of Heritage Volcanic wines - Tom Mullen*

**Domaine Auzolle. Chanturgue (red). 2017. €8.00/\$8.90 [Excellent Value 🎵🎵]**

100% Gamay from grapes grown on clay-limestone soils. Aromas—corn, dill and mint. Delivers a taste of plump red fruit.

**Clos Luern. Cuvée Tigerno. 2018. €11.00/\$12.25 [Excellent Value 🎵🎵]**

This 100% Gamay is made from grapes grown on soils with high limestone and basalt content and is matured in 160-liter clay amphorae. Quiet nose, robust body. Light Beaujolais style fruity taste.

**Desprat Saint-Verny. Basalte. 2017. €14.00/\$15.55**

Made from limited 100-year old yields of Gamay grapes grown on basaltic slopes on the Gergovie hillsides. Oak matured for 12 to 15 months. Full cherry nose, mature and well-balanced taste with Burgundian finesse.





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*Julien Maurs and Elinor Roux of Desprat Saint-Verny wines - Tom Mullen*

**[Domaine de la Croix Arpin](#). Les Amandiers Blanc. 2018. €8.90/\$9.90 [Excellent Value 🎵🎵]**

100% Chardonnay made from grapes grown over clay-limestone. Almost indistinct nose, subtle hit of grapefruit aromas. After a few minutes opens up with aromas of salt and flint, mint and eucalyptus. Beautifully crisp and creamy in the mouth.

**Domaine de la Croix Arpin. Les Amandiers Rouge. 2018. €7.10/\$7.90 [Superlative Value 🎵🎵🎵]**

Mostly Gamay with a little Pinot Noir. Grapes grown over basaltic peperite soils at Châteauguy. Barrel fermented for three weeks. A spicy beauty.

**Desprat Saint-Verny. La Légendaire. 2017.**

This Chardonnay is made from choice parcels grown above volcanic soils. Matured for 12 months in oak and six months in bottles kept in mountain cellars. Wispy oaky aromas; well-structured and with tastes that include acorn and butter.

**Pierre Goigoux. Chanturgue. 2018. €7.10/\$7.90 [Superlative Value 🎵🎵🎵]**

From this Gamay and Pinot Noir blend, hefty aromas include cherries, pine nuts, eucalyptus. Textured and complex tastes. Light and balanced with a memorable aftertaste. It definitely asks you to drink more.



*Winemaker Pierre Goigoux of Domaine de la Croix Arpin - Tom Mullen*

**[Domaine Miolanne](#). Ephémère Gamay. 2018. €7.10/\$7.90 [Superlative Value 🎵🎵🎵]**

This 100% Gamay is made from vines that grow on basalt terraces on the Gergovie plateau. It spends up to three months aging in non-new Burgundian oak. Perfume comes from peperite

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volcanic soils. A very distinct wine—even balanced and bold—with aromas of paprika, pepper, petrol and salt. Ringing aftertaste that includes cherries, eucalyptus and a hint of cumin.

**Domaine Miolanne. Volcane Rouge. 2018. €7.60/\$8.45 [Superlative Value 🎵🎵🎵]**

This 50/50 Gamay/Pinot Noir blend from Jean Baptiste Deroche is made from grapes grown on volcanic ash and pumice soils. Indistinct aromas, light in the mouth with a taste of cherries and caraway seeds.



*Winemaker Jean Baptiste Deroche of Domaine Miolanne - Tom Mullen*

Classic Wines.

**Domaine de la Tour de Pierre. Lauriers de 16 Ares. 2018. €12.00/\$13.35**

A 100% Gamay wine made from parcel-specific selected grapes, including from 120-year old vines. Carbonic maceration, with malolactic fermentation in barrels. Light, Pinot Noir like aromas. Tastes include raspberries and almonds.

**Domaine de la Tour de Pierre. Corent Rosé. 2019. €6.50/\$7.25 [Excellent Value 🎵🎵]**

From the hill of Corent, this 100% Gamay is made from 30 to 40-year-old vines that grow over basaltic soils. Candied aromas; crackling light in the mouth.

**Domaine Sauvat. Indigène Chardonnay. 2019. €4.00/\$4.45 [Superlative Value 🎵🎵🎵]**

Grapes grown over clay-limestone soils and fermented in stainless steel tanks using wild yeasts. Perfumed aromas of light tropical fruits.

**Domaine Sauvat. Demoiselles Gamay. 2018. €7.00/\$7.80 [Superlative Value 🎵🎵🎵]**

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Partial carbonic maceration used to produce this wine. Indistinct nose, but a taste of juicy blackberries. Unobtrusive heft.

**Domaine Pélissier. Cuvée X Chardonnay. 2018. €9.50/\$10.55 [Excellent Value 🎵🎵]**

Made from 100-year-old vines that grow over limestone/basalt soils. Fine floral nose, fleshy in the mouth.

**Domaine Pélissier. Volcanick. 2018. €9.50/\$10.55 [Good Value 🎵]**

This 100% Chardonnay is made from 100-year old grapes that grow over limestone/basalt soils. It is matured four months on lees. Full, open, fruity taste with slight texture.



*Winemaker David Pélissier - Tom Mullen*

**Heritage Volcanic. Pinot Noir/Gamay. 2019. €10.80/\$11.99 [Good Value 🎵]**

This 80/20 Pinot Noir/Gamay blend is made from grapes grown over the oldest segments of Chaînes des Puys volcanoes. Matured in concrete tanks and 20% in barrels. Aromas of strawberries and plum jam and a light, balanced taste.

**Heritage Volcanic. Pépérite. 2019. €5.80/\$6.45 [Excellent Value 🎵🎵]**

An 80/20 blend of Pinot Noir/Gamay. Acorns, holly, orange rind and heather on the nose. Chewy as a Grenache in the mouth with a juicy, tannic finish.

**Clos Luern. Cuvée L. 2018. €13.50/\$14.99**

100% Gamay made from vines at least 50 years old. This 'peperite' volcanic rock formation influenced wine is aged in polymer eggs for eight months. Has floral aromas and is a light zipping zinger in the mouth.

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*Winemaker Arnaud Dupouyet of Clos Luern wines - Tom Mullen*

**Domaine Auzolle. Côtes d’Auvergne Red. 2018. €6.00/\$6.70 [Superlative Value 🎵🎵🎵]**

100% Gamay. Neutral nose. Bright and well balanced in the mouth.

**Domaine Auzolle. Le Clos de Amoureux. 2017. €10.00/\$11.10 [Good Value 🎵]**

70/30 blend of Gamay and Pinot Noir that ages in steel tanks for nine months. Gritty, earthy aromas and tastes that include hibiscus, acorns and treacle.

**Desprat Saint-Verny. L’Impromptu. 2018. €8.50/\$9.44 [Excellent Value 🎵🎵]**

This 100% Gamay is made from select parcels grown over basalt soils at an altitude of 1,100 feet (350 meters). Matured in tanks for nine months. Cherry, cranberries and jellybean aromas and a taste that includes mint, paprika, licorice and cherries.

**Desprat Saint-Verny. Corent Rosé. 2019. €6.50/\$7.25 [Superlative Value 🎵🎵🎵]**

This 70/30 Gamay/Pinot Noir is made from vines growing over basalt and pozzolan soils. Includes a smoky nose; structured and silky in the mouth.

**Desprat Saint-Verny. Le Pinot Noir. 2018. €5.50/\$6.15 [Excellent Value 🎵🎵]**

Wispy cherry nose, slightly and attractively gritty in the mouth.

**Domaine de la Croix Arpin. Cerise Sûr le Gateau. €8.90/\$9.90 [Good Value 🎵]**

Pinot Noir grown over peperite volcanic rock formation soils. Quite the electric nose—with tastes that include cherries and papayas. Balanced and easy drinking.

**St. Roch de Chadeuf. 1991 The Lost Vineyard Chardonnay. 2018.**

Lemon and hibiscus aromas, while unobtrusive and attractive in the mouth.

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