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WOMEN AND WINE

Virgin Wines

WORDS BY CATHERINE COOPER
 PHOTOS BY ANNA BATCHELOR

Fine wine and women are a heady combination, which may be why L'Ecole du Vin has set up the first, women-only sommelier school

WINE-MAKING AND TASTING MAY TRADITIONALLY BE CONSIDERED A MALE PRESERVE BUT THE EVIDENCE IS THAT THIS IS NO LONGER THE CASE. Today, 70% of wine in the UK is bought by women. Moving with the times, L'Ecole du Vin, in Bordeaux—set up in 1990 to educate the public about Bordeaux wine—has recently added Women in Wine to its list of studies. The course also focuses on the contribution women are now making to wine-making throughout the historic Bordeaux region.



Women in Wine is led by L'Ecole de Vin's Wendy Narby, an English woman who has lived in Bordeaux for many years with her wine-maker husband.

"Wine-making is traditionally male-dominated," she says. "And we wanted to show that women are now doing some amazing things in the trade. Women generally just want to learn a little and drink some nice wines whereas some of the men who have signed up here are more interested in showing off their knowledge. Sometimes the women are professionals working in male-dominated environments looking for a break from that, others are mothers having a break from their families. Some just fancy a girly holiday."



The course begins at Château du Seuil, an 18th-century property owned by Welsh-born Nikki Allison, an ex-family doctor.

Wendy starts with a short introductory presentation about the various areas of Bordeaux and about how the soil and conditions (terroir) effect what sort of wine comes from which area. She then moves on to the complicated appellation system used to classify the different wines, and talks about the types of wine that come from different regions. She explains that almost all

Bordeaux wines are blends of different types of grapes with the reds being mainly cabernet sauvignon, Merlot and Cabernet Franc. Approximately 89% of wine grown in Bordeaux is red. Nikki then leads a tour of her vats and barrels, which helps put it all in context and there is a chance to try the château's wines at the various stages of their production—starting as a sweet grape juice through to something slightly fizzy and eventually a young wine. The finished wines are tasted during dinner at the château.

THE COURSE GIVES EAGER TASTERS AND WINE GURU-WANNABES A CHANCE TO TOUR SOME OF THE MOST FAMOUS CHÂTEAUX AND VINEYARDS OF THE REGION. In the Sauternes region Laure de Lambert des Granges-Compeyrot manages her family's property Château Sigelas Rabaud, growing grapes to make the sweet wine typical of the region. Grapes destined for this type of wine don't look like grapes you might see in supermarkets. To make Sauternes, grapes have to be afflicted with noble rot, which makes them look more like raisins but gives them an incredible sweetness. Laure, who also teaches on the courses, talks through the making of Sauternes, which is more



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labour-intensive than traditional wine. The grapes have to be picked at exactly the right stage of noble-rottenness, they have to be picked by hand and cannot all be harvested at the same time. Some years they may have to harvest up to seven times.

The château system of grading wine is totally separate from the rest of the region.



In St Emilion the wines are regraded every ten years, whereas in most of the rest of the regions they have remained pretty much unchanged since 1855.

Chateau Franc Hayne is a St Emilion Grand Cru château owned and run by Griet Laviale who also employs a young, female wine-maker, Laurence Ters.

Wine-making is state-of-the-art here with machines that pre-sort the grapes by measuring their sugar content before they go to be hand-sorted. High-tech systems even monitor the temperature in all the vats which are controlled by a computer. Once the wine is in the barrels, however, it is stored in underground tunnels along which, in days gone by, you could have walked through, for around 150km.

The Médoc, in the north of the region, is the powerhouse of Bordeaux and 60 of the 61 classified properties (the top dogs) come from this region. Twenty nine year-old, ex-Londoner Mélanie Tesseron came to help run the family château Pontet-Canet, one of the most beautiful in the Médoc region. Mélanie, who claims to have known nothing about wine when she arrived, now helps run the place with her uncle, and agrees that the humble and natural world of wine-making is a refreshing change from her hectic London lifestyle: "We've got something special here, we have to keep it special."

L'Ecole du Vin's Women in Wine Course is a great place to start for women who would love to learn more about wine in a friendly and informal environment. There is no classroom-learning, all the teaching is done by wandering around vineyards and tasting wine. Plus, there is the draw of excellent lunches and dinners in beautiful surroundings. The course leaves you with a good basic knowledge of the process of Bordeaux wine-making and an insight into how the wine of the region is judged and classified. But one of the most important messages, which was reiterated along the way, is that what is really important is not whether a wine is a Grand Cru, or whether or not you can tell what its top notes are, it's all about what you enjoy drinking.



L'Ecole du Vin's next courses are 25th-27th April and 3rd-5th October. €795 per person, including meals, wine and accommodation.

www.ecole.vins-bordeaux.fr

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