



# WINE WORTH ITS SALT

Grapevines can benefit from the sea. Here are a few coastal regions that produce some interesting wines.



**B**ELIEVE it or not, sun, sea and sand once saved the wine industry. In the late 19th Century, grapevines all over France suddenly started dying. Scientists were baffled and could not explain what was causing the disease and how it was spreading. The French government was so concerned that it offered the sum of 300,000 French francs – equivalent to more than RM5mil today – to anyone who could solve the problem.

Not long after, the culprit was found. It was a tiny, pale yellow aphid-like insect that fed on the roots and leaves of grapevines. The insect was called phylloxera, and it had caused an “epidemic” which had destroyed most of the vineyards in Europe. However, some vineyards, mainly those in sandy areas and close to the sea, were spared.

The reason soon became apparent – the spread of phylloxera was slowed in dry, hot climates and especially when vines are planted in deep sand by the sea, as the pests cannot survive in dry sand. Later, imported phylloxera-resistant American rootstocks formed the basis of a new replanting of vines throughout France and the rest of Europe – vigneron took the underground part of the American vine or stump and grafted on or joined it with the European vine bud.

Today, a wine produced on the sandy beaches of Provence’s Bouches-du-Rhône, which extends from the Gard Coast to the waterfront village of Saintes Maries de la Mer, commemorates the historical event yearly – reminding oenophiles that the sand, sun and sea breezes were major deterrents of phylloxera. The wine produced here is aptly called “Vins des Sables” or “wine of the sand”.

The sea has played its part in winemaking in many other ways. For the Bordeaux region, proximity to the sea brings moderating effects. Instead of a continental climate, Bordeaux wine regions near the coast enjoy a maritime climate. Essentially, it is a macroclimate that is directly influenced by the proximity to large bodies of water that act as heat sinks. Water absorbs heat during summer and slowly cools in the fall. Cold air that blows across seas will tend to warm vineyards in winter, whilst hot summers are moderated by cool sea breezes, thanks to the large mass

of the Atlantic ocean.

For the Bordelaise, the sea and oceans meant much more. In olden days, the rivers along which many wineries and chateaux were located, led out to the sea and so, facilitated the wine trade – something neighbouring vineyards in the south-west of France did not enjoy and until latter-day transportation by rail, had a wine industry that was less developed than Bordeaux. Now we know another reason for Bordeaux’s success.

Today, many other wine regions around the world – California, the southern coastlands of South Africa, and the Margaret River in Australia – have claims to the moderating effects of the sea contributing to better wines.

No one is as fervent in attributing the sea’s positive influence on wine’s terroir and taste than Robert Mann, winemaker at Cape Mentelle, Margaret River, Australia. To understand why, head to the Margaret River region. Here, approximately 10km from the ocean, you will find some of Cape Mentelle’s vines, growing amongst Marri trees on gravel soils in the Wilyabrup subregion.

“The combination of cooling afternoon south-westerly sea breezes, and soils make for the ideal conditions to produce opulent Cabernet wines with black fruit flavours and textures,” Mann shares. “However, if you are seeking Cabernets with fine velvety tannins and that bring fruit characters, look no further than wines from the Wallcliffe subregion. The rainfall is slightly higher than Wilyabrup with higher corresponding cloud cover. Not only that, the prevailing afternoon south-westerly sea breezes are stronger and cooler and this sub-area and grapes often ripen up to two weeks later.”

As I sipped, sampled and savoured the various wines (single vineyard and subregional) from Cape Mentelle, I began to appreciate that the influence of the cooling sea breezes of the Margaret River play a major role in the taste of wines in the region and subregion – but also, how other factors such as soil, rainfall and human intervention work together to give wines a unique character. If the Margaret River regional wines already have an identifiable signature taste, wine lovers can expect even more – the subregional and even single

vineyard wines from the Margaret River, now exhibit unique characters.

I found another advocate of the sea in California, north of Fort Bragg. At the Pacific Star Winery, located by the sea, water has become very much part of a process of wine-making. Winemaker and owner Sally Ottoson, claims the unique location brings a certain kind of magic to the wines. “Waves crash into sea caves under the cellar, its vibrations naturally filtering wine from its sediment. Salt from sea air deposits on barrels, accelerating osmosis while creating viscous and dense wines.” Not only that, visitors to the cellar, at the right time, are treated to a special sighting of Grey whales spouting and breaching just a few hundred feet from the cellar door on their migratory route to and from the Gulf of California!

In Italy’s deep southern wine region Puglia, I came across vines growing on fertile lands of a peninsula that is flanked by the Adriatic and Ionian seas. Here, the hot sunny Mediterranean days are cooled by ocean breezes of the evening and the result is rich characterful wines with a certain suave. And I was even surprised to find white and pink wines in abundance – all fresh and crisp – not at all something you might expect from the warm south region of Italy!

A most interesting experience I had with wine took place when I was visiting Brittany, in the north-west region of France and was looking for wine to accompany the regional speciality, oysters. I came across some bottles of Muscadet, at the local wine store. Sitting next to the Muscadet were some unlabelled bottles of the same – only these unlabelled bottles had been placed in the oyster beds (under the sea) for maturation. Naturally, intrigued, I bought both for a comparison. I found that the Muscadet that had been matured in the sea tasted fresher, plumper, fruitier and seemed to have a longer finish. Needless to say, it was the perfect wine to wash down the raw oysters. Such is the influence of the sea!

- 1 At the Cape Mentelle winery, grapes are hand-picked.
- 2 People at work on the opening day of the harvests at the Muscadet vineyards of the Louvetrie domain in Hays Fouassiere, western France.
- 3 Robert Mann is chief winemaker and estate director of Cape Mentelle, a founding winery of Australia’s Margaret River wine region.



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