

French experiment in eco vineyards

HERE'S a lot of noise about organic viticulture, but in the case of one of France's major wine regions it's wildly disproportionate to the vineyard area. Of the Loire Valley's 68,000 hectares, just 3.5 per cent have formal organic certification.

But that figure is misleading. Time and again, as I talked to vignerons during the region's 2010 wine fair, they said they followed organic practices but asking for formal acknowledgement was a step too far. Bad weather, pests and diseases always threatened: if there was a particularly bad year, they needed to resort to treatments forbidden under organic rules to save their crop. Certainly, that displays less than total green commitment, but in business terms it's understandable.

There is one area along the Loire, however, where there is 100 per cent support for a green initiative. For the first time in any French appellation *contrôle* area, every grower in Saumur-

Champigny is committed to a biodiversity programme, particularly aimed at eliminating vine pests by encouraging natural predators.

It's the beginning, says Saumur-Champigny producers, of a movement towards sustainable grape-growing "to preserve our terroir and to provide for our future generations of vignerons".

And the syndicate has even employed a professional ecologist, Marie-Anne Simonneau, to oversee the project. She reports substantial progress. Some 20km of new hedgerows have been planted to encourage the sought-after predators. A network of weather stations and traps is gathering information and feeding it to the 120 syndicate members so that,

rather than spraying randomly, they treat only when pest and fungal problems are likely. Inventories of the plants growing between the

rows of vines and insects present are building the biodiversity picture. The approach is gentle, but comprehensive. "We need

everyone to make a very small effort," Simonneau told me. And she's cautious, insisting that the results need to be assessed carefully: "There could also be the risk of bringing in more pests..."

But so far all is going well and wine tourists can see the results on guided vineyard hikes (two are scheduled, for July 20 and August 5, from Dampierre-sur-Loire – have details). But what of the wine, the purpose of all this effort? Saumur-Champigny's 1,500 hectares of vineyards

run inland from the southern bank of the river, in a triangle bounded by Saumur, Montsoreau and Saint-Cyr-en-Bourg. This is red wine country – from the cabernet franc grape, aromatic with red fruits, a leafy

blackcurrant character, a touch of flowers and spice.

While location and the grower's preferences determine whether the wine is light or more generous, fruit flavours should be rich and tannins silky. There can be greenness too, but that is reducing as more attention is paid to ripeness at harvest time. Saumur-Champigny can age gracefully, but at any age – served cool – is a perfect summer wine.

Recommendations include Domaine de Nerleux 2008 (£9.70, from RJS) on the South Bank, www.rjs.uk.com, Chateau de Targe 2007 (£10, buy two bottles save £2, Majestic), Domaine de la Croix de Chantres 2008 (£10, Waitrose) and Chateau de Hureau Turfe 2009 (£12.90, Haynes Hanson & Clarke in SW3, www.hhandc.co.uk).

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