

Vintage philosophy



With a host of Paris restaurants expanding their cellars, finding your way around French wines has never been easier. **John Brunton** offers an insider's guide to the best venues

Paris is renowned for being a gastronomic paradise, but France is just as proud of its wines as its cuisine, and the City of Light has a stellar selection of restaurants whose wine lists and maze-like cellars are just as big attractions as the cooking.

This is an opportunity to discover not just famous names of Burgundy and Bordeaux – Petrus, Romanée-Conti, Château Lafite – but emerging wines from the Languedoc, the Loire, Corsica, Côtes-du-Rhône and Alsace. Wine lovers can often arrange for a tour around the cellars before a meal, while some restaurants organise tastings and the chance to meet winemakers themselves.

As times change and clients no longer order numerous bottles of wine with their meals, so new trends are emerging in restaurants where wines by the glass are offered on a far wider selection; where the sommelier could propose a glass of Puligny-Montrachet served from a jeroboam, and then, rather than choosing from a boring-looking list of half-bottles, he may suggest opening a good vintage and decant half of it into a beautiful crystal carafe.

DROUANT

16-18 place Gaillon, 75002 Paris; tel +33 142 651 516; drouant.com Drouant is where France's equivalent of the Booker, Le Prix Goncourt, is decided each year. But recently it has been in the

news for a different reason. Famed chef Antoine Westermann shocked the world of haute cuisine by resigning the prized three Michelin stars of his Strasbourg restaurant to come to the capital and revitalise Drouant into a fashionable, reasonably priced venue. Fortunately, he couldn't bear to part with his wine cellar, and brought an incredible collection of 16,000 bottles with him. And each Saturday you can reserve for "lunch with a winemaker", when a "vigneron" will present his latest vintages.

LE CARRE DES FEUILLANTS

14 rue de Castiglione, 75001 Paris; tel +33 142 868 282; carredesfeuillants.fr

Alain Dutournier is one of those rare chefs who is as passionate about wine as he is about cooking; he is equally at home opening bottles for a tasting in the cellar of Le Carré des Feuillants as he is toiling over the stove in his kitchen. For 20 years his restaurant has been a firm Parisian favourite, but for some inexplicable reason it has been snubbed by the Michelin Guide, which refuses to give him the ultimate recognition of a third Michelin star. For a truly memorable occasion, his wine cellar can be rented for a meal, while for those not wanting the full gastronomic experience of Le Carré, he has also opened a casual bistro, Pinxo (tel +33 140 207 200), just around the corner in the Renaissance

Paris Vendôme hotel, where the 120 bottles on the wine list are sensibly displayed by price, starting at around £19.

LA TOUR D'ARGENT

15-17 quai de la Tournelle, 75005 Paris; tel +33 143 542 331; tourdargent.com

The legendary La Tour d'Argent is as much a Parisian monument as a restaurant, with a history stretching back to 1582, and a wine cellar of 400,000 bottles that is worth over £11 million and acknowledged as not just the greatest in France but arguably the world. Call before and head sommelier, the amiable David Ridgway, can arrange an unforgettable tour of this subterranean labyrinth. And it might be wise to ask his advice on which wine to order, as La Tour's phenomenal wine list runs to 9,000 references and weighs over 6kg.

LE CINQ

Hotel George V, 31 avenue George V, 75008 Paris; tel +33 149 527 000; fourseasons.com/paris

When the Four Seasons carried out their £20-million makeover of the George V nine years ago, Eric Beaumard, already one of the world's most renowned sommeliers, persuaded the owners to put aside a cool £1.5 million for him to create what is now one of the city's finest wine collections, with over 50,000 bottles. Wine lovers dining



in Le Cinq restaurant can call before and request a tour of the cellars, which is the perfect complement to the gourmet cuisine prepared by chef Philippe Legendre.

L'ATELIER DE JOEL ROBUCHON

Hotel Pont-Royal, 5-7 rue Montalembert, 75007 Paris; tel +33 142 225 656; joel-robuchon.com

Situated in the elegant left bank Pont-Royal Hotel, this gourmet but decidedly casual restaurant has an outstanding selection of more than 350 wines, with over 35 available by the glass. Joel Robuchon officially retired as a chef over ten years ago – and you'll never see him in the kitchen – but when he opened L'Atelier it launched a completely new concept of diners sitting around an "open kitchen" that has been copied all over the world. And now, just across the road from L'Atelier, he has opened La Cave de Joel Robuchon, where wine enthusiasts can stop off for a tasting and select some wine to take home from this 15,000-bottle cellar.

WILLI'S WINE BAR

13 rue des Petits Champs, 75001 Paris; tel +33 142 610 509; williswinebar.com

Mark Williamson, the doyen of British restaurateurs in Paris, has been going strong for 26 years, and Willi's, his wine bar/restaurant, is brilliant for meeting up with

Brit and American expats, or local Parisian wine lovers. The cuisine is classic French – especially the irresistible crème brûlée – while the wine list runs to 250 vintages from the 7,000 bottles in the cellar. This is the place to taste Côtes-du-Rhône wines, with over 30 different Côte Rôtie producers. Williamson also owns the rather chicer Macéo restaurant next door.

CAFE DE LA PAIX

Hotel Paris Le Grand, 2 rue Scribe, 75009 Paris; tel +33 140 073 232; ichotelsgroup.com

The Café de la Paix is like no other hotel-restaurant in Paris. Opened in 1858, the Grand was created in opulent belle-époque style by the same architect as the Opéra Garnier. The life and soul of the hotel, then and now, is the bustling street-level Café de la Paix. For single travellers wanting to socialise, the Café is famous for its ten-person "table d'hôte", perfect for a quick seafood platter, a chilled glass of Chablis, and a unique slice of Parisian life. The wine list here is extensive, and has a surprising selection of organic wines.

IL VINO

13 boulevard de la Tour Maubourg, 75007 Paris; tel +33 144 117 200 Newly opened, IlVino has immediately become the most talked-about restaurant in Paris. The brainchild of Enrico Bernardo,

who gained fame when he was crowned "world's best sommelier", the sleek IlVino turns gastronomy on its head by making the wine, rather than the cuisine, the most important thing you choose. Once the client has decided which wine tempts them from the 700-long list, the sommelier proposes what food would best accompany it. Enrico is a flamboyant, cosmopolitan Italian, and that is reflected in his eclectic collection of wines, which spans not just every French vineyard, but also Australia, South Africa, Spain, Austria and Israel. A set menu starts at around £35, going up to a stratospheric £750, which includes the likes of Petrus and Château d'Yquem.

LE JULES VERNE

Tour Eiffel, 5 avenue Anatole France, 75007 Paris; tel +33 145 556 144; tour-eiffel.fr

Nowhere in Paris can quite compare with a meal in the Jules Verne restaurant at the top of the Eiffel Tower. And now it has become part of the gastronomic empire of the world's leading chef, Alain Ducasse, the food and wine now match the breathtaking views. Gérard Margeon looks after the wine for all of Ducasse's restaurants, and for this quintessential Parisian locale he has chosen to be unabashedly chauvinistic, proposing a wine list entitled "100 per cent France". It is the perfect opportunity to discover the rising stars of France's vineyards. ■