

Wines of France

Loire Valley



Introduction

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Wine guides for the ultra curious, Approach Guides take an in-depth look at a wine region's grapes, appellations and vintages to help you discover wines that meet your preferences.

The Loire Valley — featuring a compelling line-up of distinctive grape varieties, high quality winemaking and large production volumes — is home to some of France's most impressive wines. Nevertheless, it remains largely overlooked by the international wine drinking public. This makes the region a treasure trove of exceptional values, just waiting to be discovered.

What's in this guidebook

- **Grape varieties.** We describe the Loire's primary red and white grape varieties and where they reach their highest expressions.
- **Vintage ratings.** We offer a straightforward vintage ratings table, which affords high-level insight into the best and most challenging years for wine production.
- **A Loire Valley wine label.** We explain what to look for on a Loire Valley wine label and what it tells you about what's in the bottle.
- **Map and appellation profiles.** Leveraging our map of the region, we provide detailed profiles of appellations from all five of the Loire's sub-regions (running from west to east): Pays Nantais, Anjou, Saumur, Touraine and Central Vineyards. For each appellation, we describe the prevailing terroir, the types of wine produced and what makes them distinctive.
- **A distinctive approach.** This guidebook's approach is unique: rather than tell you what specific bottle of wine to order by providing individual bottle reviews, it gives the information you need to make informed wine choices on any list.
- **Recommendations.** We mark our favorite appellations with asterisks (*) — our selections have a record for providing quality, consistency and good values.
- **Information the way you like it.** As with all of our guides, this book is optimized for intuitive, quick navigation; information is organized into bullet points to make absorption easy; trademark features of grapes and denominations are front and center.

Contact us anytime

Our readers are our greatest inspiration. Email us at founders@approachguides.com to let us know about your experience with Approach Guides — many of our recent updates have been inspired by customers like you. We personally respond to every email.

We hope this guide serves as a great resource for your wine adventures in the Loire Valley and sets you on a path to making your own discoveries.

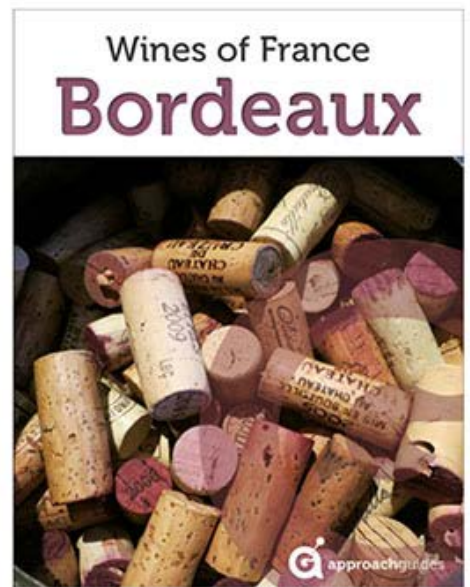
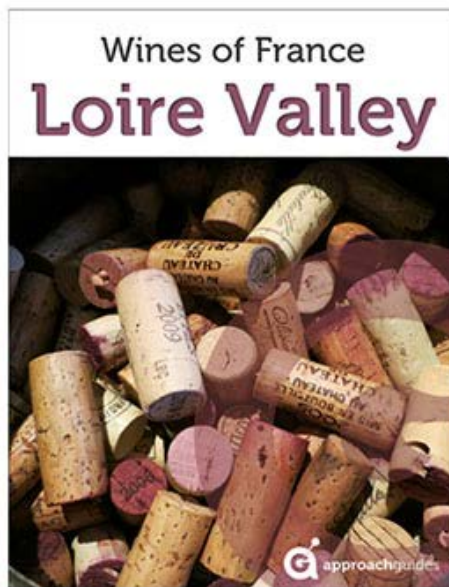
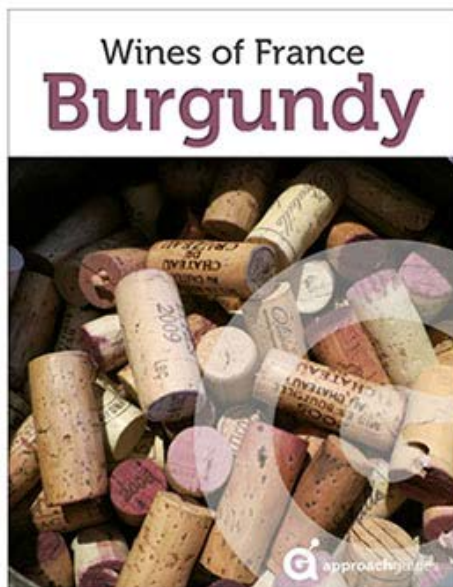
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David and Jennifer Raezer
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Wines of France: Loire Valley

Version 1.1

by [David Raezer](#) and [Jennifer Raezer](#)

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Coteaux du Giennois AOC

Menetou-Salon AOC *

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Reuilly AOC *

Saint Pourçain AOC

Sancerre AOC *

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How to Use This Wine Guide

This is a very different kind of wine guide. It leverages the strengths of the digital medium to make understanding the Loire Valley's wines easier and more intuitive.

What's Inside

- **A framework.** We emphasize the fundamental themes that are key to understanding the Loire Valley and its wines.
- **Everything in context.** We place the wines of each appellation into context by comparing them to regional benchmarks and neighboring appellations.
- **Strategy and recommendations.** We provide a strategy for choosing wines in each appellation, giving particular consideration to those that offer the best values. Our recommended appellations are marked with asterisks (*).

How It's Organized

- **Highlighted information.** The guidebook uses bullet points to organize information and bold text to highlight key points, making it easier for you to isolate what is most important.
- **Simplified navigation.** We've designed the table of contents so that you can quickly navigate to the information you need. Further, you don't have to read in linear manner, start to finish, since we ensure that key points are included in each appellation profile.
- **Quick search.** We encourage you to use the search feature to find exactly what you're looking for, whether its a specific grape, a flavor, or a soil type.

Overview

Key Differentiators

To begin, here are a few high-level points to help you contextualize wine production in the Loire Valley.

- **France's second largest wine region.** The Loire Valley is France's second largest wine producing region (after Bordeaux, which generates more than 2x the volume).
- **Roughly even split between reds and whites.** The region's production is split 55% whites and 45% reds/rosés.
- **Grafted rootstock.** In the late 19th century, the Loire Valley's vineyards — along with those of the rest of Europe — were decimated by infestations of phylloxera, a near-microscopic pest that feeds on the roots of grapevines. The only solution was to graft the Loire's native noble *vinifera* vines onto naturally-resistant American non-*vinifera* rootstocks. All Loire Valley vines are a product of this grafting process.
- **Cool climate overall, with two variations.** While the Loire Valley has a cool climate overall, the region's five sub-regions can be broken down into two climatic zones: the western zone — home to the Pays Nantais, Anjou, Saumur and Touraine — enjoys a wetter, maritime-influenced climate (warmer ocean air is drawn up the valley from the Atlantic); the eastern zone — home to the Central Vineyards — experiences a drier, cooler continental climate.
- **Two soil types.** Understanding the soils in the Loire Valley is quite important given their profound effect on the wines produced. The two most western sub-regions — Pays Nantais and Anjou — have stonier soils (schist, silica, granite), often mixed with clay deposited by the river as it made its way to the Atlantic Ocean. By contrast, the eastern sub-regions — Saumur, Touraine and the Central Vineyards — have limestone and chalky clay (Kimmeridgian marl) soils, the vestige of an ancient inland sea and the same as those that support vines in the hallowed vineyards of Champagne and Burgundy.
- **No classifications ... for the most part.** The Loire Valley has traditionally had a single-level classification system with all appellations and vineyards holding the same official quality ranking. This is quite different from the extremely hierarchical French regions of Bordeaux and Burgundy. However, in an effort to raise its international visibility, the Loire has begun to take the first tentative steps toward creating a tiered cru classification system. In 2011, two sweet wine appellations were raised to elite status: Quarts de Chaume to *Grand Cru* (the most elite designation) and Coteaux du Layon Chaume to *Premier Cru* (one step below *Grand Cru*). That said, for now, the Loire's level playing field creates a lot of opportunity for informed value hunters.

Excellent Reds ... but Whites Like Nowhere Else

Reds

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Red Grape Varieties

Cabernet Franc

A tertiary contributor to Bordeaux's cabernet sauvignon- and merlot-dominated blends, cabernet franc is the **principal red grape variety of the Loire Valley**. Known locally as **breton**, it is here that the grape assumes center stage and is featured in unblended single-varietal wines.

Mid-ripening cabernet franc produces paler, lighter, less tannic and more fragrant wines than those of its progeny cabernet sauvignon (a cross of cabernet franc x sauvignon blanc). When yields are controlled, the grape makes impressive wines that are extremely flexible with food. Medium bodied with good acidity, they typically showcase bright red fruit flavors (think cherries and raspberries) although sometimes dark fruit notes come to the fore. They also typically reveal distinctive herbaceous or leafy notes and a trademark hint of pencil shavings.

When grown in gravelly soils, cabernet franc delivers lighter, fresher wines; and when grown in limestone soils, it yields more powerful and longer-lived wines with darker fruit notes.

Cot

Better known as malbec due to its success in Argentina, cot hails originally from Cahors in southwest France and finds its way into Bordeaux's famous red blends as a very small contributor. In the Loire Valley, the grape is grown chiefly in the Anjou and Touraine sub-regions, where it achieves a high standard and is often featured in unblended single-varietal wines.

Dark-skinned, mid-ripening cot is **less fruity and more rustic than merlot**, its Atlantic associate. The best examples are well structured (tannic) and dark in color. They showcase black fruit flavors (think blackberries, black cherries) and gamey notes.

Gamay Noir

Of the 35,000 hectares of gamay planted throughout the world, 22,000 hectares are in Burgundy's Beaujolais region, spread out over 38 villages. While most widely associated with Beaujolais, gamay noir — a cross of pinot noir and the little-known white grape gouais blanc — also delivers some high quality wines in the Loire Valley, where it is grown in all five sub-regions, but the best are typically from Touraine and the Central Vineyards.

This early-ripening red grape variety is capable of **great fruitiness and high acidity**, and when treated properly, it can resemble pinot noir in many respects. The flavor profile typically leans toward the red fruit (cherries, strawberries and raspberries) side of the spectrum; the best wines will incorporate more dark fruit elements and deliver notes of earth, game, herbs and black tea. Often made using a combination of conventional fermentation and carbonic maceration (anaerobic, enzyme-driven fermentation on whole unpressed grapes) that favors bright fruit and low tannins, gamay-based wines are typically **made for immediate consumption and served with a slight chill**.

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A Loire Valley Wine Label

What's on the Label

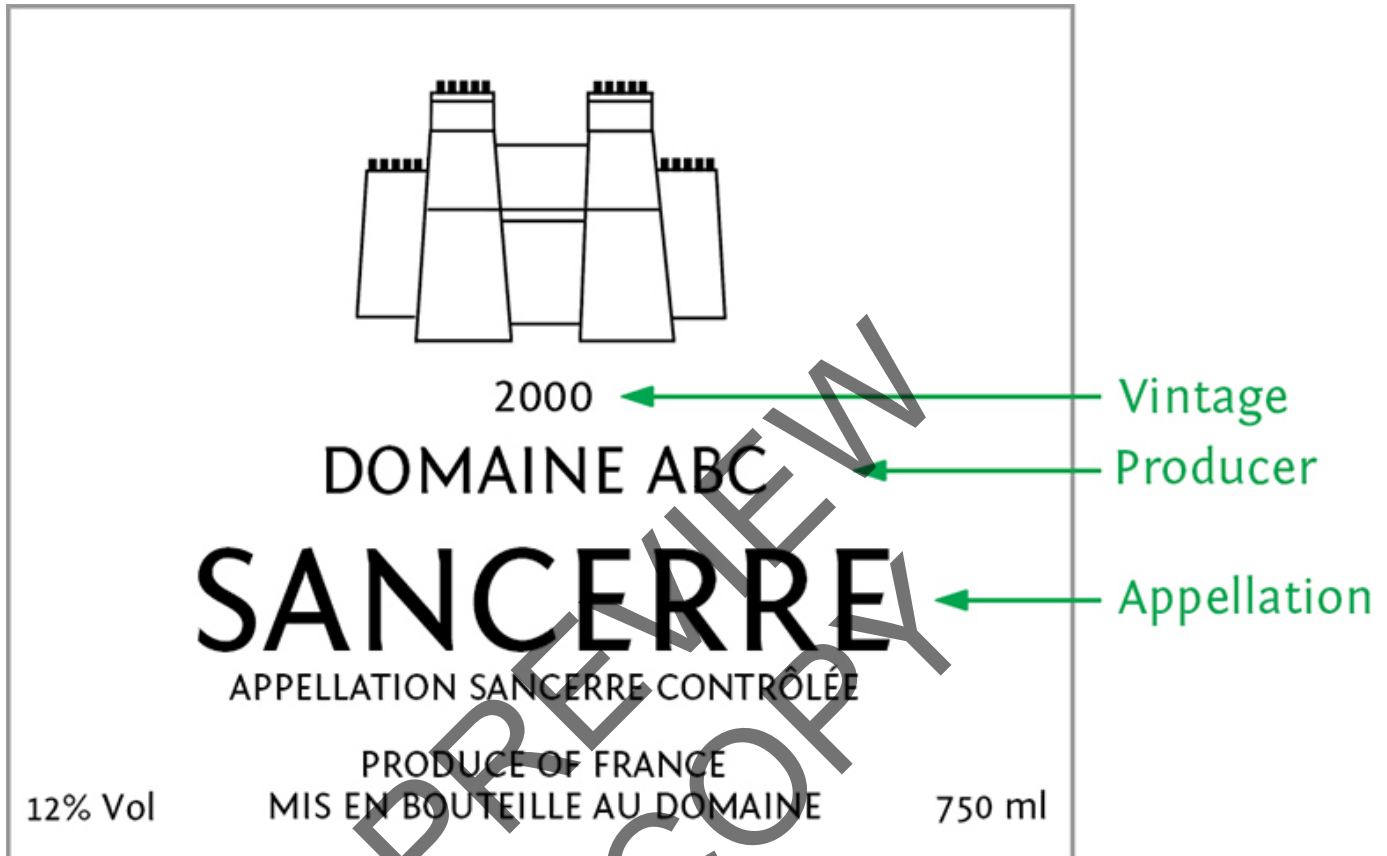


Fig. 1. A Loire Valley wine label.

A Loire Valley wine label provides critical information for understanding what to expect before you open the bottle. Most important, labels reveal the wine's vintage, producer and appellation (green highlights in Fig. 1). The appellation information requires some explanation to understand why it is so important.

Why Appellations are Important

Even if you know nothing about a wine's producer, the appellation gives you the first big clue as to what's in the bottle. Put simply, an appellation **identifies the specific geographic location** in which the grapes for a wine were grown; for reference, the Loire Valley's appellations are marked on the map in the next section. Knowing the appellation in which a wine was produced affords you some critical information.

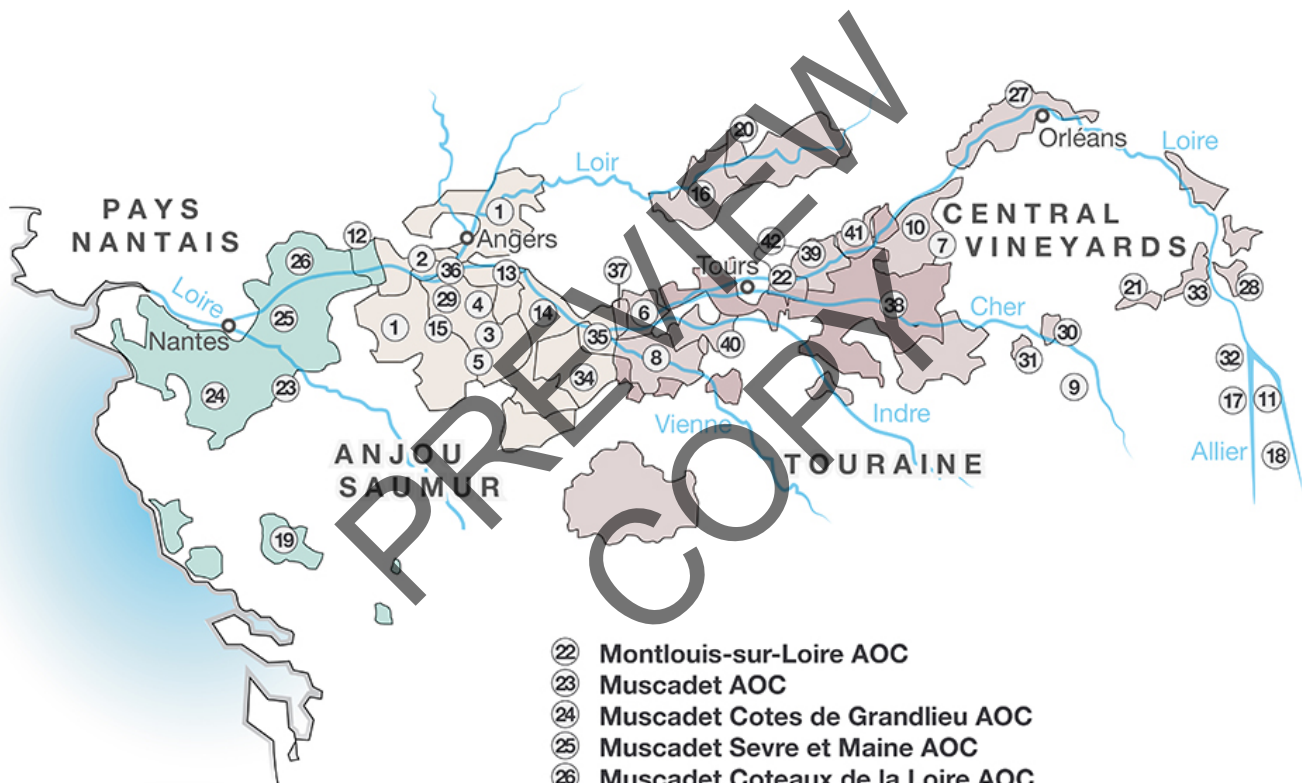
- **Terroir.** Features of each location's physical environment — climate, soil type, altitude and exposure — fundamentally impact the nature of the grapes grown there. In this way, these fea-

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Map of the Loire Valley

- ① Anjou AOC
- ② Anjou Coteaux de la Loire AOC
- Anjou Mousseux AOC
- ③ Anjou-Villages AOC
- ④ Anjou-Villages Brissac AOC
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- ⑯ Coteaux du Loir AOC
- ⑰ Côtes d'Auvergne AOC
- ⑱ Côtes du Forez AOC
- Crémant de Loire AOC
- ⑲ Fiefs Vendéens AOC
- ⑳ Jasnières AOC
- ㉑ Menetou-Salon AOC



- ㉒ Montlouis-sur-Loire AOC
- ㉓ Muscadet AOC
- ㉔ Muscadet Cotes de Grandlieu AOC
- ㉕ Muscadet Sevre et Maine AOC
- ㉖ Muscadet Coteaux de la Loire AOC
- ㉗ Orléans-Orléans-Clery AOC
- ㉘ Pouilly-Fumé AOC
- ㉙ Quarts de Chaume AOC
- ㉚ Quincy AOC
- ㉛ Reuilly AOC
- Rosé d'Anjou AOC
- Rosé de Loire AOC
- ㉜ Saint Pourçain AOC
- ㉝ Sancerre AOC
- ㉞ Saumur AOC
- ㉟ Saumur-Champigny AOC
- Saumur Blanc AOC
- Saumur Brut AOC
- ㊱ Savennières AOC
- ㊲ St Nicolas de Bourgueil AOC
- ㊳ Touraine AOC
- ㊴ Touraine Amboise AOC
- ㊵ Touraine Azay-le Rideau AOC
- ㊶ Touraine Mesland AOC
- Touraine Mousseux AOC
- Touraine Noble Joué AOC
- ㊷ Vouvray AOC



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Chinon AOC *

Located in the Touraine sub-region southwest of the city of Tours, at the confluence of the Loire and Vienne rivers, Chinon is one of the Loire Valley's best known appellations. Vineyards run east-west and face south for maximum sun exposure.

The soils are particularly important in Chinon. There are three types, each of which produces a unique style of wine:

- **Light wines: alluvial sand and gravel.** Location: the banks of the Vienne river. Wines from these soils tend to be lighter bodied and more acidic, revealing red fruit flavors.
- **Big wines: mineral-rich chalky limestone (*tuffeau*) and clay.** Location: hillsides overlooking the Loire and Vienne rivers. Wines from these soils are richer and rounder, drawing on darker fruit flavors and featuring notes of licorice and game. They are the most long lived of Chinon's offerings (up to 10-20 years).
- **Somewhere in between wines: sand and clay.** Location: select outcroppings throughout the appellation. Given the soil is basically a mixture of the first two, expect wines that fall stylistically somewhere in between.

Reds *

Chinon is home to **the region's best cabernet franc-based wines**. Keep in mind, although the appellation's rules allow cabernet sauvignon to make up to 10% of the Chinon red wine blend, it is rarely incorporated.

These are the **quintessential Parisian bistro wines**, offering sophistication without pretension. While expertly crafted, they generally do not take themselves too seriously, the style falling somewhere in between that of a restrained Bordeaux claret and a simple fruit-forward Beaujolais. Medium bodied with good acidity, they typically showcase bright red fruit flavors (think cherries and raspberries) although sometimes dark fruit notes come to the fore. They also typically reveal distinctive herbaceous or leafy notes. For more serious wines, look for those made from old vines (*vieille vignes*); they are often barrel aged for a number of years.

Finally, Chinon's **rosés** are worth trying. They are made in two styles: *rosé de pressée* and *rosé de saignée* (for more on these styles, see the Anjou's Cabernet d'Anjou AOC). They are highly aromatic and feature bright strawberry notes and a pronounced mineral streak.

Whites

While the Chinon's focus is certainly on reds (95% of total production), the appellation does make a small amount of high quality white wines, based exclusively on **chenin blanc**. Stylistically, they lean toward the dry end of the spectrum. All things considered, while certainly worth a try, we believe that other appellations' chenin blancs relatively outperform.

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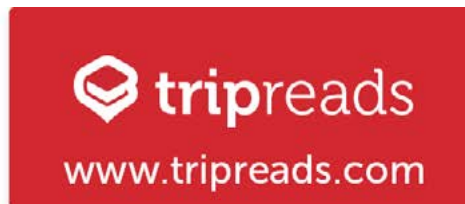
France Reading List

We've re-imagined the travel reading list for those seeking more rewarding and fulfilling experiences around the world. [Explore our collection](#) of “Trip Reads” — expertly-curated print books, ebooks, magazine articles, papers from leading academics, online resources, music, podcasts, videos and more.

Here are just a few of our France recommendations ([see the complete list](#)):

- **Adventures on the Wine Route** The famed California-based importer recounts his adventures in France's vineyards. *By Kermit Lynch.*
- **“France's Troubled Romance with Beef”** Is French gourmet culture becoming less French? *By Tanya Basu.*
- **My First French Book** Just for kids! A bilingual introduction to words, numbers, shapes and colors. *By Mandy Stanley.*

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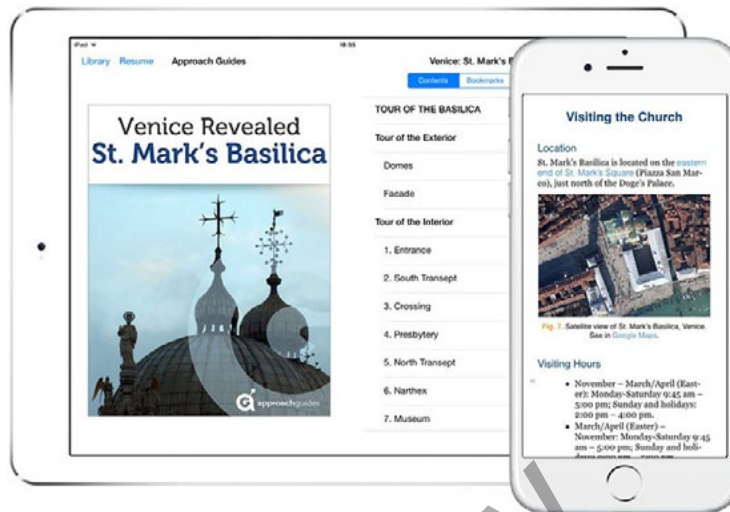
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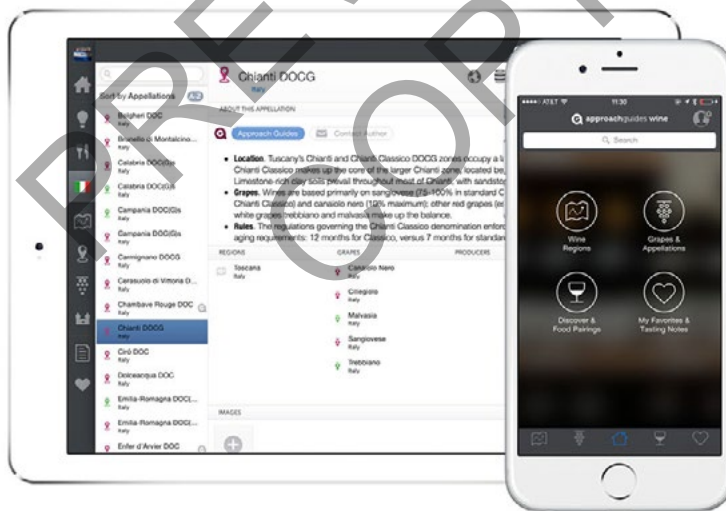
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