

# How the *Lyonnais* are crushing wine traditions



*The narrow streets of the Vieux Lyon (old Lyon) on the Presqu'île district*

**T**he world of wine is full of rules. Don't mix your drinks, serve white wine with fish, allow the wine to breathe for at least 30 minutes before serving. I fully understand why my parents didn't let my teenage self mix Lambrini with their good-quality wine, but are rules made to be broken?

The French are revolutionaries at heart. Not afraid to challenge the status quo, they lopped off the heads of their royals, stormed a prison, and decided that three desserts were infinitely better than one (thank you, France, for *café gourmand*). Now, in Lyon, in France's Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes, they're challenging everything that we know about wine.

At the sight of rows of gleaming brass taps at Les Assembleurs (The Mixers), in Lyon's 3ème arrondissement, you'd be forgiven for thinking

that you'd stumbled into a pub rather than a wine bar. There's not a bottle of Côtes du Rhône in sight, nor a bottle of any wine, for that matter. But the taps don't churn out beer: they're attached to kegs filled with wine. Forget everything that you've heard about not mixing your wine; here, it's actively encouraged.

Owner Antoine Oran spent his youth travelling all over the world. A true Frenchman, he loved wine, but he hated the snobbery and pomp that went with it. Sick of dissertation-sized wine menus served at restaurants adorned with chandeliers so heavy that the ceiling looked at risk of caving in, he decided to ditch the pretentiousness. He wanted the pub atmosphere that he'd experienced in anglophone countries he'd visited, so, alongside his friend and co-owner Gregoire Gayt, he decided to create a wine bar that functioned like a pub.

They wanted to have fun with their wine, and collaborated with oenologist David Martin to create their own, original blends. Now, Les Assembleurs serves between 60% and 70% of its own wines, with a specially-designed menu that helps their clients not only to choose a wine but also to create their own, by mixing different types.

"Most French people don't know that much about wine, whatever they may tell you," says Antoine, "which makes them ashamed to ask. Here you're encouraged to ask and experiment, and to have fun. That's why on our menu we've added a little picture for the tasting notes, e.g. apricot, raspberry or coffee. Your average person might not know that they prefer a Mourvedre to a Pinot Noir, but they'll look at the menu and think, 'I love coffee and raspberries, why don't

we combine them?'"

Do we actively seek out wines that are grown on the other side of the world? At dinner parties post-university, turning up with a Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc from New Zealand felt like a rite of passage. It seems ironic that at the same time as we're all making conscious efforts to eat locally-sourced produce, wine has slipped under the radar. The domestic wine scene in France is much more developed than it is in the UK, but it's still rare that you can drink wine from a city vineyard, delivered to your door by e-bike.

"Unless someone takes a bottle of my wine elsewhere, it's only drunk in Lyon," says Géraldine Dubois from La Têtue Vin (The Stubborn Wine). "It's a really short supply chain. I also reuse all the bottles, people can bring back the same bottle and fill it from the keg."

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*Vieux Lyon (old Lyon) on the Presqu'île district*

Géraldine's wines are grown under 20kms from the city centre, and are transported to her wine cellar in Lyon's 1ère arrondissement, or to restaurants and clients, by e-bike. She runs a one-woman show.

After a decade of working in pharmaceuticals, Géraldine took a winegrowing course in Bourgogne and was instantly smitten. She moved to Languedoc-Roussillon in southern France with her then husband, and started her first vineyard. In a male-dominated industry, she was frustrated that people regularly assumed that her husband ran the operation.

"People would ask to speak to the winegrower, assuming that it was my ex-husband," says Géraldine, "and I'd be waving, saying, hello? That's me! I'm the winegrower!"

It's not just the proximity to the city that makes Géraldine's wine unique, it's the crossover between two major winegrowing regions. To the north is Beaujolais, and to the south, the Rhône Valley. Géraldine's Lyonnais vineyard occupies a unique position, slap-bang between the two.

Unless it's a special occasion, drinking wine at breakfast is generally a cause for concern, but in Lyon it's traditional. Mâchon, a boozy, carnivorous breakfast, is served at traditional Lyonnais bouchons at 9am. A typical menu includes beef tripe or a gratin made from pig intestines, followed by regional cheese and washed down

with copious amounts of red wine.

The tradition began in the mid 19th century, with the silk-weavers and fabric merchants who made up a vast chunk of Lyon's working population. They often worked through the night, or began work very early in the morning, so quaffing wine in a bouchon was a tipsy lunch, rather than breakfast. The savoury spread, so different to the viennoiseries generally consumed for breakfast, was a way of using up the leftover lunch or dinner from the day before.

While there are those who can't stomach the idea of mâchon as soon as they wake up, it's a popular choice for people who have been up all night partying, a 'hair of the dog' complete with offal.

Enthused and ready to drink city-grown wine, delivered by e-bike, and to mix red and white wine to create a light, breakfast rosé, Antoine tells me there are still some rules that we shouldn't break.

"You can't mix red and white to create a rosé," laughs Antoine, "and I wouldn't serve it to you. I wouldn't encourage you to mix bottles of wine that you've bought, either. It's disrespectful to the winemaker. Winemakers are like perfumers, they mix and blend their bottles with care. Ours are different, because we've created them with mixology in mind." 🍷