It’s easy to have your head turned by the famous, glamorous wine regions: Sure, Napa’s great, and Bordeaux can’t be beat. But some of the most soulful places in the world of wine are often passed over or pigeonholed based on factors like geography and reputation. Some of these regions are just taking root while others are long-established, but a visit to any one of them could forever change your idea of what to drink with dinner—not to mention what it’s like to visit a winery (no limos in sight).

### Alsace, France

**First impression** Everybody has heard of France’s Alsace region but too few people outside the area actually drink the wines.

**Second look** The stellar whites from this lovely area bordering Germany—mostly gewürztraminers, rieslings, and pinot gris—are among the most sophisticated and food-friendly on the planet. They’re second to none with spicy Asian dishes because of the natural aromatics in the grapes as well as the high acid levels that develop in a chilly climate.

*Stop in* Headquartered in the fairy-tale town of Riquewihr, full of half-timbered houses with fanciful turrets, the winery Hugel et Fils (hugel.com/en) has been perfecting the family craft since 1639. When a bottle as refreshing and flavorful as the Hugel Riesling Classic 2007 costs just $11, it’s time to reconsider the whole region and deem it a super-value zone.

*Check in* Done up like a local tobacco barn, the stellar Hotel des Berges (from $355/night; hoteldesberges.com) on the willow-dotted banks of the Ill River gives travelers a luxurious embrace, and it’s next door to the world-famous restaurant L’Auberge de l’Ill, a recipient of three Michelin stars. The Ill River gives travelers a luxurious embrace, and it’s next door to the world-famous restaurant L’Auberge de l’Ill, a recipient of three Michelin stars. The room service breakfasts are among the most memorable (and calorie rich) one might ever have.

**Wine Facial for $115), big rooms, and an overall look that’s clean and mod-**

### Willamette Valley, Oregon

**First impression** Who doesn’t love those great, if pricey, pinot noirs?

**Second look** Pinot gris—from the same grape that gives us pinot grigio in Italy—is the dominant white wine produced in the fantastically fertile Willamette Valley, but it doesn’t have a distinct reputation among many Americans. The elegant and floral character of these wines, often priced at less than $30, makes them ideal for summertime drinking as well as for the Thanksgiving table, when paired with sweet potato.

*Stop in* Tri a rare white wine that has the intensity and weight of the Pinot Noir but in a much more approachable form. The tasting room and to the bocce court, as well.

*Check in* For decades, the Willamette Valley lacked a luxury hotel, perhaps because the proximity of Portland (just a 45-minute drive away) encourages day trips. But the year-old Allison Inn & Spa (from $295/night; theallison.com/en) has been perfecting the family craft since 1639. When a bottle as refreshing and flavorful as the Hugel Riesling Classic 2007 costs just $11, it’s time to reconsider the whole region and deem it a super-value zone.

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### Rias Baixas, Spain

**First impression** Spain means red wine.

**Second look** The region of Galicia, in the country’s northwest corner, is the exception to the rest of sunny Spain. In the Rias Baixas wine zone, the weather is cool and rainy, much like in southern Ireland. Albariño is an unassuming grape and hardly world-famous, but it thrives in that climate, producing fantastic dry white wines that are perfect for pairing with seafood dishes, such as paella, all over Spain.

*Stop in* If you enjoy wine made only from the albariño grape, then the tiny region of Rias Baixas should be on everyone’s list of places to visit. (Rias Baixas is a small region within Galicia, on the northwestern coast of Spain.)

*Check in* Albariño’s capital, Santiago de Compostela, is about an hour-and-a-half drive from Rias Baixas wine country. The city is one of the most important pilgrimage sites in the world because of its cathedral, which holds the tomb of St. James, part of the town is a UNESCO World Heritage site. For a true old-world experience, stay at the grand, antiques-filled Hostal de Los Reyes Catolicos (from $350/night; paradores-spain.com/)—adjacent to the cathedral. The swagger and gift is a nice contrast to albariño’s relative humility.

### Niagara, Ontario

**First impression** Nice falls. What are those grapes over there?

**Second look** Located between the famous falls and Lake Ontario, just across the Niagara River from New York State, this small Canadian peninsula produces superior ice wines. The unique microclimate facilitates extreme winemaking. The harsh winter’s frozen grapes end up with naturally enhanced sugar levels, which are captured in the wine. This is a chance to get over one’s fear of sweeties.

*Stop in* Inniskillin (inniskillin.com) is the leading winery in the area, and until one has sampled the preserved, rich, and berry-laden Inniskillin Ice Wine Cabernet Franc 10 (90/100), it’s hard to understand how good dessert wine can be. Its high acidity even out all the sweetness and prevents any cloying excess; the taste is far more balanced than one might imagine.

*Check in* Queen’s Landing (from $200/night; vintagehotels.com) is a Georgian-style manse with traditional decor located in the town of Niagara-on-the-Lake. (Picture a less crowded version of Napa’s St. Helena.) After a day of tasting at wineries, hit the spa and have yourself swaddled in a rose-petal wrap for $100. Traveler’s tip: When planning a visit to the area, fly into Buffalo since navigating Toronto’s airport security can be trying.
Margaret River, Australia

First impression Seems like the far side of the moon.
Second look Flanked by two oceans, the Margaret River area has unusually sizable growing temperatures for vines. Located on Australia’s western side and four hours south of Perth by car, it’s eight years away from the country’s population centers and other wine regions. But splendid isolation works well in this case. The traditional Italian Barolo grapes— including cabernet sauvignon, sauvignon blanc, and semillon—thrive, as do the winemakers, who surf on some of Australia’s biggest waves during their off-hours.

Stop in When one thinks of Australia, shiraz comes to mind. The Cape Mentelle (capementelle.com.au) property makes a wide range of wines, but it’s its fruity and peppery shiraz (the $65 costs $54) that rises above many versions from better-known areas. Best of all, the winery is visitor-friendly, offering a 2-hour de gustation tour and tasting for $60 a person.

Colchagua Valley, Chile

First impression Chile is the land of cheap and cheerful wines.
Second look The whole country, in particular this part of the larger Rapel Valley, has made huge strides in developing the super-premium category over the last decade. Colchagua, just 100 miles from the capital city of Santiago, specializes in lush, plus red wines that are broad-shouldered but not too tannic to drink when young. Cabernet sauvignon, syrah, malbec, and carmenere varieties rule, and some of the best bottles are a blend of two or more grape types, like Montes’s Alpha M ($89). When it comes to choosing a style, many winemakers here revere traditional red Bordeaux.

Stop in Montes has been a leader since the winery was founded in 1987, and it had the distinction of making Chile’s first premium wine for export. One sip of Montes Purple Angel 2007 ($72) shows the level of sophistication. The blackberry and spice notes in this carmenere-based wine have finesse that lingers on the palate. (Give this one some decanting.) The winery itself was designed according to feng shui principles, with lovely pools of water at the entrance. A guest can reserve a tour by visiting its website (monteswines.com).

Piedmont, Italy

First impression This area’s flagship barolo and barbaresco wines are awesome but too expensive.
Second look Piedmont’s supporting player, barbera, is a red grape used to make lively and refreshing wines that often accentuate by a taste of currant. A barbera wine is always welcome at the table because of its fresh and zesty profile. At times the wine can rival its more famous Nebbiolo-based cousins, barolo and barbaresco, in complexity—but always at a fraction of the price. Barbera d’Alba, meaning made near the hub city of Alba, is the most promising designation to look for on bottles.

Stop in Vietti (vietti.com) is a family-owned winery based in the quaint town of Castiglione Falletto. Renowned for its colorful labels, all with natural themes, the winery turns out top barolo while also taking Barbera d’Alba very seriously. The Vietti Barbera d’Alba Tre Vigne 2007 ($39) is a heady, violet-scented example of the grape’s potential. Try a bottle with veal Milanese and admire the grasshopper staring back from the label.

Jerez de la Frontera, Spain

First impression Jerez is for old ladies.
Second look Jerez is a whole wine category unto itself of nearly inﬁnite variety; seasoned drinkers and novices alike will ﬁnd something works for them. This fortified wine offers styles from bone-dry (the fino style) to dessert in a glass (Pedro Ximenez, which is often poured over vanilla ice cream) with many in between, such as the tawny, yet curiously Pali Cortado. Anyone who can’t ﬁnd a bottle to suit may simply lack imagination.

Stop in Bodegas Barbadillo ($50) is the bodega that might do it. For beginners, the Lustau Manzanilla Papirusa ($60) is the best introduction to the category. Manzanillas are pale and famously taste briny like the ocean—remember they are white wines, but with a kick of extra alcohol—and this one has a lemony character to boot. Served with salted almonds, it makes sherry newcomers sit up and take notice.

Mendocino, California

First impression Mendocino’s best crop is, um, herbal in nature.
Second look Napa and Sonoma’s immediate northern neighbor is under-sung, cool growing area for grapes, and the small Anderson Valley is the standout appellation. The pinot noir, zinfandel, and chardonnay from there don’t need heavy-oaking to make their case; the best ones have naturally vibrant fruit flavors. The proof is that many wineries based in Napa and elsewhere have bought vineyards in Mendocino, with additional purchasing expected.

Stop in With a deﬁt touch, Navarro Vineyards (navarrowine.com) excels at crafting the wines California producers usually botch: rosé ($15), pinot noir ($21), and dogs are welcome at the hotel for a $25 charge. Located at the southern end of the wine trail, the hotel provides an extremely handy base for visiting the Anderson Valley wineries along Route 128.

Languedoc, France

First impression The south of France is only about rosé.
Second look Sunny, hot weather and mild winters mean that the traditional Rhône varieties like syraths, mouvedres, and grenaches are right at home in Languedoc, the region just to the west of Provence. Big juicy reds can be had at good prices; think of it as France’s Australia.

Stop in In this cool, Mediterranean area, Bouscay ($15) is the best introduction to the category. Ramillies are pale and famously taste briny like the ocean—remember they are white wines, but with a kick of extra alcohol—and this one has a lemony character to boot. Served with salted almonds, it makes sherry newcomers sit up and take notice.

Check in The city of Jerez, the hub of the sherry trade near Spain’s southern coast, is steeped in Moorish culture and doubles as a center of flamenco. The yellow facade and gold fabrics in the rooms of the Hotel Villa Jerez (from $140) have a tony neighborhood of grand homes, complete the lavish picture.

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