

You're becoming a bit of a wine expert. You not only can tell your Merlot from your Shirah, but are starting to understand the difference between vineyards and vintages. The next step for any wine collector or fan? Getting your shoes a bit muddy tromping through the vineyards themselves.

Wine tours are offered just about everywhere wine grapes are grown, from California's Napa Valley to British Columbia's Okanagan to Australia's Yarra Valley. But the classic wine tours are through the vineyards of Italy and France.

It is in these countries that wine aficionados claim that the best wine in the world is grown with the combination of beautiful countryside with exactly the best latitudes, climate and soils.

Getting a great vacation comes from mixing first class wines and classic vineyards with the varied, beautiful countryside and history found in Italy and France. But just deciding to go to tour Italian or French vineyards won't guarantee you access to the finest vineyards. Getting into the first growth vineyards, which are vineyards on the top tier of French classification, is a matter of having the right contacts. Driving up to Chateau Margaux in France's beautiful Bordeaux region won't get you in the door, much less give you the chance to talk to the vintners or see where the grapes are prepared or the wine aged.

This access can only be guaranteed by having the right contacts in the industry, and the easiest way to get these is to book a tour with a company that specializes in wine. Companies like Avalon tours and French Wine Explorers employ staff that are wine experts with professional experience and training.

Lauriann Greene-Sollin with French Wine Explorers is not only a Sommelier-Conseil but also has her university level degree in wine. She stresses the importance of choosing a wine tour operator with extensive experience in the industry.

"Guests then get a true learning experience," she says, "when the guides know what they are talking about."



The boutique wine tours give you a sense of immersion in the culture, landscape, and wine of an area. You will come home more of an expert knowing what factors make up the specific bouquet of the wineries you've been to, whether it's the oak barrels or the combination of rainfall and sunshine in the Rhone Valley.

Most of the boutique wine tour operators in Italy and France offer scheduled tours as well as the opportunity to custom-design your own trip. These can take in the specific regions you want to see or take you for deeper and more in-depth tours of your favourite wineries.

At the end of a day of wine tasting and touring, you will be able to tuck into luxury accommodations, often at the wine estates themselves. It is one thing to visit a first house of wine, it is another to actually meet with a member of the family that has been making wine for generations, but the thrill of waking up and surveying the land that so generously offers its fruits is on another level entirely.

Man and woman cannot live on wine alone, and boutique tours are also wonderful places to experience gourmet cuisine, perfectly paired with the right grape and vintage for the best dining experience. Cheese goes well with wine, but having the cheese that was made in the same district as the grape it is paired with adds another dimension to your tour.

Peter Blattmann takes the wine tour experience to a new level, with over 40 years of experience both as a chef and a wine connoisseur, providing exclusive access to some of the world's most famous wineries. With a broad network of food experts and chefs, Peter also offers cooking classes with master chefs for an intimate, behind-the-scenes experience. By opening doors that are usually closed to the public, travellers can taste wines in the company of owners and cellar masters that are exceptional. Hotels are chosen for the ultimate comfort and restaurants are selected in each region for their award winning cuisine and personalized service.

Groups are kept small to preserve privacy and the group intimacy. Trips for Fall 2006 include visiting the best producers in Champagne and Burgundy as well as a truly exceptional journey through Italy's famous culinary and wine regions.

