

# French Wine Explorers uncorks 2002 programs

BY PAUL FELT

COCONUT CREEK, Fla. — French Wine Explorers here is uncorking a new product.

The 2-year-old firm, which previously customized its itineraries, expanded its operation to include prepackaged tours, the first of which ran this month.

According to founder and president Lauriann Greene, the company's small group tours are an "affordable alternative" to the customized product, thus accessible to a wider market of wine aficionados.

"Most people realize that custom-design tours are an expensive proposition, and some people don't want that — they want to be with other people," Greene said.

Certain featured activities that are negotiated for groups

are not feasible to arrange for a few couples, she added.

That includes a wine tasting at Chateau d'Yquem in the Bordeaux region, producer of Sauternes dessert wines and one of the most famous wineries in the world, Greene said.

With the expansion, French Wine Explorers started advertising in such magazines as Wine Spectator and Wine Enthusiast.

Greene said she also hopes to work more regularly with travel agents, who generate about 10% of bookings.

"I expect in a few months it will be 30% or 40%," she said, adding that most agents find the company via its Web site, at [www.wine-tours-france.com](http://www.wine-tours-france.com).

French Wine Explorers pays 10% commission on its

prepackaged and tailored itineraries.

The company offers seven prepackaged tours for 2002, with two departures in May and October, and one each in June, July and November.

Most tours are limited to 14 participants, and all but one are priced between \$2,295 and \$2,695 per person, double, land only.

The most expensive plan, the five-night Wines and Chateaux of the Loire Valley, features four-star accommodations and a maximum of six guests.

Priced at \$3,995, the tour departs Oct. 22.

"We want our tours to be accessible for all wine enthusiasts, and because we offer many of the same hotels and restaurants the other [wine tour operators] offer, we feel our tours represent a great value," said Greene.

An American wine expert who doubles as translator, Greene hosts each trip with her French husband, Jean-Pierre Sollin, also a wine expert and president of Les Explorateurs de Vins, a Paris wine school.

Another tour — a six-night excursion to the Rhone Valley and Provence in June — is led by Robin Garr, a wine journalist and founder of the Wine Lover's Page, an independent wine appreciation Web site, at [www.wineloverspage.com](http://www.wineloverspage.com).

Greene said her clientele



A group enjoys the shade and produce of Chateau Maucoil, in France's Rhone Valley.

mainly hail from the U.S. and Canada, and are professionals ranging in age from 35 to 65.

"Because we're wine professionals ourselves, we attract a lot of fellow wine professionals and wine tasting clubs and societies," she said.

Itineraries include accommodations in three- and four-star hotels, chateaux or country inns; daily continental breakfast, and most lunches and dinners with regional wines.

Additional highlights include vineyard tours and tastings as well as introductory wine tasting sessions.

All trips except a Beaujolais Nouveau tour in November include at least one meal at a Michelin star-rated restaurant.

Extensions in Paris — with sightseeing by day and wine activities at night — can be added to each tour.

Each Paris stay includes accommodations at the four-star Hotel Bedford and a six-course, six-wine dinner at the Bistrot du Sommelier.

All but one extension are for two nights and priced at \$399 per person, double. A one-night extension for the Beaujolais Nouveau Celebration tour in November costs \$249 per person.

Asked about her cancellation policy, Greene conceded it is strict, with a \$500 nonrefundable deposit, all money due at 90 days, 50% of the tour price charged between 90 and 61 days and 100% of the tour price charged at 60 days and less.

"My feeling is it's up to people to insure themselves," she said. "If we make it that everybody has very lenient policies, there will be no more small tour operators, and people like me will no longer be able to operate."

For more information, call (877) 261-1500 or e-mail [info@wine-tours-france.com](mailto:info@wine-tours-france.com).

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