

From the scenic Rhône Valley to the slopes of Slovenia, innovative Irish winemakers are creating cool new wine styles with a Celtic flavour, writes Katy McGuinness

Róisín Curley may not conform to the stereotype, but that hasn't stopped the Ballyhaunis pharmacist from establishing a reputation for herself as a respected winemaker in France.

Not only does Róisín still work in the family business and make elegant, sought-after wines, but last year she became a Master of Wine — one of currently only 419 people in the world to hold this prestigious qualification.

"It started as a hobby after visits to friends in the Rhine Valley," she says, "and over time, I did all the WSET [Wine & Spirit Education Trust] courses up to diploma level. It's such a vast subject, I kept wanting to learn and know more."

In 2010, Róisín commenced a two-year master's in viticulture and oenology, spending a year in Montpellier followed by another in Geisenheim.

"My brother, Mark, was a huge support and stood in for me in the pharmacy so I could follow my dream," she recalls. "After Germany, I did my thesis research at Château Latour in Pauillac, which was amazing, and the following year, I went to Château Grillet in the Northern Rhône, a very special place for white-winemaking."

Róisín's challenge then was to make the two strands of her life compatible. "I love being a pharmacist," she says. "I am needed in the business, and during the pandemic, I have found it particularly rewarding. But wine is a major part of my life, so it's a balancing act."

For Róisín, the solution is to work in her favourite wine region of Burgundy — known for Pinot Noir and Chardonnay — as a négociant, meaning she doesn't own vineyards but buys grapes grown by others and makes wine from them.

"I started in 2015 and it has gone from strength to strength," she says. "It was a big gamble and I definitely do it for passion and love, not for money! Through the year, I usually visit once a month and then I am generally in Burgundy for the whole harvest, from picking through to vinification. In between visits, I have a cellar hand who checks on my barrels, but aside from that, I do everything myself."

Róisín made eight different wines, including a Bourgogne Aligoté, a Saint-Romain, a Beaune, a Beaune Premier Cru and a Fixin, in 2019.

"It's very exciting," she says. "I love the scientific part of winemaking coupled with the art. I am very proud of these wines."

Further south, in the eastern tip of the Czeze valley in the Southern Rhône, near the village of Saint-Nazaire, Simon Tyrrell of Tindal Wine Merchants in Dublin:

Charles Deraïn, originally from France but now based in Kildare and the man behind



Charles Deraïn, Simon Tyrrell and Gerard Maguire of Les Deux Cols in the Southern Rhône



Neasa Corish and Laurent Miquel in the Languedoc. Photograph: Anna Malmberg



Róisín Curley in Burgundy. Photograph: Jib Peter



Sinead and Liam Cabot at the Roka estate in Slovenia's Štajerska region

The new Irish wine geese

Nomad Wines; and Gerard Maguire of 64 Wine in Glashtule are the owners of Les Deux Cols. They work organically with grapes grown on cooler, elevated sites, harvested by hand and fermented using natural yeasts in cement tanks — all with the goal of achieving a lighter, fresher style of wine.

"We bought our first vineyard in 2016," explains Simon. "For a few years prior to that, we used to buy grapes from a small co-op outside Avignon, but once we were established, we looked for vineyards to buy."

"We first bought three hectares in terrible condition and spent two years restoring it by hand. Since then, we have bought more land in the same area. All the

vineyards are on hills, and the higher up, the cooler it is, which is a real plus in terms of climate change. We have six plots now. We hand-harvest and rent a winery from a retired winemaker."

Les Deux Cols currently produces four different wines — 30,000 bottles in total — ranging from the entry-level O Font to the easy-drinking Alizé, the more serious Trois Terroirs, and its most ambitious wine, Chemin des Fontes — a blend of Grenache and Carignan, entirely aged in 600-litre oak barrels, with silky tannins that make it a perfect match for fatter but delicate meats such as pork or duck breast, a good rare ribeye, meat dishes with a creamy sauce, or pasta with sausage.

"Our aim is to build our own winery and create an all-in domaine," says Simon, "a place to call home."

Recently, Simon, Charles and Gerard have mentored young Irish winemaker Killian Horan to produce his own first wine, an organic Côtes du Rhône made from Syrah, Grenache and Viognier, which he's called Le Charlatan.

Neasa Corish first arrived in the Languedoc from Dublin as an au pair and met Laurent Miquel, whose family had a wine estate there. Six years later she returned to marry him, and the couple, who have two children, Sean and Alaina, now run the estate with a sustainable ethos. Laurent's style of viticulture focuses

on expressing the local terroir of each vineyard site and works to protect the soil and biodiversity.

"Our elegant 'Connemara' wine is named for the limestone soils of the southern Saint-Chinian appellation," says Neasa, whose role is to tell the stories behind the wines, "and the image on the bottle is of the hand-built stone walls that are dotted throughout our vineyards, similar to those seen in Connemara. Our 'Kinsale' wine, from Faugères, with ripe black fruits — but not heaviness because Laurent harvests the Syrah grapes early — is so named because the slate soils of the vineyards there are very like the land around Kinsale."

It's not just France where the Irish are producing wine. Liam and Sinead Cabot are a husband-and-wife team who make wines at the Roka estate in Slovenia. The couple run a wholesale business selling to

hotels and restaurants, but the transition into winemaking came out of a desire "to get our hands dirty", explains Liam.

"The locals scratched their heads when we bought a small place with a half hectare of vines in the Štajerska wine region, due south of Vienna," he says. "We knew nothing and wanted to immerse ourselves in a winemaking region, so we asked the winemaker to stay on. We spent three years coming and going and started importing wines from the area, and helped a bit with the vineyards. Then we took on a couple of rows to make wine ourselves and learned how difficult it was."

"We started with the ambition to make a wine that we'd like to drink ourselves, and we were unencumbered by education or fear. We started experimenting and applied what we had seen in other winemaking regions, and gradually became more and more absorbed."

TOP BOTTLES TO GIFT

◆ Harvey Nichols

Harvey Nichols' house Champagne (€37) is an exclusive blend of Pinot Noir and Pinot Meunier produced by the long-established house of Lombard et Médot in the traditional style, showcasing layers of orchard fruit, brioche and hazelnut.



◆ Lidl

Produced in Skibbereen, Lidl's Wild Burrow slow-distilled Raspberry & Thyme Pink Gin (€22.99) can be enjoyed with tonic water or used in festive cocktails.



◆ SuperValu

Saget La Perrière (€13.39) is a classy Sancerre made from 100pc Sauvignon Blanc, with a classic mineral and fruity profile from a rich and balanced terroir blend. The added complexity elevates the wine and makes it an ideal gift for the Sauv Blanc lover on your list.



◆ Dunnes Stores

Les Hauts de Terre 2018 (€24), available in 20 branches of Dunnes Stores, is a beautifully elegant Margaux with bright florals and a touch of cedar. The château was originally built by Irishman Pierre Mitchell — who also created the original Bordeaux bottle shape — in 1736.



◆ Aidi

Puca Single Pot Still Irish Whiskey (€29.99) is a limited-edition bottling of just four casks chosen by master blender John Wilcox. It's a spice ball of flavour rounded off with soft honey and vanilla notes.



The Cabots' winemaking methodology involves a low level of mechanisation and chemical intervention, and they now produce three wines — two whites (Furmint and Laški Riesling) and a red (Blaufränkisch) — making 2,500 bottles a year across the three varieties. You'll find the wines listed at restaurants such as Etto and Fish Shop in Dublin.

"Over the years, as we learn, the wines have evolved," says Liam. "It's slow but satisfying. We are proud of all of them but the Furmint was probably the most intellectually challenging. The Laški is wonderfully underappreciated, with rich spiciness, like a wine from Alsace. The Blaufränkisch is ripe with juicy acidity and only 12.5pc ABV; it has blacker fruit than Pinot Noir and is lovely with lamb or duck, or anything with a bit of fat."

In a normal year, the Cabots would spend between four and five months in Slovenia, travelling backwards and forwards for pruning, de-budding and harvesting, but last year they spent the whole of lockdown there with their children, Rachel, a student in TU Dublin,

and John, who is in secondary school. "We passed each wine five or six times during the growing season," recalls Liam. "Looking at them each time and thinking about how best to bring out their potential. Being in the vineyards is critical."

"The couple's skills are complementary. 'Sinead is the ideas person and the more emotional of the two of us,' says Liam. "She connects us at an earth level with the wines. I am more methodical and logistics-focused so I am the planner. She's adventurous, I'm cautious, but we have very similar tastes in terms of style of wine, and we make wine we like to drink."

Stockists include:
Róisín Curley — Mitchell & Son, Green Man Wines, from €34
Les Deux Cols — 64 Wine, Searsons, from €16
Le Charlatan — Neighbourhood Wine, Station to Station, €27
Laurent Miquel 'Connemara'
Saint-Chinian — O'Briens, €15.95;
'Kinsale' Faugères — Dunnes Stores, €10
Roka — 64 Wine, Grapevine, €25