



# Flavor Bites: Bon Appétit!

Creating flavors for the French palate

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**M**y first association with the French way of life was through a novel by Gabriel Chevallier titled *Clochemerle*. It is a superbly funny story, full of marvelously eccentric, larger than life characters. It was written, I imagine, as a satire but is indeed very close to the heart of life in France.

Chevallier's novel is set in the Beaujolais, near the culinary epicenter of France. Many foreigners visit France primarily with the intent of sampling the food and the wine. It is practically impossible to eat a bad meal in France and many of the wines rank among the best in the world. Food is an important aspect of French culture, where the popular "you are what you eat" maxim is taken very seriously. This enthusiasm for quality of food naturally extends to flavors; clearly the profile quality of flavors is generally very high in the French market.

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## Primary Flavor Preferences

**Strawberry:** In general, French flavors are deeper and more complex than those found in most other countries. Strawberry is a case in point. French strawberry flavors are very realistic and have the character of fully ripe fruit. Light fruity notes are, usually, much reduced, especially the pineapple notes commonly found in US strawberry flavors. Green notes

are also less prominent, although they need to be present at a low level to avoid a jammy effect. Floral notes, especially jasmine, are often dominant, giving the effect of the tiny alpine "fraise du bois" strawberry.

**Vanilla:** French vanilla flavors are highly characteristic and have a distinctive note, somewhat different from the character of either Bourbon or Tahiti vanilla beans. That said, the profile does often contain a significant element of vanilla extract, but it also has strong additional characteristics. Heliotropin and anisaldehyde often play a prominent part in the overall character, but they are not as dominant as they often are in flavors represented as "French vanilla type" in the United States. Balsamic and caramel notes are especially important and often dominate the flavor.

**Lemon:** Lemon flavors in France are relatively uncomplicated—they rarely contain even a hint of lime, and typically rely on lemon peel oil for most of their character. Juicy, green and fruity notes are quite subdued in these flavors.

**Raspberry:** Raspberry flavors are unusually popular and, like strawberry flavors, represent the realistic character of a fully ripe fruit. Volatile fruity esters are present at relatively low levels, but berry and violet notes are accentuated. Green notes, especially *cis*-3-hexenol and *cis*-3-hexenyl acetate, are noticeable but not very prominent.

**Orange:** Orange flavors in France are essentially peely with only restrained juice notes. They may

contain mandarin oil as a significant secondary component.

**Apple:** Like raspberry, apple flavors are also unusually popular. They normally contain high levels of *trans*-2-hexenal and low levels of esters such as butyl acetate. Moderate levels of aliphatic alcohols, especially 2-methyl butanol, give a hint of fusel character to these flavors.

**Apricot:** This is another flavor that enjoys exceptional popularity in France. The flavor is, once again, a little deeper than it is in other countries and is highly characteristic of fully ripe fruit, containing significant levels of higher esters such as hexyl butyrate. In contrast, it also has a little leavening of green notes to prevent the character from sliding into apricot preserve.

**Caramel:** Caramel flavors, are often similar to vanilla flavors in France. Higher in buttery and maple notes, these flavors contain many elements found in vanilla flavors.

**Peach:** Peach flavors are generally fresher and lighter in France than apricot flavors, but often with higher green notes and significant peach skin character.

**Banana:** Banana is yet another fruit flavor that enjoys excessive popularity in France. The character is rarely heavily dependent on isoamyl acetate and is usually natural tasting and well balanced, with subdued green notes.

## Other Important Flavors

**Chocolate:** Chocolate flavors, like savory flavors, do not make it into

my top 10 list in France. This is not a reflection of the popularity of the flavor type, but simply of the fact that flavors are used less frequently than the natural ingredients. French chocolate flavors are often dark chocolate type and have a restrained, authentic character.

**Pear:** Pear flavors are very popular in France. They are normally characteristic of William's type pears, with a heavy dependence on ethyl *trans*-2, *cis*-4-decadienoate.

**Blackcurrant:** This is yet another flavor that is extremely popular. It is not too strongly based on buchu oil and is very characteristic of blackcurrant juice. Dimethyl sulfide and terpinen-4-ol are especially useful ingredients that help to achieve the typical "cassis" note in these flavors.

**Coconut:** French coconut flavors are natural tasting and may even be based on  $\gamma$ -octalactone rather than  $\gamma$ -nonalactone. They may also contain many of the notes found in vanilla flavors.

## Interpersonal Factors

France has many attributes in addition to its food and wine. The scenery is especially spectacular and varied but, for me, the strongly individualistic French people are the real attraction. Many of my American friends are surprised that I spend so much time in France every year; they inquire anxiously, if people are "rude" to me. Contrary to the common belief, the French are very friendly and charming people. They even accept my frequent unintentional mutilations of their language with relative equanimity.

The sole exceptions to this rule, however, are the waiters. I am personally convinced that all French waiters attend a secret training course in haughtiness. Don't fall into the trap of imagining that they are singling you out—they are not, they are equally rude to everyone. The only defense in such situations is a smattering of hopefully appropriate slang.

In business, as in everything else, things tend to go at their own pace and it is wise to accept that. Personal contact with the technical people working on one's project is always very helpful. Any effort to speak French is

much appreciated, but not necessarily expected. It is not unusual to conduct meetings in a mixture of languages to ensure that everybody is involved. Sometimes errors in spoken French are corrected, but the intention is solely educational, and certainly not to put one down for making a mistake.

My personal recommendations of things French to try during one's visit could fill a book, so I will narrow it down to just one wine, Chateau Sainte Roseline Cuvee Prieure rouge.

Not widely known, it is made locally in France in a winery in Les Arcs in the Var. The place is well worth a visit, especially if one needs to entertain his/her kids on a rainy day. In addition to superb wines, it also boasts a magnificent medieval chapel containing the spectacularly wrinkled body of the thousand-year-old Sainte Roseline in a glass case.

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