

France's under- appreciated underbelly

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Charity auctions can lead to some thoroughly unsatisfactory experiences. Because of the non- commercial nature of the transaction, both donor and bidder can all too easily feel under- rewarded. But the talk I found myself giving to the Jacob's Creek sales team at their UK headquarters near Heathrow airport the other day, all connected with a wine trade auction, was a thoroughly enriching experience - for me at any rate.

The deal was that I had to present them with a range of wines that met the following brief from the wine development director of Pernod Ricard, the French owners of Jacob's Creek: "What's hot; strategic challenges; ones to watch as challengers; what will impact buyers' decisions." I was asked to focus on South Africa, Chile, California, Italy and, especially, France. After all, there was not much point in lecturing those who sell Jacob's Creek, Montana and Campo Viejo rioja on Australia, New Zealand and Spain.

I concentrated therefore on some lovely 2006 Sauvignon Blancs and Italian whites that over- deliver (from as little as £4.99 a bottle – most of them already recommended here), some particularly impressive Cabernets and a Pinot Noir from Chile, and three mass market reds from the south of France packed with flavour and individuality. I chose the following three because they wrestle in the same retail arena as Pernod Ricard's brands, at similar prices, and are made from the same sort of grape varieties as Jacob's Creek Shiraz and Grenache/ Shiraz: **Gérard Bertrand 2003 Tautavel, Côtes du Roussillon** (£4.99 Waitrose), **Old Vines Grenache Noir 2006 Vin de Pays des Côtes Catalanes** (£5.59 Marks & Spencer) and **Boutinot's Réserve des Hospitaliers 2004 Cairanne, Côtes du Rhône Villages** (£6.99 Waitrose).

The Jacob's Creek team's most successful wines are reds based on Australia's inland sea of irrigated vines that were planted relatively recently and are already under increasing pressure as drought threatens the very existence of this source of inexpensive grapes. The 2007 crop was short and another small harvest is predicted for 2008. It occurred to me when describing the identifying characteristics of the Languedoc Roussillon wine region in the south of France – vast swathes of well- established, fashionable Grenache, Syrah/ Shiraz, Carignan and Mourvèdre vines which need no irrigation and produce large crops of extremely cheap yet difficult- to- sell grapes each year – how extraordinary it is that no- one has really harnessed this bounty into a successful global wine brand.

Foreigners have made some of the most obvious attempts. The Australian company Hardys bought an old winery near Béziers in the 1990s and began to create a brand called La Baume but they lost heart and eventually sold up – to the owners of the most successful branded wine in France, J P Chenet. But J P Chenet is famous much more for its curious lop- sided bottle than its origins, sources its grapes throughout France and has done nothing to promote the Languedoc Roussillon.

In the 1990s American wine producers also swooped on the Languedoc, mainly to make up for grape shortages associated with the phylloxera outbreak in California, just as they continue to plunder Europe for varietals of which they run short for their own brands (France for Pinot Noir, Italy for Pinot Grigio, Germany for the newly fashionable Riesling). But all this activity is about building American brands rather than the reputation for any particular place. The fruit will be sourced in California just as soon as supply and the price are right.

More recently Gallo of California have had perhaps the most notable success in a wine sold on the basis of its southern French origins with their Red Bicyclette range of Vins de Pays d'Oc, made at the Sieur d'Arques co- op in Limoux. It is no surprise that Gallo chose a co- operative as their supplier. The co- ops dominate the viticultural landscape of southern France, soaking up the majority of production, so far by guaranteeing a price to their members (even if the EU's Agricultural Commissioner might like eventually to see the end of such subsidies). What has presumably hampered sales, or at least exports, of inexpensive French wine to a great extent has been the dearth of marketing expertise in the ubiquitous wine co- ops, although this is slowly changing.

Chamarré is a relatively new pan- French brand designed to draw upon some of the better co- ops all over France to produce superior branded wine, a butterfly having been chosen as its most memorable image. Tellingly, the Chamarré varietal Syrah, presumably sourced from vineyards in the Languedoc- Roussillon for it is bottled at the Val d'Orbieu co- op outside Narbonne, is labelled with the grape's Australian name Shiraz. I asked a representative of Chamarré why the French name Syrah had been abandoned and was told "Because we are very modern".

The co- op at Tuchan on the border of Fitou and Corbières country has been a model of targeting well made, intensely flavoured reds that deliciously express their mountainous, dry- grown origins, not least at the British market. Gérard Bertrand is an ambitious wine producer based near Narbonne who has been steadily infiltrating foreign markets with similarly reliable wines grown all over Languedoc and Roussillon at several different price levels. Jeanjean and Cazal Viel have had some individual successes. Paul Mas is another innovative producer to have produced an impressive range of wines from chiefly Languedoc fruit. But perhaps the name of one of his most successful brands, Arrogant Frog, provides a clue to why all this southern French fruit has been so slow to make its way in the branded wine world. It is presumably much easier for a brand owner to deal with grape growers in a free market such as those in Australia's Murray Basin than to negotiate with co- operatives more preoccupied with the latest handouts and edicts from Brussels. After all, Pernod Ricard is nothing if not French. They have enormous wine marketing expertise. And yet even they have steered clear of their own country's wines, apart from that marketeer's dream champagne.

Fine wine lovers need not concern themselves with the conundrum of matching supply and demand in the mass market, but they would be fools to ignore what the smaller domaines of the south of France have to offer them (and not just the Languedoc outposts of such luminaries of Bordeaux as Chx Lafite, Lynch Bages, Mouton- Rothschild and AXA Millésimes). This is France's hidden treasure – handcrafted wines from an ideal Mediterranean climate but at bargain prices. A dozen of my favourite reds are listed below. I could have matched it with a similar list of ridiculously underpriced whites. (See [tasting notes](#) on more than 230 southern French wines.)

SOME TOP LANGUEDOC- ROUSSILLON REDS

Dom Bertrand Bergé, Les Mégalthes 2005 Fitou

Ch Camplazens Syrah 2005 Vin de Pays d'Oc

Dom Le Cazal, Le Pas de Zarat 2003 Minervois

Les Clos Perdus, L'Extreme 2005 Vin de Pays des Côtes Catalanes

Clos du Gravillas, Vous en Voulez en Voilà 2004 Vin de Pays des Côtes de Brian

Dom Gayda, L'Archet Cuvée Occitane Rouge 2005 Vin de Pays d'Oc

Hecht & Bannier 2005 St Chinian

Dom Eric Laguerre, Le Ciste Rouge 2004 Vin de Pays des Côtes Catalanes

Mas Champart, Côte d'Arbo 2004 St- Chinian

Mas Conscience, L'As 2005 Coteaux du Languedoc

Mas Jullien 2000 and 2004 Coteaux du Languedoc

Dom Sainte Rose, Le Pinnacle Syrah 2005 Vin de Pays des Côtes de Thongue

For stockists see www.winesearcher.com and for many more tasting notes and scores on southern French reds, whites and pinks see [here](#).

See [here](#) for a full list of the wines I showed.