

The Canal du Midi

26 Aug 2009 by Jancis Robinson

Here's a little film of vineyards next to the Canal du Midi, the 17th-century miracle of engineering that connected the Atlantic to the Mediterranean and which is virtually unchanged today, except that it is used by tourists rather than for trade.

Although the hills of the Minervois are in the distance, the vineyards immediately by the canal do not have *appellation contrôlée* status. They are on such low-lying ground that they could easily be flooded during the phylloxera crisis, we are told, thereby bringing wealth to their owners in the late 19th century who were able to produce wine at a time of great shortage. On some of the neighbouring land, with its network of ditches, rice is grown today.

There are some great wines in the Languedoc, but they tend to come from higher ground and much less fertile soils. There is no doubt that the landscape has changed considerably in our 21 years in the Languedoc, with far, far less land devoted to the vine now that French wine consumption has plummeted. When we arrived in 1989 vines carpeted the entire region. Now it is much more of a patchwork with many parcels having been planted to sunflowers or olives or, commonly, simply left fallow. That said, there is plenty of planting of new vines too. The anarchic Languedoc has been a law unto itself (see, for example, [Naughty French](#) and the [resulting thread](#) in members' forum) ever since the growers so successfully rioted at the beginning of the 20th century in protest at the low prices they were getting for their grapes.