

Carignan

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Carignan is a curious red wine grape that provokes strong reactions in those who know about it. Yet, despite the fact it was the single most common vine variety planted in the world's most important wine producer France until it was overtaken by Merlot at the end of the 20th century, most wine drinkers have never heard of it.

Carignan's origins are presumed Spanish although the variety was long since supplanted by Garnacha (Grenache) in its native Cariñena in Aragon. In Spain today it is much more common in Catalonia, in Costers del Segre, Penedes, Tarragona, Terra Alta, Montsant and Priorat where, the old bushvines grown on the local *llicorella* schist can yield wines of real concentration and interest, although the Carignan is invariably blended, mainly with Garnacha. As Mazuelo, Carignan is also known in Rioja although only a handful of producers, including Marques de Murrieta, have focused on it.

As a vine, Carignan has a host of disadvantages. It ripens late so can be successfully grown only in relatively warm climates. It is also susceptible to both powdery mildew and downy mildew and needs extensive spraying in all but the driest climates. It is not suitable for mechanical harvesting because its stalks are particularly tough.

As a wine, Carignan can be pretty tough too. The wine produced is typically high in rough tannins and acidity and in southern France the softening vinification method of carbonic maceration routinely has to be used to ensure that wines made from Carignan can be drunk reasonably young. I find a rank bitterness in many Languedoc red blends too dependent on high-yielding Carignan.

So why is Carignan so widely planted in the south of France? In one word: yield. The Carignan vine is quite exceptionally productive, regularly churning out as much as 200 hectolitres per hectare, more than four times as much as decent Cabernet Sauvignon, for example.

When the even lower quality Aramon vine that dominated the productive vineyards of the Languedoc in the first half of the 20th century suffered after the extremely cold weather of 1956 and 1963, the late-budding Carignan was the most popular choice for replanting. The hundreds of vine growers then returning from Algeria, the so-called *pieds noirs*, already knew how successful Carignan had been in the (much hotter, drier) vineyards of North Africa and by the mid 1960s had transformed the Languedoc into a sea of Carignan vines.

Although the proportion of the Languedoc-Roussillon devoted to Carignan has been declining steadily as the so-called *cepages ameliorateurs* (improving grape varieties) Syrah, Grenache, Mourvèdre, Cinsault and to a certain extent Cabernet and Merlot have replaced the gnarled old bushes of Carignan, Carignan is still the most planted vine. As growers in the south of France have taken advantage of the EU grants designed to encourage them to pull up vines, Carignan has been the obvious candidate and growers actually planting young Carignan vines are very few and far between. France's (which effectively means southern France's) total are planted with Carignan virtually halved during the 1990s.

The result of this varietal evolution is that much of the Carignan that remains tends to be relatively old. Old-vine Carignan grapes, fully ripened on infertile soils in a warm summer, produce by far the best Carignan wine. The key here is that yields have been restricted and there is enough ripe fruit character to mask the naturally high tannins and acidity. Some Languedoc producers even make a feature of their old-vine Carignan, most notably in the hills of the Corbières and in Montpeyroux where the talented Sylavin Fadat, one of the first producers to earn a reputation for a 100% varietal Carignan, admits it is probably best as an ingredient adding acidity to a blend.

Because so much Carignan is planted in the Languedoc and Roussillon, the local appellation *contrôlé* regulations have to embrace this tough grape variety. Accordingly wines such as Minervois, Corbières, Faugeres, Fitou, Coteaux du Languedoc and St-Chinian all specify a certain minimum proportion of Carignan in the blend with the Grenache, Syrah et al - although this proportion has been declining as more and more Carignan is pulled out. A good example of how the AC laws do not necessarily enshrine maximum quality, but are pragmatic enough to acknowledge the status quo.

Outside the AC system some of the more energetic co-operatives such as Mont Tauch in Fitou have successfully crafted some Carignan blends for value-conscious wine lovers in northern Europe - although one has to say that Carignan brings little other than volume to the blend.

In Roussillon especially some pale-skinned Carignan Blanc can be found and the odd gifted winemaker has been known to make something interesting from it.

But perhaps the most delicious Carignan is not Carignan at all but Carignano, as the variety is called when planted, as it is to a limited extent, in the hot, dry south western corner of Sardinia. The variety's migration to this Mediterranean island presumably coincided with Aragon domination of this part of the Mediterranean but if Carignan has a perfect spot, it seems to be here, although it maybe partly because of the age of the Carignano bushvines here. The Santadi co-operative is the prime producer, making a range of warm, spicy Carignano del Sulcis reds at different prices and in impressive quantity, most of them matured and polished in small oak barrels. Terre Brune is the most famous, Rocca Rubia one of the wine world's bargains.

As Carignane with an extra E the variety has also been quite widely grown in California's hot Central Valley (raisin country), although it is not reckoned smart enough to make an appearance on many labels. Again, it has been treasured for its commercially useful high yields, though both Cline Cellars and, especially, Ridge have produced creditable examples. The vine is also grown to a certain extent in Mexico, Argentina, Chile and Uruguay. At one time it was extremely popular in Israel but that country's wine industry is now more interested in quality. But we can be sure that there are still some extremely old Carignan vines throughout the remaining vineyards of the old North African wine industry. In the right hands they might well be persuaded to produce some quite interesting wine now that their natural tendency to over-produce has been curbed by age.

In South Africa, some Carignan planted on the granite slopes of the Pederberg in Paarl have been fashioned into a massive but delightful wine by Charles Back of Fairview - but this is a most unusual example of Carignan thriving in the New World.

See also [Can Carignan\(e\) ever be great?](#), my account of what was the world's first, to my knowledge, day-long tasting event devoted to this controversial variety.

Some particularly successful Carignans:

Domaine Bertrand Bergé, Les Mégalithes 2001 Fitou
Domaine de l'Aupilhac, Le Carignan Vin de Pays
Ch de Lastours, Cuvée Simone Descamps, Corbières
Clos Manyetes from Clos Mogador, Priorat
Val Llach, Priorat
Terre Brune, Carignano del Sulcis, Santadi co-op
Rocca Rubine, Carignano del Sulcis, Santadi co-op
Pegleg Carignan, Fairview, South Africa