

Maury/Fenouillèdes - a brand new dry French red

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Okay. Now those of you who are *au fait* with French wine lore will already know that it is a solecism to refer to the Languedoc-Roussillon as a single region. The Languedoc is the ancient land of the Occitans, those who said *oc* instead of *oui* (or more usually *non*). Roussillon is the bit round the corner towards Spain, where the people are Catalan first and French only a reluctant and relatively recent second.

But are you ready for this? - a wine region in the Occitan, north-western corner of Roussillon with such potential and distinctive character that it has recently attracted investors from St-Emilion, South Africa, Tain l'Hermitage, The Hague, Pomerol, Châteauneuf-du-Pape, and Rutland.

Vins de Pays des Coteaux de Fenouillèdes may not trip off the tongue but that is hardly the point of the exceptionally concentrated dry reds now being made in the upper Agly valley round such villages as Maury, Latour de France, Caramany and St Paul and St Martin de Fenouillet.

The first name may be known to French wine geeks for its slightly rustic answer to port, the next two as permitted suffixes to the local *appellation contrôlée*, Côtes de Roussillon Villages, or CDRV as it is known by local wine producers.

But the wave of incomers here, and the most ambitious of the locals, reckon the rules of CDRV are largely irrelevant to what is so special about their beautiful corner of the Pyrenean foothills. They want to make a more specific splash.

It is quite obvious as one drives up the Agly valley, further and further from the caravans and produce trucks on the autoroute, that this is wild west vine country. We pass Mas Amiel which has done so much to make the sweet wines of Maury famous. Its pointy MA trademark is cut into the turf on the chalky hillside, but this is still relatively tame, gentle countryside, well under 200m above the Mediterranean. The Fenouillèdes vineyards are planted as high as 600m in what looks like a cross between Spaghetti Western terrain and the rockier reaches of northern Spain. The narrow valley is overlooked by the stern relics of Catharism in the form of the ruined Château de Quéribus.

Only the barest covering of rock with soil, and the widely spaced low black vine stumps, suggest that this part of the world is so dry that it can only produce low yields of very dense, alcoholic wine. The soils vary according to village: schist (just like Priorat in Spanish Catalonia and the port country of the Douro valley) round Maury; more granite, gneiss and limestone-clay round Latour de France and Caramany.

Historically the local grapes are most definitely the drought-lovers Grenache and Carignan (just like Priorat across the Spanish border). The problem with CDRV, the *appellation* that encompasses a vast proportion of Roussillon, is that it requires some Syrah in the blend, recently increased from 10 to 30 per cent, and sets an upper limit on the permitted alcohol level in the final wine of 15 per cent.

'Our big problem here is that the vines only reach full maturity at 15.5 per cent or even more,' says Marc (until recently Mark) Hoddy, a young Englishman who has chosen to settle here after making wine in places as distant as Australia and Chile. He has staked his future on Domaine de la Pertuisane, 11 hectares (26 acres) of windswept 80-year-old Grenache bushes clinging to the schist and would like to make wines that perfectly express this combination of grape and soil. 'Syrah's easy to make but it's not Maury,' he says firmly.

Vineyard manager Gilles Troullier oversees the Latour de France operation of the big northern Rhône firm Chapoutier and has wide experience outside this corner of France. 'They have great *terroirs* here. We need to emphasize their minerality'.

Carignan, the tart helpmeet of southern French vineyards, is the most widely planted vine and can provide useful acid in a blend, especially with super-ripe Grenache. Some producers such as Domaine de Poudrouz have so much Mourvèdre planted that they even make a 100 per cent varietal version of it.

Wines carrying the name of perhaps the most famous incomer, Jean-Luc Thunevin of St-Emilion's Château de Valandraud, are made of equal parts Grenache and Carignan. At least such was the recipe for Calvet-Thunevin's 2001

Vin de Pays. But this is such extreme and exaggerated wine that many palates will find its CDVR *appellation* counterpart, made of equal parts of Grenache, Carignan and Syrah, better balanced and more supple. The problem with minerality is that it is not fruity and the experience of consuming many of these wines, like those of Priorat, is more akin to licking a stone than drinking a liquid.

Talented American specialist importer Eric Solomon, so plugged in to Priorat that his wife makes one of the most famous examples Clos Erasmus, has already signed up Calvet-Thunevin as well as Clos del Rey which is made by one of Thunevin's Roussillon partners Jacques Montagné. He has a good line in self-deprecation. Just after reeling off the names of his importers in the US, Japan and Canada he answered my next question with 'business card? Me? I'm just an amateur'.

Jean-Louis Tribouley came to make wine in the region because he had been living in Franche Comté on the other side of France but his Italian wife demanded somewhere sunnier. He was encouraged by the obvious quality of the CDRV wines made by Olivier Pithon who decamped from the Loire to Calce, where Domaine Gauby, Roussillon superstar, is also based. 'There are lots of people making wine here now who have no *vigneron* tradition at all,' he explains, 'but we all benefit by exchanging views'.

The influx from Bordeaux has been particularly notable, including not just Thunevin but Stephane d'Arfeuille of Pomerol's Château La Pointe, Yves Blanc of Ch Pas de l'Ane and, of course, a member of Bordeaux's ubiquitous Lurton family. They will presumably find the grapes and terrain very much more foreign than Paul Ferraud of Domaine Pegau who commutes from his rocky Grenache vineyards in Châteauneuf-du-Pape. Jean-Vincent Ridon comes all the way from Cape Town where he runs Signal Hill winery while Eric Monné commutes weekly between his job in the European patent office in The Hague and his roots here which are now expressed in the impressive wines of Clot de l'Oum. The Limoux coop has teamed up with the Maury coop and both Parcé of Banyuls on the coast and Domaine Gauby now have joint ventures here, the latter with local *vigneron* Eric Laguerre and British importers Richards Walford of Rutland in Domaine du Soula.

Oh, and now the authorities have decided to disband the Coteaux de Fenouillèdes *vin de pays* altogether, leaving some fascinatingly distinctive wine without a name to call its own.

For more information see www.fenouilledes-selection.com.

Some especially promising producers

- Calvet-Thunevin (Jean-Roger Calvet)
- Clot de l'Oum (Eric Monné)
- Elodie Grébul (ditto)
- Domaine de la Pertuisane (Mark Hoddy)
- Domaine Poudéroux (Robert Poudéroux)
- Clos del Rey (Jacques Montagné)
- Le Soula (Eric Laguerre)