Languedoc

20 Aug 2008 by Jancis Robinson

In a nutshell: France's New World wine region, with some improving appellations too.

Main grapes: Carignan, Syrah, Grenache, Mourvèdre, Cinsaut (red); Maccabéo, Grenache Blanc, Bourboulenc, Picpoul, Clairette (white).

The Languedoc is my adoptive French home. I see it as Provence without the tourists, without too many incomers like me pushing up prices and without, regrettably, the ubiquitous smell of lavender, thyme and pines. It is, however, archetypal Mediterranean wine country, with wild landscapes, Spain just over the Pyrenees, and vines stretching in every direction. Those which stretch on the flattest land, notably the vast, arid plains between Narbonne and Montpellier, are chiefly responsible for France's still significant production of basic light red Vin de Table and therefore for much of the European wine lake.

The world's biggest wine region, a swathe of monoculture round France's western Mediterranean coast, is also, at long last, important in the international wine market - not to say vital for the economic future of European wine production.

Although the Languedoc was the first French region to be introduced to vine-growing and wine-making by the Romans, its modern reputation as a wine producer has been for quantity at the expense of quality. Once the railways had reached this reliably sunny southern part of France, it was developed as an outdoor factory producing vast quantities of light red to shipped to the recently industrialized north of the country. The hillside vineyards planted by the Romans were rapidly swamped by the sea of much less demanding vineyards established on the wide coastal plain.

So high were yields (often far more than 200 hl/ha) and so ignoble the grape varieties that France came to be dependent on importing robust, deep-coloured red wine from Algeria and then Italy and Spain to bolster the produce of the Languedoc. Co-operatives established themselves as the dominant force here, and still the great majority of vine-growers, peasant smallholders in the main, have no experience at all of winemaking.

By the 1980s the Languedoc was regularly producing 10% of the entire planet's wine output, but as the decade progressed, and French consumption of basic Vin de Table plummeted, it became clear that there was no apparent long-term future for the sort of wine on which the Languedoc rural economy was based.

Today one of France's most pressing problems is how to transform the Languedoc (and southern Italy and many parts of Greece, Spain and Portugal) from a region of thousands of vignerons producing wine no-one wants to drink into a much smaller one in which perhaps hundreds of producers concentrate on the medium to high quality wine of which the region is demonstrably capable.

The schists and garrigue-covered hills of the Fitou, Corbières, Minervois and Languedoc appellations are home to some of France's oldest vines, gnarled stumps of Carignan mainly, which ooze super-concentrated, often super-tannic deep red, suitable for blending with more recent plantings of fashionably Rhônish varieties.

Since the 1990s the Languedoc has been producing two types of wine, among which are some of the best value bottles in the world: not just these and other appellation wines but members of the rank below, Vin de Pays d'Oc, which has become the region's single most important product, and a host of other, more geographically specific Vins de Pays, many of them sold as varietals, wines named after the grape variety from which they are principally made. A recent appellation, Languedoc, may contain a blend of wines from anywhere in the entire Languedoc-Roussillon regions.

This is red wine country, although small amounts of rosé (particularly from Cinsaut, Syrah and Grenache) and increasingly interesting whites are made (from a cocktail of varieties including Grenache Blanc, Bourboulenc, Rolle, Maccabéo (Viura of Rioja), Marsanne and Roussanne of the Rhone, and the local varieties Picpoul, Terret and Clairette. Tough old Carignan still makes up the backbone of many Languedoc reds, but the proportion of so-called 'improving varieties' has increased considerably over the past twenty years. These include Grenache, Mourvèdre and, particularly, Syrah. Thanks to the influence of the southern Rhône to the east of this enormous sweep of vineyards, Grenache predominates in the east of the Languedoc while Syrah is more important in the west. The late-ripening Mourvèdre is restricted to the warmest sites.

Selling prices have been very low, which has put a natural brake on modernisation of the Languedoc's often primitive wineries. Destemmers and oak barrels are by no means taken for granted, and the prevailing habit has been to vinify whole bunches of Carignan in a version of Beaujolais' carbonic maceration, so as to soften its often rasping tannins. Things are becoming more sophisticated, however, and the best wines offer a bordeaux-like structure (rarely more than 13.5 per cent alcohol) to support much wilder, more Mediterranean flavours - at prices seldom more than AC Bordeaux.

That said, there is still a vast amount of cynical 'commodity wine' on the market, typically Corbières and Minervois that is just a step up from basic Vin de Table and has no regional character whatsoever other than light colour and an absence of positive flavour.

The region is still dominated by village co-operatives which lack marketing expertise but there are more and more exceptions to this rule, and land is still cheap enough to attract ambitious individuals to start their own winemaking enterprises.

Fitou, unusually for the Languedoc an all-red appellation, is its most southerly, in the arid foothills of the Pyrenees to the south of the Corbières region. Its enormous potential is largely unrealised, perhaps because the dominant co-operatives, with the admirable exception of the Cave de Mont-Tauch, have been slow to realise that quality is the key to survival.

Some favourite producers: Bertrand-Bergé, Castelmaure co-op, Dom Marie Fita, Mont Tauc co-op, Ch de Nouvelles.

Corbières, just to the north, is, for the moment, a much more exciting appellation, with scores of ambitious, dedicated smallholders determined to persuade the varied, dry, hillsides of the appellation to yield herby, slightly wild red wines of real quality and integrity. The concentrated dry reds made here can age well although some of the cheapest bottlings of Corbières (and Minervois), however, taste little better than basic Vin de Table.

Some favourite producers: Aussières, La Baronne, Caraguilhes, Cascadais, **Clos de l'**Arbel, Clos Perdus, Étang de Colombes, Fontsainte, Grand Crès, Lastours, Mansenoble, Les Ollieux, Les Palais-Rondolin, Pech-Latt, Rêvérend, **Sérame**, La Voulte-Gasparets.

Immediately inland of Corbières are the gentler hills responsible for **Blanquette de Limoux** and **Crémant de Limoux**, the Languedoc's very serviceable traditional method sparkling wines. The former is made chiefly from the region's Blanquette grape (the Mauzac of Gaillac), the latter includes substantially more Chardonnay and Chenin Blanc and is a less distinctive but probably more sophisticated product. **Limoux** Limoux itself can be a source of good-value barrel-fermented, still Chardonnays, and some fine Pinot Noir is also grown here.

Côtes de Malepère and **Cabardès** are twin wine zones south and north of the walled city of Carcassonne which can produce some excellent-value, relatively simple reds in which the grapes of South West France (Cabernet, Merlot, Malbec and Fer) are blended with those of the Languedoc.

Minervois, in the north-west corner of the Languedoc, produces slightly smoother, more refined wines than Corbières, but is otherwise quite similar (and equally dominated by co-operatives with extremely varied degrees of skill). The hills are gentler here but some of the most characterful wines are made high up in the foothills of the Cévennes, notably above the ancient wine village of **La Livinière**,which has its own sub-appellation. A small amount of dry rosé and increasingly sophisticated white is also made.

Some favourite producers: Clos Centelles and Domaines Borie de Maurel, La Combe Blanche, Maris and Piccinini. Other producers who have produced exceptional wines include Châteaux Coupe-Roses, de Gourgazaud, La Grave, Laville-Bertrou, d'Oupia, St-Jacques d'Albas, La Tour Boisé, Villerambert-Julien and, Domaine Ste-Eulalie.

St-Chinian is right up in the dramatically craggy Cévennes foothills and benefits from the dynamism of the dominant co-operative, whose wines are sold under the Berloup label (whites can also be good). Sandwiched between eastern Minervois and Faugères, it can produce characterful reds which represent a halfway house between Syrah and Grenache influences on the ubiquitous Carignan. As elsewhere throughout the Languedoc, many of the most interesting wines are classified as Vins de Pays.

Some favourite producers: Berlou Co-op, Borie la Vitarelle, Canet Valette, Canet-Valette, Hecht et Bannier, Ch Cazal-Viel, **La Grange de Quatre Sous**, Des Jougla, Mas Champart, Moulin des Cèbre, Navarre, Cave de Roquebrun, Viranel, Château Coujan and Domaines du Fraisse and des Jougla.

Faugères has a similar profile although the wines here can be rather smoother and rounder than those of neighbouring St-Chinian. Both St-Chinian and Faugères are effectively regarded as special 'crus' or growths within the wide-ranging Coteaux du Languedoc appellation which is gradually being replaced by the Languedoc appellation and sub-appellations such as Terrasses du Larzac, Pézenas and Grès de Montpellier.

Some favourite producers: Dom Alquier, Dom Léon Barral, Ch des Estanilles, Ch de la Liquière.

The wide-ranging and very varied **Languedoc** appellation (until very recently Coteaux du Languedoc but now also permitted to include wine from Roussillon) stretches from the strange seaside hill of La Clape on the coast east of Narbonne (particularly good for marine-scented, dry whites based on Bourboulenc) via the mountainous vineyards of Pic-St-Loup to the south-eastern border of the southern Rhône Valley. This terrain yields hundreds of interesting Vins de Pays made from a wide range of vine varieties, but properties such as Domaines d'Aupilhac and de l'Hortus, Châteaux de Flaugergues, de la Negly, Pech-Redon, Pech Céleyran, Rouquette-sur-Mer and La Sauvageonne, and Mas Jullien also make AC reds, whites and rosés to show they have not given up France's beloved appellation precepts altogether. **Picpoul de Pinet** is a full-bodied white speciality made around Pinet from Picpoul grapes.

Some favourite producers: Alquelière, **Anglès**, Aupilhac, Gérard Bertrand (and other Languedoc appellations), Capion, Clovallon, Colombette, Flaugergues, Font Caude, Grange des Pères, Hortus, Mas Bruguière, Mas de Daumas Gassac, Mas Jullien, Mas du Soleilla, Négly, Peyre-Rose, Prieuré St-Jean de Bébian, Puech-Haut, St-Martin de la Garrigue, Ste-Rose.

One reason why I like the Languedoc so much is that it produces the full gamut of wine styles: not just reds, whites and rosés well-mannered enough to drink on a hot summer's day, and the fizz of Limoux, but also not a few sweet wines, vins doux naturels

made from the Muscat grape. **Muscats de Frontignan, Lunel, Mireval** and, most delicate and tender of all, **St-Jean-de-Minervois**. These golden syrups tend to be about 16 per cent alcohol, should be served well-chilled, but once opened keep for a week or more in the refrigerator. As in Roussillon, an increasing proportion of the region's grapes are made into scented, dry, full-bodied white table wines.