

Languedoc

20 Aug 2008 by Jancis Robinson

It is a **subhall**: France's New World wine region, with some improving appellations too.

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

The Languedoc is my adopted French home. I see it as Provence without the tourists, without too many rooms like me pushing up prices and without, regrettably, the ubiquitous smell of lavender. Rhyme and prose. It is, however, an integral Mediterranean wine country, with wild landscapes. Spain just over the Pyrenees, and vines stretching in every direction. Those which stretch on the farthest land, notably the vine, and plain between Narbonne and Montpellier, are chiefly responsible for France's still significant production of basic light red [Vin de France](#).

and therefore for much of the European wine

take.

The world's biggest wine region, a swathe of monoculture round France's western Mediterranean coast: it 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 of the expense of quality. Once the valleys 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 industrialised 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 wine yields (often for 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's rural economy was based.

Today one of France's most pressing problems is how to reinvigorate the Languedoc (and southern Italy and many parts of Greece, Spain and Portugal) from a region of thousands of vine-growers 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 granite-covered hills of the Fluvi, Coteaux, Minervois and Languedoc appellations are home to some of France's oldest vines, graced stumps of Carignan mainly, which are super-concentrated, often super-tannic deep red, suitable for blending with more recent plantings of fashionably Rhôneish varieties.

Since the 1950s 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 [Vin de France](#).

... 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 region.

This is not 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, Bourboulon, Rolle, Maccabéo (Virus of Réjou), Marsanne and Roussanne of the Rhône, 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-planting Mourvèdre is restricted to the western sites.

Selling prices have been very low, which has put a natural brake on modernisation of the Languedoc's often primitive wineries. Disasters 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 Breugnot [carbonic maceration](#).

... so as to suffer its often ragged tannins. Things are becoming more sophisticated, however, and the best wines offer a baroque-like structure (rarely more than 13.5 per cent alcohol) to support much wider, 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 Coteaux 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 enterprise.

Fluvi, usually for the Languedoc an off-red appellation, is its most southerly, in the foothills of the Pyrenees to the south of the Coteaux region. Its enormous potential is largely unrealised, perhaps because the dominant co-operatives, with the admirable exception of the Caus de Mont-Tach, have been slow to realise that quality is the key to survival.

Some favourite producers: Bertrand-Bergé, Cabanac-cuq, Dom Marie Flak, Mont Tach co-op, Ch de Nouvelles.

Coteaux, 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, hillside of the appellation to yield fairly, slightly wild red wines of real quality and integrity. The concentrated dry reds made here can top well although some of the cheapest bottlings of Coteaux (and Minervois), however, taste little better than basic Vin de Table.

Some favourite producers: Aussières, La Serronne, Carquières, Casteillon, Clos de l'Abbaye, Clos Pautou, Clos de Coteaux, Fontaine, Grand Clos, Lestours, Minervois, Les Ollives, Les Pâles-Rondelles, Puch-Lat, Rivarand, Sèze, La Violette-Caprières.

Immediately inland of Coteaux are the gentler hills responsible for **Bisquitte de Limoux** and **Crémant de Limoux**, the Languedoc's very unexciting traditional method sparkling wines. The former is made chiefly from the region's Muscadet grape (the Muscat of Galles), 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 Chardonnay, and some the Pinot Noir is also grown here.

Cotes de Malzieu and **Castellan** 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 Fete) are blended with those of the Languedoc.

Minervois, in the north-west corner of the Languedoc, produces slightly smoother, more refined reds than Coteaux, 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 whites 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 whites is also made.

Some favourite producers: Clos Certeilles and Domaines Bona de Mauviel, La Combe Blanche, Marie and Picotons. Other producers who have produced exceptional wines include Châteaux Coupe-Roses, de Gourgues, La Grève, Laillé-Bertou, d'Ogier, St-Jacques d'Alais, La Tour Blak, Villersben-Julien and Domaine St-Etienne.

St-Clément 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 Berlejac label (which 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 Vin de Pays.

Some favourite producers: Berlejac Co-op, Bona le Vignoble, Olivier Vignoles, Cane Vignoles, Hecht et Bannier, Ch-Casal-Viel, La Grange de Quatre Sols, Des Jougis, Mia Champart, Moudou des Cèdes, Nèze, Caus de Riquelme, Vignat, Châteaux Coujès and Domaines du Fossès and des Jougis.

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

Some favourite producers: Dom Aiguat, Dom Léon Barré, Ch des Etavelles, Ch de la Léprie.

The wide-ranging and very varied Languedoc appellation (and very recently Coteaux du Languedoc but now also permitted to include wine from Roussillon) stretches from the strange seaside bit of La Clape on the coast east of Narbonne (particularly good for marine-scented, dry whites based on Bourboulenc) via the eucalyptus vineyards of Pic-Si-Loup to the south-eastern border of the southern Rhône Valley. The terrain yields hundreds of interesting Vins de Pays made from a wide range of vine varieties, but properties such as Domaine d'Agulhon and de Ponsac, Château de Fleurgues, de la

Nagy, Pech-Rabot, Pech-Cabeyres, Roquefort-sur-Mer and La Saucyenne, and Max Julien also make AC reds, whites and rosés to show they have not given up France's beloved appellation principle altogether. **Picpoul de Pinet** is a full-bodied white specialty made around Pinet from Picpoul grapes.

Some favourite producers: Aiguillon, Angles, Aquilac, Gérard Bernard (and other Languedoc appellations), Capin, Coubalin, Colombat, Fleurgues, Fort Caudé, Grange des Pères, Horta, Max Bruguère, Max de Courtes Gassic, Max Julien, Max de Saliès, Nègy, Peyre-Rose, Pinoux St-Jean de Bébian, Puch-Haut, St-Martin de la Garigue, St-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 sweeter wines, [see below](#).

made from the Muscat grape: **Muscat de Frontignan, Lunel, Miraval** and, most delicate and tender of all, **St-Jean-de-Minervois**. These golden nupes 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 sparkling, dry, full-bodied white table wines.