

## Roussillon

3 Sep 2008 by Jancis Robinson

**In a nutshell:** A tradition of rich dessert wines but reinventing its characterful dry reds and whites.

**Grapes:** Grenache (red), Muscat, Grenache Blanc, Maccabéo (white)

Roussillon is often appended to the Languedoc, as in Languedoc-Roussillon, but has a quite distinct character of its own, in landscape, in ethnic roots (Roussillon still regards itself as part of Catalonia across the border in Spain), and in wine styles. Whereas the Languedoc is almost entirely dependent on vine-growing, the farmers in Roussillon's fertile valleys, overlooked by the brooding Pyrenees, can choose between all sorts of fruits. The climate here is almost Spanish, and is particularly suitable for growing cherries, plums, peaches, apricots and nectarines.

Roussillon's wine speciality was traditionally a wide variety of [vins doux naturels](#), France's answer to port, in which barely fermented sweet grape juice is stabilised by a good dollop of neutral grape spirit (a technique discovered long before the distillation of stronger stuff).

**Banyuls** is the most revered of these, made mainly from almost-raisined dark Grenache grapes grown on rocky, terraced vineyards that tumble into the sea just north of the Spanish border. The vin doux naturel producers employ all sorts of methods to trap their region's sunshine in their wines. Some put the young wine in large glass jars or barrels and leave them out in the hot sunshine to bake. Others employ a complicated regime of moving it between barrels of different sizes and ages. Most leave the wine for some time to bake under the rafters during at least one summer. The result is wines which can vary from light red to deep brown, often tasting quite raisiny, sometimes having acquired a nutty, almost rancid taste called 'rancio'. Banyuls Grand Cru wines have to be aged in wood for more than two and half years, but producers such as Domaines du Mas Blanc and de la Rectorie may prolong the ageing for many years to produce uniquely treacly yet balanced wines which are recommended by many fastidious palates as good partners for chocolate.

**Maury** is Banyuls' inland cousin and wines made by the likes of Mas Amiel can be almost as fine. Between Banyuls and Maury is a vast area allowed to produce both **Rivesaltes** and **Muscat de Rivesaltes**, which are generally very much less distinguished products, better suited for pouring into halves of melon than for sipping with attention. Muscat de Rivesaltes is produced in enormous quantity, mainly from the less distinguished Muscat of Alexandria vine (unlike Languedoc and Beaumes-de-Venise Muscats). A really well-made Rivesaltes such as some of the older examples that can still be found in some cellars here can be very fine but many are vague blends of Grenache of various depths of colour, aged, not necessarily in very demanding circumstances, for the statutory minimum of just over a year.

In the past, the unfortified wines of Roussillon were generally less remarkable but there are an increasing number of exceptions – not least because of a marked influx of wine producers, some already well established elsewhere both in France and abroad. This phenomenon is particularly marked in the upper [Agly Valley](#) inland from Perpignan where ancient vines and sometimes schistous soils can produce very high quality, deeply flavoured reds and fine, minerally and intensely individual whites, often labelled **Vin de Pays des Côtes Catalanes** since this exciting corner of France does not have its own appellation. The **Côtes du Roussillon-Villages** appellation is restricted to the northern third of the Roussillon region, with the recent **Côtes du Roussillon Les Aspres** created for superior wines from the south. Many of Roussillon's robust reds and heady whites are labelled simply **Côtes du Roussillon**.

**Some favourite producers:** Calvet-Thunevin, Domaine Cazes, Domaine du Clot de l'Oum, Domaine Gauby, Domaine Laguerre, Domaine Mas de Lavail, Mas Amiel, Domaine du Mas Blanc, Domaine du Mas Cremat, Domaine Matassa, Domaine Pertuisane, Domaine Olivier Python, Domaine de la Rectorie, Roc des Anges, Sarda-Malet, Domaine des Schistes, Domaine Le Soula.

The **Côtes du Roussillon-Villages** appellations are still struggling to establish their identity and many of the region's most interesting wines are Vin de Pays or even, in the case of Ferrand-Trapani, Vin de Table. Some of the most interesting wines are full-bodied, often called whites flavoured with such varieties as Roussanne, Rolle (Yvernet) and Marsanne with Grenache Blanc providing body and Maccabéo providing acidity. Muscat is increasingly made into a grapey, dry, sometimes lightly fizzy white. **Collioure** is the heady, almost fiery red wine made from well ripened Grenache vines in the Banyuls zone. It speaks Spanish rather than French.