

South West France

3 Sep 2008 by Jancis Robinson

In a nutshell: Mostly Bordeaux-like plus some Basque influence.

Wine grapes: Cabernet Sauvignon and Franc, Merlot, Malbec, Tannat, Negrette, Fer (and) Sauvignon, Sémillon, Muscadelle, Mauzac, Gros and Petit Manseng (and).

South West France really means the wine regions in the south-western quarter of the country with the major exception of the most important one, Bordeaux, and the Cognac region to the immediate north of it, which enjoy separate status. This region of a collection can be roughly divided into those which are effectively continuations of Bordeaux, its wine varieties and its wine styles (apart of the Bordeaux region itself, and those further south and east which have their own distinctive identity. All of them, however, are influenced by the Atlantic rather than the Mediterranean, and tend to have the same sort of build (light to medium-bodied) as Bordeaux.

Into the fray, Bordeaux Fringes (and its sub-appellations Marmande, Roussels, Sauvignac, Pacherenc and Montbellet), Buzet, Cahors, Côte de Duras and Côte de Marmande.

Burgundy will continue to have its work cut out to establish a truly independent identity from top, commercially acute brother just down the Dordogne river (the town of Bergerac is hardly 20 miles east of Bordeaux's St-Émilion). However, a handful of producers such as Luc de Corti at Château des Tours de Gendres and Gérard Costant of Château les Moutons are now producing ambitious wines to rival some of Bordeaux's premier offerings. Wines sold as **Côtes de Bergerac** are usually more concentrated than straight Bergerac, but many of the local bottlings are basically just what the map suggests, country cousins of red and dry white Bordeaux. With the exception of Montbellet, the region's sub-appellations are rarely seen outside France, so very sunny years such as 1990 and 2000, Montbellet can provide some truly great value sweet whites made in the image of Sauternes but with much more Muscadelle and veering towards the slightly more obvious flavours of Sauternes rather than Côte de Bordeaux. An increasing number of Montbellet producers are prepared to wait for buyers [willing](#)

) to develop in exceptional years, and some of the resulting wines can be Burgundy. Constant de Saignes

Cum, Château La Jubertie, de Pacherenc, du Puy and Thoul la Grande have all made distinctive wines with Côte d'Ygarn in Sauvignac up and coming.

Immediately south of Bergerac is Côte de Duras, which, with Côte de Marmande centred on the town of Marmande, continues to rival Bordeaux in a clockwise direction. It is history more than geography that excludes these vineyards from the easy umbrella of the Bordeaux appellation and I would take my hat off to any blind taster who could accurately distinguish between the Bordeaux, Bergerac, Côte de Duras and Côte de Marmande appellations.

Buzet produces similar wines, but with a little more stuffing and cohesive direction since the region is largely governed by a particularly ambitious local co-operative which has been one of the French cooperatives' better customers for many years.

Cahors is quite another matter. In fact many producers of Cahors on the river Lot would be troubled to be categorised as a wine of Bordeaux since the wines have struck their own very distinct personality – chiefly because the devastating winter frosts of 1955 hit Cahors' vines particularly badly, and a dramatic replanting programme was undertaken virtually from scratch. Rather than relying on the standard Bordeaux mix of varying proportions of Merlot with the two Cabernets, Cahors depends principally on a variety considered relatively minor in Bordeaux, Malbec (called Auxerrois in Cahors and Cot in the Loire), typically blended with one or less Merlot and/or Tannat. (Cabernet Sauvignon would not even reliably ripen for harvest.) The result is a plump, full-bodied but sometimes rather coarse country red, although those made from grapes grown on the less fertile plateau and best notably longer than the produce of lower land. Cahors has attracted a number of well-heeled outsiders, whether from Paris or New York, and its more modern incarnation contrasts with its historic reputation as deep, dark colouring wine for blending with the upper stuff produced elsewhere in Bordeaux. Inspiration has come from Malbec's winery performance in Argentina. Châteaux du Gabès, Lapostolle, and Trinquand, and Domaine Sarranès and Clos-Macabreux are trying harder than most.

Almost due east of the city of Bordeaux and yet only up on France's list, wild interest, the Basque Central, the **Mercillac**. Enthusiasts and Establis operators cling to existence with scented, peppery distinctive wines which owe much to the local Fer Servadou vine, the sort to send a shiver down the spine of wine-loving theists like me. The local co-op is an important producer, as is La Vigne Pichère.

Gascon has an identity and history that is indubitably quite distinct from Bordeaux. Vines were almost certainly planted on the rolling terrain around the historic city of Agen long before they were known in the Bordeaux region, and they were long used for strengthening the light reds made downriver. All of which gives the locale a certain inherent superiority, but the truth is that on the modern marketplace, Gascon has yet to make much of a stir. Such a wide variety of grape varieties are planted here, and such a wide variety of wine styles, that Gascon tends to be a local hero rather than international superstar. The most exciting local red varieties are Duran (no relation to Côte de Duras) and the Fer of Mercillac (known locally as Braucou), but they are usually blended with Gamay and Syrah (imports from Beaujolais and the Rhône respectively) and sometimes the Cabernets and Merlot of Bordeaux. Mauzac is Gascon's signature white variety and adds a certain level of apple-petal to its whites, which come in all degrees of sweetness and fullness. The Bordeaux white varieties of Sauvignon, Sémillon and Muscadelle are also widely grown, together with local specialties Len de l'Écl and Chénac. Is it any wonder that Gascon's image is confused? The appellation is dominated by co-operatives, but Robert Pagès is the media star of the appellation and makes answers to both champagne and sherry.

Côte de Frontonais is a small but interesting red and rosé appellation just north of Toulouse, where the pinky local variety Negrette is preserved, and producers such as Château Bellevue-La Forêt and Montaudou make thoroughly modern, almost 'international' wines.

But the really characterful wines of the South West come from Gascogne (Armagnac country) and Basque country in the far south of the Atlantic hinterland.

Madiran is that region's most substantial wine, a deep-coloured, barrel-aged 'masculine' red made to last and best, chiefly because of the local Tannat variety (whose name, it is assumed, derives from its mouth-puckering tannin content). It's this level of tannin that has brought Madiran into the vinous spotlight in the last few years since it has been associated with certain health benefits. There are some exciting winemakers here such as Alain Brumont of Château Bouscaut and Morau, who seem to have mastered getting stability and smoothness out of the variety, which is usually blended with the Cabernets and a little Fer (known locally as Franc). Other notable producers include Château d'Ayde and Domaine Lafitte-Tesson. Patrick Ducourau has also been influential in pioneering [white co-operatives](#).

, a technique now used quite widely to make wines more rounded. Anyone with a serious interest in wine should keep a keen eye on developments in this often underestimated, proud Gascon winemaking support.

The group of local co-operatives, known collectively as Thomas, has played an important part in reviving the area's viticultural traditions and is the most important producer of the barely noted wine **Côte de la Mont** as well as of Gascogne's red burgundy, truly dry white Vin de Pays made from grapes surplus to the requirements of the Armagnac distillers. A counterpart from Cognac country to the north is also now available (see [Côte de la Mont](#)).

The wine wine made in the Madiran district, in relatively small quantities, both dry and sweet, is **Pacherenc du Vic-Bikin**, which itself is an often slightly paler shade of the great white of the corner of France, **Jurançon**, made in the green foothills of the western Pyrenees around the town of Lourdes. A palette of local grape varieties is responsible for Pacherenc but green-gold being Jurançon depends on its own wine specialties, Gros and Petit Manseng. The small-bested Petit Manseng is the key to making Jurançon/Montbellet, which owes its sweetness not to noble rot but to shrivelling or raisining on the vine. Jurançon comes dry (and is sweet (Montbellet), Domaine Cahupé makes some of the best wine the dry can make a great aperitif) but great bottles have also come from Bru-Baché, Château Juby and Charles Hous at Clos Unieux.

The small appellation of **Tursac** is being revived, with sophisticated oak-aged white wines, notably from Michel Guénot under the Baron de Bachel label, and the light wines of **Béarn** (of Béarnese source) are also produced in several different parts of this area.

But the real corker comes from Basque country, where almost dangerously steep, high vineyards right up in the Pyrenees themselves produce white, pink and light red **haut-pays**, chiefly from Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Tannat and Gros and Petit Manseng. The co-operatives makes interesting light but firm wines and as Pinus winemaker Sarranès now makes his Haut-Mina wine.

There are also various obscure appellations in the South West such as **Lantédes**, **Côte de Bruchac**, which are strictly Bordeaux-like, and the widely named **Vins d'Entre-deux-les-Mers** and **Vins d'Estacq**, which share characteristics with neighbour Mercillac.