South West France

3 Sep 2008 by Jancis Robinson

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

Main grapes: Cabernets Sauvignon and Franc; Merlot, Malbec, Tannat, Negrette, Fer (red); Sauvignon, Sémillon, Muscadelle, Mauzac, Gros and Petit Manseng (white).

South West France really means all 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 ragbag of a collection can be roughly divided into those which are effectively continuations of Bordeaux, its vine varieties and its wine styles upriver 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 first, Bordeaux Fringes, category fall Bergerac (and its sub-appellations Montravel, Rosette, Saussignac, Pécharmant and Monbazillac), Buzet, Cahors, Côtes de Duras and Côtes du Marmandais.

Bergerac will continue to have its work cut out to establish a truly independent identity from big, commercially acute brother just down the Dordogne river (the town of Bergerac is hardly 30 miles east of Bordeaux's St-Émilion). However, a handful of producers such as Luc de Conti at Château les Tours de Gendres and Gérard Cuisset of Châteaux les Miaudoux are now producing ambitious wines to rival some of Bordeaux's smartest 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 Monbazillac, the region's sub-appellations are rarely seen outside France. In very sunny years such as 1990 and 2000, Monbazillac 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 barley sugar rather than crème brûlée. An increasing number of Monbazillac producers are prepared to wait for botrytis (noble rot) to develop in exceptional years, and some of the resulting wines can be bargains. Domaine de l'Ancienne Cure, Château La Jaubertie, de Panisseau, du Prioral and Tirecul la Gravière have all made distinctive wines with Clos d'Yvigne in Saussignac up and coming.

Immediately south of Bergerac is **Côtes de Duras**, which, with **Côtes du Marmandais** centred on the town of Marmande, continues to skirt Bordeaux in a clockwise direction. It is history more than geography that excludes these vineyards from the cosy umbrella of the Bordeaux appellation and I would take my hat off to any blind taster who could unerringly distinguish between the Bordeaux, Bergerac, Côtes de Duras and Côtes du Marmandais 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 coopers' better customers for many years.

Cahors is quite another matter. In fact many producers of Cahors on the river Lot would be insulted to be categorised as a shadow of Bordeaux since the wines have etched their own very distinct personality - chiefly because the devastating winter frosts of 1956 hit Cahors' vines particularly badly and a dramatic replanting programme was undertaken virtually from scratch. Rather than relying on the standard Bordeaux recipe of varying the proportions of Merlot with the two Cabernets, Cahors depends principally on a variety considered relatively minor in Bordeaux, Malbec (called Auxerrois in Cahors and Côt in the Loire), typically bolstered with more or less Merlot and/or Tannat. (Cabernet Sauvignon would not ripen reliably this far inland.) The result is a plump, full-bodied but sometimes rather coarse country red, although those made from grapes grown on the less fertile plateau land last 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 vapid stuff produced downriver in Bordeaux. Inspiration has come from Malbec's velvety performance in Argentina. Châteaux du Cèdre, Lagrezette, and Triguedina, and Domaines Savarines and Cosse-Maisonneuve are trying harder than most.

Almost due east of the city of Bordeaux and yet way up on France's flat, wild interior, the Massif Central, the **Marcillac**, Entraygues and Estaing appellations 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 vine variety sleuths like me. The local co-op is an important producer, as is Le Vieux Porche.

Gaillac has an identity and history that is indisputably quite distinct from Bordeaux. Vines were almost certainly planted on the rolling farmland around the historic city of Albi 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 locals a certain inherent superiority, but the truth is that on the modern marketplace, Gaillac 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 Gaillac tends to be a local hero rather than international superstar. The most exciting local red varieties are Duras (no relation to Côtes de Duras) and the Fer of Marcillac (known locally as Braucol), 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 Gaillac's signature white variety and adds a certain twist of apple peel to its whites, which come in all degrees of sweetness and fizziness. The Bordeaux white varieties of Sauvignon, Sémillon and Muscadelle are also widely grown, together with local specialities Len de l'El and Ondenc. Is it any wonder that Gaillac's image is confused? The appellation is dominated by co-operatives, but Robert Plageoles is the media star of the appellation and makes answers to both champagne and sherry.

Côtes du Frontonnais is a small but interesting red and rosé appellation just north of Toulouse, where the grainy local variety Négrette is preserved, and producers such as Châteaux Bellevue-La-Forêt and Montauriol make thoroughly modern, almost 'international' wines.

But the really characterful wines of the South West come from Gascony (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 last, 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 Châteaux Bouscassé and Montus, who seem to have mastered getting subtlety and smoothness out of the variety, which is usually blended with the Cabernets and a little Fer (known locally as Pinenc). Other notable producers include Château d'Aydie and Domaine Laffitte-Teston. Patrick Ducornau has also been influential in pioneering micro-oxygenation , 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 underrated, proud Gascon winemaking outpost.

The group of local co-operatives, known collectively as Plaimont, has played an important part in reviving the area's viticultural traditions and is the most important producer of the keenly priced wine **Côtes de St-Mont** as well as of Gascony's real bargain, fruity 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 Vin de Pays).

The white wine made in the Madiran district, in relatively small quantity, both dry and sweet, is **Pacherenc du Vic-Bilh**, which itself is an often slightly paler shadow of the great white of this corner of France, **Jurançon**, made in the green foothills of the western Pyrenees around the town of Pau, not far from Lourdes. A palette of local grape varieties is responsible for Pacherenc but green-gold tangy Jurançon depends on its own vine specialities, Gros and Petit Manseng. The small-berried Petit Manseng is the key to making Jurançon Moelleux, which owes its sweetness not to noble rot but to shrivelling, or raisining, on the vine. Jurançon comes dry (sec) or sweet (moelleux). Domaine Cauhapé makes some of the best wine (the dry can make a great aperitif) but great bottles have also come from Bru-Baché, Château Jolys and Charles Hours at Clos Uroulat.

The small appellation of **Tursan** is being revived, with sophisticated oak-aged white wines, notably from Michel Guérard under the Baron de Bachen label, and the light wines of **Béarn** (of Béarnaise sauce fame) are also produced in several different parts of this area.

But the real curiosity comes from Basque country, where almost dangerously steep, high vineyards right up in the Pyrenees themselves produce white, pink and light red **Irouléguy**, chiefly from Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Tannat and Gros and Petit Manseng. The co-operative makes interesting light but firm wines and and ex Pétrus winemaker Bernouet now makes his Henri Mina there.

There are also various obscure appellations in the South West such as **Lavilledieu, Côtes de Bruhois**, which are distinctly Bordeaux-like, and the weirdly named **Vins d'Entraygues et du Fel** and **Vins d'Estaing**, which share characteristics with neighbour Marcillac.