

Vin de Pays

3 Sep 2008 by Jancis Robinson

In a nutshell: Some fine value, under-appreciated by the French.

Main grapes: practically anything but especially the international varieties.

Vin de Pays means 'country wine' to the French, but to outsiders it can mean New World with a French accent. These are the wines which the French authorities unreasonably allow to be labelled with the grape variety from which they were made.

It is difficult to over-estimate the importance of this large and growing category of wines for the future of the French wine trade. The French themselves may have tended to see any Vin de Pays as distinctly inferior to any [appellation contrôlée](#)

wine, whereas many of their customers abroad see the better Vin de Pays as good-value, user-friendly, sometimes high-quality non-conformist entrées from the world's most renowned wine producer.

The Vin de Pays category, a product only of the 1970s but now with almost one hundred members, is designed to allow greater flexibility, and higher yields, than the AC rules. A much wider range of grape varieties (including the 'international' ones Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon, Sauvignon Blanc, Merlot, etc) is allowed for Vin de Pays, and some producers bottle the produce of vines too young for AC wines as Vin de Pays. The normal maximum permitted yield for a Vin de Pays is 100 hl/ha for reds and whites and 90-110 for whites, whereas most ACs are limited to about 50 or 60 hl/ha, although the smaller area designated by the Vin de Pays, the more demanding the rules.

The two systems overlap geographically so that most wine producers have a choice between making an AC wine or a Vin de Pays, but the choice tends to be dictated by economics or by a wish to avoid the AC stipulated in terms of varieties allowed. Few burgundian producers choose to abandon their valuable appellation wines in favour of making a Vin de Pays de la Côte d'Or. But scores of producers in the Languedoc, for example, find it commercially more rewarding to produce a Vin de Pays d'Oc, which can also be labelled correctly with a magic name such as Châteauneuf or Merlot, or a more geographically specific Vin de Pays, than to make an AC Languedoc.

Partly because the appellations of Languedoc and Roussillon don't generally command a particularly high price, and partly because so many vineyards lie outside these appellations (having been planted to produce Vin de Table), the great majority of Vin de Pays come from this vast vineyard area. The Languedoc's regional Vin de Pays, d'Oc, is the single most important Vin de Pays produced, and certainly France's principal varietally labelled wine.

Because the area is so large, individual Vin de Pays d'Oc vary considerably but Châteauneuf and Merlot seem to have adapted particularly well to the Mediterranean climate here (even though they are relatively recent arrivals). Sauvignon Blanc, Cabernet Sauvignon and Syrah are more variable but can shine, while plantings of Viognier continue to multiply as this variety's fame spreads. Vin de Pays are also a good vehicle for such local wine specialities as Terret, Rolle and Marsanne. Oak ageing and rilly (in the case of early Viognier plantings) have pushed the price of some Vin de Pays above that of appellation wines.

One of the most striking examples of high-priced Vin de Pays is the Languedoc's Vin de Courbes Corses, whose concentrated, long-lived red, exotically scented white and curious fizzy pink are sold simply as Vin de Pays de l'Île de la Réunion but at dizzy growth-bubble prices.

This business one of the most common sort of Vin de Pays, one named after the local department, or county. The Aude and Gard are the other two Languedoc departments, while the most common Vin de Pays of Roussillon are Coteaux and des Côtes Catalans.

The French authorities have always been most keen to avoid any possibility of confusion between Vin de Pays and any of their precious appellations, so the names of Vin de Pays can sometimes be very difficult for those of us with a less-than-complete grasp of French history and geography.

Below is a table of some of the most common Vin de Pays with some geographical guidance as to where they are located (often with reference to the nearest AC) and the basic style of wine.

Vin de pays d'après l'île de la Réunion	Location	Wine common wines
Aude	E Languedoc incl Minervois, Corbières	wide range of international and experimental wines
Bouches du Rhône	around Aix-en-Provence	useful varietals
Catalans	Basile Roussillon	international varieties
Charentais	Cognac country	very light if white surplus to the distillery needs
Côte de Corse	between Coteaux and Côte de la Méditerranée	light reds
Coteaux Rhodaniens	N Rhône	lightish Syrah, Marsanne, Viognier
Coteaux Rhodaniens	anywhere in N Rhône Beaujolais or Savoie	light reds
Cornet Tolosan	all South West	Bordeaux-like reds

Coteaux de l'Ardèche	plateau on right bank of the Rhône south of St-Pierre	Some interesting Chardonnay and Viognier
Coteaux de Marval	S of St-Chinian	some very good vinetats
Coteaux du Quercy	SW of Cahors	good value country Cahors
Côte de Cabrières	hills near Roussillon	deep-flavored red, dry Muscat
Côte de Cassagne	Armagnac country	fresh, truly dry whites made from Colombard and other bracing grapes
Côte de Thongue	NE of Macon	some fine vinetats, esp Syrah and Chardonnay
Gard	Côteaux de Nîmes	country versions of Côte du Rhône
Gers	Armagnac country	very similar to Côte de Cassagne
Hérault	central Languedoc	very wide variety
Île de Beauté	Corse	light reds, some rosés
Haut-Garonne	around Toulouse	some very serious international vinetats
Jardin de la France	Loire Valley	cheap, 'northern' wines of all three colours
Lez-Ardennes	Muscadec country	occasional Chardonnays of interest
Oc	the whole Languedoc	very wide variety of grapes and winemaking skill, some excellent value
Prépyréne d'Orange	N end of S Rhône	some fine vinetats
Sables du Gâtin du Loir	sand spit near Sable	light whites and rosés, esp from Loire

For favourite producers, see the descriptions of the relevant regions.