

## Limoux 's little bargains

10 Nov 2009 by Jancis Robinson/FT

Limoux is a surprising enclave within the Languedoc, a region known best by wine lovers for its big, beefy reds made from such assertive red wine varieties as Syrah, Mourvèdre and Carignan.

Up the Aude river from Carcassonne is a pretty green valley, much cooler than most of the Languedoc, with rolling upland and stunning views of the Pyrenees to the south, where Syrah would struggle to ripen and where the most typical wines are crisp sparkling whites whose history pre-dates that of champagne. Today Limoux is a small and extremely varied wine region unable to make much of an impact globally, or even within France, but it should be of interest to anyone seeking a combination of French finesse and good value.

As in so many French wine districts, Limoux is dominated by a powerful co-op – in this case one that uses the brand names Aimery and Sieur d'Arques and produces 85% of all Limoux's wine. Its fizz is serviceable. And almost 20 years ago it came up with one of the few great PR masterstrokes I have witnessed in French wine. At that time, pre Bridget Jones, Chardonnay was the height of fashion. Realising that Limoux then had some of the country's most interesting Chardonnay vineyards outside Burgundy, the co-op launched Toques et Clochers, an annual barrel auction for local charities whereby bidders, including top chefs from all over France and beyond, are given the chance to bid for a barrel of still Chardonnay. Basically, a modest Languedoc copy of the famous Hospices de Beaune auction.

This helped put the still wines of Limoux, originally sold as Vins de Pays, on the map and since then there has been considerable tinkering with the local appellation regulations so that this relatively tiny region produces at least seven different styles of wine. The traditional, and most distinctive, fizz is Blanquette de Limoux, made mainly from the distinctive local grape speciality Mauzac, whose appleskin aromas can come as rather a shock to palates more used to wines made from Chardonnay and Pinot Noir in the image of champagne.

The Crémant de Limoux appellation, a more refined if less characterful sparkling wine dependent on Chardonnay, with between 20 and 40% Chenin Blanc and sometimes a little Pinot Noir, was created in 1990 to cater to more international tastes. And a small quantity of seriously funky Blanquette de Limoux Méthode Ancestrale is also made, a light, sweet halfway house between sparkling wine and sweet, cloudy cider with sediment defiantly left in the bottle.

But still wines are becoming increasingly important. Now there is a special appellation, Limoux *tout court*, for still whites made from Chardonnay with Mauzac and, sometimes, Chenin Blanc, and still reds that may be made of just about any dark-skinned grape variety you can think of except the one that is best suited to this cool, often Atlantic-dominated region, Pinot Noir. Why it is not allowed to produce still red Limoux is a mystery which no local could solve for me when I visited the region last August.

So anyone wanting to make a still red wine from Pinot Noir here has to sell it as a Vin de Pays, just as those who make varietal Sauvignon Blancs and Chardonnays that don't meet the strict regulations for Limoux Blanc do. For a small district, it makes a wide range of still Vins de Pays. And then there are even some still sweet wines such as Ch Rives-Blanques' rather delicious oddball Xaxa Vendange d'Hiver that has to be sold as a common or garden Vin de Table because it can be accommodated neither within the rules of the appellation wines nor within those of Vin de Pays.

By far the most interesting wines from Limoux are made by the small but tight-knit group of individual producers here, many of them run by outsiders. Jean-Louis Denois was perhaps the first of these, proving at his Domaine de l'Aigle up in the village of Roquetaillade, where the highest vineyards are at 500 m altitude, that fine Pinot Noir could be made here. But the enterprise had to be rescued financially, first by Antonin Rodet of Burgundy and more recently by Languedoc négociant Gérard Bertrand based near Narbonne.

From Holland came Jan and Caryl Panman, who now run Ch Rives-Blanques, with counsel from the previous owner, local Eric Vialade, while refugees from the world of finance in Britain James and Catherine Kinglake are installed next door at Domaine Begude. Marie-Claire and Pierre Fort are incomers from the Loire, though their wines taste more as though their experience had been in Burgundy. Jacques Calvel at Domaine J Laurens, whose fizz is really very fine, was originally local but came back from a career as an entrepreneur in Switzerland.

All of these influences help to make the wines and winemakers of Limoux more cosmopolitan and more aware of the needs of the international market than is the case in many French appellations. They all tend to have importers in both the UK and the US, and the cellar-door prices are really very reasonable. Mirroring the success of the Toques et Clochers initiative, the finest group of wines made here are the surprisingly complex, refreshing still Chardonnays labelled Limoux, but the best fizz can be a great-value alternative to champagne - and of course in this particular sector of the market, there is very much less competition.

### **LIMOUX RECOMMENDATIONS**

(with UK/US importers)

**J Laurens** (HC Wines/Beverages & More)

**Le Moulin Brut NV Blanquette de Limoux**

**Les Graiménous 2007 Crémant de Limoux**

**Le Clos des Demoiselles 2007 Crémant de Limoux**

**Ch Rives-Blanques** (Tanners, Great Western Wine, James Nicholson/Grape News Importing)

**2007 Blanquette de Limoux**

**Cuvée Occitania 2008 Limoux Blanc**

**Dédicace 2007 Limoux Blanc**

**Cuvée de l'Odysée 2004 Limoux Blanc**

**Françoise Antech** (Wine Society, OW Loeb/Baron François, K&L, Country Vintner, Cavattapi)

**Cuvée Emotion NV Crémant de Limoux**

**Jean-Louis Denois** (Lea & Sandeman/K&L)

**Rosé Brut 2006 Crémant de Limoux**

**Dom de Mouscaillo** (Genesis/Beaune Imports)

**2007 Limoux Blanc**

**2006 Limoux Blanc**

**Dom de l'Aigle** (Nicolas/Gérard Bertrand of Atlanta)

**Chardonnay 2008 Limoux**

**Aigle Royal Chardonnay 2007 Limoux**

**Dom de Martinolles** (Garrigue Wines/Wine Traditions)

**Grande Réserve Pinot Noir 2005 Vin de Pays de l'Aude**

**Dom Antugnac**

**Aux Bons Hommes 2007 Limoux Rouge**

See full [tasting notes](#) on these and dozens of other Limoux wines.