For French value, head south

A shorter version of this article is published by the Financial Times. See tasting notes on more than 100 wines in Languedoc and Roussillon tasted summer 2017, and Mature Minervois which shows how well these wines age.

In 1989 when the French franc (remember that?) was cheap and the first, pre-Ryanair, wave of British romantics sought a little slice of la France profonde, we bought half a house in the Languedoc. It was a small village in Burgundy that showed me how much more rural rural France seemed than rural Britain but I was worried that a holiday house in such an important wine region might be an oxymoron.

At that stage, the Languedoc and its Catalan neighbour to the south west Roussillon were producing wines that seemed centuries less evolved than the great wines of France. I liked the idea that an array of styles and colours of wine were available in the region, but felt safe from
the feeling that I ought to be spending my precious summer weeks of R&R visiting wine domaines.

When we arrived, grapes were virtually the only crop grown in the Languedoc and it was their produce that largely filled the notorious EU wine lake with thin, characterless red that no one wanted to drink. Successive schemes and bribes were put in place to drain this lake and transform the landscape so that to a large extent vines on the least propitious (flat and fertile) land were grubbed up. This left a much more significant proportion of them growing in more promising sites at higher elevations, on slopes and on poorer soils so that yields were naturally much lower and the resulting wine more interesting and concentrated. Only a small proportion of the vines that used to surround our house remain.

I am ashamed to say that my visits to Languedoc wine producers are still a rarity. That is because I treasure the contrast between my weeks with family and friends in and around the house and my busy travelling and tasting schedule the rest of the year. But it certainly isn't because the wines are not worthy of attention.

This summer in particular I was forcibly struck by just how much great wine is being produced in the Languedoc (white and pink as well as red now), and what wonderful bargains most of them are. And I was thrilled to see continued proof of the unique and excitingly tense dry whites that can be grown on higher ground in Roussillon. These wines are so chock full of individuality, encompassing a wide range of terrains, grape varieties and different winemaking methods, that I could not help comparing them with the much narrower range of flavours available from, say, Bordeaux and Burgundy – wines that are generally so very much more expensive (although some cult Languedoc wines, such as Grange des Pères and Peyre Rose, are exceptions).

I am not referring here to the ocean of international varietals, often from the larger, more commercial producers, that tend to carry the IGP Pays d'Oc appellation. Some of these are perfectly nice (and generally good value) but many of them are pretty dull.

It is perhaps significant that of the 28 wines chosen by a professional panel as this year's collection of ambassador wines for the Pays d'Oc (celebrating its thirtieth anniversary), half of them were white, with Chardonnay and Viognier being most common – 14 as opposed to 12reds and two rosés.

Not that long ago Languedoc vineyards were dominated by the dark-skinned Carignan grape. Then there was a vogue for planting the likes of Sauvignon Blanc and Cabernet Sauvignon – neither of them particularly suitable for the region. But now, as elsewhere in the world, there is recognition that the traditional varieties work best. So reds tend to be blends of Grenache Noir, its 'hairy-leaved' version Lladorer Pelut, Syrah, Mourvèdre, Cinsault and Carignan while whites are drawn from an even wider palette of Grenache Blanc, Grenache Gris, Clairette, Piquepoul, Maccabeu (Viura), Bourboulenc, Rolle (Vermentino), Roussanne, Marsanne and Viognier. These can make for seriously individual flavours.

The wines that really excited me this year tended to be made from a mix of local grapes, grown – generally organically and sometimes biodynamically – in highly individual conditions, by small, independent producers, many of them with extraordinary stories to tell.

Tom Hills created Domaine La Lauzeta only in 2015, but with notable success (the second picture in Thursday's article shows him on the right with his team obsessively sorting grapes). He produces small amounts of wine in a cramped and crammed garage in the St-Chinian village of St-Nazaire de Ladarez after years working as a sugar trader in Russia and America and
growing coffee in Nicaragua. He has identified some fine parcels of vines, many on the local schists, and enlisted the help of the excellent local consultant Claude Gros and winemaker Amélie Czerwenka. I had already been impressed by his Jauzimen rosé last year but the reds I tasted this year showed this was no flash in the pan.

Julien and Delphine Zernott arrived from the Loire in 2003 and have painstakingly renovated the relatively cool, isolated terraced vineyards above Poujols such as those pictured above and below that constitute their Domaine du Pas de l'Escalette even further north than the Terrasses du Larzac, one of the rockier, more windswept subregions of the Languedoc. They wisely ignored local advice to pull out such indigenous white wine grapes as Carignan Blanc and Terret Bourret and now find their nervy dry white blend particularly sought after by sommeliers.

Domaine Ste Marie des Crozes is run energetically by Christelle Alias, whose father Bernard did much to renovate the estate he took over at the end of the last century. From hillside vineyards in the northern reaches of the Corbières on the Montagne d'Alaric she produces a range of memorably named and packaged reds with varied lifespans.

Brigitte Chevalier abandoned her career exporting bordeaux to establish Domaine de Cébène in the distinctive Faugères appellation in the northern Languedoc. Like all these producers, she has been fastidious in producing recognisably differentiated, locally expressive wines with a real sense of place.

I was extremely lucky this year in being able to taste widely and pleasurably without venturing further than a few steps from the front door. I benefited to a great extent from the researches of an old friend from Cumbria, ex wine merchant Richard Neville, who happens to have settled with his wife not too many villages from us. For the last few years he seems voluntarily to have undertaken to collect a series of samples from various interesting up-and-coming producers for me and this year excelled himself.

And then there are consignments of bottles that just seemed to end up on my doorstep, either because I had tasted previous vintages from this particular producer or, apparently and usually delightfully, out of the blue.

This seemed to be the case with the Roussillon wines of Domaine Paul Meunier-Centernach based in the old St-Arnac co-op (the region is littered with abandoned caves co-opératives) and established as recently as 2013. Lucile and Paul Meunier are originally from Burgundy and bought parcels of land from retired members of co-ops in Maury, Lesquerde, St-Arnac and St-Paul de Fenouillet. Bottles also just seemed to arrive from the German-owned Domaine Courbissac in the wild hills above La Livinière, the first officially recognised sub-appellation within Minervois, which may be joined by Cazelles and Laure if their applications are successful.
SOUTHERN STARS

Note that I gave all these wines either 16.5 or 17 out of 20. You can find stockists on wine-searcher.com and my tasting notes in Languedoc and Roussillon tasted summer 2017.

WHITES

Les Clos Perdus  L’Extrême 2016 IGP Côtes Catalanes

Gayda  Figure Libre Freestyle 2015 IGP Pays d’Oc

Mas de Daumas Gassac  2016 IGP Haute Vallée du Gassac

Dom Paul Meunier-Centernach  2015 Côtes du Roussillon

Ch Mire l’Etang  Aimée de Coigny 2016 La Clape

Dom du Pas de L’Escalette  Les Clapas 2015 IGP Pays d’Hérault

Dom Ste-Marie des Crozes  Milo 2016 Corbières

ROSÉS

Ch d’Agel  Les Bonnes 2016 Minervois

Gérard Bertrand  Ballerine NV Crémant de Limoux and Ch La Sauvageonne Volcanic 2016 Coteaux du Languedoc

Dom La Lauzeta  Jauzimen Rosé 2016 St-Chinian

Les Terrasses de Gabrielle  Honi Soit Qui Mal y Pense 2016 Vin de France

REDS


Dom de Cèbène  Felgaria, Belle Lurette and Les Bancèls 2015 and Les Bancèls 2014 Faugères plus Ex Arena 2015 IGP Pays d’Oc

Les Clos Perdus  Prioundo, Cuvée 141 and Mire La Mer 2014 Corbières


Gayda  Figure Libre Freestyle 2015 and Chemin de Moscou 2014 IGP Pays d’Oc

Hegarty Chamans  No 3 La Piboule 2015 Minervois

Dom La Lauzeta  La Lauzeta and Mezura 2015 St-Chinian Roquebrun
Mas de Daumas Gassac  2015 IGP Haute Vallée du Gassac

Dom Paul Meunier-Centernach  2014 Côtes du Roussillon-Villages

Dom de Nizas  Le Carignan Vieilles Vignes 2015 IGP Pays de Caux

Dom du Pas de L'Escalette  Les Clapas 2015 and Grand Pas 2015 Languedoc, Terrasses du Larzac

Ch St-Jacques d'Albas  La Chapelle d'Albas 2012 Minervois