

THE OUTLAW WINES OF FRANCE

In the seven years since its launch, Vin de France seems to be developing in ways its creators did not expect, as Robert Joseph discovers.

What do an orange wine, a Sangiovese from the Languedoc, and Coca-Cola all have in common? The answer is to be found in three words: Vin de France. In 2010, the French authorities introduced Vin de France as a new designation covering higher-quality Vins de Table to allow wines to be sold under varietal or brand names. Valérie Pajotin, the woman charged with managing the category, talked about helping producers gain 'market recognition' and to offer consumers in export markets 'consistent taste'. Vin de France, she said, using a comparison shocking to most French wine traditionalists, would enable them to "create a well-known brand name like Apple or Coca-Cola".

Seven years later, while it is hard to say that any new Coca-Cola-like French wine brands have taken the world by storm, between 20% to 25% of French wines are now sold as Vin de France. These range from the Perrin family of Château Beaucastel's inexpensive, high-volume *Vieille Ferme*, to the 2,000 bottles of orange wine John Bojanowski produce at Clos du Gravillas in Saint-Jean-de-Minervois and the 350 bottles of Sangiovese Liz and Robin Williamson are making at *Domaine de Saumarez* in Coteaux du Languedoc.

Wines like these were not in the minds of the creators of Vin de France. Indeed they could be said to be the opposite of what they were aiming for as they imagined competitors for New World brands like *Yellow Tail* and *Jacobs Creek*. But, as Bojanowski explains, he has no choice other than to sell his orange wine as a Vin de France, because there is no other legal designation for it. And the same can be said for some of his other wines, such as a Carignan-Cabernet blend that just happened to work in one vintage.

Bypassing the system

It is often believed that the *agrément* – the official tasting to ensure typicality and quality – is no longer imposed, but this is not the case.



Liz and Robin Williamson, *Domaine de Saumarez*, Coteaux du Languedoc

Every wine sold under an appellation or IGP – Vin de Pays – still has to be tasted, and it is not unusual for wines to get the thumbs down. "One year, our AOC Saint-Jean-de-Minervois was refused by the tasting commission, which was pretty scary," says Bojanowski. "I had to prepare a defence. When the AOC guy came to apply the penalty, he sampled the wine and shook his head and said the tasters are idiots ... He was obliged to apply a penalty but all he did was to say that the next year, every tank of the wine had to be tasted. Since we only make one tank, that would hardly be a problem." This was not the only occasion Bojanowski has had to deal with narrow-mindedness by the local arbiters of taste. "Our *L'Inattendu* [The Unexpected] white Minervois which got 93 points from Robert Parker was also turned down one year."

The temptation to avoid this kind of headache is understandable, especially for producers like Bojanowski, who can sell their Vin de France for the same €12.00 to €18.00 (\$13.41 to \$20.14) as their AOC wines. But despite the logic of selling his wines as Vin de France, Bojanowski does so with some reluctance. When he and his French wife Nicole started their estate 18 years ago, their wine was labelled as *Vin de Pays des Côtes de Brian*. "British visitors liked the link to the Monty Python film, *Life of Brian*, but we were pleased when we found that we could sell it as

Minervois, because we like to be on the inside working for the group." He rejoices in the fact that "Minervois tasters are now more open to allow different profiles," so that *L'Inattendu* no longer runs as great a risk of refusal. Ideally, Bojanowski would like his orange wine to be sold as Minervois.

Another Languedoc producer, Jon Bowen of *Domaine Sainte Croix* in Corbières, to the west of Minervois, is less bound to the idea of appellation. "Our range has nine wines, of which six are Vin de France, for various reasons. Usually, it's a question of using the designation by choice or obligation. And for us, it's both." When it comes to obligation, it's not just a matter of wines that fail the *agrément*, it's also wines that fall outside the rules. "Our vineyards are a couple of kilometres outside Roussillon, where the Grenache Gris is one of the biggest varieties. But where we are, it's not allowed. The same is true of our old Carignan vines. We can't legally make a Corbières from those without blending other varieties."

Choice is just as important, Bowen continues. "A lot is done for more or less political reasons – we have the choice between selling our wine as *Vin de Pays* or *Vin de France*. The words *Vin de Pays* go unnoticed, but when people see *Vin de France* on the label they raise their eyebrows and raise questions. You just want to make a statement – like selling €20.00 Carignan."

Carignan and Grenache Gris are, as Jon Bowen says, among the most traditional grape varieties in his region. The same cannot be said for the Sangiovese and Petit Verdot Robin Williamson has planted at his *Domaine de Saumarez* near Montpellier, but they are producing wines that he is successfully selling for €16.00 a bottle. "It's a paradox, but our priciest wines are *Vin de France*, theoretically the lowest level of the appellation system."

Talking to producers like these, it would be easy to imagine that *Vin de France* is quietly becoming France's version of the *Vino*

da Tavola that revolutionised Tuscany in the 1970s and 1980s, but it's not that simple.

"A lot has changed since the first vintages of Super Tuscan wines were produced," says Bowen. At that time, big, high-profile producers like Antinori and Frescobaldi were struggling with rules that effectively prevented them from making the quality of Chianti to which they aspired. The region's red wines had to include white grapes, and winemakers routinely, and legally, added wine from the south of Italy. "In Languedoc, people already have a wide palette of what they can use. There's more freedom in the Languedoc appellation and the Vins de Pays, so there isn't really a need for 'Super Languedoc' Vins de France."

Price is another issue. Forty years ago, super-premium Chianti was a rarity; the makers of Super Tuscans broke new ground with the price tags they placed on their bottles. "In Languedoc," Bowen continues, "I think you could find heading for 1,000 cuvées with

prices of €20.00 to €200.00. Fifteen years ago, €20.00 was rare. Not now". Looking at his own wines, he says, "I think there would be a market for a €50.00 bottle. It's just not a message we'd want to send out in terms of the market we want to talk to."



"It's a paradox, but our priciest wines are Vin de France, theoretically the lowest level of the appellation system."

**Jon Bowen,
Domaine Sainte
Croix, Corbières**

Robinson points to another factor that was unknown at the turn of the century. "There is definitely a link in many people's minds between natural wine and Vin de France. They're both seen as slightly alternative and lumped together." Most natural wines, ranging from Bojanowski's orange wine to the growing number of Pet Nat sparkling wines fall firmly outside the mainstream of Languedoc (or any other) appellations and Vin de Pays styles, so selling them as Vin de France is almost a necessity.

"A lot of younger people associate natural wine and Vin de France with trendiness," says Bojanowski.

Naturally more interesting

"They say 'Why try to change the direction of a sinking aircraft carrier of appellations?'" Williamson agrees, saying that "the French like the idea of the rebel". All three producers concur, however, that the Vin de France counterculture is still quite limited in its numbers. It is perhaps no accident that they all have roots outside the region. Williamson thinks for a moment trying to estimate how many of his estate-owning neighbours are making Vins de France. "There are a few," he says, "but not many. [Across the region] rebels making what they want to do rather than what the

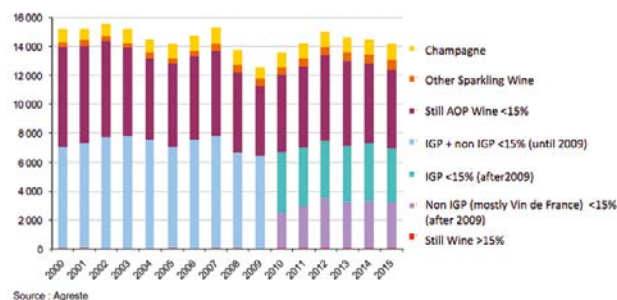
authorities demand can probably be counted in hundreds rather than thousands."

The explanation for this, Bowen says, is that in France, "there's still the assumption that AOC is the pinnacle of wine. Why not voluntarily be part of it?" The obvious paradox, of course, is that this 'pinnacle' is often represented by large volumes of own-label Minervois and Corbières selling in supermarkets for €3.00 to €4.00 a bottle, which is less than many estates' Vins de Pays. Bojanowski acknowledges this, but still prefers the appellation system, for all of its faults. "If my orange wine had Minervois on its label, people would know where it came from."

Bowen is less convinced. "Some appellations really don't make much sense. Geographically, we should be in Fitou, but that appellation was only created because a couple of villages couldn't agree with a couple of others. Today, printing it on a label has no value. Positive or negative." His views of the way the appellation system is run are partly explained by his own experience. "People want to be part of the community, but when you try to be part of it, you find that decisions are often taken behind closed doors. We make vin d'origine, but you have to be true to that idea before being true to the syndicat - the people who run the local appellation." Today, Bowen says, he's part of a group of vigneronns that now informally discusses and works independently of syndicat. For these winemakers, the lines between appellation, Vin de Pays, and Vin de France will almost certainly become increasingly blurred.

The people charged with running the French wine industry, including the first wine-friendly president in decades, may not worry too much about this. While the introduction of Vin de France has had little impact on French exports in terms of volume - in fact, combined shipments of Vins de Pays and Vins de France are smaller than in the first years of this century - they have helped to raise the value quite significantly. And that's a trend that's likely to continue, though at a speed that remains uncertain. As Robin Williamson says, "Vin de France could well become a great marketing 'toy' but it would need some big names to get behind it and shed the shackles of the AOC system. But if that system goes on feeding the vigneronns, I don't see them biting the hand that feeds them!"

French wine exports: volume ('000 hl)



French wine exports: volume ('000 €)

