

10 reasons to REDISCOVER LANGUEDOC

Decanter's Regional Editor for Languedoc has spent a lot of time in the southern French wine region over the past year, and has been bowled over by the quality on offer. Here she gives us 10 of many good reasons to look at its terroirs, estates and wines through fresh eyes

STORY NATALIE EARL

A region as vast and geographically complicated as Languedoc is difficult, if not impossible, to generalise about. With so many appellations, topographies, microclimates, grape varieties and terroirs, it's more than just the sum of its parts. Languedoc has moved into a new era, extending beyond the tropes of 'great value' and 'rustic, hearty reds'. Now is the time to discover the cutting edge of what's happening in this region. Run, don't walk, to snap up the exciting wines of Languedoc.

1 Whites

Most famous for its reds, Languedoc's white wines may surprise, in that they are becoming a real source of freshness, intrigue and deliciousness. There are still vast plantings of international varieties such as Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc in the region, but it's the local varieties that make the most complex and interesting wines. Carignan Blanc and (the rare) Gris, Grenache Blanc and Gris, Terret, Bourboulenc, Rolle, Mauzac and Clairette are being used to great effect in blends, alongside adopted varieties such as Roussanne, Marsanne, Viognier and Chenin Blanc.



Below: a trio of Languedoc whites from Domaine Sarrat de Goundy, Les Vignes Oubliées and Pierre Bories

Some producers are honing in on single-variety styles, and when sourced from old vines this can work very well, giving great concentration and varietal definition. There's one appellation that's dedicated solely to the production of dry whites, **Picpoul de Pinet**, which since its ascension to appellation status in 2013 has become a huge commercial success.

Other whites of the Languedoc region look set to follow suit. Sometimes it's an entire appellation that impresses, while at others it's more about individual producers. The whites of **La Clape** – classy, saline and fresh – have risen in profile as a success thanks to signature variety Bourboulenc's racy acidity; look out for those from Sarrat de Goundy (bottle pictured, far left) and Château Rouquette sur Mer. **Terrasses du Larzac**, where white varieties thrive in Languedoc's cooler reaches, is working on plans to have its appellation regulations updated in order to include white wines. Check out producers **Domaine Le Clos du Serres**, **Les Vignes Oubliées** and **Mas Cal Demoura** for some seriously aromatically complex whites. I've been impressed by some white **Corbières**, but here you do have to know your producers: don't miss the elegant **La Bégou** from Maxime Magnon (2021, £38 Roberson), and the whites from **Château La Baronne** and **Pierre Bories**. ▶



2 Individuality

As appellations work hard to show drinkers exactly what defines their wines, we are moving away from the region being seen as 'one monolithic block', says Amber Gardner, wine consultant and head of sales at UK importer Emile Wines. Each appellation has its own distinguishing features, and the resulting wines cater for varying tastes. The cooler, wetter **Pic St-Loup**, for example, focuses on Syrah (minimum 50% in red blends, 30% in rosés), and you'll find refined wines from Clos des Reboussiers, Domaine de l'Hortus and Mas Bruguière; while the warm, dry Corbières, especially its cru **Boutenac**, goes crazy for Carignan (up to 50% in red blends, 40% in rosés).

Terrasses du Larzac is one of the most dynamic appellations, with a sense of community and mutual respect among its producers. The influx of newcomers over the last 10 years, welcomed by the appellation's leading names (not

always a given in Languedoc), has created a fusion of sharp minds, fresh ideas and consequently standout wines. According to the appellation authorities, three-quarters of producers here cultivate using organic methods, and it's increasing each year. Pioneers such as Mas Jullien have paved the way for ambitious boundary pushers like Domaine Flo Busch, Domaine Romain Portier and Mas d'Amile.

In his 2023 book *The New French Wine* (US\$28.99 Ten Speed Press), Jon Bonné highlights **St-Chinian** and **Faugères** as showing 'some of the strongest evidence of specific terroir identity in the region', and while some still feel too extracted and heavy for modern times, there are elegant, satin-textured wines to be found from the likes of Domaine de Pech-Ménel and Terres Falmet in St-Chinian and from Domaine de Cébène and Clos Fantine in Faugères.



Amélie d'Hurlaborde, Mas d'Amile co-proprietor

3 The outliers

While the appellation system lends structure and points of reference, Languedoc is also alive with producers ploughing their own furrow. Perhaps it's what some see as excessively strict, outdated appellation rules, confusing classification hierarchy, or the obscurity of some appellations to consumers that have given rise to a host of outliers and artisans, of punks and wild warriors, pushed to cut themselves loose from the shackles of precise grape variety percentages and controlled yields. This is cowboy territory.

Labelling wines under one of Languedoc's many regional IGP designations, or even **Vin de France** (which permits the blending of grapes with no region-based restrictions), is increasingly common, but shouldn't be seen as a downgrade in quality. Often, it's the opposite. Some famous names – Mas de Daumas Gassac and Domaine de la Grange des Pères – have done this for years, as have those in the more underground scene such as Domaine Ledogar, Les Sabots d'Irène (with a wine called Anticonstitutionnellement: E24 Pure Wines) and Mas Coutelou. Scratch beneath the surface and you'll reveal a whole other world. Look for whites with extended skin maceration, which works particularly well with Muscat, such as those from Clos du Gravillas (A Fleur de Peau 2021, E27 Sip Wines) and Domaine Mamaruta (Trafalgar or Zuru Zuru).



Winemaker Xavier Ledogar of family-run Domaine Ledogar in the Corbières-Boutenac appellation

4 Experimentation

The rule-breaking artisan winemakers embody the Languedoc bywords of freedom and experimentation. Take, for example, the idea of blending white and red grapes, often from co-planted vineyards of local varieties. New from Clos du Gravillas is I'm Alive, a carbonic maceration Vin de France blend of the ancient Piquepouls Blanc, Noir and Gris, with a touch of Cinsault. Pale red in colour, the nose and palate are

radiant with wild strawberry and tangy redcurrants, flecks of orange rind and dried thyme. Other producers playing with this technique include Domaine Jean-Baptiste Senat, Le Petit Domaine de Gimios and the tiny L'Absurde Génie des Fleurs.

The move away from new oak continues in earnest as a variety of vinification and ageing vessels step in to take its place. Eggs, amphorae, dolia and jars made from concrete, terracotta, stoneware and ceramic have become a common sight across the region. These help with textural complexity, as well as aiding microoxygenation without the intrusion of oak flavours. Small new oak barriques are an increasingly rare sight, nudged out by large foudre casks and even experimental barrels made from both oak and acacia, as at Domaine de la Doubric.

Brigitte Chevalier of Domaine de Cébène (pictured, left) admits that she wishes she had started using ceramic eggs and terracotta jars earlier than a few years ago, now saying: 'I think that for the wines of Faugères, barrels are not justified.'



Owner-winemaker Brigitte Chevalier, Domaine de Cébène

5 Lighter, fresher wines

Global wine consumption is decreasing – the OIV organisation reports that estimated consumption of 232m hl in 2022 marks a decrease of 2m hl on the previous year, furthering a decline from a peak of about 246m hl in 2017. With trade reports at the same time revealing increased consumer interest in lower-alcohol drinks of all kinds, Languedoc and its rising alcohol levels are in trouble. The way forward is lighter, fresher wines, which many winemakers are already achieving. As well as the blending of red and white grapes (see '4 Experimentation') – which 'helps to combat the rise in levels



of alcohol brought on by climate change resulting in a fresher, crunchier style of red wine', according to Ania Smelskaya, independent consultant and ex-sommelier – 'I'm also hearing more about **infusion winemaking**. Often described by winemakers as the opposite of extraction, this gentle method of vinification uses whole bunches with very little punching down or pumping over, giving a lighter colour and less tannin but still with aromatic and textural complexity. This is contrary to the old image of the rich, overextracted, jammy Languedoc wine style: historically 'people looked towards

Languedoc when they wanted jam', says Nicole Bojanowski of Clos du Gravillas.

One name has surfaced on numerous occasions during my travels across the region: Eric Pfifferling of Domaine l'Anglore. Over in the southern Rhône, his deep-hued Tavel rosés and delicate reds (left) has garnered a cult following, and it's to these wines that some **forward-thinking** Languedoc winemakers are looking. That this inspiration can be found so close to home – Tavel is almost within touching distance of Languedoc's far-eastern border – shows there's great potential for things to come. 'This is the region's future,' says Bojanowski. If it's freshness, elegance and supreme drinkability on the cards, count me in. ▶



IZADI

The authentic – and unexpected – side of Rioja

In 1987, at the age of 37, entrepreneur Gonzalo Antón decided that, alongside a group of like-minded friends, he would create an innovative wine project in Rioja. And thus Izadi was born. Building on his experience in hospitality and gastronomy, and fascinated with the incredible – and untapped – potential of Rioja's many terroirs, Antón wanted to approach the region from a different angle. Instead of seeking a defined style, Izadi focused on bringing the character of Rioja Alavesa's oldest vineyards and indigenous varieties to the forefront.

Strong values

35 years on, and now with Lalo Antón, Gonzalo's son, at the helm, Izadi remains a family-owned, boutique winery, championing Rioja's vocation to produce authentic, terroir-expressive wines made for the pleasures of the table. Today, as at its inception, Izadi's core values still prevail: sensitivity, hospitality, respect and restlessness.

These are translated into an extreme attention to detail, an absolute respect for nature and a constant will to research and innovate, while keeping the link between food and wine always in mind. Gonzalo and Lalo firmly believe that this is the essence of wine culture itself: sharing a delectable meal with friends and creating collective memories that draw a direct link between the vines, the landscape of

Rioja and the lives of those who enjoy a bottle of Izadi.

In the winery, these values are translated into an extreme attention to detail, an absolute respect for nature and a constant will to research and innovate, whilst always keeping the link between food and wine in mind. Sustainable practices reveal Izadi's true respect for its environment – something at its very core, as the winery's name literally means 'nature'. Demonstrating its commitment to the land, Izadi holds the Wineries for Climate Protection certification, a pioneering international benchmark in sustainability best-practices for the wine sector, created by the Spanish Wine Federation (Federación Española del Vino - FEV).

The essence of Rioja

The wine that perhaps best represents the company's ethos is Izadi Selección, both in its red and white declinations. The



Izadi Selección Tinto combines fruit selected from 40 hectares of the best low-yielding, bush-trained vines within the triangle defined by the villages of Villabuena de Álava, Samaniego and Ábalos. A Tempranillo-based blend aged for 16 months in barriques, it captures the character of the vineyards that inspired the creation of the Izadi project in the first place. Its white counterpart, on the other hand, reflects the constant yearning to explore and delve deeper into the viticultural heritage of Rioja. Izadi Selección Blanco is the only white Rioja produced from the region's six indigenous white varieties: Viura, Garnacha Blanca, Maturana Blanca, Tempranillo Blanco, Malvasía and Turruntés. Hailing from old bush-trained vineyards in Villabuena de Álava, the wine's poise, texture and robust elegance truly convey the essence and history of the region.

It's the ability to interpret a precious viticultural lineage in a way that invites sophisticated enjoyment that drives the Izadi project forward; a daring proposition that might surprise but never disappoints.

Discover more
www.izadi.com



Katie Jones, owner and winemaker at Domaine Jones, based in Tuchan

6 Greener drinking

The surface of certified organic vineyards in the Languedoc region has increased, according to L'Agence Bio, from 13,748ha in 2013 to 32,693ha in 2022, and the surface under conversion to organics from 3,857ha to 14,800ha. Many producers have embraced biodynamics and brought increased biodiversity to their vineyard ecosystem, while others carry out trials in vitiforestry – growing trees alongside or within vineyards – and regenerative viticulture, which focuses on the vineyard, its soils and surroundings as a whole ecosystem.

As unpredictable weather patterns, and in particular extreme drought, threaten the livelihoods of Languedoc's winemakers, many are doing what they can to ensure their vines and wines survive in this new climatic era.



7 Old vines

'They don't have high yields, they're hard to work. But the idea is to make good wine,' says Maxime Magnon, whose white-variety vines in Corbières are 80-120 years old. There are many **saviours of old vines** in Languedoc, who nurture and protect their gnarled, misshapen charges with tenderness and devotion. Katie Jones, of Domaine Jones (pictured, above), tends almost exclusively old



Maxime Magnon, Corbières (see p52)

vines between 50 and 120 years old in Fitou, bottling most of them as single-variety wines. Her old-vine Carignan Gris cuvée (see domainejones.com) is a wonderfully refined, complex wine. 'You feel like you're saving these old grape varieties,' she says. The '(re-)valorisation of old-vine Carignan', as wine writer and educator Heather Dougherty calls it, is seen in particular in Corbières-Boutenac, Minervois and Faugères. ▶



Thibaud Vermillard and Jenia Vasiljeva, owner-winemakers at Domaine Ampelhus in Lunel-Viel (see 8 Indigenous varieties)

8 Indigenous varieties

Once maligned, the native grape varieties of the south are resurfacing, and there are pockets of producers intent on bringing these back from oblivion, not only for their better resistance to dry conditions, which have become a catastrophic problem in the Languedoc region, but also to reconnect with local traditions.

Thierry Navarre, in St-Chinian's cru of Roquebrun, is a Ribeyrene (or Rivairene) evangelist.

'Before phylloxera, this variety made up a third of plantings in some areas, particularly the Minervois,' he says. Now there is only a smattering of vigneron with plantings, including the young Domaine Ampelhus, east of Montpellier. The variety is late-ripening, but the alcohol remains surprisingly low (Navarre's pure Ribeyrene cuvée only reaches 10%-11.5% abv and is light-coloured and juicy: 2021, £21.20 Theatre of Wine). The Bojanowskis at Clos du Gravillas (see 5 *Lighter, fresher wines*, p45)

in St-Jean de Minervois are well-known supporters of ancient local varieties, with Terret, Clairette (pictured) and Piquepoul thriving on their limestone soils in the region's west. The gris versions of these grapes are even rarer, but John Bojanowski says: 'I'm convinced by pink grapes for making white wine.' This diversity of vine material not only makes for more structural and aromatic complexity, but also acts as an insurance policy against increasingly unpredictable growing conditions.



9 Imported grapes

On limestone above the village of Lagrasse in Corbières, Laurent Miquel has pioneered the planting of **Albariño** – the popular grape of Galicia in northwest Spain that Miquel had an inkling might work in Languedoc. He's had great success, especially on export markets; his Albariño cuvées are hyper-refreshing, clean and precise (IGP Aude 2021, £12.50 Sainsbury's, Waitrose). With climate change worsening, producers have been looking into grape varieties from other warm regions around the world. Château La Roque in Pic St-Loup has planted **Malvasia Istriana** and the Greek **Assyrtiko** grape, producing Vin de France bottlings of 1,700 and 600 bottles respectively in 2020. And in 2022, the AP Languedoc authority officially added Assyrtiko to its list of permitted subsidiary varieties, along with Italian **Nero d'Avola** and **Montepulciano**. ▶



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10 People & place

'Languedoc has always been about people,' says Marcel Orford-Williams, long-time buyer for UK merchant The Wine Society. 'The key to knowing Languedoc and revealing its secrets is to know the people.' Somewhat overwhelming, considering there are some 1,200 producers of all sizes in the region. Complicating matters further are the cycles of newcomers and a new generation of youngsters taking over family domaines; but this just serves to

inject the region with new energy, techniques, wine styles and ideas. Many of them have a sympathetic view of organic, biodynamic or regenerative practices, plus a strong concern for the environment, biodiversity and respecting the ecosystem in which they work. 'They are going to bring a spirit of freedom,' says Nicole Bojanowski (see '5 Lighter, fresher wines', p45) in Minervois.

Land prices are slowly increasing in the region – figures from French agency Safer's Le Prix des Terres arm show vineyard prices in the Aude, Hérault and Gard departments rising between 1% and 6% over 2021-2022. And prices per hectare of vineyard land in Pic St-Loup and Terrasses du Larzac are considerably higher than elsewhere in the region, averaging €72,000 and €27,500

respectively, compared with €16,000 in Faugères or €12,000 in St-Chinian, less elsewhere. Yet Languedoc still remains affordable compared with many other French wine regions – 2022 values per hectare in Côtes du Rhône villages Rasteau and Tavel averaged €80,000 and €70,000, and for Bordeaux's Haut-Médoc it was €60,000. Languedoc is therefore 'bustling with creativity', says Gardner at Emile Wines.

But there's an 'old-new' generation that still acts as a reference point and as inspiration for the newbies, too; a selection of established names quietly beavering away making top-tier, modern wines have made space and shared their experience and expertise.



Vivien Hemelsdael (see box right)

At the vanguard: 10 Languedoc wines to tempt

① **Domaine de Mouscaillo, Crémant de Limoux Brut Nature 2020 92**

mouscaillo.com

A new generation takes the reins here, in young winemakers Thomas and Camille Fort. Their Crémant is delicious: it shows a warm and sunny ripeness of stone fruit, wild flower honey and grilled pineapple. Delicate florals appear on the palate, along with baked apple, buttered toast, hay and cashew butter. An elegant creamy mousse rounds out the finish. **Drink** 2023-2026 **Alcohol** 12.5%

② **Domaine Jones, La Perle Rare Blanc, Vin de France NV 96**

£28-£34 Fareham Wine Cellar, The Good Wine Shop
A special wine whose story begins in 2009 as a single barrel of Grenache Gris, shunned

in the corner of the winery for being too oaky. Four years later, vandals emptied all of Katie Jones' white wine tanks, but the single barrel survived untouched and had transformed into a complex wonder. A solera system has been continued since that vintage, with one barrel bottled each year. Intense, oxidative aromas of fresh hay, grilled peaches, preserved lemons, praline and a distinct smokiness. The palate is explosive, full of nutty complexity, lemon oil and a real saltiness. Endless length. **Organic. Drink** 2023-2030 **Alc** 14.5%

③ **Clos du Gravillas, L'Inattendu, Minervois 2022 94**

£26.58 (2021) Les Caves de Pyrene
Grenaches Blanc and Gris, with some Macabeu, perform a delicate dance here,

Languedoc: seven names to know

Beyond the names already cited, the following producers should also be on your radar...

CLOS DES JARRES, Minervois Vivien Hemelsdael makes fresh wines that sometimes stray away from the appellation norms. leclousdesjarres.fr

DOMAINE DE VILLENEUVE, Pic St-Loup Softly spoken and a fount of knowledge, 28-year-old Victorine Frasse is the new generation now heading up this family domaine. domaine-de-villeneuve.com

ETIENNE FORT, Limoux Converting a portion of his family's vineyards to organic and rescuing them from the cooperative, Etienne makes elegant, expressive Crémant and Blanquette. +33 (0)6 33 43 41 46

LES HAUTES TERRES, Limoux A reference for high-quality still and sparkling in Limoux. domaineshautesterres.com

MAS COMBARELA, Terrasses du Larzac A relatively new domaine in the appellation, founded in 2016 by Olivier Faucon, and one to watch. mas-combarela.com

MAS FOULAQUIER, Pic St-Loup A biodynamic domaine in the northern reaches of the appellation, established by former architect Pierre Jéquier in 1998 and run since 2003 with his wife Blandine Chauchet. masfoulaquier.fr

YOHANN MORENO, Corbières A new young winemaker in Durban-Corbières, making waves in the natural wine scene. [@morenoyohann](https://twitter.com/morenoyohann)

with inviting aromas that flit between white florals, wet rocks and a fine dusting of dried herbs. Firm, mineral and refined, with a light nutty note, this is a wine that's at once pure and powerful. The dry, hot 2022 vintage has not zapped its consistent elegance. Fermented in 500L barrels and aged on lees, a little richness rounds out the finish. **Organic. Drink** 2023-2030 **Alc** 13.5%

④ **Domaine du Pas de l'Escalette, Mas Rousseau, Hérault 2021 94**

POA Carte Blanche Wines
Fragrant white blossom, honeysuckle and rosemary honey aromas seduce, transforming into crab apple and almond. Pure Carignan Blanc from a small plot planted via massal selection from the domaine's 90-year-old vines, in the far ▶

PHOTOGRAPHY: ROCKEFERNS

SOUTHERN FRANCE

northern reaches of Terrasses du Larzac. A biodynamic white of power and intensity, glinting and shimmering with energy and potential. Taut and mineral, with a saline, rocky edge. **Drink** 2023-2035 **Alc** 12.5%

Laurent Miquel, Solas Albariño, Aude 2022 90

£12.95 The Fine Wine Co

'The idea was to create something really fresh, mineral and crisp, and get the purity of Albariño,' says Laurent Miquel, and he's done just that. From his plots of Albariño planted at some 200m on limestone in the Corbières. This vintage shows a peachy outline to the citrus fruit; bright lemon zest punches through a saline finish. Refreshing and drinkable. **Drink** 2023-2025 **Alc** 12.5%

5 Maxime Magnon, Métisse, Corbières 2022 94

£28 Roberson

Inspired by the Rhône rosés of Tavel, Magnon has made this rosé (more of a 'clairret') since 2011. Métisse is a maceration of Lledoner Pelut and Cinsault, blended with direct press Carignan and aged in a combination of old oak and stainless steel. It's light on its feet, with plenty of cherry skin and crunchy red apple on the nose, finely textured on the palate with a lick of liquorice and a lifted, aerial finish. Organic. **Drink** 2024-2030 **Alc** 13%

6 Domaine de Cèbene, Les Bancèls, Faugères 2020 94

£21.50-£22.95 JN Wine, Leon Stolarski

Les Bancèls means 'terraces' in Occitan. Winemaker Brigitte Chevalier takes Syrah and Grenache parcels from an exceptional,



high-terraced site with northern exposure, along with a bit of Mourvèdre, and masterfully blends them into this silky, refined wine. Scents of damsons and bramble mix with juniper and heather, perfumed with wild garrigue. Richness is balanced by a mineral, slaty core and fine tannins. The 2020 is superb: approachable and delicious now, but bright acidity will prolong its life into the medium term. Biodynamic. **Drink** 2023-2035 **Alc** 13.5%

7 Mas Bruguière, La Grenadière, Pic St-Loup 2021 94

£30 M&Sima

A beautiful expression of Syrah built on youthful black fruit, spanning black plums, forest berries and black olives. Textured like crimson silk, with clean, defined lines and a mineral, stony centre. It's concentrated and tightly structured, but so fresh and refined. At 90% of the blend, vinified in foudres, 40-year-old Syrah claims centre

stage. 2021 was quite a fresh vintage in Pic St-Loup, leading to high acidities and good ageing potential. This will start to open out with another year in bottle. Organic. **Drink** 2024-2031 **Alc** 13.5%

8 Domaine Balansa, Versicolore, Vin de France 2021 92

£34 (2019) 161 Food & Drink, Oranj. Under the Bonnet Wines

Céline Peyre and her partner Alexandre Gressent (pictured, left) took over 14ha of old vines from the Peyre family domaine in the Hautes-Corbières, making their first vintage in 2017. This wine is all centenarian Carignan vinified in concrete and aged in old barrels. A bright expression of black fruit from the start, fragrant and bewitching. Fine-grained and intricately textured, with a slaty, mineral core and fresh acidity. The new generation and one to watch. Biodynamic. **Drink** 2023-2028 **Alc** 14.5%

Domaine Ledogar, Les Brunelles, Vin de France 2022 92

POA Dynamic Vines

Brothers Xavier and Mathieu work this domaine, within the Boutenac cru of the Corbières, having inherited many old vines and converting to organics and then biodynamics. Les Brunelles is 100% Cinsault, from one parcel of 75-year-old vines with soils of red clay and galets roulets. It's harvested a little early, has one week of maceration, and has fairly low alcohol. It's a vibrant wine, alive and kicking, full of wild strawberries, crushed raspberries and the sweet earthy bitterness of apple skins. Breezy, refreshing and joyful. **Drink** 2023-2025 **Alc** 12% **D**

