



Hidden delights from the south of France

By Jancis Robinson

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For wine consumers, especially those who like hand-crafted, highly individual wines that express the place where they were grown and are sensibly priced too, Languedoc-Roussillon is the perfect playground.

For the region's producers, however, life is far from playful. Sales are unjustifiably sluggish, while costs continue to escalate. Vineyard land costs are some of the lowest in France, which has encouraged an influx of ambitious newcomers, so there are hundreds of fine wines available.

Yet for the consumer, it is a confusing region with no track record of making great wine, which has arguably kept prices lower than they deserve to be. There are just so many wines available – mostly in small quantities and from *domaines* too modest to have developed an efficient distribution system – that these gems are largely undiscovered. Within France, they suffer for having no established reputation, while too many overseas importers prefer to concentrate on their well-travelled routes to Bordeaux, Burgundy and the Rhône.

Try as the authorities might (and they have injected huge resources and effort into trying to restructure the region's nomenclature, now under the umbrella term "Sud de France", chosen to appeal to the US market), there is still no clear hierarchy of names. The best *domaines* may sell some of their best wines as lowly *vin de pays* simply because they are made from grape varieties not embraced by local *appellation contrôlée* regulations.

And then for every superb example of one of the principal *appellations* – from west to east Côtes du Roussillon, Fitou, Corbières, Minervois, St-Chinian, Faugères, Coteaux du Languedoc – there are dozens, if not hundreds, of lacklustre examples in mass distribution, almost invariably from one of the wine co-operatives that still dominate production in the region.

Among the co-ops there has been a trend towards amalgamation. Apart from notable exceptions, such as the astute Mont Tauch group of co-ops around Fitou, co-op managements have generally been more concerned with local politics and the distribution of subsidies than with refining and finding a real market for their produce. Along with much-revived Sicily and Puglia in Italy, this is the region that European agricultural policy has most obviously been grappling with, so embarrassingly inconvenient have been their wine surpluses.

One of the most visible changes in the landscape of Languedoc-Roussillon is the dramatic reduction in area devoted to the vine, thanks to payments given to those prepared to grub up vineyards. Many of these have been on the unprepossessing plain in the immediate hinterland of the Mediterranean coast, but the payments available have also encouraged some older *vignerons* in the sweep of exceptional terrain on hillier land about 30 km inland to pull out some of France's oldest vines. This is regrettable, especially since in theory no new planting rights are granted in this region of over-production.

The strength of the euro has put yet another brake on sales of Languedoc-Roussillon wine. Hampshire importer Stone, Vine & Sun, for example, has long championed some of the region's more interesting wines, but at a recent tasting of their latest imports at the smart Sud de France showroom in the heart of London's prime shopping district (which must be quite a drain on the region's resources), the wines seemed noticeably, and not justifiably, more expensive than before.

Perhaps those who are doing best financially from selling Languedoc wine are those top-quality producers who have worked out a way of selling direct to the end consumer. There is no shortage of northern Europeans who have established themselves on small *domaines* and are increasingly selling via their own websites or to just a handful of committed importers who are personal friends. Obvious examples are Ch Mansenoble in Corbières, Les Clos Perdus, also mainly in Corbières, and Domaine Gayda north of Limoux, run by an Anglo-South African team.

The region may have its structural problems but the wines could hardly be more *de nos jours*. A delightfully wide range of grape varieties thrive here, many of them – such as Syrah, Grenache of all three colours, Mourvèdre and old stumps of Caignan – highly fashionable.

Among white wine grapes, the region offers a panoply of really distinctive varieties such as Bourboulenc, Carignan Blanc, Clairette, Macabeu, Marsanne, Picpoul, Rolle/Vermentino, Roussanne, Viognier and even Terret, all of which have their own particular favourite areas and deliver flavours quite unlike regulation Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc (both of which can produce very respectable wines in the Languedoc).

Indeed just about the only varieties that do not thrive there are Riesling and the ubiquitous Cabernet Sauvignon. The pioneering Mas de Daumas Gassac's special all-Cabernet 2007 Cuvée Emile Peynaud, named after their original Bordeaux consultant, is, however, a fine wine by any measure – as well it might be at nearly £100 a bottle, truly the exception that proves the rule about the modest prices for some top-quality wines from this extensive stretch of southern France.

Roussillon, between Corbières and the Spanish border, has undergone the most extraordinary vinous transformation in recent years. Having been dedicated to producing strong, sweet wines such as Rivesaltes, it now makes a fascinating array of dry table wines, red and white, from ancient vines whose flavours are concentrated by the low rainfall here in this, the sunniest corner of France. Even in the wetter, more Atlantic-influenced far west of the Languedoc, rain rarely ruins a crop since winds tend to dry the grapes naturally immediately after a shower. This is a part of France truly blessed by nature. It's just a shame that it is paying for man's excesses and deficiencies.

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My favourite Languedoc-Roussillon producers

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|--------------------------|---------------------------------|----------------------|-----------------------------|
| Domaine de l'Aigle | La Combe Blanche | Domaine de l'Hortus | Château d'Or et des Gueules |
| Château d'Anglès | Château Etienne la Dournie | Château l'Hospitalet | La Pèira |
| Domaine d'Aupilhac | Domaine des Enfants | Mansenoble | Olivier Pithon |
| Léon Barral | Ermitage du Pic St Loup | Mas des Dames | Peyre Rose |
| Bertrand Bergé | La Forge (from Gérard Bertrand) | Mas de Daumas Gassac | Le Roc des Anges |
| Borie de Maurel | Domaine Gauby | Mas de l'Ecriture | Domaine du Soleilla |
| Clos Centeilles | Domaine Gayda | Matassa | Le Soula |
| Les Clos Perdus | Domaine du Grand Crès | Thierry Navarre | Treloar |
| Clos du Gravillas | Hecht et Banner | Château de la Négly | |

Clos du Gravillas, L'Inattendu 2008 Minervoise 15 Drink 2010-2012 Very smoky nose. Then a little watery on the palate. Firm finish – pretty chewy. Slightly beery. £14.95 in the UK via Les Caves de Pyrène

Clos du Gravillas, Sous les Cailloux des Grillons 2008 Vin de Pays des Côtes du Brian 16.5 Drink 2010-2012 Blend of six different varieties. Cool and peppery on the nose. Bone-dry finish. Very artisanal. Easy and friendly. A bit of alcohol on the finish. £8.75

Clos du Gravillas, Rendez Vous du Soleil 2007 Vin de Pays des Côtes du Brian 16.5 Drink 2010-2015 Round and super easy and friendly. Lots of fruit and charm. £11.80

Clos du Gravillas, Rendez Vous du Soleil 2006 Vin de Pays des Côtes du Brian 15.5 Drink 2011-2015 Crunchy purple fruits and a little bit of reduction but lots of effort! Bit hard on the palate. £11.60

Clos du Gravillas, Lo Veilh Carignan 2006 Vin de Pays des Côtes du Brian 17 Drink 2010-2016 Light crimson. Like a bunch of grapes crunched in the hand. Explosive fruit. No hardness at all. Very round and welcoming. Basic portion planted in 1911. Very warm and even rich. A very complete characterful wine. £14.95