

Languedoc-Roussillon, reds A-L 2020

JancisRobinson.com by Tamlyn Currin 16 July 2020

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It is sometimes with a sense of frustration that I view the blending regulations of the Languedoc and Roussillon appellations. This, for example, is the *textes réglementaires* for St-Chinian from the INAO website (roughly translated): 'The wines must be a blend of grapes, musts or wines, comprising at least two grape varieties of which at least one is a principal grape variety [ie Grenache, Lledoner Pelut, Mourvèdre and Syrah]. The principal grape variety/ies must make up the largest proportion of the blend.' Reasonably straightforward. Unless, of course, you're in Berlou where you have to have *at least* 10% Carignan (even though it's categorised as a secondary, inferior variety for the appellation, along with Cinsault) in the blend and the principal grape variety/ies must make up at least 40% of the blend. Or, if you're in Roquebrun, where the wine must be a blend of at least two grape varieties, but this time both of them have to be principal varieties.

The rules for most of the 36 or so appellations of the region are equally convoluted, differing only in grape varieties (with plenty of overlap) and proportions. What all this amounts to, apart from being impossible to remember, a mountain of bureaucracy and a waste of everyone's time, is tying many a fine producer's hand behind her/his back.

Don't mistake me: I'm not anti blending. It is a powerful way to bring balance to a wine, especially in difficult vintages. It is a way of using the strengths of each variety to bring out the best in each other. The sum can be greater than the parts. But if, hypothetically speaking, a St-Chinian-Roquebrun producer makes a truly fine wine and that wine happens to be a varietal Syrah or a 50:50 Grenache/Cinsault blend, it doesn't matter one whit that the wine has St-Chinian perfume and elegance, that it tastes of the schist on which it was grown, or that it is a credit to its appellation. The producer is not allowed to put St-Chinian on the label, let alone Roquebrun. Everyone loses. With an IGP on the label, the producer has to fight harder for the price the wine deserves and to overcome prejudice towards IGP wines (Languedoc IGPs are still erroneously linked in many minds with cheap bulk wine). The consumer skips over the 'overpriced IGP wine' in favour of the cheaper St-Chinian; and the appellation loses out on what would have been a star ambassador for the St-Chinian name.

The Prioundo vineyard of Les Clos Perdus – if ever there was an argument for blending, this wine is it! See the tasting note below and owner/winemaker Paul Old in one of his vineyards above.

Far be it for me to suggest that producers lie, but I idly wondered, while tasting some of these wines, whether two or three of them with 'mainly Syrah' written on the back label might, *possibly*, be 99.999% Syrah.

That said, there are producers who care less about public perception of IGPs and have done a great deal of work to change those perceptions. Domaine Gayda and Mas de Daumas Gassac positively embrace the freedom it gives them, and their outstanding wines are much in demand. For others it is a chance to test the mettle of their vineyards with varietal wines. It was interesting to taste a handful of Pinot Noirs (a grape which doesn't seem quite in its element in this part of the world, although Calmel & Joseph are making a remarkably good one from their own domaine vines – see La Magdeleine below) and I liked the freshness of the Ournac and Villa Noria Pinots. I also loved the Fons Sanatis 'Pur Jus' – a 100% Mourvèdre grown biodynamically and clocking in at a refreshing 12% alcohol.

When I see '100% Carignan' on the label, however, I'm inclined to quail a little. Carignan can be so aggressively rustic and, a bit like garlic, is usually better in combination with other things than by itself. But five producers proved to me that varietal Carignan can be a great wine: Domaine of the Bee, Mas d'Amile, Treloar, Ste-Croix and Mas Combarèla. Domaine of the Bee (pictured below) and Mas d'Amile are doing some particularly exciting work with this gnarly grape. The beast can be tamed.

On the other hand, when I see '100% Cinsault', I get a little (warily) excited. Cinsault, in my book, is one of the least understood, least appreciated red varieties. It's unceremoniously blended, picked way too early in order to make boring rosés, and occasionally pounded within an inch of its life to make a 'proper' red wine. Here and there, the rare poetic soul gets Cinsault, understands that it is more Pinot Noir than Syrah, that it needs to be treated as gently as Riesling, that you have to coax fluttery petal-thin and petal-smooth flavours without expecting deep colour, knock-out aromatics or alpha-male tannins. Cinsault, left to be what it is, turns delicate, fragrant, alluding – in watercolour brushstrokes – to charcuterie and earth and sweat and seeds, but always blooming with shy charm on the spectrum of strawberry sweetness and fruit. I was thrilled to see some Languedoc producers realising, at last, the true gift of this grape. Look out for Jeff Carrel's Vin de Cinsault below, and in tomorrow's article a couple of lovely fresh examples from Domaine Montrose (certified carbon neutral as well!) and Domaine St-Martin d'Agel. But the best Cinsault, without doubt, was natural-wine producer Simon Coulshaw's Domaine des Trinités, L'Étranger. Totally addictive.

Clos du Gravillas, Sous les Cailloux des Grillons 2019 IGP Pays d'Hérault Côtes du Brian

Certified organic. Syrah, Cabernet Sauvignon, Carignan, Grenache, Counoise, Terret Gris and Mourvèdre. Their youngest vines and no oak.

Menthol-cherry cough sweets and clove oil. Nose and palate. Dry, a little astringent, a little tough and sinewy. Fresh, though! And vibrant. Pizza wine. You could gulp this down. (TC)

13.5% Drink 2020–2022

16

Clos du Gravillas, Rendez-Vous sur la Lune 2018 Minervois

Very slightly corked. You can still smell the prunes and plums. On the palate, there is ripeness with a touch of Moroccan leather and biltong. There is tang and redcurrants and clean earthiness. But drifting over it all, like the flat smell of pollution, is [TCA](#). Without it, a fabulous wine. (TC)

14% Drink ??

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Clos du Gravillas, Lo Vièlh 2017 IGP Pays d'Hérault Côtes du Brian

Certified organic. 100-year-old Carignan.

Charred mulberries on the nose. Concentrated and clenched and fierce. Without being particularly communicative. Like having goth teenager in the house – undeniable character and definition with a certain beauty but a little bit scary and not at all charming. Two things: you need the right food with this wine (and food, you absolutely need) and you need to love Carignan. My score takes both of these into account. (TC)

14% Drink 2021–2027

16.5

Clos du Gravillas, Pic de St-Jean 2015 IGP Pays d'Hérault Côtes du Brian

Certified organic. Cabernet Sauvignon at 300 m above sea level on limestone.

Smells like chocolate cake, straight out the oven, the edges burned. But very herby – sage, rosemary – on the palate. The chocolate that's there is dark and intense, growling, 100% cocoa. Tannins dry and all teeth and not a little intimidating. A wine that feels more like a stand-off with a dog on a chain than an epicurean encounter. But there is something undeniably, smoulderingly attractive – that thing of a bad guy/gal who you just *know* will not be good for you – so even though this wine is way too tough and too ripe in all the wrong places, we'll all end up drinking one too many glasses. (TC)

14% Drink 2020–2023

16

Clos du Gravillas, Douce Providence 2018 Muscat de St-Jean-de-Minervois

Certified organic vin doux naturel. RS 125 g/l. 50 cl bottle.

What a delight! Tastes like slow-roasted Cotton Candy grapes with a bit of lychee and rose water and then this wonderful sweet-fennel herbiness and sweet, warm spices. Silky texture with just enough weight to make it move with a sensuousness around the mouth, but shot through with freshness and life and energy. I couldn't imagine anything more delicious than a bowl of ripe papaya, fresh chopped mint, a sprinkling of cinnamon, nutmeg and sweet paprika, and a glass of this. Lockdown breakfast? Lunch? Mid-afternoon snack? Who cares. Ravishingly drinkable. (TC)

15% Drink 2020–2023

17