

## Wine

### What's up, Languedoc?

'I was struck by how much great wine is being produced and what wonderful bargains most are'

## Jancis Robinson



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In 1989, when the French franc (remember?) was cheap and a pre-Ryanair wave of British romantics sought a slice of *la France profonde*, we bought half a house in Languedoc. It was a small village in Burgundy that had shown 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.

Back then, Languedoc and Roussillon, its Catalan neighbour to the south-west, were producing wines that seemed centuries less evolved than the great wines of France. I liked the idea that an array of styles was available in the region, but felt safe from feeling 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 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 were put in place to drain this lake and transform the landscape so that vines on the least propitious (flat and fertile) land were grubbed up. This left a more significant proportion growing in more promising sites at higher elevations, on slopes and on poorer soils so that yields were naturally 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 rare. That is because I treasure the contrast between my weeks with family and friends at the house and my busy travelling schedule the rest of the year. But it isn't because the wines are not worthy of attention.

This summer I was struck by just how much great wine is being produced here (white and pink as well as red), and what wonderful bargains most are. And I was thrilled to see continued proof of the excitingly tense dry whites that can be grown on higher ground in Roussillon. These wines are so full of individuality, encompassing a range of terrains, grape varieties and winemaking methods, that I could not help comparing them with the narrower range of flavours available from, say, [Bordeaux](#) and Burgundy — whose wines are generally 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 international varieties, often from the larger, more commercial producers, that tend to carry the IGP Pays d'Oc appellation. Some of these are perfectly nice (and good value) but many 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, half of them were white, with Chardonnay and Viognier being most common — 14 as opposed to 12 reds and two rosés.

Not long ago, Languedoc vineyards were dominated by the dark-skinned Carignan grape. Then there was a vogue for planting Sauvignon Blanc and Cabernet Sauvignon — neither particularly suitable for the region. But now, as elsewhere, it is recognised that the traditional varieties work best. So reds tend to be blends of Grenache Noir, its “hairy-leaved” version Lladoner Pelut, Syrah, Mourvèdre, Cinsault and Carignan; whites are drawn from Grenache Blanc, Grenache Gris, Clairette, Piquepoul, Maccabeu (Viura), Bourboulenc, Rolle (Vermentino), Roussanne, Marsanne and Viognier. These can have seriously individual flavours.

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The wines that excited me this year were made from a mix of local grapes, grown — organically and sometimes biodynamically — in individual conditions, by small, independent producers.

Tom Hills created Domaine La Lauzeta only in 2015, but with notable success. He produces small amounts of wine in a cramped garage in the St-Chinian village of St-Nazaire de Ladarez, after years spent working as a sugar trader in Russia and the US and growing coffee in Nicaragua. He has

identified some fine parcels of vines and enlisted the help of the excellent local consultant Claude Gros and winemaker Amélie Czerwenka. I was 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 cool, isolated terraced vineyards above Poujols that constitute their Domaine du Pas de l'Escalette, north of the Terrasses du Larzac, a rocky, windswept subregion of the Languedoc. They wisely ignored advice to pull out such indigenous grapes as Carignan Blanc and Terret Bourret and now find their nervy dry white blend particularly sought after by sommeliers.

Domaine Sainte Marie des Crozes is run by Christelle Alias, whose father Bernard renovated the estate at the end of the last century. From hillside vineyards in the northern reaches of Corbières, on the Montagne d'Alaric, she produces a range of memorably named and packaged reds.

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

I was lucky this year in being able to taste widely and pleasurably without venturing further than a few steps from the front door.

I benefited from the research 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 past few years, he has volunteered to collect samples from up-and-coming producers for me and this year he excelled himself.

Then there are consignments of bottles that just seemed to end up on my doorstep, usually delightfully out of the blue. Examples: wines from Domaine Paul Meunier-Centernach, based in the old St-Arnac co-op; and German-owned Domaine Courbissac in the wild hills above La Livinière, the first official sub-appellation within Minervois, which may be joined by Cazelles and Laure if their applications are successful.

## Southern stars

Out of 104 wines tasted, I gave all the wines below a score of 17 out of 20, but I thought a further 27 were worth 16.5.

### Whites

- Les Clos Perdus L'Extrême 2016 IGP Côtes Catalanes

- Dom Paul Meunier-Centernach 2015 Côtes du Roussillon
- Pas de l'Escalette, Les Clapas 2015 IGP Pays d'Hérault

## **Reds**

- Ch d'Agel, Grenu and Venustas 2015 Minervois
- Dom de Cébène, Belle Lurette and Les Bancèls 2015 Faugères
- Dom de Courbissac Roc du Pière and Roc Suzadou 2015 Minervois
- Gayda Chemin de Moscou 2014 IGP Pays d'Oc
- Dom La Lauzeta, La Lauzeta 2015 St-Chinian Roquebrun
- Mas de Daumas Gassac 2015 IGP Haute Vallée du Gassac
- Dom Paul Meunier-Centernach 2014 Côtes du Roussillon-Villages
- Dom du Pas de L'Escalette, Grand Pas 2015 Languedoc, Terrasses du Larzac
- Dom Ste-Marie des Crozes Les Fugitives 2015 and Timéo 2012 Corbières

See [wineseacher.com](http://wineseacher.com) for stockists and Purple Pages of [JancisRobinson.com](http://JancisRobinson.com) for tasting notes

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