

Life In The Old Languedoc Yet?

With all the snobbery, special jargon and almost religious mystic which so often surround wine, it is easy to forget that it is simply a livelihood for most people involved in growing, making and selling the stuff. This has had a major influence in shaping the wine industry in the deep south of France.

The Languedoc Roussillon area of France covers around 300,000 hectares, making it the biggest vineyard area in the world (and nearly 3 times the total area of Australia's vineyards). It has traditionally produced vast quantities of mediocre (at best) plonk, largely by the region's subsidised co-ops. Wine for most of these growers is an agricultural crop; in an area where the drought and rocky soils mean grapevines are one of the few crop plants tough enough to grow. Payment by weight of fruit and potential alcohol has been the norm. These are easy to measure, but this approach encourages vast crops with sugar levels as high as possible (for those extra centimes) and never mind anything as subtle as flavour or acidity. Sadly, this mentality is still deeply ingrained, and is not helped by the tradition of inheritance, with most vigneron having inherited their roles, rather than choosing it. This is a complete contrast to the most dynamic areas of the New World with their passionate young winemakers.

Action and Reaction

Since the 1950s wine drinking in France has fallen through the bottom of the barrel, dropping from around 135 litres per head to about 58 litres now (though this is still high by our sober British efforts of just 22 litres). Most of this was the very plonk being produced down south in industrial quantities, from grapes like Aramon, Alicante and Carignan. Today growers seem to blame everyone but themselves for their disappearing market – the EU, the importers, the rest of Europe for daring to produce cheap wine, never mind those upstart New Worlders. This anger has spilled out into massive acts of vandalism – something French farmers seem to be very prone to (and that includes grape farmers). One negociant, Bessiere, lost 700,000 bottles of wine and its bottling line to vandalism by the Comité D'Action Viticole on 29th January this year. Ironically this company wasn't buying in non-French wine but seems to have been picked on because it is visible and conveniently close to the autoroute.

Narrow Horizons

Few of these blue-overalled vigneron appear to ever travel further than the next town, never mind taking much notice of the outside world. The idea of drinking wine without food is still pretty alien to the southern French and yet this is vital to understanding the styles of wine that we in northern Europe want. One major piece of research in the UK last year showed over 2/3 of the participants were drinking their wine on its own – my pet theory is that this is a major factor behind our taste for softer, fruitier and less tannic wines. Changes may be afoot as one winemaker reckons that people in the Languedoc are starting to drink white wine as an aperitif, instead of vermouth.

Talk about Terroir

The Languedoc Roussillon has everything it needs to become a great wine region and to give the New World a serious run for its money. In its favour, it has a sunny climate, with low summer rainfall, a huge range of soils, microclimates and interesting grapes in among the rubbish. However it is region in chaos – its very diversity is its down fall.

When you visit the region, you can't escape the talk about "terroir" (an untranslatable French word that means everything about the local growing conditions – soil, slopes, altitude, rain and the rest). If I struggle to remember whether I'm in Montpeyroux, Cabardès or Haut-Corbières and whether the soil is Marne Bleu or Villafranchien, pity the poor consumer. No wonder so many drinkers are voting with their wallets and picking those easy to pronounce New World options. Some of the effort that has gone into subdividing the region into numerous Appellations would have been better spent on improving wine quality and promoting an identity for the whole region. While there are a few great producers and a small number of forward-looking Domaines and even co-ops, the Languedoc lacks the image of Bordeaux or Burgundy and has little in the way of major brands.

Politics Rule

In France, life for the average worker seems distinctly cushy with a 35 hour working week, long holidays and one of the best health and education systems in the world. On the downside, this all adds up to among the highest production costs in the world, which has to be covered in the price of the wine. Market forces and excess production keep selling prices low and this conspires to squeeze out any room for enough profit to reinvest in new vines, equipment or quality. On top of this, 70% of wine is produced by co-ops whose interest is in paying their members and taking as much production subsidy as they can get, not thinking about what their customers actually want.

Breaking the Mould

It all looks like a bleak picture for the South of France so far, but there are chinks of light in the gloom. Choice and passion mark out many of the names to watch from the rest. Georges Bertrand (capped for France at Rugby) of Chateau Villemajou made his first wine at the age of 10, following in the footsteps of his father who introduced barrels in Corbières. Guido Janseggers of Chateau Mansenoble was forced by his wife to choose between insurance and wine. Luckily he saw reason, as his Corbières Reserve reds are rich and delicious. At Ch Puech-Haut, Gerard Bru renovated and replanted from scratch and today the wines are stunning (made by Englishman Gavin Purcell with consultancy from the almost legendary Michel Rolland)– pricey definitely, but compared to the equivalent quality from Bordeaux or California, it's actually still good value. Other producers to look out for are St Jean de Bebian, Domaine de Aupilhac and Ch Pennautier. Production of all these wines is limited and prices high for the Languedoc and they are frustratingly difficult to track down over here, but try Everywine.co.uk.

Outside Influences

It is largely outsiders who seem to be the leaders in recognising the potential of the region – though companies like Caves de Mont Tauch (their Fitou is widely available, and the gimmicky French Kiss Corbières Sainsbury £4.99 is surprising drinkable) and Foncalieu (Winter Hill) are local exceptions. The enormous Val D'Orbieu group is responsible for the delicious, ripe, spicy Cuvee Mythique (£6.49 Waitrose/Safeway/Co-op and Sainsbury from June). This wine was first launched in 1990 to show what can be done outside the appellation rules. Basically, it's a blend of the local classic grape varieties like Carignan, Syrah and Mourvèdre, with small amounts of Cabernet Sauvignon and a little oak ageing. It's selected from the best terroirs from Val D'Orbieu's most respected grower members and in

particular old vines, especially some pensioner Carignan that is more than 60 years old.

There seems to be something about the region that appeals particularly to Burgundians as several big names are heavily committed to the region. Bruno Lafon of Domaine Magellan (Oddbins may still have bin ends of his Le Fruit Defendu at £5.49) – his brother runs Comtes Lafon, one of the top names in Burgundy. Another Burgundy house, Rodet recently bought Domaine de L'Aigle in the cooler Limoux area, which they believe has potential for Pinot Noir and graceful Chardonnay. Michel Laroche, a fifth generation Chablis producer, bought Domaine la Chevalière near Beziers. He has built a winery with the aim of making French wine with international appeal, free from the strictures in Chablis. His French winemaker Yves Barry has the requisite New World experience, but where it really counts is down among the vines. Richard Lavanoux is the vine man and he spends many hours criss-crossing the region monitoring vineyards and hunting out interesting new plots of vines. His driving is hair-raising anyway, but he's inclined to screech to halt suddenly by a plot of Syrah or Merlot - anything perched on hillsides or trained up on trellises, instead of the traditional floppy Gobelet style. His next challenge is to track down the owners and persuade them to work with Laroche. One of Richard's greatest triumphs has to be persuading the president of village Cave Co-op along with several of his blue overall clad vigneronns to visit Chile. It seems to have opened their eyes wide and they placed an order for lots of stainless steel immediately they got back (something that's still very rare in the region – most wineries still have concrete vats). Look out for Michel Laroche Chardonnay in Co-op, Majestic, Budgens, Sainsbury (£5.99), Grenache (Co-op £3.99) and Merlot (Sainsbury's £5.99).

Brits Aboard (with the Occasional Antipodean)

Another outside team who have made a big impression is Nérída Abbott (Aussie wine researcher turned wine maker) and Brit partners Nigel Sneyd and Guy Anderson. Nérída started the business back in 1986 when she had no money to invest, but she spotted space in wine cellars. She works with growers to make wine in their cellars, and insists fruit is picked on taste, with payment reflecting quality. Once the wine is finished and has gained its Appellation Contrôlée status, it is taken to Abbotts own winery for blending and bottling. The wines are a modern take on the traditional appellations, using local grapes – try Abbotts Ammonite Cotes du Roussillon (£4.99 Waitrose) and Abbotts Cumulus Minervois – pure Syrah with masses of dark fruit, spice and coffee notes (£5.99 Wine Rack).

The English are everywhere and Robert Eden is another one who is seriously committed to the region. Perhaps there's something about his name, but his philosophy is to be as eco friendly as possible, though his vineyards are still officially in conversion to organic status. Labels include Comte Cathare (try the vibrant spicy Marsanne-Viognier £5.49 Oddbins), Domaine Begude Chardonnay Vin de Pays D'Oc (£5.49 Oddbins) and elegant Prestige Limoux Chardonnay (£8.99 Oddbins) and ripe warming Ch Maris (£5.99 Oddbins).

Fruit of the Vine

During the 1970s, vast tracts of vineyards were grubbed up as fast as you could say subsidy – first the lowly Aramon and then mediocre Cinsaut and Carignan. Then came the introduction of the Vin de Pays D'Oc category. This is a superior "country wine" restricted to a short list of noble varieties, so around 100,000 hectares of new Cabernet, Chardonnay, Merlot and Syrah have been planted. This has definitely hugely commercially successful as everyone lists Vin de Pays D'Oc these days. Good ones to try are the fabulously fruity Wild Pig Syrah made

by Rhone producer Gabriel Meffre (Oddbins, Sainsbury £3.99, Unwins £4.99) and Sainsbury's new Seriously Syrah and Classy Cabernet (£4.49 available June) – both “exactly what it says on the tin” wines. There's also a renewed interest in local grapes like Mourvèdre and even Carignan, which from old vines and handled with care can be wonderful.

The Future Down South.

Reports suggest that the angry mood down south has calmed down a little, but most people reckon that the Languedoc-Roussillon still needs to pull out up to 100,000 hectares of poor vineyards before it has a fighting chance. It's also time for the politicians and vigneron to open their eyes and start making wine people really want to drink, uncluttered by the baggage of local vested interests, terroir and tradition. Learning to work together and presenting a united front from top Chateaux and Domaines to co-ops is vital. Reputations are best built from the top and the Languedoc needs icon wines to build its image. Turning away Mondavi who would have put the region firmly on the international wine map still seems short-sighted. In the meantime, I remain convinced there's great potential in the Languedoc and there are already exciting wines being made, if only you can find them.

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