

Southern France: A Treasure Trove Of Great Value Reds

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Introduction

Southern France is a wonderful hunting ground for anyone looking for great value in the world of wine. The catch is that there are a myriad of appellations and finding your way round can be tricky. A good sommelier will be delighted to give you advice and you will often find that this region is often home to their own personal favourites. It is very hard to do justice to a region which has been the subject of 750 page books, but here is a selection of my personal highlights, starting at the Italian border and working my way round to the Spanish border.

The South of France is probably the biggest viticultural region in the world, producing more wine than all of Australia. Historically, the region was the source of the bulk wine that was the mainstay of French consumption at the time that France had the highest per capita in the world. As recently as 1960, the average French adult drank 180 litres of wine per annum; today the figure is just 60. Along with this drop in consumption, we have seen two very different trends. There has been an overall reduction in the size of the area under vine and a tendency to larger, more mechanized holdings. In parallel to this 'modernization', older lower-yielding vineyards in the hills away from the coast have been 'rediscovered' and are the source of some of the most interesting and exciting wines being made in France.

The region can be divided into three broad zones, Provence (from the Italian frontier to the mouth of the river Rhône), Languedoc (from the Rhône to the just south of Narbonne) and Roussillon (the region to the North of the Spanish border).

Some random history

The history of this region is far removed from the Paris-centric version of French history that we read in many text books.

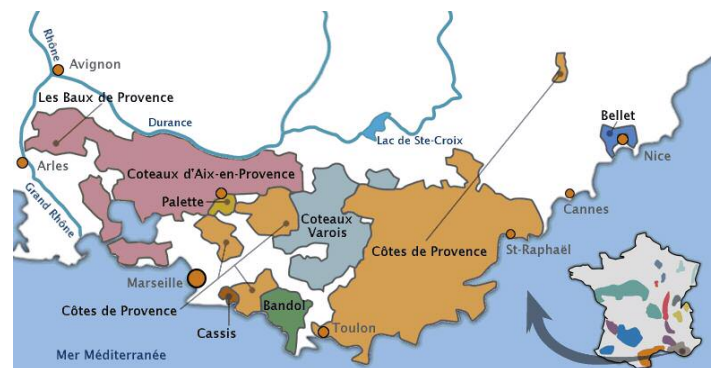
Nice was actually part of the kingdom of Sardinia until 1860 when it was ceded to France as a price paid for French support in the campaign to unify Italy.

Roussillon's inhabitants are of Catalan origin rather than French. The region was ruled by Aragón between the 13th and 17th centuries and did not become French until 1659.

Finally, Languedoc's name derives from the original language of the region - Occitan. The name Occitan comes from *lenga d'òc* (i.e. *òc* language), which in turn derives from *òc*, the Occitan word for yes (in contrast to the old French word for yes – *oïl*). Those of you who were obliged to learn Latin at school and nerdy etymologists like me might be interested to know that the word *òc* came from Vulgar Latin *hoc* ("this"), while *oïl* originated from Latin *hoc illud* ("this [is] it"). Other Romance languages derive their word for yes from the Latin *sic*, "thus [it is]", such as Spanish *sí* or Italian *sì*.

Provence

This region is probably most famous for its rosé wine, in particular the eponymous *Côtes de Provence*, which I wrote about in a previous edition of *Stirling Wines [Back in the Pink, 25 May 07]*. However, there are also a number of classic reds from this region.



Perhaps the most reputed area is Bandol, about 30km East of Marseilles. There is spectacular coastal scenery in this part of France and the vineyards have to battle with the property developers. The wines are full flavoured and must be at least 50 percent Mourvèdre. Over time this grape evolves to give the wine a wonderful earthy aroma to balance the primary fruit character. Two particular favourite wineries are Domaine Tempier (which is fairly widely distributed)

and Ch Pibarnon (which was the wine that Jacques Chirac served to the EU summit in Nice).



In the Côtes de Provence, 20 km to the East of Aix-en-Provence, lies Domaine Richeaume. This property is owned by the German Henning Hoesch, who makes a variety of wines based on Cabernet Sauvignon and Syrah.

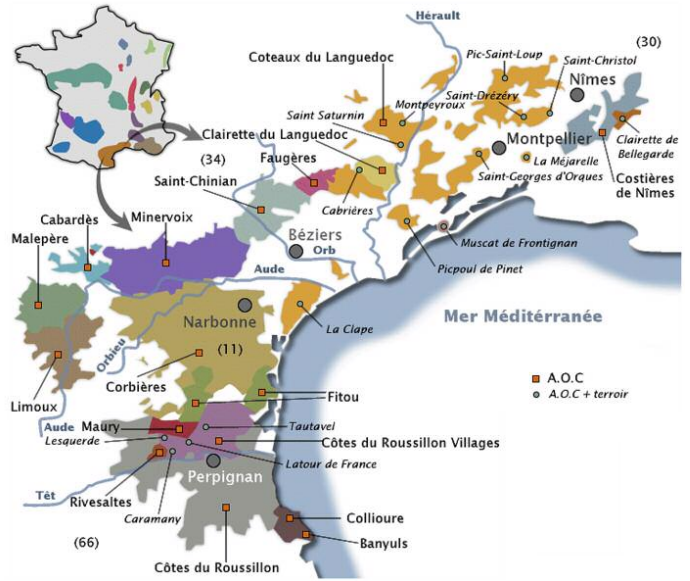
Perhaps the famous wine from this part of France is Domaine de Trevallon, near Les Baux de Provence. This wine is produced with low yields and indigenous yeasts (vs the inoculated yeast used in most commercial wineries) and is a 50/50 blend of Cabernet and Syrah. This high percentage of Cabernet makes the wine ineligible for the local appellation so it is sold as a VdP des Bouches du Rhône. These wines will easily cellar for 10 years or more and carry a distinctive funky label.



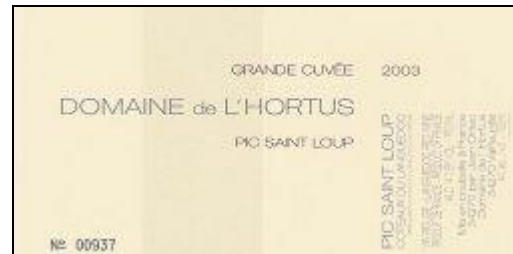
Languedoc

In this region the dominant grape is carignan, which is declining but still accounted for more than a quarter of all vines at the turn of the century. This is despite considerable incentives to plant better-quality varieties, known as cépages améliorateurs, such as grenache (the second most planted variety), cinsaut (useful for rosés), and especially syrah (third most planted variety).

The region stretches from Nîmes in the East and the appellation Costières de Nîmes to south of Narbonne and the appellation Corbières. In general, the best wines come from the hills that eventually become the Massif Central, with the coast being largely reserved for industrial plonk. However, there are also very good wines from some more maritime appellations such as La Clape (a name guaranteed to give the giggles to English schoolboys but is actually Occitan for the stony hill which gives the wine its character)



At the northern end of the **Coteaux de Languedoc** appellation is the famous 658m high crag of Pic St Loup, which gives its name to an area which is soon to have its own appellation. Grapes here must be a mix of at least 90% Syrah, Grenache, Mourvèdre. There are a number of very good wineries, amongst which is Domaine de l'Hortus, one of the pioneers of the Languedoc. Their standard wine is called Bergerie de l'Hortus and their top wine is the Grand Cuvée, both excellent



Close to Nîmes lies Domaine Puech Chaud. This estate is owned by René Rostaing who is one of the leading lights in the Côte Rôtie appellation in the Northern Rhône. His wines are 80% Syrah, the same grape used to make his Northern Rhône masterpieces; and his mastery of the grape is evident in wines that are definitely at the elegant silky end of the spectrum and represent excellent value for money.

Domaine Clavel lies just to the North of Montpellier and they make some cracking wines. Their top cuvée is a personal favourite, Copa Santa, nearly all Syrah with a dash of Grenache (10 %) and Mourvèdre (10 %) and some barrel ageing. This wine can be bought for approx £15/bottle and is best drunk after 5-10 years. I still have some 1998 vintage that is drinking beautifully – think of it as the value investor's Hermitage. To quote the wine-maker "Copa Santa possesses an authority, it's imposing. Its bouquet opens soon after decanting; in the mouth it is ample, suave and gentle. The tannins of the young Copa are firm of course but never dry."



Another good domaine in this appellation is the Prieuré de St Jean de Bebian, between Montpellier and Beziers. This is now owned by the former managers of the prestigious French wine magazine Revue du Vin de France.

In the area of La Clape, Ch Pech Redon is at the top of the infamous stony hill. Originally owned by one of the Languedoc pioneers, it is now in the hands of the Bousquet family who make a number of very quaffable reds. My favourite is probably their middle cuvée L'Epervier (sparrow hawk).

Another top-class wine from La Clape is Ch de Négly. Most of their wines are very reasonably priced but the top cuvée Porte du Ciel sells for £60+.

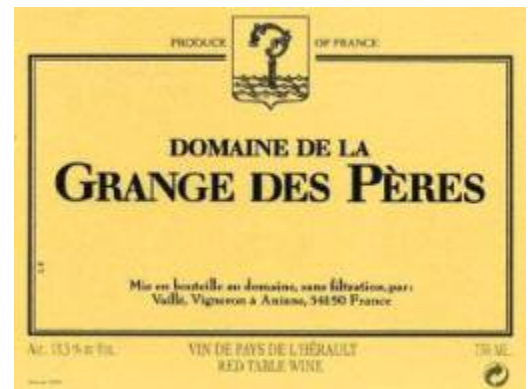


The most famous wine of this area is undoubtedly the **Mas de Daumas Gassac**. It is actually classified as a VdP de l'Hérault due to its use of grape varieties outside specifications of its AOC. The first vintage was

produced in 1978 with the assistance of the famous Bordeaux oenologist Émile Peynaud. The grape mix is predominantly of Cabernet Sauvignon, but other grape varieties include Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Pinot Noir, Tannat, as well as the Italian Nebbiolo, Barbera and Dolcetto. The only draw-back is that this is a wine which, like a fine Bordeaux, sometimes needs over a decade of cellaring.



Equally as good as Daumas Gassac but less well known outside France is the neighbouring property of Grange des Pères. The wine-maker here is a former physiotherapist called Laurent Vaillé, who trained with leading lights such as Chave, Durrbach and Coche-Dury. He makes wonderfully concentrated reds.



As one travels west, the first district with its own appellation is **Faugères**. This area is home to another star of the region - Didier Barral – although just to confuse things, the domaine is named after his father Léon. Didier is one of a growing number of high quality growers who have adopted biodynamic techniques – think of it as a cross between organic viticulture and homeopathy for vines. He makes three levels of wine. The entry level is his regular Faugères, next is Cuvée Jadis at approx £15. In years when the Mourvèdre grapes are particularly ripe he makes his top of the range Valinière (£30) - another case of a superb wine falling outside the appellation rules and classified as a lowly Vin de Table.



Other high quality names from this appellation include Domaine Alquier. Their top cuvée is called Les Bastides, another wine that rewards cellaring.

To the west of Faugère lies **St. Chinian**. The wines from this appellation tend to be more exuberantly fruity than the other regions. Good estates include Borie la Vitarèle and Cazal Viel. The winemaker at the latter, Laurent Miquel, spent some time working for Nissan in Sunderland before going back to the University of Montpellier to study oenology. He now makes a number of wines from a variety of appellation but the core is St Chinian and the wines are fairly widely available in the UK. Top cuvée is Clos des Fées, not to be confused with the Domaine du Clos des Fées (see below).



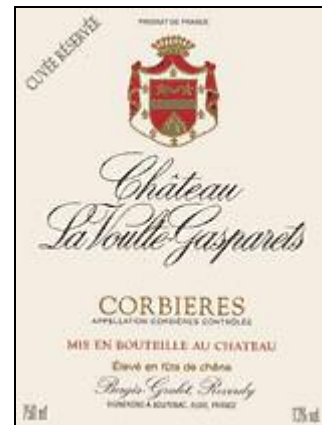
Minervois is probably the appellation with the best reputation, lying between St Chinian and the walled city of Carcassone. At the heart of the region is a sub-appellation called Minervois-La-Livinière, which is the source of most of the premium wines. I can heartily recommend a number of estates here. Borie de Maurel make a number of great wines, with a top cuvée called Esprit d'Automne. Domaine de L'Oustal Blanc is 70% Grenache plus Syrah and Carignan. This was described by Robert Parker's associate who covers the South of France as "simply the richest, most imposing Minervois of my experience. Lavender, marjoram, black pepper and black cherry on the nose lead to a velvety, expansive palate full of pure, sweet, almost honeyed black cherry essence. Vanilla, clove, and lavender add complexity as this wine – for all of its

sheer richness – maintains fluidity and hides its over-15% alcohol as it launches into a convincingly long finish." A very florid but accurate description.



Ch Ste Eulalie supply wines to the Wine Society in the UK and their top wine is called La Cantilène, with a bit more syrah and oak-ageing than their regular wine.

Corbières lies to the south of Minervois and the city of Narbonne and stands along side Minervois as the most well known appellation. I have tended to find the wines a bit more rustic than their northerly cousins. However, there are a couple of notable exceptions to this generalization. Ch la Voulte Gasparets is one of the best known estates in the area with fantastic old-vine Carignan.



Another favourite comes from a Rhône négociant called Tardieu Laurent who make a number of wines with the co-operative of Castelmaure. Look out for Cuvée No3.

Roussillon

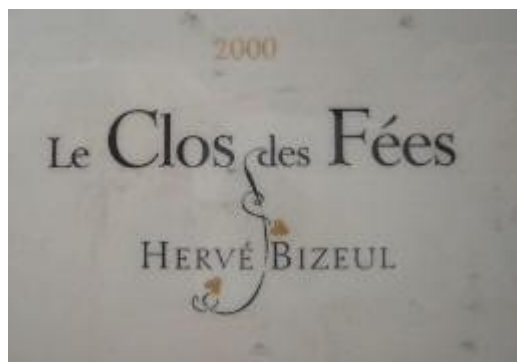
The focal point of Roussillon is the city of Perpignan, with the wine producing areas stretching south to the Spanish border. The landscape is very different here from the flat plains of the Languedoc. It is hilly country culminating in the snow-capped Pyrenees. This region is the sunniest in France and wine-making techniques

and grape varieties have much in common with Spain, not that surprising give the shared cultural heritage I talked about before.

Côtes du Roussillon is by far the largest appellation. Reds must be made from at least three grape varieties; Syrah and/or Mourvèdre must make up at least 20% but Grenache is the most widely planted variety.

Although there are many robust, good value-for-money red wines in the standard appellation, the best wines come from the northern Côtes du Roussillon-Villages sub region. The reds are robust, rarely subtle, but good value. And some of the villages such as have successfully lobbied to have their names allowed as suffixes to the appellation. Some of my favourite wines in the appellation come from one of these villages – Tautavel. The local cooperative is called Les Maîtres Vignerons de Tautavel and does a great range of value-for-money reds.

Close to Tautavel is one of the best producers in the appellation – Domaine du Clos des Fées. This was set up by a well-known Parisian sommelier called Hervé Bizeul, who bought a few parcels of very old vines (50 to 100 years old). He hand picks only, uses very low yields and all the wines are bottled unfiltered. The range runs from Les Sorcières, through the Vieilles Vignes, to Le Clos des Fées.



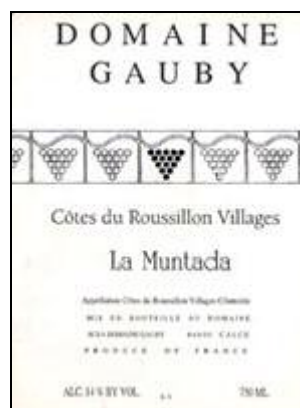
There is also a single vineyard bottling called La Petite Sibérie, so-called because the plot is often swept by icy North-West winds. This is a true vin-de-garde which will improve for at least 15 years.

Sandwiched between the appellations of Côtes du Roussillon and Cobières is the small appellation of **Fitou**. There is another excellent co-operative here, called Mont Tauch. Their top wines include Les Douze which comes from 12 vigneronns who work together to pool the best grapes from each of their properties. A snip at £7 from Majestic in the UK.

Last but certainly not least are the wines that come from the upper Agly valley near the village of Maury. This sub-region produces concentrated, red wines similar to Priorat across the Pyrenees, as well as some

stunningly concentrated whites. For a while the area had its own Vin de Pays des Coteaux des Fenouillèdes but this was rescinded and the wines are now sold **Vin de Pays des Côtes Catalanes**.

The most reputed winery in this area is Domaine Gauby. Indeed, Gérard Gauby has been described by Jancis Robinson as possible France's greatest wine-maker. The domaine has been passed through the generations of the Gauby family, but the grapes were always disposed of at the local co-operative until 1985. Much of the domaine is in the Côtes du Roussillon, in the village of Calce. The Roussillon reds include Les Calcinaires, which is Grenache with a little Carignan and Cabernet Sauvignon, among numerous others. The flagship wine is Muntada which is Syrah-based. Yields are very low here, down to 20hl/ha for the Syrah and vineyard management is biodynamic. Gauby also makes some fantastic white wines which would give most top-class white Burgundies a run for their money. These are bottled as Vin de Pays, as the maximum alcohol for white Côtes du Roussillon is 13°, and his whites regularly exceed this limit. Last but not least, Gauby makes excellent wines in the Fenouillèdes under the name of Le Soula. These vineyards are very high between 450 and 600m above sea level, which brings with it much cooler nights which slows down the maturation of the grapes, preserves the quality of the fruit and increases the depth of flavour.



Two other noteworthy producers in this valley are Olivier Pithon and Domaine Matassa. Both of them have worked with Gérard Gauby, and like him both producers follow biodynamic organic viticulture. Olivier is the brother of the noted Loire vigneron Jo Pithon. Matassa is owned by two New Zealanders. Sam Harrop is a Master of Wine and used to be the wine-buyer for Marks & Spencer and Tom Lubbe makes some great Syrah in South Africa under the Observatory name.

Fortified Reds

The final paragraphs in this brief review are devoted to sweet reds – yes, you heard me right. If like me, you adore chocolate, especially dark chocolate, there is no better accompaniment to a chocolate dessert than these so-called *vins doux naturels*. These wines are made by adding spirit to the wine when it is partially fermented. The increased alcohol content knocks out the yeast, thereby preserving some of the fruit sugars. This is also how port is made. Indeed, you could almost regard them as a feminine version of vintage port. Not quite the same depth of flavour but fabulously voluptuous. Just like port, they also benefit from bottle age. But be careful, the resultant wine has an alcohol content of between 15% and 18%.

Banyuls and Banyuls Grand Cru are the appellations for France's finest and certainly most complex vins doux naturels. These wines come from steep terraced vineyards above the Mediterranean at the southern limit of Roussillon right on the border. The regular red wine produced in the same vineyards is sold under the appellation **Collioure**. Grenache Noir must make up at least 50% of the blend, 75% for a Banyuls Grand Cru. Once again yields are very low and the grapes are often partly shrivelled before being picked in early October. The wines are aged in a very wide variety of containers: in glass demijohns or in barrels of all sizes, either carefully topped up in cool, damp conditions or deliberately evaporating, sometimes outdoors to achieve rancio, oxidative flavours. Some are even aged in a local version of a solera system, similar the system used in sherry which blends vintages across the years.

Domaine du Mas Blanc is considered by many to be Banyuls' leading estate. It is run by the Parc  family, whose distant cousins run one of the other leading Domaines. Mas Blanc makes several different wines. La Coume is a single vintage wine, mainly Grenache, with a little Mourv dre, Carignan, Syrah and Grenache Gris. In more recent vintages this cuv e may be labelled as Rimage La Coume, rimage referring to a vintage wine bottled when young. Banyuls Cuv e St Martin is a more traditional single vintage cuv e which sees extended barrel ageing before bottling. Finally there is Banyuls Hors d'Age, which is the product of a solera system. Given that the grapes are often partially raisined when they are picked, it is no surprise that the wines have a dried fruit aspect to them, as well as a velvety texture and a good tannic grip. Awesome stuff.



Maury is the other famous red *vin doux naturel*, which comes from hinterland Roussillon. Like Banyuls it is produced predominantly from Grenache Noir. The co-operative, Les Vignerons du Maury, dominates production; but there are two notable independent producers - Mas Amiel and Domaine de la Pr ceptorie. The non-vintage wines of Mas Amiel are made in a more oxidative style which gives a wine with more caramel flavours; whereas the single-vintage wines are more fresh and fruit-driven, with a concentration of black fruits. Both are excellent.



Recap of Personal Favourites

Tempier
Clavel
Grange des P res
Barral
L'Oustal Blanc
Gauby
Mas Blanc

Further Reading

The Wines of the South of France, Rosemary George

The Wines & Winemakers of Languedoc Roussillon,
Paul Strang

The New France, Andrew Jefford

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