

An Emerging Dynamique



The rising stars of the Coteaux du Languedoc

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When the opportunity unexpectedly arises to escape the Canadian winter and spend a month in the Languedoc area of Mediterranean France, what wine enthusiasts are going to refuse? Even before departing, our research told us we were in for some pleasant surprises, and we weren't disappointed. Our home for the month was to be the village of Montpeyroux in the heart of the Coteaux du Languedoc appellation, and fortuitously within biking and hiking distance of a core movement of new producers determined to change the region's image and recapture its character and *terroir*.



With a winemaking tradition dating back to pre-Roman times, in recent decades the Languedoc has been known primarily as the major contributor to Europe's lake of mediocre wine. Its production exceeds that of Australia or Bordeaux, with more vines under cultivation than in the entire USA! Partly responsible for this reputation were local grape varieties such as Aramon and Alicante, capable of delivering staggering yields of up to 120hl/ha, with correspondingly grim wine. Fundamental to the new movement however, are low yields, careful work in the vineyard, and extraction of the maximum complexity. Ironically this has often included re-emphasising the traditional old varieties, Carignan, Cinsault - even Alicante.



But with only a month to spend, how do the uninitiated go about tracking down and tasting the current crop of rising stars? Fortunately in nearby Clermont-l'Hérault we quickly discovered Au fil du Vin, a sophisticated new wine store specializing exclusively in the quality wines of the Languedoc. The store itself is symbolic of the new young style inherent in this ancient but exciting area of the south of France. “Over the last five

years, we have seen a great *dynamique* emerging here in the region” says owner Mokhsine Diouf, an experienced local wine agent.



Prior to opening the doors to Au fil du Vin last year, Mokhsine and his associate Ronny Ponce, spent 160 days visiting two winemakers a day to define and select the few dozen growers he now features. These two *cavistes* are now only too willing to spend time educating their customers and explaining their choices.

First of the new generation of Languedocian winemakers to achieve recognition was Aime Guibert of Mas de Daumas Gassac, established in 1972 in Aniane. Untypically for the region, this success was achieved with Cabernet Sauvignon. This grape was also later used, together with Mourvèdre, Syrah and Counoise, by neighbouring Laurent Vaillé, to create his enormously successful La Grange Des Pères. This wine with its cult-like following is made in very small quantities, is pre-sold years in advance, and as a result is almost unobtainable.

Equally well known as a pioneer of the new genre is Pierre Clavel of Domaine Clavel in Assas just north of Montpellier. Using the established local varietals Syrah, Grenache, Mourvèdre and vinified in his meticulously restored epoxy-lined concrete tanks, he produces his wine in more commercial quantities. His elegant Copa Santa has featured in the LCBO Classics catalogue, while his Les Garrigues is seen in Vintages and other fine wine stores.

While many emerging growers have a heritage in the business before setting up on their own, others are career-changers who have done their homework well.

Previously a chemist, Gérard Foltran of Chateau des Crès Ricards made the Hachette Guide this year for only his second vintage, Les Hauts de Milési 2001. His Alexaume 2002, a Merlot/Cabernet Sauvignon/Carignan blend also shows great promise.

At a blind tasting held earlier this year, in addition to the established



stars, local connoisseurs ranked two new *domaines* in the top flight. From Domaine Calage Resseguier, founded by three industry veterans in St Bauzille, the Rosmarinus 2001 is a blend of Syrah, Grenache and Carignan. Former lawyer Pascal Fulla of Mas de l'écriture in Jonquières scored with his L'écriture 2001, a classic regional blend of Syrah, Grenache and Mourvèdre. Both offer wonderful concentration, structure and intensity with a rich spicy nose – perfect expressions of what the Languedoc can create today.

In talking with these *vignerons*, the consistent theme is quality in the vineyard. Vineyards cover the Languedoc in every direction – despite farm subsidies that resulted in the removal of 100,000 hectares! Post-phylloxera, production moved down to the coastal plains, but as Pierre Clavel aptly observes, “That country is for rice.” Now the emerging stars are moving back to the once abandoned slopes around the edges of the



unyielding Massif Central in the Coteaux du Languedoc. It is here more than anywhere that the new expression of the Languedoc is appearing. Terroir is everything, and the defining expression here is the Garrigue. Derived from the old Occitan word *garric* (we are after all in the Langue d'Oc) for the Holm oaks that grow on the arid moors beneath the Massif Central, its fragrant aromas of almond, juniper, thyme, rosemary, and laurel are captured in many of the region's wines.

Vineyards are typically small, averaging only 3 Ha; a necessity when one considers some of the best wine comes from hand-tended vines cared for by only one or two-man operations. Regrettably this also means limited production, frequently as little as 3,000 bottles per vintage. Most of these will be snapped up by local enthusiasts, and it takes a diligent wine sleuth to track down and experience many of them. Leyris Maziere in Cannes et Clairan on the northern fringes of the region made only three barrels of one gem, a *monocepage* of pure Alicante! This can also result in high prices - 60 euros (~\$100CDN) for the top *cru* from one of the big names - but on the other hand there is still plenty of opportunity to be stunned by a six-euro bottle from a one of the up-and-comers.

Typical of these small *garagiste* operations is Virgile Joly in St Saturnin. In the process of producing his first 2001 vintage he, together with other local characters, became the hero of Patrick Moon's recent book "Virgile's Vineyard" This description of the cycle of life through a year in the area provides great insight into the hard work and determination necessary to become a successful small producer. His name and wines, in particular his Vin de Pays de l'Herault, Saturne 2002, are consistently cited as exemplifying what is being achieved here now.



Innovation isn't restricted to the small artisanal producers. Many of the region's strong co-operative operations are making great strides in quality and marketing. Most were founded after a series of surprisingly violent uprisings in 1907 among vineyard workers demanding action against the appallingly degenerate wine standards and practices of the time. Today many villages still have an active local co-op. The growers are contracted to



deliver their production to the co-op in exchange for a share in the proceeds. It takes a grower considerable determination to make a break from the fold to explore his own directions. Still it's fun to see AOC wines being dispensed à la gas pump for 1.60 a litre! Bag-in-box is common now, and bag-in-cask too; we were told 40% of French wines are sold this way now.

Appellations are almost as arcane here as in Burgundy. Within AOC Languedoc, the AOC Coteaux du Languedoc contains seven climatic regions such as the *climats* of Pic-Saint Loup and Grès de Montpellier, and within that twelve designated communities or *terroirs* such as Montpeyroux and La Méjanelle. As elsewhere, however, the strict AOC rules constrain experimentation with non-defined varietals or proportions. As so often happens, most interesting new wines are released under a lesser Vin de Pays de l'Herault or d' Oc designation. However this trend isn't going unrecognized. Later this year the Terrasses du Larzac region, encompassing some of the most interesting villages to the

North, is expected to get its own AOC status, and in a move to encourage complexity, more traditional varietals will be permitted.

A visitor can't be here long before realizing the fundamental nature of *terroir* to a Frenchman. In response to an inquiry as to the comparative character of two local wines,



rather than varietals or taste descriptors, the answer comes back, “Mais monsieur, this one is essential St Bazille; not at all the Ceyras of this one!” These villages are 5 kms apart!

Innovation and regional character aren't restricted to the reds. Viognier is rapidly growing in popularity, while determined producers of the quirky Picpoul de Pinet from the area behind Sète and Bouzigues ensure it maintains its unique position as the perfect match to the oysters from the adjacent lagoons.

In the Languedoc, rosé means Cinsault, and it too is growing in popularity, but partly for imposed factors. French drinking and driving laws were just radically tightened, with jail a real possibility, and this has been the death knell of serious wine drinking at lunch or dinner. Restaurant owners universally lament how they now only sell a glass of rosé, perceived to be a milder quaff, rather than the former bottle of red. This, coupled with the oppressively hot summer of 2003, and the sharp decline in US tourists post-Iraq, is threatening the existence of many establishments – a matter of serious concern.

Growers too are feeling the pressure from politics; one vigneron described how his sales to the US dropped from 300,000 euros in 2001 to a mere 3,000 in 2003! This may account for the warm welcome we received everywhere; certainly nowhere did we encounter the reputed French distain for marketing. While the prime markets for the small producers remain France, UK, Germany and Belgium, without exception they were very conscious of the need to increase awareness in North America (and the Languedocian education system does a remarkable job in the English department.)



Pierre Clavel, for one, would welcome more visitors to his immaculate *domaine*, and has plans to add a *gite* (a sort of French farm-style B&B) to his estate. Virgile Joly sets aside precious time in his one-man operation to receive visitors two afternoons a week.

Would-be visitors can base themselves in any of the villages from Lodève to Gignac and be within an easy drive or bike-ride of many of the charming villages home to these exciting developments. The nearby vibrant university city of Montpellier supplies sophistication and proximity to the Grès de Montpellier and Pic-Saint Loup areas.

The headquarters of the Syndicat des Coteaux du Languedoc in the Mas de Saporta, provides a good introduction for the wine tourist. A former winery on the south side of Montpellier, it offers a great *cave*, tastings, a restaurant and information. Twice a year, in March and November, the *Rencontres avec les vignerons* brings together for two days some 200 producers to present their products. It's a rare chance to meet and sample the entire range.

Restaurants aren't perhaps as frequent as in other mainstream wine regions, but the local favourites have an endearing empathy for the local wines in their menus and cuisine. Le



Pressoir in St Saturnin, right across the street from Virgile Joly's operation, offers a wine list of local gems together with a roaring fire of vine logs to ward off the chilly winter *tramontana* wind. In neighbouring St Guiraud, Le Mimosa is already on its way to Michelin stardom, while at the other end of the spectrum, the cafes in the square of St Jean de Fos repeatedly served us the best pizza we've ever tasted!

The stars are certainly shining in the Coteaux du Languedoc. No particular varietal or blend dominates, and the AOC system as yet provides little guidance. As in Burgundy, the adage "Know your grower" is paramount. But the *dynamique* is indeed in the air, and the wine enthusiast will have little problem tracking down some gems. And if in need of a little guidance, or an introduction, a visit to Mokhsine or Ronny at Au fil du Vin would be a great starting point.

More information;

www.aufilduvin.com

www.coteaux-languedoc.com

www.vins-clavel.fr

www.cresricards.free.fr

“Virgiles Vineyard” by Patrick Moon, Published by John Murray Ltd, 2003

“Daumas Gassac - The Birth of a Grand Cru” by Alastair Mackenzie, Published by Seagrave Foulks, 1995



Copies of this article “An Emerging *Dynamique*” are available for download at

www.girvanpatterson.com/wine

or in the October 2004 issue of the International Sommelier Guild News at

[http://www.internationalsommelier.com/articles/Sommelier News - October 2004 2.pdf](http://www.internationalsommelier.com/articles/Sommelier%20News%20-%20October%202004%202.pdf)

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