

Roussillon's beauty extends from mountain views to wines



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The Wine Cellar

Languedoc-Roussillon. The linked names appear so pervasively in wine literature that one might understandably assume they refer to a single, French wine-producing region. Not so.

True, both Languedoc and Roussillon (*Roo-see-ahn*) border the Mediterranean Sea and enjoy ideal wine-growing climates with hot, sunny days, strong, refreshing winds and dry growing seasons. And both regions traditionally feature grenache blanc and grenache gris for dry white wines and carignan, grenache noir and mourvèdre for reds.

But with a closer look at geography, culture, and terroir, Roussillon stands out as a distinct, vibrant wine-growing region with breathtaking natural beauty.

As France's southernmost region, Roussillon forms an amphitheater open to the Mediterranean Sea to the east. Three mountain ranges — the Corbières to the north, the Pyrénées with the Mont Canigou to the west and the Albères to the south — complete the isolation from Languedoc.

The rushing rivers Agly, Têt and Tech cut Roussillon horizontally to form roughly three separate subsections. Meanwhile, Spain's Catalan region just to the south exerts a defining cultural influence.

Catalonia's vivid red and yellow colors unfurl proudly throughout Roussillon's restaurants, shops, public buildings and parks. The

Catalan language — distinct from both French and Spanish — flows freely in the streets and pubs. Above all, bistros and open-air village markets feature delicious Catalan cuisine served with French flair.

Consider Chef Marie France's charming, 50 seat *Le Tire Bouchon* restaurant in Roussillon's capital of Perpignan. As enticing aromas waft from the kitchen, the beginning *Salade de Collioure* features candied red peppers, green olives, boiled eggs, olive oil, paprika and grilled anchovies from the famed fishing village of Collioure. Contrasting colors and flavors delight the eye and tastebuds.

Next come *Boles de Picolat* — fried meatballs of mixed veal, pork, beef, bread crumbs and milk served white beans in a sauce of garlic, green olives, onions, plum tomatoes, chanterelles and cinnamon. The fluffy, flavorful meatballs meld deliciously with the complex, rich sauce.

Other Catalan specialties include *fuets* — long, slim dried sausages with spices, *boudins Catalans* — handmade, rustic sausages — and *parillada* — grilled fish served on planks.

To complement the cuisine, Roussillon winemakers offer terrific dry table wines and sweet, fortified *vin doux naturel*. Both styles spring from impressive regional *savoir-faire* applied within a complex patchwork of *terroirs* sprawling over 13 appellations.

"In Roussillon, you can taste terroir," says Eric Aracil of the Conseil Interprofessionnel des Vins du Roussillon, the regional wine-trade council. "We have wines of personality because of terroir."

In the Corbières foothills, Domaine Picquemat illus-

trates perfectly.

Just outside the village Espira de l'Agly, *vigneronne* Marie-Pierre Picquemat first shows her family's *Les Terres Grillées* vineyard perched on steep, rocky hillsides surrounded by aromatic wild herbs in *garrigue* scrub. Remarkably complex, layered black schist soils retain heat to allow grapes to ripen fully while conveying uncanny smoky, earthy aromas to the estate's Côtes du Roussillon-Villages wines.

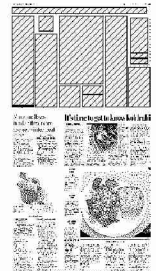
By contrast, close by *La Colline Oubliée* vineyard's stony red soils on clay and limestone create more elegance and firm tannins with superb acidity.

Further south between the Têt and Tech rivers in the village of Tresserre in the Aspres subregion, Domaine Vaquer cultivates vineyards perched on high stony terraces. After joining wine grower Frédérique Vaquer and her dog on a bumpy truck ride up to the vineyards, a clear December day afforded panoramic Mediterranean views 20 miles to the east and a dramatic glimpse of snow-capped Mont Canigou shimmering in sunbeams to the west.

For the domaine's aromatically complex, deliciously ripe "L'Expression" Vin de Pays Côtes Catalan, Vaquer tends 63-year-old carignan vines growing in sand and clay covered with marble and quartz in kaleidoscopic colors. The wine's tannins and mineral qualities come from the stones, depth of flavors from the clay and elegance from the sands.

As Roussillon's distinct qualities become more widely appreciated, regrettably spotty domestic selection has improved. In Pennsylvania, try:

2010 Michel Chapoutier



Les Vignes de Bila-Haut, Côtes du Roussillon Blanc, France (Luxury 36292; \$14.99): This blend of grenache blanc, grenache gris and macabeau comes from Vallée de l'Agly vineyards of limestone, clay and granite soils. Fermented and aged in stainless steel, the wine's fresh grapefruit, anise and honey aromas open to crisp citrus and pear flavors. Refreshing acidity and mineral notes balance a fruity, yet dry finish. **Highly recommended.**

Dave DeSimone is a member of the American Wine Society. He can be heard daily on KQV Radio with the Wine Cellar reports. He can be reached at ddesimone@tribweb.com.

Cellar key

Recommended: Indicates a well-made table wine ready for immediate enjoyment with everyday meals and offering good value.
Highly recommended: Indicates a well-made table wine ready for immediate enjoyment and offering very good value on a particularly well-made example of its type.
Note: Code numbers and prices refer to the Pennsylvania Liquor Control Board system unless otherwise indicated.

To determine the availability of wines at stores near your home, go to www.lcb.state.pa.us, type in the wine name and then your county.



TRIBUNE-REVIEW