Most Americans know that Languedoc-Roussillon is somewhere in the south of France—but where, exactly? While consumers may have toted home bottles—generally good values—from this region, most would find it about as easy to place on a map as Tajikistan. On a recent trip, THE TASTING PANEL not only experienced firsthand the lay of this historic and wine-laden land, but also learned just where Languedoc stops . . . and the Roussillon begins.

The Roussillon is French Catalonia. The name, from the root word for “red,” reflects the region’s rust-colored iron oxide soils. Snug against the Spanish border, but separated from the Iberian Peninsula politically by the vagaries of history and geographically by the Pyrenees, it still retains its Catalan language and customs. Pablo Picasso, in exile from Franco, moved across the mountains to alluring seaside Collioure in the Roussillon, while his Catalan compatriot, Salvador Dalí, once had a mystical vision in which the waiting room of the railway station in Perpignan, the region’s historic capital, became the center of the universe.
The truth is perhaps less poetic, but no less fascinating. From our base in Perpignan, we traveled to a dozen of the region’s diverse wineries, ably guided by Eric Aracil, a rugby-playing Roussillon native who serves as Export Manager for the Conseil Interprofessionnel des Vins du Roussillon (CIVR). From impressive tourist-friendly spreads with Michelin-listed restaurants to ardent garagistes with a crusher and a dream, these are some of the best-kept secrets in the world of wine.

Showplaces of the South

Local optimism about the future of the Roussillon’s wines burns as brightly in the region as the late August sun. For a taste of it, just visit Domaine Cazes in Rivesaltes. Unrelated to the Bordeaux family of the same name, the estate dates back to 1895 but has been energetically revitalized under the direction of General Manager Lionel Lavail.

Since his arrival in 2004, the engaging, debonair Lavail, who looks like he walked straight off the Boulevard St-Germain and into a row of Grenache, has overseen major investment into the place. Lavail points out the estate’s vibrantly healthy vines during a vineyard tour, while lamenting a neglected neighboring parcel. Always seeking to expand the Cazes domain and, more important, improve the region’s viticulture, Lavail shrugs his shoulders: “The owner won’t sell.”

At Domaine Piquemal, 33-year-old Marie-Pierre Piquemal shows us around her family’s spacious winery and tasting room—one of the newest facilities in the Roussillon. The wines, including the big, full-bodied and brambly Pygmalion (70% Syrah, 25% Grenache, 5% Carignan), are handled in the states by Michael Sullivan of Beaune Imports.

A good place to get a feel for the deep history of the region is at Mas Amiel, situated under the watchful eye of the medieval Cathar stronghold of Queribus. Here, old meets new as traditional glass demijohns used to age vin doux naturel stretch out in front of the modern winery.

From Cooperatives to Meta-Cooperatives

The smell of juicy, just-harvested Muscat arriving at Vignerons de Cases de Pène attracts not only visiting journalists but a squadron of local wasps as well. The six-person team at this bustling cooperative, founded in 1942, represents 60 growers holding a total of 500 hectares. Vignerons are paid by quality, and it shows in the co-op’s finished wines, including a soft, mouth-filling Cuvée de Peña 2010 Viognier with alluring white peach flavors and the Château de Péna 2006 Côtes du Roussillon Villages, a Syrah-Grenache-Carignan blend with an intriguing hint of juniper on the nose. The Château de Péna Rivesaltes Ambré is served with crunchy biscuits in the manner of vin santo. The wines are imported by Hand Picked Selections.

Taking the idea of a cooperative to the next level is the important Vignerons Catalans. “We are a group of collectives,” explains Communications Manager Anne Lataste over dinner at excellent bistro Al Très, tucked away in a narrow medieval street in Perpignan. The meta-cooperative, founded in 1964, is responsible for a whopping 40 million bottles a year, the output of 11 different cooperatives representing 2,500 growers, imported in the U.S. by Wine Wine Situation in Los Angeles, among others.

Vivacious Vins de Garage

“That’s where France begins,” says Laurent de Besombes Singla, with only the slightest trace of irony. The young vintner is pointing on a map to the Corbières, the mountain range that separates the Roussillon from Languedoc in the north. Singla’s sly comment is indicative of just how separate the Roussillonnais feel from non-Catalan France.

While the barrel room at Domaine Singla is, literally, a garage, and the homey tasting room is on the ground floor of Laurent’s rambling house, the term garagiste is still considered derogatory in France (it means “car mechanic”).
Instead, these small producers are said to be making vin de garage.

The Singla dry wines, biodynamically produced, were some of the best bottles we tasted, with beautifully expressed fruit and sun-driven ripeness, yet showing fine, controlled tannins and aristocratic restraint. His Domaine Singla 2007 Castell Vell is a young, aggressively styled Syrah with gorgeous spice flavors and an unabashed dose of oak, while his 2009 Bressol is a stylish, fruit-forward Grenache. In addition to his vanguard dry wines, the Heritage du Temps collection contains stunning expressions of the family’s vin doux naturel dating back several decades. The wines are imported by Five Grapes in Sonoma.

Proving that great things can come from unassuming places, Domaine de l’Edre is housed in a small garage in tiny Vingrau, where co-owners Pascal Dieunidou and Jacques Castany craft some of the most ambitious wines in the region. They are committed to dry wines only, sourced from remote parcels scattered in the surrounding hillsides. Both the Domaine de l’Edre Carrément Blanc (Grenache Blanc, Grenache Gris, Roussanne and Macabeu) and Carrément Rouge (Syrah, Grenache, Carignan) are gorgeously expressive wines with a great balance between fruit-forward substance and stylish restraint. The portfolio is with Hand Picked Selections in the U.S.

The term grangeiste rather than garagiste describes Patrice Ey, a farmer-winemaker who also raises organic vegetables and poultry (grange is French for “barn”). A hovering falcon graces the labels of his Domaine Patrice Ey wines, including the racy, charming 2009 Sóc Grenache Blanc (“Grenache is a transparent grape that expresses the characteristics of our terroir,” says Ey) and the richly-styled 2010 Saint Esprit Muscat de Rivesaltes.

Tradition with a Difference

English-born John Hesford was a Merrill Lynch IT guy when 9/11 happened, causing him to reevaluate his life. He and his wife wound up in the Roussillon, buying an existing winery and renaming it Domaine Treloar. These are some of the most progressive, “New World” wines in the region, and Hesford admits he sometimes bends the appellation rules a bit (as do others). His Motus (Latin for “mum’s the word) is a 95% Mourvèdre with polish and loads of style, and his other offerings are equally compelling, handled Stateside by Bradley Allen.

A boutique operation in the village of Estagel, Domaine des Schists is operated by father-son team Jacques and Mickaël Sire and produces an accomplished range of both dry and VDN wines, handled by P-S Wines and VOS Selections in the States. Meanwhile at Domaine de la Casenove, former photojournalist Etienne Montes now crafts traditional VDNs and blends such as the impressive La Garrigue (Grenache-Carignan-Syrah) on a property that once belonged to the Knights Templar.

Up Schist Creek

The Roussillon’s most distinctive wines come from vineyards consisting of schist—a black, angularly shaley rock. The region is actually a potpourri of soil types that change abruptly from place to place, even within the same vineyard, like an irregular patchwork quilt. This makes possibly a wide (and perhaps confusing) range of flavor profiles and stylistic expressions. Lack of a consistent soil type—such as Champagne’s famous chalk—may be to the Roussillon’s benefit or not, depending on one’s point of view. But it’s the schist that creates the flinty, stoically structured wines of which the Roussillonais are, justly, most proud.

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The view of the sea from Collioure is exhilarating in a way that only the Mediterranean can be. Here, Christine Campadeiu and Vincent Cantié’s Domaine La Tour Vieille, perched on a steep, vine-covered slope, was “discovered” by legendary Berkeley-based importer Kermit Lynch. The domaine produces red, white and rosé Collioure dry wines as well as superb Banyuls VDNs—all from estate vineyards. Among many standouts were the supple, sexy 2008 Collioure La Pinède (75% Grenache, 25% Carignan) and the intense, raisiny 2008 Banyuls Rimages Mise Tardive, bottled after three years in a large oak tun.

At Les Clos de Paulilles, the largest privately-owned estate in Coullioure, Managing Director Tom Warner, an expat Englishman, shows us around the seaside estate, whose crescent-shaped bay experienced its own mysterious Mediterranean tsunami a few years ago. This is the second property of the Dauré family, owners of Château de Jau in Roussillon’s Agly Valley, makers of the quaffable, value-driven Jaja de Jau line. Les Clos de Paulilles Collioure Blanc is an expressive, barrel-fermented Grenache Blanc–Grenache Gris blend, while the complex Banyuls Cap Béar, entirely from Grenache Noir, spends 18 months in glass demijohns and eight months in oak barriques. Pasternak Wine Imports handles the wines in the U.S.

Further down the coast in Banyuls, where Spain is just around the next bend, the energetic Romuald Peronne, of Domaine St. Sébastien, is in the throes of crush. Bins of ripe Grenache are arriving as visitors crowd the winery’s restaurant and shop. Amid the mayhem, we taste cuvées, named for the four elements. The earthy 2010 Inspiration Minérale is an old-vine Collioure Blanc that speaks of the soil, while the 2010 Inspiration Marine is a spicy, dry Collioure Rouge made mainly from Mourvèdre. The wines are imported by Quigley Fine Wines in San Diego.

Not far away is Domaine Madeloc, a historic Banyuls operation owned since 2002 by celebrated Condrieu producer Pierre Gaillard. Typical of many Roussillon wineries, Madeloc has the look of a 19th-century cellar, with few amenities. Gaillard handles the vinification himself. The wines (imported by Fruit of the Vines and others) range from rather short, rustically-styled reds with hot tannins, to lovely offerings such as the 2010 Asphodèles Banyuls Blanc (80% Grenache Gris/20% Muscat), with soft, ripe stone-fruit flavors and nice vanillins.

How Sweet It Is: Vin Doux Naturel

Although contemporary winemakers are focusing on modern-style dry wines, Roussillon’s most celebrated vinous product is still vin doux naturel—a sweet wine made by arresting the fermentation process by the addition of grape alcohol. This process, known as mutage, was discovered in the late 13th century by Arnaud de Villeneuve, a professor at the University of Montpellier (still one of the world’s premier enology schools).

With the exception of Muscat and reds that are bottled early to be drunk young, vins doux naturels—or VDN wines—are aged in wooden vats, barrels or glass demijohns for between 30 months and 20 years, sometimes even longer, acquiring their lovely, complex bouquet. The demijohns (called bonbonnes in French) are stored in the open air, exposing the wine to variations in temperature and sunlight that accelerate the effects of ageing.

Serve VDNs from the Banyuls and Muscat de Rivesaltes appellations in contemplative moments as vins de méditation, or with foods such as the Roussillon’s celebrated foie gras.