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# Revelation in Roussillon

Vineyards near Perpignan, beneath Mount Canigou in the Pyrenees

*The wines of France's far southeast corner are making their mark not just at home but on the global stage* by Chris Redman

Sometimes it takes many years for the value of a transaction to be revealed. Back in the 17th century when Louis XIV married the Infanta Maria Theresa of Spain to clinch a peace treaty, her father Philip IV promised to hand over half a million gold *écus* as part of her dowry. But Philip—surprise surprise—was broke and the money was never paid—thereby providing a *casus belli* for the next bout of hostilities known as the War of the Spanish Succession.

One part of the bargain, however, was honored, and under a provision of the 1659 Treaty of the Pyrenees, the Spanish ceded the province of Roussillon to France. They doubtless believed they had pulled a fast one on the Sun King and his chief negotiator Cardinal Mazarin: Back then Roussillon was part of Catalonia and the pesky, independent-minded Catalans were forever fomenting rebellion. “Let’s make them France’s headache” was surely the basic idea in Madrid.

Not bad thinking. The northern Catalans of Roussillon proved to be an unruly bunch—their loyalties and affections directed more to nearby Barcelona in the south than distant Paris to the north. To this day Catalan

is spoken widely and many Roussillonais consider themselves inhabitants of Northern Catalonia rather than the southeastern French region of Pyrénées-Orientales. They even host an annual festival, the *Festa Major Sant Joan*, to which Catalans from Spain flock by the thousands to pay homage to Catalunya and its culture.

But it’s also possible that the not-so-crafty Spaniards of yesteryear judged that Roussillon was a chunk of territory they could well afford to sacrifice on the altar of diplomacy. Much of Roussillon was—and still is—arid scrubland or *garrigue*. It’s bounded on the east by the azure waters of the Mediterranean and surrounded inland by the sparsely populated massifs of Corbières to the north, Albères to the south and the mountain chain of the Pyrenees to the west—a natural amphitheatre, into which the little rain that falls drains off to the Mediterranean via three rivers: the Agly, the Têt and the Tech. These run the gauntlet of a narrow, heat-baked coastal plain swept by the parching Tramontane winds from the northwest, which gather speed as they whistle through the corridor between the Massif Central and the Pyrenees, desiccating the landscape before hitting the sea.

## Un bon petit vin!

If offloading a distant, hardscrabble region was indeed their strategy, then the grantees in Madrid miscalculated badly. The bountiful cherry orchards and peach groves that surround the smart regional town of Céret—a favorite haunt of Picasso and the Cubists—are proof that, in the foothills of the Pyrenees at least, Roussillon is as fertile as any other region of France. But it is the very ruggedness and inhospitality of much of the region that ironically gives Roussillon its greatest asset—what 19th-century political economist David Ricardo dubbed “natural advantage”. As oenologists will attest, Roussillon’s 12,000 acres of vineyards, scattered across a hundred or so communes, are planted in land that is ideally suited for viticulture; as a result the region is fast gaining a reputation as the home of some of France’s most exciting and sumptuous wines.

Some will find this surprising. For the better part of the last two centuries Roussillon, together with neighboring Languedoc to the north, had a reputation for making modest wines with much to be modest about. The largest wine-producing region in the world, Languedoc-Roussillon was dominated by large, unregulated co-operatives that cranked out vast amounts of cheap, rough *vin ordinaire*—mainly red—that was shipped north by train to displace beer and



Vineyards in the Aspres region



Jérôme Malet at Domaine Sarda-Malet

geology and climate—provides plenty of that. For starters there are those hot, dry, Tramontane-buffed days followed by cool nights. Then there are lean hillside soils—a hugely diverse mix of schist, limestone and clay with scatterings of quartz and gneiss—that force the vines to extend their roots deep down in search of water and nutrients. In the process they—and their grapes—absorb the very essence of the land on which they are growing. Stressed vines produce fewer, better grapes.

The new generation of Roussillon wine-makers is helping the quality equation by keeping yields low. Combine the region's natural advantages with relatively low land prices and it's no wonder that savvy wine-makers from around the world have been showing up, checkbooks in hand, to join the wine rush—thus putting Roussillon in the vanguard of winemaking technology.

Local grapes are also helping to make a difference, challenging the hegemony—some might say tyranny—of global brands whose wines are based on ubiquitous varietals like chardonnay, merlot, sauvignon blanc and pinot noir. Admittedly syrah (known as zinfandel in much of the New World) is widely planted in the Roussillon in the role of what the French call a *cépage améliorateur*—an “improving variety” designed to help boost quality. But, in a way, who needs it in Roussillon?

To answer that question, and to qualify as Côtes du Roussillon or Côtes du Roussillon-Villages, the largest of the region's seven appellations, wines must respect AOC rules requiring them to use significant amounts of local grape varieties. Reds—the majority of the wine produced in the region—must be made with at least three local grapes, among them carignan, grenache, mourvèdre, cinsaut and the rare lledoner pelut. Whites are based on grenache blanc, malvoisie, macabeu, marsanne, roussanne and vermentino.

### High-flying wines

Collioure is a tiny appellation named after the delightful town on the so-called Côte Vermeille, or vermilion coast, where France morphs into Spain. It produces gracious reds, soft whites and a rosé that is as refreshing as the sparkling blue sea that laps at the foot of the town's fortified Château Royal. Wines from 37 Roussillon communes designated Côtes du Roussillon Les Aspres have enjoyed “cru” status since 2007 and it is only a matter of time before the winemaking

cider as the drink of the masses and make the French the wine-consuming champions of the world. At one time even schoolchildren received a daily ration, albeit watered down. Generations of French families have purchased this cheap wine *en vrac* (in bulk) from cooperatives or wine merchants, bottled it and served it up—often to unsuspecting guests with the assurance that they are about to be introduced to a good little wine (“un bon petit vin”—beware that phrase!) that the host claims to have discovered on his vacation. British wags dubbed the region's VDQS certification Very Dodgy Queer Stuff.

Much of that rotgut now ends up in the European Union's surplus “wine lake”, whose size the Eurocrats in Brussels have been seeking to reduce by buying up the excess, converting it to alcohol or biofuels, and trying to force mass producers to pull up their vines and turn to other ways of making a living.

Those that are left standing have adopted a number of different survival strategies.

Anti-globalization forces were clearly at work at the beginning of the new millennium when the inhabitants of Aniane, in a script worthy of Marcel Pagnol, joined forces to prevent U.S. wine giant Mondavi from creating a modern winery in the Languedoc. But many French vintners have realized that in order to compete in globalized wine market, knee-jerk nationalism or protectionism is no solution. Quality must triumph over quantity if they are to survive in a world dominated by the likes of Mondavi and Australia's South Corp.

### Tough terroir

Enter Roussillon, France's sunniest region with an average of 325 days of sunshine a year, where some of the country's most ambitious and inventive *vignerons*—joined by an influx of winemakers from elsewhere in France and as far afield as California and Australia—are now making vibrant, world-class wines.

Vines perform best with a bit of stress and Roussillon's *terroir*—the sum of geography,

efforts of Roussillon's best producers (see box) increase the number of high-flying wines enjoying special status.

And what do the wines taste like? It is impossible to generalize, but for those accustomed to the homogenized varietal wines that dominate the market, they are a revelation. They have character and charm, to be sure, but with some of them earning Robert Parker scores of 95 or more, they have more than the novelty of strange *cépages* to recommend them.

The terroir of Roussillon is so varied—the coastal plain around Collioure which produces such supple wines, for example, is markedly different from the Agly Valley with its powerful, tannin-rich reds. What the best share is a uniqueness of character that merits closer examination.

Roussillon has come a long way in the last 50 years. Back in the 1960s there were some 173,000 acres of vineyards, mostly delivering their grapes to quantity-fixated co-ops. Land under the vine has been halved since then, and the co-ops are either modernizing or fast fading from the scene, replaced by single estates. It's a sure sign that quality is improving and that Roussillon is on the upswing.

But make no mistake: its wines will



The terroir of the Agly Valley provides plenty of stress

not go unchallenged. The same drive for quality now taking place in Roussillon is also evident in adjacent Languedoc, where the likes of Mas de Daumas Gassac (dubbed the Lafite of the Midi) and Château de la Négly, have shown how a region once known for dubious *vin ordinaire* can, with the help of devoted winemakers, produce great wines. But such competition, especially from close neighbors, is no bad thing.

Just ask the good citizens of Roussillon's capital Perpignan, whose rugby team

has built itself into one of the most successful in Europe. The club colors are blood-red and gold—*sang i or*, the colors of the Catalan flag. But given the region's growing success with the vine as well as rugby, the red could just as easily represent terrific red Roussillon wines whose prospects are indeed golden. ■

## HOW SWEET IT IS

Dry table wines may be the new focus of Roussillon, but the region is justly famous for its *vin doux naturel* (VDN) made by adding neutral grape spirit to barely fermented sweet grape juice to arrest the fermentation process—a technique called *mutage* that has been practiced in the region since the 13th century. France's answer to port and sherry, VDN wines come in various permutations and can be aged upwards of 20 years to provide wines of great complexity (see *France Today* Nov 2011).

**Banyuls**, produced in the Collioure appellation, is the most prized of the VDN wines, made mainly from dark, almost raisin-dry grenache grapes. Traditional production methods include barrel-aging but also involve putting the wine in large, basket-wrapped glass jars—called *bonbonnes*—and leaving them to bake and oxidize under the hot Mediterranean sun. Banyuls wines have a deep ruby color when young, turning amber and then mahogany brown with age. Grand Cru Banyuls from producers such as Domaine du Mas Blanc and Domaine de La Rectorie are aged in wood for longer than the requisite two and a half years and are highly prized. One of the few wines that can cope with chocolate, Banyuls has a bouquet reminiscent of baked fruits and sweet coffee. It goes well with foie gras too, but can also be solitarily sipped in contemplative moments as a *vin de méditation*.

In the foothills of the Pyrenees lie the vineyards of **Maury**. At their best their wines can rival their coastal cousins for complexity. Also made mostly from grenache grapes, Maury's wines come in red, rosé and white variants. Mas Amiel is a leading producer.

With an output of VDN wines far greater than Banyuls and Maury put together, **Rivesaltes** and **Muscat de Rivesaltes** are at the mass-production end of the quality scale and their consumption, as an aperitif or with dessert, has been in decline for decades. But a few of the region's better winemakers still produce some fine examples.



## A FEW FAVORITES

With so much good wine produced in Roussillon these days it's difficult to rank producers, but here are five favorites:

### Domaine de La Rectorie

Brothers Marc and Thierry Parcé make some 30 different wines including two Collioure reds and a Banyuls-style Cuvée Parcé Frères sold as a *vin de liqueur*.

**Domaine Gauby** Hard pruning and green harvesting make for very low yields, quality grapes and some of Roussillon's best wines. Top of the line at Gérard Gauby's biodynamic domain is Muntada, now starting to command eye-watering prices.

**Domaine Sarda-Malet** This long-established Roussillon domain, now run by Jérôme Malet and his mother Suzy, produces superb examples of Côtes du Roussillon, both red and white. Try the barrel-fermented white Terroir Mailloles.

**Mas Amiel** Owned by the church until the Bishop of Perpignan lost it in a card game in 1816, this historic Maury domain is best known for its *vin doux naturel* but also produces very palatable table wines.

**Le Clos des Fées** Wonderful old vines—some up to 100 years old—produce wines of immense depth and complexity. Try the Vieilles Vignes.

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Domaine de La Rectorie



Domaine Sarda-Malet