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WINES OF THE TIMES

The Languedoc Raises Its Game

By [ERIC ASIMOV](#)

YEARS ago, when I was in graduate school in Austin, Tex., I remember buying liter bottles of red wine from southern France, mostly from the Languedoc. I particularly remember those from the appellation Minervois.

They weren't bad wines, at least I didn't think so at the time, though they were lean and perhaps a bit tart. But they were ideal for anybody on a student budget, and those big bottles were great for dinner parties.

My, how things have changed.

I don't see those big bottles anymore, and while the wines from the Languedoc, especially those from Minervois, are still very good values, these days they may stretch a graduate student's budget a little too far.

But what's really different is how much better these wines are now than they were 25 years ago.

For years, I've heard talk about the transformation of the Languedoc, a region that for so long was best known for supplying the rest of France with cheap red wine that only occasionally rose to the level of mediocre.

As the French began to consume less wine, and the competition for the inexpensive market has grown, Languedoc has had to undergo a painful evolution that is far from complete.

Not long ago the only thing you could be sure about in a bottle of wine from the Languedoc was that it would be unpredictable.

Styles might range from the most rustic wines imaginable to highly polished bottles of no discernable origin. And the quality of the winemaking was a similar grab bag.

In a tasting recently of 20 bottles of red from the Languedoc, the wine panel found them still to be all over the place stylistically. But the level of high quality in the winemaking was unexpectedly consistent.

For the tasting, Florence Fabricant and I were joined by Bernard Sun, the beverage director for Jean-Georges Management, and Michael Madrigale, the sommelier at Bar Boulud.

The Languedoc, along with Roussillon, the region just to the south with which it is habitually paired, covers a huge territory. The vineyards stretch in a long crescent along the Mediterranean between Provence to the east and the Pyrenees to the south, accounting for perhaps a quarter of all the vines planted in France.

For the tasting, we tried to confine ourselves to some of the better hilly regions inland, including Saint-Chinian, Minervois, Corbières, Fitou and certain sub-regions of the enormous Coteaux du Languedoc, most particularly Pic Saint-Loup.

We also looked for bottles \$35 or less. In the end, 15 of the bottles in the tasting were \$20 or less. Only two cost more than \$30.

These wines are generally made from a handful of grapes typical of southern France, including mourvèdre, grenache, syrah, cinsault and carignan.

Carignan is of particular interest. The grape is much derided for its lack of allure, particularly when overcropped, resulting in thin, dark, acidic, tannic wines of — big surprise — little charm.

The [European Union](#) has encouraged many farmers to pull out their carignan vines. But when old vines are carefully nurtured, and the grapes intelligently blended, the wines can be very good.

Many of our top 10 wines have a significant carignan component.

It's easy to find international grapes, too, like [merlot](#), [cabernet sauvignon](#) and even [pinot noir](#) in some of the branded bottles that are intended to compete on the global market for inexpensive wines. We avoided these sorts of wines as, frankly, I find them of very little interest.

The wines we liked best were well made and focused, with clear expressions of regional identity, particularly the earthy, aromatic blend of wild herbs that, if you close your eyes, can't help making you feel as if you're smack in the middle of the shrubby, rocky Languedoc.

Even so, we had some disagreements.

One of the things I liked best about the wines was that they were not dripping with fruit flavors, as so many modern wines are today.

Florence, on the other hand, thought that the wines as a whole did not show enough fruit flavors. Bernard, too, was looking for clearer expressions of fruit, while Michael preferred wines that he thought were rough, raw and rustic.

As much as the wines have improved, Languedoc is still a forbidding proposition for winemakers, not only because of the rugged, dry terrain but the difficulties in making inroads in an overcrowded marketplace.

Is it any wonder that one of my favorite Languedoc producers, Domaine Rimbart in Saint-Chinian, calls its wine Le Mas au Schiste? Aside from referring to the schiste on which the grapes are planted, Le Mas au Schiste is, as the British wine writer Andrew Jefford has pointed out, a pun on the French word for masochist.

The 2005 Mas au Schiste, No. 7 on our list, was not at all painful to drink. It had great character in fact, with intriguing flavors of herbs, olives and cranberries.

Our favorite bottle was the spicy, balanced 2006 Le Régal du Loup from Le Loup Blanc in Minervois. Made from carignan, grenache and syrah, it offered herbal, savory flavors, and epitomized a wine that spoke of its

origins and history.

Our No. 2 bottle, the dense, concentrated 2006 Château de Sérème, another Minervois, was an entirely different sort of wine. Though it offered more obvious fruit, it too spoke of its region with aromas of menthol, licorice and herbs. At \$14, it was also our best value.

We also very much liked the 2006 Cuvée Syrah Conference de Presse from Domaine Faillenc Corbières, with its combination of fruit and earth flavors that were somewhat rustic.

Our No. 4 wine, the 2005 Domaine de l'Hortus from Pic Saint Loup, also had an unpolished quality, yet we enjoyed its meadowlike herbal aromas and its tannic structure.

With their raft of unfamiliar appellations and little-known producers, the wines from the Languedoc have over the years often been an adventure.

The best bottles have always offered unexpected flavors and pleasing surprises.

As the viticulture and winemaking have improved, the good news is that many producers have succeeded in removing the risks while managing to leave the sense of adventure intact. That is quite an achievement.

Tasting Report: Navigating the Hilly Terrain

Le Loup Blanc Minervois 2006

\$19

★★★ (Three Stars)

Le Régal du Loup

Great sense of place, fragrant of fruit, herbs, garlic, rocks and dirt roads. (Jenny & François Selections, New York)

BEST VALUE

Château de Sérème 2006

\$14

★★★ (Three Stars)

Minervois Réserve du Château

Big, dense and true, with aromas of menthol, licorice, fruit and herbs. (Allied Beverage Group, Carlstadt, N.J.)

Domaine Faillenc Corbières 2006

\$20

★★★ (Three Stars)

Cuvée Syrah Conference de Presse

A touch rustic with aromas and flavors of smoke, earth, fruit and minerals. (Rosenthal Wine Merchant, New York)

Domaine de l'Hortus 2005

\$20

★★ ½ (Two and a Half Stars)

Pic Saint Loup Grande Cuvée

Tannic and unpolished yet appealing with true southern French aromas of herbs and flowers. (Eric Solomon Selections/European Cellars, Charlotte, N.C.)

Château Coupe Roses 2006

\$18

★★ ½ (Two and a Half Stars)

Minervois Cuvée Vignals

Distinctive flavors of smoke, herbs, bacon and fruit. (Vintage '59 Imports, Washington, D.C.)

Castelmaure Corbières 2006

\$32

★★ ½ (Two and a Half Stars)

Cuvée No. 3

Big and structured with aromas and flavors of rich fruit, anise and herbs. (Regal Wine Imports, Marlton, N.J.)

Domaine Rimbert Saint-Chinian 2005

\$20

★★ (Two Stars)

Le Mas au Schiste

Intriguing flavors of black olives, earth, cranberry and herbs. (Jenny & François Selections, New York)

Ermitage du Pic Saint Loup 2006

\$17

★★ (Two Stars)

Coteaux du Languedoc

Balanced but tannic with smoky flavors of bacon and herbs. (Kermit Lynch Wine Merchant, Berkeley, Calif.)

Château Massiac Minervois 2006

\$14

★★ (Two Stars)

Earthy, spicy and intense with aromas of clay and bacon. (Rosenthal Wine Merchant, New York)

Château Cazal Viel Saint-Chinian 2007

\$14

★★ (Two Stars)

Cuvée des Fées

Polished and juicy with simple flavors of dark fruit and herbs. (Frederick Wildman & Sons, New York)

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