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The limits of terroir : Inside the birth of a new wine region.

By Marlowe Hood.

Pic Saint Loup, France.

Even the most indifferent wine drinkers have at least heard of such famous French winemaking regions as Chablis, Châteauneuf-du-Pape, Margaux and Champagne. But how many know these mythical places-which in the wine world are called's AOCs, or *appellations d'origine contrôlées*-earn the labels that, for better or worse, have come to define their quality and price?

Actually, the decades-long process-which draws on botany, geology, history, ethnology and old-fashion politics-is a mystery even to many wine experts. But a long-running struggle by a small group of producers in the south of France to earn AOC status, and thus to join the pantheon of French winemaking, offers a glimpse into how it unfolds. Their travails also reveal a lot about the uneasy state of the country's wine industry and how the French perceive a product that is a pillar of both their economy and their identity.

There are 457 wine AOCs in France today. The 458th could well be a sublime outcropping of crumbling limestone cliffs near the Mediterranean dominated by a mountain that lends its name to both the area and its wine : Pic Saint-Loup. A 20-minute drive north of university town Montpellier, Pic Saint-Loup is home to several dozen artisan winemakers who are widely heralded as bound for stardom. Some, arguably, have already arrived. Wine critic Robert Parker calls it one of southern France's "most exciting regions for the 21st century," and French critics are no less enthusiastic. Its best wines, made with the same Syrah and Grenache grapes as those from the northern Rhône Valley, already rival bottles from that exalted region costing two or three times as much.

Southern sun tempered by elevation and north-facing slopes create a perfect recipe for earthy, concentrated red wines, rich with spice, that are at the same time cleaner and more elegant than those from neighboring regions. Twenty years ago, Pic Saint-Loup wines retailed in local supermarkets for the equivalent of a few euros a bottle. Today, quality has improved so much that importers in London, Tokyo and New York buy up some producers' vintages before they leave the barrel.

A shoo-in, in other words, for an AOC, if ever there was one. The new Pic Saint-Loup AOC label would distinguish the group from the much larger and less consistent Coteaux du Languedoc AOC, to which they are already belong.

Indeed, France's top wine administration, INAO (Institut National de l'Origine et de la Qualité), gave the application, which was filed in 2001, an informal thumbs up in 2006, according to Gilles Flutet, the INAO official who handles requests for AOC status. A happy ending to the touching tale of how patient, shoulder-to-shoulder work since the mid-1980s had lifted the region from obscurity toward the ultimate reward seemed, finally, to be at hand.

But there was a problem. A group of winemakers based in neighboring communes (the smallest administrative unit in France) wanted to redraw the map of the proposed Pic Saint-Loup AOC to include their vineyards and winemaking operations. One among them was Jean-Benoît Cavalier, proprietor of Château Lascaux in the commune of Vacquieres. He is president of Coteaux du Languedoc appellation, heads the regional office of INAO and is a member of INAO's all-powerful national committee. The Pic Saint-Loup vintners suspect that Mr. Cavalier is using his considerable influence to keep their application in limbo. Mr. Cavalier says this is nonsense, and he adds that he will recuse himself when the issue comes up for a vote before the national committee.

Further complicating the picture is a continuing root-and-stock overhaul of France's wine administration, the most important reform in a generation. Deeply shaken by over-

production, withering domestic demand and pitiless competition from the New World, the country's wine industry, backed by government, has groped over the past decade for a way to shore up both the reputation and the market share of French wines.

Many blame the AOC system itself, saying it has become flabby and indiscriminate. Originally conceived in the 1930s to include 10% or 15% of wines-produced, by the mid-1980s it covered almost half. Not all of it is good, much less great. In september 2007, a panel of experts commissioned by France's leading consumer-advocacy organization, Que Choisir ("What to choose"), said one-third of AOC Wines should be stripped of their appellations. "The AOC label is no longer a guarantee of quality or a link to *terroir*," the group said, using a French term that describes a wine's relationship to its place of origin.

But the top-down have thrown an industry with a lot of vested interests into deep turmoil, its different actors, large and small, scrambling to find their place in a shifting landscape. INAO is leaning on each wine region to raise standards, and has – for the first time – appointed independent auditors to make sure winemakers adhere to their own rules. With many of the new structures already in place, the changes will go into effect with the 2008 harvest, says the president of INAO's national committee, Yves Benard.

Collectively, the stakes are enormous. Domestic consumption of wine in France has dropped 50% over the past 40 years, as people have favored quality over quantity and younger people turn to other drinks, forcing winemakers to look abroad for new markets. If the overhauls fail, France's still glorious but troubled wine sector may continue to lose ground to Australia, the U.S. West Coast, South Africa, Argentina and Chile. After reigning for centuries as the top exporter to Britain – the No.1 importer of wines in the world-France slipped in 2004 into second place behind Australia. And while overall French wine-and-spirits export in 2007 could reach a record (final numbers aren't available yet), a closer look shows that much of the growth comes from Champagne and Cognac, not still wines;

At first glance, a backyard quarrel over how to draw the wine map of tiny Pic Saint-loup, a sea-horse-shaped area barely 25 kilometers long, and the increasingly tense national debate over whether the government's plan will keep France on top of the global wine market would seem to be worlds apart. But they both hinge on the same vexing question : what is *terroir* ?

"The core criterion for an AOC is that product-whether wine, cheese or olive oil-must have a very strong link with its *terroir*," says the INAO's Mr. Flutet.

Terroir may be the most overused word in the French wine lexicon, but pinning down its exact meaning has been tricky. A century ago the term was redolent of peasant plonk. Only with the creation of wine appellations in 1905, and the system to protect them in 1935, did it begin to take on a positive luster. "Since the 1980s, we have been working on a definition," says Mr. Flutet, seemingly unperturbed that it could take 20 years to nail down the meaning of a word. *Terroir*, Mr. Flutet says, is the interaction between a natural geographic area – including the soil, climate and exposure to the sun – and the human beings that work within it.

The investigative commission appointed to evaluate Pic Saint-Loup's petition for AOC status, for example, assessed whether the area is suited to producing quality wines, and whether the end product expresses the unique conditions in which the grapes were grown. Is the soil poor, forcing the plants to reach deep into the earth for the minerals and nutrients that distinguish one place from another ? Are the grape varieties, and the dosage of sunlight, optimal for that climate ? Are the vines old enough to reflect the character of the *terroir* ? Are yields low, to concentrate flavor ? Is the use of chemicals in the vineyard held to a minimum ?

"We always asked ourselves as we worked over the last 15 years, "what is special about our *terroir* and how can we reflect that in our wines ?" says Christophe Peyrus, whose Clos Marie is widely praised as one of Pic Saint Loup's top wineries. "We invested, we took risks on a notion of *terroir* that didn't exist – we started from scratch."

The right soil, exposure and micro-climate, in other words, aren't enough : it takes decades of hard work to transform those elements into extraordinary wine. Which is why Mr. Peyrus and the 40 or so vintners who labored to construct a viable AOC are unhappy at what they see as the Johnnies-come-lately at the gate.

"The problem is that they did not do the same collective work, they don't have remotely the same quality of wines, or the same willingness to live together, but now that the region has reached a certain level... it's the same old story," says Jean Orliac, who came to the area in the 1970s with a degree in soil science and, seeing the potential, bought abandoned hillside vineyards in the shadow of Pic Saint-Loup to create Domaine de l'Hortus. If they want to join in the prestige – and the profits – of an AOC, he adds, "let these other winemakers work together for 10 years to show what they can do."

It is this human dimension – which Mr. Orliac compared to the open democracy of the ancient Greek polis – that makes the concept of terroir so hard to pin down, and which could tilt the decision either way. Mr. Flutet of INAO, who hasn't taken sides in the conflict, made the same point. "An AOC is the acknowledgment of a community of winemakers who have cooperated to raise the quality of their wines. We do not create an AOC, we recognize one," he said.

Last year, INAO formed an investigative panel including a geographer, a geologist, a sociologist, an ethnologist and a wine historian to find out whether the communes seeking to attach themselves to the new AOC have a case. The report was wrapped up in December, and recommendations have been submitted to INAO. A decision may be imminent, says Mr. Flutet, adding the only outstanding issue is where to draw the boundaries for the new AOC.

Mr. Cavalier says he hasn't seen the 2007 investigative panel's report. "Apparently, the experts – from a technical and human point of view – think that the current zone can be enlarged with certain parts of neighboring communes," he says at his winery, in the picture-postcard village of Vacquieres. "After all, we share the same practices, and the people are the same."

Mr. Cavalier has long owned vineyards in the heart of Pic Saint-Loup, the source of his most prestigious bottles. But because his winery falls outside the proposed boundary of the AOC, he – 20 – odd vintners in the same position – could lose the right to put "Pic Saint-Loup" on their labels.

Thirty grape growers, and winemakers who joined Mr. Cavalier in a newly formed association called "At the threshold of Pic Saint-Loup" argue that their vineyards are a natural part of Pic Saint-Loup across the full spectrum of criteria defining terroir. "We have knocked on the door, now we want to come in – and be welcomed," said Jean-Christophe Granier, whose Domaine les Grandes Costes is in the same commune as Mr. Cavalier's winery. "We are orphans, and we want to find our natural family."

There is another reason for wanting an AOC : the bankable added value of those three letters – "AOC" – on the label. "This is why, when you demarcate a boundary, you have to do it in the most objective manner as possible," argues Mr. Flutet, who says that conflicts such as the one that has riven Pic Saint-Loup are common when AOCs are created or modified, such as in Champagne, where tense discussions are under way over remapping and expanding the region's vineyards. "If your vines fall on the wrong side of the divide, they will be worth €5,000 a hectare," he says. "On the other side, they will be worth a million."

The before-and-after price differences aren't expected to be dramatic in Pic Saint-Loup, where the best wines from some of the more highly regarded makers already command €40 a bottle. But for lesser-known producers, AOC status could mean the difference between scraping by or solid success. For most French consumers, a simple "vin de table", or non-AOC wine, corresponds to a bottle that should cost €2, not €12 or €22.

Nevertheless, an AOC label doesn't always mean there's a decent wine inside the bottle. Most AOCs are administratively dominated not by artisanal winegrowers using the resource-intensive methods that yield genuine *vins de terroir*, but by producers of the very mass-market wines that INAO was created to protect them from.

"The wines that truly express the uniqueness of their origins have, for consumers, been drowned in a sea of ordinary wines bearing the same AOC label," says Patrick Baudouin, a vocal advocate of authentic winemaking and a producer of an outstanding naturally sweet white from the Coteaux de Layon area in the Loire River Valley.

Sometimes the wines produced by a region's most dedicated artisans are actually stripped of the AOC label altogether – precisely because they stand above the crowd. Every year, a winemaker's production must pass muster with a tasting panel, composed of his or her peers, that checks for two things. The first is easily identified flaws. The other is whether the wine is deemed to express the "typicity," or signature taste, of the region.

That means a winemaker who, by using unorthodox methods – in an era of mechanized farming that could mean harvesting by hand so that only ripe grapes are picked, reducing yields to concentrate flavor and refusing to add aromas or sugar to boost alcohol content – to achieve a genuine expression of terroir may nevertheless be kicked out of the club for being "atypical." (For examples of exceptional wines made outside the AOC system, see accompanying article.)

"It's very democratic system," says New York-based wine importer Joe Dressner, who specializes in wines that faithfully express their terroir. "The problem is that democracy does not always yield excellence." The rules encourage conformity, not quality, he says.

Defenders of the system say that wines within an AOC must bear a family resemblance, including overachievers. "If some winemakers push to the extremes of excellence but are deemed "atypical," it simply highlights the role of the collective," says Mr. Flutet.

At the heart of the INAO reforms – which would require independent auditing of the entire chain of production, from the vineyards to the bottle – is a fundamental ambivalence about their aims: Should AOCs craft wines tailored to please, or should they mine the terroir and pray consumers from Boise to Bangkok like the result? "We have completely lost our bearings," says Pierre Clavel, whose Domaine Clavel borders on Pic Saint-Loup. "We are trying to develop a stronger and more nuanced geographic identity in a globalizing world that couldn't care less about such distinctions."

For Mr. Clavel, who easily sells his annual production of 150,000 bottles, 90% of it abroad, the reforms were the last straw. "For 21 years I have played by the rules, growing only grapes authorized by AOC, submitting all my wines for approval," he said. Many have been refused over the years, though he always managed to get back into the fold on appeal. But starting next year, he says he will probably check out of the AOC system and strike out on his own.

"I am afraid we will lose our souls as winemakers, that we will lose the possibility of making a wine that has weaknesses, but weaknesses that are in fact strengths," he says, is always enhanced by slight imperfection.

Jean-Marc Ravaille, the current head of the Pic Saint-Loup winemakers syndicate, also is concerned about a creeping trend toward standardization. "We are losing a bit of the spirit of an AOC," he says.

But these nascent doubts haven't damped the determination of Pic Saint-Loup's winegrowers to get their AOC. "We would like a decision – one way or the other," says Mr. Ravaille. "We have waited long enough."