



France: Languedoc and Roussillon – Great Wines at Great Prices

featuring Château Ollieux-Romanis
reviewed by Joe Czerwinski

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Deadlines suck. That's how I felt after returning from a February trip to the South of France. An alternate reading might be that there are just too many good wines coming out of this region.

Spending a week in the no-longer-twinning regions of Languedoc and Roussillon, I was struck by the sheer number of wines worthy of notice by consumers. For fans of Mediterranean grape varieties, chiefly Carignan, Grenache, Mourvèdre and Syrah, there are no better hunting grounds for value—and the top wines can rival any in the world for overall quality.

Roussillon

I started in Perpignan, where I spent three days working out of the Conseil Interprofessionnel des Vins du Roussillon (CIVR) offices tasting up to 100 wines each morning and then moved on to scheduled appointments with select wineries each afternoon and evening. In short, I was blown away by some of the terroirs and the potential for world-class wines.

Sandwiched between the Mediterranean Sea and the mountains of the Pyrenees, the vineyards are largely defined by elevation, proximity to the sea and the soils, which are some of the most complex in France.

As one of the hottest and driest parts of the country, Roussillon was historically known for its sweet fortified wines from Banyuls, Maury and Rivesaltes. In response to market changes, many producers have placed more emphasis on dry table wines, which is what I focused on for this report. I hope to review the sweet fortified wines later in the year.

Within Roussillon, the main AOP is Côtes du Roussillon, which covers 12,000 acres of vineyards. As wines bottled under this AOP must be blends, monovarietal wines appear under the IGP Côtes Catalanes. Certain communes considered to have better terroirs are entitled to use the AOP Côtes du Roussillon Villages. And wines from five villages can add their own names on the label: Caramany, Latour de France, Les Aspres, Lesquerde and Tautavel. These are generally at higher elevations, with more specific soil types.

Two other AOPs of note are Coullioure, surrounding the town of Banyuls-sur-Mer, and Maury Sec, which distinguishes the dry wines of that region from the fortifieds. No single AOP dominated my tastings, as I found great examples from each appellation.

While there is some vintage variation from year to year, the overall climate is relatively stable in Roussillon. The last “cool” vintage was 2014, but the past three years have been warm or hot, and also quite dry, even for a region that doesn’t get much annual precipitation. As always, consumers should shop more by producer than by appellation or vintage.

Producers tend to be on the small side, and—depending on the market—it may take some effort to find individual wines. There are well-distributed exceptions, like the Rhône-based firm of Chapoutier, which has a sizable presence in the region, and the dynamic local firm of Lafage. For Americans, a top source is the portfolio of importer Hand Picked Selections. Owner Dan Kravitz owns an estate in the region and works with numerous estates and caves cooperatives. Eric Solomon’s European Cellars brings in another widely available portfolio.

Languedoc

This vast region sprawls along (and inland from) much of France’s Mediterranean coast west of the Rhône River. An argument can even be made that it includes the Rhône-affiliated region of Costières de Nîmes. Long a source of inexpensive Pays d’Oc wines, the region includes numerous AOPs, many of which are home to producers making fine wines.

There’s no reason to hold onto any antiquated notions of Languedoc wine quality. Or, indeed, of pricing. The best wines are increasingly priced according to the market and perceived value by the producers. Triple-digit pricing does indeed exist here.

For the most part, serious wine lovers can focus on the region’s five crus: Corbières Boutenac, La Clape, Minervois La Livinière, Pic Saint Loup and Terrasses du Larzac, but many other appellations produce notable wines. Top options include Corbières, Faugères, Fitou, Minervois and Saint Chinian, but there are many estates outside these areas making excellent wines.

Producer is key. Is the producer committed to doing what needs to be done to make high-quality wines? Or are they content to pursue high yields, evaluate ripeness based on numbers rather than by flavor, not sort their fruit and fail to follow hygienic practices in the winery?

In the interest of time and space, I've only included producers I found noteworthy in this report. In fact, some great wines that I haven't had a chance to write about yet will appear in the Interim End of May Issue. Apologies for not getting all of the reviews done prior to the April deadline. I trust you'll still have plenty of wines from which to choose.

Château Ollieux-Romanis

Proprietor Pierre Bories is one of the largest vigneronns in the Corbières region, with 162 hectares of producing vineyards. His family has owned Château Ollieux-Romanis for 200-odd years, so the family has had plenty of time to purchase additional land. The production includes this chateau but also the separate Le Champs de Murailles and a small array of natural wines under the Pierre Bories label. Both those other projects are under their own headings elsewhere in this report. Vinifications emphasize indigenous yeasts, minimal sulfur additions and generally cool ferments. Bories is adding more and more 600-liter demi-muids to his cellar as time goes on, finding they harmonize well with the fruit he is growing.

2017 Corbieres Rose Cuvee Classique

The light-hued 2017 Corbieres Rose Cuvee Classique is 60% Grenache Gris, 25% Cinsault and 15% Grenache Noir. It's light to medium-bodied, with a silky mouthfeel and fresh flavors of white peach and melon. **(87 points)**

2017 Cuvee Classique Rouge

A classic blend of 40% Carignan, 30% Grenache and 30% Syrah, aged entirely in tank, the 2017 Cuvee Classique marries hints of cherries, blueberries and raspberries, wraps them in a greenish wreath of garrigue and delivers plenty of pleasure. Give this full-bodied red a few months to come together and drink it over the next 5 years. **(90 points)**

2016 Corbieres Blanc Cuvee Prestige

Raised in a mix of demi-muids and barriques, the 2016 Corbieres Blanc Cuvee Prestige is a blend of 45% Roussanne, 45% Marsanne and 10% Grenache Blanc. It offers subtle aromas of toasted grain, white peach and melon, then a medium-bodied palate with a silky mouthfeel. A touch of scorched orange zest appears on the finish. **(89 points)**

2016 Corbières-Boutenac Cuvee Or

The 2016 Corbières-Boutenac Cuvee Or spent about a year in oak but shows no overt signs of it. The blend of 40% Carignan, 25% Grenache, 20% Mourvèdre and 15% Syrah instead delivers

mixed berries and flowering garrigue notes. This medium to full-bodied wine is silky, creamy and supple, with hints of chocolaty richness on the lingering finish. It should provide great drinking over the next 6 years or so. **(93 points)**

2016 Corbières-Boutenac Cuvée Prestige

A blend of 40% Carignan, 25% Grenache, 25% Mourvèdre and 10% Syrah, the 2016 Corbières-Boutenac Cuvée Prestige aged primarily in second and third use barrels (there's 10% new oak). It's medium to full-bodied, with a bit of tannic grip, but they're silky and ripe, aptly framing the cherry and raspberry fruit. Hints of dried spices and rosemary emerge on the lingering finish. This should drink well for a decade. **(91 points)**

2015 Corbieres Boutenac Atal Sia

Aged in tank (and for a year in bottle prior to release), the 2015 Corbieres Boutenac Atal Sia is a blend of 45% Carignan, 30% Grenache, 20% Mourvèdre and 5% Syrah. It's full-bodied but silky, with floral, garrigue-like aromas, plump black-cherry fruit and a spicy, licorice-laced finish. It's a terrific wine for drinking over the next half decade or so. **(93 points)**

