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# UNDERSTANDING IGP PAYS D'OC

Home of the cheap and cheerful? On the one hand, yes – but the can-do mentality of the producers and flexible regulations throughout this huge swathe of France's Mediterranean lands are enabling a groundswell of fascinating, great-quality wine styles to rise up. **Andy Howard MW** reports

**G**iven my interests in the classic wines of Bordeaux and Burgundy, the attraction of bottles labelled IGP Pays d'Oc have largely passed me by. Up until now. Delving into the subject for this article, I discovered there was much more to IGP Pays d'Oc than I had realised. Rather than being a generic classification characterised by low prices and easy-drinking, varietally labelled wines, this is an innovative, fast-moving sector with many wines to set the pulses racing.

My formative wine experiences date back to the early 1980s – exciting times, when one could buy second wines from Bordeaux first growths for less than £15, and the world was just coming to terms with the fact that not only did New Zealand grow vines, but they produced Sauvignon Blanc which seemed to come from another planet.

Back then, Languedoc-Roussillon in France's far south was renowned for the production of cheap bulk wine, where volume was the main driver. The region was already suffering before Australian Chardonnay and Syrah joined forces with New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc to provide consumers with wines that were fruit-driven, easy-drinking and great value. Sales of Languedoc wines sank even further.

My perceptions were that although the region was home to a handful of excellent small producers, large cooperatives dominated the scene with mass-production and low-cost the key. When wine regulations were changed in 1987, allowing Languedoc-Roussillon producers to adopt varietal labelling, I suspected this was a blatant move to cash in on the demand for New World-style wines.

## Big player

Although over the years I have enjoyed great wines such as Le Soula (near Perpignan), La Grange des Pères and Mas de Daumas Gassac (Aniane, near Montpellier), I've continued to overlook IGP Pays d'Oc in favour of other

appellations. But, following research for this article, I've realised the Pays d'Oc is actually a treasure-trove of fascinating wines and dynamic producers. Pity it took me so long!

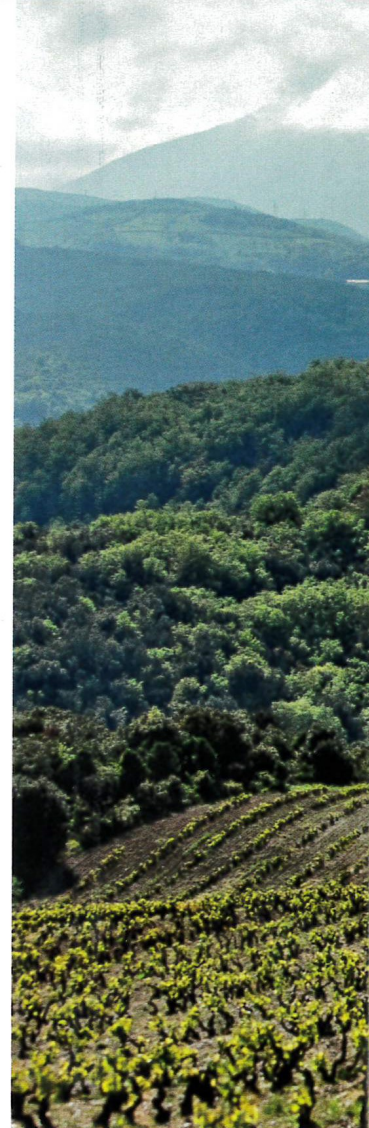
First demarcated in 1987 as Vin de Pays d'Oc, the vast scale of the vineyards is striking (*see box*). Covering four departments (Aude, Gard, Hérault and Pyrénées-Orientales), the region reaches from the Mediterranean coastline to the mountainous slopes of the Pyrenees and the Massif Central. The region's size, along with its varied geology and climate, means there is no easily definable style.

However, it more than makes up for this with diversity. Freedom of expression is the mantra adopted by both producers and regulatory bodies, with 58 different grape varieties approved for use within today's IGP. Award-winning producer Gilles Palatan from Domaine d'Aigues Belles (*right*) confirms this flexibility: 'Our Mourvèdre comes from a Pic St-Loup area, but to be labelled Pic St-Loup it needs to be a blend with a minimum 50% Syrah. I love Mourvèdre – I bottle a 100% Mourvèdre and call it IGP Pays d'Oc.'

The masterminds behind the original Pays d'Oc designation were Robert Skalli and Jacques Gravegeal – the latter now president of the Pays d'Oc wine producers' union. They believed that a varietal approach would improve quality and boost sales, while giving freedom to producers. In 1987, 200,000hl were produced; by 2015 this had increased to 6.5 million hl. In 2009, the new EC category of Protected Geographical Indication (IGP) was created, with Vin de Pays d'Oc elevated to IGP Pays d'Oc.

## Quality stamp

But size isn't everything. In today's market, wine needs to be accessible, good quality and good value in order to have a wide global reach. Innovation and variety are other key attributes for interested consumers. In this respect, IGP Pays d'Oc ticks all the boxes. As Natalie Estriebeau, director of oenology at



## PAYS D'OC: THE GLOBAL PICTURE

The numbers for Pays d'Oc IGP are impressive. In 2017, Vitisphere reported the area under vine in France as 745,000ha. Appellation d'Origine Protégée (AP) vineyards totalled 446,000ha, while all France's IGPs amounted to 195,000ha – the Pays d'Oc IGP alone has 120,000ha under vine.

On a global scale, the Pays d'Oc IGP has a vineyard area similar to South Africa (total 125,000ha). The classification accounts for 20% of total French wine volumes, while the largest of the four regions (Hérault) produced 4 million hectolitres in 2017 – more than the whole of Bordeaux (3.6m hl).



## ‘I love Mourvèdre – I bottle a 100% Mourvèdre and call it IGP Pays d’Oc’

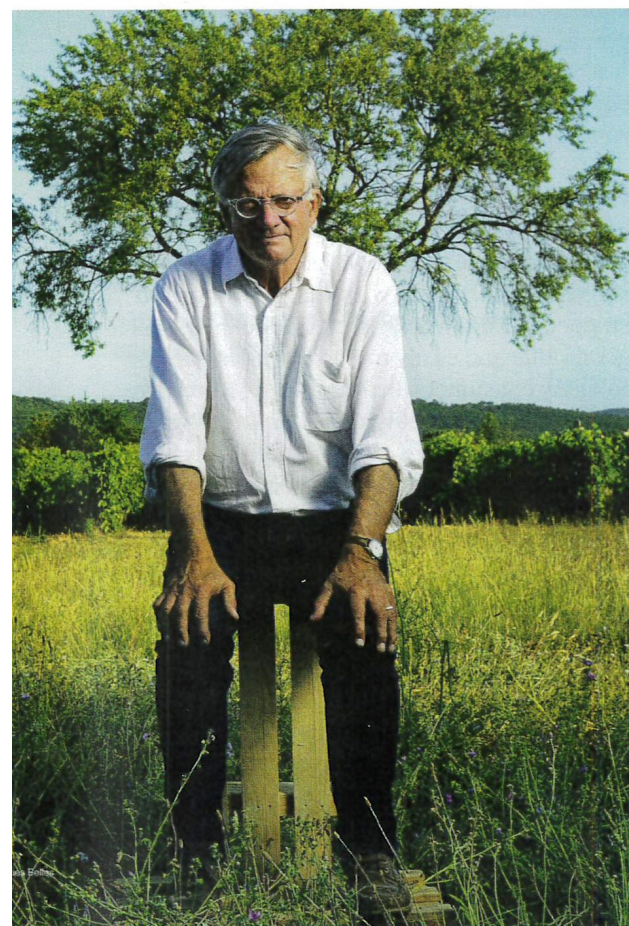
Gilles Palatan, Domaine d’Aigues Belles (*left*)

Vignobles Foncalieu near Carcassonne, explains: ‘The label is a guarantee of quality, simplicity and accessibility.’

Bruno Le Breton of Domaine de la Jasse, near Montpellier, notes: ‘With the IGP, as a producer, we have the ability to work freely with the best methods and techniques, and can easily adapt to new situations.’ Leading winemaker Gérard Bertrand, based near Narbonne, observes: ‘One of the main benefits is the official guarantee of quality for consumers: the IGP Pays d’Oc classification has strict and precise specifications.’

Unusually, all bottles destined to be labelled IGP Pays d’Oc are approved by blind tastings conducted by a range of wine professionals – an approach which would be considered unduly radical in Bordeaux or Burgundy. This exercise is not just ‘window-dressing’ – on ➤

**Above: vineyards at Le Soula lie close to the boundary between the Aude and Pyrénées-Orientale regions**



average between 7%-11% of wines deemed not to meet the required standard are rejected.

The focus on varietally labelled wines remains a key priority for the IGP, with 58 grapes permitted ranging from international varieties (Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah and Chardonnay) to those less frequently found in southerly, warm areas such as Pinot Noir, Gewurztraminer and Pinot Gris. Merlot leads in volume terms, while Rolle (Vermentino), Viognier and Cabernet Franc are producing some great wines. Rarer grapes include Terret Blanc (an ancient white Languedoc variety), Marselan (a high-quality cross between Cabernet Sauvignon and Grenache), Caladoc (Malbec crossed with Grenache) and Négrette. Recently, producers have been excited by the potential for Albariño (excellent examples being Laurent Miquel's Solas and Foncalieu's Sillages d'Albariño).

## Sunny outlook

The market for IGP Pays d'Oc is dominated by bulk wine, with 87% shipped in this way over the past five years – hardly surprising given the region's history, but in some ways a double-edged sword. Bulk-shipping benefits the environment and helps keep prices low, but the downside is that relatively few benchmark domaine wines get to put the IGP firmly on the wine quality map.

Large producers such as Domaines Paul Mas, Foncalieu and Gérard Bertrand are trying to redress the balance with blends like Cigalus – Bertrand's top IGP. This biodynamic and organic label is available as a white (three varieties) or as a blend of seven red grapes. Complex and elegant, Cigalus stands in comparison to other fine wines, albeit at an unusually high price for a Pays d'Oc label.

Domaine producers are also adding to the expanding wine scene – look out for Gayda (*see 'Producer profile' on Decanter.com*), La Négly, Les Jamelles, Les Yeuses and Sainte Rose.

Some of the IGP's most exciting wines are being produced with Rolle and Viognier. With its strength in Provence, Sardinia and Liguria (Italy), it's no surprise Rolle has a natural affinity to the coastal areas close to the Mediterranean. A leading exponent is Domaine d'Aigues Belles with its Cuvée Le Premier Rolle, first bottled in 2016 from a newly planted vineyard. Viognier, if not quite hitting the heights of Condrieu, is surprisingly successful and manages to deliver plenty of power and stone-fruit character while avoiding overripeness and low acidity. The Loire's speciality



Bruno le Breton, Domaine de la Jasse



Above: Vignobles Foncalieu's Sillages Albariño 2019

Below: Jean-Claude Mas of Domaines Paul Mas at Montagnac



red grape, Cabernet Franc, also performs very well here, with typical raspberry and cedar aromas, crisp tannins and more fruit ripeness than is typical in the Loire's Bourgueil, for example.

Given the sun-drenched climate, it's no surprise that the IGP Pays d'Oc is the leading producer of organic and biodynamic wines in France, accounting for about 25% of total production. Four strong winds – the Autan, Marin, Mistral and Tramontane – are key contributors in promoting healthy vines and grapes. At the same time, the IGP is also at the forefront of developing disease-resistant varieties such as Souvignier Gris, Soreli and Artaban – a trend likely to continue.

## Creative passion

The IGP Pays d'Oc has been remarkably successful since its inception. The focus on single-varietal wines, with a large proportion shipped in bulk, has delivered good quality, good value and easily understandable wines to many consumers. Perhaps these strengths are also the IGP's weakness – interested wine enthusiasts may view the label as simply being better than Vin de France, but below AP wines in terms of quality. This was a mistake I've been guilty of for many years.

At Domaine de la Jasse, Le Breton sums up the category well: 'The IGP Pays d'Oc encourages passionate producers who are more creative, more innovative and more concerned with the pleasure of the consumer.' This is certainly a classification to explore and enjoy. **D**

Andy Howard MW is a *Decanter* contributing editor and DWWA judge. He runs his own wine consultancy *Vinetrades*, and was formerly a retail wine buyer for 30 years

# Howard's dozen: top wines of the Pays d'Oc

## ① **Domaine Saint Ferréol, Grande Réserve Viognier 2017** 92

£17.99 Majestic

Released after several years' ageing in bottle, a fleshy, weighty Viognier, with flavours of white peach and pear, and fresh acidity to balance. A hint of bitterness adds to the complexity. Lacks the mid-palate concentration of Condrieu but there is finesse here, which is a real surprise for an IGP Viognier from the far South. **Drink 2020-2023 Alcohol 13%**

## **Foncalieu, Les Extraordinaires, Sillages Albariño 2019** 92

£9.59-£12 Inverarity Morton, Le Bon Vin

From Foncalieu's Puichéric vineyard, this impressive example of Albariño displays all the freshness of its Galician counterpart, but with a little extra richness. It finishes with a distinct saline edge – bright citrus fruit notes, with a hint of savouriness. **Drink 2020-2023 Alc 13%**

## **Domaine Les Yeuses, Vermentino 2019** 91

£9.95 (2018) South Downs Cellars

The 80ha Dardé family estate near Mèze lies on limestone-rich soils, cooled by maritime breezes. This youthful, fresh and floral Vermentino has intense flavours of stone fruit and pears, good concentration on the palate, and salty, mineral notes to finish. Shows the great potential for IGP Pays d'Oc Vermentino. **Drink 2020-2022 Alc 13%**

## ② **Laurent Miquel, Vérité Grand Cuvée Viognier 2016** 91

£17.99 Waitrose Cellar

The Miquel family first bought land in the central Languedoc region in 1791, but Viognier was only planted in 1992. This classic example has a mid-gold hue, a waxy, honeyed character and crisp acidity balancing rich, ripe, tropical fruit flavours. 70% of the blend was fermented and matured in oak barrels. Long and complex. **Drink 2020-2022 Alc 14%**

## **Les Janelles, Réserve Personnelle Pinot Gris 2018** 90

£11.99 Majestic

From two plots in the Hérault (west of Montpellier and east of Carcassonne) on stony, chalk-clay soils. Lightly floral on the nose, the palate is fleshy with crisp acidity

and a touch of green apple and ripe melon fruit. There's some typical Pinot Gris fatness with a touch of smokiness on the palate. Perfect over the next 12-18 months. **Drink 2020-2021 Alc 13%**

## **Paul Mas, Single Vineyard Collection Réserve Marsanne 2019** 89

£11.99 (2018) Majestic

From the La Forge vineyard in the Aude Valley on the edge of the Montagne Noire, this Marsanne is a fine example of the grape, with a hint of honeyed stone fruit on the palate, good weight and richness, all kept in check with bright acidity. Very clean and fresh, with plenty of complexity and concentration. **Drink 2020-2022 Alc 13%**

## **Domaine d'Aigues Belles, Cuvée du Poirier des Rougettes 2019** 91

N/A UK [www.aigues-belles.com](http://www.aigues-belles.com)

Gilles Palatan and his nephews run this excellent 20ha estate, between Montpellier and Nîmes. 80% Grenache and 20% Cinsault, hand-harvested. A powerful rosé with more than a touch of Domaine Tempier (well-reputed producer in Bandol) about it. Good concentration, ripe peach and red berries on the palate, with crisp acidity keeping the palate fresh. Just needs a UK importer! **Drink 2020-2022 Alc 13%**

## ③ **Domaine Gayda, Chemin de Moscou 2017** 93

£24.95-£27.50 (2016) Cambridge Wine

Merchants, Majestic, The Oxford Wine Co  
Domaine Gayda makes some excellent wines, with this perhaps its best. A blend of 70% Syrah, 24% Grenache and 6% Cinsault, this is loaded with meaty, spicy, dark fruits and a lingering violet perfume. Aged in a mix of new barrels and old demi-muids, this spends 21 months in wood, adding finesse to the tannins. A fine wine, which shows what the IGP Pays d'Oc is capable of. **Drink 2020-2025 Alc 14%**

## **Gérard Bertrand, Cigalus 2018** 93

£28.59-£31.25 Great Wines Direct, Hallgarten

Wines, Harrods, Shelved Wine, Strictly Wine  
Gérard Bertrand's flagship IGP wine, this biodynamic blend of seven varieties is deep, brooding and serious. Dark fruit flavours, dark plum, cherry and spice. Fine acidity, smooth tannins, very nicely integrated oak which supports and

doesn't dominate. Manages to retain freshness alongside the succulent ripe fruits. **Drink 2020-2025 Alc 15%**

## **Domaine de la Jasse, Vieilles Vignes 2018** 91

£13.50 (2017) JN Wine

Cabernet Sauvignon dominates this blend, with spicy dark cherry and currant notes, then spice and a hint of liquorice on the palate. Rich, with plenty of southern French warmth, there is plenty of concentration here for several years of ageing. **Drink 2021-2024 Alc 14%**

## **Producteurs Réunis, Marsolay Pinot Noir 2018** 90

£8.99 Waitrose Cellar

A vibrant, fresh, youthful Pinot Noir with a typical, fragrant nose full of dark berries, wood and spice. Smooth and ripe on the palate, full of juicy succulence, crisp acidity and bright red summer fruit flavours. Rounded and supple on the palate. Very drinkable, good value, a great summer red. **Drink 2020-2022 Alc 13%**

## **Domaine Sainte Rose, Le Pinacle 2016** 89

£16.95 JN Wine

Warming, enveloping, dark, ripe fruit flavours on the nose. More of a New World style – a lot of new wood here, but this balances the ripeness well. Cedar and spices. Soft and generous on the palate. 95% Syrah co-fermented with a touch of Viognier. A supple wine with structure from firm tannins and good length to finish. **Drink 2020-2023 Alc 14.5%**

