

## TASTING REPORTS

### France's Southern Frontier

The diverse terroirs of Languedoc and Roussillon deliver a range of exciting values



Gérard Bertrand sources a biodynamic rosé from its Clos du Temple estate in Languedoc-Carbrières. (Gilles Deschamps)



By **Gillian Sciaretta**

From the Aug 31, 2021, issue

The Mediterranean regions of Languedoc and Roussillon span a vast crescent of land in the south of France, from the Spanish border to just beyond Montpellier. Together, these areas contain a staggering number of microclimates, soils and grape varieties that produce an impressive diversity of wines, including reds, whites and rosés. Many of the appellations and producers may be unfamiliar to wine lovers, but the wines' incomparable value make them ripe for exploration. Moreover, winemakers across both regions have been betting big on organic and biodynamic practices, with 36% of all organic wine in France coming from the Languedoc.

"I think you can make organic and biodynamic wines everywhere," says Gérard Bertrand, a leading vintner in Languedoc. "Of course, Languedoc is more fortunate because we have the sun and we have the wind. We also have the most important sourcing in the world, which provides us with a great advantage because we have varietal ranges and also *terroir* appellations. We can play with different wines, and we can answer all the needs of the consumer."

Though tied together administratively, Languedoc and Roussillon are very separate in terms of geography and culture. Languedoc is the larger of the two, making up 90% of the combined territory with Roussillon, with more than 172,000 acres of vineyards stretching from the shores of the Mediterranean to the foothills of the Massif Central. The climate is Mediterranean, but continental and even Atlantic microclimates exist.

By contrast, Roussillon is the hottest, driest region of France, located just north of the Spanish border, where it is surrounded by the Pyrenees and Corbières mountains. The region belonged to Spain for centuries, and many people there still identify more with Catalonia than France.

Of the nearly 200 wines from Languedoc and Roussillon I have reviewed in blind tastings over the past year, 60% are red blends from hallmark grape varieties—Grenache, Syrah, Carignan and Mourvèdre—mostly in a bold style. White wines, which represent nearly a quarter of the total, are a mixed bag of varietal bottlings and blends made from both regional grapes such as Grenache Blanc and Roussanne and international varieties such as Sauvignon Blanc, Viognier and Chardonnay. Rosé is a growing category, with many of the 33 wines under review made in the Provençal style, yet carrying more accessible price tags.

The majority of the wines come from the 2018 and 2019 vintages, both of which produced many excellent bottlings despite some challenges, including mildew threats in 2018 and record-breaking heat and drought in 2019. Overall, my tastings show that the wines from these regions offer some of the best value in France, with 57 earning outstanding scores of 90 points or higher on *Wine Spectator's* 100-point scale, at a median price of \$35. The two highest-scorers, each at 93 points, come from Bila-Haut, the Roussillon estate of Rhône Valley star Michel Chapoutier, who arrived in the area in 1995.

“The idea was to look for, after the Rhône Valley, another place where we could have soil with huge potential,” Chapoutier explains when asked why he started his project in the Roussillon. “But I wanted to find soil with huge potential for a reasonable price.”

Chapoutier’s Roussillon vineyards, all maintained biodynamically, give very low yields, but, he says, there’s a trade-off that makes this worth it. “Why I love [Roussillon] is because you have some of the best soils of Europe and because you could buy these soils at a very affordable price, you can accept having a 1 ton [per acre] or a half-ton yield, because finally you can propose a very high quality with a competitive price.”

The reds and whites are equally impressive across the Bila-Haut range. The Côtes du Roussillon White Bila-Haut Occultum Lapidem 2017 (93 points, \$44) is a blend of Grenache Blanc, Grenache Gris and Vermentino from vineyards grown on gneiss-based soils in the town of Latour de France. Aged for nine months in stainless-steel vats, with 30% in mostly new French oak *demi-muids*, this white is powerful yet refined.

Chapoutier’s top red is the powerful Côtes du Roussillon-Villages Lesquerde Domaine de Bila-Haut r.i. 2017 (93, \$110), a 100% Syrah made from grapes grown on granite soils in the Lesquerde district. Chapoutier believes these areas in Roussillon will one day have *grand cru* status. “I like to say that Roussillon is to the Languedoc what the Northern Rhône Valley is to the Rhône Valley. In the Rhône Valley, the crus are more in the north. When you watch the Languedoc and Roussillon in the future, if we put some *crus*, *premiers crus* and *grands crus* in the next 100 years, it will quite well be in the Roussillon.”

Bertrand is arguably the biggest global ambassador for the Languedoc, with 11 estates located across the region. He is a longtime advocate for the organic movement and helps educate U.S.

consumers on what organic and biodynamic practices entail. “It takes time, because in France and in Europe, people are already very familiar with the categories of organic, biodynamic, vegan and sulfite-free. But in the U.S., the market was a little bit late. Now we are seeing the demand change, with more people wanting to be introduced to organic and biodynamic wines. As we are the leader in that world, this is a great window for us.”

Today, 60% of Bertrand’s wines are certified organic or biodynamic, and he projects that number will reach 80% by 2025. Standouts from his range include biodynamic offerings such as the Languedoc-Cabrières Rosé Clos du Temple 2019 (92, \$190), a rosé aged in French oak barrels, and the Minervois La Livinière Clos d’Ora 2018 (92, \$300), a suave red made from Syrah, Grenache, Mourvèdre and Carignan. Among Bertrand’s more value-driven options is the organic Languedoc Rosé Source of Joy 2020 (89, \$20), a flashy version based on Grenache.

Despite the logistical and political challenges that the region has faced over the past year, due to both the pandemic and the U.S. tariffs, Bertrand reports that business in the U.S. market is strong. “We grew in the regional chains and the independent retailers and finished 2020 with 23% growth,” he says. “We expect to continue to grow in 2021, not only with rosé but also red blends—and with organic wine too.”

Helping Languedoc and Roussillon build on their unique identities are legions of independent wineries that range from small, artisanal projects to large-scale operations. One mid-size estate is Château Puech-Haut, founded by Gérard Bru in 1980 and located in the town of St.-Drézéry, northeast of Montpellier close to the Rhône Valley.

“I planted the entire Puech-Haut vineyard, chose the grape varieties and their locations on the property,” says Bru, now 71. “At 45, I decided it was time to become a winemaker. I sold all my stuff, I got into debt beyond reason.” Today, Château Puech-Haut has 625 acres of vineyards in the Languedoc AOC, all of them converted to organic viticulture, including 230 acres in St.-Drézéry and 55 acres in Pic St.-Loup.

“I like strong wines,” remarks Bru. “My taste was for Châteauneuf du Pape, which led me to my choice of *terroir*: large, rounded pebbles. The same *terroir* as Châteauneuf. A majority of Syrah, Grenache and Mourvèdre, all planted in high density.” Recent releases show power and craftsmanship, such as the flavor-packed Pic St.-Loup Château Lavabre La Closerie 2017 (92, \$35), a Syrah-based blend, and the polished Languedoc Tête de Bélier 2017 (91, \$44), a blend of mostly Grenache and Syrah.

Because of their diversity and value, Languedoc and Roussillon have become a leading source of discovery for adventurous wine lovers, who have turned their attention toward these dynamic areas, especially as the demand for organic wines grows every year. Their status as trailblazers on the path toward sustainability has helped cement the reputation of southern France as a region worth a closer look.

## **Gillian Sciaretta’s Recommended Wines From Languedoc and Roussillon**

Nearly 200 wines were reviewed for this report. A [free alphabetical list](https://www.winespectator.com/articles/alphabetical-guide-to-languedoc-wines-083121) [<https://www.winespectator.com/articles/alphabetical-guide-to-languedoc-wines-083121>] is available. **WineSpectator.com** members can access complete reviews for all wines tasted using the online [Wine Ratings Search](https://www.winespectator.com/wines/search) [<https://www.winespectator.com/wines/search>].

## M. CHAPOUTIER

Côtes du Roussillon White Bila-Haut Occultum Lapidem 2017

Score: 93 | \$44

**WS Review:** A refined, powerful white, with almond, white peach and spiced apple flavors infused with spice and mineral. Grenache Blanc blend.

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## GÉRARD BERTRAND

Languedoc-Cabrières Rosé Clos du Temple 2019

Score: 92 | \$190

**WS Review:** Reminiscent of a white Burgundy, this pale rosé offers rich flavors of peach, apricot and currant, edged with baking spices. Grenache blend.

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## CHÂTEAU HAUT-BLANVILLE

Languedoc Grés de Montpellier Grande Cuvée 2016

Score: 92 | \$30

**WS Review:** Powerful and refined, this broad, silky red is packed with steeped cherry, red plum reduction, anise and rose petal notes. Syrah blend.

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## LA MAISON LAFON

Languedoc Cuvée Réservee 2016

Score: 92 | \$32

**WS Review:** Decadent raspberry gelée and cherry reduction flavors are backed by vibrant acidity, with nice concentration and freshness. Grenache blend.

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## CHÂTEAU DE LA NEGLY

La Clape La Falaise 2018

Score: 92 | \$45

**WS Review:** Refined tannins encase dark cherry and currant flavors that are backed by refreshing acidity in this full-bodied red. Syrah blend.

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## CHÂTEAU PUECH-HAUT

Pic St.-Loup Château Lavabre La Closerie 2017

Score: 92 | \$35

**WS Review:** A powerful red, with a broad profile, packed with refined blackberry, olive, dark chocolate and *garrigue* notes. Syrah blend.

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## BARON PHILIPPE DE ROTHSCHILD

Limoux Red Domaine de Baronarques 2018

Score: 92 | \$40

**WS Review:** Full-bodied and refined, this shows seamless currant, graphite, forest floor and cedar flavors, with polished tannins. Merlot blend.

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## DOMAINE DE FABRÈGUES

Languedoc Pézenas Le Coeur 2018

Score: 91 | \$50

**WS Review:** A polished red, layered with raspberry reduction, red plum compote and floral flavors. Syrah and Carignan.

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## CHÂTEAU FONTANÈS

Pic St.-Loup 2019

Score: 91 | \$23

**WS Review:** A spicy red, offering currant and dark cherry notes, interwoven with olive, rose water and mountain herb elements. Syrah blend.

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## DOMAINE GAYDA

Pays d'Oc Chemin de Moscou 2017

Score: 91 | \$40

**WS Review:** This offers concentration and elegance, with dark cherry and crushed red plum notes infused with anise and baking spices. Syrah blend.

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## DOMAINE DU SOMAIL

Minervois Le Vin de Plume 2018

Score: 91 | \$30

**WS Review:** Ripe flavors of red currant and raspberry preserves are supple and focused in this peony-tinged red. Mourvèdre and Syrah.

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## CHÂTEAU LAURIGA

Côtes du Roussillon Le Cadet 2019

Score: 90 | \$20

**WS Review:** Glossy, with steeped cherry and raspberry reduction flavors accented by *garrigue* and spice, bound by supple tannins. Carignan and Syrah.

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## DOMAINE MAGELLAN

Syrah-Grenache-Carignan Languedoc 2017

Score: 90 | \$20

**WS Review:** This offers nice purity and focus, with dark cherry and black raspberry notes that show accents of violet, spice and *garrigue*. Syrah blend.

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## CHÂTEAU MARIS

Minervois Savoir Vieillir 2019

Score: 90 | \$30

**WS Review:** Fresh-picked raspberry and red plum flavors are cast with anise, brick dust and *garrigue* in this lively, engaging red, showing good purity.

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## L'OSTAL CAZES

Minervois La Livinière 2017

Score: 90 | \$30

**WS Review:** Dark cherry and currant notes are nicely accented with licorice, floral and white pepper in this creamy red. Syrah blend.

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## SHATTER

Grenache Côtes Catalanes 2018

Score: 90 | \$25

**WS Review:** Lively, tangy acidity cuts through the plush profile of cherry tart, raspberry reduction and white pepper notes in this red.

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