

LANGUEDOC-ROUSSILLON

THE ERRATIC POWERHOUSE OF FRENCH WINE

After languishing in viticultural no-man's-land for more years than it is polite to mention, Languedoc-Roussillon pulled back from the brink in the 1980s.

Andrew Jefford introduces an ambitious tasting of recent offerings, with Michael Edwards and Marcel Orford-Williams adding their notes

This was an ambitious tasting—a survey of the world's largest wine-producing region. Languedoc-Roussillon now produces around twice as much wine as Bordeaux and about eight times as much as Burgundy. It is the sometimes troublesome giant of French wine: politically costly and qualitatively heterogenous, with its best wines little known outside France yet inspiring a fierce devotion in those who have come to understand and love them. What might the potential of those “best wines” be? Are local varieties or imported varieties best for conditions here? Do the wines age? And given that the favors of terroir are at all times sporadically and unequally bestowed, where might its future grands crus lie?

The recorded history of wine growing in Languedoc-Roussillon dates back to Greek colonial times in the 5th century BC. The creation of Pierre-Paul Riquet's engineering masterpiece the Canal du Midi ushered in an era of prosperity, after its locks opened in May 1681. By then, the Maunder Minimum (a period of low sunspot activity between 1645 and 1715) was under way, with the worst weather of the Little Ice Age still to come. Languedoc was perfectly placed to supply the wine that dismal 18th-century summers eliminated farther north. The arrival of the railways in the second half of the 19th century stoked the boiler of Languedoc winemaking further. Then came the epidemic of phylloxera—and the disaster of replanting



afterward. Hybrids and productive “wine-pissing” varieties replaced the traditional varieties eliminated by the insect; the struggle of hillside cultivation was replaced by the ease of increasingly mechanized viticulture on the plains. The era of *gros rouge*, of *pinard*, of *piquette*, of *vinasse*, and of *jaja* had begun.

The rebirth began in the 1980s, when the tentative and wobbly achievements of the region's *vins délimités de qualité supérieure* consolidated into the modest dignity of *appellation contrôlée* status. Now, quite properly, the market is in charge, and the region's greatest producers, appellations, and sites are slowly winning an international reputation, name by name.

The region's appellation structure has long been a work in progress, and the distinction between straight appellations (such as Minervois), cru appellations (like Minervois-La Livinière), and appellations with subsidiary named zones (like Pic St Loup, Terrasses du Larzac, or the overall Languedoc appellation, itself formerly called Coteaux du Languedoc), is a matter principally for theologians. It is, in truth, a bit of a mess. Roll on the day when every zone has its own appellation; a hierarchy can then be created by the market.

Almost uniquely among major French wine regions, though, two possible futures have beckoned Languedoc-Roussillon. One is the classic appellation journey; the other is to give varietal liberty through *vin de pays* legislation.



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You could say, therefore, that we were looking at four sets of wines: those made in both Languedoc and in Roussillon from traditional and local varieties (notably Grenache, Mourvèdre, Carignan, and Syrah), and those made in both regions from immigrant varieties (notably Cabernet Sauvignon), alone or in blends. A further qualification is that Roussillon was known for much of the second half of the 20th century for its fortified wines, both red and white, while fortified Muscat has long been a Languedoc strength, too. The focus on unfortified table wines of high quality in both regions is recent.

Let's try to make a little statistical sense of the results. Of the 38 ambitious wines included in this tasting, 12 were non-AOC and 26 were AOC. So, one might expect 33 percent of the top 12 wines to be non-AOC, but only two of the top 12 wines (or 17 percent) were non-AOC, and only one of those contained Bordeaux varieties. On the basis of this tasting, then, it seems as if the case for unorthodox blends—and in particular for Cabernet—in Languedoc and Roussillon remains unproven (though not demolished; all three tasters had at least one wine with some Cabernet in their top selections). The notes suggest that it is more difficult to manage ripeness successfully in Languedoc-Roussillon with non-local varieties than it is with local ones.

Aesthetically, the tasting was a success. Languedoc-Roussillon unquestionably has a personality of its own—wild, unpredictable, characterful, ripe, and lush, with some of the headiest and most captivating aromatic profiles in France, often redolent of the herbs that grow profusely in the region's native scrub (the *garrigue*), as well as of citrus groves and blossoms. Most of the area's wines are ripe or very ripe reds, with high levels of alcohol and low levels of acidity. When carefully made, this gives them an easy, soft-drinking deliciousness and sensual allure, to which drinkers respond well. Brettanomyces infection, though, is an ever-present risk and is something to which the appellation authorities should alert growers. French drinkers barely notice it, but international consumers increasingly will.

The other two tasters disagreed with me, but I would suggest that Languedoc-Roussillon remains almost hair-raisingly inconsistent, in part thanks to the intrinsic danger of the wines' balances. (A pH of 3.7 is regarded as low here.) I would still rather have that entertaining inconsistency, though, than the tedium that would result from acid adjustment and other ameliorations, while our tasting suggested that—for these three tasters, at least—Languedoc-Roussillon wines made in an avowedly “elegant” style, perhaps via early picking or modest

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It would be unwise to reach any definitive conclusions about the merits of different terroirs in this vast region from a tasting of just 38 wines. Côtes du Roussillon-Villages made a good showing (25 percent of the top 12 wines from only 13 percent of the wines scrutinized), and both Languedoc-Pic St Loup and Minervois can be satisfied with their performance (17 percent of the top 12 from around 10 percent of the wines we looked at). There doesn't yet seem much point in aging wines from this region: over 18 percent of the wines we looked at were from vintages prior to 2007, yet our top 12 wines were all from 2007 or 2008. Statistically, one might have expected at least two older wines to feature in the top 12.

Average and range of scores

| | Average | Range |
|------------------------|---------|-----------|
| Michael Edwards | 16.5 | 15–17.5 |
| Andrew Jefford | 13.5 | 7–18 |
| Marcel Orford-Williams | 15.5 | 10–19 |
| All wines | 15 | 13.5–17.5 |

extraction strategies, were less successful than those that embraced the potential for ripeness and extracted commensurately. A final risk is exaggerated sweetness, though this may help the wines in some markets. Alcohol levels, by contrast, are rarely obtrusive—a consequence of the fact that most of these wines are naturally articulated and amply fleshed. And they are, as Marcel Orford-Williams repeatedly reminded us, emphatically wines for food.

Andrew Jefford's top wines

- 2007 Domaine Léon Barral Jadis Faugères 18
- 2008 Domaine de l'Hortus Grande Cuvée Pic St Loup 18
- 2007 Les Trois Marie Côtes du Roussillon Villages 18
- 2009 Fontanel Vin de Pays des Côtes Catalanes 17.5
- 2008 Hecht & Bannier St Chinian 17
- 2007 La Grange de Quatre Sous VdP d'Oc 16.5
- 2008 Agly Brothers Côte du Roussillon 16
- 2008 Mas Amiel Carerades Côte du Roussillon Villages 16
- 2008 Le Clos des Fées Hervé Bizeul Côtes du Roussillon Villages 16
- 2008 Mas Jullien Terrasses du Larzac Languedoc 16
- 2008 Domaine Jean-Baptiste Senat Minervois La Nine 16

2007 Domaine Léon Barral Jadis Faugères (14% ABV) - 17.5

ME: Even ruby-purple to rim; powerful fruit under high-toned acidity on the nose; quite marked acidity, sinewy. Good but needs to work out its balance. **16**

AJ: Saturated dark black-purple. After a run of rather odd wines, this restores some Languedoc classicism to proceedings: graceful, shapely, and lifted aromatic Syrah, mainly characterized by sweet blackcurrant and raspberry fruit and floral charm but with a faint leafiness there, too. Wonderful *garrigue*-like classicism. Lush, intense, concentrated, and profoundly aromatic, this is a remarkable wine of great grace and charm. It has lots of palate wealth and drive, yet the fruit retains that sweet, leafy, late-adolescent enticement right to the end; it is amply textured yet supple, and the wine has a redeeming acid presence of soft supportiveness. Disarmingly good and utterly unique. **18**

MO-W: Lovely fruit here, sweet and syrupy. Lovely fruit; plenty of middle and length. This is lovely! **18.5**

2008 Domaine de l'Hortus Grande Cuvée Pic St Loup (13% ABV) - 17

ME: Fine, flowing wine, with approachable pure fruit. **16**

AJ: Saturated dark black-red. Gorgeous aromatic profile, evidently Syrah-led, of orange blossom, orange peel, and jasmine. Fragrant, enchanting, and refined; magnificent, heady, and seductive. Nowhere else in the world can do this. Soft, vivid, fresh, and supple, this wine has a magnificent core of soft, profoundly aromatic fruit in which those same notes of orange and jasmine are extravagantly present. It's not deep or weighty; it doesn't have a lot of palate wealth; the tannins are fine and supple; the acidity is present but unobtrusive. It is, quite simply, an aromatic tour de force. **18**

MO-W: Full fruit. Succulent and rich. Ripe blackberry and maybe a touch of olive and graphite. Delicious. **17**

2008 Mortiers Côteaux du Languedoc Pic St-Loup (14.5% ABV) - 17

ME: More stuffing and core. Lovely fruit expression. **17**

AJ: Dense, saturated red-purple. Earthy, close-textured, gruff, badger-like or wombat-like, this is a (Mourvèdre-rich?) wine with considerable presence and depth. Very much as the aroma suggested, this is a hugely dense, compact, multilayered, rather stewy, and uncompromising wine of great though constrained force. Long, full, satisfying. It has sweet edges on the palate but otherwise does almost nothing to seduce the drinker; yet that vaguely disturbing aromatic profile that it has is so uncompromising and challenging that you keep going back to the glass again and again. A challenge, but very rewarding. **15.5**

MO-W: Fab fruit, delicious, rich, and sappy. Complete. **19**

**2008 Mas Amiel Carerades Côte du Roussillon Villages (Gr/Sy/Car) (15% ABV) - 16.5**

ME: Ripe black fruits, predominating aromas; fine balanced mouthfeel, harmonious balance of fruit, acidity, high quality of pure fruit, especially; well-integrated elegant tannins. *Vin fin.* **17**

AJ: Saturated black-purple. Expansive, open, lots of charm here, with vivacity and richness of blackcurrant fruit and a herbal sweetness too. Poised, pure, and long. A very winning aromatic spectrum. Sweet, soft, almost disarmingly drinkable, yet there's also aromatic power and persistence behind the wine, driving it through the palate toward a lingering finish. Lots of red and black fruit balanced by tannins that seem deliciously saturated in the licorice-root and juniper-root austerities of the place; soft but supportive acidity. Great overall harmony. **16**

MO-W: Lovely fruit on the nose. Sweet, a little jammy, but good jam of the homemade variety. Damsons, plums with a touch of spice. Succulent, full, but quite refreshing. I like it. Sausages and mash. Finishes a little short, but no matter. **16**

2007 Mas Belles Eaux Les Côteaux Languedoc (14% ABV) - 16.5

ME: Deep, natural, not overextracted color; creamy black-fruit aromas, attractive and friendly; mid-weight, generous, non-blockbuster palate, gentle but satisfying. Excellent balance. **17**

AJ: Saturated black-purple. Sweet, warm, rather clayey, and inchoate, yet promisingly ripe. Lush, full, rich, ample, supremely soft-contoured, and gentle: a kind of yak of a wine, covered in shaggy fruit and draped in very soft tannins, with little palpable acid presence. The fruit core is present, though not briskly or precisely defined. It's so passive in terms of its articulation (thanks to ultra-low acidity) that it might be easy to dismiss, yet there is much here to enjoy, and it has a clear sense of place to it... A warm site in the sun. Delicious. **15**

MO-W: Delicious. Restrained, slightly Protestant style. Fruity, clean, intriguing, and long. I like it. Finish has some sweetness. **17**

2007 Les Trois Marie Côtes du Roussillon Villages - 16.5

ME: Deep opaque color; hint of mint/eucalyptus *au nez*; approachable fruity mouthfeel, with some tannin; straightforward but good. **16**

AJ: Another absolutely saturated black-

purple color here, with dense, color-stained streaks on the glass after you've swirled. Very ripe fruit and some evident oak aging here: warm, complex, resinous; the monastery library in high summer. Lush, full, slightly sweeter in style than the aromatic profile suggested, with armfuls, bagfuls, sackfuls of lush, warm, super-ripe fruit coaxed into shape more by stony tannins than by any palpable acid presence. We are at the extreme limits of ripeness, yet there is nothing in this wine that suggests dangerous evolutionary paths ahead, and right now it is irresistibly exuberant, warm, full of the pine forest and the sunlit hill. Lovely stuff. Perhaps more concentration than any other wine in this tasting, and magnificent textures, too. **18**

MO-W: Plenty of brambly fruit here. Some richness, plenty of middle with some sweetness too. Not complex but well made. Finish a little dry. Drink young. **15**

**2008 Le Clos des Fées Hervé Bizeul Côtes du Roussillon Villages (15% ABV) - 16**

ME: Aromatic, attractive, damson plum nose: sprightly palate, light-framed, direct, focused, straightforward, pure. **16**

AJ: Saturated black-purple. Pencilly, oak, but not exaggeratedly so, with bright firm fruits. This has an aromatic firmness and thrust to it, an uprightness—in some ways, a more Atlantic than Mediterranean aromatic profile. On the palate, it does seem truer to its place: That diagnostic softness of palate statement and tannic finesse are a contrast to the brisker, more ruffled tannins of the southwest. The fruit core is still a firm one, though, with attractively sweet edges and impressive concentration; a very long finish here. The deliciously natural balance gives the wine fine drinking qualities. **16**

MO-W: Good bright colors. Spicy and quite complex. Full flavor, rich and savory. Still firm and could do with another few months. Long finish. Pretty good **15.5**

2007 Mas Des Dames La Diva Vin de Pays des Côteaux de Murviel (Syr/Gr/Alicante) (13.5% ABV) - 16

ME: Slightly funky but promising nose. One senses that maybe, just maybe, one tastes the stems of the grapes. Character it doesn't lack. *À suivre.* **16**

AJ: Saturated black-purple. Fascinating aromatic profile: the only wine in this tasting to smell not of the ubiquitous thyme,

MARCEL ORFORD-WILLIAMS' VERDICT

This was generally a good tasting, showing some of the best sides of this amazing and complicated region.

Yes, there were weaknesses, such as a tendency to dryness and high alcohol, but the south of France is not the Loire, and the wines are indeed generous and full-bodied.

The Languedoc needs explaining, for there are innumerable styles and

approaches to winemaking there. Wines of comparative simplicity sit side by side with wines that have more ambition, and all are equally valid. Maybe the best way to explain the Languedoc is through food, and in my experience, these are wines that, more often than not, truly reveal themselves when in the right context and with food—and not just cassoulet!

Top wines

2008 Mortiers Côteaux du Languedoc Pic St-Loup 19
2007 Domaine Léon Barral Jadis Faugères 18.5
2003 Domaine Peyre Rose Clos des Cistes Côteaux du Languedoc 18
2008 La Pèira en Damaisèla Les Obriers de la Pèira Terrasses du Larzac Côteaux du Languedoc 17.5
2007 Domaine de Montcalmès Côteaux du Languedoc 17.5

2006 Léon Barral Valinière Vin de Table Français 17
2007 Mas Belles Eaux Les Côteaux Languedoc 17
2007 Mas Des Dames La Diva Vin de Pays des Côteaux de Murviel 17
2008 Domaine de l'Hortus Grande Cuvée Pic St Loup 17
2008 Domaine Matassa Vin de Pays des Côtes Catalanes 17
2007 Domaine L'Oustal Blanc Giocoso Minervois 17

rosemary, and cade of the *garrigue* but of basil. I'm at a loss to know what to attribute this to, but it is in fact a lovely graceful note over the sweet fruits beneath. Very lush, warm, and full, super-soft and gentle, with ultra-low acidity, relying on that singular herbal strain in the aromatic profile, as well as the languid grip of the tannins, for balance. Lots of tannins here, in fact. Unctuous and almost torpid, but the aromatic and flavor profile is intriguing. **14.5**

MO-W: Delicious, generous. Plenty of fruit and simplicity, and finishes well. Fully satisfying. Even better with, say, a little lamb and some gratin dauphinois on the side **17**

2007 La Grange de Quatre Sous Vin de Pays d'Oc (Syr/Cab Fr/Mal/Cab Sau; organic) (14.5% ABV) - 16

ME: Very deep purply color, lots of glycerol, legs on the sides of the glass; intense, luxuriant, black-fruit aromas, a touch of vanilla (oak?); palate-enveloping fruit and very fine, ripe, even roasted tannins. A wine of real presence, without going over the top. **17.5**

AJ: Saturated black-purple. One of the deepest-hued wines in the tasting. Dark, slightly edgy aromas of very ripe fruit. That warm, acid-pointed fruit dominates the softer, more relaxed aromatic possibilities of the place. There's also a sweet savory element to the profile. Some Mourvèdre? It has some of that hamster-like aromatic gruffness (or Gruffalo-ness, for those with children). Intense, deep, dark, close-textured, and rich, with lots of licorice at the

end. Lush and very chewy, by dint of extractive force, as well as of pure tannin textures. This is a very impressive, almost commanding wine, but the sense that the fruit has ended the season in a state of extreme, almost drying ripeness makes me wonder if the varieties here are perfectly adapted to their site. All of that said, I would enjoy drinking this wine of great breadth and texture, despite the very ripe fruits and the super-chewy tannins, and I'm sure the site is very good one. (Soria?) **16.5**

MO-W: Woody nose. Some spice but not much fruit. Decent enough on the palate, but the finish is mean and dry. Needs food to reveal itself **14**

**2008 Hecht & Bannier St Chinian (Syr/Gr/Mour) (13.5% ABV) - 16**

ME: Again, a confit-of-fruits style on the

nose. Quite a lot going on on the palate; needs to work out the right balance. **15.5**

AJ: Saturated black-purple. Hugely seductive, Syrah-led perfumes of billowing floral sweetness, with lots of backing rosemary, thyme, and stone to lend aromatic depth. Few wines anywhere in the world have this level of scented charm: utterly disappointing light after the unrefusable invitation of the aromas, but give it some time in the mouth and you'll find it's soft, darkly ripe, with all of its aromatic charm sustained on the palate. In some ways, on the palate it is almost pure-aroma, too; it definitely doesn't have the texture, fruit drive, and mid-palate weight of some of the warmer zones like La Clape. There's a modest but satisfactory tannic presence, and the soft acidity is perfect. A fascinating wine of huge charm. Pic St Loup, or somewhere else a little higher? Anyway, outstanding wine for anyone who loves aromatic Syrah. **17**

MO-W: Sound, fruity nose. Full, with plenty of flavor. *À point* but could still keep another year or two. Plenty of sweetness, though with a tendency to dryness on finish. Perfectly enjoyable glass. **16**

2007 Domaine L'Oustal Blanc Giocoso Minervois (14% ABV) - 16

ME: Denser than [2007 Mas de Daumas Gassac Cuvée Emile Peynaud], with deeper color, though less expressive. Plenty of substance and stuffing. Retaste in a few months. **16**

AJ: Saturated black-purple. Sweet, warm, lush aromatic profile of evidently ultra-ripe fruit. It's attractive in its own way, but if every season is delivering fruit like this, then it is probably time to think about different varieties that might provide aromatics where the fruit, rather than the ripeness itself, is the main point of interest. Soft, ripe, raisiny yet not monotonous flavors, with ample textural wealth, low acidity, and very toothsome, sweet fruit. Some grippy tannins and a licorice finish. **14.5**

MO-W: Lots of weight here; alcohol, too, I imagine, but this is quite delicious, fruity, sweet, and ripe, and not heavy. Good finish, too. Probably best drunk young on its fruit, but there is plenty of wine here, so it might gain in complexity with another year in bottle. **17**

2008 Domaine Jean-Baptiste Senat Minervois La Nine (13% ABV) - 16

ME: Youthful, purplish ruby; sweet, ripe aromas of hedgerow fruits, blackberry, and even from the mulberry tree, most attractively scented. Fine mouthfeel, generous, *gras*, but also racy, with some tension. Class and style. **17.5**

AJ: Dense, saturated black-red. Sweet, warm, comforting: a thick aromatic blanket of black-cherry fruit. There's a little qualifying cade and pine behind that fruit,

to make a balanced and intriguing aromatic profile. There's a discreet animal note, too. Soft, full, ample, with lots of dark fruit, though the tone of this is a little less buxomly sweet than the aromas suggested. Moderate levels of concentration, with an attractive burned-raisin edge of austerity to lift the palate overall. The tannins are quite dry and not wholly bonded to the fruit. This is nonetheless an immensely satisfying wine packed with Languedoc character, from one of the warmer and more generous sites. There is a stoniness in the finish. **16**

MO-W: Full flavor. Satisfying enough but pinched on the finish. Drink now **14**

2005 Les Bastides d'Alquier Faugères (14.5% ABV) - 15.5

ME: Scented nose, completely different and scented, lovely depth and complexity on palate. **17**

AJ: Dark black-red. Stewy and undifferentiated, after a truly awful first bottle. Lush, full, and sweetly meaty. Full of gentle, broad-shouldered appeal. Textured, ripe, and gratifying, with ample though supple tannins. **13.5**

MO-W: Big and brawny. Cooked fruit, rich, with middle and length. Some freshness, too, and a long finish. Needs food. Dry finish. Second bottle: Full and sweet and much cleaner **16.5**

2008 Belles Pierres Clauzes de Jo Côteaux du Languedoc Rouge (14% ABV) - 15.5

ME: Solid, deep color to rim: confit-of-fruits nose, a touch of oak and smoke; quite forward and oxidative on nose but attractive and giving pleasure now. **16**

AJ: Deep black-red. The kerosene, herbaceous edge to the aroma of this wine suggests this was a challenging season for these varieties in this place. Those notes, though, are the shadow cast over what is sound, sweet, ripe fruit beneath. Good wine: soft, plump, full, rich, rounded, long, and satisfying. Lots of cherry, given enjoyable depth and tenacity by notes of thyme and cade, by an ample but beautifully extracted tannin profile, by discreet natural acidity, and by a qualifying stoniness. Very good, despite the aromatic difficulties. **15**

MO-W: This is good. Personality, presence, good middle palate, loads of fruit, spice, some structure and good balance. Finish is a touch dry. Needs food. Good length. **16**

2009 Fontanel Vin de Pays des Côtes Catalanes (14% ABV) - 15.5

ME: Deep-purple opaque hue; confit, black-fruit aromas. Good acidity, linear and straight mouthfeel, ripe fruit. **15.5**

AJ: Saturated black-purple in color. A refined, sweet weave of red and black fruit, chocolate, cade, aleppo pine. Seamless, alluring, and distinctively Languedocien. Much more aromatic refinement than most,

with a purity that surely comes from low-yielding, gently handled fruit. Lush yet full, with stealthily present tannins and sustained, ripe acidity. Very shapely and poised in the mouth. Those elderberry-bramble fruits have impressive complexity. Masterful, beguiling wine that is both intimately of its place and fine by any international standard. You wouldn't want it any sweeter than this, but it's on a very beautiful cusp. **17.5**

MO-W: Nice deep color. Lovely nose. Sweet, ripe fruit. Full. Ripe blackberry, clean and well made. No great complexity. Alcohol a bit high but not unbalanced. Drink young. **14**



2008 Domaine Gardiès La Torre Côtes du Roussillon Villages (14% ABV) - 15.5

ME: Cooked black fruit, a touch acidulous on the nose; quite forward, attractively oxidative, quite expressive fruit, with straightforward, decent length. **15.5**

AJ: Deep purple-black. Very sweetly fruity—almost crystallized blackcurrants. Round, pool-like: a magnetic vortex of aroma, drawing you in. It's perhaps a little too sweet for complexity, though very attractive. Here, too, there is a smooth yet intense core of very ripe, blackcurranty fruit backed by tannins and a kind of grainy warmth. The aromatic sweetness is sustained on the palate, though the flavors of tannin qualify and redeem that sweetness. It's shapely, with gentle natural acidity to lift the fruit. Not the most complex, allusive, or Languedocien of the wines on show and some might find the sweetness a little overdone, but this still strikes me as a very delicious wine. **15.5**

MO-W: Some maturity here. Full and rich. Lots of spice, even pepper; some fruit, too. Mulled wine. Good length but tending to dryness. Needs food. **15**

2007 Mas Jullien Côteaux du Languedoc (13.5% ABV) - 15.5

ME: Generous deep-ruby hue; an attention-catching nose, violets over a nervy energetic streak of acidity; palate confirms: *nervosité*, tension, dash. I like this. Finesse in the Midi. **17**

AJ: Dark black-red. The aromatic profile here is warm though slightly resinous, without a great deal of depth or subtlety.

Soft, lush, full, rich, expressive, tannin-clad; from an evidently warm site. Satisfying, reassuring, and heady wine whose blackberry and ripe damson fruits almost seem to have a brandied warmth to them. This is another wine with very low acid levels, yet it is cleanly made, and the black fruits are agreeably qualified by the graphite flavors and textural suede of the tannin profile. **15**

MO-W: Good fruit; quite sweet. A bit dry on the finish but perfectly enjoyable. Needs food. **15**

2008 Domaine Matassa Vin de Pays des Côtes Catalanes (13% ABV) - 15.5

ME: Striking, deep, sustained purple-ruby to rim; you sense the warmth of the harvested grapes on the nose. Still youthful and angular mouthfeel but good acidity, spine, and potential to age. **16.5**

AJ: Saturated black-purple. A touch of fire and brimstone here. This doesn't have the aromatic purity, charm, and lift of the best. The fruit presence here has a very different register to most of the wines in this tasting—lots of Carignan? But the fruit is concentrated and assertive, with fat-cutting acidity; little tannin and little mid-palate weight. It might have a story to tell, but its personality is not particularly beguiling or seductive. **12.5**

MO-W: Dry style. Plenty of freshness and some attractive crunchy fruit without makeup. Very good length, with enough sap to do justice to some duck. Delicious. **17**



2008 M Chapoutier Domaine de Bila-Haut Occultum Lapidem Côtes du Roussillon Villages Latour de France (Syr/Gr/Car) (14.5% ABV) - 15

ME: A pure vivid expression of blackberry fruit on nose and palate; ripe tannins, *gras*; round without heaviness. **16**

AJ: Dark black-red. Earthy, stewy aromas, with some stock-cube meaty saltiness; little evident fresh fruit. Moderate concentration and modest expression of mid-weight, mid-ripe fruit. Attractive finishing weight and some licorice complexities. It is present and correct but doesn't quite have the seductive qualities and sense of engaging excess of the best. Satisfying and drinkable wine made from evidently low yields, though, and of its place. **13.5**

MO-W: Simple but quite enjoyable. At its best now and beginning to go dry. Nice spicy flavors, with still plenty of sweetness. **15**



2007 Mas de Daumas Gassac Cuvée Emile Peynaud Vin de Pays de l'Hérault (Cabernet Sauvignon) (13% ABV) - 15

ME: Purplish ruby gradating to maturing rim; ripe plum-prune aromas, with even a hint of fig; gently evolving mouthfeel, plum-prune, aerated fruit from a good barrel; opening up and expressive. Jolly good. **16.5**

AJ: Saturated red-ochre-purple. Intriguingly rich and extrovert aromas of the smoked ham in the chimney breast and the basil pot on the table. Characterful more than classic. Rather dry and high-toned on the palate, without any freshness or purity of fruit and with little middle-palate width or depth. **11.5**

MO-W: Lovely herby fruit, dry but refreshing and not hollow. Good food-friendly style. Sappy and appetizing **16.5**

2002 Domaine de la Garance Les Armières Vin de Pays de l'Hérault (13.5% ABV) - 15

ME: Broader, more largeness but less fine than [2007 Domaine le Soula Vin de Pays des Côtes Catalanes]; very good, all the same... **16.5**

AJ: Saturated black-red. Sweet, grainy, herbal: basil and semolina. Soft, open, all its elements slowly sliding apart: drink now. Lots of tannin remains, and that catches in the throat rather, but there is no central palate wealth anymore, and I get the sense that this wine would have been better a few years earlier. **12**

MO-W: This is lovely, too, but on the dry side. There is complexity and maturity, and it will still keep, but food is essential in order for this to be allowed to come through. **16**

2006 Domaine de la Grange des Pères Vin de Pays de l'Hérault (14% ABV) - 15

ME: Yet again, a minty/eucalyptus scent, almost New World; lovely poised fruit on the palate: very elegant and fine. Some stem character here, but I like its positive nature. **17**

AJ: Dark black-red. Another wine with those rather kerosene-like, herbal aromas of imperfect ripeness. Soft, supple, full, this graceful wine retains some fresh fruit and has freshness and poise. The finishing tannins are licorice and sustained, and the soft acidity is supportive. There is, though, little precision or nobility to it. **13**

MO-W: A late arrival but worth the wait. Full fruit, some richness. Mean finish, almost austere, yet with some sweetness. Drink now. **14.5**

2008 Metairies du Clos Vieilles Vignes Pic St Loup (14% ABV) - 15

ME: Solid deep color to rim. Interesting extracted aromas: fine black fruit and a note of dozing vinosity; fine complete mouthfeel of fruit, ripe tannins, and latent complexities. Real sense of elegant harmony, balance, *gras* generosity, and length. **17**

AJ: Saturated black-purple. Warm but a little feral. Lively, rounded, warm, with plenty of herbal complexities, more prominent acidity than many, and some brisk tannins. Satisfactory but unambitious compared to the aromatic complexities and mid-palate wealth of the best. Tasty though relatively simple wine. **13.5**

MO-W: Attractive and fruity. Vibrant and sweet, with tangy freshness. No great complexity but perfectly enjoyable. Drink young and on the cool side. **14**

2008 La Pèira en Damaisèla Les Obriers de la Pèira Terrasses du Larzac Côteaux du Languedoc (14.5% ABV) - 15

ME: Confit black-fruit nose, slightly diffuse; mid-weight cooked brambly fruit; average length. Respectable rather than fine. **15**

AJ: Deep red-black. Warm, round, affable, slightly sweaty—needs air. More finesse required, too. Soft, full, with a core of dark earthy fruits, though there is also a slightly green note of mixed ripeness in here, too, and moderate concentration. **13**

MO-W: Funky nose. Carignan? Splendid fruit, rich, savory, sappy, with both weight and freshness. Genuine taste of the Languedoc here. Where is the cassoulet? **17.5**

2004 Mas Champart Clos de la Simonette St Chinian (14.5% ABV) - 14.5

ME: Firm, fine wine. Sleeping now, but it will open up with food. **17**

AJ: Dark black-red. Sweet, round, warm,

soft-contoured, yet now relatively inarticulate. Soft, mellow, open, but gently dissolving in the autumn breeze. Harmonious, close-textured, engaging, yet any sense of primary fragrance and youthful vivacity has now gone. It has a slightly salty dryness to it, and I am convinced that the slight increment in harmony truly compensates. In other words, I think this good wine would probably have been a little better when it was younger. **13**

MO-W: Very full and brawny. Dry and rather subdued by some aggressive oak, or so it seems. Finishes dry and a little hollow. Drink now. **14**

2007 St Daumary Belladonna Pic St Loup (14% ABV) - 14.5

ME: Deep-purple color, with black touches; marked intensity of black-fruit aromas but natural to the wine and not overextracted—in a winemaking sense. Fine, intense mouthfeel; rich but with a classic austerity and promise of complexities to come. Very fine. **17**

AJ: Dark, saturated black-red. The Languedoc is characterful at all times, and this is another wine with a singular aromatic profile: cistus, dental gas, wheat-beer yeastiness, crushed lemon verbena leaves. Strange but oddly alluring in its own way... Soft, lush, full, tangy but rather dry, overly licorice fruit at the end. This lacks any sense of freshness or precision, though it's amply if dangerously characterful. **10.5**

MO-W: Full flavor. Tannic. Lots here, but it's not quite hanging together. Finish is hard and dry. Desperately needs food. Intriguing, though, and not without complexity. **16**

2008 Mas Jullien Terrasses du Larzac Languedoc (13.5% ABV) - 14.5

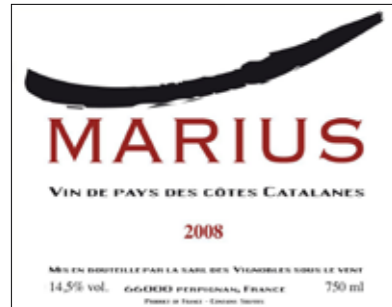
ME: Sustained, solid color to rim; pure black fruit, with an edge of underpinning acids, especially tannins (nose). A well-structured wine with broad shoulders that will develop with aging. **16.5**

AJ: Dark black-red. Aromatically, this seems at first slightly muddled, slightly stewy, without much purity and refinement, though with a number of different contributory strands: bacon, stones, sweet raisiny fruits, late summer flowers. With time in the glass, though, it acquires refinement and poise. Firm, full, long, warm, concentrated, tannin-backed, searching, faintly austere toward the finish: a finely crafted wine, with a well-developed sense of place to it. I love that

“Interesting extracted aromas: fine black fruit and a note of dozing vinosity; fine complete mouthfeel of fruit. Real sense of elegant harmony, balance, *gras* generosity, and length”—Michael Edwards on 2008 Metairies du Clos Vieilles Vignes Pic St Loup

finishing austerity, so full of the flavors of roots and woody spices. Unshowy but pure, true, and impressive. **16**

MO-W: Lean, tetchy nose. Bit pinched. Lean and dry on the palate. Dry finish and lacking charm. **10.5**



2008 Marius Vin de Pays des Côtes Catalanes (14.5% ABV) - 14.5

ME: Deep purple-ruby to rim; distinctive aromas of mint? Eucalyptus? Pine? Or is it *garrigue*...? Substance yet poise on the palate, good tannins, has appealing roundness and upright strength. **16.5**

AJ: Saturated black-red. A very resinous, menthol nose, with a rooty aromatic darkness behind but no obvious fruit notes. Arresting but monothematic. Concentrated, dark, and earthy—very earthy, almost as if it had been shaken through a spadeful of soil prior to bottling; a little haunting menthol behind. It's impressively concentrated. Well-made wine, but I get the sense that this is either a very challenging site or the variety may not be the perfect choice for this place. It doesn't have the expansive charm of the best, and while no one wants merely fruity wine from the Languedoc, some sense of fruit should be a part of any younger wine's appeal. **14**

MO-W: Much of the farmyard on the nose, with some horsey leather to boot. Not bad flavor; some sweetness, spice, and a dry finish. Needs drinking. **13.5**

2007 Roc d'Anglade Vin de Pays du Gard (13.5% ABV) - 14.5

ME: Very fine juicy black-fruit aromas, yet vinous. Sprightly palate, close to sense of harvest but with lots of vinosity. **17**

AJ: Dark black-red. Sweet, warm, but rather feral. Soft, lush, full, gently pleasing but without any refinement, concentration, or precision. **10.5**

MO-W: Lovely fruit. Sweet, with some tannin;

good middle, with some dryness on finish. Delicious but needs food (again!). **16.5**



2008 Agly Brothers Côte du Roussillon (14.5% ABV) - 14

ME: Balanced, generous, harmonious nose; mouthfeel shows fine balance of sweet ripe fruit, elegant tannins. Some style here from light-touch winemaking. **16.5**

AJ: Dark black-red. Fresh fruit notes (more red than black), with a slight kerosene warmth to them. Open, artless, generous. Soft, lush, vivacious, and fresh. That kerosene hint on the nose now seems more resinous—the sun in the pine trees. This is very soft and gently extracted, and the fruits are very ripe, dark, and fading toward herbal notes and licorice-root warmth at the end. This is a graceful and articulate wine that almost merits an outstanding score and would do so with a little more aromatic refinement, mid-palate weight, and fruit density. Very Languedoc nonetheless. **16**

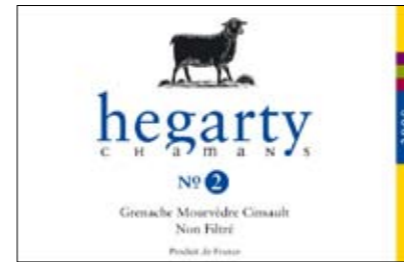
MO-W: Dull looking. Spicy nose but totally clean. Taste is better, but there is a lack of fruit, and the finish is dry. No real pleasure here. **10**

2006 Léon Barral Valinière Vin de Table Français (14% ABV) - 14

ME: Deep, striking intense color; a seamless integration of mint, eucalyptus, and something more grown-up on the nose; fine acidity, fine tannins; needs food, but excellent. **17.5**

AJ: Saturated dark black-red. Softly sweet, gently herbal licorice, celery; attractive, but muddled and fading now, losing its precision. Hard and empty; dismal wine, alas, with a bitter-acid edge at the finish. **7**

MO-W: Fabulous fruit. On the ball. Fruity, structured, balanced, and long. Delicious. **17**



2008 Hegarty Chamans No.2 Minervois (Gr/Mour/Cin) (14.5% ABV) - 14

ME: Up-front brambly fruit; pleasurable and straightforward. **15.5**

AJ: Deep black-red in color. Full, warm, meaty sweet, this is another of those wines where one has a sense of an aromatic compost rather than aromas of precise, fine-drawn focus. Generally attractive, nonetheless. Soft, quite light, and with some sweet fruit presence and ample supporting tannins. Toothsome. **12.5**

MO-W: Touch of volatility on the nose. Very ripe and sweet. Full and rich. Finishes dry. Drink now. **13.5**

2007 Domaine de Montcalmès Côteaux du Languedoc (14% ABV) - 14

ME: Almost a touch of tar and tobacco on the nose—oak or terroir? Good sinewy structure. A keeper. **16**

AJ: Deep black-red. A little dry and stringy now. If this wine has reached this stage already, there is not a lot ahead for it. Soft, light, and forgettable. This is a wine that has lost all freshness and never had much mid-palate wealth or depth. **9**

MO-W: Again, sweet and delicious, with some fat, middle, and length. Noticeable alcohol, too, so you might need a nap afterward, but very enjoyable. **17.5**

2003 Domaine Peyre Rose Clos des Cistes Côteaux du Languedoc (14.5% ABV) - 14

ME: Purple-black intensity. Minty, eucalyptus character is beguilingly asserting itself again. Black-fruit intensity on palate—any Cabernet Sauvignon? Very fine. **17**

AJ: Saturated black-red, though without any brightness of hue now. Quiet aromas of the terminus: soft, gentle fruit out of which the acidity is beginning to prickle. Tired and astringent, lacking any element of fruit, lift, or poise. I'm afraid this wine needs a complete rethink. **7**

MO-W: Lovely fruit here. Complex and long. Well nigh perfect and *à point*. There is some dryness but this is screaming for food. Lovely and complete. **18**

2008 Gérard Bertrand La Forge Corbières Boutenac (14.5% ABV) - 13.5

ME: Stewed, brambly fruits on the nose, in a good way, such as you'd find in a blackberry-and-apple crumble; palate confirms with a good edge of acidity; mid-weight. **16**

AJ: Dark, saturated black-red. Slightly strange yet intriguing aromas of sherbety fruits and sweet herbs; there's almost a rotten-ripe sheen to the black fruits. Juniper and cade behind. It might well have just too much personality for some, but I like this, and it could hardly come from anywhere but Languedoc. Very sweet and ripe on the palate, super-soft, with acidity levels almost subterraneanly low; this is a gratifyingly dangerous wine that would be best consumed soon. Fortunately, its opulence means that this wouldn't be difficult. Lush, almost deliquescent black cherry and blackberry; resinous whispers; soft tannins; some alcoholic warmth; an almost total lack of finishing austerity. Kinky but intriguing. **15**

MO-W: Prune jam. Hollow and dry. Alcoholic, too. **10**

2006 Matassa Cuvée Romanissa Vin de Pays des Côtes Catalanes (Gr/Car/Mour/CS) (13.5% ABV) - 13.5

ME: Agreeable touch of brûlée fruit on the

nose; fresh on palate; linear definition. **16**

AJ: Dark black-red. Warm, sweet, round, and earthy, but rather generalized now, with any evident aromatic focus lost. Soft, tangy, rather featureless red wine, with a southern French cast but no obvious qualitative interest. Hard tannins. **8**

MO-W: Pretty good. This is fruity, with quite complex flavors. Ripe, sweet, and quite ready. Finishes sweet and long. Some finesse here, though finish is dry. **16.5**

2007 Domaine le Soula Vin de Pays des Côtes Catalanes (13% ABV) - 13.5

ME: Very good, even ripe color: solid, constant nose of red/black fruit, very healthy and deep. Sleeping a little on the palate but with plenty of latent, potentially rich, and durable flavors. **16.5**

AJ: Saturated black-red. Lifted and warm: a compost of herbs, with some further furry feral intrigue for those who like that kind of thing. This is, in fact, one of the lightest wines in the tasting in terms of its concentration and depth of fruit, which, combined with the dangerous aromatics and recessive tannins, makes it relatively disappointing. **10.5**

MO-W: Somewhat raw. Good middle and fruit, but finish is dry and a little lean. Needs food. **14**

MICHAEL EDWARDS'S VERDICT

I don't have the opportunity as often as I'd like to taste the wines of Languedoc-Roussillon. This was one of the most enjoyable tastings I can remember, a vivid illustration of how much good and sometimes great wine there is now, in what we used to call the Midi—the word in wine terms bringing back grisly memories nearly half a century ago of head-thumping rouges in Relais-Routiers cafés en route from Béziers to Bordeaux. The wines in this lineup often needed food, but what vivid character, generous fruit expression, and agile use of oak across the board. My scores tell the story: not one, I think, under **15** and a brilliant streak in the middle of the tastings of ten exceptional wines at **17/17.5**.

My experience of the area is not extensive, but it's a happy one. I was delighted that my favorite appellations (if such they are) shone: fine expressions of some remarkable terroirs, especially Faugères, St Chinian, Minervois, and Pic St Loup. I was particular pleased that my favorite red of the Hérault, Domaine de la Grange des Pères, was right up there: lovely poised fruit expression and an elegance and finesse rarely matched by its neighbors. Very regularly in this tasting, my notes recorded mint and eucalyptus scents, reminding me of the Hemel-en-Aarde Valley above Hermanus in the Cape. Or are they just two of the beguiling smells of the *garrigue*?

Top wines

2006 Léon Barral Valinière Vin de Table Français **17.5**
 2008 Domaine Jean-Baptiste Senat Minervois La Nine **17.5**
 2007 La Grange de Quatre Sous VdeP d'Oc **17.5**
 2008 Mas Amiel Carerades Côte du Roussillon Villages **17**
 2005 Les Bastides d'Alquier Faugères **17**
 2007 Mas Belles Eaux Les Côteaux Languedoc **17**

2004 Mas Champart Clos de la Simonette St Chinian **17**
 2007 St Daumary Belladonna Pic St. Loup **14% 17**
 2006 Domaine de la Grange des Pères Vin de Pays de l'Hérault **14% 17**
 2007 Mas Jullien Côteaux du Languedoc **13.5% 17**
 2008 Metairies du Clos Vieilles Vignes Pic St Loup **17**
 2008 Mortiers Côteaux du Languedoc Pic St-Loup **17**

2008 Domaine La Tour Vieille La Pinède Collioure (14.5% ABV) - 13.5

ME: Intriguing color: positive with a brilliant shimmer; some limpity—not overextracted. Sweet, elegant aromas of fine-drawn red fruits; quite sprightly, even, lightweight palate, but the impression of elegant, easy refinement is refreshing. Pleasure. **16**

AJ: Deep, clear red-black. Reduced and lacking in aromatic lift and finesse. Soft, relatively light, with very warm fruit that lacks the inner poise of the very best. Smooth, warm, with a central-palate tang and some finishing herbal austerity to provide interest. Not an ambitious wine, though. **12**

MO-W: Not a lot of depth on color. Some maturity. Spice. Not wholly clean. Tetchy, tannic, and dry. Needs drinking. **12**

The following two wines arrived after the main tasting but were tasted blind by Andrew Jefford shortly afterward.



2008 Château d'Aussières Corbières - 16

AJ: Deep, glowing black-red, though not opaque. Sweet-scented red fruit, crushed thyme, animal fur: an attractive, harmonious, and enticing aromatic profile. Warm, full ripeness without being hot, top-heavy, or ungainly. On the palate, this is smooth, svelte, deep, and long. Fine depth and concentration of herb- and olive-infused red fruits and a soft and supple tannin profile. Modulates in the mouth toward something a little drier and leaner, with a subtle cleansing bitterness and sense of flavor-related (rather than textural) grip. Polished, harmonious, and graceful red wine. **16**

2007 Château d'Aussières Corbières - 15

AJ: Deep, dark black-red in color. Full, ripe, savory scents of calfskin, autumn leaf, and dried flowers. Gracefully expressed yet very Languedocien, too. Smooth, soft, full, and harmonious, this is a supple, seamless wine with a flavor weave that includes flavors of thyme, tapenade, and air-dried meat. Not hugely fleshy (some age here?) and in a year or two it will be drier still, but it's very lithe and digestible just now. Delicate acidity points up its edges to finish, and as with nearly every wine in this tasting, there is a refreshing herb-related bitterness in the aftertaste. **15**

“This is a graceful and articulate wine that almost merits an outstanding score and would do so with a little more aromatic refinement, mid-palate weight, and fruit density. Very Languedoc nonetheless”— Marcel Orford-Williams on 2008 Agly Brothers Côte du Roussillon