

A region on the move: Languedoc wines offer the best added value!

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What an extraordinary synergy between *Tourism and Wine*: do you want to travel on the path “Heritage of wine in Languedoc” passing through L’Abbaye de Fontcaude, Saint-Chinian, Cruzy, Quarante and Capestang...or do you prefer “The Heritage of Schist soils”? Both routes are around 40 – 45 km, with suggestions of sites to visit, places to taste wines and where to eat (and I do not mean the Michelin Star restaurants in the area).



Vine in schist soil

Imagine that this is only a tiny insight into the bigger area of the Herault Tourism Board, which again belongs to the bigger region of Languedoc, which stretches from Corbières in the south (bordering on Spain) to the west of the Rhône valley.

If you are a serious wine lover, then you would know about the newer appellations in the Languedoc vineyard area like La Clape (vineyards on the massif near Narbonne), Picpoul de Pinet (vineyards near the oyster beds of the lagoons) and Terrasses du Larzac (higher vineyards in northern area), but for now let’s look at the bigger picture.

Languedoc belongs to the bigger South-of-France region, has an area of about 245 965 ha under vine, and 22 000 estates (Bordeaux in comparison: approximately 112 000 ha and 6800 producers) producing some 1.8 billion (!) bottles a year (according to the Decanter Languedoc Guide 2016). It still supplies a quarter of the French wines shipped abroad. The President of the Languedoc Wine Trade Board, Xavier de Volontat, explains that there has been a non-stop growth over the past five years. Especially in the last two years, Languedoc wines have taken up shelf-space in supermarkets (in volume and in value), been recommended in stores and are included on restaurant wine lists. This success is due to the growth of Rosé wines (again in volume and value), but the biggest success is that Languedoc-Roussillon wines have made their mark abroad. This region is also the leading producer of organic wines (some 22 000 ha). It is growing at 7% a year and is bigger in volume than the wine production of countries like Chile, Australia, Argentina or even South Africa.



Organic bush vine

It is said that the AOPs of Languedoc-Roussillon are the “second most popular French appellation wines in China and Germany”.

Most interesting is the following:

Most wines are PGI (protected geographical indication) wines (136 000ha), but the production of AOP wines is superior in volume to all the wine of Burgundy and Beaujolais put together. 70 000 ha in Languedoc are AOP wines. The PGI wines are divided into a number of denominations, generally catering for varietal wines eg. Pays d’Oc (France’s most exported wines), followed by departmental or local PGIs eg. PGI Cévennes, which bring into focus terroirs or heritage sites (like mentioned above). Basically the classification pyramid base is AOP Languedoc (with Coteaux du Languedoc being phased out by 2017), then sub-regional appellations (or Grand Vins du Languedoc) and the pinnacle being the 6 current Crus (Corbières-Boutenac, Faugères, Minervois La Livinière, St-Chinian Berlou, St-Chinian Roquebrun and La Clape).

The ambition of the Wine Board is to create a new PGI “Terres du Midi” denomination, which brings together the Aude, Hérault, and Gard departments and forms a blended PGI of approx. 1.3 million hectolitres. The merit would be to establish a strong blended wine brand, and develop export markets. “Terres du Midi” would fall between the Pays d’Oc and Vin de France denomination. On top of creating new and bigger denominations, the Wine Trade Board wants to use a premiumisation strategy to raise the quality and prices of the wines.

Let us focus on wineries/vineyards of the Pays Haut Languedoc: this Tourism Board has a touristic calendar over summer from June to October, eg Mas d’Albo and Vignerons Independent. In Roquebrun/Ceps they offer “walking tours across the vineyards” followed by a wine tasting (for those who do not want to drink, there is coffee and cake). Other wineries have live music, wine-and-cheese tastings, honey-and-fruit tasting and snacks typical of the area (gourmandise locales). The Wines of Mas d’Albo winery are wines not only from the AOP St-Chinian, but also wines of Coteaux du Languedoc and Pays d’Oc. These wines make excellent appealing partners with typical foods from the region.

Two worthwhile sites to explore: Roquebrun in St.-Chinian is a town in the lower mountain area of the Upper Languedoc Regional Nature Park. The Roquebrun castle was first mentioned in 1036, belonging to a family of the Viscounts of Beziers. Roquebrun is known as the “Nice of Hérault” and enjoys a micro-climate with citrus and exotic plants growing on open terrain. Indeed, it is a Mediterranean climate and with abundant water, great for the vine.

The commune includes several hamlets which once lived off their terraced crops (chick peas, lentils, vines). In the 19th century wine/vine-growing started. In 1907 there was a viticultural crisis and the town council resigned. Today Roquebrun boasts outstanding vineyards of the great renowned AOP St-Chinian Roquebrun.



View from Roquebrun

An exceptional site is Chateau-Abbaye de Cassan, between Gabian and Roujan, a sumptuous abbey of the 18th Century, amidst vines and olive groves. This is a royal Priory with castle, Romanesque church and hospital, a “little Versailles of the Languedoc”.

What about the “Heritage of Schist Soils” tour? Best again is to focus on one village, and one winemaker:

Faugères is a village in the Parc Naturel Regional du Haut-Languedoc, and right on top of the most dominant hill, 417m high. There is a place called “les trois tours” and these are mills which were in use till the 16th century.



Dry-stone hut in the vineyards of Faugères

AOP Faugères includes seven villages: Autignac, Cabrerolles, Caussiniojols, Faugères, Fos, Laurens and Roquessels with viticulture being the main part of the economy and identity. Faugères is the oldest AOC of Languedoc (since 1982) and 30% of its vineyards are organic/biodynamic. The character of the wines of Faugères is that of its terroir - a schist plateau. "These 300 million year old geological formations (Carboniferous) resulting from the compression of clays from the Hercynian chain, presented here in layered sheets through which roots slip, drawing moisture from deep down. In Faugères they say that the grapes ripen at night." Schist soil stocks heat during the day and releases it at night. The vineyards are located on steep slopes, generally south-facing. In the vineyards you will find dry-stone huts called capitelles or carabelles, an ancestral way of building (Pierres sèches). The soils are thin, permeable, acidic and poor in organic matter. Rainfall is low and scarce in summer. Biodiversity and a microclimate make this area special. A Mediterranean climate allows organic farming at an altitude of about 200 to 350m, amongst the herbaceous garrigue (aromatic plants like rosemary, thyme, lavender, fennel, majoram etc). Simon of Domaines des Trinités has about 24 hectares here of Grenache Noir, Carignan, Syrah, Mourvèdre as well as Viognier and Roussanne. The wines are either organic or 3 hectares biodynamic; the vines are trained in the traditional Gobelet (especially the old Carignan and some of the old Grenache) as well as the Cordon Royat form. We were spoiled for choice: the Viognier Pays d'Oc showed white blossoms on the nose and finished bone-dry; the Roussanne was textured with pears and fennel on the palate; the Les Mourels 2013 a Rhône blend of Syrah/Mourvèdre/Grenache Noir, and the exquisite Cuvée 42 is a Syrah/Grenache/Mourvèdre blend. Both these reds showed a fruity depth and integrated spice, with great ageing potential. À Votre Santé!



Herbaceous garrigue

