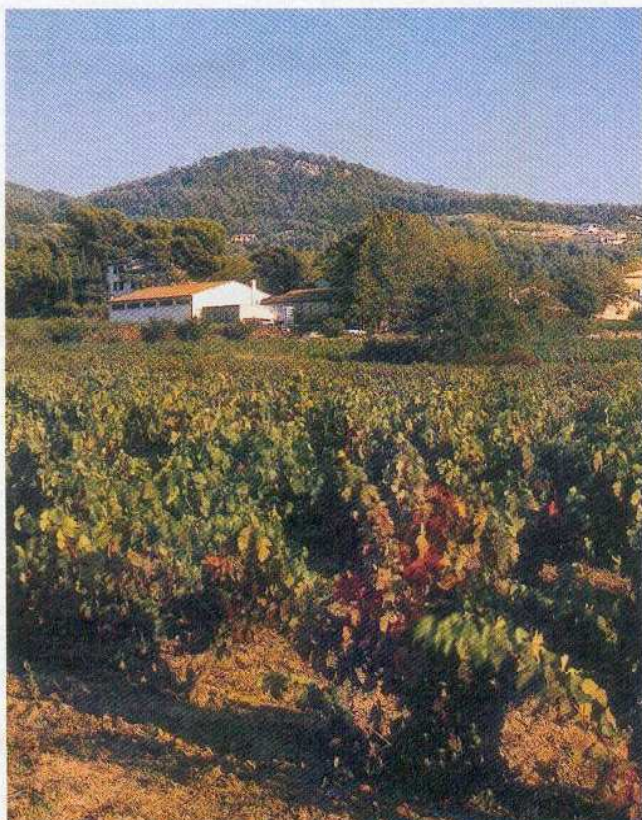


BOLD REDS FROM THE SOUTH OF FRANCE



Above: Domaine Tempier, one of Provence's oldest and best estates, made four outstanding 2001 reds from Bandol, a small district known for its full-bodied Mourvèdres.

Blends based on Syrah or Mourvèdre offer distinctive flavors and plenty of value

BY KIM MARCUS

At their best, the diverse winemaking regions of the south of France can provide deep, richly flavored reds (as well as flavorful rosés and a smattering of whites) that are relative bargains in this world of upward-spiraling wine prices. Even the outstanding wines from France's Mediterranean coast are generally priced at less than \$30 a bottle. Interesting high quality wines can also be found in the \$15 range.

The south has long been overlooked as a quality region, and therein lies the root of its value appeal. There are no official *grands crus* or first-growths and few historic quality-centered estates. Formal quality gradations and coherent appellations are only now taking shape in many districts. These factors reflect the region's status as the frontier of French winemaking. For many in France's younger winemaking generation, this is the only vineyard land that they can afford to purchase or develop in their native country. And as their new wines appear, there are exciting discoveries to be made. The opportunities attract foreigners as well.

On the downside, there are plenty of wines to avoid. Large grower cooperatives that value quantity over quality still dominate too many of the region's vineyards. And given that grapes thrive in the warm Mediterranean sun, insipid wines are all too common.

This report covers all the wines I have blind-tasted over the past year from southern France's two major wine regions: Languedoc-Roussillon and Provence. While each is distinctive, they share a climate marked by hot, dry summers and mild winters, and both have the potential to make truly memorable wines.

Almost all of the outstanding wines (those rated 90 or above on the *Wine Spectator* 100-point scale) are dominated by Mourvèdre, Syrah or blends thereof. Grenache, Carignane and Cinsault are also used. Reds made from international varieties such as Cabernet Sauvignon or Merlot are less consistent in quality, though they can provide solid value (see the list of Best Values, page 83). With their hearty flavors and firm structures, the best reds of southern France are good matches for



Left: Languedoc-Roussillon négociants Gregory Hecht (left) and François Bannier found success in the 2001 vintage; the Hecht & Bannier Coteaux du Languedoc is outstanding. Right: La Livinière, a village in Minervois, recently earned *cru* status for its distinctive, Syrah-based reds and is one of the best districts in the Languedoc.

roasted meats and poultry.

Topping the charts is the Mourvèdre-based Domaine Tempier Bandol Cuvée Spéciale La Migoua 2001 (94 points, \$42), a single-vineyard bottling from one of Provence's most storied estates. Robust and deeply flavored, it features distinctive meaty notes backed up by a muscular structure primed for aging. From the western reaches of the Languedoc comes the highest-scoring Syrah, the Château Maris Syrah Minervois La Livinière Les Vieilles Vignes 2001 (92, \$25). It's a supple wine made in an international style and filled with delicious dark plum and spice flavors.

The south is less well-known for its whites, though interesting blends of two Rhône imports, Marsanne and Roussanne, are appearing with greater frequency. This is also the land of rosé, with the best made from Grenache or Mourvèdre.

Languedoc-Roussillon

From the rugged flanks of the Pyrenees in the south to Nîmes in the east, the vineyards of Languedoc-Roussillon are the biggest in all of France. The best wines are made in the hilly terrain that lies above the coastal plain, in the Coteaux du Languedoc and associated appellations.

One estate in the Coteaux du Languedoc whose wines are worth searching out is Domaine l'Aiguelière. Owner Aime Commeyras founded the estate in the early 1980s when he tired of the lackluster wines the local cooperative produced. Since then he has fashioned

"2001 was a great vintage, just excellent ... If a winegrower doesn't have a good wine in 2001, it's a shame."—GREGORY HECHT, NÉGOCIANT

high quality Syrah-based reds from vineyards surrounding the small village of Montpeyroux, located on a bench at the base of the Cevennes massif.

His best bottling is a 100 percent Syrah called Côte Dorée. The 2000 vintage (91, \$34) is intense and focused, with the dark fruit, pepper and meat flavors that are hallmarks of top Syrahs from the Rhône. An impressive value is the Tradition 2000 (89, \$19), blended with 30 percent Grenache, which gives its plum, iron and mineral flavors plenty of snap.

The Comte Cathare group of wineries is hitting on all cylinders after a long development phase. It was cofounded in 1994 by Robert Eden, now 40, a talented Englishman who has made winemaking his career and who gained valuable experience while working in the cellars of famed Burgundy vintner Dominique Lafon. Eden has used biodynamic techniques to revitalize Comte Cathare's three major estates in the Languedoc: Château Maris, in Minervois; Château de Combe-belle, in St.-Chinian; and Domaine Bégude, in Limoux.

Besides the top-scoring La Livinière old-vine Syrah, Château Maris made two other outstanding wines from the 2001 vintage, Minervois La Livinière 2001 (91, \$20) and the Carignane Minervois

La Livinière Les Vieilles Vignes 2001 (90, \$25). From St.-Chinian comes the Château de Combe-belle 2000 (91, \$18), a blend of Grenache and Syrah. Then there is Domaine Bégude, which made one of the better whites from the south, the Chardonnay Limoux 2001 (88, \$15), a nicely crafted mix of ripe fruit flavors and crisp acidity.

For Eden, the 2001 vintage, which is the one most widely available in the market, was nearly ideal in the Languedoc. A spring frost cut yields, setting the stage for concentrated flavors in the remaining grapes. The effects of a mid-August rainstorm were tempered by dry winds from the northwest that continued through to the harvest. "We could wait for optimal ripeness," Eden explains. "It was a vintage that had concentration and the alcoholic content to provide for some serious aging."

Looking ahead, the 2002 vintage is a mixed bag, according to Eden—rain and humid weather plagued the entire south. Least affected were the western portions of the Languedoc, with Syrah faring a bit better than Grenache and Carignane. As for 2003, the record heat of the summer made for extremely ripe grapes. "[The] 2003s are going to be very New World, with a lot of sweetness. I don't consider it a great year for *terroir*," Eden says.