

Wine Spectator

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Blazing New Trails

New producers are making
their mark in the Languedoc

A pair of young vintners who are taking a different tack is Gregory Hecht, 34, and François Bannier, 35, of Hecht & Bannier, a new label that makes AOC bottlings from throughout Languedoc and Roussillon. They model their firm on the négociant system of Burgundy, buying unfinished wine in bulk and then blending and aging it in their own facilities. While there are other négociant producers in the regions, none concentrate solely on the premium appellations. “The idea is to provide a benchmark for the wine lover—to present a Minervois, a St.-Chinian, a Faugères—so they can taste the expression of the *terroir* and compare one to another,” says Hecht.

During the growing season, the pair travels the length and breadth of both regions, checking out cellars of individual growers and cooperatives to find the best wines. “The quality of the bulk wine is incredible, but we spend a lot of time in the vineyards to make sure the grapes are the best quality,” says Bannier, who helped select wines for the brasserie chain Groupe Flo before moving to the south in 2002.

Last year, Hecht & Bannier got off to a fast start with its outstanding Coteaux du Languedoc from the excellent 2001 vintage. This year, with wines from the problematic '02 vintage, one of the label's best releases is the Minervois (88 points, \$25). A tasting of the 2003s in barrel showed the same or better quality than that of 2001.

Hecht and Bannier also pursue an export-driven market strategy because of lingering French prejudice against the Languedoc, based on memories of the thinly flavored plonk that used to flow from the region. Today, Hecht and Bannier see plenty of opportunities, although they admit there is a lot of work still to be done. “The stage is set for a big quality shift. The [best] comparison to the Languedoc is the Rhône Valley of 25 years ago, but the reputation is hard to move,” Bannier says.

—K.M.