

# Syrah in Shines Southern France

TWO CONTRASTING VINTAGES PROVIDE PLENTY OF FLAVORS  
FROM LANGUEDOC AND ROUSSILLON << **By Kim Marcus** >>

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**T**he southern France regions of Languedoc and Roussillon are slowly establishing themselves as noteworthy producers of distinctive red wines that share much in common with the Syrah-based reds of their big neighbor to the east, the Rhône Valley. Full-bodied and full-flavored, the best wines of Languedoc and Roussillon offer impressive value as well.

The strength of Languedoc and Roussillon rests on rich, well-structured red blends made primarily from Syrah with varying amounts of Grenache, Mourvèdre and old-vine Carignane. They are perfect matches for a wide variety of cuisines. And while high quality whites are still just a small part of the regions' overall production, some are trail-blazing efforts with opulent fruit flavors and seductive spice elements. >>

ripening varieties such as Mourvèdre and Grenache. At Domaine d'Aupilhac, Sylvain Fadat made one of the most powerful and meaty reds in 2003 with his Coteaux du Languedoc Montpeyrour (91, \$19). He did so by increasing the amount of Mourvèdre (32 percent) and old-vine Carignane (28 percent) and decreasing the amount of Syrah (25 percent instead of the normal 40 percent or so). Grenache and Cinsault round out the blend.

"We definitely think that '03 was great for the later-ripening varieties. It was a great vintage for Mourvèdre and Grenache," says Languedoc négociant François Bannier, who, with Hecht & Bannier partner Gregory Hecht, made a top Minervois (90, \$19) and Côtes du Roussillon-Villages (90, \$23) in 2003. Adds Hecht, "The challenge in '03 was the balance," with the Syrah showing jammy flavors, while the Mourvèdre offered softer, riper tannins. "The blend was really key in 2003 and Mourvèdre is very important."

In contrast, Bannier says, 2004 offers more classically flavored and delicately textured wines, with Syrah excelling. "The '04s certainly don't have the vibrant tannic structures that the '03s do, but they are very balanced, fresh and fruity tasting," he says. The Languedoc, like the rest of Europe, experienced a heat wave of epic proportions from mid-July through August in 2003, with very little rain.

While Languedoc and Roussillon rank as two of the hottest regions in France in any year, the difference in 2003 was the intensity of the heat. For almost two weeks in August, the nighttime lows did not fall below 85° F. It was also a drought year. 2004 was cooler, and benefited from brief rains in September that invigorated the vines just before harvest.

"The 2004 vintage was better balanced for me than 2003," says Robert "Bertie" Eden of Château Maris in the Minervois. He made two outstanding wines in 2004 from a top subregion in Minervois called La Livinière, the Syrah-based La Touge (90, \$19) and Syrah Old Vine (90, \$28). "I think the old-vine Syrah in 2004 is really sexy stuff," Eden says.

In Minervois, the 2005 vintage was more problematic, as untimely harvest rains hit hard in mid-September. The weather was quite hot, but not as severe as in 2003, and lack of rainfall during the growing season once again reduced yields. "It's not a good year in terms of economics in 2005," Eden explains, saying that his production was cut almost in half. "There was a lot of stuff I had to turn away, with a lot of slush." Eden notes that grapes coming from his vineyards during this period tasted musty and were affected by rot. "But the grapes that came in earlier were just lovely."

While the Minervois suffered the worst with rain in '05, other vintners outside the district were optimistic about its potential. "I call '05 the miraculous vintage. It was very dangerous at the beginning because it was very dry all season," says Bruno Lafon in the Côtes de Thongue VdP near Pezenas. Lafon credits a north wind after the rains with drying out the grape clusters. That, combined with nighttime temperatures as low as 46° F in late September, allowed the harvest to extend almost six weeks, to the end of October, thus ensuring even ripening. "2005 should have been a disaster, but the rain and the cool nights later saved it," Lafon says.

Bannier echoes Lafon's evaluation. "2005 is very strange. The wines tasted so well so early and they are so ready to drink. There



Hecht & Bannier partners Gregory Hecht (left) and François Bannier released outstanding 2003s from both the Minervois and Côtes du Roussillon-Villages.

are wonderful fruit flavors with an incredible intensity." In mid-May, Bannier said many of his '05s were closing down, and were showing signs of reduction, which means that multiple rackings will be necessary to open them up. "I really wonder if all the wines need to go through a second winter in barrel," Bannier muses, pointing to their delicious up-front flavors.

For now, look to the '03s from Languedoc and Roussillon to offer roasted and meaty flavors, similar to those the wines of Châteauneuf are known for. The '04s are fresher and more fruit-forward, and will appeal to those seeking international flavor profiles, as found in the Syrahs of California and Australia. The '05s look like they could be something special and original, though it is too early to say for sure because many of the best wines are still resting in barrel. But based on my tasting in the region during a visit in mid-April, the early results are promising.

Far from the centers of French power and influence, and with a rebellious streak that still percolates and sometimes erupts to this day, Languedoc and Roussillon offer some of the most off-the-beaten-path *terroirs* in France. Young, ambitious winemakers from throughout France and beyond have been drawn by the potential quality and affordable vineyard land. Many hurdles remain, and too much inferior wine is still made, but the gradual quality transformation underway makes this one of France's most exciting wine regions. Only time will tell if the region's reputation as a whole can improve, or if quality will remain best understood on a case-by-case basis.

Managing editor Kim Marcus is Wine Spectator's lead taster for the wines of southern France.