

FENOUILLEDES IN FINE FETTLE

It's the area of France which is home to arguably the most excitement in terms of progress and new discoveries. It's also one of the least known.

JAMES LAWTHOR MW uncovers a rapidly developing corner of Roussillon

The western Mediterranean rim of France is a fascinating source of characterful wines. The Languedoc led the way in the 1990s with a return to defined terroirs and a string of ambitious domaines, but the staunchly Catalan frontier of Roussillon has since taken up the baton.

'Foreign' investors, often with local growers, are adding new vitality to the region, lured by affordable vineyards, old-vine Carignan and Grenache, the potential to make distinctive wines and the raw beauty of this pre-Pyrenean zone.

Fenouillèdes is a loosely demarcated viticultural zone north-west of Perpignan in the upper Agly valley. It takes in the fortified wine village of Maury as well as the designated Côtes du Roussillon-Villages areas of Caramany, Lesquerde and Latour de France. It rises from valley floor to more than 600m at villages such as St-Martin de Fenouillet and Fosse.

Dominated to the north by the high Corbières with Château de Quéribus clipping the skyline, this is rugged terrain with little but garrigue and bush-trained vines in evidence. The climate is extreme: hot and dry with less than 600mm of rain and the northerly Tramontane gusting up to 150km/hour for much of the year.

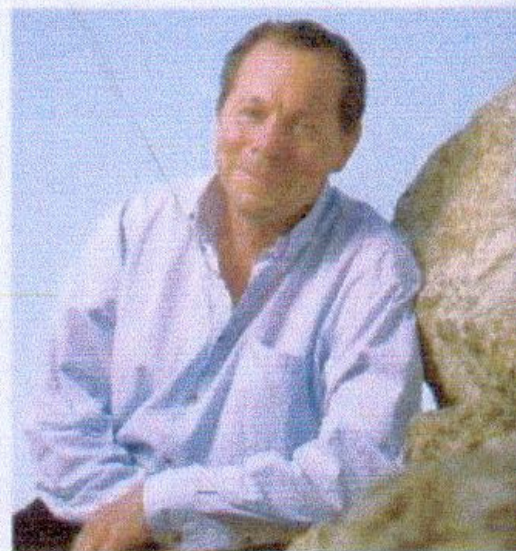
Aided by a mix of poor schist, granite, gneiss and limestone-clay soils, yields are low and sugar high. Maury built its *vin doux naturel* (VDN) reputation on these factors but, with a decline in consumption of this style, growers have been forced to sell vineyards. Elsewhere, the low yields and difficulty of working hill sites or finding manual labour has again resulted in a lack of market competition; vineyards sell for as little as €7,600/ha (hectare).

Vineyards and terroir are the gold seam in Fenouillèdes, with near century-old Carignan and Grenache providing the potential for wines of depth and character. 'This is prime terroir for Grenache, like Priorat in northern Spain

or Châteauneuf-du-Pape,' says François Bannier of H&B Sélection, a start-up négociant-eleveur that specialises in Languedoc-Roussillon. Whites, too, have an originality: the unsung Grenache Gris and Maccabeu producing a body of fruit and lively floral character.

Seeking a greater liberty of expression, new producers have opted for vin de pays status: VDP des Côtes Catalanes is favoured since VDP des Coteaux Fenouillèdes was withdrawn in 2002. Côtes du Roussillon-Villages is also a permissible if the prerequisite Syrah (or Mourvèdre) is available for blending with Carignan and Grenache.

Mas Amiel has been producing fine VDN Maury for many years. The 150ha estate is perhaps less directly associated with the Fenouillèdes metamorphosis, but there's been new ownership since 1999 and a deal of change. Olivier Decelle has been using his considerable energy and expertise to gain global market share and improve quality. This has involved hiring talented young winemaker Stéphane Gallet, building a high-tech winery, overhauling the vineyard cultivation system and introducing a range of well-executed, dry Côtes du Roussillon-Villages to complement its VDN Maury.



Domaine Calvet-Thunevin, a joint venture set up in 2001 between grower Jean-Roger Calvet and garagiste négociant Jean-Luc Thunevin of Château Valandraud in St-Emilion, has also made progress (together with Mas Amiel, the estate won a 5-star Decanter Award in the Roussillon-Villages panel tasting in September 2005). 'Why invest the other side of the world when there are wonderful old vines, inexpensive land and awesome countryside on the doorstep?' says Thunevin. The project now has 35ha under production in Maury, the potential for a further 20ha and plans to complete a high-tech €1.5 million cellar this year.

Another Bordeaux garagiste-grower combination is Yves Blanc of Château Branda in Puisseguin St-Emilion and Jean-Louis Vera at Domaine de la Serre. 'I wanted out of the co-operative system and Yves and his son-in-law had the commercial weight I lacked,' says Vera. Thunevin's arrival spurred initial interest in the region but the Blanc-Vera tandem has forged ahead with 42ha in production and a new cellar already built.

The Bordelais have been the most prolific of the newcomers. The list also includes Château Pape Clément's Bernard Magrez (*Passion d'une Vie*), cork

ROUSSILLON VINTAGES

2005 ★★★★★ The ideal year climatically. Wines of great balance and concentration. Keep

2004 ★★ to ★★★★★ Problems with rot in early September. Quite classic wines – some very good. Drink/keep

2003 ★★★ Heat and drought. Hail in Maury in July. Rich fruit, marked alcohol and occasionally dry tannins. Drink

2002 ★★ to ★★★ Cool summer, rainy harvest. It pays to be selective. Drink

2001 ★★★★★ As with 2005, a superb year. Ripe, balanced wines. Drink/keep