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Picking the best values from southern France

By Paul Gregutt

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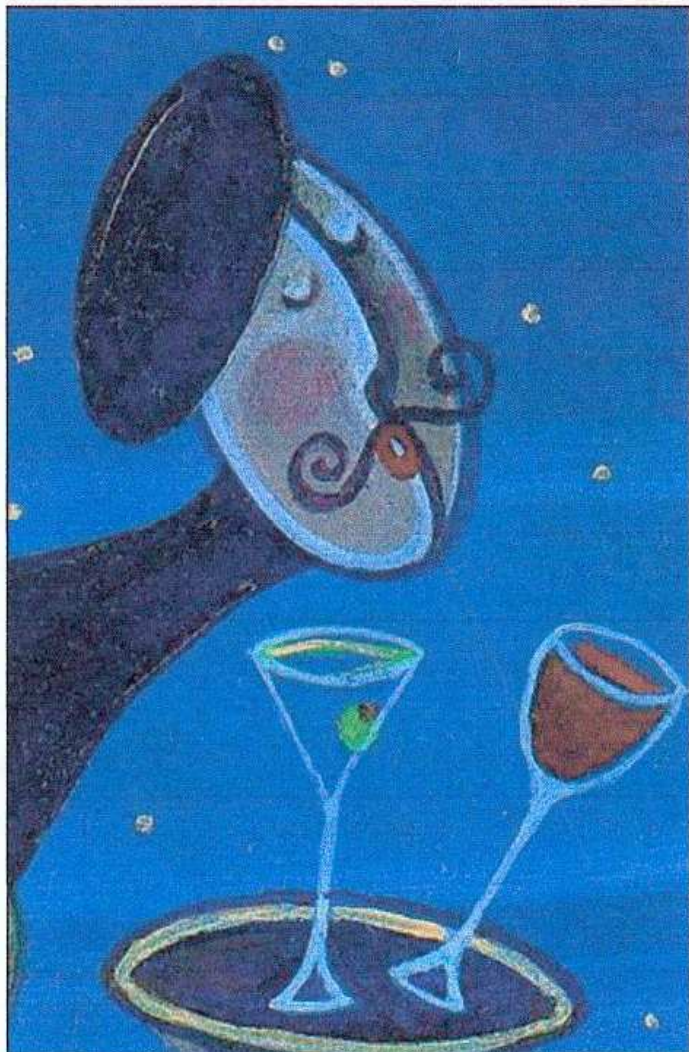
For some years now, savvy wine buyers seeking a taste of the Rhone at un-Rhonish prices have looked to the rather obscure appellations that ring the French Mediterranean coast from Nice to Banyuls.

Wines from the Côteaux du Languedoc, Roussillon, Corbières, Minervois, Costières de Nîmes, Côtes du Ventoux and others have turned up a wealth of affordable reds, principally blends of grenache, mourvèdre, carignan and syrah, and often from old vines. And of course there are the lesser appellations of the Côtes du Rhone itself, such as Vacqueyras, that also have, until now, dodged the pricing inflation that has made wines such as Chateauneuf-du-Pape unaffordable for everyday consumption.

Given the shrinking dollar and a host of other factors, the good times may not continue to "rouler" much longer. Wines from the 2002 and 2003 vintages were all made under varying, but subpar, weather conditions and should generally be avoided. In 2004 conditions were excellent, good in 2005, rather average in 2006. Advice from here is stock up on the 2004s and 2005s.

In recent years an effort to overcome a reputation for making generic, cheap wine has led many ambitious producers to age their wines in expensive new oak, which not only drives up prices but obliterates terroir. Southern France remains an incredibly diverse and exciting region for discovering unique and (sometimes) affordable wines, but it's a crowded jungle. I suggest that you look for brands or importers that you know and trust. Otherwise, it's buyer beware.

Hecht & Bannier is a small négociant-éleveur dedicated to wines from Languedoc and Roussillon. These are rather hard and austere wines that will require (and reward) decanting, but they have clearly been made and assembled with care.



Picks of the Week

Chateau de Nages 2005 Réserve White (\$14) and Chateau de Nages 2004 Réserve Red (\$14): These lovely wines, from the Costières de Nîmes appellation, offer generous, fresh and juicy flavors. The white is grenache blanc and roussanne; the red, grenache and syrah. Bright and fresh citrus flavors of lemon, lime and grapefruit, with some of the racy acidity of sauvignon blanc, characterize the white. Tight red fruits — cranberry, pomegranate, sour plum — and whiffs of smoked meat are set against nuances of herb, smoke and pepper in the red. (Distributed by First Crush.)

"We want our wines to be a reliable passport to the AOC Languedoc and Roussillon areas for wine lovers," Gregory Hecht explains. Vinum Imports represents Hecht & Bannier in the Seattle area. I hope to see many more of their wines in the future. I especially enjoyed the **Hecht & Bannier 2004 Minervois (\$21)**. This is mostly syrah with a bit of grenache added. It's a bright and peppery wine that offers concentrated red fruits, Provencal herbs, black pepper and truffle salt highlights. Its tannins are smooth but a little chalky, lending some definition and texture to the finish.

Almost as good is **Hecht & Bannier's 2005 Côtes du Roussillon Villages (\$26)**.

Tight and spicy, this brings sleek cranberry and red-currant fruit flavors to the table. It's peppery and sharp, and certainly needs airing out and/or additional bottle age.

Tim Shannon started First Crush Wines a couple of years ago, with a particular interest in southern French wines based on carignan and mourvèdre. "I'm looking for things that are not the typical blend," he explains. "There's a lot of great Côtes du Rhone out there; you need to have a different bugle to blow."

Shannon favors small producers, noninterventionist winemaking and finished wines of just 13 or 13.5 percent alcohol. He mentions his early training as a mountain and avalanche guide as a helpful influence.

"It's all about angle, aspect and elevation — where's my sun? You need to understand what weather will spin out in the spot you're standing in. There is a connection to wine. This is what [fruit] I want, where I want to be."

Mas Basile, in the Costières de Nîmes appellation, is one of his favored producers. Their affordably priced whites and reds are augmented by a delightful **2006 Syrah Grenache Rosé (\$10)**. It's an elegant wine, supple and lively in the mouth, with gentle hints of rose petals and strawberry candy.

Also recommended from First Crush:

Mas Basile 2006 Grenache Roussanne White (\$13): This roussanne/grenache blanc blend shows bracing minerality, subtle textures and lovely impressions of white pepper and herb.

Mas Basile 2005 Syrah Grenache (\$14): Concrete fermented (no oak), this fragrant wine offers bright raspberry scents over base flavors of wet clay and earth. It's bone dry, austere but thrilling, with a hint of garrigue spice.

Mas Basile 2004 Reserve Syrah (\$25): Handpicked from 50-year-old syrah vines, this mixes herb and spice scents with lifted, minty notes and a whiff of cedary cigar box. Substantial, serious, young and ageworthy, it could be cellared for up to a decade.

Most unusual is the **Chateau Haut-Musiel 2004 'Signargues' Côtes du Rhone Villages (\$15)** — 80 percent carignan and 20 percent syrah, yet labeled a Côtes du Rhone Villages. Produced from 45- to 90-year-old vines, it tastes authentically Old World. Think extract of berries poured over rock; with a healthy dose of barnyard.

Among the most widely available brands from southern France, I've often recommended the wines of Perrin. The new (2006) releases are now reaching the market, distributed by Noble. Best is the **Rasteau (\$23)**, a Côtes du Rhone Villages blend of 80 percent grenache and 20 percent syrah. It's aromatic and peppery, with sappy berries, clay, earth and a suggestion of baking chocolate. I also enjoyed **Perrin's 2006 Vacqueyras Les Christins (\$25)**, a tart, acidic wine with a pungent, grassy streak.

Finding the wine

Unless noted, all Wine Adviser recommendations are currently available, though vintages may