

A trip round the Languedoc...

by Danielle Whitehead

I have always been interested in visiting the Languedoc since I first started learning about wine. As a region it produces such a diverse range of wine styles from the sparkling wines of Limoux through to the bold, hefty spicy reds of Minervois, Corbieres and Fitou. It is home to some of the finest fortified wines in the world such as Muscat de Frontignan and Muscat de Saint Jean de Minervois, as well as the Grenache based fortified wines of Banyuls and Maury. To my surprise, the region also produces some really characterful dry white AC wines, especially from Corbieres. However, although I knew quite a bit about the wines, I didn't really know about the region as a whole. For this reason, the Languedoc seemed a natural choice for my scholarship trip.

Exploring the region

I flew out to Carcassonne on Saturday 18th October where I stayed for five days with a friend's family in a little village called Floure. As the harvest had just finished a week or two ago, it seemed an ideal time to visit. At this time of year, the vineyards are also bursting with beautiful autumnal colours of vast rows of bright red and auburn vine leaves. For me the trip was the perfect chance to really learn about the wine industry here. Therefore, over the five days I visited wineries, local wine merchants, retailers and local restaurants tasting at every opportunity.

Another great place to meet local producers is at the Fete du Vin. There was one taking place in Carcassonne Centre Ville on the day I arrived, which was great as we got to try various wines including some Blanquette de Limoux, white Corbieres, and Minervois, the latter pairing perfectly with the local speciality, Cassoulet. We also got chatting to a lady from Domaine de la Sapiniere, a winery situated in the relatively new appellation Malepere (granted AC status in 1990). Remarkably for a Languedoc appellation, they are allowed to include 50% Merlot in their AC wines. I wondered what other producers thought of this. Maybe things are changing in France!

To make full use of my time here I had also set up some appointments with local wineries before flying out. Looking back, I was lucky to visit the wineries that I did as each one gave me a completely different perspective on the wine industry here. Therefore, enabling me to piece together a much better understanding of the region and people behind its wines.

Domaine de Montmarin, Montblanc (Vin de Pays D'oc)

The first winery we visited was Domaine de Montmarin in the heart of Montblanc. Our hosts here were General Manager, Claudine Henri and Head Winemaker, Bertrand Waris, who were both extremely hospitable.

Domaine de Montmarin is a family owned business that has been in the Sarret family since 1488. The winery certainly reflects its history as it has a certain rusticity and tradition. In total the estate spans 350 hectares of which 110 are planted with vines. The current owner plants Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc for the red wines and Viognier, Colombard, Sauvignon Blanc and Roussanne for the whites. Production is around 60% red and 40% white, which can only be sold as Vin de Pays D'oc as these varieties aren't allowed to be sold as AC wines under the appellation rules.

Bertrand took us on a tour of the winery and vineyards where he explained that the white varieties are planted on the flatter sites and the reds are grown on the hillside plots. However, when the estate was first bought, it was the other way around with the red varieties on the flatter sites and whites on the hillside slopes. This was one of the first changes that they made. The soils are a mix of stony clay and limestone on south facing hills and alluvial soils on the flatter sites. The red varieties are cordon trained on wires and guyot training is used for the rest. The rows of vines are widely spaced and neatly maintained to facilitate machine harvesting, which can be costly as Bertrand showed us a new harvester which cost them 150,000 euros.

The oldest vines on the estate are around 35 years old Grenache vines. They don't have any vines older than this as in the past they have had problems with a wood disease called Esca. I had never heard of this before and after consulting the Oxford Companion on my return discovered that it is a fungal disease characterized by a white rot. It is spread by propagated cuttings and can be fatal to the vine. There isn't a modern cure but sanitation care when propagating cuttings and protection of pruning wounds are crucial to prevent it spreading.

On our tour of the winery Bertrand explained that they only use stainless steel vats and the wines are handled to a minimum with fining taking place by gravity. The winery doesn't own any barriques as their objective is to produce fresh fruity styles that are meant to be drunk young. For example, this year's Sauvignon Blanc will be bottled in 18 days. Their key markets are the UK, USA and northern European countries. Interestingly, they bottle the wines under screw cap for the UK market but this can vary for northern European countries depending on what buyers want. In the future, they may also look to Asia as a new export market.

Following our tour Bertrand tasted us through the most recent bottlings of the 2007 vintage for the whites and 2006 for the red wines. My general impression was that all the wines reflected true varietal character with good fresh aromatic profiles. They may not be wines for ageing but also they didn't intend to be. One wine that particularly stood out was the Roussanne 2005. This wine showed complexity and had a stoned fruit character with a fresh minerality. Ironically, Bertrand said that this was one of the hardest wines to sell. I suppose it is still a relatively unknown variety in the UK. The whole visit had been very informative and Bertrand had been a very humble host.

Les Coteaux du Pic, Pic St Loup AOC

Our second appointment was with a co-operative based in the Herault Departement called Les Coteaux du Pic. This winery lay at the foot of the Pic Saint Loup mountain, which resides over the vineyards at an altitude of 638 metres. The Pic Saint Loup appellation is unique in that it is the most northerly of all the Languedoc AC's. Also, because of its location, the vineyards experience both Mediterranean and continental climatic influences. On arrival it was apparent immediately that the climate was different here to Montblanc as the rain came down in short but heavy bursts as we dashed for cover.

Les Coteaux du Pic was established through the fusion of three cooperative cellars. It consists of a centre for collecting the grapes called Notre Dame de Londres, a cellar for vinification and storage in the village of Valflaunes and a main cellar for vinification, storing and bottling in Saint Mathieu de Treviers. It works with over 300 growers and covers an average area of production of 940 hectares. Our host here was Commercial Director, Otto Reithmeyer who was really interesting to talk to about the role of co-operatives in the Languedoc and the more commercial side of the wine industry here.

The Coteaux du Pic cooperative doesn't own any vineyards and all the grapes are bought in, a different variety specified on a different day. Quality control is strict and on arrival at the cooperative the grapes are checked for quality and alcohol levels. Most of the wines are bottled, marketed and labelled here. However, one of their main customers, the Carrefour supermarkets, bottle the wines themselves, as do many negociants. All table wine is also sold in bulk. At present, all the wines are bottled under cork, however, Otto mentioned that they may move to screw cap for wines intended for the UK market. However, this is a huge investment as it is expensive to install the facilities for this.

For Pic St Loup AC the 2008 vintage produced a smaller crop as the warm weather came at the very end. This year they produced 47,000hl which was down 15% on the previous year. The main variety produced here is Syrah and then Grenache and Mourvedre. All three are used to produce AC wines. However, the region actually produces much more Vin de Pays and Vin de Table than AC wines. For example, in 2007 out of a total 58,300hl only 5,400hl of red and rose were declared as Pic St-Loup AC wines with another 7,000hl declared as AOC Coteaux du Languedoc. The remaining was declared as Vin de Pays or Vin de Table. Marsanne, Roussanne, Viognier and Chardonnay are all used to produce Vin de pays wines. As a rule, all vines used to produce fruit for the AC wines must also be at least seven years old.

The cooperative produces several different ranges in different styles including a varietally labelled Vin de Pays D'oc and Coteaux du Languedoc AC range. A Primeur wine made from Chardonnay and Merlot is also released from the 3rd Thursday in October. The Selection and Cuvee Speciale AC ranges are also delicious. These are more robust styles produced from Grenache and Syrah, some of which have spent time ageing in oak barrels. The variety percentages also vary each year depending on the vintage.

I could see how these wines would be successful in the UK as the labelling is catchy and the wines expressed pure fresh varietal fruit. Moving through the Vin de Pays wines to the AC ones, you can also notice an increase in quality as the wines became more serious and structured.

Chateau Coujan, Saint Chinian AOC

I hadn't originally planned to visit this winery but as my hosts had talked such a lot about it, I became more and more fascinated to see it for myself. Therefore my third visit became Chateau Coujan, a winery with around 70 hectares of vines, situated on the borders of the Saint Chinian and Faugeres appellations. For argument sake it is classed as Saint Chinian.

The reason I was so intrigued to visit this winery is that the vineyards lie on sandy gravel soils on a bedrock of rare fossilized coral soils from an era when this land was part of the Helvetian Sea. The benefits of the coral soils are good drainage and high organic mineral content. I had never heard of vineyards based on coral soils before and so was very excited to visit the winery. As we drove in you could instantly see the roman influence in the architecture of the buildings. Also, to our surprise there were peacocks roaming around the vineyards. This place was quite unbelievable!

The winery has been in the Guy family for five generations and is now run by a lady called Florence who took over from her father in 1990. In a desire to keep the winery going she lives here with her son, who unfortunately isn't interested in winemaking yet as he is more obsessed by snakes. She hopes he will grow out of this!

We did not have very long time to spend here but did manage to squeeze in a quick tour and tasting. Florence showed us the room where fermentations takes place, consisting of huge old traditional cement vats. They have the more modern equipment too. As we ducked through the tiny doorway of another room we discovered a long dimly lit room with the most enormous barrels fixed either side. These are no longer in use but instead it is used as a tasting room. In the centre smaller barrels are used as tables. It was such a wonderful setting for tasting through the wines.

Florence produces a range of wines here including a Sauvignon Blanc/Muscat blend (called Di Vin d'Achille, named after her son), Rolle, Syrah, Grenache, Cinsault, Merlot/Cabernet and a sweet late harvest Petit Manseng. The real gem of the tasting for me though was Ile de Corail 2004 made from 100% Mourvedre. It was rich, juicy and round bursting with intense dark fruit, spice and chocolate flavours. I could taste it even after we left! We also got to try the olive oil and honey that she produces here, which was delicious.

Meeting Florence was a huge highlight of my trip. She had a determination to keep the property going in her family that was very admirable. Also, she is always looking for ways to build on the current success of the winery. She had even planted 20 hectares of Syrah contrary to her father's view that it could only produce great wine in the Rhone Valley. I got a feeling she may prove him wrong! She clearly put a lot of passion and heart in to her work and this was certainly reflected in her wines.

Chateau Cazal Viel, Saint Chinian AOC

Our final appointment was at the Laurent Miquel family winery. I first discovered the Laurent Miquel and Cazal Viel wines when I worked at Majestic and had always been a huge fan ever since. However, I had never associated the two and so was surprised to find out that the estate is actually called Chateau Cazal Viel. This has been in the Laurent Miquel family since 1789.

Our host here was Marketing Manager, Nicolas who spent hours with us taking us on a guided tour of the vineyards and winery followed by a fantastic tasting in their dining room, a very regal setting for a tasting.

The estate here is very beautiful. As you drive in and follow the windy road all the way round to the winery, the scenery consists of rolling hills covered in rows of vines bursting with autumnal colours. The vines are planted on the contours of the hills facing both north and south, in the foothills of the Caroux mountains. In total there are around 150 hectares planted with vines. However, the estate produces around 2 million hl per year. Therefore, they don't have enough vines to produce this amount of fruit annually and so they also buy in grapes locally. They work very closely with local growers to ensure the quality is always high, including carrying out vineyard inspections. They would like to expand further, however, plantation rights are strict here and they are only allowed to expand by one hectare a year. The vines are replanted on average every 25 years. However they do have some old vines of Grenache from around 40-60 years.

The climate here is distinctly Mediterranean and the dry climate along with sea breezes helps ward off diseases. The garrigues also have a fascinating effect on the vines as not only do they house pests that eliminate vine pests, which means minimal chemicals need to be used. They can also have an influence on the wines as the sea breezes can carry parts of the garrigues which attach to bloom of the grapes and add herbal notes to the red wines. The soils here are mainly calcareous which is ideal for Syrah and Viognier, the two main varieties planted. These are highly favoured by winemaker, Laurent Miquel and his father Henri who is known locally as "Monsieur Syrah" due to his passion for the variety. Viognier however, must be sold as Vin de Pays in the Saint Chinian AC. Other varieties planted include Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, Grenache and Cinsault. The latter is used predominantly for rose wines by the Saignée method (the juice is bled gently from the grapes and fermented without maceration). The AC also allows Marsanne and Roussanne to be grown here, however, they do not have any.

Nicolas informed us that the harvest had been completed by the end of the first week in October. 2008 was a small crop here too as hail storms had been a problem, especially in neighbouring appellation Faugeres in which 60% of the vineyards had been affected. The summer was cool with warm weather coming at the end of Autumn. Consequently, the grapes were small but had reached maturity quickly. Controlled irrigation is allowed with granted permission, however, they only irrigate when there is a very hot vintage to retain freshness in the grapes. Otherwise the white wines would be too alcoholic.

As well as traditional vats, the winery uses the most modern equipment including stainless steel vats, pneumatic presses and new American and French oak barrels. Filtering also takes place with Kieselguhr. The wines are bottled under plastic cork or screwcap. They have also just installed some huge white vats which Nicolas pointed out had recently been bought from Australia. They are insulated vats which saved up to 80-90% energy. Innovation was clearly a huge part of the family ethos as

Henri Miquel had also been one of the first to plant Viognier and Syrah here. Additionally environmental awareness was also high on the agenda as they strive to re-use every aspect of the winemaking process. For example, the marc is used to make eaux de vie and all remaining by-products are used as fertilizer.

Their key export market is the UK and an astounding 96% of what they produce is exported with only 4% sold locally. In the appellation, Laurent Miquel is seen as a medium sized family winery and because it also works with local growers it is looked upon favourably. It is certainly a well run commercial winery but with family values and tradition at the heart of it. A balance they seem to have got just right.

One of the main reasons I think they are so successful is that they understand their target market, UK consumers. Laurent Miquel and Nicolas both studied at universities in the UK and the family travels a lot. This understanding is clearly reflected in the Cazal Viel and Laurent Miquel ranges. Out of the wines that Nicolas tasted us through the Cazal Viel Cuvee Finesse elevage sur lie particularly stood out. This wine has character, minerality and good structure. I have always loved the Laurent Miquel Viognier wines especially the Nord Sud Viognier and so was very excited about tasting the top cuvee the Verite Viognier. This wine did not disappoint as it was rich, pungent and mouth wateringly delicious. The single vineyard Bardou (AC Syrah) is also a stunning wine and one that can be kept for a few years. Having discussed ageability with Nicolas it seems that Languedoc wines will keep a few years but generally they don't have the ageing potential of the classic French wines.

Nicolas was extremely knowledgeable about the family winery and also wine in general. Interestingly, a lot of the producers we have met have also talked about the new catch all appellation, Coteaux du Languedoc, introduced in November. Some seem slightly skeptical and concerned that it could devalue the credibility of the AC system and the quality sold under it, while others welcomed the idea. I think it is good to have a generic appellation that introduces consumers to the region and this certainly works in other areas. However, having seen the diversity and different styles and levels of quality produced, even in from the small area that we covered, it is difficult to see how this would work. Only time will tell.

Summary

I have learnt a great deal from my trip but also only really scraped the surface. The Languedoc is a huge and diverse area where average holdings are small and many vineyards are parcelated. In the north, the vines are planted on the rolling hillsides but as you venture south the land becomes flatter. Most vineyards are neatly kept, facilitating the use of machine harvesting, especially in the flatter vineyards where the vines are more widely spaced. Some vines are bush trained using the gobelet system, others are trained on wires. The latter is more common for international varieties. However, training systems can vary from one vineyard to the next. There are no general rules, each vineyard is different.

Overall though the Languedoc is a region of beauty and character and its true heart lies in the wonderful people that you meet here. I often think it is difficult to really appreciate the true value of a wine unless you know the people and story behind it. Then and only then can you get the most pleasure from it. On my trip the wineries I visited all had different stories and the people different roles. However, they did have one thing in common and that was genuine passion for what they do. I shall certainly be going back to discover more.

Websites of the properties that I visited:

Les Coteaux du Pic, Pic St Loup AOC: www.coteaux-du-pic.com

Château Coujan, Saint Chinian AOC: www.chateau-coujan.com

Château Cazal Viel, Saint Chinian AOC: www.laurent-miquel.com

Other great properties to visit:

Château de Lastours, Corbieres: www.chateaudelastours.com

Château Rives-Blanches, Limoux: www.rives-blanches.com

Château la Voulte-Gasparets, Corbieres: www.lavoultegasparets.com

** Notes on the Languedoc:

- 1) Visit the port of Sete, it is wonderfully Venetian in character.
- 2) Take a detour down to the salt pools, the Camargues near Narbonne - here you will find pink flamingoes!