Languedoc-Roussillon and Its Red Wines: The Beautiful Patchwork

by David Rosengarten

The southern French wine region Languedoc-Roussillon--which sweeps majestically from the western edge of the Rhône Valley all the way down to the Spanish border, and from the Mediterranean up to the foothills of the central French mountains--is not only the largest wine region in France. It is also the largest wine region in the *world*, with over 600,000 acres of vines under cultivation, and approximately 13 million hectoliters of wine produced every vintage. However, for hundreds of years, the region, sometimes called the "Midi," has not had a large reputation. A recent article in a French wine magazine described Languedoc-Roussillon, in the 19th and 20th centuries, as "an industrial basin," pouring out cheap wines that provided "miners and steelworkers" all over France with affordable plonk, fueling the multi-liter-a-day habits of another era.

In the late 20th century, as the wine-drinkers of the world were decisively turning from quantity to quality, many Languedoc-Roussillon producers decided to flow with the new times. Starting in the early 1980s or so, high-yielding vines were ripped out in favor of high-quality ones that yielded less fruit. International ideas flooded in, and new oak barrels, not part of the local tradition, sprang up everywhere. Today, Languedoc-Roussillon, particularly in red wine, is an extraordinary region of new wine styles mixed with the idealized best of the old wine styles. It is place where, if you know what you're doing, you can still find wines that seem very authentically "southern," of their place. And the miracle is...while this historic area finds its footing in the 21st-century market...all of this glorious scarlet juice can be sampled at bargain-basement prices.

There's only one problem: figuring the place out.

Languedoc-Roussillon in 2010 is such a patchwork of styles, terroirs, grape varieties and winemaking philosophies that finding a bottle you like in a wine shop is something of a lottery. There are no less than 41 appellations for red wine, with numerous sub-appellations...as well

as close to 60 different Vins de Pays designations, an important part of the picture...making regulations in Bordeaux and Burgundy seem positively simple by comparison. It is so confusing for the consumer that the Languedoc-Roussillon committee decided in 2006 to de-emphasize the geographic designations, and to emphasize a blanket term for the wines of the whole region: "Sud de France," which means "South of France." About a third of the region's 3000 wine producers have agreed to use "Sud de France" in their marketing, but only about 7% have agreed to use it on labels. What's out there to buy is still a whole lot of wine with very specific, but largely unknown, geographic designations on the bottles.

Me...I'm happy with that. I really am. This is part of the joy of wine. Wine grapes are grown in specific places, and the expression of those places in the wine itself provides an important dimension to enjoyment. No one questions the joy of knowing the geographic origins of a Margaux from Bordeaux, or a Gevrey-Chambertin from Burgundy. The problem in Languedoc-Roussillon is that the potential geographic analogues for Margaux and Gevrey-Chambertin are not yet well-known, and therefore difficult to market. I say that's *our* problem--and that smart consumers will start understanding the region's specifics to get maximum enjoyment and nuance from the region's wonderful wines.

I have been doing that very thing for over a year now--and, in the process, have been developing a deeper and deeper love for the red wines of Languedoc-Roussillon, which constitute about 80% of production in the region. It is a perfect time to get going--since the 2007 vintage for red wines in Languedoc-Roussillon is the best in a decade.

This much is clear: there is today a schism in the region between the leaner, more elegant style of traditional French wine-making, and the riper, fruitier, oakier, more opulent style of New-World winemaking. As you set out to explore the wines of Languedoc-Roussillon...it’s an advantage to know which side you're on!...though indecision is not discouraged.

A logical place to start the exploration is with grape varieties.

*In the old days of mass production, going back hundreds of years, local high-yielding varieties such as Aramon and Alicante ruled; there is practically none of either left today.

*Later, towards the turn into the 20th century, a few vines showed up from other places and became widely planted in the region, such as Carignan and Cinsaut. These varieties still exist today, and are thought of as the "traditional" varieties in the Languedoc-Roussillon; they yield wines that often have an old-fashioned style to them.

*But they do not dominate any longer. The new Languedoc-Roussillon loves three grapes that were brought over from Rhône Valley vineyards; they are loved because they produce bigger, darker, fruitier, higher-alcohol wines, much more international in style. They are Syrah, Grenache Noir, and Mourvèdre, and they are the contemporary holy trinity.

*Finally, very modern producers of Languedoc-Roussillon reds take the internationalization one step further--planting such trendy varieties as Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, and Pinot Noir.

Obviously, one must choose what one likes. For me, the star grape of the region is Carignan--which, once upon a time, had a bad rap; as we moved into the modern era, people started calling it "hard, tannic, lean, austere." Much Carignan was ripped out in the last 30 years, and replaced with Syrah and its ilk. Today, there is a growing realization that planting international varieties like Syrah, and producing international-style wine, is pushing the whole world towards one style of wine. So producers in regions like Languedoc-Roussillon are starting to go back to older varieties; Carignan is on the rise! And they have figured out better places to plant it, better ways to grow it, and better ways to vinify it (including some techniques borrowed from Beaujolais producers and converted to Languedoc-Roussillon needs). I do everything I can to find out the grape varieties of any Languedoc-Roussillon red I'm considering; if it has a good percentage of Carignan in it, my excitement grows. These

lighter, more elegant, often more complex wines almost always taste like they're from somewhere.

That's the easy part, the varietal "what's." Figuring out the regional "where's" is trickier.

The name of the region itself requires explanation--for Languedoc and Roussillon have since time immemorial been two very distinct though contiguous regions, dead center on the southern border of France, with two very different languages. In 1919, the French government decided to start patching regions together, in hopes of creating evenly sized political entities across France that would be something like American states. Languedoc-Roussillon got its forced "statehood" in 1960...and today there are 22 such "states" in France. So, though Languedoc makes wines that are a little more Provençal in feel, and Roussillon (which is actually part of cultural Catalonia) makes wines that are a little more Spanish in feel...the two areas are today yoked together, administratively, into Languedoc-Roussillon.

Next issue: the categories of Languedoc-Roussillon wines, the most important of them based on geography. Roughly speaking, when you buy Languedoc-Roussillon wine, you'll be buying wines that are designated either:

*_Appellation Controllée_ wines, also called AOC, or

*_Vin de Pays_ wines, also called VDP.

(At the bottom of the hierarchy are wines called _Vin de Table_, which can be great values--but are not often seen here.)

AOC WINES

So let's begin with the AOC wines, the region's most prestigious. Theoretically, each AOC reflects hundreds of years of winemaking tradition, and each AOC has, based on its *terroir* (a combination of soil, weather, placement, other factors), its own profile. I choose to believe that this is largely true; however, the modernization of Languedoc-Roussillon in the last 30 years has lessened the degree

to which each place tastes like "this place;" you can find international-style fat, purple, oaky wines from almost everywhere in Languedoc-Roussillon today, AOC or not.

However, one very smart rule keeps the AOC wines from morphing entirely: any one of them grown in the Languedoc part of the region must include at least two different grape varieties, and any one of them grown in the Roussillon part of the region must include at least different three grape varieties. Moreover, permitted varieties in AOC wines are tightly regulated--all of which means that is impossible to find a single-varietal Cabernet Sauvignon monster that's an AOC from Languedoc-Roussillon. Good!

The following very personal guide reflects my favorite red-wine AOCs in Languedoc-Roussillon, among the 41 that exist. I'm open to all the AOCs, of course, but these are the ones I seek, the ones I recommend. For many of them, the retention of some AOC character is one of the reasons they stand out. I list them here in alphabetical order:

AOC CABARDÈS
I find Cabardès fascinating, because it's a meet-up point for grapes! It lies, just northwest of the medieval city of Carcassonne, at the precise spot where the winemaking of the southern coast merges into the winemaking of France's southwest coast--and the wines reflect that! There are eight permitted varieties in this AOC--including the Bordeaux varieties Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Merlot, Malbec, all very unusual for an AOC wine from Languedoc-Roussillon. Note that these grapes are traditional here, not something imposed by a marketing director. An excellent example in the U.S. is the 2005 Chateau Salitis, Cuvée Premium, which blends the Bordeaux boys with the Rhône gang (Syrah and Grenache) into a lovely, medium-bodied, mineral-scented wine.

AOC CORBIÈRES (and CORBIÈRES-BOUTENAC)
One of my top appellations, without a doubt, is Corbières, a wild, forlorn region, set among steep and irregular mountains, just inland from the sea and about 35 miles north of the Spanish border. It was

the historical base of the doomed Cathars, heretics who defied the Catholic Church in the early Renaissance, lending a special poignancy to the region (you can see their broken fortresses today). Of course, it is a very large AOC (the largest in Languedoc-Roussillon), with tons of specific microclimates, so it is difficult to generalize. But there is much classicism in Corbières, which I like. Some call the wines "chunky," but they're not chunky like New-World wines are; "European rustic" would be a better description. This is a stronghold of Carignan, with 50% Carignan allowed in AOC wines, much higher than most AOCs.

In fact, my favorite estate in all of Languedoc-Roussillon is in the Corbières AOC: Domaine des 2 Ânes, or Domaine of the Two Donkeys. I love best of all their Carignan-Grenache-Syrah blend, the complex, beautifully balanced 2006 Fontanilles, with its great core of concentration. But I also love their young, all-Carignan Premier Pas, even better in 2007 than 2008, filled with a kind of barnyard majesty.

Another fine Corbières is the 2007 Domaine de Fontsainte, Reserve La Demoiselle--a quiet, elegant, subtle wine with a Bordeaux-like structure, and hints of celery seed and animal alongside its broadside of healthy-berry fruit. For a lighter, younger Carignan-influenced Corbières...I was also very much taken with the 2008 Champagnes of Maxime Magnon. This light-garnet red smells almost like a fruity white wine--until the subtle notes of rose, violet, lavender, and pine nut kick in. Zappy and refreshing.

Corbières also has a smaller AOC within it, very highly regarded: Corbières-Boutenac, which, in my tastings, lived up to its reputation. A great estate named Chateau Maylandie produces its finest wine in this smaller AOC, Villa Ferrae (30% Carignan). And the winery Gerard Bertrand produced a gorgeous 2005 Corbières-Boutenac, La Forge, which is all minerals and silk. In my experience, the Boutenac edge is "elegance."

AOC COSTIÈRES DE NÎMES

There are a few Languedoc-Roussillon AOCS that actually sit in the

western Rhône valley; this particular AOC, just a short distance northeast of Montpelier, is my favorite of those Rhône ones. I like these reds for their Rhone-like beefiness--though most of the Costières de Nîmes reds I've tasted manage to be elegant at the same time. Syrah and Grenache are on the rise in this AOC, though there are pockets a-plenty of old-style Carignan. My fave, of course, comes from one of those, the 2007 Domaine de la Petite Cassagne, an utterly classic-tasting, mineral-y wine. Another great one is the 2006 La Bolida, from Chateau d'Or et De Gueules--90% Mourvedre, very Rhône-like, dark and rich, but with classic backbone and a harmonious finish.

AOC CÔTES DE ROUSSILLON-VILLAGES

Most of the AOC reds produced in Roussillon (there are six Roussillon AOCs) include the words "Còtes de Roussillon" in their AOC names; this particular AOC is my favorite of the Roussillon AOCs. It represents the wines of 32 villages in the northern part of Roussillon.

There are a lot of very old-fashioned winemakers in Roussillon, and some new-style wines--which means you can find all kinds of red wines here. So generalizations are difficult. But you can sense a general difference in the very color of the wines: the Languedoc part of the Languedoc-Roussillon region is loaded with dark purple wines, while the extremely dry and hot Roussillon part has many wines that are a dark garnet-brown. Some even say that there are a considerable number of oxidized wines—*very* old-fashioned!--in Roussillon.

The best Côtes de Roussillon-Villages I've tasted avoids the oxidation syndrome. The tippy-top, for me, is the 2006 Domaine Gauby, a gorgeous, purply wine, with abundant minerals and cherry fruit, extraordinarily flavorful and gentle at the same time. Not far behind is the 2006 Carrement Rouge, a Côtes de Roussillon-Villages from Domaine de l'Edre; it's a big, meaty, but well-behaved wine with an extraordinary raspberry-truffle nose, kind of an Old World/New World fusion.

AOC FAUGÈRES

Faugères is unique, and wonderful, in several ways. First of all, it is the only Languedoc-Roussillon AOC that has a single soil type throughout its zone. The soil of Faugères is schist, which forces vines to send out deep taproots in search of water--a botanical feature that strengthens the vine, and the wines it ultimately yields; wines grown under these conditions are known to be long agers. Furthermore, the AOC rules stipulate that Faugères vines have the lowest yields of any Languedoc AOC. And, lastly, a number of highly talented winemakers have grouped in Faugères, helping to form the AOC's high contemporary reputation.

There is a good deal of consistency in this region: pleasingly round, balanced, full-bodied wines, with lovely berry aromas and flavors. I did find some pumped-up, New-World wanabees in my tasting, but Faugères wines are mostly wines that taste like traditional France, southern-style.

A good Faugères estate is Chateau Haut Lignières, whose 2006 "Le 1er" is beautifully balanced, filled with the interest of currant, and the local herbs known collectively as "garrigue." But the star of the region--though his wines can occasionally crash through the "big-wine" ceiling--is Carignan-lover Didier Barral, at Domaine Leon Barral; I'm a big fan of his basic 2006 Faugères, an elegant, well-balanced symphony of dried red fruits (like cranberry), shot through with hints of wild green plants, minerals, citrus, and a touch of Christmas spice.

AOC MINERVOIS (and MINERVOIS LA LIVINIÈRE)

Minervois is one of the best-known of the Languedoc-Roussillon AOCs, but in my tastings over the last year it provided many disappointments. I found the wines often hot, often sweet--and it was not so easy to find gentler, more elegant, more classic-tasting ones. One sommelier explained to me that since Minervois wines have more prestige, winemakers there feel they must go for the "bigger" wines that will bring "bigger" prices.

I did visit one lovely estate that breathes restraint into the bigness: Chateau Coupe-Roses, particularly in its 2007 La Bastide (made from 50% Carignan). I was also fond of the 2007 Grande Tradition from Chateau du Donjon (racy fruit, peppery, good acid, a little warm in the finish). And I admired the classic structure under the fruit-bomb overlay of the 2007 Domaine de la Borie Blanche, produced by Lorgeril.

The other Minervois AOC--the "upgrade" Minervois La Lavinière, from a small zone within Minervois--has a reputation for being even more elegant than Minervois. To me, Minervois today is not elegant--and Minervois La Livinière is even less so, with a range of broodingly big, dark and hot wines, at least in my tastings.

AOC SAINT-CHINIAN

I had a great time with Saint-Chinian, and found it to be quite distant from its clichés.

This AOC--located between Minervois and Faugères, but generally much closer to the style of Faugères--was at the heart of the Languedoc-Roussillon renaissance in the 1980s. Many early "improvers" began their work here, and the reputation of "big" wines has lingered--wines "aimed at the great restaurants of France," as one textbook says.

Those restaurants must have extremely level-headed sommeliers--for the group of Saint-Chinians I tasted were better-balanced, less show-off-y than practically any other AOC group I sampled. And because Saint-Chinian is not so well known, there are some great values to be had here.

My favorite wine came from the Domaine Rimbert, a 2008 St. Chinian called Les Travers de Marceau, with a majority of Carignan: youthful purple, watermelon fruit, heady and bouncy but not big. Their 2006 Le Mas au Schiste is tighter, more closed--but should open beautifully with time. I also enjoyed the wines of the Saint-Chinian co-op winery, Chateau Saint Baulery--particularly the dusty, peppery, flavorful but lithe 2007.

There are two within-Saint-Chinian AOCs--Saint-Chinian Roquebrun, and Saint-Chinian Berlou--with the lion's share of the wine world's attention going to the former, grown in the north of the zone. For my money, the Saint-Chinian Roquebruns are sweeter, thicker, darker than the regular AOCs from Saint-Chinian, and much less elegant.

A VERY SPECIAL CASE: AOC LANGUEDOC and AOC COTEAUX DU LANGUEDOC

I've set these outside of alphabetical order, because they constitute a unique situation needing special commentary.

For starters, and for now, you may think of AOC Languedoc as the generic regional appellation; if you see a wine labeled AOC Languedoc, it may come from anywhere in the wide, wide region of Languedoc-Roussillon. However, if a local winemaker in an area with a more specific AOC--say, Saint-Chinian--wants to give his wine the more specific AOC of "Saint-Chinian," he may, as long as he passes all the AOC Saint-Chinian requirements. That's the winemaker's choice: produce lower-prestige AOC Languedoc...or...produce lower yields, be more strict in grape varieties, etc....and get a more-prestigious regional appellation like AOC Saint-Chinian. Bordeaux winemakers have the same choice: label their wines AOC Bordeaux, or go through hoops to get an upgrade like AOC Pauillac.

Some decades ago, as quality was improving in the region, the authorities instituted a new AOC that sounds similar to AOC Languedoc: it is called AOC Coteaux du Languedoc. The areas that can use it are much more limited than the areas that can use AOC Languedoc: you will find them in a slice of the region that begins in its center, near the city of Narbonne, and sweeps for about 100 miles northeast, down by the sea and up to the mountains, just until the edge of the Rhone Valley. If you make wine in a few "blessed" parts of this swath, and follow the regulations, you may call your wine "AOC Coteaux du Languedoc." The revolutionary wines we started to see from the Languedoc-Roussillon region in the 1980s and 1990s--big, purple, fruit-forward, New-World kind of wines--were often labeled AOC Coteaux du Languedoc, which means, roughly "slopes

of the Languedoc." Much passion developed here for the three new biggie grapes, Syrah, Grenache Noir, and Mourvèdre.... and therefore it is not uncommon to find big, purple, New-World-ish wines in the Coteaux du Languedoc AOC, albeit made with a European touch. The grape variety law is actually rather strict here, with some areas within this AOC *insisting* on a high percentage of Syrah, Grenache Noir, and Mourvèdre!

More evolution. Over time, fifteen specific areas *within* Coteaux du Languedoc started to distinguish themselves for specific styles of wine. The government allowed, and allows, these 15 areas to place their names on the labels, along with AOC Coteaux du Languedoc (places like La Clape, Terrasses du Larzac, and more). So you will see labels today that say "AOC Coteaux du Languedoc/La Clape"--a very prestigious appellation, likely with high-quality wine in the bottle.

It is a little confusing to refer to these 15 areas, in part because they don't have a category name right now. When I asked Christine Molines, Executive Export Manager of the Conseil Interprofessionel des Vins du Languedoc-Roussillon what the 15 special areas are called, she told me that "we sometimes call the 15 ‘denominations,’ sometimes call them 'terroirs.'"

But more changes are coming.

For one thing, these 15 areas are all--at their own speeds--in the process of switching over to full AOC status. That is to say: the day will come, soon, when the top wines of the La Clape area will no longer be "AOC Coteaux du Languedoc/La Clape," but will simply be "AOC La Clape."

As the 15 areas pass into full AOC status, what will become of the area now known as "AOC Coteaux du Languedoc?" It will cease to be. I can tell you when. As of the 2013 harvest, everything in this wide AOC Coteaux du Languedoc zone that has not switched over to these new, more specific AOCS...will become AOC Languedoc! After 2013, there will be no more AOC Coteaux du Languedoc! But there will be plenty of AOC La Clape, AOC Terrasses du Larzac, etc. from

the area *formerly* known as AOC Coteaux du Languedoc. And lots of less prestigious sounding AOC Languedoc.

You've got lots of shopping to do before 2013. Some of the best wines of the Languedoc-Roussillon region are currently labeled "AOC Coteaux du Languedoc" with one of the 15 names attached. So here are the three denominations-terroirs-whatevers that really showed individual character in my tastings (all of them candidates for elevation to AOC soon):

AOC Coteaux du Languedoc, La Clape
Without doubt, one of the most distinctive names in the entire Languedoc-Roussillon region. This is so because La Clape has a unique situation, first noticed (and planted) by the ancient Romans; the vineyards are on and around a tall mountain that thrusts up from the land directly next to the sea. To me, the result of this is rich, purply, AOC Coteaux-du-Languedoc-style wines--that have amazing acidity, and therefore elegance, despite the big frames. La Clape rules require that at least 70% of the wines be made from Syrah, Grenache Noir, and Mourvèdre--but the specialness of this place lightens the usually heavy load that those grapes carry, and makes them beguilingly drinkable. Many say there is nothing else in the entire region like La Clape, and I agree.

Take the 2006 Julius, from Chateau Camplazens, as an example. It is largely Syrah...but its big, chewy, oaky, wham-bam mouthful is amazingly easy to drink, and goes gorgeously with many foods. The 2007 Les Bartelles, from Mas du Soleilla--this one principally Syrah, Grenache Noir, and Mourvèdre--is similarly amped and oaked, but a very classic Old-World structure emerges. Lastly, the 2004 Chateau d'Anglès--which slips in a few grapes from old Carignan vines--is a winning combo of dried red fruits, minerals, and chocolate, carried by a medium-bodied wine that results in an astonishingly harmonious finish.

AOC Coteaux du Languedoc, Terrasses du Larzac. Here's another spot within the AOC Coteaux du Languedoc that I think has powerful local character. It occupies a northerly position, about 20 miles

northwest of Montpelier, and sits at a high altitude. It also is an area that is still embracing Carignan. The result of it all...is complex, old-fashioned wines, that have an amazing proclivity for showing flavors of age even in relative youth.

One of my top wines of the last year was the 2005 Les Terrasses, from the winery La Croix Chaptal, made from 45% Carignan; the candy-like fruit is joined by a wild party of leather, coffee, toast and earth, with a silk-textured background, and good prospects for another 5-7 years of aging. Another winning winery in Terrasses du Larzac is Mas Jullien, whose 2006 Etats d'Ames is a portrait of cured, earthy leather, a gratifyingly old-fashioned taste.

AOC Languedoc, Pic Saint Loup. The last of my picks in AOC Coteaux du Languedoc is a little less consistent than the others. These wines are generally big, with a regulatory requirement of 90% Syrah-Grenache Noir-Mourvèdre. But that said, some Pic Saint Loups are gorgeous fusions of New-World-style fruit and Old-World-style winemaking; others, unfortunately, are simply over the top, big, hot, and wiry. So you have to choose carefully here.

My runaway favorite in Pic Saint Loup is Chateau La Roque, which has two winners in the market right now. Their basic Pic Saint Loup from 2006 is tops: browning purple, minerals mixed with vestiges of red fruit, filled-in and concentrated but not showy or meretricious. Classic wine from the south of France. Their 2006 Cupa Numismae, largely Mourvèdre, is also lovely, a great blend of stewed fruit and wood spice. Lastly, from another estate, the 2006 Ermitage du Pic Saint Loup is a wine I adore: a crazy number with exotic scents of herbs, tomato stems, melon stems, Japanese pickles and passion fruit. Mint emerges on the juicy, refreshing palate.

VIN DE PAYS WINES

Of course, AOC is *not* synonymous with red wine from Languedoc-Roussillon! Many terrific reds, and many at great prices, receive another official designation, Vin de Pays--which generally carries more weight in Languedoc-Roussillon than it does in other regions of France. Over 65% of all wines made in Languedoc-Roussillon, in fact,

are Vin de Pays wines! If you choose well, you will be rewarded with excellent ones.

Here are the most important things for you to know about Vin de Pays, or VDP, in Languedoc-Roussillon:

*Winemakers who use this designation have much greater freedom than winemakers producing AOC wine. VDP vignerons can be more creative, making use of a wider range of grape varieties and techniques. Decades ago, some Chianti makers in Italy rebelled against the Chianti rules, wanting to add French varietals like Cabernet to their blends. The Italian authorities finally let them--as long as they did not call the wines "Chianti." Same principle here. A producer of, say, Corbières, can be more creative in his region making a wine called Vin de Pays than in making a wine called AOC Corbières.

*Some of the VDP wines are "mono-varietal," or made from one grape variety only. This is not allowed in any of the AOC wines. This is the designation you'll see on expensive, high-end Cabernets--as well as cheap, everyday-type Merlots from Languedoc-Roussillon.

*VDP quality, as you can infer, is quite variable. It's good to educate yourself. If, for example, a multi-varietal VDP wine comes from a zone in which the same winemaker is making an AOC wine, chances are the VDP is a secondary effort for him or her. But if that multi-varietal VDP is made by a winemaker who makes no AOC wine, chances are higher that the VDP will be his or her top priority, and a high-quality wine.

One more important thing to know: there are three different levels of VDP wines: Vin de Pays de Zones, Vin de Pays de Départements, and Vin de Pays Régional. Confusingly, you cannot pinpoint any one of these three levels as making the best VDP wines. But let's look at them anyway, along with some of the best VDP wines I tasted in the last year. Please note: all of the wines mentioned below received ratings from me that were comparable to my best AOC wines!

VDP DE ZONES
This is the category that has the greatest number of Vin de Pays designations...a whopping 54 of them, to be precise! They are keyed to very small localities all across Languedoc-Roussillon, each one, believe it or not, getting its very own Vin de Pays designation. It is impossible to memorize, or comprehend, all of them...the chart of VDP zones is absolutely daunting...but three of these small "zones" turned up consistently delicious wines during my tastings.

The first is Vin de Pays des Côtes Catalanes, tucked in right near the Spanish border. I was very fond of several wines from this "zone" VDP, especially the 2007 La Bonté des Amis from Domaine Cabirau. Made from 100% Grenache (which VDPs can do), it's a bit dark, as Roussillon wines often are...but it carries some lovely rich fruit and spice. Not inexpensive, at $20 a bottle or so.

The second zone I found consistency in is the Vin de Pays Côtes de Thongue, which lies right near the region's great oyster-producing areas on the Mediterranean coast. I very much like the wines of Les Chemins de Bassac in this "zone" VDP, especially the 2007 Isa (a blend of local and Bordeaux varieties, because VDP can also do that!) with its lovely green bouquet and palate length. Here's a VDP de Zone bargain, at $12 the bottle.

The third zone that caught my eye really wowed me: Vin de Pays des Coteaux de Peyriac, situated between Narbonne and Carcassonne, very close to the AOC region of Corbières. This is a discovery. I loved the combination of complexity and elegance in these wines, really of a first-rate order; there is some New-World-ish-ness here too, but not in a clumsy way. The big winery winner, for me, was La Galinière, who, despite their considerable Carignan plantings, created a gorgeous-smoky 2008 Merlot in this zone at $15 a bottle. But I also fell for the 2006 "Expression Carignan" from Domaine Massamier la Mignarde--a plum-colored meat-and-mineral beauty for even less, coming in not much more than $12 a bottle.

VDP DE DÉPARTEMENT
A key political division in France is the *département*; there are 96

départments all together inside France. Inside the region of Languedoc-Roussillon, there's an average number of them, four--and each one gives its name to its own Vin de Pays de Département: Vin de Pays de l'Aude, Vin de Pays du Gard, Vin de Pays de l'Herault, and Vin de Pays des Pyrenées-Orientales.

For me, these designations are merely markers, without a lot of intrinsic style indication. Let's say you're a winemaker in Roussillon, and you've got grapes from 3 different "zones" going into your Vin de Pays. You cannot name this VDP wine for any single one of the zones (because there's three of them)--but you can give it the Vin de Pays from the département in which it was made, Vin de Pays des Pyrenées-Orientales.

VDP RÉGIONAL

This is the big one, the one VDP category that's seen on more labels than any other. Lucky break here for those keeping score: there is only *one* VDP régional designation in all of Languedoc-Roussillon, and it's called Vin de Pays d'Oc. Easy? The downside is that these wines can come from anywhere inside the vast region of Languedoc Roussillon, and there is a very wide variety of Vin de Pays d'Oc wines being made; some winemakers use the designation for classic multi-varietal wines, and some use it for single-varietal wines, both downscale and upscale.

One of my favorites of the latter kind comes from a great winery south of Carcassonne that has a commitment to Cabernet Franc, though their stunning 2008 Puydeval--a floral, incense-reminiscent grabber with adult concentration and tannin--indicates only Vin de Pays d'Oc on the label with no reference to Cabernet Franc. But another Vin de Pays d'Oc I like, the 2008 Villa des Anges Cabernet Sauvignon, does indicate the varietal right up front on the label. These are not bargain-basement wines; each will cost you around $20 at the wine shop, considerably more than some AOCs.

Another kind of Vin de Pays d'Oc wine is being produced by large international companies, such as Robert Skalli...and offered at very reasonable prices. I'm rather fond of their 2008 Fortant de France

Malbec, with its warm, jammy nose, and medium-chunky body. But a general note about mono-varietal Vin de Pays d'Ocs: though quality may in some cases be high, the wines would be hard to pick out in a blind tasting as wines of Languedoc-Roussillon. Of course, a producer like Skalli is also trying to make more local-tasting wines that are labeled Vin de Pays d'Oc--such as their lovely 2006 La Cuvée Mythique, produced from a combo of Syrah, Grenache Noir, Carignan, Mourvèdre, Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon.

It is a grand, exciting game, reckoning the styles of red wines from Languedoc-Roussillon, and I urge you to join in. Right now. Why? Truth be told, you may never have this chance again. For looming over all the small changes constantly being made by Languedoc-Roussillon officials are some macro-changes being instituted by an even large authority: the EU. Not now, not next year, maybe not even in this decade--but sometime soon, if the EU gets its way, there may be no more Corbières and Saint-Chinians. There may be no more Barolos, Gevrey-Chambertins and Riojas. The word is out...EU bureaucrats want to institute a squeaky-clean pan-European system in every country that has two generic tiers only, and cuts out most of the local geographic detail to which wine geeks are addicted.

The future is coming. Savor the complexities of Languedoc-Roussillon now, just as you savor its surprisingly wonderful wines.