

# To Roussillon, in search of finesse



When Rosemary George MW criticised the lack of elegance in Roussillon reds, in a *Decanter* panel tasting last year, the region's producers threw down the gauntlet – come and visit and we'll change your mind, they proposed. Here she reports on her trip, and shares her conclusions

*DECANTER'S* PANEL TASTING of the red wines of Roussillon (February 2015) provoked cries of outrage from many of the region's growers. Inexplicably, wines from some of the best names simply did not show well, so that there were no Outstanding wines, and only five of the 82 wines tasted were Highly Recommended.

As the journalist commissioned to write both the introduction and the summing up, I attempted to be as diplomatic and fair as possible; however, I was taken to task for saying that I found very little elegance in the line-up. Clearly Roussillon deserved better than that, so at the invitation of the region's wine body I spent five days there last autumn, to find out what Roussillon is really all about. It is always good to have preconceived ideas challenged, and challenged they were.

The first thing to make clear is that Roussillon is quite distinct from Languedoc. So often the two wine regions are lumped together, and this is clearly unfair to Roussillon.

Its history and traditions are quite different – it was part of Spain until the Treaty of the Pyrenees was signed in 1659 and its modern history places it firmly in Catalonia. Perpignan has more to do with Barcelona than with Narbonne, for the Pyrenees are not a frontier, but a unifying link between two parts of Catalonia. And unlike the Languedoc, its viticultural development was based on the production of fortified vins doux naturels.

The next thing to appreciate is the extraordinary geological complexity of Roussillon – what Lionel Lavail of Domaine Cazes calls '*une mosaïque de terroirs*'. The region is crossed by three rivers – the Agly, the Têt and the Tech – and it has mountains to the south, the Pyrenees, dominated by the Canigou, which play a big role in determining the climatic conditions of the region. To the north are the hills of Corbières; and to the east, the sea. Alain Razungles from Domaine des Chênes observes that Roussillon has >

*'So often Roussillon is lumped together with Languedoc, and this is unfair'*

Photograph: Mick Rock/Cephas

Above: hillside vineyards above the Côtes du Roussillon village of Caramany and the Barrage de l'Agly dam

just about every soil type somewhere in its vineyards, with the one exception of volcanic soil. In short, as Fabrice Rieu, president of the CIVR, the official body of the region, puts it: 'Roussillon grows 23 different grape varieties on 25 different soil types.'

### Varietal mix

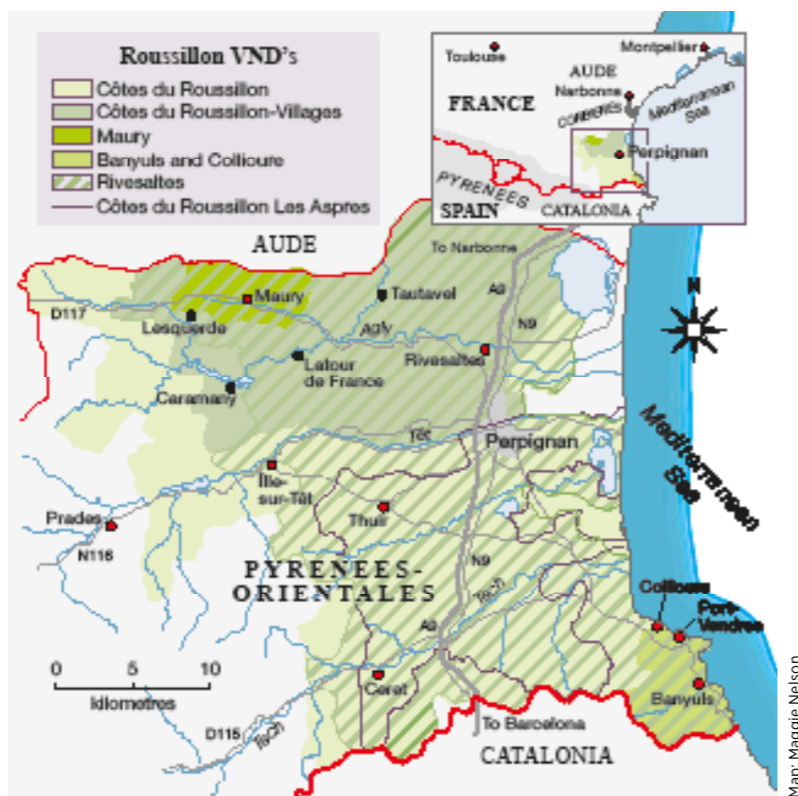
Grenache, in all three colours, with many venerable old vines, provides the backbone of the grape variety mix of Roussillon. Carignan, also with many old vines, is important too, and considered by Etienne Montès of Domaine la Casenove to be 'more aristocratic than Syrah'. Indeed Marjorie Gallet at Le Roc des Anges observes that she would not replant Syrah and that it is the truly Mediterranean varieties that work best of all.

It was the Parcé family of Banyuls that introduced Mourvèdre to the region, inspired by the example of Bandol in Provence and their friendship with Lucien Peyraud of Domaine Tempier, and this variety does perform particularly well close to the sea. In addition, Roussillon has its fair share of the so-called international varieties, such as Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay, which are used for vins de pays, as well as an incredible diversity of white varieties, about which more anon.

The main focus of Roussillon is on its red table wines. Côtes du Roussillon-Villages is the principal appellation, requiring a minimum of two varieties, and covering 32 villages in the northern part of the department, including a handful of named villages – Caramany, Lesquerde, Latour de France and Tautavel – each with their own distinctive terroir and character. Les Aspres, a dry, undulating area close to Perpignan, is about to be incorporated into the Côtes du Roussillon-Villages AC as another named area.

Maury is the newest table wine appellation, with vineyards on an oasis of black schist, making for wines with intense minerality, while Collioure is the table wine appellation of Banyuls, with wines that benefit from a tempering maritime influence. Côtes du Roussillon covers the southern part of the region, while Côtes Catalanes is the principal vin de pays and can be a wonderful source of originality and creativity, with its producers showing a healthy disrespect for some of the finer points of the appellation laws.

There is no doubt that the wines of Roussillon have seen a considerable evolution over the past decade or so; indeed for



**Left: Mas Bécha's Cuvée Excellence is unoaked, reflecting a move by some producers in the region towards wines of greater freshness**

Stéphane Gallet, 'Roussillon only really has 15 years of history.'

More than one vigneron asserts that 'we are not standing still'. You will see modern cellars equipped with the latest technology, and wine growers are experimenting with amphorae, concrete eggs, *tronconique* (tapered) vats, and vats of other shapes, not to mention oak barrels of different sizes. These days the traditional large wooden foudres are used for ageing the sweet, fortified vins doux rather than table wines but some, like Charles Perez at Mas

**Above: at Mas Amiel, Maury Doux sweet wines ripen in demi-johns under the Roussillon sun**

Bécha near Perpignan, in his Cuvée Excellence, use no wood at all, affirming simply that 'it is not necessary'.

The wines are also tending towards lower alcohol levels. At Roc des Anges the highest vines are at 300m and north facing, closer to the Pyrenees than to the sea, so that they enjoy the effect of the cool mountain air, and lower alcohol levels. Organic viticulture also makes for lower alcohol, according to Marjorie Gallet.

Nevertheless, the difference in temperature between Maury and the coast can be as much as 5°C in the summer. Vineyards in Roussillon are influenced by either the mountains or the sea. For Philippe Gard at Coume del Mas in Banyuls the *côté mer* has a strong vintage influence, whereas the *côté montagne* is more regular.

### Changing styles

Essentially you could see two trends in the red wines of Roussillon: some producers are looking for greater freshness and drinkability, while in other areas the grapes perform better when really ripe. As a result, there are still people making powerful, oaky wines, while others are searching for elegance, with a trend towards lighter extraction.

Charles Perez is one of several wine growers to talk about the search for drinkability, in a style that combines ripe fruit and elegance. Nicolas Raffy at Mas Amiel in Maury wants ripe grapes, while avoiding over-extraction, so he is using less wood – in particular fewer barriques – and working less on his fermentations.

A comparison of 2012 and 2006 vintages from Clos des Fées further east towards the

## Many facets: top Roussillon buys

**Domaine La Tour Vieille, Les Canadells, Collioure 2014** 97  
£16.50 Yapp Bros

Some oak and white blossom on the nose, with a rounded, satisfyingly textured palate and hints of fennel. A touch of oak makes for structure and ageability.  
**Drink** 2016-2018 **Alc** 14.5%

**Domaine de la Rectorie, L'Argile, Collioure 2014** 96  
£28 Fields Morris & Verdin

Mainly Grenache Gris with Grenache Blanc and including some centenarian vines. Lovely slaty, mineral notes and very well-integrated oak. A youthful freshness on the finish.  
**Drink** 2016-2020 **Alc** 14%

**Coume del Mas, Folio, Collioure 2014** 95  
£22-£26 Clark Foyster, Hedonism, Noel Young

Mainly Grenache Gris from 1960s vines, with a little Grenache Blanc, Terret and Carignan Blanc. Rounded, peachy fruit and white blossom nose. Textured palate, with citrus notes and fennel. Some salinity, especially on the finish.  
**Drink** 2016-2020 **Alc** 14%

**Domaine Lafage, Centenaire, Côtes du Roussillon 2014** 95  
£10-£12 All About Wine, The Drink Shop, Vin Cognito

A classic blend of Grenache Blanc and Roussanne. Fresh minerality on both nose and palate with an underlying salinity. Tight-knit and stony with a long finish. Youthful.  
**Drink** 2016-2020 **Alc** 13%

**Domaine La Toupie, Fine Fleur, Côtes du Roussillon 2014** 95  
£12.70 Joie de Vin

A little oak on the nose and palate, but nicely integrated fruit and fresh acidity. Harmonious, long finish.  
**Drink** 2016-2020 **Alc** 13%

**Domaine Vial Magnères, Petit Couscouril, Collioure 2014** 95  
N/A UK [www.vialmagneres.fr](http://www.vialmagneres.fr)

A blend of Grenache Blanc, Grenache Gris and Vermentino. A fresh, sappy nose with a lovely salinity on the palate. Refreshing and elegant with great depth of flavour.  
**Drink** 2016-2020 **Alc** 14%

**Domaine Vaquer, L'Expression, Carignan, Côtes Catalanes 2011** 95  
£14.95 Wine Sensations

A stunning example of a pure Carignan, from vines planted in 1936. Aged in vat, so there's some lovely red fruit and elegant tannins, followed by a refreshing finish.  
**Drink** 2016-2023 **Alc** 13.5%

**Le Roc des Anges, 1903 Carignan, Côtes Catalanes 2013** 95  
N/A UK [www.rocdesanges.com](http://www.rocdesanges.com)

Lovely example of pure Carignan, with firm, mineral notes. It is rich and powerful but with an underlying freshness, especially on the long finish.  
**Drink** 2016-2025 **Alc** 13.5%

**Domaine Boucabeille, Les Orris, Côtes du Roussillon 2014** 94  
£22.50 Justerini & Brooks

An unusually high proportion of Mourvèdre in the blend as it was especially good in 2014. Portrays the elegance of the vintage with firm black fruit and fresh, peppery notes. Nicely balanced finish.  
**Drink** 2017-2025 **Alc** 14%

**Mas Bécha, Classique, Côtes du Roussillon-Villages 2013** 94  
N/A UK [www.masbecha.com](http://www.masbecha.com)

A blend of Syrah with Grenache and Mourvèdre. Lots of ripe black fruit on both nose and palate with a firm backbone of tannin and a fresh finish.  
**Drink** 2017-2025 **Alc** 14.5% ➤





*‘Roussillon only really has 15 years of history’*

**Stéphane Gallet of Le Roc des Anges, pictured above with wife Marjorie and the family pet**

coast showed a definite shift in style, while a vertical tasting of Jean Boucabeille’s Cuvée Les Orris from 2010 back to 2003 illustrated not only the vintage effect but also the ageing potential of the best red wines of Roussillon.

However, much as I enjoyed Roussillon’s red wines, the real surprise for me was the outstanding quality and originality of the whites. They may only account for a small part of the production of the region, but they are truly worth seeking out, for their minerality and depth of flavour.

The backbone variety is again Grenache, both Blanc and Gris, with the real depth of character coming from Grenache Gris, its citrus notes, salinity and minerality. Roussanne, Marsanne and Vermentino were introduced into the region in the 1980s, with Vermentino proving the most successful. Hervé Bizeul of Clos des Fées was inspired by the Vermentino of Corsica, and he also makes a delicious pure Semillon, with distinctive varietal character.

Carignan Blanc is tolerated, but not included in the appellation, even though it performs a useful role, adding structure and acidity. There is also Malvoisie, otherwise known as Torbat, which is declining in importance; and Macabeo, which is more delicate. Generally Roussillon’s whites never undergo malolactic fermentation as it is vital to retain acidity, and sometimes they may be fermented and aged in barrel. Lees stirring can enhance flavour, but must be done with care as it can make a wine too fat and heavy.

**Sweet to dry**

The other significant change has been a distinct shift away from the fortified vins doux naturels (Maury, Rivesaltes and Banyuls) towards table wines, which they call vins secs. Jean-Michel Parcé observed that 20 years ago he was making one-third vin sec to two-thirds vin doux – today that figure is reversed.

**Top Roussillon buys (continued)**



**Clot de l’Oum, Numero Uno, Côtes du Roussillon-Villages Caramany 2009** 93  
N/A UK [www.clotdeloum.com](http://www.clotdeloum.com)

Mainly Syrah and Carignan. Round, lightly smoky nose, with spice and fruit on the palate, and along and elegant finish. **Drink** 2016-2023 **Alc** 13%

**Domaine des Chênes, Le Mascarou, Côtes du Roussillon-Villages Tautavel 2009** 93

£12.05 **OW Loeb, Vin Cognito**  
Very intense nose of oak and garrigue scents. Youthful fruit with herbs, spice and liquorice, well-integrated oak and a fresh finish, despite the alcohol. **Drink** 2016-2023 **Alc** 15%

**Domaine Modat, Comme Avant, Côtes du Roussillon-Villages Caramany 2012** 92

N/A UK [www.domaine-modat.com](http://www.domaine-modat.com)  
Ripe, spicy nose and a rounded, harmonious palate. There is more

than enough fruit to balance the alcohol. **Drink** 2016-2025 **Alc** 15%



**Domaine Cazes, Cuvée Aimé Cazes, Rivesaltes 1978** 95

£83-£104 **Exel, Hedonism, Liberty Wines, The Fine Wine Co**  
Beautiful amber colour. Dry nose, with firm nutty fruit on the palate. A little reminiscent of very dry old oloroso Sherry. One of the great Rivesaltes.

**Drink** 2016-2025 **Alc** 15%



**Mas Amiel, 15 Years Old, Maury NV** 96

£21.50-£34.95 **Georges Barbier, Perfect Cellar**  
Pure Grenache Noir aged to an amber brick colour. Rich fruit with figs, spices and liquorice. Long, elegant and utterly delicious. One to be savoured and treasured.

**Drink** 2016-2025 **Alc** 16.5%

*For full UK stockist details, see p111*

Vins doux still remain an important part of Roussillon’s production however, and a very significant part in terms of wonderful originality. Producers of Banyuls and the new appellation of Maury Sec continue to take pride in their vins doux, while hoping that the recognition of the latter won’t have an adverse effect on Maury Doux. The young vintage sweet red styles, Rimage and Grenat, as they are called in Banyuls and Maury respectively, have a beguiling freshness and fruitiness compared to ruby or LBV Port, while the wines that mature for years, if not decades, in old barrels have a unique individuality, and deserve a wider audience. Utterly irresistible!

But let me save my final words for the vins secs of Roussillon, and in particular the red wines of the region. There’s no doubt that both viticulture and winemaking have improved enormously in recent years, and the style of the wines has gently evolved, so that elegance features in the flavour palette of Roussillon in a way that it never did before. I am confident that the judges for *Decanter’s* next Roussillon tasting, whenever that may be, will not be taken to task for failing to find elegance. **D**

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