

Once derided as a region of cheap jug wine, the south of France is now proving its ability to make characterful, terroir-driven wines at highly competitive price points. This modern transformation began relatively recently in the early 1990s, when a younger generation of globetrotting winemakers decided to adopt a new approach, bringing a more international outlook and fresh ideas to Languedoc wines across the board.

It is this firmament – winemakers such as Nathalie Arnaud-Bernard of Domaine de Nizas and Jean-Philippe Leca of Domaine Bassac – that has continued to drive ever-increasing improvements in wine quality. “After my appointment at Domaine de Nizas in 2011, I initiated an intense programme of vineyard restructuring across the estate’s prized vineyards,” says Domaine de Nizas’ winemaker Arnaud-Bernard. “We undertook a radical restructuring of the vineyard, with the ultimate goal of bringing significant improvements to the quality of our wines.”

Organic viticulture is also of particular importance in this regard – Domaine Bassac was responsible for creating the international trade fair Millésime Bio, which promotes and celebrates organic wine production in the region.

However, larger players such as Domaines Paul Mas are also driving innovation. Indeed, this ever-growing outfit remains the poster child for the modern face of the Languedoc, producing brand-driven wines at competitive price points.

Under the leadership of Jean-Claude Mas since 2000, the domaine focused its initial efforts on building a robust presence across key export markets, having found the French unreceptive to the idea of premium Languedoc wines. “France is still a very traditional market; French consumers have not classically prescribed any real value to wine from the Languedoc,” admits Jean-Claude Mas.

Today, however, Mas’ current preoccupation is producing sulphur-free and low-sulphite wines. At the LWF, Mas unveiled his Cuvée Secrète red, a sulphite-free blend of Merlot/Cabernet Franc, in addition to the 2015 vintage of the Cuvée Secrète Chardonnay. “In 2015, we vinified around half of the total white wine volume and 25% of the red volume with only a minor addition of sulphur,” says Mas.

“It’s important to remember that the Languedoc has fewer traditions to respect than, say, Burgundy, and so winemakers in the region are far more willing to experiment and innovate than in other parts of France,” he adds.

IGP rules

Indeed, the Languedoc is today the only major French wine region where a significant number of producers are increasingly sidelining appellation frameworks in favour of the IGP designation. It is this freedom to make wines outside of the traditional appellation frameworks, that Mas and many others regard as the region’s most important USP.

Moreover, growers point out that the Languedoc’s myriad appellations will probably never be understood by consumers. “The appellation system is extremely limiting and outdated with regard to the varieties you are allowed to grow in the Languedoc, and the viticultural and winemaking techniques you can apply – it’s a minefield for consumers,” insists Domaine Sainte Rose owner Ruth Simpson.

TAKING THE PULSE OF THE SOUTH

The revolution in Languedoc-Roussillon winemaking is one of the most dramatic in France’s wine industry in recent times, writes James Lawrence



Domaine Sainte Rose owner Ruth Simpson

“This sidelining of appellations for IGP designations is wonderful”

Ted Sandbach

She continues: “In 2012, as a result of changes in the IGP system, we began producing traditional-method sparkling wine, which was a major development for us as we had previously only focused on still winemaking. We now make a range of blanc de blancs, blanc de noirs and rosé sparkling wines.”

In contrast, other estates take a more conservative line. “We believe it is good to have both IGP and AOC wines. The AOC rules were created in part to refocus on the production of quality wines and to protect the terroirs, so it is not surprising that AOC wines are our heartland as they generally offer more balance and complexity,” argues Arnaud-Bernard.

New World approach

Nonetheless, it is equally undeniable that this “New World” approach has empowered the Languedoc to create some formidably strong brands – something of a rarity in France. In this regard, Domaines Paul Mas is clearly the market leader, having pioneered the globally recognised Arrogant Frog and Striking French varietal range. The range has since become Domaines Paul Mas’ leading mascot, its signature tongue-in-cheek label that is much loved by consumers everywhere.

Meanwhile, the UK trade generally reports a strong take-up of Languedoc wines, particularly in the retail sector. “Sales of top Languedoc wines have been fantastic over the past 12 months,” enthuses Oxford Wine Company owner Ted Sandbach. “This sidelining of appellations for IGP designations is wonderful – the public are not interested in AOC status, rather they care about how the wine tastes. My only reservation is that prices are a little high, but put the wines in a blind tasting with more established areas and you will see that they stand up.”

However, this is not to suggest that the region has had no challenges to contend with, or that the entire industry is enjoying the same level of prosperous growth and development. Domaine Bassac owner François Delhon observes that some parts of Roussillon in particular are resting on their laurels, with little dynamism seen from the Côtes du Roussillon and appellations such as Banyuls and Maury.

In addition, Delhon and others argue that the region still has some ghosts to exorcise. “Our major weakness remains this stubborn image of co-operatives churning out indifferent wines, an image that still lingers in the minds of some global consumers,” says Delhon.

“Unfortunately I think that as a result of the traditional French appellation system and established assumptions about the area, Languedoc wines will only ever be able to command a certain price point, which is a crying shame as in many cases these wines are worth a lot more,” adds Simpson.

Yet overall there is good cause to remain optimistic about the Languedoc’s future on the global stage. Its leading producers have displayed a remarkable flair for marketing, successfully exploiting key export markets like the UK, Scandinavia and the US. Moreover, the diversity of the region’s output is astonishing: high quality traditional-method sparkling wine, characterful reds, esoteric white blends and even good Pinot Noir are all up for grabs, at prices that generally compare very favourably with regions like Marlborough and Mendoza.

But most importantly, the region’s winemakers are committed to their cause of furthering the good name of the Languedoc worldwide. “We can’t rest on our laurels – our job is to go around the world and convince the global trade that they need a shelf exclusively dedicated to Languedoc wines. For only if we persevere, will this archaic image finally die a long-deserved death,” Delhon offers as his final thought.

And presuming that its winemakers continue to refine their craft, innovate and promote the quality of their wines on the global stage, it would not be hyperbole to suggest that the Languedoc has a very bright future ahead.