

**T**he Languedoc is currently one of the world's most exciting wine regions, fuelled by progressive winemakers who have the freedom to innovate, a dazzling array of geological and climatic conditions and a host of appellations and varieties.

But it still has a job to do in educating consumers about its manifold gems and trading them up to its superb array of premium wines.

OLN brought together some of the UK's leading independent wine merchants at a roundtable event to discuss how the trade can premiumise the Languedoc for UK shoppers.

We looked at education, packaging, marketing, how to bring in younger consumers who love New World wines and how to win over older drinkers who remember the Languedoc as a cheap and cheerful "wine lake".

We were joined by Marie-Annick Consola, UK sales manager at Les Vignobles Foncalieu, a union of co-operatives representing more than 1,000 grape growers covering 4,500ha of vineyards in the region.

Seventy per cent of its business is export and around a third of that goes to the UK, making it Foncalieu's largest market. But 90% of its UK sales go through the on-trade, so it was keen to discuss how it can increase its footprint among indies - it is not targeting supermarkets - and how the UK trade can benefit by driving value into the Languedoc category. "The Languedoc was well known many years ago as a big producer of entry-level wines with big volumes to sell," Consola said. "We have worked to change the image and make people understand that Languedoc is a rich region with so many terroirs and so much versatility to offer. We can produce entry-level wines but also very high quality wines."

The independents who gathered were generally full of praise for the region, and none more so than Ted Sandbach of the Oxford Wine Co, who said: "The Languedoc is the most exciting wine region in the world, without a shadow of a doubt. South Africa is interesting at the moment too, but Languedoc is so exciting and it's only just beginning to reach its potential. We have a list of about 30 or 40 Languedoc wines."

"The wines go really well with food, they are versatile and they have a healthy, clean, pure image. It's the best region in the world."

Ben Slater of The Sampler added: "Languedoc is an exciting region at the moment because of the younger winemakers around, but also because of the diversity of the terroir. There are so many different soils and geological conditions that there is a lot that can be done, combined with all the different varieties available."

"We sell around eight Languedoc wines. It's a conversion job from people who have come in looking for the lumped-together idea of the Languedoc where everything has to be

# LOVING THE LANGUEDOC

The trade loves it, but how can the Languedoc reach consumers? An expert panel tackled the question. Martin Green reports

at a certain price point and then getting the conversation going and turning them towards a specific region or terroir or winemaker, then building up the knowledge level. That pushes the price point up as they get more interested. There is a lot of potential and we have seen decent growth in Languedoc sales."

But the retailers highlighted some key obstacles for the region to overcome if it is to crack the UK market.

## POINT OF DIFFERENCE

"In the premium market you have to focus on what you can do that no one else can. What your exclusivity is," said Sam Tyson of Brighton retailer and wine bar Ten Green Bottles. "The Languedoc is unwieldy. It can't have one direction. It needs to figure out an identity for different things, because the policy that works in one place doesn't work in another. So it comes down to sales and marketing directors as the sector matures to figure out their points of difference."

"It's a vast region with different climates and it can be very confusing," said Yannick Loué of Le Vignoble in Plymouth, who highlighted the importance of marketing in a bid to communicate the region's strengths. "Languedoc is an interesting area for us as

we target the younger generation with lower income than the older generation. It's a key area. The versatility you can find in the Languedoc, and the freedom, is interesting. To show that beauty that can be made from the Languedoc to the younger generation can be quite amazing."

"We market it in the shop the same way as the New World. It becomes easier. The freedom to do whatever it wants is a big strength. To have freedom and follow the vineyard rather than the appellation. You have 1,000 passionate, committed winegrowers. Tell us about it. Being a big co-operative can put a bad label on the wines. People want to know who makes it, where the wine comes from. Play with your 1,000 passionate, committed winegrowers."

Slater at The Sampler added: "Making the Languedoc more premium is about drawing a line between what's in the bottle and who has



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made it and the vineyard in order to provide some kind of traceability.

"A co-operative blurs the lines between what's in the bottle and who made it. It's a misunderstanding among consumers, because there are lots of good co-operatives."

Sandbach said co-operatives are necessary in a part of the world where a lot of people have great terroir but don't have the money, the knowledge or the wherewithal to grow grapes that produce top wines.

As the discussion progressed, Mark Flounders from London retailer Vagabond Wines said: "I have learned a new definition of a co-op. I would like more information about making that consumer friendly so they don't have negative connotations with the word. I think our Languedoc range will be led by interesting, obscure varieties and upcoming AOCs. It hasn't been high on our radar but it is now. It has good versatility and I would like to learn more about the thousands of winegrowers going forwards."

Obscure varieties are a key focus for Foncalieu's viticulturalist Gabriel Ruetsch. "There will be a new revolution for the Languedoc and the project for me is to plant new varieties," he said. "We already have Albariño, Sauvignon Gris and Picpoul Noir. At Foncalieu we have an open mind and we are always developing new projects and helping our growers to plant new varieties."

Everything kept coming back to the 1,000-plus winegrowers Foncalieu represents and how this can be turned into a strength. That is because the retailers agreed that the Languedoc is still a hand-sell. "It will take another 10 or 15 years before consumers understand it correctly," said

Sandbach. "People lump it together but it's an enormous region with huge variations. That education is not going to happen quickly."

Slater added: "Most of our customers are starting to realise the Languedoc makes quality wines. There are not that many consumers who come in looking for an individual region within the Languedoc and that's where the opportunity lies. Playing on the diversity of the region will help premiumise the region as a whole. Almost steering away from the catch-all term the Languedoc and explaining where the wines are from could be the way forward."

"Varietal labelling is great, but there should be typical rather than overly unusual varieties. It doesn't mean they have to be expensive, but they should be local to maintain an identity, and that flows through to how to premiumise - identifying individual terroirs, where the quality appellations are and communicating the diversity of the region a bit more in order to pull the price points up, and make each region distinctive so people can understand that. Those are key, and provenance, connecting the people making it to the wines."

## VARIETAL LABELLING

For Flounders at Vagabond, varietal labelling is crucial to bringing shoppers into the Languedoc category. "It is an exciting region, with the ability to label single varieties and have flying winemakers that come and take risks," he said. "The fact they can put Albariño or Carignan or Sauvignon Blanc on the label can help. Although it is often a hand-sell, it also attracts people by grape variety."

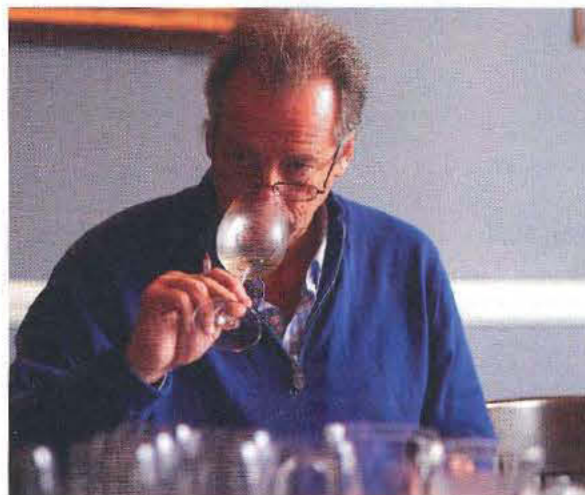
"It will take a very long time for the general punter to learn about specific regions from the Languedoc." He believes shoppers would pick up an Albariño from Foncalieu's portfolio, ask where it is from, learn that France produces grape varieties like that then begin to explore the region and trade up to premium offerings.

Small minimum drops are always a barrier for suppliers wanting to trade with independents. Sandbach said: "Foncalieu is a big operation with a lot of versatility and a lot of fruit. The key thing to get into UK regional wine merchants is to have some good everyday stuff, so that we can bring over 30 cases of this, 40 cases of that, but then we can add on the really interesting wines in your portfolio."

"None of us can afford 50 cases of this [pointing to one of the producer's top wines on the table] despite being reasonable sized companies. We need something to hang it on - good quality everyday wines, with some really interesting single vineyard wines."

"There is nothing wrong with the Languedoc having a generic blend that tastes good - fruity, easy - and then you go into the more interesting wines after that. You can add on a couple of cases of something really interesting to an order of something that is the workhorse."

Another issue Consola at Foncalieu wanted to explore was exclusivity, but the Indies around the table said it was not a major concern. Flounders said: "We don't really chase exclusivity. We wouldn't want the wineries we import not to be able to earn by selling elsewhere in the UK. If it's our next door neighbour it's maybe an issue we would have a chat about, but if we are not stepping on each other's toes we don't have an issue. We don't want to steal business from each other. We are independents because we don't want people to



The debate was lively throughout the Languedoc tasting and roundtable



## ROUNDTABLE EXPERTS



**Ted Sandbach**  
OXFORD WINE CO  
Managing director



**Mark Flounders**  
VAGABOND  
Wholesale manager



**Marie-Annick Consola**  
FONCALIEU  
UK sales manager



**Gabriel Ruetsch**  
FONCALIEU  
Viticulturalist



**Sam Tyson**  
TEN GREEN BOTTLES



**Ben Slater**  
THE SAMPLER  
Trade sales manager



**Yannick Loué**  
LE VIGNOBLE  
Owner



**Martin Green**  
OFF LICENCE NEWS  
Editor

## ON THE TABLE THE WINE TASTING

The participants sampled these premium wines produced by Les Vignobles Foncalieu:

- Albariño 2015 Vin de France 100% Albariño
- Château Haut Gleon Blanc 2014 AOP Corbières
- 60% Roussanne/40% Grenache Blanc
- Carignan Old Vines 2015 IGP Coteaux d'Enserune
- 100% Carignan
- Atelier Prestige les Illustres 2013 IGP Coteaux d'Enserune
- 60% Syrah/30% Cabernet Sauvignon/10% Malbec
- Atelier Prestige L'Apogée 2013 AOP Saint Chinian
- 85% Syrah/15% Grenache Noir
- Château Haut Gleon Rouge 2013 AOP Corbières
- 60% Grenache/25% Syrah/15% Vieilles Vignes de Carignan

have to go and buy trash from the supermarkets, so we don't want to hinder other people who want to help with that aim."

Sandbach said: "The biggest problem with exclusivity is with wholesale, not with retail, and most of us know each other. We have a conversation with each other that puts it right. There aren't big worries about that."

"Independent wine merchants recognise each other for what we are and we are all trying to achieve the same thing. We don't want to bugger up everyone else. It's a sensible conversation, everyone has to make margins."

The independent retailers were convinced that the quality of wines coming out of the Languedoc will allow them to make a margin going forwards. Flounders and Sandbach predicted their ranges from the region would increase. Tyson has no concerns about driving value into the category because most of Ten Green Bottles' Languedoc range sells for north of £20. He said: "There is still that idea of the wine lake and people pulling up old vines, but that perception is becoming increasingly dated. It's coming through to the consumer that these wines are beautiful and have value. Appellation and the context of Minervois or Faugeres are where growth comes from."

Loué is enthused about the region because he believes it can win over the younger demographic he is targeting - and which the entire trade should really be targeting. "If you want to target the young generation that knows the New World the versatility is good. These labels [from Foncalieu] are approachable to the young and the old generations. It's all about education. The price point is correct for the younger generation and it's very easy to bring them in."

"Versatility, traceability and freedom are its strengths. Communication of the whole region is key. It's an exciting time for Languedoc. With Brexit and the prices of the other regions in France, Languedoc is in a good position to bring over some very good wines at good prices, and we can get the younger generation behind them." 🍷