

HAND PICKED SELECTIONS

25+ years of quality, character and value



Character Counts!

Featured HPS Wines
6/30/11



Robert Parker
eRobertParker.com

FRANCE - ROUSSILLON

The myriad permutations and combinations of vine, terroir, and vintner that lend Roussillon's wines their dazzling stylistic diversity already result in some of these being among the world's finest, as well as its best vinous values. To paraphrase what I wrote in introducing this region for my reports in issues 173 and 183, whether your taste runs to South Australian Shiraz or Loire Valley Chinon; Blaufränkisch from Burgenland or Pinot from Burgundy; Riesling or Bordeaux Blanc; Rhône or Port, you'll find a wealth of Roussillon wines both to welcome you and stretch your imagination. And the best is yet to come. Sons and daughters of this region continue to blaze new quality trails, while an international cast of experienced wine growers and starry-eyed novices keeps growing, drawn by a dry climate; remarkable and diverse soils; ancient vines; and still-affordable land. It's hard to point to another region of the wine world that looks more promising even on paper not to mention to look at, but of course that wouldn't matter if proof were not in the glass, and this region's track record for excellence is burgeoning. The self-critical and inspired determination one finds among the Languedoc's top talents (profiled separately in this issue) seems to be heightened in the rarified air of the Pyrenean foothills.

CUVÉE DE PENA

While Joseph "Tony" Gonzalez has officially retired from his long-time position overseeing the cooperative in Cases-de-Pene, I am told that he will remain active not to mention vigilant, and the team here has once again turned out a set of exceptional values for marketing under the "Pena brand."

2010 Cuvée de Pena Rosé

(87-88) points

I tasted the Grenache-Syrah 2010 Cuvée de Pena Rosé (formerly labeled "Ninet de Pena") as a tank sample in January, although it was in the U.S. market already by early spring. Roughly half of the juice for this comes from bleeding red wine fermentations, which no doubt partly explains its deep reddish-pink color and its robustness. But it is plenty refreshing for all of its fullness, and not in the least boring. Tart rhubarb; pungent evocations of scrubby herbs; and a lick of salt all lend invigoration, while ripe cherry and raspberry fruit is also underlain by a hint of meatiness, all of which should lend this remarkable bargain versatility at table over the next 6 months.

Cuvée de Pena Viognier

(87-88) points

From vines just twelve years old and a cepage that I continue to view skeptically for warm, arid Roussillon, the Pena 2010 Viognier - tasted in January via a tank sample - appears to have beaten the odds. A heady nose of overripe pear and peach in syrup garlanded in acacia is unmistakably of its cepage and sets up - in my mind at least - expectations of softness and heaviness on the palate. But these are defied. To be sure, this is expansive, oily in texture, and almost sweetly-ripe. But it never becomes tiring, thanks to a modicum of fresh fruit juiciness and to notes of lime peel, peach kernel, and wet stone that offer pungent, piquant, and mineral counterpoint all the way through to a finish of Acacia honey and fruit preserves. Plan to enjoy this amazing value (how can they grow finicky Viognier and bottle such quality for this price?) by the end of the year.

2009 Cuvée de Pena Rouge

90 points

The as usual Carignan-based red 2009 Cuvée de Pena is simply the finest of its illustrious bargain-priced breed that I have tasted (and I go back 20 years with this cuvée and its predecessor), which also makes it a mind-boggling value! Clean and polished, concentrated but unexaggerated, this delivers sweet fruit with soil and soul. Ripe cherry, black raspberry, and purple plum are shadowed by their distilled counterparts in a high-toned nose and practically gush on the palate. Pungent, resinous herbs, smoky black tea, toasted pecan, brown spices, and crushed stone all serve for aromatic and gustatory interest, leading to a brightly juicy yet deeply rich finish. Buy it by the case, or buy it by the bag-in-box; delight and - if you dare reveal its price - amaze your guests over at least the next couple of years, though quite possibly longer. (And we wine snobs need to stick this into some blind tastings to put quality-price rapport into perspective, and perhaps some prejudices to rest.)

DOMAINE CABIRAU

Importer-proprietor Dan Kravitz has scored renewed success with his latest Domaine Cabirau releases, vinified and raised in tank under the auspices of Nicolas Burger at the (now joint) Tautavel-Vingrau coop of which he is also a member.

2009 Domaine Cabirau Grenache Serge & Nicolas

91 points

Dominated three-quarters by old vines - some of which informed in 2007 a memorable separate bottling known as "Le Bonte des Amis" that he no longer plans to produce - Kravitz's 2009 Grenache Serge & Nicolas is redolent of black raspberry preserves and grenadine, along with overtones of kirsch, herbal distillate, peat and smoked meats. Sappy concentration of dark berries and grenadine syrup are mingled with herbal liqueur in a palate performance that for all of its sheer ripeness preserves startling verve and invigoration, bitterness of cherry pit and schiste-licking mineral notes - along with an exposed seam of tannin - serving for robust counterpoint in a sustained finish. This terrific value ought to be even more expressive - and possibly more refined in finish - in another year or two, and be worth following for at least half a dozen.

2009 Domaine Cabirau Côtes du Roussillon Malgre les Fonctionnaires

90 points

From Grenache - with a bit of Syrah and Carignan acquired via a rental agreement in order to permit classification as A.O.C. - the Cabirau 2009 Côtes du Roussillon Malgre les Fonctionnaires ("Despite the Bureaucrats") delivers sweetly-ripe scents and juicily-generous flavors of grenadine and black raspberry, with nips of white pepper and pleasantly astringent impressions of berry seed serving for invigoration in a palate-staining finish that preserves a distinctive sense of crushed stone and peat underpinnings. Firm and bright as it is, this outstanding value is likely to open up with another year or two in bottle, just as it did in the glass after opening.

DOMAINE DE L'EDRE

Jacques Castany and Pascal Dieunidou - for more about whom, see my report in issue 183 - are slowly but confidently expanding their estate. They are also focusing on achieving more gentle fermentative extraction, increasingly favoring remontage over pigeage. The 2010 white here was still working on its sugar, while the Carignan destined for the red blends was still in malo - reflecting an unusually retarded evolution by this estate's standards - so no useful assessment was yet possible of that vintage at this address. Note that the Mourvedre coming on line here is now influencing the character of both of the l'Edre reds.

2009 Domaine de l'Edre Du Roussillon Villages Carrement

90 points

While the bitter elements in the 2009 Carrement white were a bit too accentuated by heat from 14.5% alcohol, the tank-raised red l'Edre 2009 Côtes du Roussillon Villages Carrement - around half Syrah, but now including a significant amount of Mourvedre as well as Grenache and Carignan - gives an impressive account of itself. Dark berries, bitter dark chocolate, and a gaminess that diminishes with aeration are joined by licorice, vanilla, cherry pit, and black pepper on a plush, texturally-polished, glycerin-rice, seamlessly-ripe palate. While there is faint finishing warmth here, there is also an exuberant persistence of juicy, fresh black fruits such as one too-seldom encounters in this vintage. I would plan to enjoy this over the next 2-3 years.

2009 Domaine de l'Edre Côtes du Roussillon Villages l'Edre

92 points

More than half Syrah, along with Grenache, Carignan and now Mourvedre, a portion of the 2009 Côtes du Roussillon Villages l'Edre was vinified in upright, new demi-muids, and the entirety was aged in older barriques. Vivid black raspberry and dark cherry inform the nose and a seamlessly ripe, dense, glycerin-rich palate. Ultra-fine tannins do nothing to disrupt a liqueur-like sense of richness, kissed in the finish by dark chocolate, iodine, and brown spices. This should merit following for at least 6-8 years. Castany and Dieunidou, incidentally, class it with their 2005 as the best exemplar of this cuvée that they have yet bottled.

2008 Domaine de l'Edre Côtes du Roussillon Villages l'Edre

93 points

More pungently spicy and with, if anything, a yet finer edge than its 2009 counterpart, the 2008 Côtes du Roussillon Villages l'Edre - roughly two-thirds Syrah, with Grenache and Carignan - is flamboyantly ripe in its evocations of dark cherry and black raspberry preserves. Pungent ginger and smoky black tea, along with tart berry skin and piquant fruit pit, make for tactile energy and invigoration in superbly sustained finish. Unlike its authors, I give this the edge over its 2009 counterpart, largely on account of its sense of dynamic and its sheer juiciness. But it will be fascinating to track the two of them over the next 6-8 years.

2008 Domaine de l'Edre Du Roussillon Villages Carrement

91 points

L'Edre's Syrah-Grenache-Carignan blend 2008 Côtes du Roussillon Villages Carrement features ripe purple plum and dark cherry accented by licorice, black pepper, and piquant fruit pit. Polished and glycerin-rich like its 2009 counterpart, this predictably musters an even more remarkable sense of primary fruit juiciness for an effect at once soothing and invigorating, its bitter and pungent elements lending a medicinal cast to a palate-staining finish. It ought to be worth following for several more years, although there is plenty of incentive to revisit and relish it soon.

LE CIRQUE

Le Cirque is a new joint project between the recently united coops of Tautavel-Vingrau and member-importer Dan Kravitz, strikingly-labeled to depict the gigantic bowl of cliff-encircled vineyards above Vingrau for which the wines are named. The three inaugural releases are pretty striking themselves. (Note that another collaboration between this coop and member-importer Dan Kravitz, known as Domaine des 3 Vallées, is reviewed under its own name in this report, as are two wines under the coop's own label, Les Vignerons de Tautavel Vingrau. And, as if this were not proliferation enough, it must be noted that the team has plans to market under the Le Cirque label within Europe cuvées entirely different from those being offered in the U.S.)

2010 Le Cirque Grenache Gris

90 points

The Le Cirque 2010 Grenache Gris - which I tasted just after its winter bottling - smells alluringly of iris and honeysuckle atop ripe melons and pineapple. Luscious and infectiously juicy, it saturates the palate with watermelon, Persian melon, and pineapple, mingled with walnut oil, peat, crushed stone, and saliva-liberating salinity, all of which collaborate on an exuberant finish, delivering an amazing value that will certainly continue to satisfy for at least a couple of years.

2010 Le Cirque Rouge

90 points

The freshly-bottled 2010 Le Cirque red - which I refer to as "Le Cirque" since it is otherwise a vin de pays with no name; although I could refer to "50% Carignan, 25% Mourvedre, 25% Syrah" as they appear prominently on the wrap-around label, and despite my having reason to believe there's some Grenache here, too - reached me just as this report was going to press. "I'm surprised that this has evolved enough to be bottled already," remarked Kravitz. "I thought it would be September before I blended it." I'd be able to drink quite a bit of this by September! Here are the virtues of the 2010 vintage on tasty display: impeccably ripe but vivacious fruit (above all red raspberry and cassis) accompanied by enticingly salty minerality; pungent, resinous impingement of rosemary and black pepper; and a slight, but by no means unattractive, reductive suggestion of smoked meats. I'm willing to assume that the alcohol level is 14.5% as labeled, but given the levity and infectious juiciness of a finish free from heat or roughness, I would have found it easier to believe this harbored 13.5%. My suspicion is that this superb value will be best drunk over the next couple of years, but there's really no telling, given no track record.

2010 Le Cirque Rosé

89 points

From Grenache (around 10% of it Gris) and Syrah, the Le Cirque 2010 Rosé is distinctively suggestive of tart cherry, prickly pear, and pineapple; is lush yet bright, possessed of invigorating tactile impingement suggesting citrus zest, red fruit skins, pineapple core; and crystalline minerality; and introduces a rich element of nut oils as well as a foundation of wet stone in its vibrant, refreshing finish. Quite distinct from any other pink wine you will have tasted, this outstanding value should be worth pursuing over the next 6-9 months. (And it's not a rosé to confine to warm-weather consumption.)

LES VIGNERONS DE TAUTAVEL VINGRAU

The cooperative of Vingrau was recently absorbed by that of Tautavel, which has been an unusually quality-conscious entity of its kind. Two of their more ambitious wines from 2009 will be marketed under this new joint coop's name. (Note that the Le Cirque and Domaine des 3 Vallées labels also issue from this coop - in collaboration with member-importer Dan Kravitz - and are reviewed under those names in the present report.)

2009 Les Vignerons de Tautavel Vingrau Côtes du Roussillon Villages Piedmont du Château

87 points

The Tautavel-Vingrau 2009 Côtes du Roussillon Villages Piedmont du Château is Grenache with 20% each Carignan and Syrah, matured in older barrique. Scents of cherry, black raspberry, rhubarb, and peat foreshadow a - particularly for this vintage - surprisingly tart palate impression with rhubarb and cherry pit prominent. Firmly tannic though thankfully still brightly juicy, this finishes with added interest via smoky, stony notes. I wouldn't have picked it out as a 2009, but it is certainly distinctive, and apt to prove more winsome in the proper culinary contexts than it does on its own. I won't speculate on its bottle potential past the next couple of years.

2009 Les Vignerons de Tautavel Vingrau Côtes du Roussillon Villages Tautavel Silex

90 points

The Tautavel-Vingrau 2009 Côtes du Roussillon Villages Tautavel Silex features lightly-cooked black raspberry mingled with licorice, smoky black tea, and crushed stone. Remarkably bright, focused and juicy for its vintage, yet very sweetly ripe and with a rich finishing undertone of nut oils, this (older) barrique-matured blend of equal parts Grenache and Syrah with 20% Carignan was allegedly crushed by foot. If that's what it took - "do it again!" is all I can say. Given that this is not inexpensive wine, one could quibble about the slight alcoholic after-burn in its otherwise impressively long finish. But this is going to deliver enormous pleasure at the dinner table for at least the next several years.

FRANCE - WESTERN LANGUEDOC

It would be hard to overestimate either the high quality-price rapport or stylistic diversity of wines from the top hundred or so Languedoc producers – not that many people seem tempted to!

CHATEAU DU DONJON

2009 Château du Donjon Minervois Grande Tradition

89 points

Donjon's 2009 Minervois Grande Tradition - as usual, a blend of Grenache and Syrah with a touch of Carignan - is scented with sandalwood and nutmeg accompanying ripe, lightly-cooked cherry. Deep cherry and purple plum fruit informs a lush, polished palate to which suggestions of chalk and iodine add interest. This generous and exceptionally well-balanced exhibition of Minervois virtues ought to show well for at least the next couple of years.

2010 Château du Donjon Minervois Rosé

89 points

Jean Panis has once again demonstrated how well he works in pink with a 2010 Minervois Rosé that adds Cinsault to his usual Syrah-Grenache blend. Ripe cherry and tart rhubarb are well-matched and almond and pistachio generate a sense of underlying richness uncommon in rosé. Lush and infectiously juicy, this finishes with refreshing yet soothing length, hints of bitter herbs and cherry pit serving for further counterpoint. Expect this deftly-crafted wine to perform well until the 2011 comes onto the market.

DOMAINE MASSAMIER LA MIGNARDE

2010 Domaine Massamier la Mignarde Cuvée des Oliviers Rosé

86 points

Minervois-based Massamier La Mignarde's Cinsault-based 2010 Cuvée des Oliviers Rosé delivers ripe cherry and subtle nuttiness on a soft palate whose pungent herbal and tart berry skin impingements serve for some finishing invigoration. Given its low price, one can certainly recommend its simple pleasures over the next 6 months.

2008 Domaine Massamier la Mignarde Expression de Massamier Carignan VDP

88 points

...a 2008 Carignan Expression de Massamier, from vines planted by his grandfather right after World War II demonstrates the ability of that cepage to stand up to a highly-extracted treatment (albeit via a version of maceration carbonique). Certainly the fruit here - blueberry and blackberry - is confitured and I would have welcomed a bit more juiciness. But the palate impression is very rich, underlain by chocolate, accented by pungent notes of sage and spruce resin; piquant fruit pit; and a saline streak, all of which offer some invigoration and counterpoint in what would otherwise have been a rather opaque, heavy finish. I have no experience with older examples of this cuvée but can imagine it would remain robust for 4-6 years. (See under Mourrel Azurat in this report for a review of Venes' latest and once again successful Fitou.)

MOURREL AZURAT

2008 Mourrel Azurat Fitou

(88-89) points

...this fourth vintage of Mourrel Azurat is clearly set to become yet another outstanding value in its series. Cassis and blackberry mingle with cedar, juniper berry, and bay on a pungent nose and tight, impressively-concentrated palate. Crushed stone and smoky, peat-like inflections add appellation-typical interest and a burst of fresh fruit and tart chew of berry skin render the finish both invigorating and refreshing. Frankly, some folks in search of really inexpensive but serious reds may find the concentration exhibited here severe, but the finish will, I suspect, clinch consumers' attachment. So far, indications are that one can hold this for at least 4-5 years, and indeed it will probably be more expressive after it has enjoyed a year in bottle. (For other wines from Venes, see under the name of his Minervois estate, Massamier La Mignarde.)

VAL AUCLAIR

Denis Auclair is centrally located in the Corbieres appellation, which is to say nowhere familiar to very many wine lovers. This biodynamic grower eschews use of that appellation on his labels, though. And, after all, legal technicalities aside, the vin de Pays "Vallée du Paradis" has an obvious ring to it - in fact the Auclairs' official business name is "Ermitage Val Paradis." Gypsum-, calcite- and silica-rich chalk clay soils dominate here and those (including the many growers) who associate such soils with the potential for levity and elegance in red wine will find the Auclairs' first two vintages to ship to the U.S. - in a cuvée dominated by Carignan from 80-year-old vines, with an admixture of young Syrah - grist for their stone and rumor mills. I can't wait to taste this domaine's other wines, which include two additional cuvées featuring old vines Carignan and three of Macabeu.

2010 Domaine Val Auclair Les Barras

89+ points

The Auclairs' 2010 Les Barras delivers a more pungent and complex if marginally less winsome performance than its 2009 counterpart. Bitter hints of huckleberry and a tart, seedy intensity accent the blackberry fruit here, and along with pronounced rosemary oil there is a suggestion of overtly alkaline and chalky mineral undertow. Firm in feel; fresh and bright in its tangy, invigorating finish, this ought I suspect to merit 3-5 years of attention. Indeed, once it recovers from bottling - and allowing for the sample having reached me transatlantic at the last possible moment - it will probably gain in short order.

2009 Domaine Val Auclair Les Barras

90 points

A lovely, pure expression of ripe Carignan unencumbered by oak, the Val Auclair 2009 Les Barras brims with ripe blackberry and blueberry subtly tinged with mint, rosémary, and brown spices. Its polish and sheer ability to refresh are notable - a subtle salinity serving for saliva-inducement - and while I am willing to assume that the label indicating 14.5% alcohol is accurate, you would definitely have fooled me. The sense of exuberant juiciness and, yes, levity here can't help but finish with a smile. I suspect - without any prior experience of these wines - that this fine value will be worth following for at least 2-3 years.

SPAIN

It is no secret that Spanish wines sales in the United States are better than ever.

...there has never been a better time to buy. The market is close to working its way through the more challenging 2007 and 2008 vintages in the Tempranillo belt (Toro, Ribera del Duero, and Rioja), the Garnacha belt (the Aragon DOs, Priorat, and Montsant), and the Monastrell regions. In these places, the entry level 2009s have generally been released, many of them offering superb value. The high end wines will be out in the next year or two, hopefully by which time the economy will have continued to improve. The early word is that 2010 in these regions is very promising as well.

Despite the unfavorable Euro, Spain still manages to send a remarkable number of great values our way. It is clearly a buyer's market.

PANARROZ

2010 Panarroz

87 points

The 2010 Panarroz is a blend of 60% Mourvedre, 30% Syrah, and 10% Garnacha fermented and raised in tank. Brier, underbrush, meat, game, and blueberry aromas inform the nose of a juicy, ripe, savory wine meant for drinking over the next 3-4 years. It is a very good value.

SEÑORÍO DEL ÁGUILA

The four Señorío del Águila offerings are very good values.

2008 Señorío del Águila Crianza

87 points

The 2008 Crianza offers up liqueur-like black fruit aromas, jammy fruit on the palate with lively acidity lurking in the background.

2009 Señorío del Águila Crianza

88 points

The 2009 Crianza is slightly richer with a bit more density. Both vintages are meant for drinking over the next 3-4 years.

2007 Señorío del Águila Reserva

88 points

The 2007 Reserva offers up a spicy bouquet, round, savory fruit on the palate, and a sense of elegance unusual in a \$15 wine. Nicely balanced and lengthy, it might well evolve for 1-2 years but can be approached now.

2004 Señorío del Águila Gran Reserva

90 points

The 2004 Gran Reserva delivers serious flavor interest. Dense, plush, and succulent, this lengthy effort will drink nicely over the next 5-6 years.



Imported by Hand Picked Selections, Inc.

Warrenton, VA - www.HandPickedSelections.com

www.facebook.com/HandPickedSelections