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Saying Oui and Si to France's Most Spanish Wines

By **LETTIE TEAGUE**



John Dykes for The Wall Street Journal

The names of French wine regions—Champagne, Bordeaux, Burgundy—roll readily off most wine drinkers' tongues. But Roussillon represents a kind of linguistic roadblock. "Is that in France?" was the invariable, skeptical question I fielded from everyone for whom I poured a glass of Roussillon wine this past month. My answer: technically yes, but culturally no.

The sunny region of Roussillon (pronounced roo-see-yohn) is officially one half of the Languedoc-Roussillon department in far southeastern France, though the hyphen is pretty much all that the two regions share. Languedoc is quite large and comparatively well known, with familiar spots like Corbières, Montpellier and Minervois.

Roussillon is much smaller and more obscure—and its inhabitants identify themselves as Catalan rather than French. This fact comes with a long history attached: Once part of the principality of Catalonia, Roussillon was passed between Spain and France for hundreds of years.

Terrific reds and whites are being made in Roussillon, a Catalan region of France, by some entrepreneurial winemakers who may have been priced out of better known regions. Lettie Teague has details on Lunch Break.

Dan Kravitz, founder of the wine importing company Hand Picked Selections, describes Roussillon wines as a cross between two great wines of those countries—France's Châteauneuf-du-Pape and Spain's Priorat—when he talks with retailers unfamiliar with the region. Many of the same red grapes are used—Syrah, Grenache, Mourvèdre and Carignan among others—though Carignan has long been the most important in Roussillon.

There are white wines made in Roussillon, too, and while the reds may be more familiar (comparatively speaking), the whites, made from Grenache Blanc, Grenache Gris, Macabeu, Muscat and other grapes, have elicited great interest recently, especially among winemakers. Michel Chapoutier, the famous winemaker from the northern Rhône, is one of many producing high quality, well-priced whites and reds in Roussillon.

Mr. Chapoutier, who calls himself "a scout for soil," came to Roussillon more than a decade ago and purchased an old farm quite close to the Spanish border that he named Bila-Haut, or "high farm." He was particularly impressed by the variety and quality of Roussillon soils, a mix of schist, limestone and clay. The soils had tremendous potential, Mr. Chapoutier said.

It may sound odd to describe a region many hundreds of years old as possessed of "potential," but Roussillon today is very different than it was just a few decades ago. Until recently the region was dominated by cooperatives, and most producers turned out large quantities of rough, rustic wines—the sort that the British call "plonk."

There were exceptions, of course, often found among the makers of fortified wines or *vins doux naturels*, the Roussillon versions of Sherry and Port. But table wines are where some of the region's ambitious producers have been focusing some of their most-heralded efforts in recent years. These include young men like Daniel Laffite of Domaine des Soulanes and Jean-Louis Tribouley, a social worker turned winemaker, and outsiders like Mr. Chapoutier and Jean-Luc Thunevin, a famed winemaker from Bordeaux, who teamed with a local, Jean-Roger Calvet, to make wines in the Côtes du Roussillon Villages appellation.

There is one superstar of the region, Gérard Gauby of Domaine Gauby, who makes wines biodynamically from very old vines, some well over 100 years old. Mr. Gauby makes several different cuvées that he ranks in a Burgundian-style system of his own devising—from "village" wines like Les Calcinaires to "grand crus" like La Muntada, which, at about \$100 a bottle, is one of Roussillon's priciest wines. In fact, very few of the wines that I tasted were more than \$25 a bottle, and most cost considerably less. This, along with their wide range of flavors, was one of the most appealing aspects of the Roussillon wines that I tasted.

As a Châteauneuf-du-Pape lover, I was particularly enamored of the ripe, generous Grenache-based reds that were reminiscent of that wine (but cost a great deal less). A few of my favorites included the 2009 Hecht & Bannier Côtes du Roussillon—a rich, full-bodied wine with a spicy note of Syrah and a \$19 price tag. There was also a supple, fruity aromatically buoyant blend from Domaine des Soulanes, whose 2010 Cuvée Jean Pull, named in honor of the estate's former winemaker and owner, was a delicious deal at \$20 a bottle.

A third Grenache-dominant blend came with a terrific back story—the 2008 Domaine Cabirau Malgré Les Fonctionnaires. It's one of several wines produced at the domaine owned by wine importer Dan Kravitz, who chose the domaine for its old-vine Grenache vineyard. But Mr. Kravitz was not allowed to produce a wine from his vineyard alone, as an all-Grenache wine is not permitted by law to be dubbed a Roussillon wine. Instead he had to buy and add 20% Syrah and 10% of something else—in his case, Carignan. (The winemakers of Roussillon may think they are Catalan, but the absurd wine laws they must abide by are classically French.) Fortunately, Mr. Kravitz located some high-quality fruit and was able to make a wine whose name trumpets his triumph—Malgré Les Fonctionnaires ("in spite of the bureaucrats").

I had a few other reds, some with more Carignan, some with Syrah, that were more structured, tannic and intense than some of the Grenache blends, with notes of dark red and black fruit. The Syrah-dominant 2009 Domaine Gauby Les Calcinaires (\$25) was impressive but definitely in need of decanting. The whites were easier to enjoy, especially the 2010 M. Chapoutier Domaine Bila-Haut Blanc, a lively, medium bodied wine made mostly from Grenache Blanc and Grenache Gris. Also good was a lighter, high-acid white, the 2010 Tramontane Macabeu (\$15), made from a grape seen more often in Spain than in France.

In fact, Spain may be a better reference point for Roussillon than France. Tim O'Rourke, manager of Weygandt-Metzler Wines in Washington, said that he sells Roussillon wines most easily to Spanish-wine lovers. "When I talk about the Roussillon, I talk about how the wines resemble those from Spain. It's not like I'm going to sell a Burgundy lover a bottle of wine from the Roussillon," he said.

I understood what he meant. There was so much richness and intensity of flavor in the Roussillon wines that I'd tasted. It wasn't about subtlety or restraint, just pure deliciousness. And then there were the prices. At \$15 to \$25 a bottle, they weren't numbers that a Burgundy drinker could possibly comprehend.

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