

REGIONAL OVERVIEW

# ROUSSILLON'S INFINITE VARIETY



An aerial view of Tautavel in the Côtes du Roussillon Villages appellation located between the Pyrenees mountains and the Mediterranean sea in the south of France

**Roussillon is a region of extraordinary geological complexity, a mosaic of different *terroirs*, crossed by three rivers**



that she would not replant Syrah and that it is the truly Mediterranean varieties that work best.

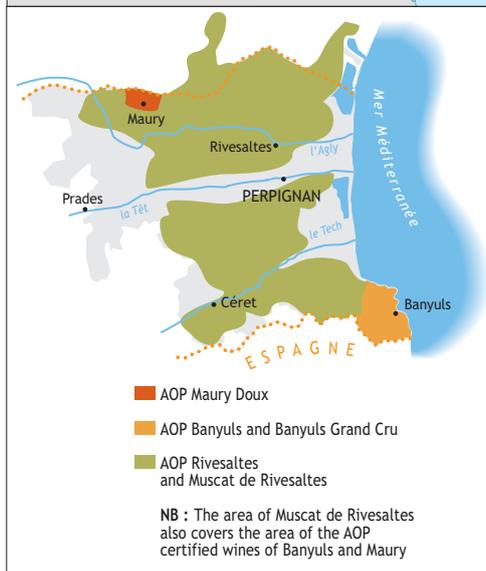
The main focus of Roussillon is its red table wines. Côtes du Roussillon Villages is the most important appellation, requiring a minimum of two grape varieties and covering 32 villages in the northern part of the department, (including Caramany, Lesquerde, Latour-de-France and Tautavel, and the vineyards of Vingrau.) And then there is the region closest to Perpignan, les Aspres, which is about to be incorporated into the appellation of Côtes du Roussillon Villages as a named area.

Maury is the newest table wine appellation, with vineyards around the village planted in an oasis of black schist. Collioure is the table wine appellation that shares vineyards with the fortified wine of Banyuls. Both are coastal towns, with dramatically situated vineyards on steep terraced cliffs. One marvels that anything can be cultivated in such difficult terrain. Of course, proximity to the sea ensures that the temperatures are never extreme and the wines retain their finesse. Côtes du Roussillon covers the rest of the region, while Côtes Catalanes is the principal *vin de pays* or country wine 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.

**W**inemaking in Roussillon has improved and progressed, as it has all over the south of France. More than one wine grower asserted that “we are not standing still”. You will see modern cellars equipped with the latest technology. Wine growers are experimenting with amphorae, egg-shaped vats and conical vats plus other shapes, not to mention oak barrels of different sizes. These days the traditional large *foudres* or casks are used for ageing *vin doux* rather than table wines. And some like Charles Perez at Mas Becha, in his Cuvée Excellence, use no wood at all affirming quite simply that it is not necessary. Also, the wines are tending towards lower levels of alcohol. At Roc des Anges the highest vines are at 300 metres, north facing, and closer to the Pyrenees, than the sea, which means that they enjoy the effect of the cool mountain air, leading to lower alcohol levels. Organic viticulture also makes for lower alcohol, says Marjorie Gallet.

Essentially there are two trends in the red wines; some people are still making powerful, oaky wines, while others are searching for elegance, along with a trend towards lighter extraction. Charles Perez was one of several wine growers to talk about the search for drinkability, combined with ripe fruit and elegance. Nicolas Raffy at Mas Amiel wants ripe grapes, while avoiding over extraction, so he is using less wood, and in particular, less *barriques* and working less on his fermentations. A comparison of 2012 and 2006 Clos des Fées shows a definite shift in style, whilst a vertical tasting of Jean Boucabeille’s Cuvée Orris from 2010 back to 2003 amply illustrates the ageing potential of the best red wines of Roussillon.

However, much as I enjoyed the red wines of Roussillon, the real



**Much as I enjoyed the red wines of Roussillon, the real surprise for me was the outstanding quality and originality of the white wines**

surprise for me was the outstanding quality and originality of the white wines. They may account for only a small part of the production of the region, but they are truly worth seeking out. The backbone of the white wines is grenache, blanc and gris. The real depth of character comes from grenache gris, with its citrus notes and salinity and minerality, both. Roussanne, marsanne and vermentino were introduced into the region in the 1980s. Of the three, vermentino is probably the most successful, providing some good acidity in a blend.

**H**ervé Bizeul of Clos des Fees is very enthusiastic about vermentino, inspired by examples of vermentino from Corsica. He also makes a pure semillon, with some fabulous varietal character. Carignan blanc is tolerated, but not included in the appellation, even though it performs

a useful role in adding structure and acidity. There is also malvoisie, otherwise known as tourbat, which is declining in importance, and macabeo that is more delicate. Generally, the white wines never undergo a malolactic fermentation as it is important to retain acidity, and sometimes they may be fermented and aged in barrel, with lees-stirring enhancing the flavour. Jean Boucabeille of Domaine Boucabeille is not alone in insisting that minerality is an essential aspect of the white wines of Roussillon.

The other significant development in Roussillon over the last decade or two is the shift away from the fortified *vins doux naturels* (which formed the earliest appellations of the region, namely Maury, Rivesaltes and Banyuls), towards table wines, which they call *vins secs*. Jean-Michel Parcé of Domaine du Mas Blanc observed that 20 years ago he was producing one third *vin sec* to two thirds *vin doux*, and today that figure is reversed. However, *vins doux* still remain an important part of the production of Roussillon, 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*, and hope that the recognition of Maury Sec will not have an adverse effect on Maury Doux. The young red Rimage and Grenat have a beguiling freshness and fruitiness, making them a delicious alternative to ruby or Late Bottled Vintage port, while the barrel-aged wines that are exposed to the seasonal changes of temperature either in attics, or indeed outside, have a unique individuality and an extraordinary ageing capacity. An abiding memory of my visit will be the taste of a 1931 Rivesaltes bottled in 2012 from Domaine Cazes. It was rich and intense with firm nutty flavours that lingered in the mouth. ❖