



Pays d'Oc IGP

How the outsiders became insiders

Due to its central location, the Pays d'Oc IGP region has traditionally formed a crossroads and a haven – not just for people, but also for grape varieties. Since the late 1980s, varieties have travelled from across France and the globe to find a new home here. And the results are show stopping.

The vast swathe of vineyards running parallel with 200 kilometres of Mediterranean coastline in one of France's most sun-kissed regions was for centuries the domain of local varieties. But in a bid to create a more market-led choice of wines, appealing to a broad international audience, the regional wine industry made the decision to enrich the local staples and encourage the introduction of non-native grapes. Over the decades, classic varieties from French regions such as Bordeaux, Burgundy and the Loire have been joined by overseas grapes, some of them Mediterranean, some from more northern climes. Pays d'Oc IGP started out in 1987 with the conventional, internationally-endorsed grape varieties that have enabled it to cement its reputation as a prime producer of quality varietal wines – Merlot, Cabernet-Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Pinot Noir, Chardonnay and Sauvignon blanc – many of which found more felicitous conditions in the South than in their native regions. Some of the varieties, such as Riesling or Gewurtztraminer, may seem counter-intuitive, whilst others – like Tempranillo and Nielluccio – are a long way from home. As the climate has warmed up, the flexibility and liberty of style of the Pays d'Oc IGP approach has enabled growers to move

to cooler sites and north-facing slopes, producing ripe, fresh wines offering many surprises, and showing that elegant, cooler climate varieties can succeed farther South.

In recent years, Pays d'Oc IGP has turned its focus towards newer, more under-the-radar grapes with the ability to deliver even greater choice, offer disease resistance and form a buffer against climate change. The catalysts for subsequently putting grapes such as Albariño and Marselan into the ground were environmental stewardship and climate change. Further down the line, they will be joined by greater numbers of cross-bred varieties, specifically designed to ward off disease, and other non-native grapes from hotter climates in response to global warming.

Pays d'Oc IGP's southern location and hot, dry climate could have put a curb on its varietal ambitions, were it not for the variations in landforms and geology that create a mosaic of soil types and weather patterns ripe for growing an extensive range of cultivars. All the newcomers to the region have therefore been able to settle in vineyard sites that allow them to best express their potential, aided and abetted by Pays d'Oc IGP's creative winegrowers, and under the watchful eye and stringent palates of the custodians of the Pays d'Oc IGP designation.

An incredible 58 grape varieties are now permitted by the label. As with any fast-moving wine region, Pays d'Oc IGP winegrowers have constantly been ahead of the curve when it comes to navigating complex and shifting drinking patterns, encouraging their consumers to expect the unexpected.

Elisabeth Gabay MW reviews a selection of the non-native grapes that now thrive in Pays d'Oc and illustrate not only its extensive and eclectic choice of wines, but also its forward-looking mindset.



Chardonnay

Predictably, Pays d'Oc spawns multiple versions of Chardonnay, from fresh and simple to big and complex. The variety's versatility lends itself to myriad styles, some of which have the ability to age. Site selection and the use of oak or temperature-controlled tank fermentation naturally produce wide-ranging results, further diversified by the way the fruit is approached. The ripeness of the fruit can create New World richness combined with some Old World restraint.

Camas 2019, Anne de Joyeuse comes from the relatively cooler sites in the foothills of the Pyrenees which gives this wine the long length, stony precision and fresh acidity to support the ripe yellow stone fruit and rich, buttery roundness.

Prestige 2019, Les Collines du Bourdic, A restrained style with classic citrus acidity, slightly herbal notes and long length has intensity and weight, ripe fruit and ageing in oak and a touch of vanilla. The oak is there to support rather than dominate.

Le Conquérant 2017, Domaine La Provenquiere. From old vines planted at the beginning of the Pays d'Oc story, this wine has partial fermentation and ageing in oak. Intense, buttery richness and ripe fruit has restrained elegance with some mature, well-integrated oak and notes of white nuts.

Chardonnay Fut 2016, Mas du Novi Fermented and aged for 12 months in barrel, this is an example of aged Chardonnay. Low yields and ripe fruit have resulted in honey and lemon richness, with notes of dried fruits and garrigue and mellowed integrated oak.

Sauvignon Blanc

Sauvignon Blanc's fresh character and lively acidity is more often seen in blends. On its own it is still a novelty, with producers in cooler sites experimenting with various expressions of the variety in its solo role. The wines can range from young, fresh green fruit to more intense New World examples with zippy acidity, creamy ripeness and gooseberry fruit, along with more complex, oak-aged examples with honeyed richness.

Les Quatre Chemins 2020, Les Vignerons d'Argeliers A classic, restrained style, this wine has light delicate green fruit, with fresh creamy acidity.

Chemin de la Pinède 2019, Les Vignerons du Sommiérois. A riper style with cream, fresh gooseberry fruit and long zippy acidity.

Adély's 2018, Domaine de l'Engarran. A distinctive style, aged for 12-24 months in barrique to create intriguing complexity. Notes of fennel seeds, melted honey, rich ripe fruit and long balanced acidity.

Cabernet-Sauvignon

As with Grenache, Cabernet-Sauvignon is found in many appellations throughout the south-east. As such, crafting it as a single varietal wine stems from the personal choice of the producer. Classic Cabernet character is exhibited in a range of styles from rich intense cassis fruit and bitter chocolate tannins to wild black berry fruit with mineral, 'pencil shaving notes', firm grippy tannins and fresh acidity. Producers experiment with wines for easy-drinking as well as intense, concentrated wines suitable for ageing.

Grand Prestige 2019, Domaine Villa Noria A benchmark Cabernet with mineral black fruit aromas. On the palate, pretty, floral elegance with blue-black mineral fruit, fresh grippy acidity and dry pencil shaving tannins going onto a rich black chocolate finish.

Domaine Villepeyroux Forest 2017. Punching above its weight, this non-filtered wine has lovely intense cassis fruit aromas. On the palate, it has copious juicy wild black berries, vibrant acidity, firm tannins and rich bitter chocolate.

Jasse Tête de Cuvée 2018, BLB Vignobles A vibrant example with spice and elderberry fruit aromas with a palate of intense black fruit, firm, dry inky mineral tannins and mouth-watering acidity.

Evidence 2019, La Belle Pierre A classic style with hints of spice and blue-black fruit aromas. On the palate, vibrant, long fresh acidity, with a lively balance of berry fruit, tobacco and pencil shavings, and beautifully handled ripeness and alcohol.

Merlot

Merlot is a variety which can revel in exuberance making it a supple easy-drinking wine, whilst other examples exude power and complexity. It is a variety which seems beautifully adapted to the climate of Pays d'Oc, where ripeness produces firm ripe tannins with spice, garrigue and rich chocolate notes for a bold structure to the floral notes and fruits, typical of the variety – plum jam, compote and wild sour plums finishing with fresh acidity and minerality.

Merlot de Tino 2019, Clos des Augustins Very gamey, violet aromas. Excellent typicity of sour wild plum fruit, smooth silky tannins and fine slightly grainy texture. Crunchy acidity and inky minerality with sour black cherry fruit.

Tendem 2019, Bruno Andreu Garrigue and red fruit aromas. Lots of rich black chocolate, red fruit, fresh acidity, spice, chewy ripe tannins. Beautifully ripe and juicy and nicely balanced.

Domaine Sainte Marie 2018, Chantovent A refined classy style with blue black inky fruit, intense weight and elegance, fine mineral tannins and long fresh acidity.

Le Petit Balthazar 2019, Pierrick Harang Wine. Scented spicy aromas. Supple black juicy fruit with almost Syrah-style spice and perfume. Supple, voluptuous with big black inky tannins and blue floral mineral acidity, sour cherries and a hint of black chocolate. Fresh and vibrant with a lightness in weight and alcohol.

Cabernet Franc

Another newcomer still making its impression in the south is this classic variety from Bordeaux and the Loire. Often regarded as a more austere and green variety, it reveals a very different character in hotter climes. Pronounced aromas of violets are quite charming with fresh blue-black fruit, leafy freshness and fine mineral acidity.

Outsider Alias 2019, Domaine Sainte Marie des Crozes A natural wine illustrating the creativity which can be found. With leather and spice and hints of violets on the nose, the wine has savoury saline and garrigue notes with ripe, sweet jammy fruit and vibrant blue floral acidity.

Jardins des Vignes Rares 2018, Les Domaines Auriol Delicate and floral warm-climate Cabernet, this charming wine has notes of violets, soft rich fruit, fresh leafy acidity and supple tannins.

Pinot Noir

Pinot Noir from the cooler regions of Burgundy and Champagne has been slowly spreading through the region and can be a real test of skills to achieve the silky delicate character of the variety with its ripe fruit. It is also the variety which often prompts the greatest surprise that such elegance can be found in such a hot region. Floral aromas followed by wild berries, red and black cherries and almonds, supple juicy fruit and silky tannins with vibrant acidity.

Domaine Girard 2019 Fragrant violets on the nose, this wine has classic silky tannins, ripe black cherries and raspberry fruit and fresh acidity.

Villa Blanche 2019, Calmel & Joseph A very perfumed and floral style full of wild berry fruit, vibrant and edgy with a fresh and nervy finish.

Louise 2019, Bastide des Songes Vegetal, cherries and almonds. Wild raspberries and cherries. And long fresh acidity.

Domaine de la Métairie d'Alon Pinot Noir le Village 2019, Abbotts & Delaunay Ripe black cherry fruit with perfumed notes. A supple, juicy fruit, easy-drinking wine which shouts Pinot Noir!

Marselan

A new variety created in 1961 but only reaching a respected status in the past twenty years. A cross of Cabernet-Sauvignon and Grenache, designed to be resistant to vine diseases, the combination of these two varieties has resulted in fruit which has the benefits of both. Juicy opulence of elderberry and blackberry fruit, juicy fruitiness, fresh acidity and firm ripe tannins. IGP Pays d'Oc's open-minded approach to new varieties has encouraged the emergence of Marselan.

Sibille 2019 Elderberry and orchard fruit aromas continues on to the palate with abundant juicy fruit, vibrant fresh acidity and firm ripe tannins.

Domaine Lalaurie 2019 Blackberries and elderberry crumble. More of everything, acidity tannin and spice and the potential to age further.

Domaine Villepeyroux Forest 2019 Elderberries and blackberries with hints of intense liquorice, fresh leafy acidity and firm tannic structure. Lovely balance of fruit and weight with intense juicy blackness.

Domaine la Grave 2017 With such a new variety, we are still learning how Marselan ages, with many commenting on how it takes on added richness. While still fresh and floral, here the juicy black fruits are taking on a honeyed richness balanced by firm dry tannins and long mouth-watering acidity.

Albariño

Another southern variety which is spreading slowly from its home in northern Portugal/North west Spain to the region is Albariño. As Laurent Miquel says, the variety is following the pilgrim's way from Santiago di Compostela! This is still a fairly uncommon variety in the region, grown by just a handful of producers. It has naturally high acidity which is well-suited to the region. Look for creamy white fruit, perfumed white peach, sometimes notes of almonds and marzipan and chalky acidity.

Sillages 2019, Vignobles Foncalieu. Chalky, white fruit, white peach perfumed, creamy, nice acidity – perfumed.

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