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Pilgrimage among the vines

Sometimes it must feel like the French are doing it deliberately. Making life difficult for people trying to get to grips with their wines, that is.

Leaving aside the whole business of region names rather than grape varieties, no back label explaining what sort of wine might be in the bottle and an impenetrable Appellation Contrôlée system – is a Saint-Emilion Premier Grand Cru Classé better (in theory at least) than a Burgundy Grand Cru? We'll let all that go, but let's talk names.

You pick up a bottle, not cheap, and it says Pacherenc du Vic-Bilh on the label. Is that a grape variety that you've never come across before? A region? And while we're at it, how on earth do you pronounce it?

In fact there's nothing bloody-minded or contrary in the story of how things got so confusing in the world of French wine. It's simply a perfect illustration of local produce, consumed locally, with names, rules and customs that evolved over centuries when, for the most part, people were born, lived and died within the same small corner of the country.

If you lived in the Pacherenc du Vic-Bilh wine-growing area (yes, a place, rather than a grape) you would know that its white wines are so labelled. The grapes involved would probably be a blend of gros and petit manseng, possibly with some petit courbu or arrufiac as well. Travellers from elsewhere in France would be every bit as confused and intrigued as you or I if they ever found themselves in Southwest France, home to Pacherenc and a host of other little-known wines and grape varieties.

Southwest France is the name given to the rather rag tag band of wine appellations lying roughly between Bordeaux, Toulouse and the Pyrenees. Sometimes it's hard to see what unites them – and in truth, sometimes, there is no real link between the wines you find here. However, one thing that all these little mini regions share is that they lie on the ancient pilgrimage route south towards Santiago di Compostella – and where there's pilgrims, it seems, wines will follow. Now, wine pilgrims with an adventurous bent will find it a rewarding area to explore.

The same vineyards which produce white wines labelled Pacherenc du Vic-Bilh also make red wines, this time called Madiran, from the aptly-named tannat grape. As you might imagine, this grape is naturally high in tannin (and acidity) and makes some of the densest, monster reds you will ever encounter – though they can also age surprisingly gracefully.

Or you can stop off in Fronton, which supplies sappy, robust and spicy reds and rosés made from the Fer Servadou grape to the thirsty inhabitants of nearby Toulouse.

Beyond Toulouse is Gaillac, where Fer Servadou is known as Braucoil (still with me?). This same grape is also known as Mansois in the tiny appellation of Marcillac. Confused? And we haven't even touched on Negrette, Pinenc or Duras yet.

Heather D had the chance to immerse herself in the wines of the region (not literally you understand) while working on behalf of Southwest France at the recent London International Wine Fair. Having tasted her way through 77 wines, these are her picks of the Southwest.

Côtes de Gascogne, Les 4 Réserve, Domaine du Tariquet 2009, £9.40 from Wineservice of Lingfield

Gascony, famously the home of d'Artagnan, the fourth musketeer, is also home to the family-owned Tariquet winery. Most Côtes de Gascogne is pretty simple, fruity and crisp stuff. This one, an intriguing blend of gros manseng, chardonnay, sauvignon blanc and semillon has a hint of floral, slightly peachy fruit – a gentle introduction to the region.