

FRANCE TODAY

The Magazine of French Travel and Culture



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The vineyards of Saint-Mont and the village of Sabazan

TRUE TO TERROIR

by Chris Redman

August 17, 2011

When the French—and particularly Parisians—talk about *la France profonde* it's not always clear whether they are conjuring up a faraway geographical region or a state of mind. Either way, if there's any part of France that corresponds to the notion of "deepest France" it's the southwest. Within this part of *l'Hexagone* (another French term for France, thanks to its roughly six-sided shape) there still remains much of what the French, in their more nostalgic moments, imagine their country to be: an old-yet-ageless, bucolic idyll where the pace of life remains much as it was in palmier days of yesteryear, and whose denizens, housed in medieval hilltop *bastides*, still have the time to savor the good things in life—meaning truffles from the Périgord, *jambon* from Bayonne, plums from Agen, brandy from Armagnac, foie gras from just about anywhere and, of course, the local wine.



Patricia Atkinson in her Clos d'Yvigne vineyards



The lucky people of the southwest have all these things, but—rugby aside—it’s probably the wine that most arouses their passions. The region is hugely diverse—the red wine of Madiran bears no resemblance to the “black wine” of Cahors. Some believe this is a problem, denying the southwest the recognition it might claim as a more cohesive region, such as the Rhône Valley.

But the *vignerons* who produce these widely differing wines can boast that they are true to their *terroir*, preserving and reflecting the diversity of the region and its winemaking traditions—a diversity that this short survey can only begin to explore. The diversity also makes the southwest a bulwark against the global wine industry’s relentless rush to conformity. In the southwest you will find good wines made from the standard cabernet sauvignon, merlot and chardonnay grapes, of course. But you will also discover the delights of wines made from fer servadou, duras, prunelart, mauzac, muscadelle, côt, tannat and petit manseng, to name but a few regional varieties. And when you get to tasting them, bear in mind the old Aveyron proverb quoted by southwest wine guru Paul Strang in his comprehensive guide *South-West France: the Wines and Winemakers* :

Wine should be drunk...
neat in the morning
without water at midday
and in the evening just as
the Good Lord gave it to us

Gascony

Well over half of the wine produced in the southwest these days falls into the *vin de pays* category. These are wines that, for one reason or other, do not conform to the rules that would allow them to be classified as AOC (*appellation d’origine contrôlée*) or even VDQS (*vin délimité de qualité supérieure*). Time was when a wine sporting the *vin de pays* label or (heaven forbid!) deemed to be a mere *vin de table* was probably a modest wine with much to be modest about.

But today wines with these lowly labels are often the most fascinating around, because they are being produced by *vignerons* who are happy to break the rules in the pursuit of a better wine. *Vin de pays* is now the fastest growing wine category in the southwest and nowhere is it growing faster than in Gascony—that loosely defined historic region stretching from the Garonne River in the north down to the foothills of the Pyrenees. The département of the Gers, in the heart of old Gascony, is now France’s most prolific producer of white wine.

It’s a welcome development, given that Armagnac, Gascony’s most famous liquid product, is currently going through one of its periodic sleeping-beauty phases. Gascony’s success on the wine front is a tribute to the legendary, now-retired André Dubosc who, back in the 1970s, came up with the then eccentric notion that the region could produce wines for drinking rather than distillation. To develop their *vin de pays des Côtes de Gascogne*, Dubosc and his fellow *vignerons* (grouped in the cooperative known as Producteurs Plaimont) found new ways of vinifying the rather acidic grapes used for making Armagnac. They also introduced new varieties, particularly colombard and, more recently, gros manseng, that now go into the fruity, highly drinkable white

wines of the region. Another major player has been the Grassa family, whose Château du Tariquet properties now constitute the largest privately owned wine estate in the region and whose marketing muscle has ensured that Gascon wines can be enjoyed around the globe.

Gascon winters are more forgiving than winters farther inland, while the influence of the Atlantic makes for cooler summers. The resulting white wines are nicely balanced and eminently drinkable. The reds of the Côtes de Gascogne usually take a back seat to the whites but, in Côtes de Saint-Mont, squeezed between the vineyards of Bas Armagnac and the neighboring wine region of Madiran, reds of some distinction are being produced, thanks again to Producteurs Plaimont who have earned VDQS status for Saint-Mont's tannat-based blend.

GASCONY

Château du Tariquet

The best-known producer in the Gers with a range of white and red wines (and Armagnac too). Try the chardonnay/sauvignon blend. 05.62.09.87.82.

Originally published in the July/August 2011 issue of France Today