

WINE

Higher learning, with an accent on France

BY JASON WILSON

Negrette. Mauzac. Fer Servadou. Gros Manseng. Loin de L'Oeil: Those are the names of grapes used to produce the wines I've been drinking for the past few weeks.

Fronton. Madiran. Marcillac. Gaillac: Those are the French designations of origin where those wines come from.

Ah, wine. Once I think I have you all figured out, have all the grapes sorted in my mind, all those foreign pronunciations committed to memory and all the geographical hairsplitting mapped out, you throw something new at me. Something I've never tasted before that makes me realize, once again, that I will never, ever know everything about you.

Recently, that something new has been wines from southwestern France. Even though it's France's fourth-largest appellation in terms of volume, we see very little of the wine from this region in the United States. That's a shame, because most of what I've been drinking has offered tremendous value.

I was introduced to these wines last fall when I visited rustic Gascony — where I was stuffed with duck confit and foie gras — to write about Armagnac. Much of the viticulture in this region is focused on brandy-making, with much of the vineyard land given over to Ugni Blanc. Until recently, Ugni Blanc (known as Trebbiano in Italy) was dismissed as producing a neutral, high-acid and characterless wine better left to be distilled into Armagnac.

That has changed in recent years. A number of producers are making wines by blending Ugni Blanc grapes with more aromatic varieties such as Colombard

(also used for Armagnac) or Gros Manseng (a floral, fruity white you'll find only in Gascony) or even international grapes such as chardonnay. Most wine stores now carry an Ugni Blanc blend from Gascony that's ridiculously cheap (almost always well under \$10) and usually crisp and zingy enough to serve chilled on a hot afternoon.

But there is much more to southwestern French wines than zippy whites. In Gaillac, they blend the Mauzac grape, with its baked-apple and fleshy peach notes, with sauvignon blanc or chenin blanc or other local varieties to create a distinct, aromatic full-bodied white. Gaillac can be inconsistent, but when it's good, it's very good, like the Domaine des Terrisses listed in my accompanying recommendations.

Perhaps the area's best-known wines are big reds from Cahors. Long before the Malbec grape gained popularity in Argentina, it flourished in this part of France, and the region has been trying for several years to gain a foothold in the market with its "Cahors — The original Malbec!" campaign. Although the price of these wines is attractive, I still prefer Malbec from Argentina.

Instead, I look to other reds from southwest France. In particular, I've very much enjoyed what I've tasted from Madiran, where the Tannat grape is king. The only other place I've seen Tannat widely planted is Uruguay.

Madiran wines are muscular, earthy, meaty, tannic; they feel perfect for when the weather turns cold; to me, there's a even a hint of autumn leaves in the nose. A friend of mine described one of the Madirans we tasted as "smelling like a beautiful woman who's been hard at work picking

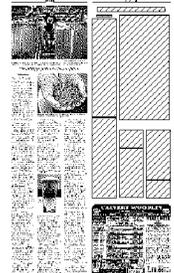
grapes all day in the vineyard." She meant that as a good thing, and I had to agree with her. What's most amazing is the price: Most every Madiran I've seen in U.S. liquor stores retails for under \$15.

At the other end of the spectrum are the light-bodied, blood-purple wines from Marcillac, made with the extremely obscure grape Fer Servadou. Good Marcillac shares certain green, spicy, dried-herb characteristics with cabernet franc, particularly those from Chinon.

The Marcillacs I have opened are some of the most food-friendly wines I've tasted in a while. A couple of friends who were tasting with me kept returning to the Domaine du Cros, and the bottle was killed almost immediately: always the most reliable test of a wine's drinkability.

But perhaps my favorites from southwestern France are the Negrette-based wines from Fronton. Negrette is a dark red wine that's often blended with cabernet franc or cabernet sauvignon, full of berries and flowers, but with unique spice and a backbone that you don't usually find in rosé. I especially enjoyed the rosé from Chateau Bellevue la Foret, which is blended with gamay and syrah. I drank a lot of great rosés over the summer, and this was one of the best, and priced most attractively at \$10.

Consequently, I had to add Fronton and Negrette — along with the other Gascon grapes — to the ever-crowded space in my head where wine information is stored. Fer Servadou and Gros Manseng are now as old-hat to me as chardonnay and merlot. Maybe I'm getting closer to having this wine thing all figured



out. Which means, I guess, that something will come along soon enough to remind me otherwise.

Dave McIntyre will return next week. Wilson is the author of "Boozehound: On the Trail of the Rare, the Obscure, and the Overrated in Spirits" (Ten Speed, 2010). He can be reached at jason@jasonwilson.com.

Recommendations

Prices are approximate. Check Winesearcher.com to verify availability, or ask a favorite wine store to order through a distributor.

In Gascony, you'll find grapes you've probably never tasted or even heard of. But you'll also find some unbelievable values, mostly under \$15.

—J.W.

Domaine du Tariquet Classic Ugni Blanc-Colombard 2010

Gascony, France, \$8

It's bright, crisp, zippy; an amazingly great value. A perfect aperitif for those last warm days of the year.

Robert Kacher Selections: Available in the District at Circle Wine & Liquor, Cleveland Park Wine and Spirits, Dixie Liquor, MacArthur Beverages, Whole Foods Market locations, Morris Miller Wine & Liquor. Available in Maryland at State Line Liquors in Elkton, Wells Discount Liquors in Baltimore.

Domaine des Terrisses Blanc 2010

Gaillac, France, \$13

The predominant grape in this rich, dry white blend is the intensely aromatic Mauzac. It's floral with a touch of nuttiness, similar to a good Soave Classico. Wine Traditions: Available in District at Cork Market, P&C Market. Available in Virginia at Arrowine in Arlington, Out of Sight Wines in Vienna, Rick's Wine & Gourmet in Alexandria, the Wine Cabinet in Reston, the Winery in Alexandria.

Chateau Bellevue La Foret Rosé 2010

Fronton, France, \$10

The strange, dark Negrette grape (blended with a little gamay and syrah) gives this a lot more structure and liveliness in the mouth than most rosés have. It's more complex as well, with good acidity, a touch of pepper and herbs.

Wine Traditions: Available in the District at Cork Market, Whole Foods P Street. Available in Virginia at Arrowine and Whole Foods Market in Arlington, Chain Bridge Cellars in McLean, Oakton Wine Shop in Oakton, Rick's Wine & Gourmet and Unwined in Alexandria. Available in Maryland at Finewine.com in Gaithersburg.

Domaine du Cros Lo Sang del Pais 2010

Marcillac, France, \$12

From the obscure Fer Servadou grape, this is totally purple, light-bodied, low in alcohol (12.5 percent) and so drinkable. Fresh, spicy, with a touch of smokiness and dried herbs, it's somewhat similar to cabernet franc, yet still its own unique flavor.

Wine Traditions Ltd.: Available in the District at DeVinos, D'Vines. Available in Virginia at Arrowine in Arlington, Rick's Wine & Gourmet in Alexandria, Out of Sight Wines in Vienna, the Vineyard in McLean.

Domaine du Moulie 2006

Madiran, France, \$12

In the Madiran region, the predominant grape is tannat; this wine is a meaty, earthy, tannic, full-bodied example of the grape's style. On the nose, it's like autumn leaves and cedar, with big, rich fruit on the tongue and long, pleasant finish.

Available in Virginia at Total Wine locations in Alexandria, Fairfax, Fredericksburg, Manassas, McLean.

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