

Les 5 du Vin

Banyols-Budd-Cobbold-Lalau-Vanhellemont

Back to Gascony (Part 1) : dry whites

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It has been two years since I tasted a comprehensive range of wines from the widespread Côtes de Gascogne designation. This IGP (they don't want to become an AOP and I think they are quite right) covers much of the Gers département in South-West France, as well as small bits of two neighbours, Landes and Lot-et-Garonne.

Their white wines have gained a well-earned reputation as being, on the whole, reliable, fresh, quite aromatic yet low in alcohol and very inexpensive. In other words the sort of white wines that many people want to drink and can afford. I will talk only about the dry (or almost dry) wines in this article, as most producers also make gently sweet versions, not to mention reds and rosés. I will look at the reds and the sweet whites next week, but, on this occasion, I skipped the rosés since there were already close on a hundred samples to taste (and I must admit to not being a fashion victim having not tasted a single rosé wine all summer so far!).



Facts and figures to set the scene

This vineyard is a recent creation in a land that has been producing wine for many hundreds of years. Paradoxical? Yes, because the whole area is also that of the production of that wonderful grape spirit called Armagnac which of course uses wine as its base for distillation, but which, unlike its cousin Cognac, has not gained a world-wide commercial success under the impetus of major brands. Hence the vineyard has been extensively converted to the production of white, rosé and red wines since the 1980s. **The vineyard area today covers some 12,000 hectares that**

produced, in the 2018 vintage, close on 800,000 hectolitres of wine. 85% of this is white, mostly dry, with just 8% rosé and 7% red. Since the early 1990s, production of Côtes de Gascogne has increased by more than 200%.

The main grape varieties for the whites are Colombard (see above), Gros Manseng (see below), Ugni Blanc, Sauvignon, Petit Manseng and Chardonnay. There is also some Sauvignon Gris and a few others. Here one can see signs of the conversion, since Colombard and Ugni Blanc are also used for the production of Armagnac, whereas most of the other varieties have been introduced more recently. The tendency is for an increase in the proportion of local varieties, namely the two Mansengs, with the Petit Manseng being mainly used for sweet wines or as a blending component in a few dry wines of the highest level. Colombard is also a local variety and forms the basis for most of the entry level dry whites. The choice of grape varieties is totally free within this list and one can find single variety wines as well as blends using two or more of the cultivars in the above list.

The climate is quite strongly influenced by the Atlantic ocean, particularly on the western side of the Gers that borders on the Landes. This summer, for instance, the fields down here have retained a green aspect that is sorely lacking elsewhere in drought-stricken France.

Exports, upon which the commercial success of these wines have been based from the start, still dominate sales with a 60% share, but the French market has grown in recent years, unusually in what is a shrinking market situation. Given the low prices, the main markets tend to be the most price-conscious ones: Germany and Holland, with the UK some way behind.

Now for the wines (*and my selection from 52 dry or off-dry whites tasted on August 27*)

All were tasted blind and at the right temperature. I selected the following 17 wines on the basis of a simple star rating that went from no stars to three stars. All the wines in this list obtained at least two stars. Most of these dry white wines were from the 2018 vintage, apart from the last four. I have divided the list into two parts: the lighter and simpler wines first, then the more complex ones. The dividing line is naturally debateable, but a high proportion of Colombard or of Sauvignon Blanc is usually a constant in the first group.

Good light whites (all these wines retail for between 4 and 6 euros)

Domaine Tariquet, Classic 2018 (Ugni Blanc, Colombard, Sauvignon, Gros Manseng)

One of the pioneers of the emergence of Côtes de Gascogne. Those who mock Tariquet because of the size of the operation should just taste this, their basic wine, blind! Plenty of intensity and complexity on the nose. Has similar qualities on the palate also, with a rounded feeling that provides body to what is essentially a deliciously light wine. Perfect balance for the type.