

❖ Indulgences

In France's Cabardès, Bordeaux

by Henry E. Teitelbaum

BY ROAD, the wine-producing areas of Languedoc and Bordeaux are separated by no more than a few hours drive. In spite of this relative proximity in the southern and southwestern reaches of France, the types of grapes grown and the styles of wines produced in the two regions couldn't be more different.

On the one hand, Bordeaux wine makers find that their soil types and exposure to the Atlantic maritime climate favor cultivating red wines primarily from grapes of the sturdy Cabernet Sauvignon and more delicate Merlot varieties—resulting in structured, tannin-driven wines with refined cassis and plum fruit flavors, and notes of leather, smoke or cigar box.

In Languedoc, to the east and stretching south to the Mediterranean Sea, the warm, dry climate favors the sun-loving grape varieties of Syrah and Grenache, among others, leading to wines characterized by riper, more intense fruit flavors, but also notes of minerals, herb, spice and licorice.

By history and tradition these two families of grapes are rarely blended in France—indeed, in wine-producing regions governed by the Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée certification, combining these families of grapes is specifically forbidden in all labels but one—Cabardès. The little known region in Languedoc gained AOC status in 1999 for doing precisely this kind of blending, using Atlantic and Mediterranean grapes in roughly equal proportions.

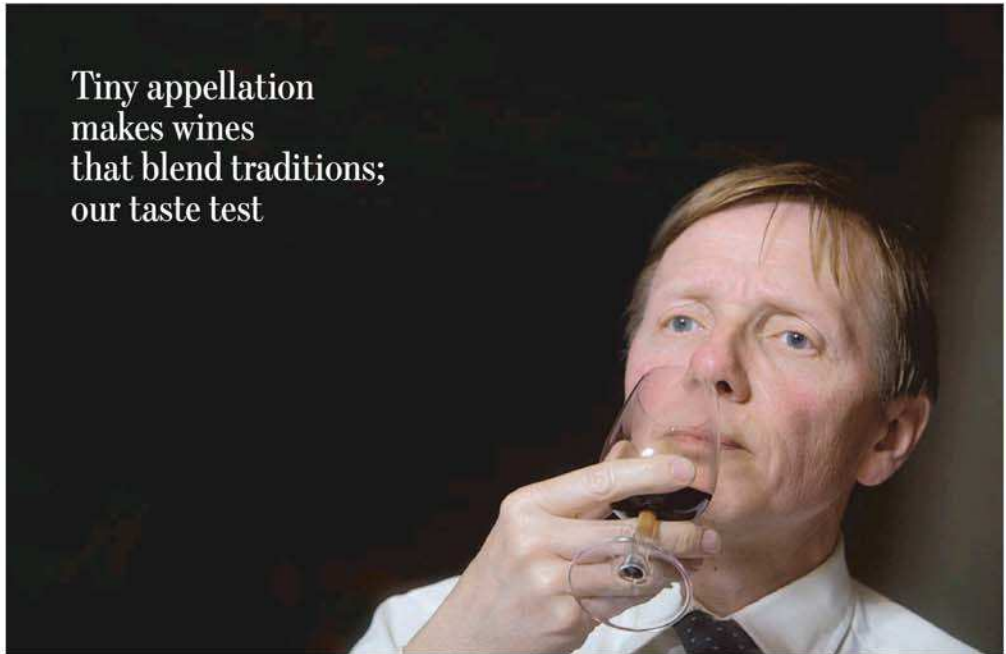
I found the idea intriguing. Would this blending take strengths from each style, resulting in a wine greater than its parts? Or would it be a muddle of mismatched styles, better left on the “that's interesting” shelf?

I decided to find out in a taste test. I asked four wine experts and enthusiastic amateurs to join me in the project. We tasted 10 wines from among the 30 small domaines and châteaux from around Cabardès, and found that even while strictly observing rules that require at least 40% of the blend to be from Bordeaux varieties and 40% from Languedoc varieties (the rest made up of Malbec and Fer Servadou), there was a surprising amount of variation among them in terms of aroma, concentration and balance. Overall, the group found a promising style that—while sometimes rough-edged—drew strengths from both traditions, and wines, at prices ranging from €6 to €25 a bottle, that were excellent value for money.

Joining me for the tasting at London's Vivat Bacchus restaurant and wine bar were Colin Wills, a Higher Certificate holder in Wines and Spirits from the Wine and Spirit Education Trust and owner of Fine Wine Arch Ltd., a London-based wine events and education business; Matthew Stubbs, a Master of Wine who runs his own wine-consultancy business in Languedoc; Simon Rostrom, a London-based public-relations consultant and long-time wine collector; and Timothy Schroder, a wine enthusiast and author of several books on precious metals, including the “Gilbert Collection of Gold & Silver.” My own interest in wine dates to my early years living in Rome and to a subsequent six-year stint in Paris.

I first came across wines from Cabardès at the Salon des Vins des Vignerons Indépendants, a gathering of independent wine producers, in Paris in 2002, and have occasionally encountered them since, both in the U.K.

Tiny appellation makes wines that blend traditions; our taste test



At our tasting: top, Timothy Schroder; above, Colin Wills (left) and Simon Rostrom; above right, Matthew Stubbs. Left, our reporter.

and in the U.S.

Cabardès is a tiny collection of villages north of the medieval walled city of Carcassonne. Its vineyards cover only about 500 hectares on the northwestern reaches of the region of Languedoc-Roussillon, leading up the southern slopes of the Montagne Noire. It is the smallest of the 10 AOC areas within Languedoc—the adjacent Languedoc AOC of Minervois has 5,100 hectares in production,

while Corbières, the largest AOC in Languedoc, works 15,000 hectares.

Winemaking in Cabardès dates to the Roman era, but experimentation in cultivating and blending the Atlantic and Mediterranean families of grapes has been under way since only the late 1970s. The effort reflects not only the distinctive soil qualities—characterized by chalky clay and limestone—but the unique wind currents that draw prevailing warm winds from the Mediterranean (the Marin), and also cool westerly winds from the Atlantic (the Cers).

Limited production and a virtually nonexistent marketing budget have meant that the availability of Cabardès wines is still only sporadic outside France, where they are widely available. Elsewhere selected labels can be found at major retailers such as Delhaize and Karstadt, at specialty wine stores and on Web sites such as Everywine.co.uk. I bought the wines for the tasting directly from the Cabardès AOC office, although it doesn't normally sell to retail customers.

For the tasting the wines were presented starting with four tank-matured wines followed by six barrel-aged wines from five vineyards suggested by Adrian Mould, director of the Cabardès AOC representative office in Aragon, France. Each of those attending was

meets Languedoc

asked to share his impressions and to rate the wines Poor, Good, Very Good or Delicious.

Several of the tasters resisted so-called grade inflation, which brought the average down for even the wines that were judged most appealing. An 11th wine, Château Pech Rosié, was dropped from the tasting altogether because the bottle was corked. (See the accompanying chart for the full results.)

Among the tank-aged wines, Château Bournonville 2003 led off the tasting with a fresh, nicely perfumed nose that evoked the soft elegance of a Bordeaux blend. Colin found ripe blackberry fruit flavors and a not-unappealing scent of suede. But despite the wider palette of flavors available through the 40% Syrah content, he found it rather unevolved and somewhat astringent, and we all felt that the finish dropped off too abruptly, leaving few lingering sensations. I was particularly disappointed because the 1999 vintage of the same wine was what first brought my attention to Cabardès as a region. In that vintage, the Mediterranean grapes brought a welcome dimension of fruit to the Bordeaux blend, which too often seems missing.

The Château Rayssac we tasted was from the bolder 2005 vintage, which benefitted from a long, steady growing season. It had an almost metallic edge to the nose after opening that only gradually dissipated, and some of the panel found it rather green. But there was huge, brambly fruit in the young, 14% alcohol content wine and, in sharp contrast with Château Bournonville, a powerful finish that promised to improve with age. Here, the combination seemed more dominated by the big-fruited Mediterranean style of wine making. Matthew termed it "more sledgehammer than seduction," with a New World feel to it, and rated it among his favorites.

We also liked Château Salitis, which despite being from the estate next door to Rayssac, produced a completely different experience. It presented a more evolved range of flavors that may have reflected the additional two years the 2003 vintage had given it in the bottle, or the higher percentage of spicy Syrah and fruity Malbec that went into the blend. Simon enjoyed the "fine toffee touches" that came through and the more finished feel of the wine, and I liked its fresh Mediterranean acidity, balanced tannins and length on the palate.

Universal agreement on Château Salitis gave way to controversy over the minerally Domaine de Cabrol, Vent d'Est 2004. Tim liked the "tautness" of the wine, which may owe something to the conditions that exist further up the slopes of the Montagne Noire. There, the vineyards' placement in poor, increasingly rocky soils and exposure to powerful winds yield a leaner, drier style of wine. Simon was put off by the tannin, calling the wine a "real throat catcher" that lacked much expression of fruit, which was derived in equal proportions from the thick-skinned Cabernet Sauvignon and the similarly rugged and tannic Syrah. But Matthew found much to recommend the Vent



d'Est, or East wind, saying it offered the subtle notes of pepper, mint and licorice of a Languedoc wine along with interesting potential to develop further in the bottle. I also warmed to the wine after it was left to breathe, finding the early chalkiness giving way to subtle dark fruit flavors. While clearly a different expression of the distinct blend of Cabardès, the Vent d'Est also reaffirmed to us the central role of "terroir" in determining the outcome of any particular wine-making effort.

Among the barrel-aged wines, we found more-evolved expressions of the region's potential. This may be due in part to the Bordeaux grapes' particular affinity for barreling in new oak—a process that imparts desirable aromas to the juice.

The Château de Jouclary-Cuvée Guillaume de Jouclary 2004, from the eastern reaches of Cabardès, was not one of those successes. Colin enjoyed the floral notes in the bouquet, the plum fruit and soft tannins, but found that they dissipated without a trace on the finish. Simon summarized it as "a day at the seaside. It starts well, but ends depressingly." We all felt that the wine, an easy drinking, if not terribly ambitious blend of Merlot, Syrah and Grenache, didn't benefit from being from an uninspired vintage.

The panel also had trouble with Château de La Bastide Rougepeyre-Cuvée Prestige 2002, which despite a lightly fruited nose and interesting blueberry and cocoa flavors on the middle palate, suffered from inadequate acidity, flabby tannins and a flat, slightly sulfurous finish.

But the remaining four wines were treats, including the ambitious Prieuré du Font Juvénal-Le Sauvage 2003, and my favorite, O'Vineyards' Domaine du Thou Les Américains, a 2005, made by a family of three Americans working just north of Carcassonne.

The Château de Brau 2003-Cuvée Exquise, with its eccentrically decorated bottle featuring a cherub with a horn, blew us away with its approachable, layered fruit and long finish. Colin found the wine—the only one in the group to be made entirely from organic grapes—"beautifully ripe."

Matthew preferred the slow dazzle of L'Esprit de Pennautier 2001, the top-of-the-line wine from Vignobles Lorigeril, which also owns Château de La Bastide Rougepeyre. Made from Cabernet and old vine Syrah, L'Esprit had a soft, yet complex dark-fruited nose and an initially understated lightness in the mouth that built as we retasted it, revealing layers of tobacco, pepper and truffle. The oldest wine in the tasting, I thought it gave an insight into how we might expect some of the promising younger Cabardès wines to develop over time.

Cabardès sampler

The results of our tasting

VINEYARD	PRICE	RATING	COMMENTS
Château de Brau-Cuvée Exquise 2003	€10	Delicious	Blew us away with its layered fruit, long finish and toasty cigar-box infusion of new oak. Made with organic grapes.
O'Vineyards Les Américains 2005	€18.50	Delicious	Richly extracted, smooth brambly fruit, smoke, pepper and herb; "crunchy tannins"; an expressive finish that promises to develop. The first vintage from an estate that was only bought in 2005.
Château de Pennautier L'Esprit de Pennautier 2001	€25	Very Good	Soft yet complex nose with a touch of cassis and an understated lightness in the mouth that accumulates, adding layers of tobacco, pepper and truffle.
Château Salitis Cuvée Premium 2003	€9	Very Good	Fine toffee touches, fresh Mediterranean acidity, balanced tannins and length on the palate. A seamless blend, with a more finished feel.
Domaine de Cabrol Vent d'Est 2004	€13	Very Good	A leaner, drier style of wine that spurred the most disagreement. Simon thought the tannin made the wine a "real throat catcher" that lacked much expression of fruit, but Matthew found subtle notes of pepper, mint and licorice of a Languedoc wine along with interesting potential to develop further in the bottle.
Prieuré du Font Juvénal Le Sauvage 2003	€22	Very Good	Big, bold and brash, with powerful, long-lived tannins, good structure and dense fruit concentration. An international style that may be shedding "terroir" to achieve ambition.
Château Jouclary Cuvée Guillaume de Jouclary 2004	€15	Good	Floral notes in the bouquet, plum fruit and soft tannins, but dissipating without a trace on the finish. Easy drinking but not terribly ambitious.
Château Rayssac 2005	€7.80	Good	Had an almost metallic edge to the nose after opening that only gradually dissipated; huge, brambly fruit with a powerful finish that promised to improve with age. Matthew termed it "more sledgehammer than seduction" with a New World feel.
Château Bournonville 2003	€6	Poor	Had the soft elegance of a Bordeaux blend with ripe blackberry flavors, but somewhat astringent, with a finish that dropped off too abruptly.
Château de La Bastide Rougepeyre Prestige 2002	€11.50	Poor	Disappointing. Interesting blueberry and cocoa flavors but suffering from inadequate acidity, flabby tannins and a flat, slightly sulfurous finish.