

A fresh look at white

From popular Picpoul de Pinet and Limoux sparklers to dynamic IGP producers, **James Lawther MW** gives an overview of today's star performers

Among the Gold medals and Trophies awarded at the 2015 edition of the Decanter World Wine Awards, there were a couple of eye-catching choices made by the Languedoc panel. Two Languedoc whites were awarded Trophies, while a Picpoul de Pinet and white La Clape scooped Gold. Surprisingly perhaps, the Languedoc *does* produce dry white wine and, as these awards show, quality is on an upward curve.

If you're still a little fuzzy about Languedoc whites, it is understandable. Only 10% of the

region's production is white and apart from Limoux and Picpoul de Pinet, white-winemaking has always appeared a low-key activity. The Mediterranean climate generally favours full-bodied reds and rosés, with whites seemingly an afterthought.

That train of thinking, though, belies historical precedence – Picpoul de Pinet has always been uniquely white and La Clape was principally white before turning to red wines. It also ignores the existence of local white varieties, Bourboulenc, Carignan Blanc, Clairette and Piquepoul Blanc, which have been steadily cultivated over the centuries due to their suitability to the climate. Factor in the successful integration of imports like Grenache Blanc from Spain and Marsanne and Roussanne from the Rhône – as well as the increasing skill of local winemakers – and the foundations for white-winemaking appear solid.

Technical skill has been acquired over the years by trial and error, as well as prescribed investment. Practices such as harvesting at night or in the cool of the early morning, temperature control and cold settling have helped the quality of the wines.

The blending of grape varieties and use of oak also seems better handled. Above all there is greater knowledge of the different terroirs and those best suited to producing whites with freshness and balance. The higher reaches of Minervois, Faugères and the foothills of the Cévennes come to mind, as well as the basalt and limestone soils of Pézenas and Pic-St-Loup lower down.

Change of style

Tastings across the region conducted in February this year indicated that producers are moving away from overripeness and heavy extraction, towards a more elegant expression of the fruit. Vintages seem relatively uniform with a touch more freshness in 2013 and 2014, and a more rounded profile for the warm, generous 2015. Thereafter, there is an ➤

Below: Limoux produces some of the best-value sparkling wines in France

'Picpoul de Pinet is the largest white appellation in the south of France'



intriguing diversity of styles depending on the grape variety or blend and winemaking influence, principally oaked or unoaked wines. The stamp of the south, though, is evident with floral/herbal aromas, white and yellow fruit to the fore and, in the best examples, freshness without overriding acidity.

Picpoul de Pinet

As an easy-drinking, go-to wine, Picpoul de Pinet fits the bill perfectly. It is made from a single grape variety, Piquepoul Blanc, vinified to preserve the fruit and bottled early (November to March after the vintage) in an easily identifiable, tall, embossed bottle known as the Neptune. The later ripening Piquepoul provides a zesty, citrus-edged wine with good acidity, to drink within the year. Picpoul de Pinet is the largest white wine appellation in the south of France, producing an average nine million bottles a year, just over half of which are exported. It's one of the more visible Languedoc whites and one that already appeals to the British market as a third of the production is consumed within the UK.

In a similar vein La Clape – which received full communal appellation status in 2015 for red and white wines – uses a local variety, Bourboulenc (minimum 40% in the vineyard) to provide the backbone for its whites. Again late ripening and suited to warm, dry conditions, Bourboulenc provides balance without marked acidity and a low-key citrus perfume. It is usually blended with Roussanne and a little Grenache Blanc or Viognier so the aromatic nuance can vary and there is more weight to the palate than Picpoul de Pinet. To my

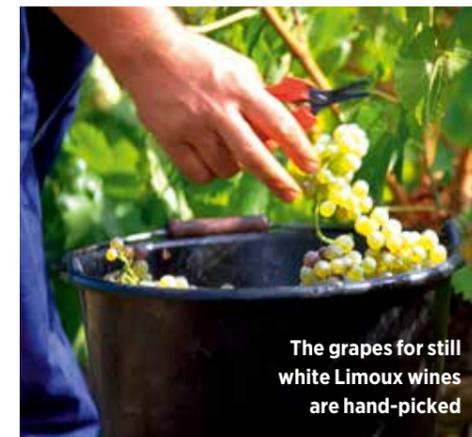


mind this is a wine that's best enjoyed on the fruit within a year, but there are some oaked examples that possibly merit a little longer.

The finest examples of white Languedoc – wines with a little more complexity and substance that can age for five or six years – are often labelled AC Languedoc (or Coteaux de Languedoc until 2017). They can come from a broad sweep of land but, as mentioned, a higher terrain (200m to 350m above sea level) and/or calcareous-clay soils are often favoured. Perfumed Roussanne with its herbal, floral notes and higher acidity is the mainstay of many blends, complemented by Grenache Blanc, Marsanne and sometimes Viognier or Vermentino.

Over in the far west of the Languedoc, Limoux appears as a stranger within the context of the region. Green, rolling hills replace stony garrigue.

Above: the vineyard at Château La Négly in La Clape, where the local grape Bourboulenc provides the base for white blends



The grapes for still white Limoux wines are hand-picked

Mediterranean temperatures are moderated by westerly air currents and elevation (200m to 450m), and rainfall is higher. It's a more attractive climate for white wine production and both sparkling and still wines are made, this time from Chardonnay, Mauzac and Chenin Blanc.

Limoux whites

Historical records show sparkling wines have been produced here since 1544. Today, Blanquette de Limoux and Crémant de Limoux, both made by *méthode traditionnelle* – the former with 90% appley Mauzac and the latter with a minimum 50% Chardonnay – provide some of the best-value sparkling wines in France. Still white Limoux is made essentially from Chardonnay, sometimes with a little Mauzac or Chenin Blanc. The grapes are

'The stamp of the south is evident with floral/herbal aromas, white and yellow fruits to the fore, and freshness'

hand-picked and fermented and aged in oak barrels. Domaines such as Baronarques approach a Burgundian weight and presence but generally speaking the acidity produces a zestier style with a pronounced pitch of fruit. Over-oaking used to be a problem but has now abated.

One last area to keep an eye on for interesting Languedoc whites is among the region's IGPs, formerly vins de pays. There's a greater liberty in the selection of grape varieties, so huge diversity, plus some talented producers, and terroirs that are suitable for white wine production.

IGP Côtes de Thongue, to the west of Picpoul de Pinet, has a group of dynamic producers (domaines Condamine L'Évêque, l'Arjolle, Montrose and Monplézy, for example) but my bet, certainly for the future, goes with IGP Cévennes and IGP Coteaux du Pont du Gard to the east in the Gard department. The former can climb to 300m altitude and has an interesting diurnal temperature range, with schist and calcareous soils. Mas Seren's Etamin (see below) is a sign of the good things to come.

The Languedoc's whites may be in the minority but they have an original taste profile, are keenly priced and increasingly worth seeking out. In the main they are best with food. 

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Top whites to try



Domaine Delmas, Cuvées des Sacres, Crémant de Limoux AOC 2011 89

N/A UK www.blanquette-delmas-bio.com

Chardonnay (60%), Pinot Noir, Chenin Blanc and Mauzac from selected parcels. Only the first press (cuvée) used. Fine and persistent bead. Citrus and apple notes. Real purity of expression. The palate is dry, long and refreshing. **Drink 2016-2017 Alcohol 12.5%**

Château des Estanilles, L'Impertinent, Faugères AOC 2015 91

£13.75 (2014) Yapp Bros

A blend of Marsanne and Roussanne with a touch of Viognier. Complex floral and herbal aromatics and flavours. Palate is round, supple and balanced. Minerally

tension provides a long, persistent finish. **Drink 2016-2019 Alc 13%**

Domaine d'Aupilhac, Les Cocalières, Languedoc AOC 2014 91

£17 (2011) Dulwich Vintners

A blend of Roussanne, Marsanne, Grenache Blanc and Vermentino grown at an altitude of 350m. A subtle and complex nose with blossom and white fruit notes. The palate is rich, round and supple with a caressing texture and lingering finish. Will develop further. **Drink 2016-2020 Alc 13%**

Domaine Py, 3ème Cuvée, Corbières AOC 2015 90

£10.75 (2014) Yapp Bros

Blend of Grenache Blanc, Vermentino and Roussanne. Rich but harmonious. Expressive aroma and flavour with dried fruit, pear and vanilla notes. Minerally

freshness and length on the finish. This needs food. **Drink 2016-2019 Alc 13%**



Mas Seren, Etamin, Cévennes IGP 2014 90

N/A UK www.mas-seren.fr

Blend of Roussanne (80%) and Grenache (20%). Aged on the lees but with no oak. Beautiful texture and fruit. Peach aroma with smoky, toasted notes. Palate unctuous and aromatic; acacia and honeyed flavour. Finishes with a bright, minerally tension. **Drink 2016-2018 Alc 13%**

Prieuré St-Jean de Bébian, La Chapelle de Bébian, Languedoc AOC 2014 90

£11.46-£17.20 Georges Barbier, Terroir Languedoc

The domaine's second wine. Principally Grenache Blanc and Roussanne with a

little Clairette and Viognier. Real purity of fruit with peach, pear and floral notes. Palate supple and seductive; lovely texture and intensity of fruit. Drinking really well now. **Drink 2016-2019 Alc 14%**



Château La Négly, La Brise Marine, La Clape AOC 2015 89

£11.99-£12.95 (2014) Bancroft, Berry Bros & Rudd, H2Vin, James Nicholson, Uncorked

A blend of 70% Bourboulenc and 30% Roussanne. Fresh, floral and fruity. The palate is clean, juicy and well balanced. Easily downed, this is a thirst-quenching wine with substance. **Drink 2016-2017 Alc 13%**

Clos du Gravillas, L'Inattendu, Minervois AOC 2014 89

£22.99 Les Caves de Pyrène, Joseph Barnes A blend of Grenache Blanc and Macabeo. Rich and full palate with confit fruit notes

and a hint of buttery oak. Plenty of extract. Lovely mineral tension on the finish. Best with food. **Drink 2016-2019 Alc 13%**



Caves du Sieur d'Arques, Toques et Clochers Haute Vallée, Limoux AOC 2013 88

£13.99-£14.35 (2012) Ellis Wharton, Hay Wines, Joseph Barnes

Made from 100% Chardonnay. Subtle, citrus-edged nose. Palate structured and fresh with well integrated oak. Bright acidity gives a long, linear finish. Complete and harmonious – not at all over-worked. **Drink 2016-2018 Alc 13%**

Château-Bas d'Aumalans, Languedoc AOC 2014 88

£16 (2013) The Sampler Majority Grenache Blanc blended with

Roussanne and Viognier. Floral and honeyed nose. Medium-bodied, minerally and dry. Well-balanced. Clean, fresh finish. **Drink 2016-2018 Alc 13%**



Domaine Félines Jourdan, Picpoul de Pinet AOC 2015 88

£8.50-£9.99 Carruthers & Kent, Majestic, The Wine Society 100% Piquepoul. Floral, citrus aroma and flavour. Good depth of fruit. Round but crisp and fresh. Lip-smacking flavour. **Drink 2016-2017 Alc 12.5%**

Domaine des Lauriers, Prestige, Picpoul de Pinet AOC 2015 87

£8.30 Tanners 100% Piquepoul. Touch more depth than the regular cuvée. Apple and pear notes. Fruity and fresh with a bone-dry finish. **Drink 2016-2017 Alc 12.5%**

For full UK stockist details turn to p18