

# The lure of the South

In search of sunnier climes, Andrew Jefford didn't have to be persuaded to decamp to the south of France. For a wine writer, bringing his family to live surrounded by vines was an easy choice. Here, he outlines his favourite regions and wines to try

IT'S THREE YEARS since my family and I moved to France. After half a century spent north of the 50th parallel – north (in other words) of Prague, Kraków and Kiev, on the damp Atlantic island called Great Britain – there was never really any doubt in our minds that we would be heading as far south as we could go. I'd been in love with the Mediterranean ever since my own parents had taken my brothers and me to Spain and Greece as children. That salty, sunlit sea is now lapping gently on the sands of Palavas and Carnon, 16km from my desk.

As a jobbing wine writer, of course, it wasn't illogical to deposit myself in the middle of France's (and the world's) largest expanse of vines. I thought I was heading for a distinct entity called Languedoc, but what I now realise is that almost all of France's wine production lies, semi-connectedly, in my half of France. An imaginary line between Lyon and La Rochelle marks the start of 'the south' – and thus defined includes at least 601,000 hectares of the 788,700ha of French vines (2010 figures), around 77%. Cognac, Bordeaux, the southwest, Languedoc-Roussillon, the Rhône valley and Provence – they are all, in different guises, 'the south'.

France's great good fortune becomes evident the moment you look at a relief map. The country's uplands and mountains lie preponderantly in the south; the northern half of the country is much flatter. If it were the other way around, France would produce oceans of boring wine. With the relief in the south separating, qualifying, shading, nuancing and ventilating the basic latitudinal warmth, all the intricacy, character and difference with which drinkers are familiar becomes possible.

I've revisited almost all of those southern regions since living here, and have got to know them a little better, although a lifetime of study remains. It's hard not to have favourites. Terroir is elitist. Some places give more memorable results than others. The quality equation is one of almost insoluble complexity. Happily, assessing and enjoying the results is far easier.

## Personal tastes

This article constitutes a short ramble through 'my' deep south – all of those regions whose wines I seek out and enjoy myself. Like any drinker, I have my own tastes and preferences, so perhaps I should make those clear at the outset.

I love tannin, extract and chewiness in red wines, which is why you'll find Cahors, Madiran and Bandol in my selection – for me the three greatest French red-wine appellations outside Burgundy, Bordeaux and the Rhône. I also love richness and wealth of flavour, low acidity, and have no objection to high alcohols (in naturally articulated wines), so you'll find ambitious reds from Côtes du Roussillon-Villages, Fitou, St-Chinian and Terrasses du Larzac.

At the same time, I'm increasingly intrigued by the subtlety, nuance and understatement of southern white and pink wines – hence the white Collioure and the rosé Côtes de Provence. Aroma, character and that mysteriously sinewy, stony quality often called minerality are universally appealing, and you'll find those variously articulated in Jurançon, Faugères and Pic-St-Loup. Together, I hope, they add up to an exciting journey through the heartland of Europe's most diverse wine-producing nation. ➤

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Above: Andrew Jefford resettled his family in the sunlit hills of the south of France, where he is only 16km from the sea



Photograph: Mick Rock/Cephas; Map: Maggie Nelson



## Cahors

This ‘sweet spot’ in the Lot valley, a deeply incised, serpentine length of river mid-way between the mountains and the plain, is not only the ancestral home of Malbec but also the source of the south’s most athletic and energetic red wines. There’s been a huge surge in quality from the best estates in recent years. With better to come? It’s more than likely. Many of the great pre-phylloxera vineyards still lie uncleared and forgotten in the dappled oak forests which line the river bank.



**Château du Cèdre, Le Cèdre 2009**  
17.5/20pts (91/100pts)

£23–£30 **Bancroft, Les Caves de Pyrène, Swig**  
The Verhaeghe brothers of Cèdre have been appellation leaders for more than a decade now, and this wine suggests a growing finesse and restraint in Pascal Verhaeghe’s winemaking. Scents of damsons and sloes fresh from the forest, and a classically proportioned, mid-weight palate – this wine is both generous, yet full of flavour refinement, too, and is crafted with great assurance. Cahors, it says, doesn’t have to thunder; perfect for fine dining. **Drink** 2013–2018 **Alcohol** 13.5%

## Madiran

France is rarely more rural than in Madiran – small, remote, lonely, politically morsellated, agriculturally rich. So rich, indeed, that it’s sometimes hard for visitors to locate the vineyards and their indigenous Tannat vines here among the seed maize and other cereals growing in the moist gravels and clays of the vast Lannemezan alluvial fan deposited beneath the Pyrenees. Madiran’s wine, too, is a summary of the French countryside – deep, dark, thickly textured, ruggedly contoured, sometimes aromatically challenging (always decant Madiran if you can, for up to 24 hours before drinking). Despite the obstacles, these are often philosophically profound wines of great resonance and epic depth.



Above: Pascal and Jean-Marc Verhaeghe of Cèdre are appellation leaders in Cahors, the ‘sweet spot’ in the Lot



**Vignobles Brumont, Montus 2007** 17 (90)  
£22–£26 **Davis Bell McCraith, Fine & Rare, Good Wine Shop, Harvey Nichols, Highbury Vintners, Selfridges, The Totnes Wine Co, The Wine Society**  
Alain Brumont, the region’s dominant producer, manages to civilise Madiran without compromising its character. This wine mingles smoke and autumn woodland scents with those of fine leather; the palate is resonant and vivacious (acidity is often high in Madiran), powerfully aromatic, structured and commanding. The allusive repertoire includes sloes, prunes, smoked ham and turned clay – wine for a winter feast. **Drink** 2013–2020 **Alc** 13%

## Jurançon

Jurançon is the emblematic appellation of the French Pyrenees. Its close neighbour, Iroulégu, by contrast, is the great wine of France’s Basque country, though it lies even closer to the snowy summits. Growers here seek out the warmest, snuggest exposures in which to plant Gros Manseng and its parent, Petit Manseng – both hardy white

Above: rust-coloured soils are typical in a Collioure vineyard above the coast near Port-Vendres

varieties able to resist a late-season dousing, and hang on for the warm *föhn* winds which come romping up from Spain and glide over the mountains and can gently raisin-ripen them deep into autumn. The dry wines (as shown in the example below) can be shockingly fresh and vivid, and the sweet wines speckled with sumptuous, often faintly tropical fruits – pineapple and mango notes are not uncommon.



**Domaine Cauhapé, Chant des Vignes Sec 2012** 17 (90)

£8.75 **The Wine Society**  
Gros Manseng is blended with 40% of the rare Camaralet de Lasseube to make this bracing, complex dry Jurançon. Aromas almost jump from the glass – pineapple, hay, pounded almonds, hawthorn blossom, a little banana, some fresh apricot. On the palate, the wine is rousing, vivid, saline and incisive, yet every bit as perfumed, and as singular, as its aromas – diverting yet palate-cleansing. I don’t think you’ll find a more intriguing aperitif from France than this, and few to match it for concentration and character at under £10. **Drink** 2013–2014 **Alc** 14.5%

## Collioure

The rust-coloured soils and soaring schist terraces of France’s Côte Vermeille, the rocky link between French and Spanish Catalonia, have traditionally been used to create the fortified wines of Banyuls. In recent years, though, they have begun to produce haunting and surprisingly soft-textured reds and whites, sold under the Collioure appellation. The moist marine air seems to be a key to their qualities – which are a striking contrast to the firmer, bigger, more evidently powerful wines grown in the arid conditions of inland Roussillon. Collioure can never be cheap, though, as everything has to be done by hand here – La Rectorie is the first French domaine I have ever visited that doesn’t even own a tractor. **Domaine de la Rectorie, L’Argile Blanc 2012** 18.5 (95) **£22 The Wine Society (2011)**

You only have to look at the label of this bottle, or check out the Rectorie website ([www.la-rectorie.com](http://www.la-rectorie.com)), to see that the Parcé brothers have an exquisite sense of aesthetics. A taste of this beautiful Grenache Gris, complemented with its dash of Grenache Blanc (10%), is an alluring confirmation of this. The scents are subtle ➤

*‘Everything is done by hand here – La Rectorie is the first French domaine I have ever visited that doesn’t even own a tractor’*

and refined; the flavours (quince, aniseed, apricot) concentrated and poised, with great width in the mouth and gentle, ripe acidity. An artfully expressive southern white, which easily rivals good premier cru Burgundy.

**Drink** 2013–2015 **Alc** 14%

## Côtes du Roussillon-Villages

Roussillon is shut off from the rest of France by the often savage uplands that surround it (the rugged Pic du Canigou is still snowy in May). The Perpignan plain, an amphitheatre facing the Mediterranean, is the work of three rivers that fight their way out of the mountains, and it is the vineyards that line the northernmost of these, the Agly, where the region's most rewarding red wines are found. Up here, just south of the watershed that separates Roussillon from Corbières, conditions are dry, hot, stony and windy – tough country in every season. Yields are necessarily low, and those who tend the vines end up as gnarled and weather-beaten as the vines themselves.



**Domaine Gardiés, La Torre 2010** 18 (93)

£30 **H2Vin**

I adore this Mourvèdre-rich (70%) cuvée from the supremely talented Jean Gardiès, and have bought it over the past decade whenever I've had the chance. All great Roussillon wines seem to taste somehow elemental, made of wind and fire as much as grapes, but this late-ripening variety seems to bring a fleshiness and a rich thunder to that raw power, which adds a gorgeous

hedonistic note. The 2010 is searching, masterful and complete. **Drink** 2014–2023 **Alc** 14%

## Fitou

I've got a soft spot for the mountain sector of this appellation of two halves (there is a coastal sector, too), lying just over the hills from the lower Agly Valley, within sight of the Cathar fortress of Aguilar, and underneath the brooding mass of Mont Tauch. The aspects, altitudes, air currents and soils are all different to those of the Roussillon villages, despite their proximity. The large co-operative (which takes its name from Mont Tauch) dominates production and most growers tractor their grapes there, but the work of the finest independents here suggest that this western corner of Languedoc has much greater potential than the world yet realises.

**Domaine Bertrand-Bergé, Ancéstrale 2010** 17 (90)  
£14.59–£16.99 **Bentley's Wine, D Byrne & Co, Halifax Wine Co, Highbury Vintners**

Complexity, precision, depth and amplitude – few Languedoc wines manage to pack so much in without losing their sense of poise and refreshment. There's a little oak for this wine's Syrah and Mourvèdre components, but it's sensibly discreet and the rest of the blend (Carignan and Grenache) is unoaked. It's a wine that smells and tastes of the plants on the Languedoc hillsides, yet in its structural finesse it manages to intimate a little of the grandeur and nobility of its remarkable surroundings. **Drink** 2013–2018 **Alc** 14.5%



**Top: view of the village of Caramany and the Barrage de l'Agly in Roussillon-Villages, where yields are low due to the harsh growing conditions**

**Above: Jérôme Bertrand of Bertrand-Bergé in Fitou is making wine of complexity, precision and depth**

## St-Chinian

Most of the appellations (or appellations-to-be) of the Languedoc lie along the long strip of hill country running from Alès all the way to Carcassonne. It's a single climate zone. Time, though, and wine-growers' efforts are slowly revealing where the greatest locations are. St-Chinian is certainly one of them; it's a vast zone of different sectors. Its great sites include the vineyards of the lonely Vernazobre valley, as well as those of the Roquebrun hills. The best St-Chinian is vivacious, exuberant, expressive and perfumed, producing some of Languedoc's most head-turning wines.

**V de Viranel 2010** 17 (90)



£15 **Bancroft**

Few St-Chinian wines can match the purity and depth of fruit that Arnaud Bergasse gets into this blend of 45-year-old Syrah and Grenache grown on limestone slopes. Let all that plum gently subside on your tongue, and then out come the aromas and flavours of the south – oil of rosemary and orange peel, grated lemon zest, burnt thyme. Concentrated and broad-chested, exuding personality. **Drink** 2013–2016 **Alc** 14%



## Faugères

Faugères, like Collioure, is sited on hills of schist, yet the style is very different. We're a long way from the sea's moist, caressing breezes – this is high, almost mountain country, spliced from the Cévennes by the river Orb, but barely less lonely. Those who are looking for the Languedoc wines of nerve and sinew, with the unfruity complexities that suggest vine roots fumbling deeply among rocks and stones, will find them here. There's less flamboyance than in neighbouring St-Chinian, but often more rigour, penetration and depth.



**Domaine de Cébène, Felgaria 2011** 17.5 (91)  
£25.99 (2009) **Cambridge Wine Merchants**

This Mourvèdre-rich cuvée (blended with smaller quantities of Syrah and Grenache) from Brigitte Chevalier's outstanding Cébène is one of Faugères' reference cuvées and a Languedoc fine wine by any measure. The style is much less extractive and much more aerial than Jean Gardiès' La Torre – refined and suave aromas that mingle earth, flowers, sweet black fruits and fine suede, while the flavours are taut and dramatic, almost explosive in their concentrated force. **Drink** 2013–2020 **Alc** 14%



**Above: Jean Gardiès of Domaine Gardiès in Côtes du Roussillon-Villages – not an easy location for wine-growing**

**Below left: Jean-Emmanuel Parcé of Domaine de la Rectorie, where all the work is done by hand**

## Terrasses du Larzac

Close to the immaculate medieval village of St-Guilhem-le-Désert, you'll find the Terrasses du Larzac – another roomy Languedoc hill-face appellation whose clearly differentiated zones will surely one day assume an identity of their own. My recommended wine comes from the rugged hill country around St-Jean-de-la-Blaquière, but you'll find other fine domaines in the high-sited limestones up at Pas de l'Escalette to the north of Lodève, in red volcanic soils closer to Lac du Salagou, in the generous glacial-gravel benchlands near Jonquières, as well as in the celebrated glacial soils of Aniane.



**Clos du Serres, L'Humeur Vagabonde 2011** 17 (90)

£21.99 **Cambridge Wine Merchants, Dusty Road Wines**

This cuvée, from the talented team of Béatrice and Sébastien Fillon, is made principally from centenarian Carignan (the historic variety of Languedoc) grown in the distinctive red ruffe soils found in the southwest of this zone, blended with a little Grenache and Syrah. It's dark, dense and dramatic, with scents of blood, cherrystone, thyme and lavender, and concentrated flavours layered with perfumed, resonantly bitter extracts. A grandee of the hills. **Drink** 2013–2018 **Alc** 14.5%

## Pic-St-Loup

This is my backyard vineyard. The Pic itself is within cycling distance, and I love to go walking in winter with my sons in the beautiful scrubby woodland (*garrigue*) that covers its slopes. The style of Pic-St-Loup varies considerably, depending on where the vines are in relation to the peak and to the crags of Hortus: you'll find every aspect here ➤

*'Pic-St-Loup is my backyard vineyard, within cycling distance, and I love to go winter walking with my sons in the scrubby woodland'*

## SOUTHERN FRANCE



**Above: in Provence, vineyards run right down to the Mediterranean shoreline, as here at Château Léoube**

from cool north to glittering south. Even the warmest sites lie well above sea level and are full of fragrance, poise, detail and interest.

**Château Fontanès 2011** 17.5 (91)

N/A UK, [www.chateau-laroque.fr](http://www.chateau-laroque.fr)

Cyriaque Rozier is a Bordeaux-trained Burgundian who found himself in Pic-St-Loup in order to draw up its AC dossier – and he liked it so much that he stayed. This blend of Serine (the Tain/Ampuis clone of Syrah), plus Mourvèdre and Grenache, is my leading Pic discovery so far this year – perfumed, floral, beguiling, textured and deep. It can't be long before canny importers find their way to Rozier's front door, although the domaine is a tiny one; his day job is with Jacques Figueffe's biodynamic Château La Roque. **Drink** 2013–2018 **Alc** 13.5%

## Côtes de Provence

Like the overall Languedoc appellation, this vast and discontinuous zone is best regarded as a testbed for future sub-zones of excellence (Ste-Victoire, Fréjus and La Londe can already append their own names to the overall AC). I've included it for one reason above all – for me, this is where the greatest pink wines in the world come from. Unlike in the Languedoc, the hills of Provence tumble right down to the Mediterranean shoreline; Grenache, Syrah, Cinsault and Mourvèdre, grown in these often cool, moist, breezy conditions, seem to express themselves best of all via the understatement, subtlety, nuance and discretion of pink wine. It is, however, the hardest of all wines to vinify well. This rosé, crafted by Romain Ott, is a benchmark.



**Château Léoube 2012** 17 (90)

£13.83–£14.50 **Corney & Barrow, James Nicholson**  
Peach-pale in colour, with delicate scents of apricot, orange, magnolia – aromatic calligraphy. On the palate, the wine is caressingly gentle and creamy (Romain Ott chose to put his rosés through malolactic) yet mouthfilling, too, and those subtle fruits have a faintly saline edge, as if the summer fruits were somehow macerating in the marine air. **Drink** 2013–2014 **Alc** 12.5%



Photograph: Nigel Bradley

## Bandol

In general, I prefer Provence's whites to its reds. There is one zone, though, where reds of shocking grandeur suddenly loom out – the limestone amphitheatre behind the pretty little yacht port of Bandol. Mourvèdre is the key grape – it loves warm, sunny, well-ventilated surroundings, and produces wines of substance and complexity with a uniquely savoury, allusive repertoire. We've come a long way from Cahors, with its incision, vivacity and fruited freshness; these wines are more Italianate, more meditative.

**La Bastide, Blanche 2010** 17.5 (91)

£14.50 **H2Vin, Waitrose**

Deep, though not opaque in colour, this is an aromatically quiet but subtle wine, hinting at thyme, lavender, mountain honey and meat grilled over vine prunings. The palate has wonderful baseline grip and then (almost like Barolo) relatively open-pored fruit above that. It's savoury, yet spotlessly clean – those aromatic notes steal back in to the palate, joined this time by suggestions of pine forests in high summer. Masterful and pure. **Drink** 2013–2020 **Alc** 14.5% **D**

For full details of UK stockists, see p84

**Above: Andrew Jefford with Faugères winemaker Brigitte Chevalier of Domaine de Cébène**

*Andrew Jefford is the 2012 Louis Roederer International Online Columnist of the Year for articles on Decanter.com*