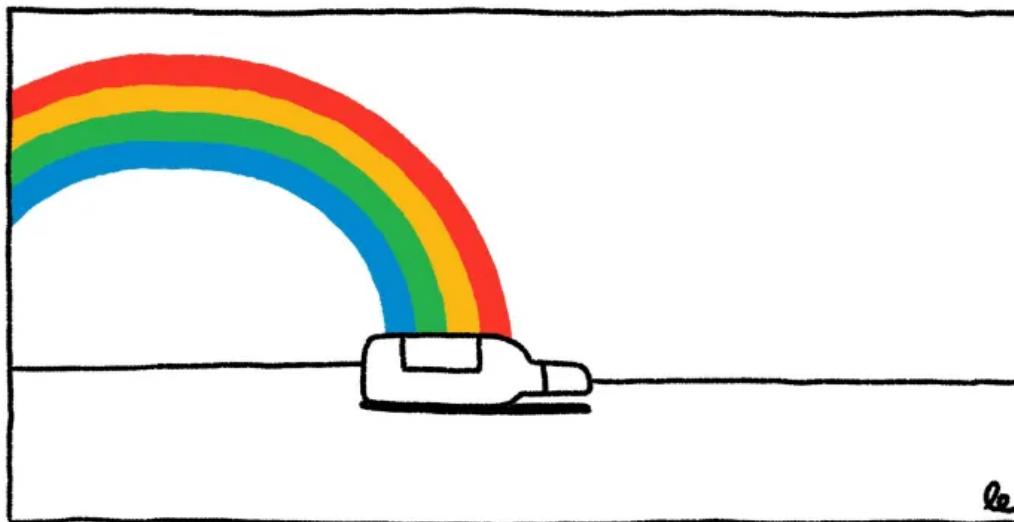


Opinion **FT Magazine**

## The hidden treasure of Languedoc's wines

Superb bargains are to be found in the region's schist-rich hills

**JANCIS ROBINSON**



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Brigitte Chevalier of Domaine de Cébène makes truly superb wine by any measure. It is handmade, terroir-dictated wine that has been getting better and better now that it is produced in Chevalier's own custom-built cellar dug out of an isolated hill rather than in cramped rented space in a nearby village.

During a socially distanced visit there last month, I asked her whether she had put her prices up. She frowned and shook her head.

"No. This is the Languedoc." There you have the nub of the problem for France's most extensive wine region — but it's one that can provide wine lovers with an array of potential bargains.

I asked Chevalier's US importer Eric Solomon of European Cellars why I could find so few listings of her wines on the generally trustworthy Wine-searcher.com and even then only older vintages.

He emailed his frustration from a country bedevilled by 25 per cent tariffs on French imports and a stagnant hospitality industry: "The wines are brilliant but in a strange middle price point. The market here in recent years has not embraced Languedoc wines except for the cheap and (not very) cheerful candidates."

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Perhaps the wines would sell better if they were more expensive? Current prices are \$12 to \$35 a bottle for the 2013 and 2015 vintages in the US and £11 to £34 for the 2014 to 2019 vintages in the UK.

As Solomon knows well, there are small domaines all over the Languedoc making the very best wine they can from hugely distinctive vineyards, typically in the foothills of the Cévennes. They are high above the plains that delivered plonk for the masses in the second half of the past century and still churn out inexpensive varietals labelled IGP Pays d'Oc.

But can these hard-working vigneronns sell their wines? Even at bargain prices — and even in the open-minded UK market — the Languedoc is a hard sell. Rather than being marketed on the basis of a well-known grape variety, the best wines tend to be labelled with the name of one of the region's many and relatively little-known appellations. This can make life complicated for those both selling and buying the wines.

Chevalier is a star of Faugères, one of the Languedoc's most distinctive appellations in the hills above Béziers. It is defined by the rocky [schist](#) that is visible everywhere — just as in Portugal's Douro valley, where port is grown, and Priorat in Catalonia, whose wines can also taste almost as though they contain powdered rock. A major asset of schist is its ability to keep vines moist in a region with dramatically low rainfall.

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When we met, Chevalier had seen practically no rain since March, yet she kept showing me with delight walls of schist in vineyards where plant roots had insinuated themselves between layers of rock to reach metres down towards moisture. The larger appellation of Saint-Chinian to the west also has schist, but only in part of it. In Faugères — slogan "*Grand Terroir de Schiste*" — the 50 or so producers revel in the appellation's homogeneity.

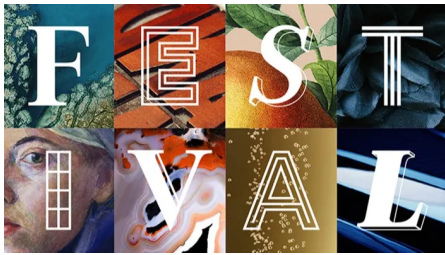
Chevalier is from Bordeaux, where, during her 10 years exporting wine for the Saint-Émilion wine producer and impresario Jean-Luc Thunevin, she was exposed to some of the greatest wines of Europe. Her conversation is peppered with references to her native region — where, she claims, the wines are so much less varied and interesting than further south.

She had long wanted to make wine herself, she says, but wished to be a pioneer rather than follow the Bordeaux recipe, and she was particularly fascinated by the effect of schist. There is some in Roussillon on the Spanish border but Chevalier was attracted to the cooler climes of the Haut-Languedoc.

When she arrived — in time to make the 2008 vintage — she deliberately looked for north-facing, low-yielding vineyards rejected by the locals as unprofitable. Grapes in these cooler vineyards — hers are at 300m elevation or more — were traditionally more difficult to ripen, but later ripening is a boon as summers heat up.

She put together her domaine, now certified organic, from scratch. Guided by the sort of wine that she wanted to make — delicate, fine — she now has a total of 10.5ha of vines in production, on four carefully chosen sites with pitifully low yields: sometimes as little as 15 hectolitres per hectare, much lower than in Bordeaux.

## FTWeekend Festival



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Bancèls”, after the local word for vine terraces.

Six of her hectares surround her underground cellar, now with a home and tasting room on top — so convenient. When I drew up to the neat, modern villa, there was a keen breeze. I was assured the day counted as remarkably still compared with the windy norm that presumably helps keep vine diseases at bay.

Chevalier’s other parcels of land are not far away and include the most extraordinary hillock: narrow terraces of vines wind round it to such an extent that the locals call it “*l’escargot*” (the snail). The man who sculpted the vineyard grew tired of its low yields but the Syrah vines that push up through the rocky fragments give a nervy base for the bottling Chevalier calls “Les

The Faugères regulations outlaw wines made from only one of the permitted grape varieties, chiefly Syrah, Grenache, Mourvèdre and Carignan for reds and rosés, and various Rhône varieties plus Vermentino for the unusually lively whites.

## **Faugères, one of Languedoc's most distinctive appellations, is defined by the rocky schist that is visible everywhere**

As Chevalier showed me her naturally cool underground cellar, which she describes as “zen”, she spoke of her delight in the art of blending the contents of her row of shiny 5,000l tanks.

She uses very little wood, just a few 500l casks for her Felgaria bottling, based on the unusual combination of mainly Mourvèdre

and schist. Her Belle Lurette is based on old Carignan vines, while her sumptuous Grenache-based Ex Arena bottling has to be sold as an IGP Pays d'Oc because the sandier soil on which it is grown is not deemed schistous enough to qualify for the local appellation.

Faugères used to be rather sleepy but Chevalier claims the locals are waking up to the “treasure beneath their feet”, and she is heartened by the arrival of a few outsiders, such as those at Domaine Les Serrals and Domaine de Monthély, who have been asking her for advice. As well they might.

### Languedoc recommendations

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All of these have produced at least two wines that scored a minimum of 17 out of 20 in our recent coverage of the Languedoc on JancisRobinson.com

- Ch des Adouzes, Faugères
- Ch d'Anglès, La Clape
- Gérard Bertrand, top single-vineyard bottlings
- Ch Les Bugadelles, La Clape
- Ch Castigno, Saint-Chinian
- Dom de Cébène, Faugères
- Dom de la Cendrillon, Corbières
- Les Clos Perdus, Corbières
- Dom Gayda, IGP Pays d'Oc
- La Jasse Castel, Languedoc
- Ch La Liquière, Faugères
- La Madura, Saint-Chinian
- Mas de Daumas Gassac, IGP

Saint-Guilhem-le-Désert, Cité d'Aniane

- Mas Lasta, Terrasses du Larzac

- Dom Montrose, IGP Pays d'Oc
- Ch Puech-Haut, Languedoc
- La Réserve d'O, Terrasses du Larzac
- Ch and Dom Rives-Blanques, Limoux
- Dom Sainte-Croix, Corbières
- Terre des Dames, Languedoc

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