

NEW WAVE IN THE ROUSSILLON





A new pioneering spirit is passing over the Roussillon region with winemakers creating top quality, boutique style dry white and red wine besides traditional fortified sweet wines, writes **Marisa D'Vari**

For hundreds of years, the Roussillon region of southern France has been famous for its fortified sweet wine called *vin doux naturel* or VDN.

In many ways the Roussillon, with its extremely warm climate and near constant sunlight, is well suited to the production of sweet wine. Grapes are gathered when they are at the perfect moment of ripeness without being overripe, and at the right phenolic maturity so that the skins of the red grapes are bursting with colour and tannin. Because of the cool nights and higher altitude in many areas, you also find freshness and zesty acidity in the fortified white wines.

VDN is produced by the mutage method, very similar to the way Port wine is made in Portugal. The winemaker begins the alcoholic fermentation just as if he or she were making a dry wine. However, at the midway point the

Snow-capped Mount Canigou. Between the Mediterranean and the Pyrenees, the Roussillon district enjoys an ideal climate for producing wine



The seaside resort town of Collioure, around where Clos Saint Sebastian is located

fermentation is interrupted by the addition of high-alcohol spirit. This stops the action of the yeast so that significant residual sugar is left, along with elevated alcohol levels that range between 15.5 and 17.5%.

The most delicate style of VDN is produced from the fragrant, very floral, white Muscat grape. The wine is usually quite pale in colour, and has the aromas of freshly picked honeysuckle. Although the wine often has about 105 grams per litre of residual sugar,

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it is balanced by the natural, high acidity and minerality from the terroir, so that the sweetness never seems cloying. This is a great wine to have with a light summer dessert, like Angel Food Cake along with light berries.

One of my favourite VDN wines is made from a majority of the red Grenache grape. This particular style of Grenache-based wine is protected from oxygen as it matures, so that the colour is a gorgeous, youthful, purple-black, and the aromas are similar to those you would find in a basket of fresh-picked fruit in a summer garden such as black plums, blackberries and blueberries. This wine, too, has over 100 grams per litre of residual sugar, but the sugar is well integrated into the wine. It tastes fabulous with a dark, chocolate cake, the more decadent the better.



Left: Bombonnes or large glass bottles in which the wine is left to mature in the sun to hasten the oxidative process

Right: The Muscat grape variety used for producing the region's famous fortified sweet wines known as vins doux naturels

Although the above styles of VDN which have been protected from oxygen are very popular, when most people think of VDN they usually think of the deliberately oxidative style in which the wine is matured for years – often decades – in giant wooden barrels to develop the aromas and flavours of caramel and toffee. Some winemakers are so passionate about this oxidative style that they hasten the oxidative process by leaving the wine to mature outdoors under the hot sun in glass bottles called *bombonnes*. This style of wine is best sipped alone or perhaps with dry fruit and cheese.

Today, however, things are changing. The winemakers of the Roussillon, while keeping one foot in the traditional world of VDN production,

have placed the other in the modern world of dry wine. On a recent visit, I was surprised to see dozens of winemakers who are creating top quality boutique style, dry white and red wine, similar to what you'd find in the elite vineyards of California's Napa Valley or Australia's Margaret River. In many cases, these are younger winemakers in their 30s, who see what their peers are doing around the globe and want to show the world what the Roussillon terroir is capable of.

According to Eric Aracil, head of the CIVR (Conseil Interprofessionel des Vins du Roussillon) micro terroir is what the Roussillon is all about. One morning, he took me on a tour of a vineyard near his home to show the amazing diversity of soils. You could find sand, gravel, grey and black schist, and many other soils in a single small vineyard just as you might

find in Burgundy. In addition to the soil, wild herbs and plants like lavender, fennel, and mint (called *garrigue*) grow through the rocks, adding to the diversity of flavours.

M. Peronne, the owner of Clos Saint Sebastian, is a good example of a dynamic producer who appreciates the distinctive terroir of the Roussillon. During a visit to his *cave*, housed in a 17th century structure near the seaside resort town of Collioure, he introduced me to his Clos Saint Sebastian Inspiration Marine 2015 red wine (90% Mourvedre and 10% Grenache Noir), which takes its name from the terroir unique to the vineyards near the sea. This wine is in contrast to his Clos Saint Sebastian Inspiration Celeste 2015 (largely Grenache with some Carignan), which is named after the terroir of the vineyards located near the mountains. Like virtually every producer, M. Peronne also makes fine sweet fortified wines in the name of tradition.

During my visit I also met many producers who came from other countries and regions beyond Roussillon to make wine in this unique spot. The immigrant couple behind Domaine Treloar (she is from New Zealand, he from England) are a good example of youthful blood combined with an old-fashioned pioneering spirit. Independently self-financed, they found an old vineyard and ancient farmhouse in the village of Trouillas, 15 miles from the main city of Perpignan. They quickly set about working the land and making the wine, while raising children at the same time. Ever since they founded Treloar, they have become beacons of light to other people who yearn to leave their jobs in the big cities to make wine in the Roussillon. Caroline Bonville, owner and winemaker of Mas Karolina, is Bordeaux-born yet she has made a name for herself in

Beloe: Clos Saint Sebastian Inspiration Celeste 2015, Grenache with some Carignan and right, right, Clos Saint Sebastian Inspiration Marine 2015 wine, 90% Mourvedre and 10% Grenache Noir



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the Roussillon, thanks to her well-made dry wines and some sweet wines with colourful, attractive labels meant to catch the eye of wine-savvy millennial consumers.

The dry wines of the Roussillon are making a name for themselves with sommeliers in the best restaurants in the world. The reds, usually based on Grenache Noir, are terroir driven and aged partly in new French oak barriques. And the white wines, because of the cool nights, keep their freshness and vibrant acidity even in this warm climate. The best of the whites are fermented and aged in small French barriques, like the finest Burgundy.

Fortified wines of the Roussillon are now being discovered by the new generation to be used by savvy mixologists from Paris to New York as a basis for exotic cocktails instead of being restricted to post-dinner enjoyment. According to Eric Aracil, young people who may never have heard of VDN are fascinated by the thought of enjoying a fortified wine that has been aging in a giant barrel for 30 years, mixed with popular liqueurs like Cointreau and Curacao, and attractively presented in a martini glass with a garnish.

Today, the Roussillon retains the charm of the Old World, with its winemakers respectful of maintaining the tradition of its fortified sweet wines and yet the region is increasingly home to dynamic young, creative winemakers who are determined to put it on the world's map of terroir-driven wines.▼