



ROUSSILLON: THE RISE OF DRY IN AN IN-BETWEEN LAND

The singular dry red and white wines of Roussillon deserve separate billing from those produced in the other half of the southern French hyphenate in Languedoc, says **Miquel Hudin**, who travels to Catalan France to meet the community of longtime locals and newcomers who are changing perceptions of a region best known historically for its sweet wines

In recent times, many words have been written about the quality revolution taking place in France's Languedoc. The plentitude of grapevines both young and old, a favorable climate, and much lower costs to entry for new winemakers has made for a vinous cauldron, simmering with experimentation and quite often success. Roussillon, on the other hand, is still largely seen as simply another one of the wine regions in southern France, which in this case happens to be situated after the hyphen in Languedoc-Roussillon.

Perhaps with the exception of size, Roussillon has all that Languedoc offers and has been better known historically for dessert-wine production. In fact, it produces upward of 80 percent of all the dessert wines in France, while only having 2 percent of France's total wine production. This, however, has been set to change, as a growing number of people realize that the ideal ingredients needed to produce fine dessert wines can readily produce fine dry wines as well.

It's a story similar to that of other wine regions in Europe, where outsiders have arrived and taken stock of what quality vines there are to produce excellent wines. At the same time, traditional families of the region now aspire to produce more ambitious wine than their local cooperatives used to make. All told, Roussillon is showing that being at this blurry crossroads of a warmer "Spanish" climate and the almighty "Product of France" on the label is starting to pan out, as they have developed their own taste profile and wine identity above and beyond their more famous dessert wines.

That which binds, defines

Roussillon has 14 different AOCs and three IGPs, but it's the five AOCs for sweet wines—Rivesaltes, Maury, Banyuls, Banyuls Grand Cru, and Muscat de Rivesaltes—that most people will readily identify by name when asked about the region. These have served as an entry point into the region for many. But while they are still lovely wines, dessert wines the world over have fallen upon hard times, so they aren't, for lack of a better term, the sticking point that could lure potential new drinkers to the region.

We're seeing a similar evolution in other dessert-wine regions such as the Douro, where Port is ceding space to more dry wines. The example in Roussillon that illustrates this best is Banyuls and Collioure. They have exactly the same geographic boundaries, but the former appellation is for sweet and the latter for dry. Collioure has been making gains over its sweet sibling, with its area under vine now extending over 589ha (1,455 acres), up from 478ha (1,180 acres) five years ago. Banyuls, on the other hand, shrank from 1,019ha (2,518 acres) to 828ha (2,046 acres) over the same period. This drying of the territory isn't happening overnight, but the evolution is clear.

An amphitheater in an island

But what exactly is Roussillon? And what defines it stylistically apart from its dessert wines? The easiest case to make for its uniqueness is that, despite differing soil types, it is overall unified geographically, forming a wrinkled pocket tucked in between the Aspres range to the south that leads up to the Pyrenees in the west, and the Massif des Corbières to the north. Along this northern border, old castles called the Sons of Carcassonne are dolloped upon the peaks to form what was the old 17th-century border with Spain that now exists farther south.

To look at a soil map of the region gives the appearance of a Schnauzer with its head out of a car window, beard blown back in the wind, with streaks of various types slithering toward the eastern opening of the pocket that sits on the sea. Scrapes of red sandstone on top of limestone, as well as exposed limestone around Thuir, contribute to a terroir that's well known for giving excellent acidity to the grapes. Farther afield and more uphill are large portions of clay and silt.

Around Perpignan are large tracts of clay, sand, and silt that are all poor in organic content and heavily planted with vines due to their proximity to the main towns and villages. For anyone who needs to see this in more detail and rapidly, a trip on the TGV will get the point across.

Opposite: The Château Royal de Collioure has inspired artists including André Derain, Georges Braque, Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, and Charles Rennie Mackintosh.

But the most fascinating of the soils are those that are schistose in nature. The marl and slate around Maury is quite different from the colluvial deposits of Banyuls and Collioure, but the result is the same: crumbling, extremely poor soils that make for highly intense grapes. This has been the secret of the dessert wines of these two regions for some time now, and it's proving, much as it has in the Mosel, Priorat, Douro, Ribeira Sacra, and other areas, that such soils can produce wonderfully intense yet dynamic wines when harnessed correctly.

It's important to mention how much the soils define each of the smaller zones in Roussillon, since unlike Languedoc, the grape varieties are largely homogenous across the region. Reds are based on Grenache, Carignan, Syrah, and Mourvèdre; the whites, on White Grenache, White Carignan, Macabeu, Muscat, Marsanne, and Roussane. Here and there are surprises such as Gray Grenache and Vermentino but in smaller numbers. While some more "international" varieties like Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, and Chardonnay are permitted in IGP wines, the focus is very much on the other local grapes that have now proven their worth by creating fine wines year after year.

Many turns to Thuir and other paths that meet

Thuir is a quintessential French-Catalan village with a charming old center and church at its heart, but it would otherwise be unremarkable were it not for the "cathedral" to vermouth, Byrrh, upon which the village seems founded. Like many modern winemakers, Jonathan Hesford and his wife Rachel Treloar didn't start out with the intention of having a winery, let alone one in a village just outside Perpignan. While the pages of books and the Web are awash with similar expatriate journey stories, theirs traces back to the events of 9/11 in New York City, which set this couple on a different course. Jonathan shifted from IT in the financial sector to winemaking, having worked at Neudorf in Rachel's native New Zealand prior to heading to France.

Jonathan actually looked up and down this stretch of the Mediterranean and might have ended up somewhere farther south such as Priorat or Montsant in Catalonia, before coming across the village of Thuir. While relatively unknown in terms of wine fame, it sits just as the slopes start rising up into the Aspres mountains, so it enjoys beneficial cool breezes, even in summer.

While the growing conditions were optimal, fine-wine production was still a challenge when Jonathan and Rachel arrived. But Jonathan isn't one to back down from, as five minutes of conversation makes readily apparent. "I wanted to find somewhere in France where I could have ideas." It's a premise that perfectly sums up part of Roussillon's appeal, and while it hasn't attracted squads of expat winemakers as Languedoc has, this freedom via anonymity is a powerful draw for those open to the possibilities. Being off so many must-know wine lists allows adventurous winemakers to try things like varietal Grenache, Carignan, or Mourvèdre, the latter showcased in Jonathan's blockbuster, Motus.

Jonathan is not the only one, of course, to have taken note of what Roussillon has to offer, and he is in the company of a few equally enterprising Brits. Justin Howard-Sneyd MW consults in the area (including at Domaine Lafage) and happily makes his

Opposite: Rugged terraced vineyards in Roussillon, where it is the very varied soils—clay, silt, and sand, limestone and sandstone, marl and slate—that define the zones.

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itinerant Domaine of the Bee, a lovely expression of Mediterranean grapes from poor soils. Richard Case also consults here and has his own Domaine de la Pertuisane, where he shows what the local Grenache is capable of when left unfortified. Katie Jones, whose Domaine Jones is on the border with Languedoc in Tuchan, makes small quantities of Carignan from Roussillon vines. And Monty Waldin filmed his *Château Monty* series in St-Martin-de-Fenouillet, as he ventured forth to produce a biodynamic wine in the region.

This village of St-Martin-de-Fenouillet has charmed others, because it's also the base for Domaine des Enfants. Oregonian Carrie Sumner (a sommelier) and Swiss Marcel Bühler (a banker) both arrived in Roussillon via different paths to meet in Maury and start their winery, as well as a family, in the region. Their story is much like the others, in that it was the old vines, unique pockets of soils, and quite staggering valleys that disappear westward into nothing past Maury that lured them into the region and then kept them there. Short of any world-changing event, more will undoubtedly come.

Understanding Banyuls' dryer side: Collioure

It's only 7 miles (12km) in a straight line to the French/Spanish border from Collioure, but it's 15 miles (25km) of twisty roads and nearly an hour of driving (if holiday camping vans don't slow you down further). On the other side of the border is Catalan Spain and DO Empordà, which is unarguably a continuation of the Banyuls/Collioure wine-growing region. Thousands of people fled here after the Spanish Civil War. Although in exile, many stayed close and found work in the vineyards on the French side, which saw an unbroken tradition of grape-growing and winemaking that essentially stopped in Empordà and is only now seeing a revival.

Augustin Parcé knows these little winding roads in the area well and has little problem racing about the crumbly vineyard slopes that tumble down upon his native village of Collioure. He's the sixth brother in a very large family of nine siblings. While he may have started his namesake Domaine Augustin as recently as 2015, the family has a much longer claim to fame in the area, having opened Domaine de la Rectorie back in 1984. Before that, as is wont to happen in the region-born-of-ashes narrative, they had been selling their grapes to the local cooperative prior to striking out on their own.

The reason for starting Domaine Augustin was necessary convenience. If the question is ever raised as to how many winemakers can be in one cellar, nine is clearly on the side of "too many"; with so many siblings, they needed to spread out a little. This is entirely reasonable, given that the Parcé family were at the forefront of recognizing the potential quality of dry wines from the region and knew which path to take from their experience with Rectorie.



While it's easy to think of Banyuls and Collioure as the sweet and dry binaries of one another, it doesn't quite work that way. While Banyuls can be produced as a white fortified wine, it's the achingly long and persistent reds from Grenache that set mouths watering. But this doesn't mean that the still wines of Collioure find all their strength in the reds. As Augustin puts it, "The Collioure reds have a great deal of variation between the producers, but the whites are where you find more consistency."

This is immediately clear when tasting their wines; the reds are lovely and fresh, but there is a windswept lift and clarity to their white—Adéodat, meaning "what God gives." It is often a similar experience in other cellars. Producers such as Domaine Madeloc with its Crestall or Clos St-Sebastien with its Le Clos show that there is indeed a path to the future for the reds as well, but much as Augustin says, the whites show a uniformity for the region that really underlines and defines Collioure, with its crumbling, schistose soils rocketing up from the rough shores of the Mediterranean, dotted with old fishing villages that have long since submitted to seasonal touristic sprawl.

Learning to dance on many floors

It's an unseasonably warm day in the middle of March, but still it is predictably windy. As Ramuntxo Andonegui, Lafage's commercial director, cautiously drives down a country road; a dog sitting in front of a gate squints into the wind as it flaps one of his ears back and forth across his head, taunting him. A short way past the windswept hound, he stops the car at an old vineyard of Grenache Gris and Blanc grapes. The peak of

Canigou is in the distance, liberally glazed in snow, with the wind seeming to broadcast these glacial sheets directly at this scrap of rocky soil in the middle of nowhere.

We'd come from Domaine Lafage's new cellar that opened in 2014 and is just 4 miles (6km) from the coast of Roussillon, but it couldn't be in a more different world if it tried. This was all once the river plain of the Têt River, which, once it receded to the much more modest form we see today, left behind fields of hardpacked, stony soils. The stones of the vineyard are uniquely shaped, as Ramuntxo points out: "See this? This is the wind. Over millennia, this wind has not only slowly moved them down from the hills but cut them as well." This soil is in an abusive relationship with nature, and in it sit these old vines, working within with what's given to produce intense, elegant wines.

Founder Jean-Marc Lafage is originally from Maury, and with his wife Eliane he has been producing Maury Sec—an exciting appellation that's also quite new, approved only in 2011. But when starting the larger Lafage project back in 1985, Jean-Marc also bought some 50ha (124 acres) around Les Aspres, taking advantage of the finesse that Jonathan at Treloar treasures as well.

Make no mistake: Lafage—with its production of 3 million bottles a year and very welcoming tasting room alongside the D617—isn't some cobwebbed hidden jewel. It is one of the larger producers in the region, which has dipped its toes into all the main high-quality zones in this "wrinkled pocket" called Roussillon. The region overall has excelled at having many mid-range producers now producing good, reliable wines, including



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the 30 cooperatives that are still responsible for 75 percent of the production. And Lafage offers an excellent point of entry for anyone wanting to understand the region better through its takes on the various appellations.

In an in-between land

It doesn't matter how rebellious or commercial one cellar or the other might be, since when making wine in Roussillon, one is making it in what was Catalonia more than 350 years ago. Despite such a lengthy separation from Spain's independence-minded northeastern region, many people still speak the language and preserve the traditions, whether they be their northern interpretation of the winemaking, the human towers called *castellers*, or simply a healthy plate of flame-roasted snails for lunch in the vineyard.

The people of this in-between land have a singular identity and have attracted others to the region who are like-minded, whether these newcomers are aware of it or not. This in turn has shaped the winemaking, which, if dissected clinically, may not immediately seem unique in a broader Mediterranean wine sense but undeniably and unhesitatingly says "Roussillon" once tasted. ■

Above: Augustin Parcé, who created Domaine Augustin, specializing in dry wines. Opposite: Jonathan Hesford, who set up Domaine Treloar with wife Rachel Treloar.

WINE HIGHLIGHTS

Domaine La Différence La Grande Cuvée Côtes du Roussillon Villages-Tautavel 2009
(60% Syrah, 25% Carignan, 13% Grenache, 2% Mourvèdre; 14.5% ABV)

Dark ruby, little rim. Red cherry and plum, licorice, graphite, orange peel, rose petals, toasted notes: great intensity. Full and rich, with oak tannins integrating well, mature plum, a great mid-palate, and very, very long finish. | 95

Domaine Treloar Motus Côtes du Roussillon 2015
(Mourvèdre; 14% ABV)

Dark ruby, thin rim. A mighty bouquet of red cherry and other brambly forest fruit, vanilla, almond blossom, orange peel, and cocoa. A rich and full palate, with a wealth of tannins still integrating, leading into a crisp, lingering finish. | 93

Domaine of the Bee Rouge Côtes du Roussillon Villages 2015
(Grenache, Carignan; 15% ABV)

Ruby with a thin garnet rim. Rich red fruits with an underpinning of ripe plum, orange peel, licorice, cocoa. Broad, round tannins, with a touch of toast and sweet cocoa in the long finish. Manages to stay very light on the palate despite the high alcohol. | 93

Domaine le Puig Le Fort St-Pierre Côtes du Roussillon 2011
(30% Carignan, 30% Grenache Noir, 30% Syrah, 10% Mourvèdre; 13.5% ABV)

Garnet with a light brick hue. Delicate red cherry and rose petal, green herbs, chopped coriander, cracked black pepper. Excellent balance on the palate. Good grip of red fruit matched by fresh acidity and a lengthy finish. | 93

Domaine Augustin Adéodat Collioure 2016
(Grenache Gris; 14.5% ABV)

Lemon and white peach, strong kick of salinity, and toasted notes. Very fleshy and full on the palate, peach notes more prominent as well as Meyer lemon, medium plus acidity and a lengthy finish. | 93

Les Vignerons de Maury l'Akme Maury Sec 2016
(70% Grenache, 30% Carignan; 15.5% ABV)

Bit, broad red-cherry notes with vanilla, light tobacco, tea leaf, underlying slate mineral notes, generally fresh and airy aromatically. Rich and dense dark fruit on the palate, with fig notes and a touch of kirsch. Despite the weight, it stays quite light and holds medium plus acidity through the lingering finish. | 92

Domaine Fontanel Priuré Côtes du Roussillon Villages-Tautavel 2014
(Syrah, Grenache, Mourvèdre; 14.5% ABV)

Dense ruby, brick flecks. Crisp red fruits, a waft of volatility making for a light nose with a spicy licorice and leather component. Crisp and lively, with red-cherry fruit and a nudge over medium acidity. Nice lingering finish. | 92

Domaine Paetzold Nagello Côtes Catalanes 2015
(Syrah; 13.5% ABV)

Dark ruby. Predominantly red cherry but a healthy amount of black fruit, too, as well as earthiness, light wood, minor herbal notes, and black pepper. A full embrace of red fruits on the palate, with medium and well-placed acidity, lively freshness, and a lingering finish. Very articulate. | 92

Domaine Madeloc Crestall Collioure 2016
(Syrah, Mourvèdre; 13.5% ABV)

Ruby with light garnet rim. A mix of red and dark brambly fruits, eucalyptus, light leather, and orange blossom. Broad red fruits on the palate, a lightly sweet aspect from the oak, rich dry tannins with a full structure, and a long finish. Needs more time but already quite good now. | 92

Mas Bécha La Bergerie du Camps de Nyils Côtes du Roussillon Villages Les Aspres 2013
(80% Syrah, 10% Grenache, 10% Mourvèdre; 15.5% ABV)

Inky ruby with a cherry-red aspect. Sweet red fruit, cherry, ripe strawberry jam, spicy meat, licorice, sage, a light touch of vanilla. Rich, creamy red fruits on the palate, very smooth, fine tannins, good mid-palate and medium finish. Very ripe and big berry fruit but also fresh and expressive. | 92

Mas l'Avail Initiale Maury Sec 2014
(70% Grenache, 10% Syrah, 10% Mourvèdre, 10% Carignan; 15% ABV)

Ruby with a brick hue. Red cherry, young plum, reductive notes, licorice, a touch of leather, light floral notes. Balanced and fresh dark fruit on the palate, medium acidity but with a well-worked mid-palate and a meaty finish. | 92

La Coume du Roy Voluntas Maury Sec 2011
(90% Grenache, 10% Carignan; 15% ABV)

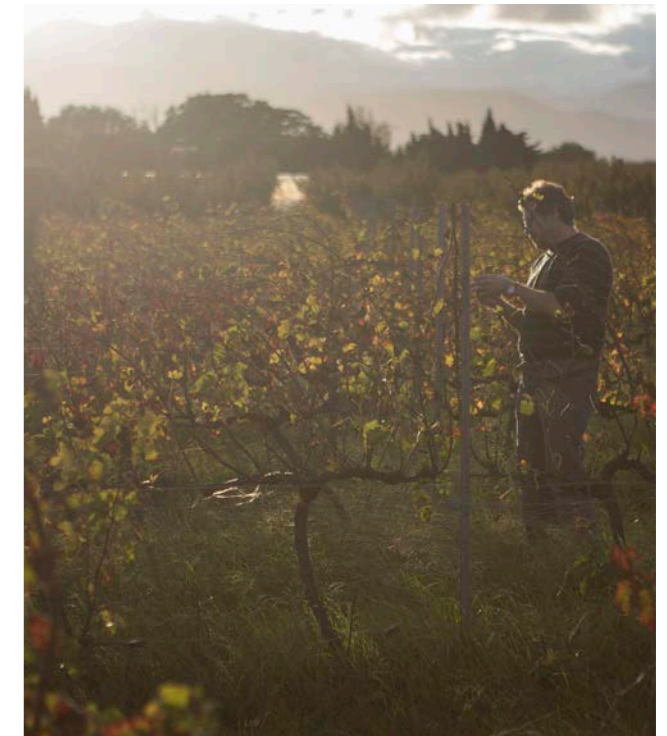
Dark ruby with light garnet rim. Light red cherry and young plum, herbal notes of fennel and rosemary, touches of cedar. Balanced and crisp on the palate, with medium-plus acidity, quite fine, dry tannins, and a lengthy finish. | 92

Abbé Rous Cornet & Cie Collioure 2016
(60% Grenache Gris, 25% Grenache Blanc, 15% Roussanne, Marsanne, Vermentino; 14.5% ABV)

Peach, orange peel and blossom, honey, dried apricot, and a hint of green apple. Very nicely balanced in the mouth, green-apple notes more prevalent, medium-plus acidity, and a lengthy finish. Fresh, lively, and very pleasing to drink. | 92

Domaine Thunevin-Calvet Les Dentelles Côtes du Roussillon Villages 2015
(50% Grenache, 50% Carignan; 15% ABV)

Complex dark-cherry notes with cedar and toast, thyme, rosemary, pencil shavings. Full and grippy fruit on the palate, oak evident but integrating, medium acidity and a medium-plus finish. Holds a great deal of complexity that should come out fully over the following years. | 91



Domaine Rièr Cadène Les Galets de la Têt Côtes Catalanes 2016
(Syrah; 14.5% ABV)

Ruby, with a lovely density and hue. Light and very airy red fruit of cherry and raspberry, mineral as it opens up in the glass. Light red fruit on the palate as well; needs a great deal of time to open but holds wonderful balance through the lingering finish. | 91

Domaine Treloar One Block Grenache Côtes du Roussillon 2015
(Grenache; 13.5% ABV)

Ruby with a garnet rim. Crisp red-strawberry, *garrigue*, rose-petal and rosewater perfumed notes. Light and delicate red fruit in the mouth, with medium acidity that lifts the wine overall and just the right amount of tannins to brace and push it along into a medium-plus finish. | 91

Maison Carrel Sous la Montagne DSM Vin d'Altitude Côtes du Roussillon Villages 2016
(41% Grenache, 30% Syrah, 23% Grenache, 6% Hairy Grenache; 13.5% ABV)

Dark ruby. Red and dark fruit, focusing on forest berry bramble, a touch of prune, light tobacco, and mineral notes. Medium acidity, well-balanced alcohol, and nicely integrated overall, with a good punch of red fruit on the palate that carries into the finish. | 91

Domaine Lafage Château St-Roch La Chapelle Côtes du Roussillon Villages 2014
(Grenache, Syrah; 14.5% ABV)

Dark ruby. Brambly red fruit, minor dark-cherry notes, light orange peel, kirsch, barnyard, spicy cloves. Wonderfully balanced on the palate, nice integration of fruit and oak, perhaps slightly short on the finish, but overall ample in the mouth. | 91

Mas Amiel Initial Maury Sec 2015
(60% Grenache, 30% Carignan, 10% Syrah; 14.5% ABV)

Ruby with a thin garnet rim. Dark cherry, dried roses, light thyme, minor mineral notes, blueberry, a touch of butteriness. A wealth of fleshy plum on the palate, medium acidity, as well as a finish that comes up with chewy, tasty tannins. | 91