

The mosaic of Languedoc-Roussillon *terroirs*



Jean Natoli

Presenting in a clear and informative way the *terroirs* of such a vast winegrowing region (more than 250,000 hectares) is somewhat of a challenge. The climate, the geology and the winegrowers themselves have created incredibly diverse and complex *appellations*. Although the Mediterranean climate is a common denominator in the region, even this varies - sometimes within the same *appellation* -

depending on altitude. Geological upheavals have resulted in a landscape often described as a jigsaw puzzle. And, perhaps above all, the creativity of winegrowers over the centuries has given rise to astounding variety.

The location of the region, long traversed by routes from southwest France, the Rhône Valley, Spain and Italy, has meant that its winegrowers have adapted to a multitude of different grape varieties: a far cry from the two grape varieties of Burgundy, the three of the Champagne region or the half-dozen of Bordeaux. There are also many wine production methods: red, white, rosé, *vin doux naturel* (sweet, fortified wine), *prise de mousse* (ancestral or traditional sparkling wine methods), and late-harvest wines. Historically, industrial and *terroir* winemaking have coexisted in the region. Industrial winemaking had made Languedoc wealthy by the time it reached its peak at the end of the 19th century, but it has since undergone major changes. The *terroir* tradition owes its existence to the presence of the Romans, Benedictine monks and to various accidents of history.

Sticking strictly to geography, our voyage of discovery will take us north from the Spanish border and then eastwards to the Rhône Valley.

ROUSSILLON

An expansive amphitheatre opening onto the Mediterranean Sea, Roussillon is bordered by the Corbières massif to the north and the Pyrenees to the south, extending westwards to the peak of Canigou. The high number of days of sun per year favoured the planting of Grenache over the centuries, which has since been joined by other grape varieties such as Carignan, Mourvèdre, and more recently,



ROUSSILLON IS AN EXPANSIVE AMPHITHEATRE OPENING ONTO THE MEDITERRANEAN SEA.

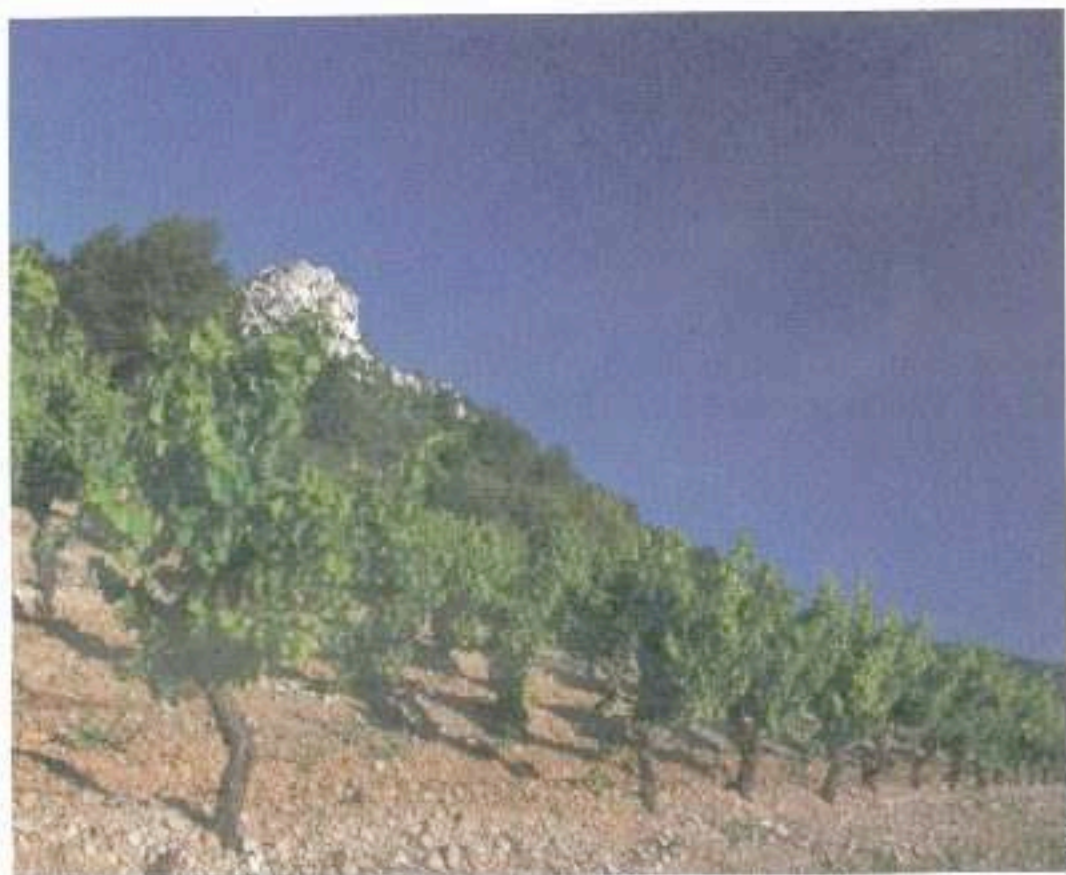
Syrah, all suited to this Mediterranean environment. Early on, *vins doux naturels* were produced in this rugged region. Banyuls and Maury are the most well known of these. Both of these *appellations* grow in subsoil that contains schist. The schist of Banyuls is very old (Cambrian); that of Maury is more recent marly schist. Elsewhere, the geology underlying Côtes du Roussillon and Rivesaltes forms a mosaic including Pliocene molassic formations, terraces of Quaternary pebbles, and volcanic cones. The oldest rocks of the Agly massif reveal schist, gneiss and granite.

CORBIÈRES

We find the same geological puzzle in this extensive winegrowing area, but at a higher altitude. Here, different *appellations* rub shoulders: Corbières with its 11 *terroirs* (Montagne d'Alaric, Saint Victor, Fontfroide, Quéribus, Boutenac, Terménès, Lézignan, Lagrasse, Sigean, Durban, Serviès), Fitou, and also the *vins doux naturels* of Roussillon (Rivesaltes and Muscat de Rivesaltes). In the diverse but difficult soils, Carignan has long predominated, followed by Cinsault and Grenache, and then Syrah and Mourvèdre. A wide range of geological formations are present:

- Palaeozoic schist at Cascastel and Tuchan
- Triassic marl at St Jean de Barrou
- Early Jurassic chalk marl near Fitou

QUALITY FACTORS



IN LANGUEDOC-ROUSSILLON,
MANY DIFFERENT APPELLATIONS
RUB SHOULDERS.

- Lower Cretaceous Urgonian limestone at Durban
- Reef limestone of the Fontfroide massif
- Grey marl and chalk beds of the Val de Dagne
- Quaternary stone fragments at Lézignan
- New Oligocene soil at Narbonne.

The Fitou *appellation*, which has a maritime zone with soils of marl, limestone and stone fragments, and a central zone of schist, limestone and marl, illustrates the effect of altitude on wine styles. It also demonstrates the potential of the much disparaged Carignan grape at restricted yields and when harvested at full ripeness.

LIMOUXIN

This winegrowing area north of the Pyrenees includes Limoux, Malepère and Cabardès, going from south to north. The variable altitude (with vines growing at altitudes of up to 500 metres) and the oceanic influence give the wines of this area their originality. The northern orientation and predominance of chalky soils of the Limoux winegrowing region give its primarily white wines (the sparkling wines *Blanquette méthode ancestrale*, *Blanquette de Limoux*, *Crémant de Limoux*, and its still white wines) their unique characteristics. The main grape varieties are Mauzac, Chenin and Chardonnay. Red Limoux wines, introduced more recently, are made from Atlantic grape varieties such as Cabernet, Merlot and Cot. In contrast, Cabardès abuts the south-facing foothills of the Montagne Noire. This *appellation* has chalky soil in which Grenache and Syrah grow alongside Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon.

MINERVOIS

This large *appellation* is the natural extension of Cabardès. Its south-facing slopes descend the Montagne Noire, cut by two

north-south landforms that define three distinct winegrowing areas: oceanic, central and Mediterranean.

The soil of the steep buttes alternates between soft molasse and hard sandstone. The terraces of Quaternary stone fragments are excellent for growing vines and are particularly suitable for Syrah.

After Minerve and Agel, we reach the highly original terroir of Saint Jean de Minervois. This lacustrine limestone plateau is bordered by cliffs of cavernous limestone. At a higher altitude than its neighbours, this small *appellation* is known for its elegant vin doux naturel Muscat.

COTEAUX DU LANGUEDOC

This *appellation* covers a vast area from Narbonne to Nîmes. In 2007, the winegrowers of Coteaux du Languedoc agreed to allow the name 'Languedoc' to be used for all the *appellations* of this part of southern France, thus creating the base of the regional classification hierarchy.

As we move north, the geographical division of winegrowing areas remains complex, but is more coherent. This is clear for l'augères, with its soil of Ordovician schist. Here, Carignan progressively

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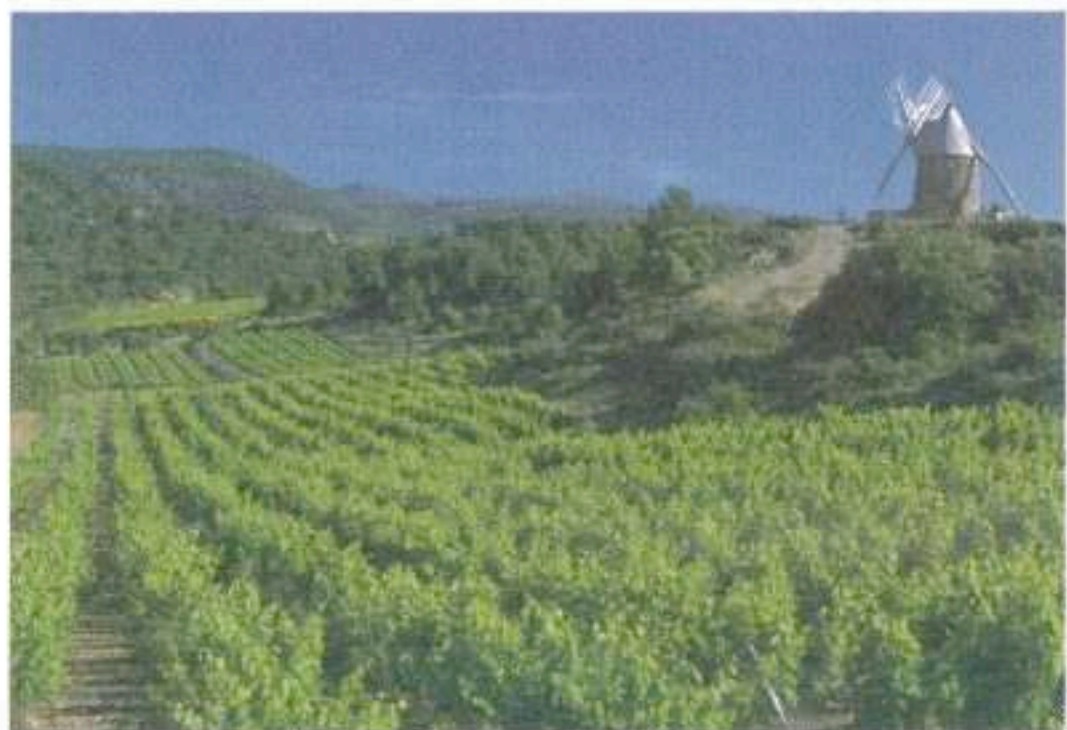
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QUALITY FACTORS



MINERVOIS : THE SOIL OF THE STEEP BUTTES ALTERNATES BETWEEN SOFT MOLASSE AND HARD SANDSTONE.

makes way for Grenache and, above all, Syrah, allowing its winemakers to obtain expressive wines with powerful, silky tannins.

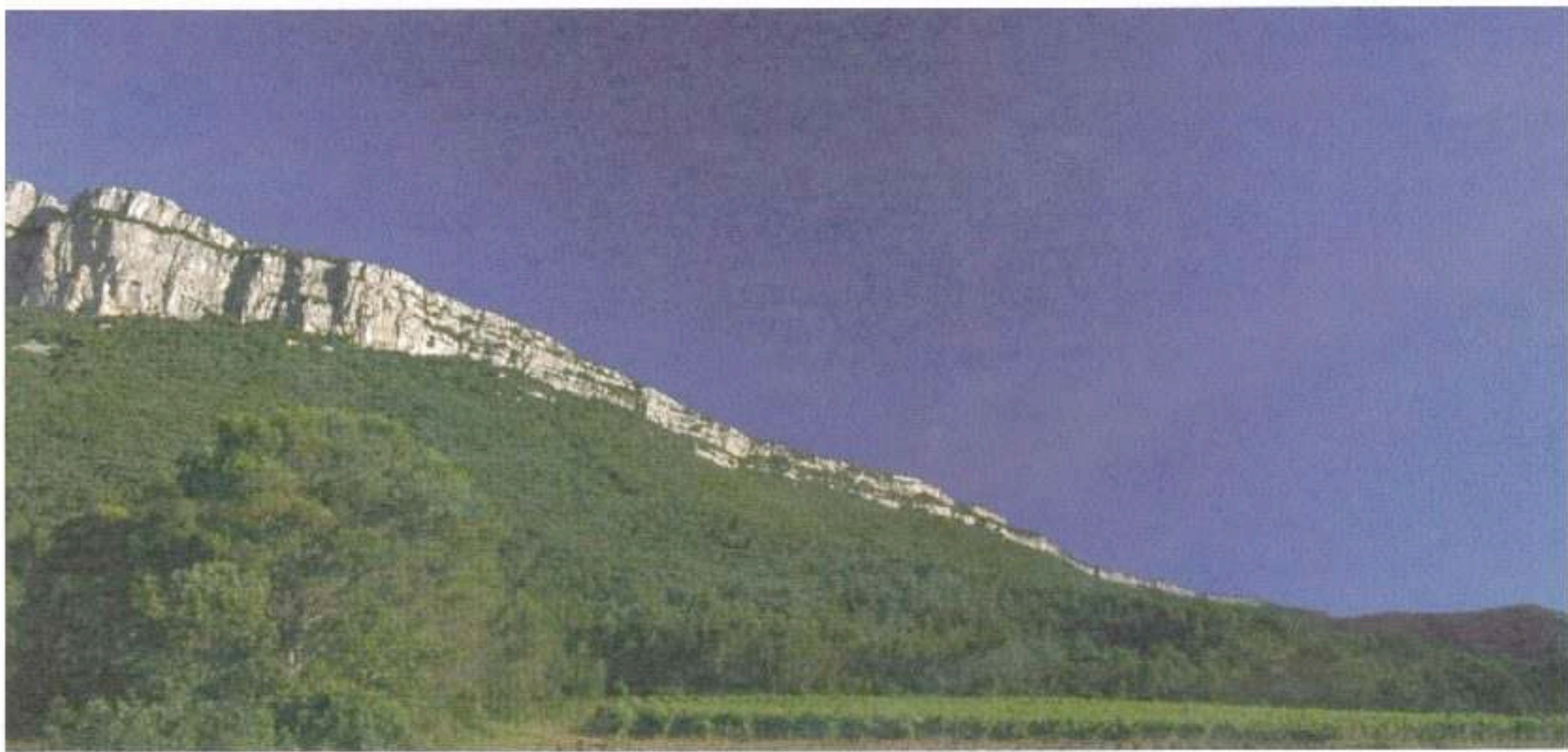
The schist soil stretches east to Cabrières, known for its Cinsault rosés, and west to Saint Chinian. This *appellation* has schist soils (at Berlou and Roquebrun), as well as small valleys of calcareous clay bordered by ridges of rocky limestone. This geological variety explains the style differences of the *appellation's* wines.

Moving north and east, the Terrasses du Larzac skirt the southern edge of the Massif Central. Steep slopes covered by fallen rocks, pebbly gravel and deep red mudstone (near Lake Salagou) support the classic Languedoc *appellation* grape varieties, Carignan, Grenache, Syrah, Mourvèdre and Cinsault. To the east, the Pic Saint Loup *appellation* produces exceptionally elegant wines, primarily of Syrah and Grenache, which grow well in this cooler area of rocky slopes alternating with chalk marl soil.

The Terres de Sommières *appellation* is situated in the Gard. The influence of the Rhône is stronger here, and the Mistral wind prevails. This undulating area of small valleys is predominantly chalky, with Quaternary pebble fluvial deposits in places.

Grès de Montpellier brings together several of the older names, such as Saint Georges d'Orques, Méjanelle, Saint Christol, Saint Drézéry and Vérargues. They share an underlying geology of Quaternary terraces carved out by previous meanderings of the Rhône, although towards the west there are also hills dating from the Jurassic period. East of the Hérault river lies the Pézenas *appellation*. It has a unique combination of ancient terraces and basalt flows, as well as schist near Cabrières. This results in a very distinctive plateau landscape. The wines made here are bold and concentrated. This area is also home to Clairette du Languedoc, which is named after its ancient and unique grape variety (the *appellation* was created in 1948).

The vineyards of Picpoul de Pinet, at the edge of the Thau Lagoon, specialise in another unique white-wine grape. The consistent temperatures of this marine environment result in very distinctive, crisp, acidic whites.



THE PIC SAINT LOUP APPELLATION PRODUCES EXCEPTIONALLY ELEGANT WINES, PRIMARILY OF SYRAH AND GRENACHE.

QUALITY FACTORS

The Terrasses de Béziers spread over the stony fluvial deposits of the Orb river. La Clape is situated on a limestone massif from the Lower Cretaceous period. The rugged chalky landscape of this ancient island, today attached to the mainland, has a host of microclimates. Its aspect, proximity to the sea and altitude give rise to unique and elegant wines. The Quatourze is a tiny appellation on the gravel terraces of the Aude river at the edge of the Bages lagoon.

VIN DOUX NATUREL MUSCATS

It would be a mistake to pass by the various *vin doux naturel* Muscat-producing areas without a word. In addition to the Saint Jean de Minervois plateau and the Muscat de Rivesaltes already mentioned, there is Muscat de Lunel, produced from soils of fluvial deposits; the Muscat de Frontignan (*appellation* created in 1936) grown in soils of Jurassic limestone, molasse and ancient alluvium south of the Gardiole massif; and Muscat de Mireval, grown in similar soils, but nearer to the sea.

COSTIÈRES DE NÎMES

This area, although administratively part of Languedoc-Roussillon, has ties with the family of Rhône wines. Its *terroir* is the largest stretch of stony fluvial deposits in France: a plateau of gravel jutting over the Camargue wetlands and abutting the Urgonian limestone north of Nîmes. Clairette de Bellegarde, at the north-eastern edge of the Costières de Nîmes, has similar soils.

A NEW LABEL FOR VINS DE PAYS

The progressive classification of the *appellations* in Languedoc-Roussillon has been a slow process. The French *Institut National des Appellations d'Origine* (INAO) is not an institution that rushes its decisions. The progress that certain winemakers working outside the *appellations* have achieved has led to the emergence of some very interesting wines. These areas now have official recognition in the division of the departmental Vin de Pays (Aude, Pyrénées Orientales, Hérault, Gard) into smaller zones (for example, Côtes de Thongue, Cucugnan, Saint Guilhem le Désert, Coteaux de la Cèze, Côte Catalane). Their proximity to the designated *appellations* means they benefit from similar *terroirs*. One of the main features of these wines is that they are made from a wider variety of grapes, adding Bordeaux varieties (Cabernet, Merlot, Malbec, Sauvignon), Burgundy varieties (Pinot, Chardonnay) or hybrids (Marselan, Caladoc) to the traditional regional varieties. These practices led to the creation of Vins de Pays d'Oc in 1987, which became IGP Pays d'Oc in 2009 (IGP or *Indication Géographique Protégée* is a recent method of classifying wines by 'protected geographical region'). This new classification has increased the production of varieties across the entire winegrowing area of Languedoc-Roussillon.

This change in approach does not impede the emergence of *terroirs* adapted to certain types of grapes, nor does it mean that the exacting methods of wine producers have been relaxed. It simply gives winemakers more liberty to use their creativity under less constraining regulations than those for the AOC *appellation*. However, this type of production is best suited to vineyards with deeper soil, which are more adapted

WHAT FUTURE FOR THE WINES OF LANGUEDOC-ROUSSILLON?

The assets of this winegrowing region are countless: the beauty of the landscape, the diversity of its *terroirs*, a clement climate, its long history. In terms of the challenges it faces, the principal difficulty is an inertia stemming essentially from a stubbornly strong collective unconscious linked to the wealth that its wine industry produced over a century.

The advent of the industrial era, the specialisation of the land, and the replacement of the region's grape varieties (accelerated by the phylloxera epidemic) created the conditions for an incredibly efficient industry. As is often the case, the force of habit and a certain passivity created by prosperity eventually brought on the decline of the system, as it was unable to react to societal changes, the new demand that arose during the second half of the 20th century, or the emergence of international competition. It appears that things are shifting, however, and some dazzling successes during the 1990s (an upswing in popularity for Languedoc *appellations*, as well as the undeniable success of varieties) look set to continue.

To build on this success, the next generations of winemakers should reinforce the technical and commercial advances their predecessors have made and further encourage the professionalisation of every stage of the winemaking process. Their efforts can be aided by political will, the establishment of networks in the sector, a pragmatic approach to the market, and training, research and development. As for competition from abroad, market share will likely be set according to price. Winemakers will need to determine their target, whether 'basic', 'premium' or 'icon', and structure their strategy and marketing techniques accordingly. The producers that succeed could be of any size or style, cooperative or private, industrial or traditional. However, the key to success will remain the skills of the winemakers, both individually and collectively.

to the water requirements of grape varieties of oceanic or northern environments.

BY WAY OF CONCLUSION

In this partial (in both senses of the word) presentation of the winegrowing region of Languedoc-Roussillon, it is worth ending by noting that its transformation is still in progress. The latest generation of winemakers has brought about many changes in terms of production regulations, grape varieties used, and sales and marketing strategies. Even more significant changes are in progress, which should allow wine enthusiasts a clearer understanding of the region's wines and *terroirs*. All good things come with time...

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