

# MEININGER'S WINE BUSINESS

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## INTERNATIONAL



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*Wine fraud expert Maureen Downey is so respected that she has been consulted by the FBI and the US Department of Justice. She explains her work to Robert Joseph. Page 30*

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### UNTANGLING THE GERMAN MARKET

*Introducing our new 'How To' feature, which reveals how a market functions and what you need to know if you want to sell there. Page 68*

# THE VALUE OF EXPERTISE

What does it take to change a region's reputation and focus?  
Darren Smith looks at a tool used in Languedoc.

The Languedoc's evolution from bulk wine heartland into one of the most dynamic regions for premium-quality wine in France is well documented; the role of consultancies in that development less so.

The modern vine-to-market wine consultancy business in Languedoc was effectively founded in the mid-1960s by Narbonne-based Laboratoires Dubernet, which now works with around 300 Languedoc wineries, making it the biggest private wine laboratory in the region. Enabling such practices as estate bottling at a time when all Languedoc wine was still on the bulk market, figures like Matthieu Dubernet and, subsequently, Jean Natoli, have given many growers the confidence and capability to produce and market their own wines. They also act as a sort of think-tank for Languedoc wine.

## Languedoc's awakening

Such scope and influence brings its own concerns over the potential of homogenisation – particularly as the maturing industry seeks to convince the world of its fine wine credentials.

Samuel Guibert, owner and winemaker of the so-called Languedoc Grand Cru Mas de Daumas Gassac, believes this is a legitimate concern. "Languedoc is going through a phase of awakening," he says. "No one disputes that there are amazing quality [wines] coming out of the Languedoc and that it has improved a lot in the past 10 years, and part of that is definitely with the help of some laboratories. But there is a risk that we go through a stage of uniformisation."

Labs, Guibert explains, are risk-averse. One good example of this is the lab's advice on sulphur

use – an area where Guibert believes the labs' influence is questionable. "Daumas Gassac has been reducing its SO<sub>2</sub> [sulphur dioxide] down to the minimum – we are almost at the level of a natural wine for the red," he says. "The lab knows how we work, but they are still recommending what is 'safe.'" For wineries that view minimal intervention and low sulphur use as a means of producing the highest-quality wine, such recommendations may hamper more than they help, Guibert believes.

"This is a perfect example," he says. "Philippe [Michel, cellar master] and my team who have been doing it for 20 years – we know what works, but someone who has bought his 10 ha and is making his wine for the first year, what is he going to do? He is going to add the SO<sub>2</sub>."

Jean Natoli has been consulting for 25 years. His company, Laboratoire Natoli, based close to Montpellier, works with around 250 Languedoc producers, from tiny three to five hectolitre operations to co-ops churning out 70,000 hl a year. He does not lose sleep over such concerns. "It's a danger but I think the first quality of a wine is to be well made, without defects," he says. "If the final wine is correctly done, at this moment there are so many elementary decisions – from the planting to the growing of the vines to the date of the harvest to the strategy for the extraction, fermentation, ageing – that, even with the same oenologist, it's impossible that two wines could be exactly the same."



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Jean Natoli,  
Laboratoire Natoli



Matthieu Dubernet,  
Laboratoires Dubernet

on the right track. Languedoc PR manager Louise Hurren, who works with the Saint-Chinian appellation, notes that of the region's top 10 wines, as judged by blind tasting by judges in different countries each year, at least three – Clos Bagatelle (first-placed), Château La Dournie and Domaine La Linquière – are clients of Laboratoire Natoli.

"Brand Languedoc has been evolving since the late 1970s when the focus started shifting from quantity to quality, and making wine in bottles started to gain traction," says Hurren. "We have plenty of appellation rules and regulations to ensure that the DNA of brand Languedoc won't get lost, but it's important that we move with the times too. That's where experienced oenologists can play a valuable role."

Moving with the times entails being sensitive to changing consumer tastes and to the effects of climate change, Dubernet believes. It will also require an ever greater focus on viticulture as producers refine their wine offerings and convert to organic, biodynamic or natural; such producers now account for 30 percent of Natoli's clients. "We do think that vine growing and winemaking have to be brought closer," he says. "For instance, vine fertilisation could be considered as well as a winemaking process, considering all the influence it has on the wine balance. The agro-oenology concept is very promising."

The next phase, says Natoli, is to shout about the achievements of Languedoc producers. "When I [think of] the quality of the wines at the beginning of my career, we have made a lot of progress," he emphasises. "Now the problem is to be recognised for that. Marketing is very, very important. Even very good wines at this moment are not recognised enough for their quality. You have to be very precise about that. It's not only the talent, it's the methodology. I think the Languedoc needs that a lot."

## Results speak

The accolades their clients achieve would suggest they are