

Jancis Robinson

Roussillon part 1 – red and proudly independent

14 Jul 2021



Welcome to northern Catalonia. Please set your watches to the time zone not-French-not-Spanish, a hundred years back ... and forward.

Tam writes The way we (and I use the collective here with purpose) have portrayed and considered Roussillon is, incontrovertibly, one of the biggest travesties of the wine world. This wild, fiercely unique little wine region, bearing absolutely no relation whatsoever to its sprawling neighbour, has been ignorantly, lazily and damagingly lumped in as a hyphenated adjunct to Languedoc, despite the fact that its history, culture, language, climate, soils, grape varieties and heritage have little in common.

Andrew Jefford has called it the 'northern Catalan echo of Priorat', and as the place where he'd 'set about hunting for absolute grandeur'. I'd go further. Priorat wines taste of power and grandeur and the hot, arid place where they come from. Roussillon wines, I am increasingly discovering, have this almost perturbing grace. The best of them, from the oldest vines in harsh mountain vineyards, are strikingly introvert, perfumed, bafflingly fine-boned. Unlike Priorat or southern Rhône, many of them are well under 14% alcohol. Those that aren't almost always carry a linear core of freshness that makes the wines taste incomprehensibly cool.

Grandeur? Maybe. But this is not the grandeur of red-velvet-dollar-lined-oak-barrels Napa. This is not the grandeur of \$100+ bottles. This is not even the grandeur of hedonistic fruit and monumental tannins. I think what Jefford might mean, in his dry understated poetic way, is the grandeur you sense when you pull off the N116, stand in a lay-by, in silence, soaking up the snow-capped Pyrénées Catalanes. Quiet grandeur. No-fuss grandeur. You-need-to-stop-and-notice-it grandeur.

Roussillon could probably lay claim to some of the oldest vines in France; it is an epicentre for gnarly old-vine vineyards. I'd love to know the exact statistics but I'd place a decent bet on its having one of biggest concentrations of old vines. It's steeped in old time. But it is also, interestingly, one of the most forward-looking regions in France. Many of the producers and vigneronns are outlaws from other parts of the world, and it leads the way in terms of organic production, not just in France but in Europe. Dom Cazes is the largest biodynamic wine estate in France. More than 20% of Roussillon vineyards are organically certified; many more are working organically without certification.

I'm going to shamelessly steal (beautiful) words from Chris Howard, one of our [WWC21](#) entrants, who wrote this in his essay: "'heterotopia' – an 'other' space that disturbs and contradicts our assumed order of things. Understanding these strange spaces requires more than seeing and looking, but what the anthropologist Anna Tsing calls 'arts of noticing'. 'Noticing' implies a subtle but important shift, because to notice something is to realise that it has unsettled your worldview – the way you understand and inhabit the world.'

He's described Roussillon. A heterotopia. A place that defies all the rule books. A place where old vines form the vanguard. A place where climate is most extreme yet vigneronns do the least they can do to resist or control it. Arid Roussillon? Yet this is dry-farmed country. Baking heat? Yet this is the home of exquisitely fresh whites (more on that tomorrow). Rugged old vines? Yet I'm finding tannins of gossamer texture. I asked myself, several times, as I tasted through these various Roussillon wines, 'Can a wine like this *really* come from the hot Agly Valley?'



Photographer Michel Joly's beautiful picture of the Danjou-Banessy Roboul vineyard

Heterotopias attract people who are brave, pioneering, gutsy, independent, proud – maybe even a little rebellious. But, more than anything else, I've realised that heterotopias attract people with integrity. That's a word we use with lazy impunity, but it can be defined as 'the state of being whole and undivided'. The Roussillon producers I have got to know make their wines with laser integrity – they love and manage their vineyards and make their wines the way that they live their lives. No pretence, no pretentiousness, no marketing bullshit, hard slog, love, no compromise.

Roussillon part 2 – white, rosé, sweet

15 Jul 2021



Roussillon's old vineyards hold the key to the future.

The heritage of Roussillon is a sweet one. As far back as the first century AD, Rosemary George tells us (in her new book, *The Wines of Roussillon*), Pliny the Elder was praising the sweet Muscat wines of the region. In the thirteenth century, James II of Majorca issued an edict protecting the wine of Pepinyà (Perpignan), and in the late 1700s Voltaire wrote of the pleasure in a glass of Salses (Rivesaltes). Dry table wines from the region were barely considered, but the sweet wines were held in high esteem right up until the 1980s. They received their AOP designations many years before the dry wines – indeed, it's probably only in the last 20 years that dry Roussillon wines have been of any significance at all.

It's a heritage to be proud of – Rivesaltes, Maury and Banyuls make truly beautiful, sweet, fortified wines, from pale gold and delicately spun in white florals and lemon, to dark as Mordor and so rich that coffee and chocolate would stand aside to make way for its sticky treacle flow. Many of these wines are made from ancient vines and are aged, rancio, for years and years in bonbonnes,

foudres and generations-old barriques, sometimes solera style, developing ullage, spice, cream, fire and intensity.



Rancio wine demijohns ageing at Dom Jolly Ferriol, Roussillon – sadly I didn't get to taste the wine

How and why these complex wines have fallen so far from our collective awareness is a puzzle. Rosemary George suggests that Byrrh might be to blame – an alcopop-style blend of grape juice, spirit and quinine developed by the Violet family, drapers, in the 1860s, marketed as a *tonique*, which became enormously popular as a ‘poor man’s aperitif’. Sales peaked in 1910 at 30 million litres (6.6 million gallons) per year. Soon after it was bought by Cinzano in 1960, the brand collapsed. But damage had been done. The region was associated with cheap, industrial, sweet ‘wine’. The real fortified wine was tarred with the same brush and production began to plummet. George also suggests that it is not insignificant that around this time Portugal entered into the European Union, which meant that port became cheaper and more widely available.

The downturn brought poverty to the region – many old vineyards were abandoned and families didn’t have the money to plant new vines – and the irony is that poverty has, in many ways, preserved precious vineyards that today pave the road to the revolution in Roussillon. Low-yielding, labour-intensive old vines in difficult-to-work, arid vineyards are now worth their weight in gold. From these discarded field blends, co-planted decades ago for sweet wines, are coming some of the most exciting sweet and dry wines imaginable. Not only that, but these old vines are remarkably resilient, quite possibly holding valuable genetic keys to climate-change adaptability.



Dramatic view of Roussillon from Le Soula's vineyards

Thanks to Wines of Roussillon, Sud de France and Cambridge Wine Merchants, I've managed to gather a rather special collection of these fascinating sweet wines, and I would urge you to explore them. They don't have the fieriness of port, which means that you don't have to lay them down as long for the tannins and alcohol to soften. They're wonderful with cheese. Try the lemony fresh young Muscat de Rivesaltes with goat's cheese. (And next time you peel a lemon, pop the peels into a pot on the stove, chuck in some sugar, add water, simmer slowly until sticky, and serve the candied lemon peels with the goat's cheese – it's a revelation!) Ripe brie and washed-rind mountain cheeses are stunning with the ambré and rimage styles. Blue and salty matured hard cheese go with the red Banyuls and Maury (although cheddar is also surprisingly good with the golden lemony Rivesaltes). They're great with chocolate (across the board) and, chilled, drizzle them over ice cream. I'd also happily pair the more apricot-flavoured wines with foie gras and the darker-fruited wines with dishes involving sauces such as sticky hoisin, teriyaki, ssamjang, Chinese plum sauce, bulgogi and okonomiyaki.



Collioure – light, salt, sky

But the chunk of Roussillon that has ultimately captured my heart is her white-wine vineyards. Her native grapes are Grenache Blanc, Grenache Gris, Macabeu, Muscat, Carignan Blanc, Carignan Gris... often from old, old vines, twisted and bent into the eight or more winds that whip at them from every direction, roots so deep beneath the schist and limestone, clay and gneiss, sandstone and granite, that they seem to be connected to the very centre of earth. In Roussillon, more than anywhere else on earth, these varieties seem to muster up a defiant contradiction of richness and freshness. Wild honey, mountain flowers, figs and apricots tuck into rock planes of structure and minerality. You can taste the salt and the dust on the winds that etch these wines. These are whites with muscle and sinew and soaring, even howling, soul. Newcomers such as Vermentino and Roussanne may tame them, for now, but I'd venture, just wait until those vines, too, get old. Roussillon has a way of getting into the bones of a vine.

People often ask me which is my favourite wine region. I dodge this impossible-to-answer question with various well-worn replies. But to anyone genuinely interested in winegrowing on the edge, history and innovation, old vines/new wines, pioneering spirit/tradition, and wines that are wonderful with food, I'd send them straight to Roussillon, and tell them to look for the white wines.