



Tim's Wine Market

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This month we are taking a deep dive into one of the least well known, yet increasingly important wine regions of France, the Languedoc. Because of the regions size, and the historical preponderance of generic wines under the appellation banner, it is rarely seen as a serious wine area. However, with the cost of vineyard land skyrocketing in the major regions of France since the 1980's, many young winemakers flocked to the area looking for affordable sites. What they found was a region that has great historical significance that was washed away in the post WWII push for quantity over quality. Armed with a greater knowledge of viticulture and winemaking they set out to reestablish many of the sub-zones as the great wine regions they once were. Three decades later this region is primed and ready to explode, with amazing wines and values everywhere.

As a wine region, the Languedoc extends from the Spanish border to the Rhône River wrapping nicely around the Mediterranean coastline, but also stretching inland for 60-70 miles. It is a fascinating area with extreme mountains, valleys and often a view of the Mediterranean or nearby estuaries. This creates a myriad of different microclimates, expositions and soil compositions which makes the diversity of wines even greater. For red grapes the playbook is similar to the Rhône; Grenache, Syrah and Mourvèdre, along with international varieties like Cabernet Sauvignon, and even Pinot Noir. The Languedoc is also home to some of the best, old vine Carignan wines produced anywhere, but that is for another feature.

Part of the perception problem for the producers of the Languedoc is that since the late 1800's the region has been mostly known for oceans of generic, inexpensive wines. This started with the industrial age when many of the region's historic vineyards were replaced with high-yielding, low quality vines which were sold simply as Gros Rouge or "Big Red." Ironically enough, the resulting wines were actually thin and under-ripe, commonly chugged by the liter in working class taverns. An overproduction crisis, compounded by shipments of wine from French Algeria, led to an economic crash and a series of riots led by frustrated winemakers in 1907. Overproduction remained a consistent problem for much of the 20th century and it was not until the formation of the European Union in 1993 that production was finally slashed. At that time many vineyard owners were paid to remove their vines and plant other crops, or to begin following strict guidelines to increase quality and reduce quantity.

It is hard to believe at the time but the wines of the Languedoc were once held in the same regard as those of Bordeaux, Burgundy, and the Rhône Valley. This region of France boasts a staggering amount of micro-climates, a long growing season, and ample sunlight, all of which attracted the attention of 8th-century Carthusian monks as they re-introduced the grape vine to the south of France. The local communes, such as St. Chinian and Montpeyroux, became famous for their unique, terroir-driven wines, and were a perennial favorite in the court of King Louis XIV. Today, a renewed focus on terroir has helped the Languedoc reclaim much of its identity, and while co-op wineries still account for much of the region's sales, a new generation of wine drinkers is gravitating towards traditionally made, terroir-driven wines made by independent producers.

One such producer is Meridiem, a winery located in the heart of the Languedoc northeast of the city of Montpellier. The co-founders of the estate met in China, where they created a sales agency linking French importers to the growing East Asian markets. Years later they moved back to the south of France and purchased a small domaine surrounded by the steep cliffs which make up the Terraces du Larzac AOC. Today, the Meridiem winery produces a variety of cuvées from their estate vineyards and purchases fruit from local growers who share their commitment to sustainable viticulture. The "Alma Mater" line of wines, our focus this month, come from their estate owned, certified organic, single vineyard sites with Alma Mater paying an homage to the earth, or "nourishing mother."

2022 Meridiem Terrasses du Larzac "Les Louves" (\$25 per bottle)

This wine is produced from the vineyards closest to the winery in the Terrasses du Larzac appellation. This ominously named appellation was created in 2014 and covers 32 villages in the foothills of Larzac, with its northern boundary naturally formed by the Causse du Larzaco. Elevations run from 400-1300 feet above sea level and thanks to the proximity

to the Central Massif, the region experiences a wide diurnal temperature swing each night during the growing season. This allows for full ripeness of the grapes but they retain good freshness as well. To make this wine all fruit comes from the estate's single vineyard "Les Louves," with the blend being a mix of Grenache, Syrah and Mourvèdre from vines that are at least 50 years old. All of the grapes are destemmed and each variety is fermented separately. Once dry the blend is made and the wine is aged in concrete tanks for 18 months before release.

Decant this wine for a half hour before serving and chill to cellar temperature. Then it reveals a rich combination of cooked raspberries, dried black figs, wet black slate, bergamot and cold black tea. This is the bigger of the two wines, with a rich mouthfeel and fairly obvious tannins that grip this wine into the finish. Drink 2024-2029.

2022 Meridiem Montpeyrroux "L'Orangerie" (\$25 per bottle)

The cru of Montpeyrroux is unique in the Languedoc, a single village standing alone between the other Languedoc AOPs of Faugères and Pic St. Loup. The vineyards are at elevations over 1000 feet above sea level and the soil is limestone rubble, so poor in organic material that you wonder how anything can survive. At night the winds sweep down off the imposing Larzac plateau, cooling the area and stretching out the growing season to make this one of the Languedoc's latest ripening appellations. In an interesting contrast to the wine above this is made from the same grapes and in similar manner. The only real difference is the climate and soil, which is astonishing given their differences.

Like above, decant this wine for at least a half hour before serving. Unlike the riper wine above, this one is more reticent, with notes of fresh red cherries and black raspberries, dried thyme, bay leaf, oregano and gardenia. On the palate this wine is slightly lighter and the tannins and acidity more obvious. There is a precision to the fruit that is unusual for many Languedoc wines and while good now it is only starting to show its true character. Drink 2025-230.

Lamb Shanks with Pomegranate

In my opinion there are few food and wine pairings better than lamb and red wines made from Rhône varieties. This dish shows this with the added zing of pomegranate, which helps cut through the richness of the shanks. I also find the pomegranate works beautifully with the two wine selections this month. You can substitute pork or beef shanks for this recipe but make sure to adjust cooking time. (You can find pomegranate molasses on Amazon or at middle Eastern grocery stores.)

2 lb lamb shank
1 teaspoon kosher salt
½ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
2 tablespoons olive oil

Braise

1 ¼ cups chicken broth
4 tablespoons pomegranate molasses
1 cinnamon stick
½ teaspoon fennel seeds
1 sprig fresh rosemary
1 bay leaf
1" piece fresh ginger, unpeeled

4 medium spring onions, halved lengthwise
3 rainbow carrots, cut into 3 pieces each

Garnish

¼ cup pomegranate seeds
3 tablespoons chopped pistachios

Season lamb by rubbing salt and pepper on all sides; set aside. In a medium bowl, combine ingredients for BRAISE and set aside.

Preheat the pot over medium-high heat and add oil. Once the oil begins to smoke sear the lamb for 2 minutes on each side or until evenly golden brown, about 10 minutes. Remove the lamb and set aside.

Add the BRAISE to the pan and scrape any fond that developed during the sear. Add the lamb shanks back to the pot, cover and braise over low heat for 60 minutes.

Add in onions and carrots and move the lamb shanks back on top of vegetables. Cover and braise over low heat for another 30 minutes.

Take out lamb and all vegetables. Simmer sauce over medium heat for 10 minutes or until sauce thickens. Drizzle the reduced sauce over lamb and vegetables. Sprinkle pomegranate and pistachios for garnish.