

Wine, etc: Languedoc region has great potential

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JULY 15, 2015, 9:26 AM

It isn't hard to find Olivier Dauga in a crowd. Amid the suit coats, ties, and polo shirts, he's the dude with the wild shirt, bluejeans, colorful glasses and a pair of shoes that leaves one speechless. Modest, he's not. Self-confident and knowledgeable, he is.

Talk about a shoe fetish. Dauga owns so many — 62 pair, he admits — he reserves one suitcase just for them when he travels.

When he's not shopping for shoes, Dauga is advising about 20 French clients how to make wine. As a consultant, he often comes to a failing operation, analyzes the strengths and weaknesses of the terroir and puts the producer on track with new wines. These wines are usually reasonably priced and satisfy wine enthusiasts with a sense of adventure. A former rugby player, Dauga is competitive and usually gets his way — or loses a client.

His company has been known as Val d'Orbieu, but the day we tasted his wines, it was announced that he had merged with a competitor and the company would be called Vinadeis. Collectively, they manage 2,000 wine growers in Bordeaux, Languedoc-Roussillon, Corbieres, Minervois and other regions of southern France.

Dauga says he is challenged by the Languedoc region because it is so vast and because it doesn't yet have the history that gives a region a focused identity. Today, a wide variety of grapes are grown in very dry and hot regions. Still, this is a region with great potential. It is especially worth exploring while the prices are reasonable. A lot of crisp dry white wines, roses and simple red wines hail from this region.

As a lot, they are well balanced and not overly extracted with moderate alcohol levels and little oak flavors.

Here are several red wines we liked in the tasting:

- Chateau de Jonquieres Cuvee Eole 2012. (\$22). A blend of grenache and syrah, this wine from Corbieres has rich, extracted dark berry fruit flavors, a good dose of licorice and sweet tannins.
- Domaine Cazelles-Verdier Les Pierres Qui Chantent 2013 (\$22). This had very broad flavors from a Minervois blend of syrah, Grenache, mourvedre and carignan. It had ripe notes of blackberry and plum fruit with a hint of spice and easy tannins.
- Chateau Les Combes Merlot 2012 (\$35). This merlot comes from the Saint Emilion region of Bordeaux. Made entirely from merlot, the full-bodied wine explodes with beautiful black fruit flavors and hints of chocolate and sweet vanillin oak.
- Chateau Vieille Dynastie LaLande de Pomerol 2012 (\$38). This satellite region offers some of the best deals in Bordeaux, although sometimes it's like looking for a needle in a haystack. We liked this blend of merlot, cabernet sauvignon and cabernet franc. There are serious tannins, but generous flavors, herbal notes and good balance.

Wine picks:

- J. Lohr Estates Hilltop Cabernet Sauvignon 2012 (\$35). This reasonably priced, effusive cab has extracted and ripe plum flavors with a dose of dark chocolate and a velvet texture. It is juicy and new World in style.
- Tascante Buonora 2013 (\$20). We loved this expressive and unique Sicilian wine made with carricante grapes. It's bright acidity, floral nose and clean, mineral and citrus notes make it a great match for seafood.
- Fulcrum Landy Vineyard Petite Sirah 2012 (\$45). The producer of some terrific Anderson Valley pinot noirs has applied his talents to the debut vintage of a Russian River Valley petite sirah. Not always appreciated because of its tannic nature, petite sirah is a serious wine. In Fulcrum's hands, it's also a friendly petite sirah with varietal blackberry flavors and a hint of licorice.
- Franciscan Estate Cuvee Sauvage 2013 (\$40). We have raved about this unique chardonnay year after year. Using wild yeasts ("sauvage"), a winemaker never knows what he'll get. But in this case the winemaker manages to get a rich, expressive wine with lemon and apple notes with toasty oak.
- Robert Mondavi Fume Blanc 2013 (\$40). Mondavi shows that sauvignon blanc doesn't have to be a simple, insipid white wine. Its fume blanc, blended with 11 percent semillon, is a contrast between crisp acidity and silkiness — very nice.
- Rodney Strong Vineyards Charlotte's Home Sauvignon Blanc 2014 (\$17). Aromatic and tasty, this northern Sonoma sauvignon blanc has copious peach and pineapple flavors.
- Cliff Lede Sauvignon Blanc 2014 (\$25). The only white wine in the Cliff Lede portfolio, this sauvignon blanc is worthy of the money. With