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OCTOBER 2024

BORDEAUX The way forward

Andrew Jefford on why the region needs to change, and on those leading the charge

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Terrasses du Larzac

In the decade since it was officially recognised, this wild, other-worldly corner of Languedoc has been garnering increasing attention, both from winemakers keen to set themselves up in the region, and from wine lovers attracted by its fresh, highly drinkable wines

STORY NATALIE EARL

The mountainous area of the Massif Central occupies about a sixth of France, bordering Beaujolais and the Rhône to the east and Languedoc to the south. The massif's southern section consists of a number of limestone plateaus – called *causses* in the Occitan language, from the Latin *calx*, meaning 'lime'.

It's this landscape, with its stalactite-littered caverns and dramatically deep gorges, that gives rise to one of France's most famous cheeses: Roquefort (also the first product of any kind in France to be granted 'appellation d'origine' status under the then-new law of 1925). It's also one of these arid, sparsely populated limestone ►

Terraced vineyards in the dramatic landscape at Domaine du Pas de l'Escalette, Poujols

REGIONAL PROFILE: TERRASSES DU LARZAC

plateaus, the Causse du Larzac, that defines a spectacular wine terroir: the Terrasses du Larzac.

Ten years since itself becoming an independent AP (appellation d'origine protégée, as the designation has been known since early 2016), Terrasses du Larzac has quickly established itself as one of the most exciting and dynamic areas in this vast region. Identified as a denomination of the wider Languedoc in 2004, this is one of the rare regions that gained its appellation status quickly; usually the process takes many years.

In Rosemary George MW's 2001 book *The Wines of the South of France*, Terrasses du Larzac hardly gets a look in. 'I gave it little more than a cursory mention,' she acknowledges in her 2018 book *Wines of the Languedoc*, yet it 'has attracted enormous interest over the past 20 years'. And for good reason.

LAY OF THE LAND

Up on the arid, exposed Larzac plateau, wind-battered grassland is interspersed with gnarled lumps of grey-white rock that resemble ancient ruins. This Jurassic landscape – 145m–200m years old – has a long history of supporting the Lacaune sheep that provide the milk used in Roquefort production, an activity in which a number of wine estates were also historically involved.

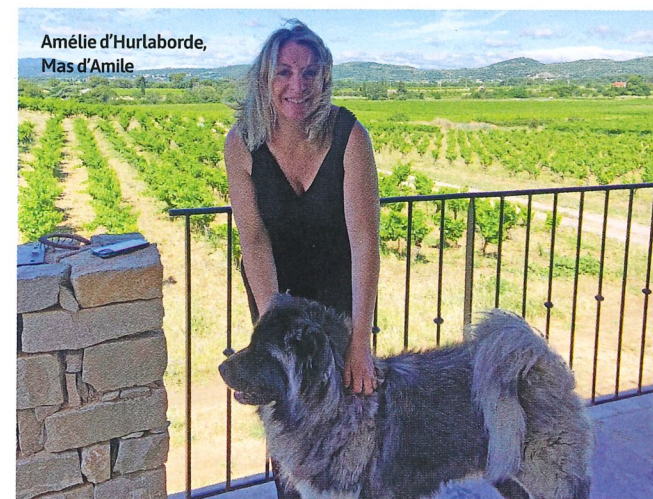
The wheels of this veiny blue cheese that age in the caves under the village of Roquefort-sur-Soulzon, at the western edge of the Causse du Larzac, benefit from similar natural phenomena as the vineyard area below. The caves feature



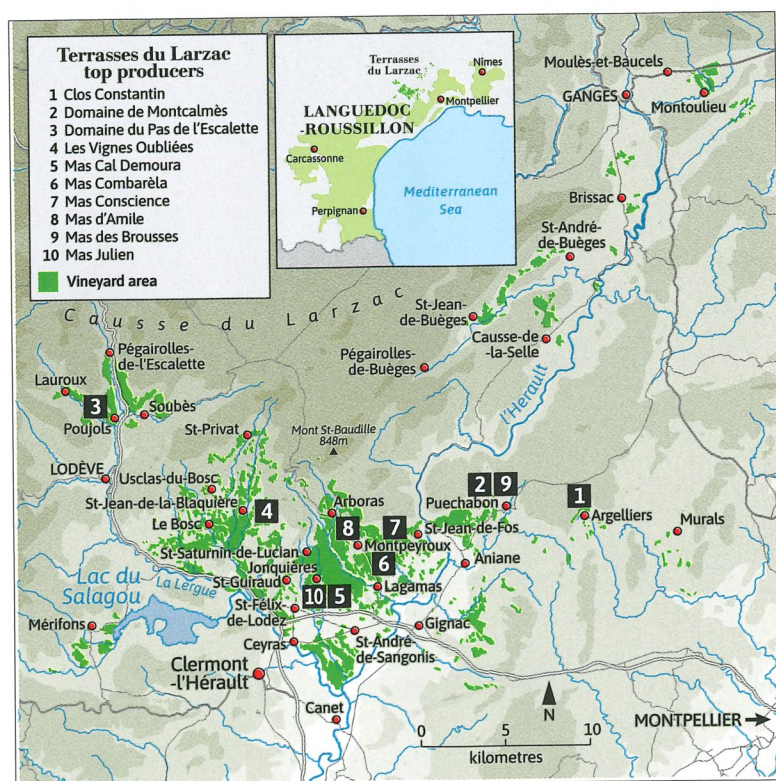
Vineyards of Les Vignes Oubliées at St-Jean-de-la-Blaquière, looking south



Julien and Delphine Zernott, Domaine du Pas de l'Escalette (pictured, p62)



Amélie d'Hurlaborde, Mas d'Amile



cracks and fissures (called *fleurines*) that allow cool winds from high up on the plateau to blow down through the mountain itself, creating the perfect conditions for ageing the cheese. These same winds blow off the top of the plateau into the foothills where the Terrasses du Larzac vineyards lie, one element in a terroir that's ideal for producing wines with an inherent freshness.

'We're an appellation with Languedoc generosity but Larzac freshness,' says Jean-Baptiste Granier, owner and winemaker of Les Vignes Oubliées.

The region's climate, which is heavily influenced by the proximity of the Larzac plateau, is a unifying factor in an appellation with a huge diversity of soils, exposures and elevations.

This is one of the most northerly vineyard areas of Languedoc, scattered across 32 villages and communes that hug the foothills of the *causse* and fan out along the geological terraces that stretch to the confluence of the Hérault and Lergue rivers at Canet, forming a rough 'V' shape (see map).

Vines are planted between 40m and 450m. Hillsides and valleys cut like notches into the

landscape, creating a wealth of different exposures. This, combined with the northerly latitude and more inland location, means that there's a significant diurnal temperature range, 'at least 20°C difference between night and day in the summer months', says Loïc Benezeth (pictured, p69), fourth-generation winemaker at Domaine La Rouquette. This helps to preserve freshness and acidity, but also provides a 'bigger aromatic revelation', says Vincent Goumard, owner and winemaker of Mas Cal Demoura.

GRAPES & STYLES

Grenache, Syrah, Mourvèdre and Carignan are the key varieties in this red-only appellation, with Cinsault, Counoise, Lledoner Pelut, Morrastel and Terret Noir as secondaries. A blend of at least three varieties is required (see 'the facts' box, p66).

As in other Languedoc regions, a renewed appreciation of once-maligned Carignan is helping to save old vines and bring fresh acidity to blends. Syrah, on the other hand, is suffering across Languedoc due to its sensitivity to drought, but here it's less aggrieved, thanks to the fresh

'We're an appellation with Languedoc generosity but Larzac freshness'

— Jean-Baptiste Granier, Les Vignes Oubliées

climate. Even so, Amélie d'Hurlaborde of Mas d'Amile (above) says that the climate keeps reminding them to look after the indigenous varieties that have better resistance to drought, like Carignan. Cinsault plays an increasingly important role here, lending blends an ethereal, floral, juicy quality. I also love pure Cinsault – of course it's not permitted under the appellation rules, but a few producers bottle one as Vin de France or IGP, so it warrants a mention here. Try examples from Mas Combarèla, Le Clos Rivieral, Domaine du Pas de l'Escalette, Le Clos Rouge (Piccolo 2021, £22.49 The Wine Reserve) and Mas Conscience (Cieux 2021, £18 Dead Time).

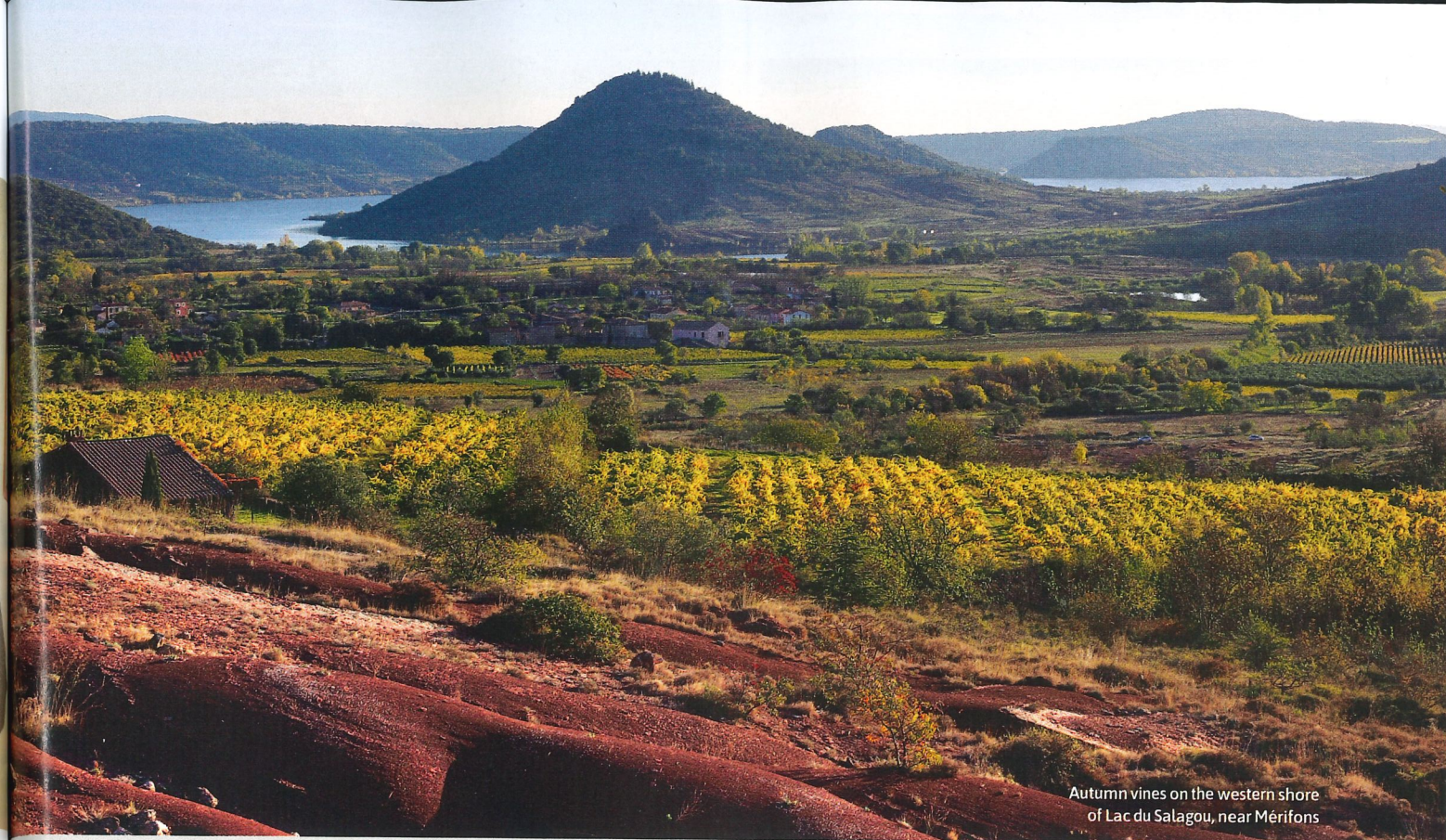
Although it's hard to generalise about the style of a large region with such variable geology, there are four striking things about the wines: their ▶



Olivier Faucon with wines from his organic-certified Mas Combarèla range



Sébastien Fillon of Le Clos du Serres, and president of the Terrasses du Larzac appellation (see p68)



Autumn vines on the western shore of Lac du Salagou, near Mèrifons

freshness, drinkability, aromatic display and tannic finesse. Generous, dark brambly fruit is often tempered and lifted by red fruit undertones. Notes of garrigue – sage, thyme, juniper – are infused into the very core of the wines' being. Many are moreish, delectable and succulent, boasting suave tannins with the texture of fine, wet clay. Some are also elevated by a stony, iodine, mineral quality. It's when these elements come together that the vigneron has succeeded in sharing their place with the drinker.

Although not currently permitted under the appellation rules, white wines are making promising strides and an official request for their inclusion is being assessed as I write. The main varieties would be Grenache Blanc, Roussanne,

Terrasses du Larzac: the facts

Producers 96 independents, 3 cooperatives; 4 négociants
Area planted 747ha (AP)
Production (2023) 2.7m bottles
Average yield (2023) 27.1hl/ha
Grapes Principal Grenache, Syrah, Mourvèdre, Carignan;
 Secondary Cinsault, Counoise, Lledoner Pelut, Morrastel, Terret Noir
Blends At least three varieties, of which

two must be principal varieties; principal varieties at least 75% of the blend; no single variety more than 70% of the blend; Carignan maximum 50%, Cinsault maximum 25%; secondary varieties (other than Cinsault) max 10%
Organic producers (2023) 79% certified or under conversion (92% if including HVE or Terra Vitis certification)

[SOURCE: AP TERRASSES DU LARZAC]

Rolle, Carignan Blanc and Chenin Blanc. Many of the whites currently made under the local IGPs are delicious, so this is definitely an area to watch.

Overall, despite the quality coming out of the region, the Terrasses du Larzac wines still appear fairly difficult to sell abroad. 'It is the name of the estate that sells the wine,' says Marcel Orford-Williams, wine buyer at UK retailer The Wine Society and DWWA judge for Languedoc-Roussillon. Indeed the wide variety of terroirs and potential styles makes it difficult to define a singular identity for the region – but arguably this is also the region's strength.

THE PLACE TO BE

The Terrasses du Larzac region is incredibly dynamic, having a combination of long-standing, native producers (such as Mas Jullien, Mas des Chimères and Domaine de Montcalmès, which all helped to create the reputation of the ►

Producers to know in Terrasses du Larzac

- | | |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| • Clos Constantin | New & noteworthy |
| • Domaine de Montcalmès | • Domaine de l'Accent |
| • Domaine du Pas de l'Escalette | • Domaine Flo Busch |
| • Les Vignes Oubliées | • Les 8 Sarments |
| • Mas Cal Demoura | • Le Clos des Combals |
| • Mas d'Amile | • Mas Lasta |
| • Mas des Brousses | • Mas Origine |
| • Mas Combarèla | |
| • Mas Conscience | |
| • Mas Jullien | |

THE TERRASSES TERROIR: A PATCHWORK OF SOILS

The vineyard area is a complex array of geological eras – a fascinating mix of colour, shape and texture, a Kandinsky painting splashed out across the terrain. As soil types meander through alkaline limestone to more acidic sandstone and schist, the wild Mediterranean vegetation that surrounds the vineyards changes – a shifting, contrasting, metamorphosing landscape. The thyme, juniper, bay and holm oak of the limestone-based garrigue transforms into the heather, mint, white oak and lavender of the sandstone-based maquis.

Although communication around individual terroirs is at a nascent stage, a few specific areas are worth pointing out...

Cercle de la Blaquièrre

An enclave to the west of Mont St-Baudille, at 300m, from St-Privat down to St-Jean-de-la-Blaquièrre. It's mainly grès (sandstone) and schist – although not the same schist found in the Faugères appellation further southwest. The combination of schist and cool nighttime temperatures brings elegance and silky tannins.

Escalette

The upper valley of the Lergue river, at 350m-400m, with rocky limestone soils and a very cool climate. Some vineyards are on terraces, and there are *clapas* – piles of stones – that surround the vineyards.

'Women removed these large stones from the vineyards so that men could work the land,' says Delphine Zernott of Domaine du Pas de l'Escalette (pictured, p65), 'but they also act as barriers, protecting vines from strong winds.' This is a particularly fresh terroir, 'really white wine country', according to *Decanter* contributing editor Andrew Jefford. Reds have fresh acidity, a lighter body and a saline, mineral character.

Salagou and ruffes

In the west around the manmade Salagou lake, with a few outcrops in the southern part of St-Jean-de-la-Blaquièrre, striking red soils resemble the Australian outback. These *ruffes* (from the Occitan *ruffus*, meaning



Ruffes soils in Mèrifons

'red'), were formed during the Permian period some 275 million years ago. According to author and geologist Luc David, these are alluvial terraces, with silty iron-oxide-rich soils. There's also basalt from ancient volcanic eruptions.

Aniane and Puéchabon

To the east of the Hérault river, a few top-quality estates have made their mark, notably Mas de Daumas Gassac and Domaine de la Grange des Pères, although neither labels its wines as Terrasses du Larzac. Hilly vineyards with stony limestone soils and galets roulés (large, rounded stones) make for a lunar landscape.

The heart: Jonquières and surrounds

The lower-lying ancient terraces of the Lergue river. The soil is varied but there's more clay here, with limestone pebbles as well as galets roulés. This part also includes Montpeyroux and St-Saturnin, historic denominations under the Languedoc appellation, both of which hope to gain individual AP status. The wines are denser and more structured.

The Buèges valley

Extending far up the right-hand branch of the Terrasses du Larzac 'V' (see map, p64). This follows the Cévennes fault line, with glacial deposits of fractured limestone.

REGIONAL PROFILE: TERRASSES DU LARZAC

appellation) and a steady stream of newcomers who have arrived in a relatively short space of time (40 new wine-growers since 2014). Some big names, including the likes of Gérard Bertrand, Calmel & Joseph and Vignobles Jeanjean, even have properties here.

'With this mix, it could have been two worlds that coexisted but didn't acknowledge each other, but that's not at all what happened,' says Sébastien Fillon (pictured, p66), president of the appellation and winemaker at Le Clos du Serres. 'They interacted and exchanged and discussed, and the people from outside were accepted, so it worked.' One senses the cohesion and partnership among the producers.

'Everyone helps each other. We're friends – there's no competition,' says Benezeth, who took over the family domaine in 2021 at the age of 26. 'When you're young and recently installed in the region, it's important to have the big names on your side.' What's more, about 80% of producers are organic and many are biodynamic, too (and

'Everyone helps each other. We're friends – there's no competition'

Loïc Benezeth, Domaine La Rouquette (right)

the proportion rises to 92% if HVE and Terra Vitis certification are taken into account), which highlights a certain like-mindedness among them, and also 'allows for large areas in which biodiversity can thrive and a natural balance can be achieved', according to Goumard.

The wines, with their fluidity and delicate structures, could strike a chord with new drinkers discovering wine for the first time, as well as seasoned wine lovers looking for wines with a southern soul but also balance and finesse. In the mighty tome that is the Languedoc, Terrasses du Larzac might be the most compelling chapter.



Languedoc charm: 10 from Terrasses du Larzac

① **Domaine de Montcalmès, Blanc, Languedoc 2021** 95

domainedemontcalmes.fr

Roussanne and Marsanne. A dazzling array of shining golden fruit: Mirabelle plums, mango and white peach. A soaring rush of freshness fills the mouth, not acidity *per se*, but a prickly mineral tension that balances the concentration and huge length. There's a real sense of luminosity here, bright enough to bask in its light. **Drink** 2024-2032 **Alcohol** 13.5%

Mas Jullien, Blanc, Pays d'Hérault 2022 94

£72 Millésima

Grenache Gris, Roussanne, Chenin Blanc. Such a complex and beguiling wine, hinting at lemon curd, wet stones, gunflint, lemon peel and linden flower. Texture, energy and a sensation of crushed rocks. A wine that's entirely present, everlasting, crystalline and pure. **Drink** 2024-2030 **Alc** 13.5%

② **Mas Cal Demoura, Les Combariolles, Terrasses du Larzac 2022** 95

£35 Millésima

Syrah, Mourvèdre, Carignan. Spectacular and enchanting aromatics of bramble, iris, juniper, smoky thyme. This is mouthfilling

and refined in texture. Fluid and energetic, with red apple skin bite. A wine in motion. Biodynamic. **Drink** 2024-2030 **Alc** 13.5%

③ **Mas des Brousses, Cléo, Terrasses du Larzac 2022** 94

POA £ Stone Vine & Sun

Syrah, Mourvèdre, Grenache. Incredible purity of squashed strawberries and red plum. Fresh acidity meets silky, fine tannins for a seductive finish. A wine that's flowing and elegant, combining concentration with a moreish and delectable charm. Organic. **Drink** 2024-2030 **Alc** 14%

Mas des Chimères, Nuit grave, Terrasses du Larzac 2021 94

masdeschimeres.com

Grenache, Syrah, Mourvèdre. A brilliant example of Languedoc generosity and Larzac freshness. Deep, plummy fruit has a raspberry undertone, speckled with dry, scrubby herbs. The palate races, swooping and swirling, full of freshness. Organic. **Drink** 2024-2030 **Alc** 14%

Domaine du Pas de l'Escalette, Les Clapas, Terrasses du Larzac 2022 93

POA £ Carte Blanche

Syrah, Carignan, Grenache. This wears a smoky grey cloak of embers and wispy sage

over a silky red dress of wild raspberry and mulberry. A deep, herbal and mineral wine with tannins like fine clay. Biodynamic. **Drink** 2024-2030 **Alc** 13.5%

④ **Les Vignes Oubliées, Terrasses du Larzac 2022** 92

lesvignesoubliees.com

Grenache, Syrah, Carignan. Aged in a hidden cave, this is a serene, cool-headed wine with mulberry and loganberry fruit shot through with a peppery, minty lift. There's a deep rumbling core, taut tannins and fine acidity, a complex interplay of light and dark. Organic. **Drink** 2024-2028 **Alc** 14.5%

Domaine Flo Busch, Pointe du Jour, Terrasses du Larzac 2022 91

POA £ Indigo Wine

Syrah, Grenache, Carignan. Expressive and alluring, notes of red-fleshed plums, star anise, red apple skin and liquorice. Juicy but still structured, with those lovely fine-clay tannins and a long rush of fresh acidity. Biodynamic. **Drink** 2024-2028 **Alc** 14%

Clos Constantin, Euziéra, Terrasses du Larzac 2022 91

clos-constantin.com

Grenache, Syrah, Carignan. Mellow and approachable, with notes of soft, squishy

plums and dried herbs. The first sip is like biting into a warm plum, light and fresh and delicate. Quench your thirst with this! Biodynamic. **Drink** 2024-2028 **Alc** 14%

Mas d'Amile, Le Petitou, Terrasses du Larzac 2022 90

£20 (2020) Roberson

Grenache, Syrah, Carignan. You feel the ripeness of the year here. Deep purple and gorgeously floral on the nose, with violets, cherries and ripe blackberries. The fine-grained texture and mineral bite mean this is still light and fresh. Organic. **Drink** 2024-2027 **Alc** 13% **D**



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