



COTES DE THONGUE?

Where?!

Ask most people if they've heard of the Languedoc region in the heart of the southern France and they'll say "of course!" and associate the area with good value "sunny" wines, full of power and flavour . . . and alcohol!

But mention the Cotes de Thongue . . . and you're likely to be faced with a blank expression and a response of "Cotes de Where?"

This understated jewel in the crown of the department of Herault lies between Beziers and Pezenas, where winemaking dates back to Roman times.

It is a sad reflection of recent times that due to overproduction and a very competitive market, many estates have been struggling for some time and a number have already disappeared. The ones that remain, however, are those estates which are committed to quality. The hot, dry climate tempered by sea breezes and night winds from the mountains of the Cevennes

produce wines with full flavour and rich concentration balanced by the complexity and elegance provided by the expertise of a new generation of winemakers.

One such estate, Domaine La Croix Belle, has been in the hands of the same family for more than three hundred years. A family who, in the 1980's, changed their focus from bulk wine production to an uncompromising approach of quality and character. The link from father to son has ensured the introduction of new technology marries seamlessly with traditional heritage, expressed by the talents of an experienced winemaker. So much so that the estate was awarded eighth best Vin de Pays producer in 2007, and has wines featured on the wine lists of some of the top restaurants throughout the world.

On November 14th, Frederic Lambocuf from the estate will be hosting a dinner tasting. Please contact me for details.

Les Champ des Lys (£6.25),

is an unusual blend of Grenache Blanc and Viognier with a touch of Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc for good measure. A superb harmonious wine with full fruit and great weight and a perfect mate for seafood with a touch of garlic and chilli.

The two flagship wines, No. 7 Rouge and Blanc (both £10.50), are so named because of the seven grape varieties used in the blend of each wine. The grape varieties for the white are fermented separately in barrels for ten months before assemblage giving a wine full of complexity and depth, luscious and elegant and reminiscent of a Burgundy from the south of the region. No. 7 Rouge, perhaps the best wine in the collection and featured in the Hachette Guide, is concentrated black fruits with hints of chocolate and coffee and a wonderful smooth finish – stonking!

Further up the road in Alignan du Vent, Domaine de Brescou uses the skills of a globetrotting winemaker to produce wines that regularly win medals all over the world. Their Cabernet Sauvignon 2005 (£9.25), has recently been included in the Hachette des Vin Guide. Deep garnet in colour with sweet pepper and spice on the palate. But if concentrated perfection is what you are looking for, try the Prestige Rouge (£14.75). 100% Cabernet Sauvignon like it's little brother, but with an even lower yield which has been made under the "minimal

intervention" rule; i.e. "if it ain't broke, don't fix it". Unfiltered and rustic, this is produced in tiny quantities and is worth grabbing when available.

But the Domaine which really deserves the accolade for sheer determination and hard work is Domaine Bonian from Pouzoles. A husband and wife team with a tiny production. They are now in their third year of production but still battling against the constraints of commerce and accountants.

Muscat Sec (£7.00), is relatively unusual in this form as most of the Muscat from the region makes sweet wine. This is fresh, fruity with a lingering finish of limes and white currants, delicious! To its credit, it has been awarded a gold medal in Paris this year.

Opus (£8.00) is a wine close to my heart. It is a barricked version of their Old Vine Carignan and I'm proud to say I was the first person to sell it. The wine was made using carbonic maceration which ferments the free run juice of whole bunches of grapes to give powerful aromas of wild strawberry. Twelve months in new French oak gives the wine balance and volume supported by firm tannins. ■

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