

ANDREW JEFFORD

Enjoy the Languedoc – it won't be here forever

Ever since Alfred Wegener quietly expounded his theory of continental drift in 1915, we've come to realise that even the earth beneath our feet is moving. Australia is steaming northeast at 70mm a year; a collision with Indonesia and Papua New Guinea beckons. Those living in expensive villas in St Tropez ought to know that the Mediterranean is doomed. Africa will pummel France, Italy and Greece over the next 50 million years, forming a mountain chain like the Himalayas across Europe's heart. Burgundy may lie somewhere above the snowline. Yeti will plod about the place that was once Romanée-Conti.

Geological time unfolds with treacly slowness, though invincible force; human historical time, by contrast, races by, and we have our hands (albeit erratically) on the tiller. Both were on my mind as I set off on a recent trip to the Languedoc.

Geologically, the Languedoc hills are a synopsis of everything which makes France so propitious for winegrowing: you find almost every card in the geological pack beautifully shuffled there, from the ancient shales, sandstones and schists of the Montagne Noire, via middle-aged limestones under the Cevennes to youthful gravel terraces along the river valleys, all ruffled into a variety of expositions under a rarely excessive sun. Only history has been against it, turning it in to a wine factory for pre-globalised Europe. Surely in any other country, those Languedoc hills would have been a star region; their misfortune was to find themselves sharing a nation with Champagne, Bordeaux, Burgundy, the Loire and the Rhône. And too far from Paris.

But where is the best spot in the Languedoc? I've treasured bottles from wild Corbières, plush La Clape, perfumed Pic St-Loup (brilliant for Syrah), chunky St-Chinian and mineral Faugères. The gravels and warmth of Pezenas have long sung in the wines of Prieuré de St-Jean de Bébian, and are now starting to do the same at Axa's Mas Belles Eaux. Yet I now have a theory, which I'm going to enjoy spending the rest of my life putting to the test. My theory is that Terrasses du Larzac is the greatest spot in the Languedoc.

> 'Terrasses du Larzac is the Languedoc of everyone's retirement dreams'

Forget scores, notes and glamorous tastings: we all have a secret wine pantheon of discoveries. Let's call them EE wines, since they Exceed Expectations. If wine hierarchies are in the process of being superseded, EE wines constitute the evidence. The six allusive, balanced and gently evolving bottles of Mas Jullien 1998 I bought were all EE, and I have since drunk the sure-handed 2001 and found that qualifies, too (indeed, I've matched my 1998 against Lynch-Bages 1990 and preferred it). Earlier this year, I discovered a new Languedoc red called La Pèira (now imported by Berry Bros & Rudd) which, together with its siblings, rewired my Languedoc fusebox in a burst of EE fireworks: it's sumptuous and intricate, built on a core of great Mourvèdre, Grenache and Syrah. Mas de Daumas Gassac needs no introduction to *Decanter* readers, and nor does Grange des Pères – though I don't think Cabernet is the grape of the future in Languedoc. Sylvain Fadat's Domaine d'Aupilhac and Pascal Fulla's Mas de l'Ecriture are other Languedoc references. Common denominator? They all come from Terrasses du Larzac, even if the two made with Cabernet don't claim the AC.

I visited Terrasses du Larzac last summer. It's the Languedoc of everyone's retirement dreams: open, uncluttered countryside where the fennel plants sway idly by the roadside, where olive trees mark property boundaries, and where a netful of stars gets emptied in easy-going chaos across the sky every night. The terraces themselves tend to be limestone rubble weathered from the Causse above: new stars here are Mas Conscience and the rejuvenated Mas Cal Demoura. The vineyards laid out like picnic rugs on those pale stones give way, as the hills rise, to scrubby forests patrolled by boar (the fine-grained wines of Causse d'Arboras are highest). To the east of the zone, though, there are some dramatically stony schists, like the vast rockyard heroically cultivated by Fred Brown and Gavin Crisfield at Domaine la Sauvageonne. Beneath the schist there is a glowing red soil of volcanic origin called *ruffe*. At dusk, as the sky grows pale, this earth seems stained with blood. The key domain here is Joël Foucou's Plan de l'Om. Stones and slopes alone don't make for great wine – as much of Provence proves – but when skilled winegrowers grapple intelligently and sensitively with nature here, the results seem to me to have the same aromatic, textural potential as the best of the Rhône. Africa may come to claim Terrasses du Larzac in the end, but 50 million years should be long enough to realise a wine dream or two. D

Andrew Jefford's *Wine Course* has just been published by Ryland, Peters and Small, priced at £19.99

WHAT ANDREW'S BEEN DRINKING THIS MONTH...

AUTHENTICALLY ORGANIC

When I last met Carol Duval-Leroy and Michel Oliveira of Duval-Leroy, they seemed a little disheartened about their efforts to make (and sell) organic Champagne. Cheer up: the 2001 organic **Authentis**, a single-village pure Pinot Noir from Cumières, is superb. Classically rooty Pinot scents, and a wonderfully pure, expressive flavour which tasted like liquid chalk to me, but which also made my son's godmother Katherine, who doesn't give a stuff about terroir, comment on how delicious a Champagne it was. Keep it up.

PHOTOGRAPH: DEBBIE ROWE