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March 2011 £4.00

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Two expressions of Catalonia

The Catalan regions of Empordà in north-east Spain and Roussillon in south-west France are divided by the Pyrenees, but winemakers share a common heritage and language. That doesn't mean their wines are the same though, says Adam Lechmere

IT WAS ONLY after a few days in Empordà, Spain's most northeasterly appellation, that I began to understand the effect the wind has on people. The northerly *tramuntana* blows more or less the year round, at certain seasons reaching gale force 8 and speeds nearing 100km per hour, whipping the sea into a furious white froth. At other times it's a mild breeze. The locals seem very proud of it.

Empordà is separated from Roussillon in south-west France by the Pyrenees (see map, p54) – the border between the two countries runs along the ridge of the great mountain range – but many see that as no barrier at all. 'There is no "other side" of the Pyrenees,' Diego ('Didier') Soto Olivares, proprietor of the remote Mas Estela in Empordà told me. 'It's just an administrative barrier. We share the same country – Catalonia – and the same language – Catalan. We eat the same, dance the same, make wine in the same way...'

Well, to a point. Empordà and Roussillon may have politics and regional pride in common, but they are very different indeed when it comes to wealth. Roussillon is one of the poorest regions of France, while Empordà has the highest per-capita income in Spain – and more Michelin-starred restaurants per head (including Ferran Adrià's *elBulli*) than anywhere in Europe. As for winemaking styles, and attitudes, they are intriguingly dissimilar.

Vignerons either side of the Pyrenees are faced with some of Europe's most unforgiving vineland – mainly granite and schist, with areas of clay and limestone, quartz and marble, changing to silt, sand and clay in the coastal areas. The wealth of minerals in the soil, together with more than 320 days of sunshine a year, cool, almost cold, nights, and, on the south side of the mountains, the wonderful cleansing wind, makes for wines that are celebrated for their freshness, bracing acidity, and, in many reds, alcohol and tannins that ensure longevity.

Right: looking over vines in Roussillon to the slopes of the Pyrenees. Below: vineyards in Capmany, close to Empordà's main town of Figueres and just 12 km from the French border. Despite the proximity – and shared Catalan heritage – of the two regions, their winemaking approach is at odds

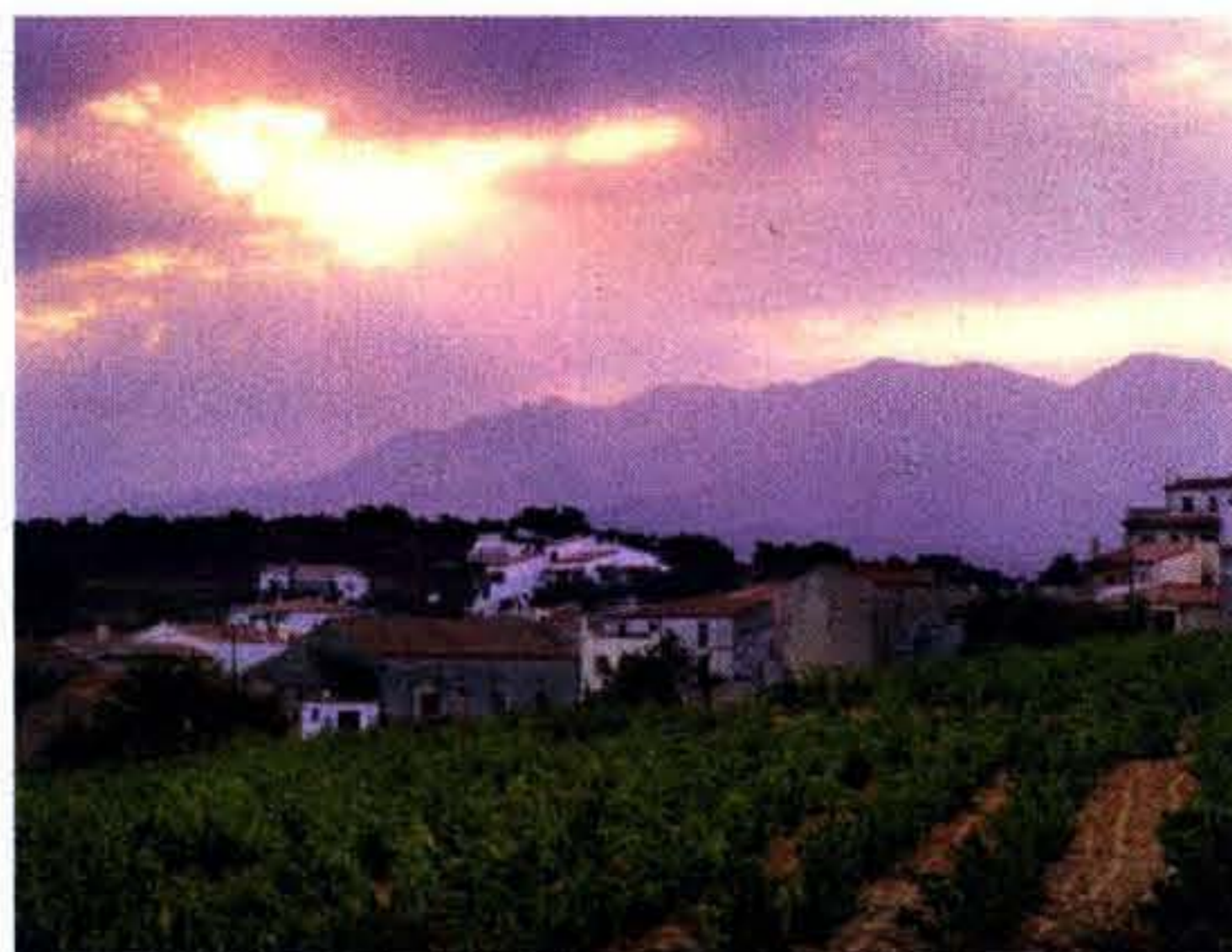
Road to Roussillon

It is when you come to discuss grape varieties, and the politics of what is traditional and what is a usurper, that you begin to see how different the regions are – and how their wine styles differ.

In Roussillon there is a *réal* sense of custodianship. There are five permitted red grapes for AC-level wines – Grenache, Mourvèdre, Cinsault, Carignan and Syrah – of which at least three must be used. Of all the wineries I visited, only a few would advocate anything other than these traditional varieties.

At Château Planères, in St-Jean-Lasseille, central Roussillon, Gilles Jaubert told me: 'We try to express and channel our land's characteristics. When you open a Planères wine you have to discover the country, the limestone and clay of the soil.'

All winemakers, of course, talk like that, but there is indeed an earthiness to his wines; a saltiness that seems to root them in the ground we're standing on.





There's Jaubert's La Romanie, for example (see box, far right) a classic Mourvèdre-Grenache-Syrah blend that, after a maceration of 40 days, produces intense meaty flavours, mixed with spice and rose petals, white pepper and precise tannins. Above all, Jaubert's wines are fresh – the minerality of the soil ensures that, and the acids that develop overnight when average summer temperatures can dip to 6°C.

At Domaine Pouderoux in Maury, Robert Pouderoux, a winemaker with faith in the primacy of 'place before process', will use only traditional grapes. He shows us the effect on his vines of height, wind and garrigue shrubs – that scent of crushed rosemary, thyme, sage and juniper so redolent of the south of France. His hunched and wiry Grenache, Mourvèdre and Syrah vines struggle for sustenance in the schisty soil at between 300m and 400m of altitude, constantly exposed to wind.

Towards the coast, there's another producer that, in many ways, is just as typical of modern Roussillon. At his eponymous family domaine, Jean-Marc Lafage farms three properties in three very distinct terroirs: Agly, the Perpignan plain and Aspres. Lafage (who has joined with UK importer Bibendum on a cross-Pyrenean wine, Els Pyreneus) is no sentimentalist. 'Why plant Chardonnay?' he asks. 'Because wherever you go, you get a good result. If you want citrus character, plant Chardonnay.' But is it suited to the region? 'What is the character of Roussillon?' Lafage replies. 'Do you want fresh wines or 14.5% Vermentino? In my opinion you want freshness.'

Freshness is the holy grail of winemakers the world over, and in Roussillon the best reds – even with 15% alcohol and strong tannins – have a superb racy character. I found the whites less successful.

Lafage recognises the drawbacks of non-local varieties. He is cutting back on his Chardonnay and has also stopped production of Cabernet Sauvignon. 'It doesn't give the right expression here. It's difficult to handle – it's too vigorous in the heat, and the grapes don't mature properly.'

Across to Empordà

Across the Pyrenees and into Spain and Empordà, where at first sight you would think you were still in Roussillon. It's the same ochre-coloured landscape, the same beguiling, spice-laden sea-breezes. The same, only different. Instead of pulling up in farmyards next to rusting tractors, we park on aprons of sun-blasted concrete in front of steel and glass bunkers.

Our first stop, Terra Remota, looks like it's



expecting a visit from UN weapons inspectors. Its owner, the charming Marc Bournazeau, assures me he's going to grow greenery to soften some of the harsher angles of his multimillion-euro winery.

Bournazeau runs an ultra-modern ship. He has 23ha – 6ha each of Grenache (Garnacha), Syrah and Cabernet Sauvignon plus a few fields of Tempranillo. Then there's 1ha of Chardonnay, some white Garnacha and Chenin Blanc. Vines are biodynamic and irrigated, and the winery is entirely gravity-fed.

So why does he plant Cabernet? Because it's the most resistant to water stress. Bournazeau's not from a family of winemakers, he says, so he's not beholden to traditional varieties. 'What matters is what's in the glass: if Cabernet Sauvignon gives the best result, why shouldn't I plant it?'

At the opposite end of the spectrum is Lavinyeta, started by the Serra Pla family in 2008. Rather than a huge, gung-ho project, this is winemaking run on pure enthusiasm, from a single, modern barn-like structure. 'Local grapes are our pillar,' winemaker Josep Serra Pla says, 'though I believe in looking for new varieties to play with.' He has 17 different grapes planted. Cabernet Sauvignon gives more concentration to Garnacha, he says. I constantly hear that Cabernet has more concentration than Garnacha or Carignan, so will last longer. 'These wines will be in barrels for a very long time.'

Above: the Catalan regions of Roussillon in France and Empordà in Spain may share the Pyrenees as a border but the wine styles can be quite diverse

Below right: Diego ('Didier') Soto Olivares, proprietor of the remote Mas Estela in Empordà (top left), checks the fermentation of one of his wines in barrel

Garnacha is great for elegance but it doesn't have the concentration for a long life.'

As in Roussillon, Empordà has its share of hard-core purists. In Cadaques, Celler Martin Faixó's owner Rafa Martin's intense local chauvinism drives him to seek the purest expression of his land: he's giving up on all international varieties and achieving more concentration by closer planting of vines. He's also convinced the land is rejecting the non-native vines: 'Look at vines. The Cabernet and Merlot isn't taking well. The Garnacha is vigorous.'

Sense of place

Vigorous it may be, but for every Rafa Martin – or Didier Soto, the charismatic owner of Mas Estela, who forges magnificent wines out of his mountain retreat – there is a Castillo Perelada, Empordà's multinational, with a €37m turnover in wine. Perelada exports energetically, and has a highly motivated research department which publishes, along with the EU, a best-practice manual covering everything from how to plant in mountains to the effects of wind on vines.

It is a formidable operation and it makes some formidable wines with equally daunting price tags. Finca Garbet, for example, retails at £100. It's a fabulous wine with a nose of garrigue herbs and a metallic tang of blood. Extraordinary – but local? No more so than the winery's flagship 3 Fincas and 5 Fincas. They are excellent wines: full and fresh, 'very attractive and approachable', I wrote in my notes.

But 'attractive and approachable' is not the same as 'charismatic', and selling millions of bottles worldwide is, of course, not the same as making interesting wine. There is nothing meretricious about Perelada. The winemaker Delfi Sanahuja is highly respected and the company's dedication to research is laudable. But somewhere along the way their wines have lost their sense of place.

I don't know if it's due to the grapes they use, or the simple fact that if you invest millions in your business, then you'll need a return: from Norway to Nashville, these wines must offend no one. And eagerness to please doesn't sit well with the Catalan character. Nor does it make fascinating wines.

In the end, the thing that lends a wine real interest is its sense of place. These are two distinct regions whose winemakers share so much in terms of history and politics. But their wines are very different. The only thing the best of them share is a dedication to the tiny squares of land they farm to produce some of the most compelling, idiosyncratic wines in Europe. **D**



Best from both sides of the Pyrenees

ROUSSILLON

Area under vine 38,000ha

Main ACs (Dry): Collioure, Cotes de Roussillon, Cotes de Roussillon Les Aspres, Cotes de Roussillon Villages, CRV Caramay, CRV Latour de France, CRV Lesquerde, CRV Tautavel. (Sweet): Banyuls, Maury, Muscat de Rivesaltes, Rivesaltes

Permitted varieties (Reds): Carignan, Grenache Noir, Cinsault, Syrah, Mourvedre. (Dry Whites): Macabeu, Grenache Blanc, Malvoisie, Marsanne, Roussanne, Rolle or Vermentino. (Sweet): Grenache, Macabeu, Malvoisie, Muscat a Petits Grains, Muscat of Alexandria

Specific regulations Reds must include at least three varieties, whites at least two

Domaine Poudoux, La Mouriane, Côtes de Roussillon-Villages, France 2005 ★★★★★ 19pts/20

£33 Harrogate Wines

100-year-old Grenache. Incredible nose of garrigue and spicy, tarry notes. The palate is much juicier and fresher – very bright with lifted red fruit. Excellent acidity, fresh and vibrant, a superb wine. **Drink:** 2011–2025

Cave de L'Abbé Rous, Cyrce, Collioure, Roussillon, France 2008 ★★★★★ 18

£23 (2002) Haslemere Cellar

Wonderful nose of sweet almonds. Great mouthfeel, opulent, very spicy and rich with blackberry, raspberry and ripe figs. Long, saline finish. A DWWA 2010 Silver medal. **Drink:** 2011–2020

Château Planères, La Romanie, Côtes du Roussillon-Villages, France 2006 ★★★★★ 18

£13 Mixed Case

Beautiful Burgundian nose, meaty with spice and pot pourri. Very fresh, very grippy but juicy tannins and integrated oak. Pepper on the palate, with blackcurrant and blackberry fruit. Full and meaty. **Drink:** 2011–2015

Mas Amiel, Notre Terre, Cotes de Roussillon-Villages, France 2007 ★★★★★ 17.5

£14.25 Vin Neuf

Very meaty, black fruit aromas. Lovely black fruit on the palate with deep, sweet spicy quite dry tannins, getting much stronger on the finish. Strong, meaty, macho wine to drink with powerful red meats. **Drink:** 2011–2020

EMPORDA

Area under vine 2,000ha

Main DO Vins de L'Empordà

Recommended varieties (White): Grenache blanc, Macabeu or Viura, Muscat of Alexandria. (Red): Grenache grise, Carignan, Grenache noir. A wide variety of international varieties including Chardonnay, Gewurztraminer, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Cabernet Franc is also permitted. **Specific regulations** Nothing on grape varieties, though yields are restricted

Mas Estela, Vinya Selva de Mar, Empordà, Spain 2006 ★★★★★ 19.5

£12.50 La Cave à Fromage

Blackberry, black pepper and graphite laden with spice and garrigue, with dense and tight tannins. 15% alcohol but still refreshing thanks to acidity and minerality. Delicious. **Drink:** 2011–2015

Espelt, Coma Bruna, Empordà, Spain 2007 ★★★★★ 17.5

£16 Moreno

Very attractive nose with minerals, fruit and iodine notes. Palate is big and round, very juicy. Sweet and spicy red fruit, some balsamic flavours, with mature, very soft tannins. Good length. A meaty wine. **Drink:** 2011–2013

Castillo Perelada, Finca la Garriga, Empordà, Spain 2006 ★★★★★ 17

£22.50 Everywine

Sweet, bright fruit nose. Incredibly complex with underlying meaty notes. Mineral, metallic palate, with salty, wet stone notes, then ripe red fruit and grippy, persistent tannins. Unusual, rustic and delicious. **Drink:** 2011–2018

Vinyes dels Aspres, Oriol, Empordà, Spain 2009 ★★★★★ 17

£10.50 Albion Wines

Creamy nose. Seem simple at first but the palate opens up to exotic stone fruit, blackcurrant and herbal notes. Bright, refreshing tannins. **Drink:** 2011–2015

Terra Remota, Clos Adrien, Empordà, Spain 2007 ★★★★★ 17

N/A UK www.terraremota.com

90% Syrah. Fennel, balsamic, pepper and lavender. Nicely knit oak. Big, creamy palate, cassis fruit offset by fine tannins. Atypical but good. **Drink:** 2012–2018

For full details of UK stockists, see p106