

The Black Wines of Cahors

By NEIL ALLANBY



The vineyards of the region known as South West France lie scattered as far as the four corners of the Aquitaine Basin, between the foothills of the Massif Central and the lower slopes of the Pyrenees. This diverse region of France is characterised by a wide variety of wine styles and grape varieties, yet has one thing in common — the vineyards are located in

sheltered valleys in close proximity to major waterways. These waterways have historically been the transport routes to market for the wines from these rugged lands. The most important of these waterways is the Garonne River — and its tributaries the Lot and Dordogne — which subsequently flows into the Atlantic Ocean further downstream from Bordeaux.

In countryside of such rugged natural beauty, with a tough harsh climate, it is no wonder that the food specialities of the region are refined but hearty and solid affairs: *cassoulet*, *foie gras*, *confit de canard*, *ragout* and roast game birds flavoured with locally found black truffles.

The South West is also home to the Massif Central forests of Limousin, one of the sources of oak used for the manufacture of wine barrels. About one quarter of this geographical area of France is forest and, of this area, about one third is oak, so it is no surprise that France is a major supplier of oak barrels for wine maturation. The botanical genus of which oak trees belong is *Quercus*.

Two former French provinces located side by side in this region are Quercy (named after the oak genus) and Périgord (home of the Périgord black truffle). Périgord black truffles (*Tuber melanosporum*) form a symbiotic relationship with the roots of oak trees and can be found between the leaf litter and the soil beneath these trees.

As always, when seeking a wine match for different French specialities it is best to seek out a local wine from the same region as the dish. In the case of Périgord black truffles, look no further than the wines from the capital of Quercy, the black wines of Cahors.



Image credit © Luca Manieri

Cahors wines have been famous for their depth, body and intense colour since the Middle Ages, when they were exported via the waterways and oceans to England where they earned the nickname “black wine”. Cahors wines are made from a minimum of 70 per cent malbec grapes, complemented with supple merlot and tannic tannat. These wines have a deep, intense colour and good fleshy fruit in their youth, maturing to become generous, rounded, spicy wines with robust tannins. Mature Cahors wines take on the aromas of cinnamon, pepper and cocoa with a hint of truffles.

Winemakers from this region have always had to do it tough. In the Middle Ages, malbec was a common grape variety in France and the vineyards of Cahors had a greater reputation for good wines than those of Bordeaux. Following the alliance of England with Aquitaine, all vineyards turned their attention to markets in England. The route to market was via the rivers and waterways to the Atlantic Ocean. Unfortunately for the winemakers of Cahors, this route passed through the vineyards of Bordeaux. The Bordelais charged tolls on river transport and also imposed the important dispensation that the wines of the high country could not be sold prior to those of Bordeaux. At that time, wine was shipped in barrels to be drunk young. By the time the wines of Cahors arrived in England they were expensive and had begun to spoil, ensuring Bordeaux’s rise to commercial superiority.

In the 19th century, the phylloxera epidemic hit hard and left the vineyards of South West France in shreds. Further decrees in the early 20th century >>



Image credit © Lucia Lucci

FROM LEFT TO RIGHT:

 OPPOSITE: Château Lagrèzette
 THIS PAGE: Malbec grapes grown in Cahors in the south west of France
 • Locally found black truffles

ensured wines produced outside the Gironde department could no longer be called Bordeaux wines. Finally the intense frosts of the 1956 winter pretty much finished things off for these vineyards.

Today, however, thanks to the efforts of several hardened local winemakers clinging to their historical local grape varieties, we have seen the vineyards of the South West and of Cahors saved,

resurrected, restored to their former glory and rebranded for commercial success.

My favourite wine from Cahors is Château Lagrèzette, owned since 1980 by Alain Dominique Perrin, the past president of the luxury House of Cartier and founder of Paris-based Fondation Cartier for contemporary art. The chateau was built in the 15th century on the site of a medieval fortress and has now been completely restored. The vineyard itself is known as the oldest in South West France and has been brought back to life cultivating the original malbec, known locally as *auxerrois*.

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For vinification and assembly of their wines, they call on Michel Rolland, the globally recognised oenologist and consultant. Their top-of-the-range wine, Le Pigeonnier, is recognised as one of the top 100 wines in the world, with a price to go with it. However their other wines also match perfectly with truffles.

Today Cahors is a very picturesque town situated on the Lot River. It is famous for its medieval bridge with three towers, Pont



FROM TOP TO BOTTOM:
 THIS PAGE: Périgord black truffles (*Tuber melanosporum*) • A picturesque laneway in Rocamadour • The town of Rocamadour on the cliffs overlooking the River Dordogne
 OPPOSITE: A bottle of Château Lagrèzette



Valentré, and old town featuring half-timbered houses and narrow alleyways. The local cathedral is the Gothic and Romanesque-style Cathédral Saint-Etienne, which contains centuries-old frescoes.

About 35 kilometres north of Cahors we find the town of Rocamadour, clinging to the steep cliff face on the banks of the Dordogne. Rocamadour is located on one of the pilgrim routes through France that joins the Camino de Santiago, the routes to the shrine of the apostle St James in the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostella in Galicia, northwest Spain. Rocamadour is famous for its church containing the Black Madonna to which King Louis IX of France (later Saint Louis) paid homage when making his pilgrimage.

There is a strong link between the Catholic religion and wine. One

of Cahor's famous sons was Jacques Duèze, who later became Pope Jean XXII, the second of the Avignon popes (from 1316 to 1334). He is credited with bringing winemakers from his birthplace to Châteauneuf-du-Pape to help set up the local vineyards close to Avignon.

Also in South West France, you will find the prehistoric caves of Lascaux with their wall paintings, magnificent medieval castles such as Beynac along the Dordogne River, and the beautiful town of Sarlat-la-Canéda which is famous for its market. This region is also home to the historic town of Auch, which is close to the birthplace of d'Artagnan, famously the fourth musketeer in Alexandre Dumas's novel *The Three Musketeers*. Yes, d'Artagnan was a real person!

So next time you are sitting down to a meal of *confit de canard*,



a truffle risotto or truffle-flavoured roast guinea fowl with sides of roast vegetables, think of matching it with a glass of malbec from Cahors and contemplate the rich history of South West France. ♣

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