

Southern France The vineyards of southern France lie along the Mediterranean coast from Italy in the east to the Spanish border in the west. They are split into three broad areas: Languedoc and Roussillon to the west of the Rhône, and Provence to the east. The prevalence of the local IGP, Pays d'Oc, for the wines of Languedoc and Roussillon, alongside a number of more traditional appellations means that a great diversity of wine styles can be found in this part of France.

CLIMATE AND GRAPE GROWING

This region has a warm Mediterranean climate with summer temperatures often in excess of 30°C, mild winters and low rainfall levels especially during the growing season. Consequently, in most years this area can offer ideal conditions for growing grapes.

However, the region is by no means uniform.

Vineyards planted inland in the foothills of the mountains that surround this region are noticeably cooler than those on the coastal plain and often have less fertile, well-drained soils that are better suited to quality viticulture. Strong winds can also have a significant impact on the climate. Cool dry winds blow from the north, cooling the eastern and western ends of the region. The *mistral* blows down the Rhône valley and the *tramontane* blows through the gap between the Massif Central and the Pyrenees.

The warm dry climate means that the biggest grape growing challenge is drought, whereas fungal diseases are less of a problem here than anywhere else in France. However, the region can occasionally experience summer floods.

GRAPE VARIETIES AND WINEMAKING

Black varieties account for the majority of the plantings in the region. The last 20 years has seen dramatic changes to the composition of the vineyards and today both black and white wines reflect a mix of local and international varieties.

Black Varieties

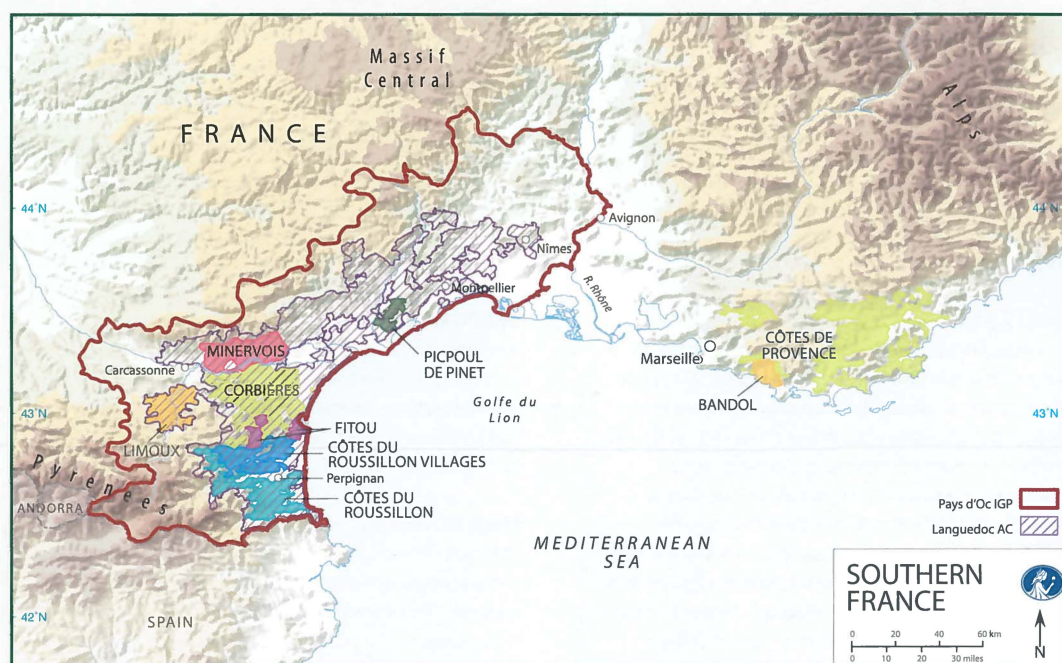
The most important local varieties include **Grenache** and **Syrah**. Grenache is well suited to the warm, dry summer climate, whereas Syrah tends to perform better in the cooler sites. **Carignan** is also widely grown. This grape is naturally high in tannin, acidity and colour but can lack fruit or finesse, although old vine Carignan on poor soil can produce quality wines. Its popularity in the past was due to its ability to produce enormous yields; however, plantings have been reduced significantly, a trend that is likely to continue. Nevertheless, it is still so widely planted it is permitted by all AC regulations. There are smaller plantings of **Cinsault**, which is used in rosé production or to add red fruit flavours to red blends.

Mourvèdre can ripen successfully only in the warmest



Ploughing during the growing season to keep weeds under control.

KEY



sites and plays an important role in blends adding richness, colour and complexity. There are also significant plantings of international varieties, particularly **Merlot**, but also **Cabernet Sauvignon**, that are used in the production of IGP wines.

Most wines of the South of France have benefited from investment in modern equipment, improved cellar hygiene, temperature control, oxygen management and the judicious use of new and old oak. Semi-carbonic maceration is practised by some producers as it can play an important role in softening the tannins in Carignan.

White Varieties

Grape varieties that were not traditionally grown in the region now dominate the plantings of white varieties. **Chardonnay** and **Sauvignon Blanc** are the two most widely planted varieties and are used in the production of IGP wines. There are smaller but still significant plantings of **Viognier**. The most widely planted local varieties are Muscat and Grenache Blanc. Muscat is used in the production of sweet fortified wines, but is also sometimes used to make dry wines with aromatic grapey aromas. Grenache Blanc makes dry wines that have a soft peachy fruitiness, full body and low acidity, but tend to oxidise easily. It is often blended with other local or Rhône varieties. There are a number of local varieties that are grown throughout the region such as Picpoul in Pinet, Mauzac in Limoux, Maccabeu in Roussillon, Rolle in Provence and Clairette in Languedoc and Provence that are prized in their specific locales. Of these, **Picpoul** is perhaps best known, producing wines with refreshing high acidity and green fruit and citrus flavours.

LANGUEDOC AND ROUSSILLON

The majority of the wines from the south of France come from the vineyards of the *départements* of Aude, Hérault and Gard traditionally known as Languedoc, whereas the vineyards of the *département* Pyrénées-Orientales are known as Roussillon. There is a large coastal plain area between Béziers and Montpellier. Further inland and towards the Spanish border the vineyards become more hilly and rugged.

Appellation Wines

Languedoc is a generic appellation that covers all the appellation vineyards from the Spanish border to Nîmes. The best sub-regions within Languedoc can add their names to the label alongside Languedoc AC, for example, Pic-St-Loup. Above this there are a number of more geographically specific appellations such as Côtes du Roussillon and Minervois, which have their own individual regulations. Certain areas within these appellations have been recognised for their quality and now have their own sub-appellations such as Minervois-La Livinière. The appellation system continues to evolve as the sub-regions of the Languedoc apply for full AC status.

Most appellations permit the production of red, white and rosé. The vast majority of these wines are red and based on the quartet of grapes: Carignan, Grenache, Syrah and to a lesser extent Mourvèdre. It is very difficult to describe a typical wine from each of the appellations, not only because of the possible variations in the blends but also because many appellations cover significant geographical areas with different climatic and soil conditions dominating in different zones. The cooler

areas produce wines with more finesse and lighter tannins and often produce the best Syrahs. In the warmer areas Mouvèdre is at its best and wines have greater body and some meaty, gamey flavours. However, in the larger appellations, wines can often be blends of these different styles. The best wines are full-bodied and have concentrated spicy red fruit often with oak flavours. Rosés tend to be soft and fruity wines.

A few examples can show this diversity. **Côtes du Roussillon** is more consistently rugged and mountainous than the other areas of the Languedoc. Bright sunlight, low rainfall and particularly strong winds can produce concentrated wines. The best vineyards are in the north and qualify for **Côtes du Roussillon Villages**. **Fitou**, just to the north of Côtes du Roussillon Villages, is split into two separate areas: a warm coastal strip that produces fuller-bodied wines and another cooler area inland and at altitude, where lighter wines predominate. **Corbières** covers warm sites near the coast and vineyards planted at altitude that are cooled by the *tramontane*. It has been subdivided into 11 sub-regions, the best of which, Boutenac, has its own AC. **Minervois** lies on the slopes of the Massif Central. The vineyards do not reach the coast but vary in their qualities due to altitude, the richness of the soil and the extent of their exposure to the cooling influences from the Atlantic. It too is subdivided and the best sub-region, La Livinière, has its own AC.

Whites can vary as dramatically as the reds depending on the grape variety and location. **Picpoul de Pinet** is near the coast, the cooling sea breezes helping to retain the natural high acidity of the Picpoul grape. By contrast, Limoux benefits from the cooling effect of altitude and is a source of premium oaked Chardonnays.

IGP Wines

More IGP wines are made in this area than in any other region of France, and they are vital for the commercial survival of grape growing in the south of France. Most are sold under the regional name of Pays d'Oc, which covers all the *départements* that make up Languedoc-Roussillon. The success of these wines is the result of a number of factors. The IGP regulations permit a wider range of grape varieties as well as varietal labelling, and the warm, sunny climate means that large volumes of ripe, fruity wines can be produced here relatively easily compared with other areas of France and therefore many of the wines are excellent value for money.

PROVENCE

The landscape is very varied and is broken up by many prominent ranges of hills. These offer protection from the *mistral*, and provide a great variety of different site climates and soils. Rosés account for the vast majority of production. These wines tend to be very pale in colour, light-bodied and dry on the palate, and display delicate flavours of grapefruit and red fruits. Red wines range from fresh and fruity to more full-bodied, barrel-matured styles. The best white wines often make a feature of the aromatic qualities of Rolle or Clairette.

Côtes de Provence is by far the largest appellation in Provence. Rosés account for the vast majority of production. Along the coast there are three isolated pockets of vineyards, each with its individual *Appellation contrôlée*. The most important of the three is **Bandol**, located to the east of Marseille. It produces premium reds based on the Mourvèdre grape, which is able to ripen reliably on the region's south-facing terraces slopes. These are dark, full-bodied wines with powerful tannins, and they require bottle age before they show their full spectrum of bramble, meat and liquorice-spice flavours.