

Cahors

Southwest France

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MALBEC'S TRUE HOME IS IN THIS ANCIENT APPELLATION.

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*Valentré Bridge (top);
Clos Triguédina Malbec
vine (below).*



There it stands, its 125-year-old roots firmly, deeply planted in the earth of Cahors. A monument to vintners of yore, this rare Malbec vine produced grapes even when its neighboring plants withered away during the devastating frost of 1956. Today, its thick and powerful trunk stands out amid the rows of 40-to-60-year-old vines at Clos Triguédina.

A beautiful vine, perhaps, but emblematic of its appellation. Most people would walk right past it and never give a thought to its history or the battles it has won over Mother Nature and human authority. Cahors is indeed the forgotten terroir of France, even though it's only 25 miles west of Bordeaux. Its winemakers struggle to find American importers, even

as their flagship grape, Malbec (known locally as Auxerrois or Cot), has become an international sensation for Argentina.

Some 80% of Cahors production is sold in France; in the past few years, vintners have started selling boxed wine to locals, apparently in acknowledgment of their reputation for simple, value-priced potables. But like Clos Triguédina's old vine—which grows only six to eight bunches of grapes a year—Cahors wines deserve closer scrutiny. Producers here are shedding their stereotypical shackles and overcoming market challenges to create well-structured, Malbec-based wines ranging in style from fruity to intense and complex.

Few European cities can match Cahors's medieval charm. Situated on a rocky peninsula surrounded by the Lot River, the region is filled with historical reminders of its former occupants, the Visigoths and Romans. The Valentré Bridge, built in the 14th century, links modern-day drivers to their ancestors who crossed the river on the same span.

Photos by Patrick Boillaud (top), Fred Minnick (bottom)

But the most interesting aspect of this area's wine history involves King Henry III of England. In 1225, he ordered Bordeaux authorities not to impose taxes on or hinder the production of the "Black Wine of Cahors," so named for its impenetrable color. After the Hundred Years' War, the wines fell out of favor in England, but they remained popular in France and Russia. From 1866 to 1878, phylloxera wiped out Cahors's 143,000 acres of vines. In 1947, however, local winegrowers established the Parnac cooperative, hoping to restore the prestige of Malbec. Then the 1956 frost destroyed 99% of their vines.

Producers continued to make the best wines they could with what little they had. And when Clos Triguedina, the oldest continuously family-owned vineyard in France (founded in 1830), won the 1971 gold medal at the Salon des Vignerons Indépendants in Paris, Cahors was back on the map. "My father Jean showed people we could make good wine," says Jean-Luc Baldès, the current owner and winemaker.

After the gold medal, Cahors was recognized as an Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée. The AOC now comprises 11,366 acres, including the communes of Vire-sur-Lot, Soturac, and Prayssac. AOC-labeled wines must contain at least 70% Malbec, with Merlot and Tannat also allowed; this is the only southwestern French AOC that prohibits the use of Cabernet Franc and Cabernet Sauvignon.

In fact, Cahors winemakers do not want to be like either Bordeaux or Argentina. They believe their own Malbec can make intense, complex wines bursting with fruit and framed by dense tannins. "Cahors's identity is its terroir," Baldès believes. "France tends to have two seasons—spring and fall do not exist. It's a lot drier and hotter here, which is great for the Malbec grape." Equidistant from the Atlantic Ocean, the Mediterranean Sea, and the Pyrenees, Cahors's climate is influenced by all three. "Some-

times the Atlantic dominates it," says Baldès. "Sometimes it will be the hot, dry Mediterranean climate. It changes from year to year, but that's what makes us different than Bordeaux." The region receives about 2.5 inches less rainfall a year than Bordeaux, but the east-to-west Lot River moderates temperatures and delivers the water needed by the vines. A towering limestone plateau provides ample drainage for its upper vineyards.

AOC regulations designated nine terraces, with two-thirds of the Cahors vineyards located on terraces one, two, three, and four. These so-called Lot River terraces consist of alluvial deposits from the Massif Central, with limestone subsoils, quartz stones, smooth pebbles, and limestone gravel. They are close enough to the river to receive ample water, but not so close that drainage is compromised. The region's top wines tend to come from terraces three and four, where vineyards are owned by Château de Chambert, Château de Gaudou, Château du Cèdre, Château Lagrézette, and Clos Triguedina.

Most producers' blocks are scattered around the AOC. Baldès grows vines on all four Lot River terraces, making Clos Triguedina one



Cahors vineyards (above); Jean-Luc Baldès, owner and winemaker of Clos Triguedina (bottom).





Château de Chambert estate and vineyard (top) and proprietor Philippe Lejeune (middle); Philippe and Michel Vincens of Château Vincens (above).

of the few wineries that can bottle Malbec, Merlot, Tannat, Chardonnay, and Chenin Blanc. He has planted the white grapes at higher altitudes, for the southern exposure and drainage, and his prized Malbec in plots where it can receive the most sunlight. "Being so well located gives us an advantage because we can taste the various levels of the soil," says Baldès.

The vineyards on the limestone plateau have an average elevation of 900 feet and are less fertile than those in the Lot River valley. Winemakers here have beautiful views of Cahors and the French countryside, but need to be more careful with their viticulture. "We try to pick plateau grapes as late as possible to get as much maturity," reports Philippe Vincens, owner of Château Vincens. "In the plateau, with the clay soil, wind,

OUTSTANDING RECENT RELEASES

The 2009 releases had not yet been bottled at the time of my visit, but I tasted many samples from barrel. While Bordeaux is trumpeting its great 2009 vintage, Cahors is receiving little attention for what could well be the appellation's greatest vintage in history.

Château de Chambert Grand Vin 2007 \$40
100% Malbec. Produced from a certified Biodynamic vineyard at the highest part of the plateau, 1,000 feet in elevation, this fresh wine has a bright purple color. Elegant tannins round out a pleasant finish.

Château de Gaudou Renaissance 2006 \$26
100% Malbec. Mechanical harvesting and traditional vinification were used to create this deep-garnet-colored wine. An intense nose of black fruits and spices sets up a chewy, tannic Malbec that should age well for some time.

Château du Cèdre Le Cèdre 2007 \$19
100% Malbec. This expressive wine offers black fruits, profound spices, and velvety tannins.

Château Haut-Monplaisir Pur Plaisir 2007 \$17
100% Malbec. A dark-red color leads to aromas of blackcurrant and smoky minerals. The bold palate presents flavors of cherry, blackcurrant, and chocolate. Intriguingly earthy, with a crisp, dry finish.

Château Vincens Prestige 2005 \$12
80% Malbec, 20% Merlot. These Guyot-trained grapes were mechanically picked and hand-sorted. Deep red in color, the wine has a nose full of juicy berries with notes of vanilla and spice. The silky palate is set off by well-rounded tannins. Perhaps the best value in the region.

Clos Triguedina Probus 2007 \$30
100% Malbec. Grapes were hand-picked and -sorted. The color is violet, nearly black. A slightly oaky nose shows a touch of cranberry. The palate features concentrated blackcurrant with hints of plum, but the wine's most impressive aspect is its smooth, long, complex finish.

Clos Triguedina The New Black Wine 2007 \$60
100% Malbec. After being hand-picked and -sorted, the grapes are heated to further concentrate the sugars. The color of this limited-production bottling is unmistakably black; the nose displays dried fruit and licorice. Possibly the most complex wine made in Cahors, it's not jammy, but jam-packed with intense dark fruit, well-structured tannins, and vibrant acidity.

Le Bout du Lieu Orbe Noir 2006 \$12
100% Malbec. A profound garnet color is followed by expressive black fruit with notes of vanilla and woody tannins.

Mas del Périé Les Escures 2008 \$16
100% Malbec. The '08, from an organically grown vineyard, has a deep ruby color that could easily be taken for black. Intense black fruit on the nose transitions to a powerful, gritty mouthfeel with hints of blackberry, chocolate, and black pepper.

Prices are current estimated retail.



Château Lagrézette (top center) and owner Alain Dominique Perrin (above); Château du Cèdre vineyard (middle); Clos Troteligotte proprietor Emmanuel Rybinksi (bottom left) and vineyard (bottom right).

cold nights, and warm days, the grapes don't mature as fast. This doesn't mean the grapes are not good; they just require more attention, and we have to wait two or three weeks later than we do in other terraces."

Vincens, 29, is among a growing number of young Cahors winemakers—more than three dozen under the age of 35—who refuse to let their vineyard locations detract from the quality of their wine. "Terroir is not just about the soil and climate; it's about the people," says Vincens. These tradition-breaking producers might provide just the injection of energy the appellation needs to achieve a stronger international presence.

Château Haut-Monplaisir is owned and operated by Cathy and Daniel Fournié, both 30. The Fourniés hand-pull their weeds, grow vines within grass verges, and prune their canopies for optimal sun exposure. What makes their wines unique, though, is their long fermentation in barrels.

While Clos Troteligotte sticks to traditional winemaking techniques, 26-year-old Emmanuel Rybinksi uses social networking, blogging, and e-commerce to sell his wine. Taking a page from the American marketing playbook, Rybinksi blogs about the minutiae of pruning, pressing, and blending. "Consumers love that," he finds.

Many of these young vintners have

ventured off to other lands and industries before returning to their family estates. For example, Vincens was a financial executive for a French bank, but says, "I just missed it and had to get back to the vineyard."

Lucien Dimani, 26, of Le Bout du Lieu winery, has stayed in the United States for now. Armed with degrees in viticulture and enology from the prestigious Institut Rural de Vayres and a lifetime of experience, Dimani was a hot commodity for any American winery; he currently works at Afton Mountain Vineyards in Virginia. Dimani says he'll



Photo by Marc Dantan (top right)

KEY PRODUCERS

Château de Chambert

Les Hauts-Coteaux
46700 Floressas
+33-565-319575
www.chambert.com
Importer: Monsieur Touton Selection, Ltd.
New York

Château de Gaudou

46700 Vire-sur-Lot
+33-565-365293
www.chateaugaudou.com
Importer: Vinotas Selections
www.vinotasimports.com

Château du Cèdre

Bru
46700 Vire-sur-Lot
+33-565-365387
www.chateauducedre.com
Importer: Martine's Wines, Inc.
www.martineswines.com

Château Haut-Monplaisir

46700 Lacapelle Cabanac
+33-565-246478
Importer: Vintage 59 Imports
www.vintage59.com

Château Lagrèzette

46140 Caillac
+33-565-200742
www.chateau-lagrezette.tm.fr
Importer: Frederick Wildman & Sons, Ltd.
www.frederickwildman.com

Château Vincens

Foussal
46140 Luzech
+33-565-305155
www.chateauvincens.fr
Importer: Metrowine Distribution
www.metrowine.com

Clos Triguédina

Les Pujols
46700 Vire-sur-Lot
+33-565-213081
www.jlbaldes.com
Importer: Eagle

Eye Imports
www.eagleeyeimports.com

Clos Troteligotte

Le Cap Blanc
46090 Villesèque
+33-674-819226
www.clostroteligotte.com
Importer: Old World Wines, Inc.
www.oldworldwinesinc.com

Le Bout du Lieu

46140 St. Vincent Rive d'Olt
+33-565-307080
www.domaineleboutdulieu.com
Not yet imported

Mas del Périé

Le Bourg
46090 Trespoux Rassiels
+33-565-301807
Importer: Wine Traditions, Ltd.
Falls Church, Va.



committed to making his vineyard 100% biodynamic; the 2012 vintage will be the first to be produced with 100% organic grapes. Mas del Périé won a silver medal in 2009 at the Paris Concours Général Agricole and became the crowd favorite at the 2010 International Malbec Days in Cahors.

Their fathers may have been content with selling to the locals, but the younger generation wants its wines in American restaurants. In 2009, many Cahors winemakers visited the East Coast on a marketing tour. When Vincens asked a Boston wine retailer where he would display a Cahors Malbec in the store, the owner didn't know whether to place it next to the Argentine Malbec or in the French wine section. In a nutshell, that's the challenge for Cahors today. "We have to find our new consumers and show them what we do," says Vincens. "We are small producers. There's room for everybody in the American system."

It looks like Americans are beginning to take notice of this appellation's youthful vigor and the complexities of its wines—Mas del Périé, Clos Troteligotte, and Château Vincens have all recently landed U.S. importers. Their marketing efforts may already be paying off. 🍷



eventually return to Cahors, but is still inspired from afar by the Cahors youth movement.

The rock star of that movement is 25-year-old Fabien Jouvès, who launched his Mas del Périé in 2004. Jouvès has adopted a Burgundian approach, harvesting and fermenting separate blocks according to their terroir. In 2009, he

Fabien Jouvès, founder of Mas del Périé (top); Le Bout du Lieu vineyards (below) and soil (bottom right).



Photo by Fred Minnick (bottom right)