

## UNDER A SOUTHERN BANNER



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The Languedoc-Rousillon is the world's largest wine producing area, responsible for a third of France's production. It's also a region in trouble. One response has been to replace the Coteaux du Languedoc AOC with an expanded appellation, to simplify things. Another is to try New World syle branding - with a twist.

For all the largesse that comes their way from the EU, many of France's growers, wine makers and co-operatives are in deep trouble, making wine that either nobody wants to drink or, worse, that people are too scared to try, put off by the impenetrable labelling. But many of the French, for their part, see their current system as a vital part of their wine culture that they don't want changed.

So it was nice, at this year's ViniSud in Montpellier, to see the cheery Sud de France banner. Now two years old, Sud de France is an historic initiative, bringing together some 300 of Languedoc Roussillon's Appellation Contrôlée (AOC) wines, plus a wide variety of Vin de Pays and varietal wines, under one banner.

The idea is simple: a producer who joins gets to wrap a branded blue banner around their bottle, which indicates that it's a wine of good quality hailing from the south of France, the world's largest wine area.

### *A way through the maze*

"The French wine system is too complicated and consumers need help," says marketer Louise Herrun, one of the brains behind the new brand. "This is an argument for consumers."

To be part of Sud de France, producers have to submit their wines each year. The sticker can't go across a whole winemaker's range, but only on those wines that reach a certain quality level. Successful producers then get a brand kit, including bottle stickers.

The brand doesn't replace the AOC system, because it's simply a signifier without legal standing, so the wine's label will also carry the traditional information about producer and origin. The beauty of it is that consumers who are bamboozled by French complexity can be reassured by the Sud de France brand, while more sophisticated wine drinkers can still enjoy the classic labelling.

### *Simplifying the proposition*

It's an elegant solution to some very complex problems. The Languedoc-Rousillon is one of the world's most complicated areas, spanning the Mediterranean coast from the Spanish border as far as the Rhône Valley, producing around 16m hectolitres of wine each year. That's a lot of wine looking for a

home: last year exports dropped just over 11% in volume, having fallen nearly 10% the previous year.

But what has made dealing with the problem more difficult is that this is a vast, fragmented area, whose producers are not noted for their coolheaded approach to falling sales: the wine riots of 1907 remain the biggest civil revolt in France in the 20th century, while in more recent times, a terrorist group of wine-makers, who call themselves the Comité Régional d'action Viticole (CRAV), have taken hostages and issued death threats.

Yet the four trade associations of the area - the CIVL, CIVR, Inter Oc and Anivit - are now working together within one structure, Inter Sud de France, with the region contributing €15m in 2008 to help launch consumer marketing campaigns across the UK and Europe. Canada, the US, Russia, Korea and Poland are also on the drawing board.

### *The potential to transform*

"It's a fantastic concept that will help this area to change course and mentality," says Gerard Bertrand, owner of Domaine de L'Hospitalet, one of the regions biggest producers. "It will also permit the younger generation to come and develop the business in the area, because we have a fantastic potential, a beautiful product." Bertrand says that, so far, producers responsible for about 4.5m hectolitres, or more or less 35% of the global volume of the area, are participating in Sud de France.

If the concept works and it convinces more people to join, that can only be a good thing; it's clear that wine countries or regions that present a united front tend to do better than places that are fragmented: think Australia, New Zealand and Austria as standout examples of cooperative industries.

Anecdotal evidence from Sud de France participants suggests there's already been a payoff for uniting with other producers.

"Sud de France enabled us to promote as an area, especially in the UK, with a marketing budget behind," says Katie Jones, wine marketer at Mont Tauch. "We're going in as a group rather than as individuals, which obviously gives us more impact. We're united under one banner, and the coherence shows." ■