

Roussillon RISING

Discovering the power and potential of France's Catalan terroirs

By Robert Camuto
Photographs by Clay McLachlan



The steep, terraced vineyards of Collioure's Domaine La Tour Vieille were built by the Knights Templar in the 12th century.

Fifteen years ago, the Roussillon wine region, on France's Mediterranean flank near Spain, was a backwater. Today, more and more winemakers see Roussillon as France's next big thing. The area boasts *terroirs* that are often compared to those of Priorat, Spain's rising star some 150 miles to the south.

"It's just a question of time," says winemaker Gérard Bertrand, 50, who is part of a wave of newcomers helping to transform this Grenache-rich region of rugged sea and mountain landscapes from a producer of fortified aperitif wines into a bastion of fine dry reds. "There's a rebirth of Roussillon happening now, with modern

winegrowing, modern winemaking, a new way of thinking of about *terroirs* and a will to make high-class wines,” explains Bertrand, a southern France native and leading biodynamic producer from neighboring Languedoc who moved to Roussillon in 2003 with a 20-year deal to manage the local Tautavel cooperative’s grapegrowing, winemaking and marketing under his namesake label.

“Roussillon has more diversity of varietals, old vines and *terroirs* than Priorat,” he adds. “It will take another 10 years to fully develop the image and notoriety here.”

Among the dozens of adventurous outsiders who have arrived are big names such as the Rhône Valley’s Michel Chapoutier and Pierre Gaillard, St.-Emilion’s Jean-Luc Thunevin and California’s Dave Phinney.

They’ve come for the things that define Roussillon: a hot, dry

climate; abundant old Grenache vineyards; naturally low yields; varied, hilly *terroirs* dominated by rugged schist-based soils; and fierce northern tramontane winds.

“Roussillon is the most undervalued, underappreciated, under-recognized place I have ever made wine,” says Phinney, 42, founder of Napa’s Orin Swift Cellars. The globetrotting winemaker launched his Department 66 winery here in 2009. “In Napa we would kill to have those kind of soils. You can’t replicate those kinds of vineyards in the U.S. or anywhere else.”

For a time, however, it looked like those vineyards were endangered. The region was long known as a producer of sweet *vins doux naturels*—fortified, Port-like aperitif and dessert wines aged in wine barrels or glass demijohns left to bake in the sun. Then, in the 1990s, the market for such wines crashed, and crisis loomed.

Many growers abandoned or sold their old, difficult-to-cultivate vineyards. Some vineyards—particularly in the 800-year-old coastal terraces of Collioure and at the heights of the Agly Valley—are too steep and unevenly planted for tractors and require a daunting amount of hand labor. Yields throughout the region’s hills are generally modest, with production levels considerably below annual averages for Bordeaux’s Médoc and AOCs elsewhere in France.

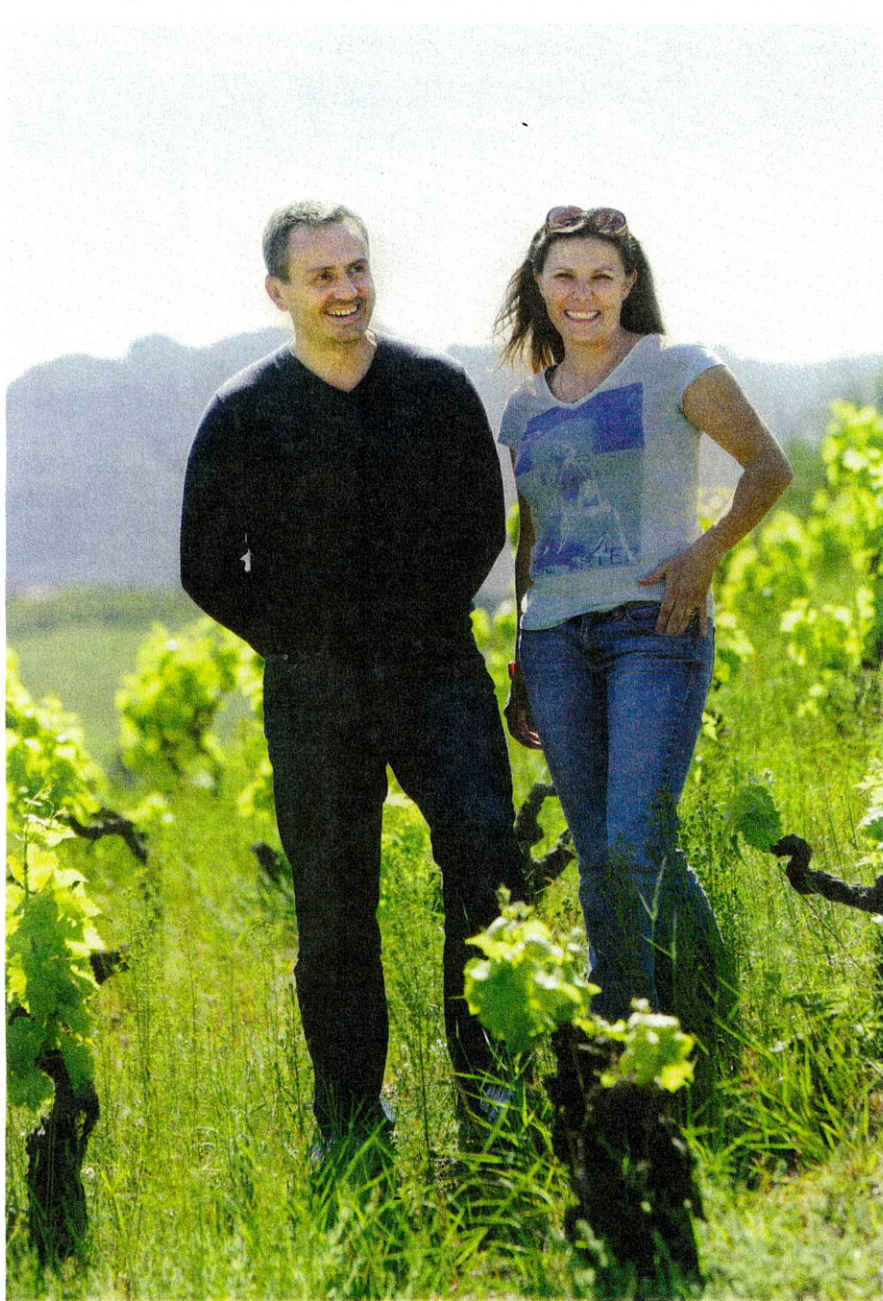
Roussillon’s best vineyards have been saved by a shift toward dry wines, not to mention the influx of new vineyard buyers who value high quality wines. “When you make fortified wines, you can be lazy,” says Bertrand. “When you make dry red wines, you have to reach for the sky.”

Roussillon’s dry reds are typically blends of Grenache with Carignan, Syrah or Mourvèdre. The harvest season stretches more than two months, from mid-August through October, giving winemakers flexibility in terms of ripeness levels in their wines.

“We always have sugar ripeness, so everyone gets to decide when to harvest,” says Hervé Bizeul, 55, a former Parisian wine journalist and sommelier who came to Roussillon in the 1990s and stayed to create Domaine du Clos des Fées, in the limestone hills around Vingrau. “In Bordeaux, they have less choice—they have to harvest when the grapes are ripe and before the rain.”

In its new life, Roussillon is a work in progress. “Roussillon is wild and in the middle of finding its new identity,” Bizeul notes. “It’s like a modern art museum. You can find everything.”

Dry wines generally fit into one of three appellations: Côtes du Roussillon-Villages in the Agly Valley, which takes in Maury and the north of the region; Côtes du Roussillon to the south and west; and Collioure on the southeastern coastal strip bordering Spain. But many quality-driven winemakers seeking a freer hand in their blends opt for the region-wide designation of Côtes Catalanes.



John-Roger and Marie Calvet at Domaine Thunevin-Calvet in Maury. John-Roger, a member of the appellation’s wine cooperative board, was a major proponent of the region’s shift from fortified *vins doux naturels* to dry reds.

Navigating Roussillon requires some study of producers and soils. What follows are profiles of three of the most notable *terroirs* and some of the winemakers who have brought them to bottle.

Maury and the Agly Valley

Maury is nestled in the hills of the Agly Valley, below the first soaring ridge of the Corbières. The dark schist-based vineyards that climb more than 800 feet, coupled with summer temperatures that are among the hottest in Roussillon, make some of the biggest of the region's big Grenache wines.

Until recently, Maury vineyards were used nearly exclusively to produce Roussillon's darkest, densest fortified *vins doux naturels*, also called Maury. But by the late 1990s, Jean-Roger Calvet, a local wine cooperative board member, had become an advocate for a shift to dry wines.

"I saw that in other regions, like the Priorat and Châteauneuf-du-Pape, they had the same varietals and had global success," says Calvet, 44.

Calvet, whose family traces its history in Maury farming and viticulture to the 18th century, and his wife, Marie, began to experiment with their own winemaking outside the cooperative and eventually sought an investor. They found that partner in Jean-Luc Thunevin, the St.-Emilion-based renegade winemaker and négociant, who joined them in 2001 to form Domaine Thunevin-Calvet.

"At first I was trying to make big, bodybuilder-style wines," says Calvet of his early efforts, which used overripe fruit for results that typically topped 17 percent alcohol. "The wines were good, but they were too heavy. So we decided to make something more elegant, with more drinkability and balance."

Since 2008, the Calvets have tamed the power and heft of their wines by harvesting slightly earlier and using shorter macerations, less extraction and larger barrels for aging. As they have grown to farm



Above: Domaine de la Pertuisane was founded in a rented garage by Brits Richard and Sarah Case after they fell in love with the region on their honeymoon in 2002. Below: Case (right) and Napa's Dave Phinney, who founded his Department 66 winery in 2009.



nearly 150 acres, they have also taken on a higher percentage of cooler vineyards.

"We looked for zones where we could slow maturities," says Calvet, standing in a young vineyard on the north-facing lower slopes to the east of Maury in Estagel. "Here the soils retain less heat."

The Calvets and other Maury winemakers balance their wines by using fruit from vineyards to the west, in neighboring St.-Paul-de-Fenouillet, where a microclimate from the Galamus gorges brings more rainfall and cooling winds.

In 2002, British newlyweds Richard and Sarah Case visited Maury on their wine-and-backpacking honeymoon and never left. The Cases worked as cellar hands in the Languedoc and were on their way to Spain when they stopped in the Agly Valley and tasted the Calvet wines.

"We said, 'What are we going to Spain for?'" recalls Richard Case, 41. "We've got crazy old vines of Grenache here with amazing soils and massive potential."

The Calvets helped the Cases find 4.5 acres of pre-1950s vineyards, which they used to launch their own Domaine de la Pertuisane in a rented garage. "Our idea was to come here and be among the first to say, 'Let's make wine as if these were the finest vineyards of Napa Valley or Côte-Rôtie,'" says Case.

Then, in 2008, Phinney arrived and took the scene to another level. Introduced to Case by a California distributor, Phinney took one trip to Maury and went on a spree—buying old, low-yield

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Grenache vineyards that locals were eager to unload. Within a year, starting with about 30 acres, Phinney built a sleek, modern winery with a schist facade and hired Case as his winemaker and manager.

Phinney is the last to finish harvesting, in late October, and his wines remain the ripest among local offerings. The bulk of the fruit from his approximately 300 acres of vineyards goes into his D66 red, a blend of Grenache and Carignan, with about 10 percent Syrah grown on granitic hills just over the ridge to the south of Maury; production totaled 8,500 cases in the 2013 vintage.

"I used to hate the word *terroir*—I thought it was some bullshit the French made up," says Phinney, who had a revelatory moment when tasting Maury wines: He noticed the same mineral notes in all of them. "It clicked, and I said, 'That's it. That's what they are talking about.'"

Banyuls and Collioure

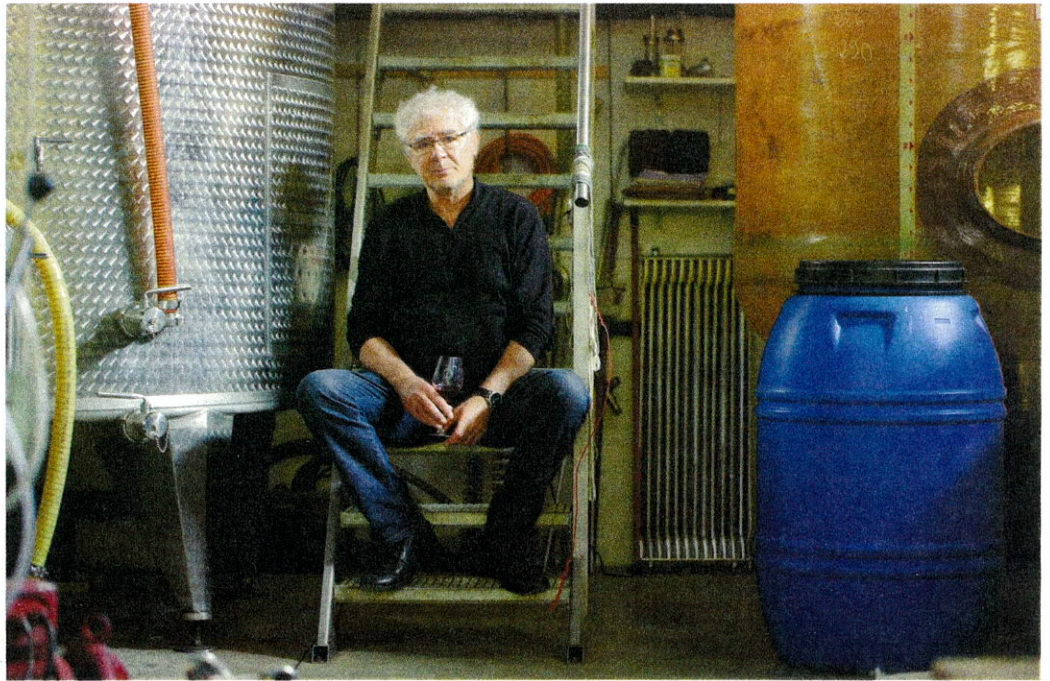
We are like a vestige from another time," says Vincent Cantié, 62, an agricultural engineer who returned to his coastal hometown in Collioure to found Domaine La Tour Vieille in 1982. "Today, agriculture with no mechanization is archaic."

The brown schist vineyards of Roussillon's coast start near the Spanish border, climbing steep, terraced seaside slopes and spreading along the inland valleys of the Albères mountains. Built by Knights Templar in the 12th century, the terraces are so narrow and irregular that tractor plowing is impossible.

Today about 30 independent producers and growers for three wine cooperatives work nearly 3,000 acres—mostly by hand and sometimes with mules. Sweet fortified wines classified as Banyuls and dry red and white wines classified as Collioure are made from the same vineyards, stretching over four coastal fishing villages: Collioure, Port-Vendres, Banyuls-sur-Mer and Cerbère.

The harshness of the *terroirs* can be seen everywhere. In late 2014, many of the vineyard roads and some terraces were eroded by flooding: Though the area generally gets less than 24 inches of rain annually, most of it falls in autumn torrents. In the vineyards, craggy, wind-sculpted Grenache vines expose roots that have grown along the schist surface in search of cracks to enter the bedrock.

"This is a region of excess," Cantié explains, standing in an



Vincent Cantié, of Domaine La Tour Vieille, advocates for a return to traditional wine production methods in Collioure. His bottlings, sourced from 40 acres of vines, include reds made from Grenache, Syrah and Mourvèdre, as well as a full-bodied white blend.

inland vineyard on the hilltop of Puig Auriol as it is whipped by a more than 80-mile-per-hour tramontane wind. "When it blows here, it blows."

Wines here tend to be less dense than their Agly counterparts, thanks to cooling summer sea breezes. They also tend to use higher percentages of varieties other than Grenache.

Cantié, for example, who farms about 40 acres to produce about 5,000 cases, offers three dry red Collioure blends, none of which sees barrel aging. One is dominated by Grenache; the other two are mainly Syrah and Mourvèdre, respectively. His full-bodied white Les Canadells is a blend of Grenache Blanc, Grenache Gris, Macabeu, Roussanne and Vermentino, barrel-fermented on lees.

About 5 miles south, in Banyuls, another leader for quality is Domaine de la Rectorie, founded by Thierry Parcé, 56, who returned here to his hometown after studying computer science in Paris in the early 1980s.

Today Parcé and son Jean-Emmanuel, 32, produce about 7,000 cases of wine from just under 75 acres scattered over 30 parcels—about a third of which are on lower slopes worked with mule and plow. Most of the harvest goes into dry reds, dominated by Grenache and followed by Carignan, Syrah, Mourvèdre and Cunoise. In general, the ripest grapes from the hottest parcels go into La Rectorie's line of Banyuls, and the more balanced grapes make up the dry reds and whites. Since 2010 the Parcés have scaled down their extraction techniques in the winery in search of leaner wines. Among the first to vinify dry white wine here, beginning in the 1990s, Parcé also makes one blend of barrel-fermented Grenache Gris and Grenache Blanc.

One of La Rectorie's most prized vineyards is about 2.5 acres of

*"I used to hate the word *terroir*—I thought it was some bullshit the French made up. [Then] it clicked, and I said, 'That's it.'"*—Daye Phinney

1940s-era Grenache and Carignan nestling at nearly 1,500 feet of elevation below the crest of a hillside known as La Barlande. Its southeastern exposure protects vines from the afternoon sun and the relatively thick, 18-inch topsoils create a cooling effect. In recent years the Parcés have debuted a single-vineyard wine called Barlande, bottled only in magnum.

"It's cooler here than by the sea," says Jean-Emmanuel, looking east toward the Mediterranean from the top of the vineyard. "Here we can make a wine with a good amount of finesse."

Calce

Standing in front of an exposed wall of bedrock in his underground cellar, Gérard Gauby gives a visitor a geology lesson. One end of the wall is hard, silvery schist. The other end, just a few paces away, is soft, lime-rich marl.

The affable Gauby, 55, explains how the formation of the Pyrénées some 60 million years ago created vertical bands of schist, limestone and marl abutting one another. This complex geology is reflected in the Domaine Gauby vineyards on the gentle slopes around the village of Calce (population 230), above Perpignan and the Roussillon plain.

The organically farmed vineyards are planted on a tapestry of soils, from deep red iron-rich clay limestone to brown schist to gray marls, scattered over more than 100 acres. "On some parcels we have three *terroirs*—it's crazy complicated," says Gérard's son Lionel, 32, who took over winemaking at the estate in 2008.

"I don't like to intellectualize too much about *terroir*," says Lionel, a taller, leaner version of his father, as he drives a dusty four-wheel-drive vehicle along the dirt trails that cross vineyards and family-owned forestlands. "We like Grenache on schist, we like Grenache on limestone, but we feel that marl soils bring lots of depth that makes wines that are very, very long."

The son of a French rugby star, Gérard Gauby came to the family farm in the 1980s, and beginning with about 7 acres of vines he began bottling Domaine Gauby wines in 1990. At first he produced ripe, chest-thumping reds. But after a decade, he observed that the wines didn't stand up to cellaring, growing flat or flabby. "With time, they pleased me less and less," he says.

The domaine radically changed course in 2000, and has since

sought to produce some of Roussillon's most surprisingly light and complex wines, with some of the lowest alcohol levels. "It's like the Pinot of the south," Gérard says, holding up a glass of ruby-hued Grenache from a large oak cask. "We don't look for concentration, we look for finesse."

"Everything they say to do in the north, we do the opposite," Gérard laughs. "In the north they say smaller berries make better wine. We say bigger berries make better wine."

The Gaubys have worked toward their goal by favoring cooler eastern slopes that face the sea, about 15 miles away; planting in water-retaining marls; enriching soils with compost to stimulate root growth; harvesting earlier; and replanting some of their oldest vineyards.

The conditions and ages of many of the domaine's older vineyards make for irregular production, varying from about 50,000 to 100,000 bottles per year, divided among three red blends (from Grenache, Carignan, Mourvèdre and Syrah) and three whites (from Grenache Gris, Grenache Blanc, Macabeu, Muscat and Chardonnay).

In the past 15 years, the Gaubys have attracted a handful of apprentices who have come to tiny Calce from other parts of France as well as Germany and South Africa—and stayed, creating their own organic estates in what is known here as "the Calce school."

Their brand of farming is an intensive style of Mediterranean organics developed on-site. Vineyards are sprayed with a mix of 30 plant-based teas to encourage root development and soil life. For several years, they followed a biodynamic regime but have since rejected it as too formulaic.

"Rudolf Steiner was from Austria," Lionel says of the biodynamics founder. "He didn't know the tramontane and the dust we have. He would have done things differently if he were Catalan." □



Domaine Gauby's Lionel (left) and Gérard Gauby farm a diverse range of soils around the village of Calce, employing organic methods derived from biodynamics and modified to suit Roussillon's *terroir*. The Gaubys, once enamored of big, ripe reds, now favor more elegant, low-alcohol wines.

Recommended Wines From Roussillon

A free alphabetical list is available at www.winespectator.com/113015. WineSpectator.com members can access complete reviews for all wines tasted using the online Wine Ratings search.

| WINE | SCORE | PRICE | WINE | SCORE | PRICE |
|--|-------|---------------|--|-------|---------------|
| GÉRARD BERTRAND Grenache-Syrah-Carignan Côtes du Roussillon-Villages Tautavel Grand Terroir 2013 This has a polished texture, with concentrated flavors of cherry tart, ganache and blackberry preserves. Fresh acidity keeps this focused, with a lingering floral-, graphite- and licorice-infused finish. | 91 | \$20 | LES VIGNERONS DE TAUTAVEL VINGRAU Maury Sec Domaine Cabirau Serge & Nicolas 2013 A fresh, savory undertone marks the red berry, dried herb and grilled plum flavors in this full-bodied red. Crisp acidity drives the finish. | 89 | \$28 |
| MAS DELMAS Côtes du Roussillon-Villages M del Mas 2012 Muscular yet smooth, with plum sauce, mocha and licorice aromas. Balsamic acidity and chewy tannins provide structure through the paprika- and black olive-laced finish. | 91 | \$43 | GÉRARD BERTRAND Syrah-Mourvèdre-Grenache Côtes du Roussillon-Villages Les Aspres Grand Terroir 2013 Plush, with fine-grained tannins, this boasts notes of black cherry and blackberry preserves, with cocoa powder and sweet spice accents. | 88 | \$20 |
| MAS DELMAS Côtes du Roussillon-Villages Pad del Mas 2010 A muscular red, with concentrated flavors of roast plum, dried raspberry and black olive that are well-structured. Shows lots of bitter-sweet chocolate notes as well. The finish is well-spiced and creamy. | 91 | \$76 | M. CHAPOUTIER Côtes du Roussillon White Les Vignes de Bila-Haut 2014 This white has a pretty profile of floral, peach and creamed melon flavors, with underlying spice and mineral elements. Nicely textured. | 88 | \$14 |
| HECHT & BANNIER Côtes du Roussillon-Villages 2011 A rich and extracted style, with luscious dark fruit, blackberry and tar flavors that are well-structured. Features hints of licorice snap midpalate, leading to a long finish of dark chocolate and cream. | 91 | \$25 | M. CHAPOUTIER Côtes du Roussillon-Villages Domaine de Bila-Haut L'Esquerda 2013 Juicy, with fine-grained tannins, this red has layers of raspberry, dried cherry and exotic spice flavors. Fresh minerality midpalate. | 88 | \$26 |
| DOMAINE LA TOUR VIEILLE Collioure La Pinède 2012 Concentrated raspberry and red plum flavors are matched with notes of hot stone and cream in this muscular red. Intense spiciness midpalate lingers with sandalwood and paprika accents on the finish. | 91 | \$25 | LES CLOS DE PAULILLES Banyuls Rimage 2011 This mouthcoating style has ripe blackberry, plum and fig flavors. Delivers mineral and briar notes on the finish. | 88 | \$18 375ml |
| MAS DELMAS Côtes du Roussillon-Villages Marie Delmas 2013 A suave red, with lush favors of dark currant, boysenberry and all-spice, carried on a lithe frame. Minerally midpalate, offering dark chocolate and white pepper notes on the finish. | 90 | \$26 | DOMAINE DE L'EDRE Côtes du Roussillon-Villages Carrément 2012 A plush red, with supple flavors of plum, blackberry, olive and cocoa powder. Mineral and sweet spice accents emerge on the finish. | 88 | \$35 |
| BERNARD MAGREZ Collioure L'Excellence de Mon Terroir 2011 A sinewy red, with plenty of notes of dried meat to the dark plum, dried blackberry and graphite flavors. Firm acidity midpalate, presenting a powerful finish of cocoa powder and spice. | 90 | \$30 | HENRIQUÈS Côtes du Roussillon-Villages Força Premium 2013 White pepper and green olive notes mark this medium-bodied red. Offers firm, integrated tannins and a floral, spiced finish. | 88 | \$20 |
| BERNARD MAGREZ Côtes du Roussillon Si Mon Père Savait... 2012 A rich red, offering a fine texture and flavors of raspberry tart, orange pekoe tea and dark chocolate that blend together effortlessly. Nectarine notes come alive midpalate, with a juicy finish. | 90 | \$24 | HENRIQUÈS Côtes du Roussillon-Villages La Linéa 2013 Fresh, with ripe black cherry and blackberry flavors, supported by medium-grained tannins. Spicy, loamy finish. | 88 | \$17 |
| DOMAINE LA TOUR VIEILLE Banyuls Rimage 2011 Rich and robust, this is filled with off-dry flavors of coffee, plum tart, cream and coconut. A note of chocolate-covered cherry lingers on the ripe finish. | 90 | \$24 | LES DOMAINES AURIOL Côtes du Roussillon Domaine Mirabau 2013 A savory red, with bright flavors of red berry and spicy cherry, accented by plenty of black olive notes. Peppery finish. Syrah and Grenache. | 87 | \$15 |
| CAVE DE L'ABBE ROUS Banyuls Helyos 2003 A solid, fresh backbone of acidity lifts the brown sugar, prune and coffee flavors in this sweetie. Lingering finish. | 89 | \$60 | DOMAINE DU VIEUX CHÈNE Côtes Catalanes Rosé 2014 Features red plum and berry flavors, with some meaty notes. The finish is filled with pastry details. Syrah, Cabernet Sauvignon and Caladoc. | 87 | \$12 |
| DEPARTMENT 66 Côtes Catalanes D66 2013 A smooth, full-bodied red, this is layered with notes of blackberry preserves, mocha and grilled plum. Smoky and floral finish. | 89 | \$38 | MAS AMIEL Côtes du Roussillon Rosé Le Plaisir 2014 Fresh, with creamed melon, grapefruit peel and white cherry flavors, this rosé has a clean minerality. Herb accents add appeal through the finish. | 87 | \$19 |
| BERNARD MAGREZ Vin de Pays des Côtes Catalanes Passion Blanche 2011 A rich and high-toned white, with notes of almond and lanolin to the dried pear, mango and apple tart flavors. The buttery finish lingers. | 89 | \$30 | HENRIQUÈS Grenache-Syrah Côtes du Roussillon NY 2013 Taut and mineral-driven, this red features fresh acidity, with savory herb and spice notes surrounding the dark fruit flavors. Crisp, clean finish. | 86 | \$10 |
| DOMAINE DU VIEUX CHÈNE Côtes Catalanes Red 2014 A crisp, litting style, with plenty of fruity essence, offering raspberry and cherry flavors that are focused and well-balanced. | 89 | \$12 500ml | DOMAINE VAQUER Côtes du Roussillon Rosé L'Ephémère 2014 Juicy, with a plump core of cherry, plum and red berry flavors. Floral and sweet spice notes round out the lingering finish. | 86 | \$22 |
| | | | LES VIGNERONS DE TAUTAVEL VINGRAU Côtes du Roussillon Domaine Cabirau 2013 A juicy red, packed with crushed plum and blackberry flavors. Sweet spice and gumdrop notes add appeal through the fruity finish. | 86 | \$18 |