

Languedoc – the buzzword is garrigue

by Tamlyn Currin

Garrigue shapes the landscape

The Languedoc isn't shaped only by soils, geology, climate, politics, history and culture – it's also shaped by garrigue. The plants are woven into folklore, music and literature. The herbs have shaped the cuisine and produce, from cheese to honey to meat to tisanes and medicines. The plants have built, held and structured the soil, while also shaping micro- and macroclimate systems and hydrological cycles. Garrigue knits the vast vineyards of the Languedoc together, from the Gard to the Hérault to the Aude.



As I walked in vineyards from the wide, sunny spaces of Côtes de Thongue to the cool, mountainous Limoux, from vineyards tucked up in the foothills of the Montagne Noir to vineyards with their toes practically in the Mediterranean Sea, I began to see that garrigue is Languedoc's dot-to-dot. I began to see a picture emerging. Perhaps, to some, garrigue is merely an unfashionable tasting note (I clearly write unfashionable tasting notes). But I realised just how important, and how complex, garrigue is. And it may prove to be even more important in the future.

Garrigue anchors soil, builds soil, cools soil, holds water. In heatwaves, it is drought-tolerant garrigue that digs deep, brings water up to the surface for vines, breaks the back of hot winds, provides shade, creates small clusters of evapotranspiration clouds for wilting vines. In stony vineyards of low fertility, it may well be the oaks drawing up nutrients and the mycorrhizal networks they foster that make those nutrient available to the vines. Garrigue ecosystems drop deep roots through tiny splits in bedrock, developing drainage systems and creating the threads through which rainfall feeds aquifers. Garrigue is home to a vibrant ecosystem of biodiversity, providing the free services of natural pest-management systems. We now know that the underground systems of well-established forests are high-communication networks of energy, nutrients and chemical signals – it is most certainly not a step too far to assume that old-vine vineyards, nested into forests of garrigue, survive and thrive thanks to the deep and complex networks they are a part of and connected to. And the producers in the Languedoc who are protecting the garrigue, even giving over vineyard land to garrigue, may well be the producers who are protecting the future of wine production in the Languedoc.

Domaine de Cabrol

It was in Cabardès, however, at Domaine Cabrol, that I really felt and saw the tension and relationship between garrigue and vineyard. I climbed into the battered 4x4 of Nicolas Carayol, and we rattled along erosion-fissured dirt tracks at close-your-eyes speed, low-hanging branches and prickly thickets of kermes oaks snatching and scratching at the windscreen and paintwork. Every vineyard we stopped at seemed to be clinging to a ribbon of a terrace on a very steep hill. Every vineyard was surrounded by garrigue so thick, dense and pervasive that it felt as if it might close over the road in our wake, so redolent that I felt like I could draw shapes in the air with the scent.

Just one of Domaine de Cabrol's vineyards in the foothills of the Montagne Noire, completely surrounded and almost hidden by dense garrigue forests



Carayol talked about how the forests throw shade, act as windbreaks, cool the vineyards and their soils in a heatwave, hold the rain during a downpour. But he also showed me how the skinniest vines were the ones closest to the trees. The relationship between garrigue and vine is not a simple one. It is, let's face it, the relationship between man and nature – a tightrope, simultaneously both potentially good and potentially disastrous.

Dom de Cabrol, Pique de Nore 2024 Vin de France

17/20

From the domaine's Le Sentier vineyard at 300 m in Cabardès. Grenache Blanc, Manseng, Chenin. The Pic de Nore is the highest peak of the Montagne Noire, the mountains which have such a significant impact on the wines of this region. The first vintage of this wine was 2021. Certified sustainable (HVE).

The flavours that tumble out of this wine really do seem to sing of the vineyard it comes from. Honey, quince, gorse flowers, touch of almond and almond blossom. Clementine. Little stoniness under the ripples of fruit. Little brush of thyme. Fabulous, thrumming persistence and presence. (TC)

Alcohol: 14%

Drink: 2025 – 2032

Dom de Cabrol, Réquieu 2023 Cabardès

17/20

Bottled three weeks before tasting. 50% Syrah, 40% Cabernet Sauvignon, 10% Grenache. Carbonic for Syrah. Certified sustainable (HVE).

Lush nose. Sherbet acidity, really dark, a line of cassis, tapenade. Starts rich and then tightens up, deep dark fissures of savouriness. Blackcurrants and elderberries. Really intense acidity and the tannins feel embroidered into the fruit, forming a helical spiral of texture around the wine. Fabulous texture. Violets and iris on the finish. Throat-warming but a long cool spine. Touch of dark menthol. Cabardès has really been a bit of a revelation for me on this trip - these wines are so delicious. (TC)

Alcohol: 14%

Drink: 2026 – 2033

Dom de Cabrol, Blue Note 2022 Vin de France

17/20

Syrah and Grenache from Cabrol's Cabardès vineyards, roughly 50/50 blend. Young Syrah vines. Grenache 'picked not too late'. Hot dry summer. The cuvée name is because Nicolas Carayol's father (Claude, who was a leading light in Cabardès) was a jazz fan, and the artwork is inspired by the 'blue series' of artist Pierre Soulages. Certified sustainable (HVE).

Beautiful dark-cherry and wild-berry nose. Dense tannins, spicy and aromatic and pine needles. Lingonberry fruit. Drawing density and matrix. And fragrant - you can surely taste the garrigue. Sharp and intense and concentrated but energetic and fresh. The tannins have sinew but lots of flow. Rippling finish. (TC)

Alcohol: 13.5%

Drink: 2025 – 2032

Dom de Cabrol, Red Notes 2021 Vin de France

17.5/20

50% of the juice comes from an old, complanted vineyard containing Aragon, Cinsault and Carignan, the other 50% is young Syrah with a bit of Cabernet Sauvignon. Vineyards in the Cabardès appellation. The red artwork on the label is inspired by Mark Rothko's paintings. Certified sustainable (HVE).

This is so vibrant. Like a needle dropped on a vinyl record, it crackles and then explodes into music. So much energy. Crunchy tannins, a touch of kalamata olive and orange peel and damson. Rugged tannins but like the Blue Note cuvée, they have flow. Black-pepper finish leaving the linger of slightly bitter papaya seeds. Intriguing. (TC)

Alcohol: 13.5%

Drink: 2025 – 2032

Dom de Cabrol, Vent d'Est 2021 Cabardès

17.5/20

Blend of old-vine Syrah and Cabernet Franc. Certified sustainable (HVE).

So much rounder on the nose and on the palate than the Cabernet-dominated Vent d'Ouest, but also more savoury, in a charcuterie and leather vein. Masses of sumptuous but fresh red fruit and dark fruit. Briary and brambly in structure and tannins. Lovely dense graininess to fruit and tannins. Long. (TC)

Alcohol: 14%

Drink: 2025 – 2035

Dom de Cabrol, Vent d'Est 2003 Cabardès

16/20

This wine was made by Nicolas Carayol's father, Claude.

Smells like chocolate! Deep umami notes, deep-timbre flavours of mahogany, prunes, tamarind. But there is also still surprising brightness in little up-flecks of orange peel, dried cherries and raspberries. Another wine proving that wines from humble appellations in the Languedoc, made in simple cellars, have tremendous capacity to age. (TC)

Alcohol: 13.5%

Drink: 2005 – 2025

Dom de Cabrol, La Dérive 2020 Cabardès

17/20

50% Syrah, 50% Cabernet Sauvignon, co-maceration, co-fermentation. They destem the Cabernet and put the grapes on top of full bunches of Syrah, close the tank up and leave it alone for two to four weeks. Certified sustainable (HVE).

So juicy! Lovely juice and lovely minerality, long wavy lines of chewy tannins. Black cherries and damsons and then loads and loads of black and pink and white pepper. Roses. Those tannins really are plucky, but it's so juicy that it doesn't matter. Unusual winemaking, but it does seem to meld these two very different varieties together and bring out something totally different in the finished wine. It doesn't taste like Syrah plus Cabernet. (TC)

Alcohol: 14%

Drink: 2025 – 2035

Dom de Cabrol, Vent d'Ouest 2019 Cabardès

16.5/20

So named because the blend puts more emphasis on the west side of the appellation, ie dominated by Cabernet Sauvignon, but blended with Grenache. No oak and the wine spends four to five years in concrete tanks not bottles. Certified sustainable (HVE).

Incredibly aromatic, wild bullace plums, olive, tapenade. Very strong, straight-up-and-down tannins. Long and strong. Dark, dark fruit. Interesting layers of bitterness, layers and layers. Concentrated but not at all hefty.

Sartorial. (TC)

Alcohol: 14%

Drink: 2025 – 2035