

WINE

Wine has been produced in Languedoc for more than 2000 years. The Greeks, and later the Romans, established colonies to produce wine and olives.

In later times the area produced high volumes of weaker wine to blend with the strong wine imported from the North African colonies. During the 1960's the vines were replanted with the high volume, stronger, but undistinguished Carignan grapes.

With the worldwide excess production of wine the Languedoc area has been actively replanting with varieties which produce quality wines. Today, increasingly, Grenache, Syrah, Merlot, Cinsaut, Mourvedre, Sauvignon and Viognier are used for wine making. Languedoc has become a highly respected producer of quality wines, and many domains now produce wines that command high prices. The "appellation" Wines of the Languedoc covers 120,000 acres of vines on the slopes and garrigues of Languedoc producing red, rose and white wine. Four departments of the Languedoc-Roussillon, Gard, Herault, Aude and Pyrenees Orientales share the biggest French vineyards. Between them they produce 40% of the French production, with 18% in AOC and 70% in Vins de Pays.

The Languedoc covers roughly the region between the Rhône and the Aude River, extending northwards to the Cévennes and the Massif Central. The name derives from Occitan (French: langue d'oc), the language spoken in the region before French became the general usage language. Languedoc has been settled by the Greeks, Phoenicians and Romans, and invaded by the Alamanni, Vandals, Visigoths, and Saracens. Some parts of Languedoc have been part of the dominions of the kings of Aragon and the kings of Majorca; it did not come under French control until the 16th century.

Languedoc has a long and diverse history. As part of the Mediterranean basin, it has been influenced by the various civilisations in the region. This has resulted in rich and varied architecture. This region was one of the earliest to be inhabited by humans and, located between the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean, was an extremely important trade route and passage.

The Roman history of Languedoc-Roussillon is long and has left some spectacular traces. The names of towns, the Catalan language, the region's heady wines and olive-oil dishes all testify to the lasting influence of 400 years of occupation. It is also where the Romanesque art emerged in the early 11th century in its most impressive way ranging from little churches to large, important Cistercian abbeys. This is also a region where the "Cathars", named after the Greek "katharos" or "pure", fought the Catholic church of the time in the 13th century; it took many decades to exterminate this movement whose followers believed the visible world to be the work of the devil. Nowadays, many impressive fortresses perched on dizzying heights and the ancient villages still bear witness to a lost religion. The population of the Mediterranean sea arrived on the coast in the VI century BC. They introduced the culture of the vineyards and the olive production. They created very rapidly some agreements with the local population inside the country. The Phoenicians founded Collioure and Agde. Originally from Minor Asia, the Greeks of Phocée founded Massilia (Marseille). The Massaliotes (inhabitant of Marseille) took the control of Agde and allowed it to be a great commercial trade center between the Mediterranean and Northern Europe.

In 123 BC was the conquest of the region by the Romans. Narbonne in 118 BC, then Beziers. In 27 BC, was created the Narbonnaise, a province that would correspond to Languedoc.

The city of Carcassonne was the site of a Roman town until the invasion of the Visigoths in the 5th century. In the 8th century it came to a Franks tribe. During the 13th century crusade against the inhabitants of Albi, Carcassonne was captured and its inhabitants were killed by the Anglo-Norman soldier Simon de Montfort. In 1247, Carcassonne came under the French crown.

Perpignan

The economic and cultural capital of Roussillon, this is a Catalan city. You'll notice the strong influence of Barcelona, capital of the "new" Catalonia. With its architectural refinement of its cathedral, royal palace, its convents and monasteries, the town houses, ramparts and fortifications, similar with the Barri Gothic of Barcelona, Perpignan is one of the capitals of Gothic art in the Mediterranean.

Collioure

A lovely resort in a bay by the Mediterranean Sea. Many artists such as Matisse have painted the picturesque landscape of this Catalan port. The town was restored to France in 1659, after being annexed to the kingdoms of Aragon and Majorca.

This is a fishing village and a few small anchovy processing facilities still exist. At the Societe Roque, you can purchase some of these salty delicacies!

The canal du Midi: opened in 1681, the 204 km Canal du Midi is a superb engineering challenge and the oldest functioning canal in Europe. Designed by Pierre-Paul Riquet, the canal links Toulouse to the Mediterranean sea. During 15 years, from 1666 to 1681, 12 000 workers dug up with shovels this long trench. However, it wasn't long before Louis XVI ran out of money to finance this great project. Pierre-Paul Riquet give it his personal fortune and then that of his wife. Riquet, exhausted and sick, retired in his home and died some weeks later without having seen his life's master-piece achieved. The Canal du Midi contains many original features that renders it quite unique in France's abundant heritage. The Canal du Midi was classified as a World Heritage site by UNESCO in December 1996.

- BC 450,000 Tautavel man lived adjacent to Languedoc in Rousillon. Traces of prehistory have been found in Languedoc
- BC 7500 - 1500 The remains of buildings, tombs and artifacts indicate the development of modern civilisation
- BC 800 Believed Etruscan settlements
- BC 600 - 50 Establishment of Greek colonies
- BC 560 Establishment of Phoenician settlements
- BC 60 Commencement of Roman occupation
- AD 300 - 500 Invasion by Alamans, Vandals and Visigoths
- AD 476 Collapse of the Roman empire
- AD 700 Occupation by the saracens
- AD 865 Formation of Catalonia
- AD 900 - 1300 Intermittent war resulting in changes of ruler. Elimination of the Cathares
- AD 1276 Much of present Languedoc was under the rule of the king of Majorca
- AD 1500 After a long period of war and famine the French establish control of the region
- AD 1559 Protestant v Catholic wars ended by Edict of Nantes granting freedom of worship
- AD 1666 Canal du Midi started
- AD 1875 Phylloxera attacks the vines
- AD 1962 Repatriation of North African colonists to Languedoc

Geography

The Rhone delta influences both the Camargue and the majority of the Languedoc coastline. The coastal plain is low, flat and sandy with a number of lagoons. Only at Sete and Cap d'Agde do the mountains extend to the coast and produce cliffs. This is in contrast to Provence and cote d'Azur where the mountains descend to the sea. Further North, Languedoc extends to the Cevennes, and lower Massif Central. The highest point in Languedoc is Mt Lozere at 1669m (5480 feet). The soil and weather define agricultural production.

The building of the irrigation Canal Philippe Lamour in the 1950's changed the possibilities and landscape. The canal originates at the mouth of the River Rhone and extends along the Languedoc coastal plain, with branches to the valleys. The latest plans are to extend it to Barcelona.

Languedoc-Roussillon region is composed of 5 departments: Lozere, Gard, Herault, Aude, and Pyrenees Orientales. This region is very diversified: farmlands, countryside, vineyards, the beaches of the Cote du Languedoc (214 km) and important cities such as Montpellier, Narbonne, Perpignan, Beziers and Carcassonne.

2 500 years ago, the olive trees were brought by the Greeks. The olive trees of Languedoc grow dry little black olives or juicy big green olives. Olives and olive oil are on all outdoor markets. This region consume 50 000 tonnes of olive oil per year!

Agriculture

Languedoc is the largest wine producer in France. Other major crops are olives, rice, fruit and lavender, with significant market gardening activity. Sheep and goats are reared in the mountainous areas, mainly for cheese production. The coastal lagoon of Lake Thau produces large quantities of shellfish, particularly oysters and mussels. Fishing, both inshore and further afield, is a significant industry along the coast. The largest centre is Sete.

WEATHER

The coastline, sheltered by mountains, provides a varied climate. The coastal plains are typically Mediterranean, rarely freezing in winter, and enjoying average high summer temperatures of nearly 30 C (86F). Further inland, the maritime influence is less, and temperatures are a few degrees cooler in winter and warmer in summer. Nimes is reputed to be the hottest place in France, and recorded a shade temperature of 43C (110F) in 2001. 2003 was a hot summer with many windless days exceeding 40C. Mountain areas have higher rainfall, temperatures depend on altitude. In most of Languedoc, a nice winter day can be as warm as 20C (70F).

Rainfall is medium at around 700 mm (28 in) per year on the plain, more in the mountains. Summers are exceptionally dry with occasional, but often very heavy, rainfall in the autumn months. In September 2002 680mm (27 in) of rainfall was recorded in 48 hours near Anduze causing severe flooding further down the river valleys. This rainfall is equal to the annual rainfall in London, and represents 680 litres per square metre (16 US gallons per square foot).

This weather pattern produces a pleasant sunny climate. Montpellier claims 300+ sunny days per year, Lunel 330+. The cool Northerly Mistral wind from the Rhone valley influences Eastern Languedoc, and the North Westerly Tramontaine influences Western Languedoc. Both blow for a few days, several times each year.