



Marcillac

Southwest France

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FROM OBSCURITY RISES A UNIQUE GEM OF SOUTH- WEST FRANCE

Marcillac—a tiny, enigmatic Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée tucked away in the north-eastern corner of France's Southwest winegrowing region—has been quietly making its way into some of the United States' best restaurants and retail stores. Its distinctively rustic charm is best displayed in medium-bodied reds made from the native Mansois grape. Regulations allow for as much as 20% Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, and, most recently, Prunelard (the parent grape of Malbec), but most producers consider Mansois to be the only grape in town.

Marcillac has a long wine history; vines are believed to have grown here since the Abbey of Conques first planted these beautiful, rolling red

hillsides between the 8th and 10th centuries. The local industry peaked during the mid-19th century, when nearly 5,930 acres of vineyard quenched the thirst of a then-flourishing mining community. But the phylloxera epidemic at the turn of the century, two world wars, and mine closures led to the near-total demise of production. By 1960, only 25 acres were planted to vines. Today, thanks to renewed interest in working the land, nearly 500 acres have been replanted, with more to come.

Marcillac occupies its own little world in the pastoral foothills of the Massif Central in the department of Aveyron (its closest, and more famous, neighbor is Cahors in the Lot Valley). It's

Mansois grapes at
Domaine Matha (left);
panorama of Marcillac
(right).

a labyrinth of medieval villages where the lifestyle is quiet and humble and winding roads can derail even the most pinpoint of global-positioning systems. The vineyards that sprawl through these hamlets are dug deeply into mostly south-facing, terraced hillsides at altitudes high enough to prevent damage from spring frosts and angles steep enough—with gradients of 45-60°—to allow maximum exposure to the sun.

Visitors to Marcillac can see that the deep, oxidized red-clay soils known locally as *rougiers* have something special to declare. Covering the surrounding landscape at elevations up to 1,000 feet, they provide the perfect foundation for Mansois vines, lending typical red-fruit and exotic-spice flavors and providing a backbone of bright acidity and quietly firm tannins. Farther up the slopes, at around 1,475-1,650 feet, more calcareous and schistous soils lend freshness and structure to the wines.

To understand Marcillac is to understand its king of grapes, Mansois, known as Fer Servadou throughout much of the rest of Southwest France—except in Gaillac and Madiran, where it's called Braucol and Pinenc, respectively. (The French word *fer* means “iron,” in this case alluding to the vines' hard, tough trunks and canes rather than the profile of the resulting wines.) Mansois is a late-ripening member of the Carmenet family, which also includes Cabernet Franc, Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, and Sauvignon Blanc. It produces wines with strong personality, often showing some of the same spicy pyrazine qualities of its cousins, as well as bright



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flavors of cassis, raspberries, and persimmon and spices like paprika and ground red pepper. Mansois is noted for being rich in catechins and procyanidols, which inhibit thickening of the blood and have been found to help prevent heart disease. (Who needs a doctor when you can just have a glass of this stuff?) Importer Charles Neal of Charles Neal Selections describes Marcillac as “Loire Valley Cabernet Franc meets Gamay from Beaujolais”; vigneron Jean-Luc Matha likens it to “a tender caress that passes all the way through your belly.” In short, Mansois at its best is bottled poetry. But it's important to add that most producers do not consider the variety well suited to new oak. Rather, with some exceptions, they use either old, large oak barrels or cement or epoxy tanks to preserve its freshness.

The appellation's best-known estate is probably Domaine du Cros, owned by the

Old Mansois vines on
limestone soil.



OUTSTANDING RECENT RELEASES

Domaine des Costes Rouges Cuvée Classique 2011 \$13

Scents of fresh-picked blackberry and strawberry jump out of the glass, followed by charming notes of fresh dried herbs, cracked peppercorns, and rose petals. This is a wine to chill down for 10 minutes and share with friends while enjoying cheeses, charcuterie, and jovial conversation.

Domaine du Cros Lo Sang del País 2011 \$14

With brambly red fruits and loads of smoky, spicy minerality, this wine is best served slightly chilled alongside beef tacos, burgers, or a traditional dish of sheep's tripe stuffed with blue cheese, cooked in wine, and accompanied by the mashed-potato-based *aligot*.

Domaine du Cros Vieilles Vignes 2009 \$16

Notes of cassis, fresh black raspberry, and spicy tomato dominate; touches of red-pepper flake, paprika, and mint round out the flavor profile. The acidity and tannins are beautifully balanced. Slightly chill, then decant and serve with herbed roast lamb or a veggie pizza.

Jean-Luc Matha Cuvée Laïris 2009 \$15

Cassis, strawberry, and elderberry aromas burst out, along with scents of paprika, ginger, and turmeric. On the palate, a tender, mineral freshness complements soft, smooth tannins. Enjoy this wine with Asian foods like lamb biryani or beef teriyaki.



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Philippe Teulier presenting a vertical of Vieilles Vignes (top) and winding routiers at Domaine du Cros (above).



Domaine Matha vineyards (middle left) and vigneron Jean-Luc Matha (bottom left).

Photos by Fred Dexheimer (right, bottom left); photo courtesy of Jean-Luc Matha (middle left)



Eric and Claudine Vinas of Domaine des Costes Rouges.



Old barrels at Domaine du Cros.

quiet yet charming Philippe Teulier and his son Julien. It's the largest independent producer in Marcillac with 64 acres of vineyards, many planted nearly a century ago, at gradients of more than 60° and altitudes of around 1,475 feet—among the highest in the appellation. Winemaking here is staunchly traditional, relying on grevit, flow, cement tanks, and large oak and chestnut barrels—some more than 100 years old—in the service of only two wines. According to New York City-based importer The Vine Collective, the entry-level *Lo Sang del País* (“Blood of the Countryside”) is highly sought after in New York and New Jersey. Du Cros's top cuvée, the *Vieilles Vignes*, comes from 80-plus-year-old plantings and spends 12-18 months in old oak and chestnut (compared to six months for the lower-tier label). I had the pleasure of tasting a vertical of *Vieilles Vignes* going back to 1990 with the Teuliers, and it was exquisite. Nearly all the vintages were showing beautifully, offering freshness, bright fruit, and loads of varietally typical spicy and savory aromas.

A trip to Marcillac would not be complete without an encounter with Matha, the region's most expansive wine personality. He considered becoming either a priest or a professional clown before the earth called him back, and he's been tending to his 40-acre property, built on a mix of *rougiers* and limestone, ever since. Nowadays, you can find him in the vineyards talking or singing to his vines. “The wine is listening; it loves to hear people talking,” he insists. His jovial nature is infectious, and his wines have as much character as he does. Matha makes two Marcillacs: the entry-level *Cuvée Lairis*, aged in

tank to preserve the freshness of the Mansois, and the top-of-the-line *Cuvée Pèirafi*, from 80- to 100-year-old vines grown in the fine stones that lend it their name. Aged in large, old barrels for 20 months before release, it's a contemplative wine that tends toward dark-cherry, violet, and mocha flavors.

The 15-acre *Domaine des Costes Rouges* is owned by Claudine Vinas and her husband Eric. This modest duo does all the work on their tiny property, including management of a small inn. Their vineyards, ranging from 25 to 60 years old, are planted exclusively on *rougiers* soils to 100% Mansois. Farming is done organically, and the wines are made in a traditional, non-interventionist style, with bright, refreshing, soft-textured results. The Vinases make two delightful Marcillacs: the entry-level *Cuvée Classique*, aged in cement tanks and bottled without filtration, and the *Clos de la Ferrière*, aged in underground cement tanks for 18 months.

With renewed interest among locals in reclaiming the hillsides that flourished with vines nearly 200 years ago, the future looks bright for this relatively unknown appellation. American importers like Neal and Edward Addiss of *Wine Traditions, Ltd.*, in Falls Church, Va., find that Marcillac is starting to gain ground with top sommeliers and buyers on both coasts. The singular expressiveness and easy-drinking nature of Mansois (it generally contains only around 12% alcohol), combined with a retail price of \$13-16, have caught the attention of many discerning and adventurous drinkers. In short, Marcillac is nimbly ascending from obscurity to become a wine of uncommon cheer. 🍷

KEY PRODUCERS

DOMAINE DES COSTES ROUGES

Combret de Nauviale
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Importer: Charles Neal Selections
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DOMAINE DU CROS

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DOMAINE MATHA

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