

Southwest France

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A PANEL SAMPLES FRENCH VARIETIES RANGING FROM THE FAMILIAR TO THE ESOTERIC.



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Assembling wines for a Southwest France tasting can be a daunting project. This diverse area, made up of relatively isolated subregions, is home to some of France's least-known appellations and most obscure grape varieties. Stretching from Bordeaux to the Pyrenees and from the Atlantic Ocean to Languedoc-Roussillon, it comprises more climates, aspects, and soil types than any other region in the country. It also produces what seems to be an endless variety of wines. Do we go with the esoteric and exotic, such as Gros Manseng and Man-

sois, or stick with the more comfortable and familiar, like Tannat and Cabernet Franc?

Fred Dexheimer, MS, the U.S. spokesperson for Wines of Southwest France and a member of *Sommelier Journal's* Editorial Advisory Board, helped our panel pare the list down to a few representative, but perhaps still unfamiliar, selections. "There is no Cahors in this tasting, since it is hard to just do one or two Cahors," he said. "I did this in two flights: indigenous varieties, like Len de l'El, Mauzac, Gros Manseng, Petit Courbu, Petit Manseng, for the signature white grapes, and for the three reds, we have a Fronton, which is Négrette; a Gaillac, which is Duras; and a Marsillac, which is called Fer Servadou or Mansois or Brauocol throughout the region. The second flight is all Tannat, which can

be blended with Cabernet Sauvignon or Cabernet Franc. This flight has four different producers from Madiran and two Irouléguys."

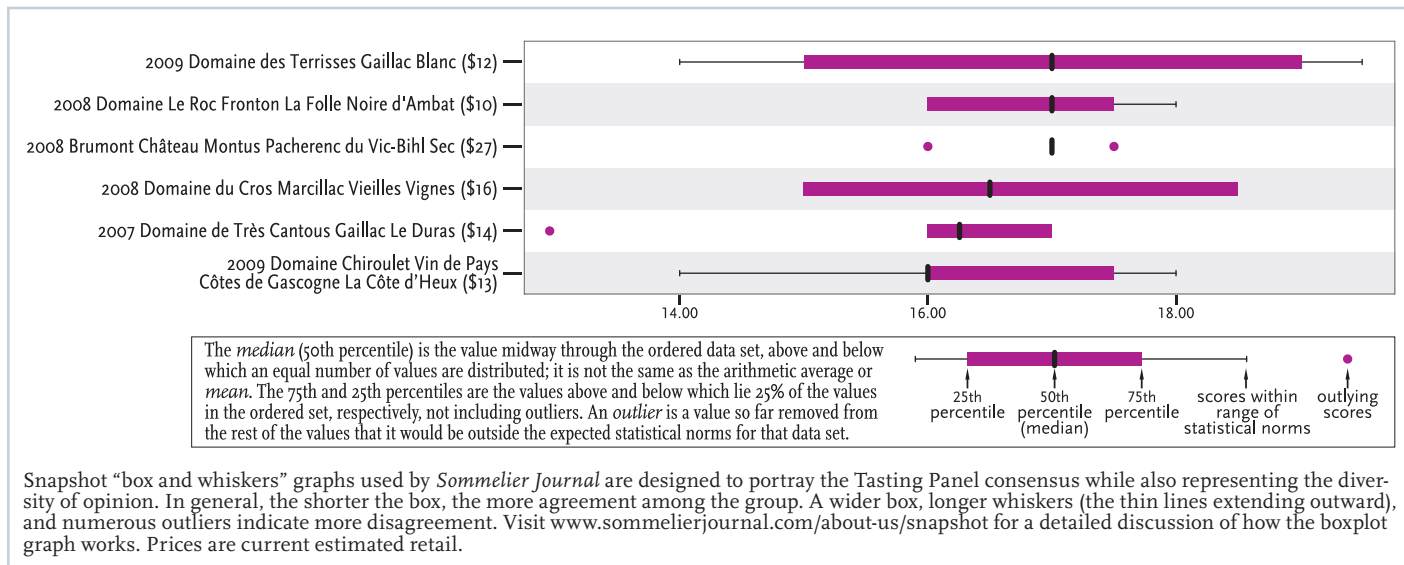
The panel gathered to taste the 12 wines at Ruth's Chris Steak House, just north of Dupont Circle in Washington, D.C. I acted as moderator, and the other participants were Elli Benchimol, beverage director of Chef Geoff's Universal, a local family of restaurants; Julie Dalton, CWE, the Terry Theise national portfolio representative from Michael Skurnik Wines in New York City; Brent Kroll, wine director of Adour at the St. Regis; Kathryn Morgan, MS, an independent wine consultant and educator; and Michael Williams, beverage director of Occidental Grill and Seafood.

"It seems that every one of these wines can be good recommendations for guests who ask for more internationally known grape varieties, and they would be more than pleased," Dalton remarked. "Plus, the wines are more affordable." Kroll agreed: "My guests rarely want to know about first-growth Bordeaux; they want to know what the best value is, what I drink in my spare time, and this can fit that niche. These wines show that you can have a lot of power and complexity without sacrificing acid, which is great with food." As Dexheimer noted, "We have to remember that this is a food area, too. Foie gras comes from here, and duck confit and *casoulet*, and these wines are fantastic with food, whether you want a salad or lobster or steak. We didn't taste sparkling wines or sweet, which they also have. Also, Tannat is one of the most heart-healthy grapes in the world. As sommeliers, we are the gatekeepers to consumers, and so, hopefully, one or two of these on a wine list can cause a spark."

"When I taste a wine, I think of how I can sell it," said Morgan. "I have sold Madiran many times to California Cab and Bordeaux drinkers—anyone who likes a big wine with lots of tannin loves Madiran, whether they know it or

TASTING PANEL

SNAPSHOT: FIRST FLIGHT



not. I can also see that Irouléguay would be good for Chinon drinkers. This indigenous flight of wines I found most interesting—incredibly food-friendly because of that intense minerality and acid that works well in food pairings. I think that these wines would be great for a tasting menu.” “Tannat is a very distinctive varietal, and there are a lot of distinctive wine styles in this region,” Williams concluded. “I wouldn’t want any of these wines to soften themselves or seek to try and make the wines more accessible. I feel like the last thing that anyone wants to do with Southwest France is to internationalize it—they are supposed to be a little evil.”

The panelists, including Dexheimer, tasted the wines blind and scored them on SJ’s 20-point scale. As usual, they were told that the concluding discussion was more important than their ratings. Representative comments from that discussion are presented in order of the wines’ ranking on the “snapshot” graphs.

FIRST FLIGHT

2009 DOMAINE DES TERRISSES GAILLAC BLANC

“This wine is from Gaillac and is a blend of Len de l’El [50%], Mauzac [30%], and Sauvignon Blanc [20%], so you are going to get a lot of green notes, like green apple and quince,” Dexheimer pointed out. “What I really like about this wine is that there is also a textural note that complements the citrus elements. It is fun, well balanced, and a nice way to start the tasting.”

Williams: On the nose, I got a lot of sweet grapefruit and citrus, like a citrus punch (but not as sweet as that may sound). I loved that the texture was round, but it had a lot of acid. It was coating, but clean. It finished with a nice chalky minerality. This one made me think of hot weather in the shade.

Kroll: This was bright and clear. On the nose, I got summer melon and pear juice, wet stone, and green tree fruits, like a youthful Grüner Veltliner—very juicy. On the palate, it had more of a dry, raw quince note, kind of starchy. I found it balanced and pleasant, but fairly neutral.

Morgan: I liked this wine a lot; it was a pleasant surprise. I thought it was a bit floral, and I can definitely see the Grüner comparison because I got white pepper and tarragon along with that little bit of jasmine and lime juice and cantaloupe rind, which I tasted for more than 40 seconds.

Dalton: This was my most highly rated wine because it is just the kind of wine I like to drink that goes with the foods I like to eat. I picked up on the creamy after-texture that might be *bâtonnage*, but it was still crispy and crunchy, which I totally love.

2008 DOMAINE LE ROC FRONTON LA FOLLE NOIRE D’AMBAT

“This is the prettiest of the three reds in this flight,” said Dexheimer. “It is from Fronton and is 100% Négrette, which is a low-acid grape with high tannins. It has spice, but also a pretty floral-violet character.”

Dalton: I found this wine to be the least aromatic

of the first flight. I just kept finding black fruit; dark, dark rocks; and cocoa nibs. I thought it was relatively easy drinking, with manageable tannins. I didn't dislike it, but it's rather forgettable. Pair with a dish where the food is the star.

Benchimol: This was my favorite of the flight. Once you get past the tannin, it has a really pretty spice to it. It was simple and easy and good.

Williams: My favorite, too, because of its interplay between bergamot and really drying, focused tannins, and then this wonderful combination of tart red and black fruits and their skins. There was an intensity of spice and aromatics and headiness to it. If we were drinking these wines with food, it may not have been my favorite, but by itself, I really loved it.

Kroll: I got a lot of roasted, dark fruit. It smelled really fruit-forward, and I wasn't getting a lot of complexity on the nose, but then I got a little dried cocoa powder and topsoil. It definitely had a slight chalkiness. This was the first wine where the tannin started to hit me.

Morgan: I got a burst of coriander. I found it juicy-ish, black-cherry-ish—this was an “ish” wine for me, which is useful in that it's not going to offend anyone. There is definitely a market for that “ishiness.”

2008 BRUMONT CHÂTEAU MONTUS PACHERENC DU VIC-BILH SEC

90% Petit Courbu, 10% Petit Manseng. “You can see that this is quite a jump in winemaking from the previous two wines in the flight,” Dexheimer commented. “It has a lot of texture and raging acid. With Petit Courbu, you have a wine that is a bit more texturally robust. I think the Bordeaux Blanc or the Burgundy drinker would like that it has the oak; it is aged in 500-liter oak barrels. As it opens up, you'll see that this is a white you can decant. It's that serious.”

Morgan: There's definitely a lot of quality winemaking going on here, and the new oak kicked in right away with the vanilla and the star anise and clove. Its white-melon and lemon-curd flavors are very useful for the oaky-Chardonnay drinker in your restaurant who wants to try something different—more useful than a Burgundy or a white Bordeaux. Its flavor was riper and more approachable than some of those wines for someone trying to transition from California.

Dalton: Just give me a smoked pork shoulder with pineapple compote to go with this wine.

Benchimol: Two words: cougar juice.

Williams: There was a wonderful hazelnut brittle on top of all the rest of the flavors, which added a savory and textural component that really blew me away. This was a gorgeous wine. The combination of rich fruit and ripping acid is not that common, but really fun.

2008 DOMAINE DU CROS MARCILLAC VIEILLES VIGNES

100% Mansois. “I get ashy, smoky iodine and blood,” said Dexheimer. “It's an everyday wine and is totally rustic and intriguing—Beaujolais meets Rhône, with hints of Chiron. This is Domaine du Cros's top cuvée.”

Morgan: There was such a strong mineral presence in these three reds. It was like Spain, but without the alcohol for me. I got a lot of dark rock, bell pepper, raspberry, Maraschino cherry, ferns, herbs, and a little bit of leather.

Dalton: When I first smelled it, I thought there might be a bit of semi-carbonic maceration—it seemed to be like a cornucopia of berries with a little banana. But then as it opened up, it turned into a Rhône—it had black fruits and smoke. It was my most highly rated red wine, and I thought it was delicious. Give it a slight chill and give me some ribs.

Benchimol: I had barbecue as a pairing as well. It was a simple wine, easy to drink, and possibly a nice entry level to these wines because it's not in your face. It's softer, with really pretty spices and fruits.

Williams: This one wasn't my favorite. It obviously did have a lot going on, but I felt like it had been manipulated to be softened somewhat, with some of that oxidative, marshmallowy softness, which makes it more approachable, but to me, doesn't speak of Southwest France.

Kroll: I thought this was an easygoing, everyday wine. It had a bit of rubber tire and leather, and it had some of that dark minerality that reminded me of Beaujolais, with some of the fruitiness of Gamay, but also reminiscent of Grenache from Spain.

2007 DOMAINE DE TRÈS CANTOUS GAILLAC LE DURAS

As Dexheimer explained, “This is 100% Duras, which is a grape variety of Gaillac. Generally by Appellation d'Origine Protégée laws, you are not allowed to do 100%, but Robert and Bernard Plageoles don't really care. It is also natural and biodynamic, which can be a gamble, but these guys are pretty consistent. Duras always reminds me of Syrah—I get a lot of cracked peppercorn and black fruit. And there is a sense of root vegetable, which, for me, is like a radish with that spiciness, crossed with a blue potato.”

Morgan: Like Syrah with a dark twist. I got a lot of sourness here, red and black fruit, green olive and green peppercorns, and green tea, along with cured meat. This is like Syrah grown in southern Italy.

Benchimol: This wine struck me as dirty and dark and evil; it's very meaty. There's a niche out there somewhere for this. Maybe if it were paired with the right dish.

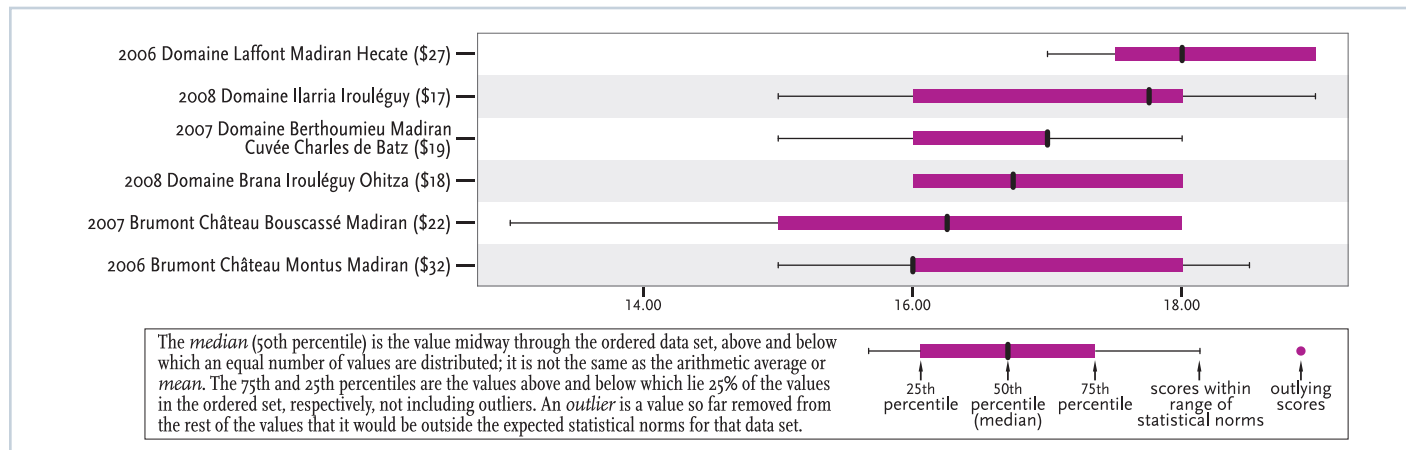
Williams: It made me think of roots and things you dig out of the ground—not in a green way, but a sweet way, like parsnips. There was a sense of red fruits that are dried to the point of being black fruits.

Kroll: I was getting a bit of dried green onion on the nose, but it wasn't really vegetative on the palate. It was medium-bodied with burnt tannin, but then it was silky with burnt sugar, though not residual sugar. I thought it was good and complex and would probably improve with food.

2009 DOMAINE CHIROULET VIN DE PAYS CÔTES DE GASCogne LA CÔTE D'HEUX

“I love this wine because it is 100% Gros Manseng, aged in neutral barrels with *bâtonnage*,” Dexheimer noted. “Gros

SNAPSHOT: SECOND FLIGHT



Manseng is similar in character to Sauvignon Blanc, with citrus and fresh-cut hay, but more texture. It's very bright, like sunshine in a glass. Now that my glass is empty, I get a woolly, bruised-apple aroma. Most Côtes de Gascogne producers use Ugni Blanc or Colombard, so this wine is actually a step above."

Kroll: I found this to be earthy, funky, and musky in a good way—barnyard and hay—and then slightly floral, with golden raisin and baked Asian pear. Soft, generous fruit; subtle, soft medium body.

Dalton: It reminded me of a Chenin Blanc, with funky mushroom notes; lanolin, waxy notes; and lemon-curd florality. I liked the off-dry finish. Delicious wine.

Morgan: It was funky and fleshy, super-mineral, with Asian pear, lemon zest, yellow apple. I definitely thought it was higher alcohol. It is a richer style.

Benchimol: I liked how this hit different parts of my palate and opened up some fruit profiles that I don't often get, like mango and starfruit, along with a sort of quirky funkiness. It was really fun.

Williams: I liked that it had a greenness that was not under-ripe, like fresh, minced green chilies.

SECOND FLIGHT

2006 DOMAINE LAFFONT MADIRAN HECATE

100% Tannat. "This one is generous and inviting on the nose," said Dexheimer. "I can see a shift in the style of wine-making here. I think this is in a really nice state because it is structured and pretty, as pretty as Madiran can be. Something you could give to Bordeaux or California drinkers."

Morgan: I thought this one smelled a lot like Cabernet and had a little more finesse than the others. It had a licorice strain that seems to run through Tannat. A very interesting wine, and the most accessible of this flight.

Dalton: You could pour this for any New World wine fan. It's got the alcohol, color, extraction, and sweet oak spice and stewed blackberries. Not my cup of tea, but a lot of other people's.

Kroll: I thought this was the most approachable, maybe the easiest to have a second glass of. If the others are overalls and a hard hat, this one was more like a sundress by comparison. I also got some copper or brass minerality.

Benchimol: This was my favorite of the flight. It was the most feminine, if any of these can be called that. It was pretty to watch—photographically, a beautiful wine—and the aromatics and finish were nice.

Williams: My favorite as well. I liked the hint of straw and barnyard and the gray cedar and black tea, and I loved the ripping, focused tannins. On the nose, I got birch root or sarsaparilla, which added an extra dimension of attractiveness.

2008 DOMAINE ILARRIA IROULÉGUAY

70% Tannat, 20% Cabernet Franc, 10% Cabernet Sauvignon. "Peio Espil is the only guy in Irouléguay who grows on limestone," Dexheimer reported. "Definitely more sour cherry, sour berry, mineral rock, moisture-sucking, but also leaving your mouth watering at the same time. Irouléguay is interesting because it is in the foothills of the Pyrenees and has terraced vineyards, so you have the cool air from the Atlantic Ocean and the warm air from the Pyrenees coming over. In Madiran, it is more rolling hills."

Williams: I'm with you on the limestone. I got a stone-cellar kind of minerality and a hint of a bitter red-apple skin. It certainly didn't fail to deliver on the tannins or the body, but it had some bright high notes that I thought made it a lot more approachable and a lot prettier.

Dalton: It was definitely my favorite of the Tannat flight. In the summertime, I like to make a dessert of balsamic-soaked strawberries with a bit of thyme, and this wine reminded me of that. To me, there was a smoky, sedimentary minerality to it. I found the tannins to be manageable, and it was just a delicious wine overall.



Benchimol: It was more approachable than some of the others. This would be another good introduction to Tannat for Bordeaux-varietal drinkers.

Kroll: I got a barbecue note that I often get in South Africa and a green note that I get in Chile. The tannins were fierce and green. It wasn't for me.

Morgan: I felt like I was moving from Argentina to Chile. I found it to be very green—dried mint and geranium, which I only call in Chilean wine. It's definitely a different style of Tannat from the wines before, more rustic and less ripe.

2007 DOMAINE BERTHOUMIEU MADIRAN CUVÉE CHARLES DE BATZ

90% Tannat, 10% Cabernet Sauvignon. According to Dexheimer, "You can see there is a thread of continuity, but differences in winemaking and in terroir. This is a departure—it has more sour cherry. This wine, to me, is in a weird stage; it is playing peek-a-boo, only giving a little bit."

Morgan: I thought this one was very complex, with a lot going on: olives, black tea, coriander, licorice, smoke, meat, ferns, with a long finish and a huge impression of minerality.

Benchimol: Really complex: I got this mix of berries and savory spices, like a berry tart with spice in the crust. I would like to see how it develops.

Williams: I didn't give this one a high score, but it came at me with a little more direct fruit. I got cherry-and-blueberry pie, which made it really approachable.

Kroll: It had good complexity, good body, good tannin balance. It reminded me of mulberries—super-ripe, super-dark, but you take a bite of it and you're hit with sour fruit with slight greenness.

2008 DOMAINE BRANA IROULÉGUY OHITZA

65% Cabernet Franc, 25% Tannat, 10% Cabernet Sauvignon. "Jean and Martine Brana are champions of Cab Franc," said Dexheimer. "It is cool here, and if that warm wind didn't come up from the Pyrenees, this area couldn't exist. Because Jean spent some time at Château Pétrus, he knows how to use oak pretty well, so you get those smooth tannins. This is a crossover for those who say, 'I love Chinon.' It's Chinon in a more Schwarzenegger style—more muscular without being the bull in the china shop."

Benchimol: I called this Carménère-like—very green, lots of floral notes, lighter tannins, and a lot more delicate. Very rustic and less complex, but it has this delicate finesse.

Williams: I liked that it pulled off its rusticity really well. There was cooked bell pepper and green-tomato leaf that I thought were really well integrated; the tannins were a little riper and rounder, too—more polite.

Dalton: I got all purple flowers and green peppercorns. I thought it was floral and pretty.

Kroll: I liked the floral notes on this, and I got some brininess that was a little less aggressive than in the previous wine [Domaine Ilarria]. There was a little funky saddlebag, but the wine appeared to have good balance.

2007 BRUMONT CHÂTEAU BOUSCASSÉ MADIRAN

60% Tannat, 25% Cabernet Franc, 15% Cabernet Sauvignon. Dexheimer commented, "This is the least generous of these Tannats. It is concave in a sense—a lot of earthy rock and not a lot of generosity. It is encapsulated in itself right now, so we will see what it does in the future."

Dalton: I was wondering if this had some Cabernet Franc, because I got ashy tobacco, green peppercorns, and purple irises. It was the most Cab-like and manageable.

Kroll: I saw a lot of staining of the tears. This one had a bitter herbal-floral component, like wild violets or lavender. On the palate, I was left with heavy, gravelly-rock minerality and a lot of drying tannin.

Morgan: I got vegetal notes and black rock. I thought it was simple, but pleasant. Blackberry, black plum, blackcurrant, game, and olives.

Williams: I was not a fan of this wine. I thought the tannins were green and underripe; it was all texture and not a lot of different flavors. I felt like there was something going on here that they didn't intend.

Benchimol: This one hits you fast and then drops off. It's really pretty, but it would be good to explore again down the road.

2006 BRUMONT CHÂTEAU MONTUS MADIRAN

80% Tannat, 20% Cabernet Franc. "This wine has a unique greenness, like it was aged in a barrel where the staves weren't completely dried," Dexheimer felt. "It is generous, fruit-forward, and has a lot of appeal to that New World consumer. It is a 5-year-old wine, so you can see where these wines will lead in a few years."

Morgan: This was my favorite of the Tannat flight, and for the reader who can't see, let me say that these are all opaque, black wines with heavy staining of the tears. This one smelled the sweetest to me; there was a good amount of new oak, so you could definitely turn your New World wine drinkers on to this. I loved the black-licorice vein that ran through with a little bit of mint; black olive, and instead of green bell pepper, I got a roasted red bell pepper.

Dalton: I got a black, bitter thing on the nose—almost like an Amaro—and dark-chocolate powder, but I concur with Fred's green oak. It reminded me of Rioja, with dill on the nose. Delicious wine, with lots of complexity and thick, thick, mouth-coating tannins.

Kroll: To me, what this lacked in complexity was made up for in soft, generous fruit—very pillowy. It had a burnt ripeness of a dark-berry compote with a touch of cherry cough syrup, loads of cassis, and blackberry fruit for the New World drinker.

Benchimol: This was the most approachable and ready to drink, especially if I were going to introduce a Cabernet drinker to Tannat.

Williams: It seemed too tight at first; the nose didn't give me a whole lot except for some dried wild strawberry. It had a really firm structure, like a wine that I want to put away and check on. 🍷