

Wine Variations Number 80 Provence – Which? – Hunt

By Ian Parkin – July issue of
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Our 2007 whites and rosés are now all neatly tucked up in their bottles, with varying levels of price increases; and the results of all the major award-giving competitions available.

Perhaps of most use in deciding what ‘the experts’ make of our wines, are two recent booklets: from the Conseil Général (**Balade Varoise 2008**, free, from Tourist Offices and vineyards), listing the awards for Var wines at the prestigious Concours Général de Paris: and the just-published fifth edition of the magazine devoted to rosés (**Rosés 2008**), published by La Provence, available in all good Maisons de Presse (and a lot of rubbish ones too). This latter wine publication is following the trend, established by our local vignerons, through increasing its cover price by 16% this year – following a hike of 25% the previous one...it’s obviously the cost of oil and the fact that the Chinese and Indians have suddenly started to eat food, that have necessitated this inflation.

On top of these I’d highly recommend, this year, the July/August edition of **La Revue du Vin de France**, which rates their top Provence wines for the summer, before doing us all a favour by having a subtle mini-go at those self-preening ninnies, ‘Les Crus Classés de Provence’.

These were originally a group of 23 well-heeled self-bottlers, who, in 1955 were granted this status on the basis that they lived in a château, were already very rich, and took an oath to continue charging excessive amounts for their wine. They were also very well connected with the ‘right’ people in Paris.

18 of these ‘Crus Classés’ still remain, and most of them are currently trying to revive the (now legally defunct) classification, as superior vineyards.

The Revue du Vin de France suggests that in any future official classification of ‘Crus de Provence’, 7 of these producers should be booted out, leaving only 11.

Personally, I would excommunicate a further 5. This

would leave only 6 remaining, which would rank amongst the best of, say, 50 Var producers. These 6 include the super-expensive Ott/Louis Roederer enterprises of *Château de Selle & Clos Mireille*...but then, one could ask, are they even typically Provençal? Also *Rimauresq*, whose admirable range is equally not for those on a budget, and likewise *Minuty*.

This leaves us with just 2 affordable ‘Cru’ sources: *Château Ste Marguerite* at La Londe, and *Jas d’Esclans* at La Motte.

The Revue also includes 6 incontrovertibly super producers who, they feel, should be included in ‘top Provence vineyard classification: *Courtade, Créssonière, Gavoty, Richeaume, St André de Figuière* and *Sarrins*. No argument there, then, but there are, indisputably, many others who, at half the price, knock spots off the existing so-called ‘Cru Classés’.

If I were Julian Faulkner at *Le Grand Cros*, I’d want to know why, two pages earlier, my *Esprit de Provence Blanc 2007* (€7) was given a *coup de coeur* and a mark of 16.5/20, when the ‘Crus Classés’ of *Clos Mireille Blanc de Blanc 05* (€20) and *Ste Roseline’s Prieure Blanc 06* (€16) only rate 13/20 & 14/20 respectively. But you have to snigger at the absolute ridiculousness of such a concept. Take *Chapelle Ste Roseline 2004 rouge* (which was only awarded 15/20, at the veritable bargain price of €45 a bottle). We are told, in a lugubriously confidential tone, that this wine was secretly sneaked in to a tasting of 150 Grand Bordeaux of 2004...and it showed its potential by coming...68th. *Zut alors, tiens, etc.* For €45 I would have felt entitled to somewhere in the top 50 at least.

But, back to reality, and **Paris gold medal** winners in the Var, at acceptable pricing levels.

For those around Les Arcs, the co-op, *Les Celliers des Archers* in rosé, and, many VVV readers’ favourite, *Château St Pierre*, star.

In the Brignoles region *Ramatuelle, La Grande Vigne, Château d’Escarelle* and *La Lieue* have hit gold. The latter for its always super *Vin de Pays du Var blanc* (100% Chardonnay).

In the Correns direction: top efforts from *St Andrieu* in rosé, and 2 particular favourites of mine – the whites of Bruno Guibergia at *La Grande Pallière* (do also try his beautifully made rosés) and Philippe Guillanton’s red at *Château Margui*.

Regional co-ops which are regular gold winners at Paris, and therefore warrant a sniff-and-slurp include **Carcès, Collobrières, Flassans, Gonfaron and St Maximin.**

Other selected gold medal winners from what I have always found to be well priced impeccable sources include: *Domaine de la Rose des Vents* (Roquebrussane), *Clos la Neuve* (6k's west of St Maximin on the RN7 and excellent value), *Château la Calisse* (Pontevès), *Les Crostes* (Lorgues), *Jasson and St André de Figuière* (la Londe), and, at Tourves Marc Sicardi's excellent budget wines from *Domaine de la Julienne*, *Château Lafoux*, and, by no means least, a gold for *Domaine de la Goujonne* for both Coteaux Varois and CDP rosés – the latter also gaining the *coup de coeur* in the 2008 Rosé Magazine (€5.20).

The mags' other important, for us, regional rosé *coups de coeur* are for Coteaux Varois *Domaine de Merlançon* (€5) – on the road from the RN7 to the Barbaroux Golf Club, the CDP Ste Victoire of *Domaine des Diables* from the young stars of Ste Lucie at Puylobier, and the ever-delicious *Domaine de la Laidière* at a Bandolian wince-making €13.20.

For those wishing to display plutocratic conspicuous-consumption, however, why not try some of their highly rated Côtes de Provence 'Cru Classés' – Minuty (€15), Roubine (€17), Bregançon (€11.60)...? Mind you, next year should see the first millésime of what the new owner of Château d'Esclans, Sacha Lichine, promises will be the world's best rosé. Priced at around €40 it may qualify him for elevation to the 'Cru Classé' club.

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