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FRENCH MEDITERRANEAN WHITES ANYTHING BUT CHABLIS

Andrew Jefford was joined by Alex Hunt MW and Charles Metcalfe in a tasting that divided opinion on matters of balance, ripeness, and vitality but which featured many charming wines from Corsica, Languedoc, Provence, and Roussillon

It's just over 340 miles (550km) from Menton, on the French-Italian border, to Cerbère, where France meets Spain. That's farther than the distance between Chablis and Avignon. The latter journey, though, involves 3.9 degrees of latitude; the former, a mere 1.2. Those are the figures that fundamentally explain why, in the tasting of French Mediterranean white wines that follows, there were no stark differences of balance and wealth of flavor among the contending wines, despite the fact that they are produced in locations distant from one another. Essentially, these are gentle, languid, sometimes delicate and sometimes lush white wines produced within a single, warm-climate zone. The best of them beguile and please the drinker via their textures, their multilayered complexity, and their aromatic intricacy.

Warm? A comparison of the average growing-season temperatures provided in the seventh edition of Johnson's and Robinson's *World Atlas of Wine* shows Béziers with 66.7°F (19.3°C), and both Perpignan and Bastia on Corsica with 67.6°F (19.8°C). These are similar figures to those for Napa, 66.8°F (19.3°C); Stellenbosch, 67.5°F (19.7°C); and Barossa, 67.6°F (19.8°C). Note, though, that the overall latitudes in France are much higher than their non-European equivalents, meaning that these temperatures are achieved over longer day lengths in summer. My own belief (as a Languedoc resident and former Adelaide resident) is that the French

Mediterranean locations are in fact slightly cooler than those figures would suggest, since the vast majority of appellation whites are found at higher, breezier altitudes than the urban weather stations cited, with often striking diurnal temperature differences, without summer heat spikes, and with much colder winters. I suspect that very few, if any, of these wines were acid-adjusted.

What about grape varieties? Here the picture is one of huge complexity. Of the top 11 wines, all of which achieved an aggregate score of either 16 or 15.5, no wine contained fewer than two varieties (even the "varietal" Grenache Blanc from Clos des Fées contains a little Grenache Gris) and some (like the whites from Mas Jullien and Clos Bagatelle) contain six or more varieties. The most common varieties in those first 11 wines are probably Grenache Blanc and Roussanne, but the full list includes Grenache Gris, Carignan Blanc, Maccabeu, Clairette, Viognier, Chenin Blanc, Vermentino, Sauvignon Blanc, Chardonnay, Picpoul, Bourboulenc, Petit Manseng, Terret Blanc, and Terret Gris. (Terret, by the way, is now an obscure relic—Mas Champart's is 110 years old—but Terret Gris was once the most widely planted grape in the Languedoc.)

Some of these varieties have been sanctioned for use in appellations, and others not—hence the fact that the tasting included both IGP and AOP wines. It's worth noting that five of the

top 11 were IGP rather than AOP; the two categories compete fairly and squarely in this region. Southern France is still principally red-wine country, and the extension of its appellations to include white wines is often recent. Apart from one or two local specialties (like the Grenache family in Roussillon and Bourboulenc in La Clape), the precise constitution of individual blends remains a work in progress. None is yet lapidary.

Blends, though, would seem to have won our tasting day over varietal wines. Most of the whites from Provence and from Corsica are made from Vermentino alone (sometimes known in France as Rolle), and these were generally less liked than the blends from Languedoc and Roussillon—with the exception of my own tasting sheet, where the top wine and one of the four second-placed wines was a single varietal Vermentino (the Cuvée Clarendon from Domaine Gavoty) in two different vintages. Charles Metcalfe's top nine wines included two Corsican Vermentino wines, but only one Provence Vermentino made it into Alex Hunt's top eight.

Did one region emerge from the pack? Yes. For both Alex Hunt and Charles Metcalfe, that region was Roussillon: Half of Alex Hunt's top eight wines were from Roussillon, as were all of Charles Metcalfe's top four, despite the fact that Roussillon fielded only eight wines in total, compared to 12 from Languedoc. On my sheet, the

honors were shared more evenly. Note that the wines were regionally grouped within our blind tasting; it would be interesting to see if this result were duplicated with a random serving order.

A future for all

Opinions about and scores for the wines varied significantly, with Alex Hunt's top wines averaging a modest 16.06, mine an equitable 16.88, and Charles Metcalfe's an enthusiastic 17.83. Views of individual wines often, too, showed wide disparities. Hunt criticized the "neutrality" he perceived in the whites of Provence and the Languedoc's "tendency to sweet flabbiness"; "Chablis this is not," he wrote about one Provence white, lamenting its lack of "vitality." He wrote of another Provence white that "it cries out for a metaphorical squeeze of lemon."

Issues of ripeness and balance are, I think, the key point of contention for these wines, and the issue came to a head with the 2011 Coume Gineste from Domaine Gauby, an early-picked, 12.5% blend of Grenache Gris and Grenache Blanc. This wine achieved Hunt's top mark (and one of Charles Metcalfe's second-highest scores), while I gave it my lowest mark of all. Hunt loved its pungency (which he described as lying somewhere between Fino Sherry and Vin Jaune): "like a Margarita stripped of fruit and alcohol." Metcalfe twice noted its high acidity. For me, though, it was unripe, uneasy, and ungiving, a "barely ripe" wine with a bitter finish. More

ANDREW JEFFORD'S TOP WINES

Domaine Gavoty Cuvée Clarendon Côtes de Provence 2011	17.5
Domaine Gavoty Cuvée Clarendon Côtes de Provence 2013	17
Mas Champart Saint-Chinian 2013	17
Domaine Gardiés Les Glaciaires Côtes du Roussillon 2013	17
La Pèira en Damasèla Deusyls Pays D'Hérault IGP 2012	17
Domaine de Bébian Prieuré Saint Jean de Bébian Languedoc 2013	16.5
Château Hermitage Saint-Martin Ikon Blanc Côtes de Provence 2013	16.5
Domaine de la Rectorie L'Argile Collioure 2012	16.5

AVERAGE AND RANGE OF SCORES

	Average	Range
Tasting	14.5	7-19
AH	13.5	12-17.5
AJ	15	10.5-17.5
CM	15	7-19

WHAT I LOVE ABOUT THE VERMENTINO-BASED WHITES OF PROVENCE AND CORSICA IS PRECISELY THEIR GENTLENESS, THEIR SOFTNESS, THEIR QUIET AROMATIC CHARM

amply constituted wines (like the Deusyls from La Pèira) appealed greatly to my palate but not to Hunt's—though Metcalfe's broad palate seemed to accommodate both.

If you are to enjoy the majority of these wines, it is indeed important to remember that Chablis they are not. Personally, Chablis I hope they never become; this is a different place altogether. I don't long for a pure Vermentino from coastal Provence to exhibit "vitality" in the way that a wine from northern France might; nor do they have me reaching for my lemons. What I love about the Vermentino-based whites of Provence and Corsica is precisely their gentleness, their softness, their stealthiness, their quiet aromatic charm, often hinting at wild flowers and aniseed, and their nourishing almondy richness. Alongside them, Languedoc's whites do indeed seem more baroque, more exuberant, and often more challenging—they are wines that dare more and, perhaps as a consequence, fail more, too, though the successes are notable. And Roussillon's whites, over and beyond any disagreements about ripeness and balance, seem better anchored in the non-fruit flavors we call "mineral," in allusions to stone and in saline hints. Out of these things, indeed, comes a natural vitality, still amply apparent in those wines (like the Clos des Fées Grenache Vieilles Vignes and the Gardiés Les Glaciaires) that have ripened fully. The future beckons for all.

**Domaine du Clos des Fées
Grenache Blanc Vieilles Vignes
Côtes Catalanes 2013** (14% ABV) | 16

AH | This is fairly neutral on the nose, with a vague sense of warmth and ripeness, but little in the way of identifiable individual aromas. The palate has lovely structure, with fresh balance, a long finish, and appealing saltiness. There's a certain citrus cut to it, but really this is a wine that is all about architecture, not aroma—a sort of white cube. Remarkably, it works very well. | 16

AJ | Pale silver-gold. Very gentle and understated aromatic profile but full of soft nougat and anise charm; billowy in style. Graceful and attractive, with a gentle blow of orchard fruit, too. Later a little more savory. Again, a more vivid and vital balance than I was expecting: Perhaps (for some obscure mineral reason) Roussillon can manage this in a way that Languedoc and Provence can't? Anyway, this is a lively, lemony wine of lift and poise. The secondary intrigues come from a stony hint in the finish, and a touch of salinity that takes the wine out to the edges of the tongue. Understated but excellent white. | 16

CM | Fresh, interestingly fruity aromas of lemon and white peach. Good acidity balancing quite rich wine, both in terms of fruit intensity and alcohol. It's a big style and will settle down with more time in bottle, but everything seems in balance, and it should evolve well over the next year or so. | 16.5



**Domaine Gardiès Les Glaciaires
Côtes du Roussillon 2013** (13.5% ABV) | 16

AH | A slightly cloudy appearance and a dull honey/nut aroma do not bode well here. The palate is thick and phenolic, but we're missing the full-on pungency and spirit of an orange wine. This seems like a halfway house, of limited interest. | 13

AJ | Full light lemon-yellow. Lots of developed aromatic appeal here: ripe autumn apple, creamy lemon, some oat flake, lime pith, crushed stone. An excellent aromatic profile, though oddly reminiscent of mature Blanc de Blancs Champagne when you've let all the gas out of it (less acidity, of course). Long, full, sustained palate, in which fruit notes are in fact recessive, but there is lots of non-fruit "mineral" width to support the wine and give it length and drive. Again (with Roussillon), there is lively, vital acidity, and once again it seems to have a kind of percussive, mineral quality. This is serious, subtle white wine. | 17

CM | Rich, exotic, and savory, with aromas of

white chocolate, fresh pear, and barley sugar. Lovely, ripe, demonstrative wine, with lots of powerful flavors and enough acidity and spine to balance them. There was probably some oak aging involved as well, and a little note of that creeps through. But the flavors are so intense and exotic that they shrug off the oak. Big, successful white. | 18



**Mas Jullien Pays d'Hérault IGP
2012** (13.5% ABV) | 16

AH | This wine seems to be aiming for a tauter, fresher style than its peers. Paler in color, with a slight rubbery whiff of reduction, there is also an attractive spice and the sense of fruit waiting to emerge. The palate shows real density without heaviness, and fine structure keeping the evident richness of fruit in check. If taking some structural influence from Burgundy, it nevertheless has an apricot character on the finish that belongs firmly in the south. | 16

AJ | Pale gold. Rather neutral in the context of its peers: white pear fruit and soft floral notes. Fresh, lively, and more expressive on the palate than the aromas suggested it would be; an almost-juicy wine, full of orchard fruits, buoyed by lively though ripe acidity, which has a tangerine cling to it. Very tasty and moreish. | 15.5

CM | Apple and creamy toffee aromas. Fresh in the mouth, with good acidity and pleasing roundness. Well balanced, with enough freshness to support the more opulent side, and a faint hint of tannin. The creamy, toffee note persists to the end, buoyed up by good acidity. Not a complex wine, but successful in its limited aims. | 16

**Le Soula Vin de Pays des Côtes
Catalanes 2009** (14% ABV) | 16

AH | Deep gold/amber in color, this wine is showing its age. The nose has some agreeable salty tang to it, but the impression is dulled compared to the [Domaine Gauby Coume Gineste Vin de Pays des Côte Catalanes 2011]. The palate, however, is still brimming with life, with a breadly/yeasty component that complements the dried-peach fruit. Dry, savory, balanced, and characterful, there is still much to recommend here. | 15.5

AJ | Full yellow-gold, but it is a 2009. Rather "candy crush" on the aromas; evolved, but was it wise policy to keep? A touch oxidized, in truth. A little bit heavy and monotonous in flavor, though there is plenty of flavor and it has the Catalonian flavors of straw, wild flowers, powdery stone. Solid, well-crafted wine, but I would have preferred it with a little more youthful vitality. | 13.5

CM | Full yellow-gold in color, this has obviously had longer in bottle than most wines here. The nose is savory and opulent, with the fruit aromas running from lemon to melon and even to pineapple. The acidity is excellent and well balances all this opulent fruit. Very rich, exotic

white, which could easily fulfill the function of a red at table. Gloriously opulent, with complexity, stature, and presence. | 19



**Clos Bagatelle Le Clos de ma
Mère Saint-Chinian 2013** (13.5% ABV) | 15.5

AH | A real fruit salad of a nose, with red apple, apricot, melon, and also something spicy, like preserved ginger. The palate offers a satisfying continuation of these aromas, marshaled by a well-judged structure that prevents the wine from seeming soppy while remaining quite discreet. Characterful and refined. | 16

AJ | Pale old gold. Very beguiling, gently aniseedy scents, with a lovely creamy richness to them. Very similar on the palate: lovely charm and grace to this; not huge concentration, presence, or tenacity of flavor, though. This is, in other words, one of those wines where one has to decide how to reward disposition of flavor against accumulation of flavor... It's a kind of Kabinett of the south. I'm going to reward it, as to me it is just so pretty and so true to its place, even if it doesn't have the persistence, the sap, and the savor of a great white Burgundy. | 16

CM | Still has a hint of the peardrops of youth, but evolving to creamier aromas. The flavors are fresh, with good acidity and pleasing fresh pear and candy notes. This is not a complex wine, and it fades rather fast on the finish, but it's pleasant and should last until the 2015 summer season. Just. | 14.5

**Domaine de Bébian Prieuré
Saint Jean de Bébian Languedoc
2013** (14% ABV) | 15.5

AH | Dried peaches, heady floral notes, and some oak make for an appealing if quite rich nose. The palate, though, tends toward heavy butterscotch and buttered toast, quite forgetting about the fruit. The result is rather clumsy and old-fashioned. | 12.5

AJ | Full gold in the context of this tasting. Much more characterful and assertive aromas than were evident in the Provençal flight, this Languedoc white smells of stone and straw, as well as white peach; there's a hint of pale leather, too. On the palate, it is round, full, and satisfying, with plenty of vinous depth and drive. The flavors remind me of mixed white and yellow fruits dressed with a little light honey; the finish is more like almond nougat. An excellent Mediterranean white. | 16.5

CM | Creamy, rich, pleasing. A slightly toffeeed overtone. The flavor is good, balanced between

creamy flesh and lemony acidity. It's young and still evolving, but already delicious, with candied creaminess and bright, tangy freshness. A pleasure to taste. | 17

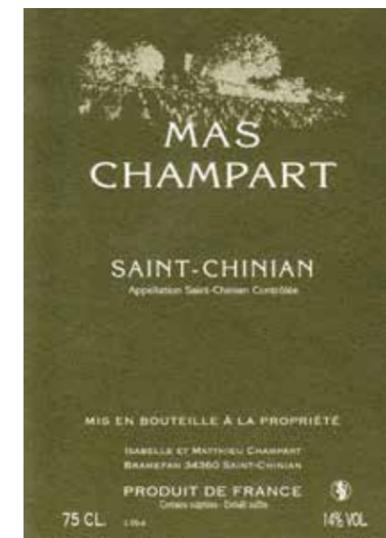


**Mas Champart Saint-Chinian
2013** (14% ABV) | 15.5

AH | While not as extreme as [Mas Champart Pays d'Oc (Terret/Grenache Gris) 2013], this is still in the caramel/vanilla/banana world of sweet aroma. Nice balance and texture on the palate cannot quite redeem the narrow range of banoffee flavors, leaving the wine ultimately feeling simple and heavy. | 13.5

AJ | Pale to mid-gold. Clean, and subtly fruity: fresh, subtle yellow fruits but also a hint of pineapple and lime. All very harmonious and understated withal. The palate opens with some perfumed width, but there is plenty of more linear push and follow-through here; for me, it is one of the more concentrated of the 2013 Languedoc whites. There's creaminess and richness, but freshness and perfume, too. Beautifully composed, and an outstanding effort here. | 17

CM | Creamy, still young, with a hint of peardroppy youth. Pleasant, buttery, candied, with good acidity and freshness. Not a very complex wine, but pleasant and fresh. Has some of the toffeeed flavors that mark many of these wines. | 15.5



**Mas Champart Pays d'Oc
(Terret/Grenache Gris) 2013** (13.5% ABV) | 15.5

AH | Extraordinarily sweet, creamy, heady nose: like brandy butter. Structure-wise, the palate is nicely balanced and delineated, but you would

ALEX HUNT MW'S VERDICT

The great unifying theme here was texture. With the natural generosity and low acid that a warm climate brings, as well as grape varieties that contribute a degree of richness, most of the wines were full, rounded, Rubenesque affairs. Success, therefore, depended on two things. First, is the richness combined with delicacy, or is the wine heavy? Second, does it have sufficient aromatic interest to bring the texture to life?

Those that managed to tick both these boxes flew a proud flag for the region, combining broad structure with evocative mineral-piney aromas and fresh-plump fruit in a way that is difficult to replicate elsewhere. They were in a small minority, however. Well over half the wines were, to my palate, either too neutral to offer much inherent interest, or too heavy to be refreshing, or both. Provence tended strongly toward neutrality, though at least with some delicacy and charm in the better wines. The Languedoc lineup erred more on the side of heaviness, with several cloying, butterscotchy clunkers and worryingly rapid evolution overall.

The Roussillon flight was the clear winner for me, fielding as it did some genuinely exciting wines that managed to avoid both Provence's excessive modesty and the Languedoc's tendency to sweet flabbiness. Some wines achieved this through the straightforward expression of interesting vineyards; others through detectable winemaking quirks that introduced an oxidative tang. Both routes were demonstrably successful.

That said, overall this remains an esoteric category of wine, no longer bargain-priced, in which too many examples are, despite their uniqueness and regional expression, rather dull.

TOP WINES

Domaine Gauby Coume Gineste Vin de Pays des Côtes Catalanes 2011 | 17.5

Domaine St Sebastien Inspiration Minérale Collioure 2013 | 16.5

Clos Bagatelle Le Clos de ma Mère Saint-Chinian 2013 | 16

Domaine du Clos des Fées Grenache Blanc Vieilles Vignes Côtes Catalanes 2013 | 16

Mas Jullien Pays D'Hérault IGP 2012 | 16

Sainte-Fleur Triennes Viognier Méditerranée IGP 2013 | 15.5

Château Hermitage Saint-Martin Ikon Blanc Côtes de Provence 2013 | 15.5

Le Soula Vin de Pays des Côtes Catalanes 2009 | 15.5

have to love sweet, heavy flavors to enjoy it. With the only actual fruit note being caramelized banana, you get the picture. Not my cup of tea, this. | 13

AJ | Bright white gold. Warm, soft, orchard fruit scents; elegant and fresh, doughy, enticing. Vivid, lively, and long on the palate, with plenty of almondy depth and poised white fruits. Fresh, but very complete, too, and with the aromatic intricacy a good southern white needs to give it personality and profile. | 16

CM | There's the faintest hint of something not quite white to this (maybe a little Grenache Gris, or something even darker?). The aromas are rich and structured and might even suggest red grapes vinified white. There's definite grip in the mouth, too, with apple and butter flavors and slight tannins. I like this—it's a wine of character and personality, and it could cope with fairly rich seafood dishes and reduced sauces. Not a conventional wine, but one with an individual and interesting message. | 17.5

**Domaine Gauby Coume Gineste
Vin de Pays des Côtes Catalanes
2011** (12.5% ABV) | 15.5

AH | This still pale straw-coloured wine has a distinct pungency that lies somewhere between the apple skin and nuts of Fino Sherry and the mountain tang of Vin Jaune, without, presumably, the influence of *flor*! There is a real savor and citrus-saltiness to the palate here. Like a margarita stripped of fruit and alcohol and instead focused on dense, savory flavors, this is a challenging wine of real distinction. The coherence from first smell through to the finish is remarkable. | 17.5

AJ | Very pale silver-gold. Rather confined scents of anise and wheat grain or wheat beer. Thin and barely ripe on the palate, with more wheat-beer complexities; to me, this tastes like the work of someone who is not at ease with their place in the Catalonian sun, afraid of ripeness, and generally fretting about all the wrong things. No doubt the wine has its fans, but I'm not one, alas. Bitter finish. | 10.5

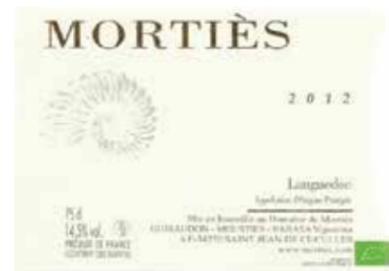
CM | Complex, savory nose, with herby, balsamic, citrusy aromas. Acidity is high, and is keeping this in good shape. It's very full-bodied, rich, and opulent but has this lovely spine of acidity, as well. The result is a wine that has developed but is still in astonishing shape and a delight to drink now, or to keep another few years. | 18.5

**Domaine de Mortières
Languedoc 2012** (14.5% ABV) | 15.5

AH | Attractive aromas of cooked peaches and varnished wood. The palate is soft and fairly rich, but not cloyingly so, the fruit flavors and delicately balanced acid together giving just enough lift and energy. Alcohol is evident, and this is not a complex wine, but it does have charm. | 15

AJ | Clear butter yellow. A super nose, in truth—yes, it's toward the richer end of the spectrum, but there are lovely, intriguing, complex notes of white almond, of marzipan, of ginger spice, of baked honey, and of coriander. On the palate, you re-find many of those aromatic elements, clustered

together in a central palate that is more almondy than fruity. Richly southern all over; glycerous in texture; super-low acidity. Surely barrel-fermented, and some will find it all a little much, but for me it's an exciting wine of extravagance and difference, and I love it. | 16
CM | Ripe, opulent, exotic, with buttery richness and cooked apple aromas. There's something slightly savory on the palate as well, giving it individuality and appeal. Rich, creamy, and opulent. You could almost use this to match pan-fried foie gras. It fades rather fast on the finish but is fun while it's in the mouth. | 15



La Pèira en Damasèla Deuysls Pays d'Hérault IGP 2012 | 15.5
 (14.5% ABV)

AH | Despite a bit of green-apple freshness, this is essentially one of the flight's several banoffee-flavored wines. The extra degree of zing is welcome, but it is still ultimately subsumed in creamy butterscotch notes. The impression overall is heavy, despite the relative finesse to the structure. | 13.5

AJ | Full yellow-gold. Very creamy and sumptuous; almost Pessac-Léognan-like. Lovely creamy lanolin and freshly laundered linen. There's just a mist of lime and lime pith drifting over this to give it a little complexity. A really lovely nose: bravo. On the palate, it is fresher and more fruity than the nose suggested (though barrel-fermented); vivid, both creamy and fresh, with light citrus and even a little daring green apple for balance. A wonderfully gastronomic wine. No huge concentration and intercellular tightness, however; but in stylistic terms, hard to fault. A southern classical white of true poise and finesse. | 17

CM | Rich, creamy, savory aromas. A buttery start to this in the mouth, but well balanced by lemony acidity. More development and evolution than some, but it has the balance to stand this. Creamy, candied, rich, with good acidity and lovely butter and toffee-apple flavors. Also a characteristic musky, slightly mysterious Grenache Blanc/Gris note. More length than many. | 16.5

Château Hermitage Saint-Martin Ikon Blanc Côtes de Provence 2013 (13% ABV) | 15

AH | Delicate yet very perfumed: hyacinths and honeysuckle, apricot and melon. Barrel-ferment character is kept well in the background. A little heavy in texture, with a certain earthy quality, but heaps of character. | 15.5

AJ | Pale silver-gold. Attractive if shy scents of cream and jasmine. Very delicate and pretty. On the palate, this is a soft, mid-weight wine with quite a sweet spectrum of flavors: more jasmine and citrus blossom over delicate white peach (and some oak). Lots of finesse and elegance. A whisper of clean, lemony acidity freshens the wine. Very attractive; very sippable. | 16.5
CM | Aromas of oak, lemon, and pine are immediately apparent. First impression is in fact a little reminiscent of a lemon-and-pine-scented domestic product. Oak takes over on the palate, still with lemony acidity and a distinctly piney note. This may have picked up notes from surrounding pines but is somewhat unnerving. And too oaky for me. | 13.5



Clos Bagatelle Saint-Chinian 2013 (13.5% ABV) | 15

AH | With a bright apricot-jam note—even apricot eau de vie—this has a definite late-harvest quality on the nose. The palate, conversely, is quite linear, mineral, medium-bodied, and very dry in feel: more Atlantic than Mediterranean! This, then, is a wine of two halves, both of which are attractive in themselves, but which don't particularly cohere. | 14.5

AJ | Full pale gold. Elegant and fresh, with a sense of the wind in the pine trees here; some clean lanolin behind. Vivid, full, and round on the palate, balanced by clean lemon-pine fruit; no oiliness at all. A state-of-the-art Languedoc white. Well crafted and intricate. | 15.5
CM | Curious nose, with a hint of raspberry! Creamy, fresh, quite full-bodied, with good acidity and rich, ripe fruit. There's lemon in there, but also this slightly disconcerting note of raspberry. Something faintly apple as well. An unexpected lineup of flavors, but it's all adding up to a pleasing whole. | 15.5

Domaine de la Rectorie L'Argile Collioure 2012 (14% ABV) | 15

AH | This wine has developed a slight pink-amber tinge, and it smells excessively mature for its age. The structure remains excellent, with a creamy, pithy plumpness and almond/apricot flavor, but the wine lacks aromatic vigor. | 13.5

AJ | A hint of old gold in the color of this wine. Resolved, mellow, honeyed, and harmonious aromas; a smooth porridge of yellow fruit. More concentrated than I expected on the palate, with deliciously rich, honeyed flavors. Super composition and harmony here. I wouldn't keep it a moment longer than you have to, but it is a deliciously ripe and generous wine that, nonetheless, has real balance and poise, as much because the fruit has been so well handled and treated as for any other reason. Truly limpid vinification: It's a mouthful of late summer in French Catalonia. | 16.5

CM | Rich, ripe, very generous yellow-fruit aromas. There's a hint of oak on the palate, but the fruit is just about intense enough to carry it. Toffeed flavors mingle with lemon and stone fruit. Acidity supports all. I'd rather this didn't show quite so much oak flavor, but it's a pretty good, rich white. | 15.5



Clos Venturi Vin de Corse (Appellation Vin de Corse Côtrolée) 2007 (13.5% ABV) | 15

AH | Mature but quite lively, this nose offers warm leesy, appley notes—think Chablis on a beach holiday. The palate is pretty, with a piney lift and lots of character, but it does sag in the middle, with slightly tired, nutty flavors. | 14

AJ | Full gold, as you'd expect from the oldest wine in the tasting. A rich, evolved, honeycomb full of aromas: tangy, bready, and the (oddly Rieslingesque) fruits now baked in an earthenware dish in the oven. Lush, soft, smooth, and round, with great seamlessness and harmony. A survivor, and a lovely southern white to sip on a warm Corsican evening, though personally I would prefer it with a little more detail in youth. | 14

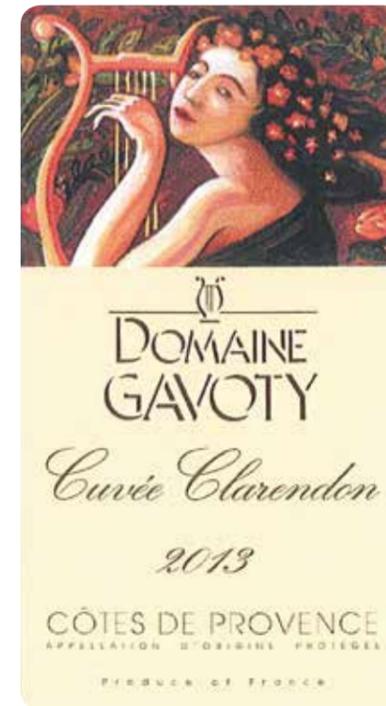
CM | Dark yellow-gold and obviously mature. This has complex, bottle-aged aromas, of toast, lemon, and buttered bananas. Even a whiff of petrol. The flavor is rich and complex, with some slightly resinous pine notes sneaking in, as well. It's an impressive wine, still in fine form, though it may be reaching its apogee. A fascinating example of a mature Corsican white. | 17.5

Domaine Gavoty Cuvée Clarendon Côtes de Provence 2013 (13.5% ABV) | 15

AH | Aromatically rather dull, with traces of dried peach but mostly heavy, floral aromas. The palate is fairly concentrated, though more through thickness of texture than intensity of flavor. The occasional green leafy note lends a bit of freshness, but mostly this feels solid and workmanlike. | 13.5

AJ | Pale silver-gold. Light, delicate scents of angelica and white spring blossoms: very pretty. Hint of pineapple, too. Poised, fresh, and gently articulated flavors of white summer fruits with anise and more spring blossom on the palate. Very delicate and gestural wine, but satisfying, too. Beautifully disposed; wonderful restraint. Japanese art, turned into white wine. | 17

CM | Pleasantly candied aroma, with notes of lemon and butter. Acidity is fresh and pleasingly tangy, and the general impression is of a soft, gentle white, unchallenging, but attractively crisp. | 14.5



Sainte-Fleur Triennes Viognier Méditerranée IGP 2013 (13.5% ABV) | 15

AH | Quite lively apricot aromas, but they seem a bit bruised, even moldy. Something not quite pure here. With high intensity and a notably chalky feel to the palate, this is a challenging (as opposed to "easy-drinking") wine, offering uncompromising thrills. Something to drink with relish rather than sniff contemplatively. | 15.5

AJ | Pale to mid-gold. Some gentle spice elegance on the aromas here, plus tangerine citrus. Very clean and lots of fresh lift. On the palate, it is a fuller and more marrowy wine than some of its

peers, but there is perfumed citrus, too, to add charm and intricacy, and clean lemony acidity to shape it all up. Not a lot of primary fruit, though, and some may find that marrowy middle palate a little uneventful. I like this wine a lot, though, and it would perform well with food. | 15

CM | Crisp, fresh, lemony aromas, with overtones of boiled sweets. The palate is simple, clean, and lemony, the main flavor reminding me of the lemon-flavored sweets in round tins that my parents deployed to keep me quiet on long car journeys. Pleasant, uncomplicated. | 14.5



Château Sainte Roseline La Chapelle de Sainte Roseline Côtes de Provence 2012 (14% ABV) | 15

AH | Bordering on neutral, this nose nonetheless shows an attractive creamy quality and a touch of apricot perfume. The palate is a bit thick and pappy; it cries out for a metaphorical squeeze of lemon. | 13.5

AJ | Mid-gold. Restrained scents of dry leaf and wheat flakes. Smooth, long, unctuous flavors, with a more apricot and yellow-fruit character than many of its Provençal peers. Ample, full, gently chewy white of weight and persistence, though not a lot of aromatic focus. | 15

CM | Creamy, subtle, candied, with hints of lemon and oak. Attractively matured wine, which has gained complexity in the aging. The creamy, candied richness is well supported by fresh acidity, and the wine is still vigorous and a pleasure to drink. | 16.5



Mas Cristine Côtes du Roussillon 2013 (14% ABV) | 15

AH | A warm nose but still in the fruit spectrum, this has apricot and herbal notes with a bit of a yeasty/bready edge. The palate is still quite youthful in flavor, with a nice apricot-skin pithiness to the texture. Fairly straightforward but

entirely enjoyable, balanced wine. | 15
AJ | Pale silver-gold. Relatively simple, principally fruity scents: fresh pear and dessert apple, a little leaf, a hint of coriander. Lots of spice-seed flavors dominate the recessive fruits in a palate which has depth yet exhibits less of the "mineral" vivacity that the best of its Roussillon peers have. A little short and pinched on the finish. | 11.5
CM | Lovely, delicate aromas, with lemon and lavender predominant. Fresh but rich on the palate, with very good acidity balancing savory, intense flavors. This really seems to have some of the herbal aromas of the countryside woven into its complexity. The main thrust is creamy and rich, with tangy acidity and lemony freshness, and the herbal interplay around the edges. | 18.5



Domaine St Sebastien Inspiration Minérale Collioure 2013 (14% ABV) | 14.5

AH | A delightful paradox: a very ripe, mineral-dominated wine, all piney herbs and warm rocks in place of fruit—but it works. The palate manages not to break the spell either, with a delicate crème patissier flavor and a slightly grippy texture knitting those flavors together. A really beguiling, gently bonkers wine. | 16.5

AJ | Bright silver-gold. Exciting aromatic complexities here: nuts and milled cereal grains, oat flake and soft lemon, with some creamier input from successful barrel fermentation. Sappier and more vividly lemony on the palate than I expected from the aroma: long, vivid, and aromatically complex, though without a great deal of fruit complexity. Nonetheless, a very good southern white of adaptable, food-friendly balance. | 14.5

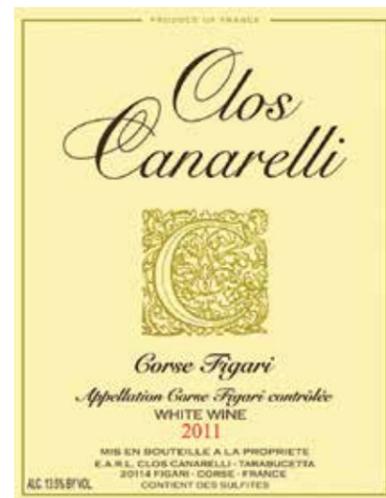
CM | Very strong oak aromas, with a balsamic hint in the background. The acidity is good, but the oak use completely dominates the wine. I really have little idea of what this wine might have been if it had never seen oak. From start to finish, oak is the only flavor that comes through. Pity. | 13

Clos Canarelli Corse Figari (AOC) 2012 (13% ABV) | 14.5

AH | There's an appealing spectrum of aromas here—from buttered toast, to red apple and peach. The palate is not obviously aged and yet lacks a spark of freshness: It's a bit pappy and bland. Unfortunately, little to engage the drinker past the first couple of sips. | 13

AJ | Pale gold. Lots of toasted almond here; lemon, lime, and a hint of sour milk, too. Intriguing. Fresh, subtle, nutty, and with an exotic allure, thanks to that original collection of allusions. Well-crafted white with a story to tell. | **13.5**

CM | Aromas are rich, creamy, maybe barrel fermented. There's good freshness here, and lively acidity, to balance the rich, creamy flavors. A wine that is developing well, with lovely balance between acidity and (quite powerful) alcohol. Opulent, balanced, and excellent drinking. | **17.5**



Clos Venturi Vin de Corse (Appellation Vin de Corse Contrôlée) 2013 (13.5% ABV) | **14.5**

AH | This nose is quite cheesy and rustic, but there is an appealing freshness to it, as well as some lovely apricot-pulp fruit. The palate shares that fruit quality but is just a shade tough and rubbery. There is good depth; perhaps it needs a few months to relax. | **14**

AJ | Very pale silver/green-gold. Fresh, sweet, and becoming, though understated; a hint of jasmine, a hint of lanolin. Bright and fresh, light, almost mountain-light and mountain-fresh, with a surprising petiteness to it—was this made at altitude? Graceful wine of freshness and charm, though without much primary fruit resonance. | **15**

CM | Fresh, young, appley aroma. Young, with a hint of something slightly curious (gherkin?). It's fresh and creamy, with good fresh acidity and a suggestion of tannin. Quite simple, but interesting. | **14.5**

Château Leoubé Blanc de Leoubé Côtes de Provence 2013 (12.5% ABV) | **14.5**

AH | There's an uncomfortable nutty tang of slight oxidation here, masking otherwise appealing dried-fig and peach aromas. The palate is very creamy-leesy without being vital (Chablis this is not). Simple and underwhelming. | **12**

AJ | A slightly fuller gold than its peers. Resinous

CHARLES METCALFE'S VERDICT

It is great to have a series of Mediterranean French whites dominated by indigenous grape varieties. And I don't include Viognier, as I think of it as a Northern Rhône variety. (There didn't seem to be much sign of Viognier, anyway.) Grenache Blanc, Grenache Gris, and Macabeu seemed to be the dominant grapes in many of the wines. They have an inherently creamy richness, which gives an easy opulence to the wines, but sometimes they lack a bit of backbone.

The best wines had a lovely balance between this opulence and a bright acidity, sometimes showing notes of oak fermentation, especially texturally. Too many, however, were overwhelmed by the flavors of new oak-barrel fermentation and maturation. If producers want these wines to taste of wine, and the place where the grapes were grown, oak use has to be subtle. If, on the other hand, producers know their drinking public wants oak flavor, fine—use loads of new oak! But I did not reward such wines.

We had three wines that were far too young to assess. A 2014 wine tasted in December 2014 is hardly ready to sell, or to taste. In contrast, with one splendid exception, most wines from vintages before 2012 seemed past their best. So that offers a relatively limited drinking window for many of these wines.

Roussillon and Corsica were probably my preferred regions, with some lovely wines coming from both.

TOP WINES

Le Soula Vin de Pays des Côtes Catalanes 2009 **19**

Mas Cristine Côtes du Roussillon 2013 **18.5**

Domaine Gauby Coume Gineste Vin de Pays des Côtes Catalanes 2011 **18.5**

Domaine Gardiès Les Glaciaires Côtes du Roussillon 2013 **18**

Clos Canarelli Corsica Figari (AOC) 2012 **17.5**

Mas Champart Pays d'Oc (Terret/Grenache Gris) 2013 **17.5**

Clos Venturi Vin de Corse (Appellation Vin de Corse Contrôlée) 2007 **17.5**

Domaine de Bébian Prieuré Saint Jean de Bébian Languedoc 2013 **17**

Château Leoubé Blanc de Leoubé Côtes de Provence 2013 **17**

and a little raw in scent, with pear fruit behind. Lively, fresh, vinous, and long, without much primary fruit (pear again) but with plenty of sappy, vegetal notes (cucumber). More concentrated than some of its peers. This is a young wine, so it may be that a year or two more in bottle brings extra charm. But for the time being it is a little stiff and inarticulate. | **14**

CM | Rich, opulent, with a color moving toward light gold. This has a creaminess that suggests it may have seen some older oak barrels but is unencumbered by oak aromas and flavors. Acidity is lively, and there's a lovely tanginess, also straying into lemon and cream flavors. Fresh, bright, opulent. | **17**

Château d'Anglès La Clape Languedoc 2012 (14.5% ABV) | **14**

AH | With a golden tinge to the color and a nutty, autumnal feel to the peach fruit, this wine seems to be maturing apace. Heavy in the mouth, with a thick pithy texture and not a great deal of acidity, it's ultimately the nutty finish that lets it down and says "over the hill" already. | **12.5**

AJ | Full gold now. Very rich and marrowy on the nose, with an ample, honeyed glow to it. Almost exotic. Lots of heavier floral notes mixed into the honey: Indian balsam, lily. An exciting aromatic profile. On the palate, it is a livelier and fresher wine than the aroma suggested it would be; there are developed yellow fruits, and spice notes, and a buttery finish. A southern white of unapologetic wealth and amplitude—but it works. | **16**

CM | This is quite evolved, and I'm not sure how well it will last into next summer. It has the honeyed, slightly melony note synonymous with aging. At the moment, it's drinkable with pleasure but seems on the border of a collapse. It finishes short and leaves little aftertaste. | **14**

Domaine du Clos des Fées Herve Bizeul Côtes Catalanes 2012 (14.5% ABV) | **14**

AH | This deep golden-colored but still lively wine has a base scent of peach nectar, spiked with resinous herbs and dried flowers. It's complex, evocative, and really speaks of its region. The palate has balancing acidity but certainly seems fully mature, some woody notes together with the dried fruit giving a liqueur wine feel (think Pineau or Flocc). | **14**

AJ | The fullest gold in the tasting so far (and this is served as wine 29): buttercup yellow. A rich and unctuous scent: ripe yellow fruits, cream, a squeeze of passion fruit, a sliver of mango... On the palate, it is generous, open, exuberant, buxom, and affable, with lots of richer summer fruits, roundness, and depth. There is some acidity, though less of the non-fruited mineral notes that some of the Roussillon peers have. Tangy finish. Everything save subtle—but a good wine nonetheless. | **14.5**

CM | This is golden in the glass, with a rich, savory aspect to the nose. Not quite as impressive on the palate, with a faintly soapy note creeping in. Acidity is good enough, but this is just fading past its best (as the dark color suggested). It's a pity,

because this was probably splendidly opulent a year ago. Now declining. | **14**



Domaine les Aurelles Aurel Côteaux du Languedoc (Roussanne) 2011 (14.5% ABV) | **14**

AH | A deep golden color makes the lively cooked-peach fruit a welcome surprise on the nose. The palate, too, is surprising, if less pleasant, with a high-alcohol, high-pH feel that is oddly unwinery, more liqueur. Maybe something that would work in small doses with the right food, this is hard work as a drink, with low refreshment value. | **13.5**

AJ | Full light butter gold. Honey, butter, and jonquil nose, with some pollen on a sunbeam or two: unapologetically full. Mellow, rich, languid, just a little bit torpid on the palate. I'm not suggesting this kind of oaky handling isn't possible here, but you need to have enough sinew and intrinsic aromatic complexity in the fruit first, and here it's all a bit touch and go. But everything in this wine is very grown-up, very secondary; there is no banana-y simplicity of fruit, which can sometimes be the case. A knife-and-fork white. | **14.5**

CM | The color is a much deeper yellow than most, and there's not a lot showing on the nose. The palate is a surprise, with a creamy almond-paste flavor and even a hint of residual sugar. It's a very ripe style—perhaps a little too ripe?—opulent and toffeed. The buttery, toffeed side is a little overwhelming, even though there is acidity. But not quite enough acidity. | **14**

Domaines Ott Clos Mireille Blanc de Blancs Côtes de Provence 2012 (12% ABV) | **14**

AH | Quite oak-dominated on the nose, with notes of wood adhesive, but there is some attractive stone fruit lurking somewhere! The palate is balanced but really very neutral, and a nutty character leaves the finish feeling tired. | **12**

AJ | Pale to mid-white gold. Soft, restrained spice and aerial lemony charm, but this is not a hugely articulate aromatic profile. Lively and elegant on the palate, but a fundamentally simple wine of fresh and youthful virtue. It has a white-almond character but not a lot more than that. | **13.5**

CM | Lemon and pine aromas, but in a natural, way. A hint of oak use, as well, but not overwhelming. This is still admirably fresh, and attractively drinkable. The oak has contributed creaminess and texture, rather than overt woody flavors. And there is a sense that this is a wine of its surroundings, with pleasing lemon flavor and just a suggestion of pine. | **16**

Domaine Gavoty Cuvée Clarendon Côtes de Provence 2011 (14% ABV) | **13.5**

AH | Aromatically almost completely neutral, this wine does show some crispness and unripe melon character on the palate. There is some decent mid-palate weight. But you have to look hard for the interest here. | **12.5**

AJ | Bright white-gold. Fresh, light, and lively, with plenty of mayflower and hawthorn blossom. On the palate, the wine is light, graceful, and fresh yet well rounded and gently creamy too; there are more of the floral notes that were evident on the aroma, and it has admirable freshness for a 2011. Lots of almondy depth provides plenty of mid-palate satisfaction. An outstanding Provençal white with both charm and concentration. Grated nougat sprinkled over the finish: glorious. Wonderful drinking; wonderful white wine. | **17.5**

CM | This seems to be slightly losing its freshness. It's lemony but quite simple. Not an especially complex wine, and age is reducing this to a gawky mixture of acidity, alcohol, and fading lemony fruit. A pity. This was probably better a year ago. | **11**

Château Sainte Marguerite Cuvée Symphonie Blanc Côtes de Provence 2013 (13.5% ABV) | **13.5**

AH | Fairly neutral, slightly gluey aromas, with a faint note of peach. The palate is more exciting, its principal beauty residing in a limpid, fluid texture that makes it effortless to drink. Fine balance and poise make up for the rather modest degree of flavor. | **15**

AJ | Pale white-gold. Faint note of reduction; some soft fruit and mealy oat flake below, but not a charming aroma. Full-flavored and vinous on the palate, with fair length of almondy fruit, but not hugely articulate at this stage. | **12.5**

CM | Oak is the first aroma that leaps from the glass, followed by lemon zest and perhaps a hint of cream. The flavor is similarly oak-led, leaving the wine element trailing in its wake. There's decent acidity to this, but the wine flavors are overwhelmed. | **12.5**

Roc D'Anglade Vin de Pays du Gard 2012 (13.5% ABV) | **12.5**

AH | Despite being just two years old, this wine has the feel of clinging on for life. The dominant aroma is of nuts, and fruit is notable by its absence, with no particular savory/mineral notes in its place. The palate, happily, offers a bit more vivacity than the nose, thanks to a cidery, vinegary edge that is understated enough to blend in. There is good power and persistence here. It's a shame that there is not more aroma to complement the structure. | **13.5**

AJ | Pale to mid-gold. Exuberant, but less classical than the best of its peers: apple and peach, tossed together in a basket a little bit any-old-how. And the palate is built along similar lines: worthy and honorable, but lacking precision and finesse. All of that said, there is plenty of differentiated fruit notes in here, but there's also a kind of biscuity maltiness that I am not sure should really be there... | **11.5**

CM | Savory, buttery, but not wildly exciting. This has fresh acidity, definite notes of tannin, and a creamy, toffeed flavor. Somehow, in this case, they don't quite fit together. And the finish is very short. Is this past its best? Or perhaps there was never an optimum moment. | **13**



Domaine Gavoty Cuvée Clarendon Côtes de Provence 2010 (13.5% ABV) | **11.5**

AH | Gluey, heavy, and woody, this nose is not in its first flush of youth, but nor does age seem to have revealed much depth or interest. There is some plumpness on the palate but also a tired, piney quality. This is a Christmas tree long past Epiphany. | **13**

AJ | Bright white-gold. Rather confined scents, like damp reeds. Perhaps the oaking hasn't worked out well here in the long term. On the palate, too, this is a rather uncharming and heavy wine, though the almondy core of flavor is true enough. | **11.5**

CM | Slightly dusty, with a fading lemon aroma. Definitely past its best, with a dusty, fading character that has no allure. Maybe a minor starlet in the past, but not even propped up by the makeup of oak. | **10**

Château de la Negly Brise Marine 2014 (13% ABV) | **11.5**

AH | Strikingly pungent nose, somewhere between Fino Sherry and pickled figs. The palate is positively gentle by comparison, with a mild taste of fizzy sweets (Fizzers, Refreshers, Love Hearts, etc.). This, I suspect, will prove a fleeting impression given the wine's youth, though there is still plenty to enjoy in this fresh yet soft-textured mouthful of wine. The sharpness of the nose and its incongruence with the palate is a cause of concern, however. | **14**

AJ | Pale gold. Delicate orange and tangerine scents: an attractive young wine. Elegant, fresh, soft, and lively, with a pounded white-almond core and lots of graceful fresh citrus and citrus blossom for aromatic interest. No great concentration or depth, however. | **13.5**

CM | At least this is brilliant, with no haze, but still very marked by the peardropy aromas of cool-temperature fermentation. There's a creaminess that may develop into an attractive texture, but at present this is very young—too young to be here—and needs time to come together. This may be in bottle, but it's really too young to assess. | **7**