



Hidden heroes of the southwest

Two producers in southwest France are making glorious organic and biodynamic wines, without fuss – or hefty prices

IT IS RARE that I have the opportunity to meet two wine producers whose wines dovetail so closely with my own tastes. Luc de Conti and Pascal Verhaeghe are based in southwest France, and both produce wines that are probably deeply unfashionable. Yet within a small group of wine lovers they are recognised as true greats, among the very best you will find in France.

One producer is organic, the other biodynamic, yet neither mentions it on the label, and they do not wish to receive any kudos for working this way. For them, it is part of making wine that reflects the terroir and traditions of the area; they have modernised these traditions in such a way as to show the true potential of the region rather than pandering to the whims of wine critics.

Their wines are notable, and in my eyes achieve greatness, by ignoring most of the adjectives used to describe most great wines. They are not huge, big, ripe, powerful monsters. De Conti argues that “extraction is my enemy”, and goes out of his way to avoid anything brash or clumsy.

These are elegant, balanced wines that lack nothing. None that I tasted were more than 13.5 per cent alcohol and most are below that.

The key to their winemaking is deceptively simple: low yields, careful viticulture, and picking grapes that are not over-ripe. They use indigenous yeasts, and generally age their wines in old rather than new oak. The primary modern innovation is micro-oxygenation, a process of bubbling oxygen through the fermenting must and later in tank. This process gives a smooth gentle edge to wines that might otherwise be raw and tannic in their youth.

The severe wines of Cahors, where Verhaeghe is based, used to require 10 years to show at their best. Now they are very drinkable from the start. De Conti is based in Bergerac, a near neighbour of Bordeaux. There are many winemakers from that region who could learn a thing or two from both men.

These two producers are not alone. If you are looking for real excitement, southwest France offers it in spades. Every region still has plenty of average wines, but there are plenty of high-quality producers trying to make something special.

Given that the areas are not well-known, even within France, the wines are still available at very reasonable prices. I have stocked up on all of the wines below,



LOVE FROM CAHORS Pascal Verhaeghe (above) and Luc de Conti from Bergerac

and would certainly recommend that you do likewise.

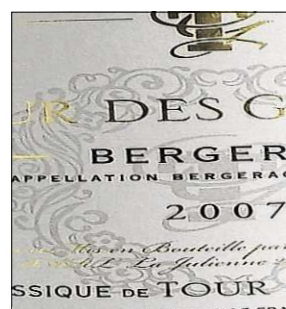
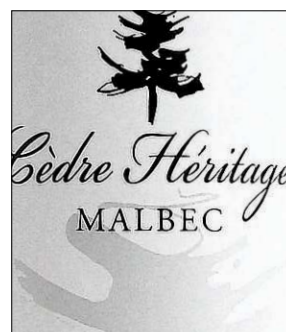
WINES OF THE WEEK

Châteaux du Cèdre Heritage 2007, Cahors, 12.5%, €12.75. This latest vintage is a real step up from the 2006. A lovely nose of red fruits, elegant, smooth dark fruits on the palate, and a cool, very slightly austere finish. A perfect introduction to Cahors at a very reasonable price. Try it with pork or duck dishes.

Stockists: Fallon & Byrne, Exchequer Street; The Corkscrew; Avoca; Liston's, Camden Street; Redmond's, Ranelagh; On the Grapevine, Dalkey; 64 Wine, Glashule; Enowine, IFSC and Monkstown; Le Caveau, Kilkenny.

Tour des Gendres Bergerac 2007, 12.5% €12.65. A marvellous blend of Merlot and Malbec, this was a house wine in the Wilson household at one stage, and may yet make a return.

Light, smooth



and elegant, with silky soft, plump, ripe fruit, finishing dry but never harsh, this is a great all-purpose red to go with most meat dishes.

Stockists: Fallon & Byrne, Exchequer Street; The Corkscrew; Avoca; Liston's, Camden Street; Harvey Nichols, Dundrum Shopping Centre; Nectar Wines, Lucan; thewineshop.ie; Le Caveau, Kilkenny.

Tour des Gendres, Le Gloire de mon Père 2006, Cotes de Bergerac, 12.5% €19.80.

A quite wonderful, soft, satin-coated wine with perfectly judged blackcurrant fruits, and a long, dry finish. Exceptional wine at a very keen price. I would have this with roast meats, probably lamb to show it at its best. **Stockists:** Fallon & Byrne, Exchequer Street; Avoca.

Château du Cèdre, Cahors 2006, 13% €19.95 (and Le Cèdre 2005, €38.95).

A more savoury wine than the Gloire de mon Père above, but equally enjoyable. Lovely, cool, elegant, meaty plum fruits, with a dry but not austere finish. Drink with game and red meats.

(I could not resist also buying a few bottles of the outstanding Le Cèdre, expensive at €38.95, but worth every last cent.) **Stockists:** Fallon & Byrne, Exchequer Street; The Corkscrew; Avoca; Liston's, Camden Street; selected O'Brien's; On the Grapevine, Dalkey; Nectar, Lucan; 64 Wines, Glashule; Enowine, IFSC and Monkstown.

TWO UNDER TWELVE

Il Bucco Montepulciano d'Abruzzo 2008, 13.5% €10.50. A very nicely priced red, with generous, lively, dark cherry fruits and a smooth finish. This region produces some pretty awful cheap wines, but this certainly over-delivers at the price. A good all-purpose bottle to drink with pizza and tomato-based pasta dishes.

Stockists: Jus de Vine, Portmarnock; Claudio's Wines, Newtownmountkennedy; Ardkeen, Waterford; Next Door outlets in Thomastown, Raheen, Granville Hotel, Waterford, Patrickswell, Ennis, Sundrive, Kilkee and Enniscorthy; O'Donovans, Cork; Bin No 9, Goatstown; Hole in the Wall, Dublin 7; Wicklow Arms, Delgany; The Mill, Maynooth; Mac's, Limerick; McHugh's, Kilbarrack; Martin's, Fairview; Deveney's, Dundrum; Redmond's, Ranelagh; Morton's, Galway; Keller's, Nenagh; Callan's, Dundalk; Sheil's, Dorset Street; Paul's, Donegal; Cashel Wine Cellar, Cashel; Dicey Reilly's, Ballyshannon.

Grand'Arte Touriga Nacional, Lisboa 2008, 13.5%, €10.99. Touriga Nacional is one of the great grape varieties of Portugal, but can be ferociously tannic when young.

This reasonably-priced example not only avoids that trap, but also offers lovely, supple, dark fruits with a savoury twist, a light touch of oak, and a smooth easy finish. **Stockists:** The Grapevine, Glasnevin; Redmond's, Ranelagh; Jus de Vine, Portmarnock; The Vintry, Rathmines.

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