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Micro-negotiating the Languedoc



While Tam recovers from her Mad road trip round Europe, and attacks the Bordeaux 2015 tasting notes, we are publishing reminders of how well she writes in a pair of articles about the Languedoc today and tomorrow.

Just over 15 years ago Jancis wrote about a new breed of *négociants* that she described thus: 'much smaller merchant businesses founded by young, quality-driven winemakers. Like the traditional merchants they buy in grapes, grape must and/or wine and then oversee everything until the wine is eventually bottled one or two years later. But they are every bit as passionate about squeezing *terroir*, or a sense of place, into a bottle as those who run the best small domaines. One could call them the new *terroir* merchants.'

Today, micro-*négociants* are almost commonplace in Burgundy, with the likes of Nicolas Potel's Maison Roche de Bellene, Olivier Bernstein, Chanterêves, Christophe Cordier, Mark Haisma... (I

could go on and on) making wonderful, noteworthy wines, every bit as credible as their domaine-bottled peers. In Languedoc-Roussillon, however, they are still a relatively rare thing. In a region dominated by co-ops, many of which are monolithic by any standards, there are some large, well-established négociants such as JeanJean, Skalli and Gérard Bertrand. While Bertrand is a bit like Jadot, with extensive vineyards and estates of his own, producing everything from stunning top-end wines to the most mundane supermarket blends, the other big négociants tend to focus on bulk production for mass distribution, made to satisfy the most undemanding of palates and the most stringent of budgets.

There is, however, a slowly growing number of these small 'terroir merchants' in the region. Hecht & Bannier, Abbotts & Delaunay and Les Clos Perdus are no strangers to Purple Pages, but there's another pair whose wines I have been keeping an eye on since 2012, and in September last year I finally got a chance to meet them.

I stand to be corrected, but Jérôme Joseph might quite possibly have been the first micro-négociant in the region. After a hospitality management degree at L'École Hôtelière de Lausanne (where the authors of our recent *exposé of wine funds* are based) and various jobs abroad, he headed home to the Languedoc and started J Joseph in 1995. In 2007 he was joined by Laurent Calmel, flying winemaker with stints in California, Moldova, Chile, Australia, Spain, the Languedoc, the Rhône and Provence. At last Jérôme could get closer to the winemaking, as he had long wanted to do, and Laurent could put his suitcases away. Calmel & Joseph was born.

With the kind of rugged good looks that makes them a PR dream (no airbrushing needed, see Ken Payton's photo above, Laurent on the left, Jérôme on the right), these two are quite different from each other but have an ease between them that has them finishing each other's sentences. What they share, too, is an intensity and their quite extraordinarily fierce determination and vision to map out the terroir of Languedoc-Roussillon with their wines. Their ambition is to produce a wine from every significant and/or interesting appellation and IGP in Languedoc-Roussillon, a wine that clearly tastes of the place it comes from.

In my opinion, they've achieved just that. To taste through their entire range is a remarkable traversal of Languedoc-Roussillon: the dark broodiness of Corbières; the sweet gaminess and spice of Roussillon; the peppery bright bite of Minervois; the herbs and black fruit of Montpeyroux; the red-fruited elegance and lift of St-Chinian. It's all there, a textbook masterclass of Languedoc-Roussillon. If they're missing anything, I'd say there's room for a rich, structured Chenin from Limoux, and an old-vine Grenache Blanc from St-Chinian. But with the very recent addition of a stunning and very serious Limoux Chardonnay, not yet released, who knows what might be in the pipeline.

There is a distinct Calmel & Joseph thumbprint on each of these wines. From the very first time I came across them, they have always put me in mind of a wild boy, given a haircut and brush down and fitted for a beautifully tailored Savile Row suit. It is a strange fusion of glossy modern elegance, a haute couture if you will, with the untrammelled, unmanicured ruggedness of Languedoc-Roussillon. But it actually works. The Calmel & Joseph suit is light and very finely stitched.

They work closely with 50 growers, spending time in their vineyards, getting involved in every decision from pruning to picking. The winemaking is done by Laurent, with Jérôme (the business head) in close consultation. Their first wine was a Vieux Carignan, IGP Côtes de Brian, from 125-year-old vines, just 3,000 bottles made. Since then they've added 14 different AOCs to the collection and a couple of Pays d'Oc. They make a stunningly good value Crémant de Limoux.

Their newest addition is a Corbières, and as Laurent explained rather grumpily, the reason it took so long to get a Corbières in the range is because 'it's a difficult region, full of wood, full of alcohol, and in the end full of nothing. Just cheap-mentality big producers making lots of bulk wine for Paris. It was difficult to find a good partner.'

It's no secret that to be a high-quality négociant, good partners and thereby good fruit is everything. The pair are clearly proud of their growers and the relationships they have with them. In eight years their production has gone from 3,000 bottles to 700,000. But they've just gone one, perhaps inevitable, step further. In late 2015 they finally took over the ownership of a beautiful wine estate, Domaine de la Madone, in the village of Montirat in the Aude. With this acquisition, it looks like there may be very big changes ahead indeed.

Of the 26 wines described below, 22 are presented according to the burgundian quality hierarchy with which Calmel & Joseph have classified their range. It starts with the regional wines, their Villa Blanche range, all varietal Pays d'Ocs (apart from the Picpoul) that are very good value. The next tier is the pair of red and white Languedoc wines. The next tier, a type of 'villages' quality level, they call Les Terroirs, and this is where the appellation-benchmark lesson really starts. The following tier could be described as their premiers crus, and they call it Les Crus - the Caramany and the Terrasses du Larzac. Finally, at the top of the pyramid, come Les Cuvées Rares: Le Pic and Les Arques. I was lucky enough to taste a small vertical of Le Pic, described at the end of these tasting notes.

The last four wines were sent to me by Samuel Delafont, described as 'Artisan Négociant' on both label and website.

VILLA BLANCHE

- Calmel & Joseph, Villa Blanche Sauvignon Blanc 2014 IGP Pays d'Oc 100% Sauvignon Blanc. Light, but ripe, gooseberry nose. Juicy with just enough tart pep to give the wine a bit of bite, but deliciously free of New World tropical-fruited shouty sweetness. Greengage and just a hint of green fig. Leafy streak on the finish. Great uncomplicated stuff. (TC) 12% Drink 2015-2016
16
- Calmel & Joseph, Villa Blanche 2015 Picpoul de Pinet Pale lemon. Bit of fruit bonbon on the nose. Crisp and clean, melon and papaya. (TC) 12.5% Drink 2016-2017
15
- Calmel & Joseph, Villa Blanche 2014 Picpoul de Pinet Just a faint imprint of the scent of May blossom and crushed leaf. Savoury, dry, citrus tinged with the taste of mint lingering in the mouth. A bit of sunflower seed and grapefruit pith. Salty. Very appetising, almost infused with botanicals - the vinous version of G&T! So very refreshing. (TC) 12.5% Drink 2015-2017
16.5
- Calmel & Joseph, Villa Blanche Chardonnay 2015 IGP Pays d'Oc Pale gold. Delicate floral aromas, wild honeysuckle and lemon verbena. Silky texture, soft herb and lemon veil drawn over white stone fruit. A light note of vanilla pod and cardamom. All the components are there, drawn in by a tense thread of acidity. Dry, understated and rather lovely. Surprisingly long. **VGW** (TC) 13% Drink 2016-2018
£8.99 Hennings Wine 16.5
- Calmel & Joseph, Villa Blanche Rosé Grenache 2015 IGP Pays d'Oc Pale peachy pink. Apricot-blossom perfume. Sappy and bright, without a hint of confection. Chock-full of juicy nectarine and apricot fruit, lightly restrained by dry elegance. For a Pays d'Oc rosé, this is exceptional.

(TC)12.5% Drink 2016-2017

16.5

- Calmel & Joseph, Villa Blanche Rosé Grenache 2014 IGP Pays d'Oc 100% Grenache. Pale provençal pink. Pretty, peachy, scented. Pink Lady apples and early-season raspberries – just before the real warmth of the sun has ripened them to sweetness. Delicate and dry with just a smidgeon of chalky texture on the finish. Very good rosé. I'd love to taste this alongside some Provence pinks. (TC)12.5% Drink 2015-2016
16
- Calmel & Joseph, Villa Blanche Pinot Noir 2015 IGP Pays d'Oc Translucent bright ruby. Cherry and liquorice and wet twigs. So mouthwatering! The nose smells very sweet and fruity, but it's as dry as a bone with slightly grainy, fine tannins. Super-tangy cherry tucked tightly into the mid palate with a long cinnamon finish. Great stuff. **GV** (TC)13% Drink 2016-2017
£8.99 Waitrose 16
- Calmel & Joseph, Villa Blanche Pinot Noir 2014 IGP Pays d'Oc Pale ruby. Very clean, pure, bell-like damson and unlike so many Pinots from warmer climes, not too sweet/thick smelling. Fresh and neat, cherry liquorice slicing across the mid palate, and a crisp tannin framework tucked around sappy fruit. Fun and bright without too much onerous ambition. (TC) Drink 2016-2018
£8.99 Waitrose 16
- Calmel & Joseph, Villa Blanche Syrah 2014 IGP Pays d'Oc Parcels vinified separately then blended. Bottled yesterday. Gamey, dark plums and bit of tarry smoke. Lots of thick chewy tannins, purple tasting, like char-grilled black figs. Not massively long but it has good presence and is **GV**. (TC) Drink 2016-2019
£9.99 Wine Therapy 15.5

LES LANGUEDOC

- Calmel & Joseph 2014 Languedoc Grenache Blanc, Roussanne, Marsanne. Fermented at 15 °C in stainless steel with one month on fine lees. Just bottled at time of tasting (September 2015). Clean, tight and quite floral on the nose. White citrus. Hint of nettle, green, and then lots of compact juicy fruit on the mid palate. Real core. Delicious, defined edges, mouth-watering finish and length. (TC)13% Drink 2016-2019
16.5
- Calmel & Joseph 2014 Languedoc Roughly 50% Syrah, 30% Grenache, 20% Carignan. Quite surprisingly pale ruby. Ripe nose - like bramble berries in warm September sunshine. Bit of singed straw. Lots of smokiness at the core wrapped up in fruit - gorgeous piercing acidity, lip-smacking. There's a bit of rosemary and lavender lift on the finish. (TC) Drink 2016-2018
16.5

LES TERROIRS

- Calmel & Joseph, Les Terroirs Vieux Carignan 2014 IGP Côtes de Brian Earthy dusty nose. A little furry. Unexpected sweetness to start, like a mouthful of wild strawberries, and the slightly bitter-leafy note you'd get if you ate them little green calyx and all. Real charm and appeal, this cinnamon-lined berry-bright wine has a bracing face-to-sea-breeze freshness and it's only right at the end that the old Carignan tannins drift across and get tangled up, rather pleasantly, in all that fruit. Quite different to the 2013 - perhaps somewhere between the 2012 and 2013 in character. But this one is more fun, more front-loaded, more light-hearted, and

you could almost drink it without food. (TC)14.5% Drink 2016-2022

17

- Calmel & Joseph, Les Terroirs Vieux Carignan 2013 IGP Côtes de Brian125-year-old vines in Minervois.

Mineral scented - that very particular smell of fresh rain on dry earth (petrichor) and cold wet concrete. Slight aniseed note spilling over into the palate, which is rich with the flavour of Victoria plums simmering on the stove. Streak of sage green. Woven, craggy tannins, like the hands of an old man who's worked in the fields all his life. Freshness, cutting across the ripe robust palate like a silver knife. Some earthiness and earthy spices collecting on the finish.

(TC)14% Drink 2016-2021

17

- Calmel & Joseph, Les Terroirs 2014 St-ChinianPinot-like in its transparency of colour and perfume. Chewy, sharply etched red fruit on a palate stretched as tightly as an artist's canvas on a frame. All structure and tension at the moment, underlying complexity promising much more when this relaxes its grip a little. Long, dry, tobacco-leaf finish. (TC)13.5% Drink 2018-2025

17+

- Calmel & Joseph, Les Terroirs 2013 St-ChinianQuite extraordinary perfume! Almost burgundian in its lift and purity. Violets and cranberry and sour cherry, clinched in high-fluted acidity and cello-string-fine tannins, but so much more than the sum of its parts. Real purity. Nuances of garrigue trailing through the finish like dust blowing in the wind. So long. Hard to spit. (TC)14% Drink 2016-2023

17.5

- Calmel & Joseph, Les Terroirs 2014 FaugèresAppetising nose of warm dark fruit and toast. Then a real fistful of tannins. Thick purple fruit, lots of dark clove and nutmeg spiciness. A real mouthful, bustles across the tongue bristling with confidence and character. Dry persistently spicy finish. Lots of dry fragrant herbs packed into this - really really thyme-scented and that lingers in the mouth for a long time. Needs time and big food. (TC)14% Drink 2018-2025

16.5+

- Calmel & Joseph, Les Terroirs 2013 FaugèresAlso one of their earliest wines. This is the alto to the St-Chinian soprano. Much more garrigue on the nose here - crushed verbena and lavender and rosemary and laurel. Purple flavours. Elderberries, boysenberries, slightly rugged tannins. This grapples where the St-Chinian dances. All marshalled into a tight-knit, sappy finish, a sage note lingering long. (TC)13.5% Drink 2017-2024

17

- Calmel & Joseph, Les Terroirs 2013 MinervoisBottled yesterday. Bright, and *pretty* on the nose. Spicy! Peppery! Explodes and crackles with spices. Then a swathe of sweet, beautifully shaped red fruit across the palate. Softness and spice. A kind of Moroccan wine in its blend of sweet spices and sweet fruit and yet savour. Cheeky yet charming. So sappy on the finish. A wine you really want to *drink*. (TC)14% Drink 2016-2021

17

- Calmel & Joseph, Les Terroirs 2014 CorbièresBit of black cherry fruit, bit of paint-like aromas. Roasted fruit and cacao nibs, dark and broody and guttural structure with an intense, dark ripeness at the very core. Garrigue woven into every sip and girded by powerful polished tannins. Surprising grace for its immensity. (TC)14% Drink 2017-2024

17

- Calmel & Joseph, Les Terroirs 2013 CorbièresCompletely different from the preceding Minervois. Ram-packed with laurel and box and resin and eucalyptus aromatics. Tea leaves on the palate, mixed with very black fruit, broody and some seriously swarthy tannins. Massive tannins - lots of chew - needs time and a big steak! But gorgeous dark tarry fruit. (TC)13.5%

Drink 2017-2025

16.5+

- Calmel & Joseph, Les Terroirs 2014 Côtes du Roussillon-Villages Quite enchanting nose - fresh ripe damson, rosemary and the lightest note of just-ground coffee beans. Absolutely gorgeous! Vibrant and dense red fruit, almost luscious, sashays across the palate and winds itself around the tongue with shimmering energy. A lick of bright acidity and, just playing orchestra to the solo, spice and earthiness and leather and coffee. Tannins bold and muscular and accurately matched to that Roussillon-sun-soaked fruit. (TC)14% Drink 2016-2025

17.5

- Calmel & Joseph, Les Terroirs 2013 Côtes du Roussillon Gamey/saucisson nose. Brocaded woven palate, peppered with nutmeg and allspice. Very dry, skulking tannins. Lots of tang and texture but the fruit is a little buried in burly tannins, spice to the fore. Unfriendly, but complex. I'd put this one away for now and wait for a bit of age to mellow the surly youth. (TC) Drink 2018-2024

16.5++

- Calmel & Joseph, Les Terroirs 2013 Languedoc, Montpeyroux *Between Larzac and Pic, 150 m high. Syrah, Grenache and Carignan - no Mourvèdre.* Pungent liqueur fruit and furniture glue leads a bold charge out the glass. This one comes at you jousting! Sharp and prickling and cough syrup and liquorice. Then there's a mid-palate pause and sweet blackcurrant pastille and menthol fill the mouth, as if to apologise for all that upfront aggression. Dominant tannins, not brutish, but they prevail. Lovely length. (TC) Drink 2017-2022

16.5

LES CRUS

- Calmel & Joseph, Les Crus 2014 Limoux *One of their highest vineyards at 300 m above sea level. 100% Chardonnay. To be released in 2016. They did a lot of different presses, working with texture all the way, pressing until they felt that the texture was right.* Rich mandarin nose, slight hint of flower nectar. Rich and tense - apricots, sweet satsuma, a tiny bit of caramel brioche. Gorgeous tight-knit acidity, shimmering with intensity. Structure and tension, really exciting. Long. So much here with a long life ahead of it. (TC)13% Drink 2017-2025

17.5

- Calmel & Joseph, Les Crus 2013 Côtes du Roussillon-Villages, Caramany *A very small AOP within the Côtes du Roussillon-Villages. These are the last vines before the Pyrenees, then it's Spain. The vigneron cuts the grass for 10 ha by hand. Seriously organic.* Ripe dark pretty nose. Little bit of nettle, green pepper, herbs. Brambly dark fruit and chewy chunky tannins. Has a bit of a growl. Sharp acidity, like Seville oranges. Black pepper and a singed note on the finish. It desperately needs food. No flattering sweetness but lots of fierce Caramany character. (TC) Drink 2018-2025

16.5+

- Calmel & Joseph, Les Crus 2014 Languedoc, Terrasses du Larzac *50% Mourvèdre, 25% Syrah, 25% Grenache.* Not pronounced, but distinctive nose: pomegranate and beetroot, orange peel, guava. Glossy intensity spreads across the palate filling all corners of the mouth with reverberating layers of flavour. Clenched with tension and intent, ambitious, beautifully balanced, tannins smouldering in the background, no single component dominating. Strong, spiced finish. Almost long, and then it just fades a tiny bit too quickly for so much delivery. (TC)13.5% Drink 2016-

2024

17.5-

- Calmel & Joseph, Les Crus 2013 Languedoc, Terrasses du Larzac 50% Mourvèdre, 25% Grenache, 25% Syrah.

With time, Laurent tells me, this wine becomes very perfumed. At the moment it smells remarkably of red apples! And chestnuts. Notably light and soulful nose after the Caramany. Really gorgeously ripe fruit with an edge of caramelised orange peel. Layers of flavour here. Warm spices. Red currants. Quince. Precise scythe-like acidity but there's a distinctive savoury gentle-roast coffee note here too. Almost mocha. Stunning. Silky tannins. (TC) Drink 2016-2025

17.5

LES CUVÉES RARES

- Calmel & Joseph, Les Cuvées Rares La Ruffe 2013 Languedoc *Ruffe is the local word to describe the type of soil, very unusual, dark red black. It can be found round Lake Salagou. This wine could have been a Terrasses du Larzac but it isn't because it is vinified in Lavalette ('a "village" with 25 people living there', says Jérôme with a half smile. 'Depending on how many people are still alive, it may be a commune', remarks Laurent drily). Made and aged for six months in barrels that had housed a white wine for 18 months. 50% Carignan, 40% Syrah, 10% Cinsault. They didn't want to pump the wine, so they had to carry it down with a pick-up truck. No filtration.*

Dark chocolate, peppermint, green herbs. Lots of black chocolate, lots of power, massive structure. Thick velvet-and-portcullis tannins with opulent fruit firmly behind bars at the moment, but it's definitely there. Tightly bound. Very imposing. A sleeping dragon. Needs five to 10 years. (TC) Drink 2019-2026

17+

- Calmel & Joseph, Les Cuvées Rares Le Pic 2013 Languedoc, Pic-St Loup 5,000-6,000 bottles produced. UK is biggest market. Very curious nose - vegetal (almost lettuce-like), red pepper and redbush tea leaves. Herbal complexity and a shell of green spices - some peppercorn, some cardamom - encompassing light red fruit with citric acidity. Orange peel and tamarind tang persist on the finish. (TC) 14% Drink 2017-2023

17

- Calmel & Joseph, Les Cuvées Rares Le Pic 2012 Languedoc, Pic-St Loup *Not a ripe vintage. Rainy year, cool, lower alcohols.* Smells like crushed green hedgerow leaves. Herbal and tea leaf but more black tea than red tea. Woody spice from slightly drying tannins. Something a little medicinal and citrus clinging to the red fruit. There's an edge of sweetness, but mostly tang and savouriness. (TC) 14% Drink 2015-2019

16.5

- Calmel & Joseph, Les Cuvées Rares Le Pic 2011 Languedoc, Pic-St Loup *Pretty hot year, very ripe fruit.*

Perfumed sweet-fruited peppery nose. A little sweeter, softer, than the 2012. There's a leafy raspberry tang across the palate and a persistent staccato of pink peppercorn, swaddled in rather plush tannins. The most approachable of the four vintages, showing real charm and elegance. Dances rather prettily across the palate. (TC) 14% Drink 2015-2020

17

- Calmel & Joseph, Les Cuvées Rares Le Pic 2010 Languedoc, Pic-St Loup *Crunchy nutty nose with a hint of animal. The first vintage with a totally different label. Loads of mouth-puckering*

acidity and tannins - almost crackling with structure around the still super-fresh red fruit, tinged with damson/quince paste. Like the 2011 and 2013, lively bite of pink peppercorns. Lovely intensity and there's an autumnal leaf note on this that lingers and plays in the mouth. The most gentle on the palate of the four vintages. (TC)14% Drink 2014-2019

17

S DELAFONT

- **S Delafont 2013 Limoux** Samuel Delafont calls himself, on the label, an 'artisan négociant... with a militant approach', specialising in the crus of the Languedoc. This Limoux is 100% Chardonnay grown on sandstone, clay and limestone at 450 m elevation. Fermented in barrels and nine months in French oak barrels.

Nose laden with linden blossom and Danish pastry. It smells and tastes full-bodied, creaminess of lemon curd, sandalwood spice tingling on the finish. (TC)13.5% Drink 2016-2019

16

- **S Delafont 2014 Languedoc** 50% Syrah, 25% Grenache, 20% Carignan, 5% Mourvèdre. All the grapes come from Pic St-Loup, Terrasses du Larzac, La Clape and Minervois. Syrah and Mourvèdre macerated for 30 days. Low-temperature fermentation for the Grenache. Carbonic maceration for the Carignan.

Translucent purple-ruby colour. Slightly gamey nose. Light brambly berries and a winter-hedgerow woodiness that charms with quiet understated ruggedness. Dry-spiced, manicured tannins. As restrained and elegant as afternoon tea at The Savoy. If you're looking for the rich-fruited *sauvage* of the Languedoc, this isn't it. (TC)14% Drink 2016-2019

16

- **S Delafont 2013 Languedoc, La Clape** 58% Syrah, 42% Mourvèdre. On clay and limestone. 'Long maceration', 12 months' ageing in 60% French oak barrels and 40% in stainless steel. Dark ruby, old-blood tinges at the core. Spicy sawdust perfume, a fine layer over a darker layer of blackened plums. Driftwood tannins, soft-lined yet craggy. Charred black fruit shot through with cumin and crushed coriander, and on the finish, a note of rosemary lingering and tingling. Quite light for La Clape, although so fresh! (TC)14% Drink 2016-2019

16

- **S Delafont 2013 Languedoc, Pic-St Loup** Cinnamon. Cumin. Blackcurrant. Refreshing, lithe, cool - almost minty but much more subtle than that. A tightly woven, fine-stitched, beautifully tailored elegance that glances at savoury-sharp red-berried fruit but is fundamentally so integrated that it becomes almost a pointless exercise to try and peel apart the flavours. It works as a whole. A beautiful wine for top-end food. (TC)14.5% Drink 2016-2022

17