



ABOVE: Côtes de Gascogne wines form a large part of the southwest's white output

THE WHITES

If you concentrate on the 18 AC and VDQS appellations, the southwest looks rather like red wine country. In fact, just over half the output is white, thanks largely to Vin de Pays des Côtes de Gascogne. Nobody is pretending that this light, fresh white is a profound wine, but it has its place, especially when beefed up with Gros Manseng or Sauvignon Blanc. There are now also some successful oaked cuvées.

Gros Manseng and the closely related Petit Manseng come into their own in the two white-only ACs: Jurançon, which needs no introduction, and Pacherenc du Vic Bilh, which perhaps does. Pacherenc is the white of the Madiran zone, but from

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the cooler, higher, northwest-facing slopes. Three-quarters of it is sweet – intensely honeyed and fruity, but distinctively tangy. The grapes are harvested late into typically long, sunny autumns – and traditionally also on New Year's Eve for a St-Sylvestre cuvée. The dry wines, oaked and unoaked, have a similar intensity and freshness.

The sweet wines are based on Petit Manseng, together with Petit Courbu and occasionally some Arrufiac. The latter is Pacherenc's own grape variety and is mostly used for dry wines, though not with the enthusiasm given to its partner Gros Manseng.

Neighbouring St-Mont makes dry whites from the same four grape varieties, again with lively unoaked and richer oaked bottlings. Tursan, to the west, also has the Mansengs, but its own white variety is Baroque, which has acidity but needs other varieties for aroma and finesse. In fact white wine, once the staple, is now only 16% of Tursan, but it has a celebrated champion in the three-Michelin-starred chef Michel Guérard. He is one of only two producers outside the cooperative, with his 20ha (hectare) Baron de Bachen estate.

At the other end of the region, in the Aveyron and Cantal departments, a tiny amount of white VDQS is made in Entraygues et Fel. White represents one in five bottles of the total output from just 20ha (there were 1,000ha before phylloxera) and six producers. Traditionally, whites were grown only in Entraygues, which is lower down and on sandier soils. Now, Laurent Mousset of La Chèvre Blanche, who was the first to replant vineyards up in Le Fel in 1985, has planted some Chenin Blanc at 450m. A yet smaller volume of white wine is made in Estaing – a VDQS with 14ha and France's smallest coop (12 members, 11ha).

The Mauzac grape's heartland is further south in Gaillac, which straddles the Tarn river. But Mauzac is not alone here. As well as Ondenc, Sauvignon Blanc, Muscadelle and the recently revived Prunelart, the oddly named and variously spelt Len de l'El has been regaining ground. With low acidity, it can produce well-rounded quince/fig/apricot-flavoured dry whites as well as impressive botrytised sweet wines.

PRODUCERS TO FOLLOW

Côtes de Gascogne:

Domaine du Tariquet

Pacherenc du Vic Bilh (dry and sweet): Château Bouscassé; Domaine de Maouries; Producteurs Plaimont

St-Mont: Producteurs Plaimont

Tursan: Baron de Bachen

Gaillac (dry and sweet):

Domaine Rotier

Gaillac sparkling:

Domaine de Labarthe