

CELLAR

Swashbuckler

Madiran is a dark, spicy, tannic expression of the French Southwest.

BY JOHN WINTHROP HAEGER

If one were to design a wine from scratch to suit the personality of a swash-buckling musketeer and to complement the goose-and duck-fat-based cuisine of the French southwest, that wine would surely resemble madiran. It's deeply colored and full of extract, like a St-Estèphe: almost black, with highlights of dark red or purple, like an old-fashioned Cahors; seasoned with peppery spices, as if some red Châteauneuf-du-Pape had been blended in, at least in its youth, which cuts the omnipresent fat in the fare of its native Gascony.

The Madiran region lies about 30 miles northwest of Tarbes, where the foothills of the Pyrenees melt into the valley of the Garonne. The local wine was once widely appreciated – by pilgrims, bound for Santiago de Compostela, as well as at the court of Henry IV and in northern European export markets – before being eclipsed by the more refined and better-mannered wines of neighboring Bordeaux. Only heroic efforts by a handful of local vintners, beginning in the 1970s, saved madiran from oblivion. They championed lower yields to improve concentration and introduced the use of oak barrels to help tame the wines' legendary tannins. (The process of micro-oxygenation, now widespread if controversial throughout the wine industry, was devised by a Madiranais in the 1990s to soften tannins without the use of wood.)

Classically the wine is a blend of tannat (an apparently local variety not much grown elsewhere, except in Uruguay, where Basque settlers carried it in the 19th century), cabernet franc, cabernet sauvignon, and another local red variety called fer (iron) or pinenc. Many vintners, though, now coax their best wines from pure tannat, and a 2005 proposal encourages local growers to increase the percentages of tannat in their vineyards.

Despite improved vinification, madiran makes an unfriendly quaffing wine. Locals advise drinking it with some high-butter-fat cheese, rich pâté, or good ham and recommend giving it five to ten years of bottle age, if possible. Time does seem to transform this restless youth into one of France's best reds: a fleshy, sensuous, and handsomely structured wine with the alluring aroma of toasted country bread.



Tasting Notes

Only a small number of madirans are imported into the United States, but we found ten good ones (two of them produced according to the specifications to a California winery), plus one good tannat-based wine each from California and Uruguay.

BONNY DOON "DEWN" 2002 (\$25). A tannat cuvee made at Château de Viella in the Madiran region for California's Bonny Doon Vineyard, with the pressed skins of white petit manseng grapes added during fermentation. Exceptionally aromatic, with scents of evergreen, cigar box, ink and earth; then rich and chewy in the mouth with some chocolate. Unusual and exciting.

BONNY DOON "HEART OF DARKNESS" 2002 (\$18). A blend of tannat (60 percent), cabernet franc, and cabernet sauvignon, made at Chateau de Viella. Inky wild cherry and blackberry aromas; burly and earthy but somehow still angular on the palate.

CHÂTEAU BOUSSASSÉ 2002 (\$17). Some ink, wet stones, and smoke in the aroma. Attractive midpalate with a hint of sweetness and licorice; then seamless and mouth-coating until a grippy finish overpowers the fruit.

CHÂTEAU LAFFITTE-TESTON "REFLET DU TERROIR" 2002 (\$14). Seventy percent tannat, plus both cabernets. Wet earth, blackberry, and evergreen aromas; well mannered on the palate, with intense black fruit flavors.

CHÂTEAU LAFFITTE-TESTON "VIEILLES VIGNES" 2002 (\$18). All tannat. The nose shows ink, blackberry, black pepper, and orange peel; the finish is long and strong in minerality.

CHÂTEAU MONTUS CUVÉE PRESTIGE 2002 (\$60). Opens with intense aromas and nutty highlights, leading to bright grape-cherry flavors with hints of citrus peels. Exceptionally charming, elegant, and complex.

CHÂTEAU DE PERRON 2001 (\$13). Dense, earthy nose, with highlights of cocoa, nuts and a variety of hard spices. Fruit-sweet on the palate, with a blackberry and graphite core and well-wrapped tannins.

DOMAINE BERTHOUMIEU CUVÉE CHARLES DE BATZ 2001 (\$20). Aromas of meat and wet earth; flavors of cassis and graphite; rich and soft.

DOMAINE LAFFONT "ERIGONE" 2002 (\$20). Tannat and cabernet franc (80/20). Incense, leather, fir balsam and ink aromas; then rich and intense, with chocolate and cassis, on the palate.

DOMAINE LAFFONT "HECATE" 2002 (\$35). More New World in style than Old, made from 100 percent tannat in new oak. Mint and camphor aromas; inky and dense, with flavors of coffee and cassis.

TABLAS CREEK VINEYARD PASO ROBLES TANNAT 2003 (\$35). Black and opaque, with aromas of mint, camphor, and tobacco, with some overtones of Christmas greens. The tannins are neatly wrapped in sweet, ripe berry fruit but emerge unmistakably on the finish. Big and beautifully crafted.

VINA PROGRESO TANNAT RESERVE 2002 (\$19). A handsome 100 percent tannat produced by a Franco-Uruguayan joint venture. Vanilla, caramel, coffee, and floral elements on the nose; then sweet cassis, blackberry, licorice, and black pepper in the mouth. - J.W.H.