



Bandol: Mourvèdre in the Limelight

"Their head in the sun and their feet in the sea" is a common saying for the ideal growing conditions for Mourvèdre, and nowhere is that more true than in the south-facing amphitheater that's located around the towns of Bandol, Le Castellet and La Cadière d'Azur (just to name a few of the villages). Covering roughly 2,700 acres, the appellation of Bandol was created in 1941 and is the home of Mourvèdre, a late-ripening, heat-loving, and challenging variety that yields big, concentrated and structured wines when done right. This gorgeous region is loaded with steep, terraced plots of vines and mostly limestone soils that lie within sight of the Mediterranean Sea. The surrounding mountains and the proximity to the sea yield a unique microclimate that possesses loads of sun (the region sees over 3,000 hours of sunlight per year), cool nights, high humidity and little precipitation. This provides a long, gradual growing season that's ideally suited for Mourvèdre.

Looking at the wines, the reds (and rosés) are required to contain at least 50% Mourvèdre; however, most cuvées contain more, and numerous wines reviewed here are upwards of 80-90 percent. Grenache, Cinsault and Carignan round out the other varieties, and are mostly used as blending components. In addition, the reds are required to spend 18 months in barrel prior to bottling. It's worth noting that while the region's stereotype is one of masculine, tannic and rustic wines, I think this is far from the reality, and the top wines today show beautiful purity of fruit, fine tannin and even polished, elegant characters. Looking at the rosés, they span the gamut from lightly color, quaffable and Provençal styled efforts, to rich, structured and even age-worthy (if you're so inclined) blends that show best with food. In my view, the top rosés are based largely on Mourvèdre and strike a unique balance between richness and freshness. In addition, while I'm normally in the group that thinks rosés should be consumed in their first year, Bandol rosés can have broad drink windows and show nicely for 2-3 years. While I think it's unfortunate that the region is more widely known for their rosés than their reds (which I think are world class), there's no denying that the top rosés from this region are superb. For the whites, the main grapes are Clairette, Bourboulenc, Ugni Blanc and Sauvignon Blanc. Most are clean, crisp and refreshing, and best consumed in their youth.

This report focuses primarily on the 2010s and 2011s, both of which are excellent vintages that share plenty of similarities to the same vintages in the Rhône Valley (which is not always the case). The 2010s yield beautifully defined, rich and structured wines that will reward cellaring, while the 2011s possess more upfront appeal and ripe, hedonistic characters. In general, the 2011s should be consumed before the 2010s. All of these wines were tasted during my trip through the region in September, 2013.

—Jeb Dunnuck



PIBARNON ROUGE 2010

“Moving to the classic cuvee and even more impressive (it was one of the top wines I was able to taste for this report), the 2010 Bandol, which is over 90% Mourvedre, sees partial destemming and aging in oak casks, offers both gorgeous aromatic complexity and superb richness and depth on the palate. Giving up notions of pepper, Provencal herbs, underbrush and leather, with a solid core of dark fruit, this medium to full-bodied, pure, layered and beautifully balanced effort needs another 2-3 years of bottle age, and will easily keep for a decade or more past that.” (94 pts, eRobertParker.com #211, Feb 2014).

PIBARNON ROUGE 2011

“More approachable, yet still with classic Mourvedre character, the 2011 Bandol (same blend/elevage as the 2010) offers ample blackberry, raspberry, underbrush, allspice and assorted floral nuances to go with a medium to full-bodied, balanced and seamless profile on the palate. Polished and already delicious, yet with fine tannin and solid concentration, it will continue to thrill for 10-15 years. These are classic Bandols that should not be missed!” (93 pts, eRobertParker.com #211, Feb 2014).

PIBARNON ROSE 2012

“One of the top roses coming from the region, the 2012 Bandol Rose gives up mineral-driven notions of orange peel, rose petal, hints of strawberry and distinct, saline-like minerality that gives lift and length to the fruit. Medium-bodied, fresh and crisp, with a focused and lengthy feel, it’s a gorgeous effort that should not be missed.” (92 pts, eRobertParker.com #211, Feb 2014).