

Decanter BUYING GUIDE

EXPERT RECOMMENDATIONS AND ESSENTIAL READING



PHOTOGRAPH PHIL BARKER



This month's tastings

90 EDITORS' PICKS

Team highlights from recent tastings

92 BANDOL

77 wines tasted Reds, whites and rosés from the French Riviera: four Outstanding wines

100 ETNA ROSSO

109 wines tasted Making wine on the slopes of an active volcano is an inherently risky venture. The rewards? This extensive tasting of Etna reds revealed three Outstanding and 41 Highly recommended wines

108 EMPORDA, CATALONIA

Expert's choice 18 selected by Fintan Kerr

113 WEEKDAY WINES & WEEKEND WINES

25 top picks up to £20, and seven at £20-£50

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Bandol

Red, white and rosé wines, all from this small but well-reputed region on France's Côte d'Azur, with quality and interest across the board

REPORT ELIZABETH GABAY MW

Bandol is an appellation with a dual image – part of Provence proper, but not part of its marketing activities. This tasting offered an opportunity to ascertain whether any distinctive Bandol characters shone through, especially in the rosés.

Overall, the quality of the wines excelled, with really good examples in all three colours (30 rosé, 29 red and 18 white) in a distinctly Bandol style, especially evident in the big, structured reds and rosés. There is a growing interest in the whites from this region, so it was good to see a decent representation. Despite the high volume of rosé produced in the region (74% in 2023, according to Vins de Bandol), the true stars of this tasting were the reds, representing 71% of the wines scoring 91 points and above.

Though the one 2016 wine (Domaine Maubernard, see p95) did have the biggest tannic structure of all, reflecting the traditional vision of Bandol reds as being ageworthy, most of the reds were showing much greater youthful accessibility than Bandols of decades past. The windows for ageing potential were judged to be lower than usually estimated – although it's worth noting that these wines are yet to go through the common closed, 'moody teenager' phase that occurs at around five to six years. We queried how well these wines would age with such fruit-forward friendliness when young, and wondered whether some producers keep some cuvées back to release with more age.

Fruit profiles varied from deep, dark, opulent berries to blue fruit and elegant minerality. Others, namely Château Canadel and Peyraud's Domaine Tempier, have a more traditional, intense tannic structure.

Beatrice Bessi was expecting more alcohol,

so was surprised to find only a few had high levels. The least successful wines were tasting faded or too lightweight. Oak use was homogenous and not overwhelming.

While the reds may have attracted the high scores, the rosés were probably the most interesting category – compared to Provence rosés, most were distinctly darker, yet there were certainly some with a paler, salmon-pink tone, albeit with a bigger structure. Poppy de Courcy-Wheeler said that some reminded her of light-red clairets.

Both Bessi and de Courcy-Wheeler felt that these are rosés with ageing potential and that consumers can be confident in seeking out older vintages, although both were cautious about recommending more than a year of ageing. De Courcy-Wheeler wondered if aged rosés would have a better chance in the market if they were sold as a different category with their own shelf space, in order to give consumers confidence in the style.

With global demand for white wines growing, it wasn't surprising that there were a good number of whites in the tasting. Although lack of acidity is often considered a problem in Bandol, especially with Clairette as a majority component (50% minimum), the 2023 vintage showed very fresh acidity. An oily texture was also observed and de Courcy-Wheeler noticed that for the whites and rosés, the word 'tangy' came up a lot. The Clairette character of soft honeyed pears and white flowers gave the wines an attractive, distinctive character and Bessi highlighted that the intense ripeness of fruit often gave the impression of some oak ageing.

With prices ranging from about £15 to more than £50, the ageing potential of all three colours helps justify the investment in Bandol.

THE JUDGES



Elizabeth Gabay MW

is a wine writer, educator, speaker and consultant, with a focus on rosé and the wines of southern France, where she has lived since 2002. Her second book *Rosés of Southern France*, co-authored with son Ben Bernheim, was published in July 2022 (£22 Zalabim Conseil)



Beatrice Bessi

is head sommelier at Chiltern Firehouse luxury hotel and restaurant in central London. A DWWA judge, Bessi is a CMS Advanced Sommelier and WSET educator. She moved to the UK from Italy in 2016 and began her sommelier career at 67 Pall Mall



Poppy de Courcy-Wheeler

is a wine buyer for Waitrose, focusing on rosé, Burgundy and regional France, having previously worked for more than five years in roles including wine buying and head of trade sales at importer Charles Taylor Wines

THE SCORES 77 wines tasted

Exceptional 0 Outstanding 4 Highly recommended 26 Recommended 42
Commended 5 Fair 0 Poor 0

Entry criteria: producers and UK agents were invited to submit their latest-vintage AP Bandol wines in white, rosé or red, and preferably all three if possible

Outstanding 95-97pts



Château de Pibarnon, Nuances 2020

Elizabeth Gabay MW 94

Beatrice Bessi 95

Poppy de Courcy-Wheeler 95

US\$53 Terry's West Village

Producing different expressions of Mourvèdre (including reds) from different terroirs, Eric de Saint Victor felt that consumers were drinking his Pibarnon rosé too young and wanted to make a quality rosé using his red wine knowledge. Nuances rosé was thus created in 2014. The 2020 is 100% Mourvèdre; oxidative winemaking includes extended ageing, half in oak casks and half in stoneware jars. The wine stays in the cellar until at least the second spring after harvest.

Elizabeth Gabay MW Firm

minerality and crunchy red berry fruit with fading notes of tropical fruits on the palate, yet it's still one of the freshest wines in the line-up.

Beatrice Bessi Sweet berries, like strawberry jam. Savoury, glossy-textured palate with dried herbs and smoky, spicy layers. Pleasant minty character. Balanced, complex.

Poppy de Courcy-Wheeler More like a claret than a rosé. Red fruit with grip and salinity.

Bravo for choosing to make an unfashionably deeper-coloured version. **Drink** 2024-2034

Alcohol 14%



Château de Pibarnon 2019

EG 95 BB 95 PC 95

£52.99 Les Caves de Pyrene

Eric de Saint Victor took over the family estate in 2000. The terraces his parents had dug into the limestone hillside quarry and the 9.5ha south-facing amphitheatre of vines they created are the source of the estate's flagship red. The 2019 is 90% Mourvèdre with 10% Grenache, vinified partly using whole berries and aged for 20 months in new oak. 2019 was also the year that Pibarnon obtained organic certification.

EG Restrained nose opens up to jammy flavours. Sweet fruit, creamy acidity and silky, firm tannins. Blue floral minerality. Full-bodied but elegant.

BB Precise, lifted nose of jammy red fruit, flowers, dried mint and lavender. Fresh, glossy palate. Savoury balsamic lift. Good length and polished tannins.

PC A serious wine with precise, intense fruit supported by oak. Ripe dark plum and damson fruit. Tight structure and bright acidity. Still early days yet.

Drink 2024-2041 **Alc** 14% ►



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CHATEAU DE PIBARNON
83740 LA CADIÈRE D'AZUR