



MALBECISTAN

Argentina may have lodged Malbec in many wine drinkers' minds, but it is in France's Lot Valley that its story began. **Jacqueline Friedrich** returns to the source, profiling nine producers who are transforming the modern face of Cahors, and a further six who are doing as much for the variety in the Loire

One Sunday afternoon in February 2016, James Williams, reporter for CNN's travel show *In 24 Hours: Buenos Aires*, visited a winery that I'm assuming was in the Mendoza Valley. He told viewers that Malbec, the region's premier grape, was from France but had been perfected in Argentina because the latter has the climate to fulfill Malbec's potential whereas France does not.

Fighting words? Fake news? A bit of both—but more accurately, a report woefully dated and blissfully ignorant of the French side of the story.

To be sure, Malbec was born in France. According to *Wine Grapes*—by Jancis Robinson MW, Julia Harding MW, and José Vouillamoz—DNA analysis shows that the grape variety, which they call Cot, is a natural progeny of Prunelard, which is native to the Tarn, and Magdeleine Noire from the Charentes, both in southwest France. Analyzing its siblings, they conclude that it's natural to assume that the grape's place of origin was the ancient French province of Quercy, which encompassed what is now the Lot department, as well as part of the Tarn.

Cot, which has a multitude of aliases, was not called Malbec until sometime in the late 18th century, when a Monsieur

Malbeck cultivated it in his vineyards in the region now known as the Premières Côtes de Bordeaux and who then propagated it throughout the Médoc.

The name took root—losing the final k—in the Lot, though ampelographers continue to call it Cot or Côt, the name that—at least for now—is used in the Loire Valley, where it was also known as Cor, or Cos, since at least 1783. Cot and Cor are assumed to be truncations of Cahors, the center of cultivation and production of the wine that bears its name. (It's worth noting that many Cadurcians call the grape Auxerrois, which some believe to be a linguistic deformation of Haute-Serre, a *lieu-dit* in the Causses; *see below*).

Cahors more back than black

The Lot department takes its name from the Lot river, a corkscrewing body of water whose infinite series of loops resembles a child's drawing of a roller coaster (*see above*). The town of Cahors, the prefecture of the Lot department, is surrounded on three sides by the river. And a profile of the Cahors vineyard is almost as dramatic as the madcap river below. Its summit, some 820–1,150ft (250–350m) high is an irregular tableland called Causses, which, as James Wilson notes in *Terroir*, is local dialect for an arid limestone plateau, though these soils are interspersed with marl and siderite as well. Next comes a succession of what are termed *vallées* or

terraces, which look like a series of giant's steps descending toward the river, each with a complex mix of soils derived from alluvial deposits of the Massif Central with outcroppings of limestone scree and, at the base, the silty, alluvial banks of the river.

Grapes have been cultivated here since Roman times. Like many other regions, Cahors's wine was subject to the vagaries and vicissitudes of history—of fame and fortune when it was sought out by royalty in France and in Russia, of frosts and trade wars, and, of course, by phylloxera, which decimated its vines.

Real recovery didn't begin until 1947, with the founding of the local cooperative. The region evolved in fits and starts, finally winning AOC status in 1971. Under that decree, Cahors must be a minimum of 70 percent Malbec with the possible addition of Merlot and/or Tannat not to exceed 30 percent.

Until recently, vineyards have been concentrated along the banks of the river, as well as the lower terraces, and most has been sold as bulk wine. In the 1980s, investors began taking an interest in the appellation. Entrepreneurs like Alain Dominique Perrin, who set up shop at Lagrezette and, with goha (222 acres) of vines and an historic château, now makes more than a dozen bottlings of Cahors aided by consulting enologist Michel Rolland. Perrin and producers like him began making ambitious, gargantuan wines that some consumers loved and others found too heavily extracted and oaky.

The majority of the producers with whom I spoke want to make wines that are lighter, fresher, more elegant and terroir-driven. Many of their wines are a light, clear red, recalling Gamay or Pinot Noir, rather than the impenetrability of a young Tannat

As Pascal Verhaeghe, a leading producer and president of the Union Interprofessionnelle des Vins de Cahors (UIVC), told me, “The early days coincided with the period of heavily extracted wines. We changed in 2002/2003. We used to punch down two to three times a day throughout the entire fermentation. Now we’ll punch down only during the first two or three days. After that, we do nothing except wet the cap. So, not a lot of extraction. Also, we don’t add yeasts, and we keep temperatures to around 28°C [82°F].”

“Since our growers have had increasing contact with Argentine producers,” Verhaeghe continued, “they realized that though the styles are different, both are valid. That was encouraging. We now know that we have our feet on gold but hadn’t realized it. Most of our existing vines are planted on alluvial soils and are VdP Malbec.” It should be noted that Verhaeghe, in a recent conversation, said those wines would now be IGP Malbec, not VdP. He also sells wines labeled IGP du Lot, as well as Côtes du Lot. “I believe the AOC should be *haute de gamme* [top of the line],” he says. “And producers can make both. Thirty years ago, everyone chaptalized. Today it’s rare. We’ve lowered yields. The climate has evolved. At least 25 percent of the wines are organic. And we encourage that. It recreates the true craft of winemaking.”

Any visitor can see that Cahors is in the middle of a quality revolution, one of the most promising aspects of which is that the best soils are being reclaimed, the high terraces and the Causses replanted. The children of growers who sold to the co-op are instead bottling their own wine; strangers to the region—including Argentinians such as Leo Borsi at Ultra-Local—are investing in the region, buying and planting vineyards, and producing noteworthy wines. Exports are flourishing, rising 82.66 percent between 2007 and the end of 2017.

As the UIVC incessantly reminds us, “Cahors is back. Cahors is black, Cahors is Malbec!” Parenthetically, I find it curious that the UIVC emphasizes the blackness of Cahors. Not only does it bring to mind overextraction, it also recalls the days when the grape must was cooked to concentrate the wines, making them very black indeed. So, is uncooked Cahors black? Not really. I find most of the wines the color of Agen prunes. Moreover, given that the majority of the producers with whom I spoke want to make wines that are lighter, fresher, more elegant and terroir-driven, with alcohol levels at or close to 12%, many of their wines are a light, clear red, recalling Gamay or Pinot Noir, rather than the impenetrability of a young Tannat.

I’ve selected nine producers to illustrate the various aspect of the Cahors revolution and organized them thus: Pioneers,

Venerable Old Guard, New Classics, and Rebels. My overall criterion for selection? I love their wines. (A little reservation: Most of these domaines produce numerous different bottlings. Indeed, the cuvée count seems to climb yearly. In most cases, fewer would be better. My guess is that when the exhilaration of discovery subsides, so will the multiplicity of bottlings.)

Pioneers

Homage must be paid to Danielle Biesbrouck, former owner of Domaine des Savarines, a 4ha (10-acre) property that she farmed biodynamically. (She was surely the first in the region to follow the dictates of Rudolf Steiner.) Her wonderful wines made me fall in love with Cahors. It was a sad day indeed when she sold the property in 2003.

Château du Cèdre

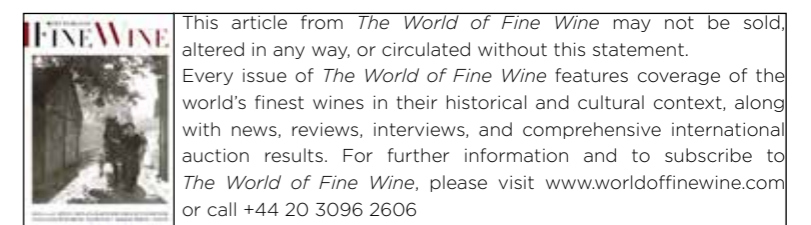
In 1987, Pascal and Jean-Marc Verhaeghe took over the family domaine of 27ha (66 acres) from their father. Pascal, who studied enology in Mâcon and did stints in Burgundy and Napa Valley, is in charge of vinification; Jean-Marc, who has a diploma in enology from La Tour Blanche in Sauternes, of the vineyards. In 2003, the Verhaeghes began the conversion to organic farming. They are now certified by Ecocert and use some biodynamic principles as well. The Verhaeghes harvest both by machine and by hand; most wines are filtered and most have some added SO₂. There are numerous cuvées—some pure Malbec, others with varying proportions of Merlot. Below are the bottlings I’ve tasted.

Pure Malbec, the Le Cèdre bottling comes from vines between 26 and 50 years old on a slope known as Bru, whose two major types of soils are scree cones called Tran and clay-silex, both littered with weathered stones. Yields are limited to 28hl/ha. Wines ferment in large barrels at 82°F (28°C) and vat for 40 days, with punching-down at the start of fermentation. After malo, the wine ages for 24 months in barrel, 80 percent of which are new *foudres*, 20 percent once-used *fûts*. The wine is then bottled with neither fining nor filtration. The 2012 Le Cèdre, 13% ABV, with its classic Agen prune color, has mingled sweet black- and red-fruit aromas. Smooth, silken, fresh, and inviting, with hints of licorice and oak, it was a masterly Cahors.

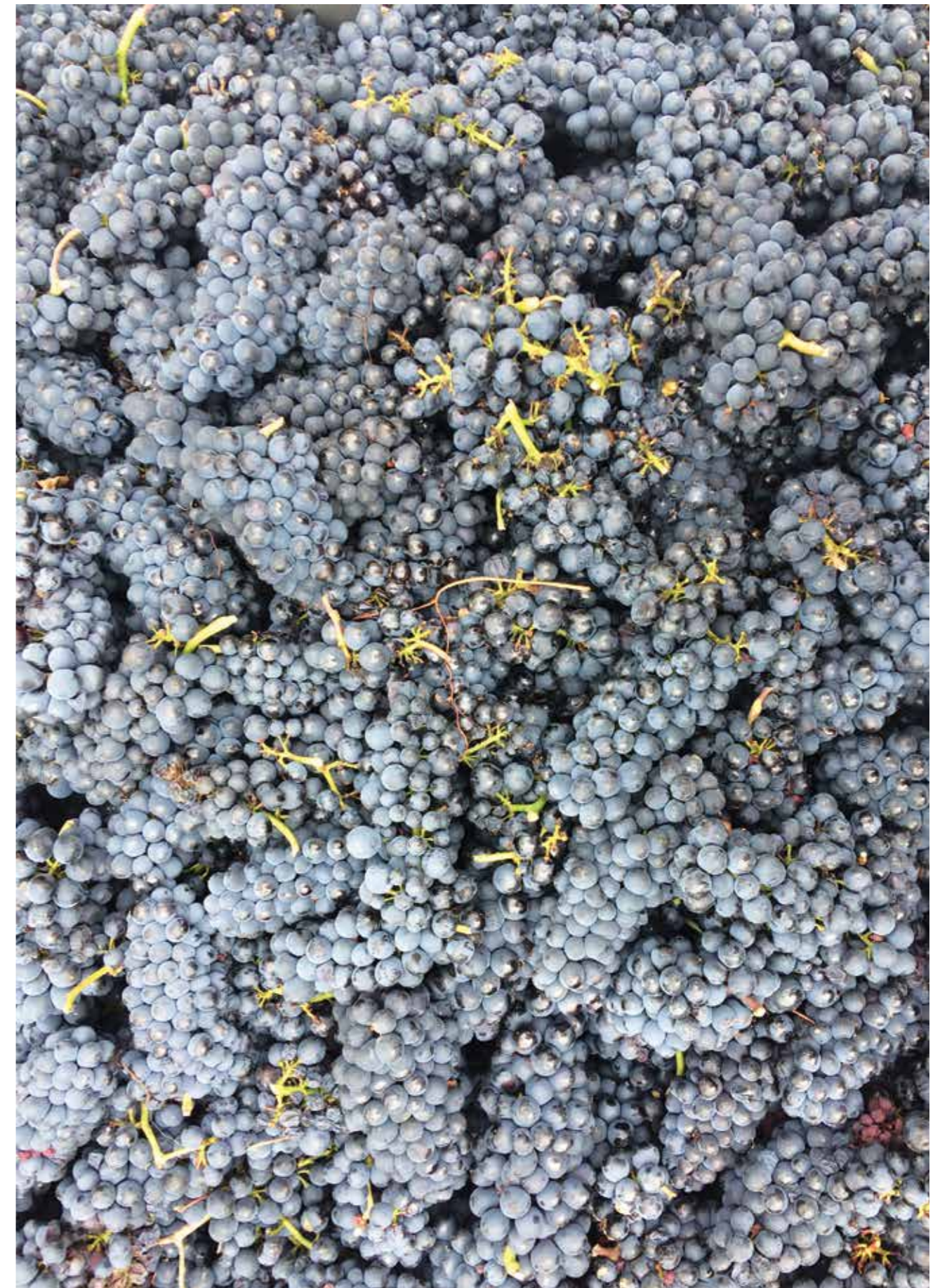
Extra Libre (Ultra Free, in my translation) comes from similar soils. This cuvée, which contains 3% Merlot, spends 30 days in concrete tanks at 82°F. Punching down is limited to the beginning of alcoholic fermentation, and the wine ages for 12 months in large barrels of one or two wines. So far, so conventional. What makes it so radically Libre? No added SO₂. Oh. Despite its hyperbolic moniker, the 2015 Extra Libre was fresh and floral, mingling flavors of black and red fruits, as well as mild oak. A supple and appealing Cahors.

Cosse-Maisonneuve

Matthew Cosse, who received a diploma in enology from Bordeaux’s Institute of Enology, and Catherine Maisonneuve, a graduate in viticulture and enology at Blanquefort, created their 17ha (42-acre) domaine in 1999. Twelve of those hectares (30 acres) are located in Cahors, and the other 5 hectares (12 acres) are in the Coteaux du Quercy. The farming is biodynamic and certified by Demeter. Wines ferment with indigenous yeasts and are never fined or filtered.



This article from *The World of Fine Wine* may not be sold, altered in any way, or circulated without this statement. Every issue of *The World of Fine Wine* features coverage of the world’s finest wines in their historical and cultural context, along with news, reviews, interviews, and comprehensive international auction results. For further information and to subscribe to *The World of Fine Wine*, please visit www.worldoffinewine.com or call +44 20 3096 2606



Photography courtesy of Xavier Weisskopf, Le Rocher des Violettes

Previous spread: The corkscrewing River Lot, which surrounds Cahors on three sides. Opposite: A crop of perfectly healthy Malbec or Côt, as it is normally known in the Loire.



The domaine's entry-level cuvée, Le Combal, is made from grapes grown on soils composed of silt mixed with quartz pebbles. The vines are an average of 25 years old, and yields are generally 45hl/ha. The grapes ferment in stainless-steel tanks at low temperatures for about three weeks before aging for 12 months in barriques of one or two wines.

I tasted a tank sample of the 2015 Le Combal in the summer of 2016. One of the most nuanced entry-level wines I've ever tasted, it had lovely fruit, herbal and mineral flavors, as well as distinct metallic notes. My notes say, "Bottle this now!"

The vines for La Fage, with an average age of 30 years, grow on the third terrace, where the clayey soils are strewn with stones. Fermentation takes place in temperature-controlled tanks and is followed by 14 months of aging in barriques of one wine. The 2014 La Fage, tasted from barrel in 2016, had abundant flavors of rich, black-cherry fruit, blueberries, and minerals, as well as mild oak and balsamic notes. It was well structured, nicely textured, and quite succulent.

Les Laquets, named for its 4ha (10-acre) parcel, comes from 40-plus-year-old vines grown on limestone and siderite soils above the bedrock of the Causses's Jurassic limestone. Yields are limited to 30hl/ha. Whole-cluster fermentation is followed by 18–22 months in new or once-used barriques. The 2014 was a fresh, textured wine, with rich cherry flavors interwoven with metallic and saline threads. Truly lovely, it was serious without being solemn.

Created in 2011, the La Marguerite bottling is made from a selection of century-old vines grown on several small parcels with siderite soils. The 2012, 14% ABV, was the color of blackberries. Rich, smooth, and structured, the wine mingled flavors of oak, blackberry, raspberries, griotte cherries, anise, and baking spices. As Baudelaire said, *luxe, calme et volupté*.

Venerable Old Guard

Clos La Coutale and Château La Caminade have been making appealing, easygoing Cahors from their vines on the lower terraces for decades. Le Bout du Lieu is another property well worth mentioning. Arnaldo Dimani, a former director of the cave cooperative, created Le Bout du Lieu in 1990 and was recently joined by son Lucien. They practice sustainable agriculture and produce nicely crafted, pure-fruited wines, notably l'Orbre Noir and the barrique-aged, top-of-the-line Emprée.

Clos de Gamot/EARL Jouffreau-Hermann

Vignerons since 1610, the Jouffreau family could be the poster child for French family farms. In 1968 the Jouffreaus won first prize in the Ministry of Agriculture's French Farm competition, which resulted in an invitation to Nixon's White House. And as early as 1905, the Jouffreaus, who were already selling their wines in bottle, were among the first, if not the first, to paste handmade labels—"Caors"—on their bottles.

The Jouffreaus have 18ha (44 acres) of vines, mostly on the second and third terraces of the Lot Valley in Preyssac, and, in 1993, acquired and planted an abandoned 1ha (2.47-acre) plot, the Clos St Jean, on a steep slope with pure limestone soils. "We follow ancestral methods and avoid fads," Yves Hermann, who seems to have become a Jouffreau by marriage, told me. "We never got into overextraction or new oak, for example." The Jouffreaus practice sustainable agriculture, harvesting their old vines by hand and their young vines by machine. Madame Jouffreau is the one in charge of the vinification.

Above: Clos de Gamot, belonging to the Jouffreaus, "who could be the poster child for French family farms," and whose top wines are Vignes Centennaires and Clos St Jean.

Photography © Jérôme Morel

Most wines ferment in tank at temperatures from 73 to 80°F (23–27°C) and, after a year, are transferred to large oak barrels for 18 months.

The domaine's signature wine is Le Clos de Gamot, named after an 18ha parcel on the second and third terraces. The vines, ranging from 40 to 60 years old, grow on a Byzantine mix of limestone, clay, silex, flint, pebbles, and a streak of siderite, as well as the alluvial soils of the Lot. The 2014, 12.5% ABV, had a brilliant, ripe cherry nose. It was fresh and, though easy drinking, had distinct gravitas. A real charmer. The 2012, also 12.5% ABV, mixed warm cherry aromas with spices. It was a mellow, nicely structured wine with good follow-through. The only drawback was that, with some aeration, acidity seemed to take over. (It is worth noting that this was true of many of the wines I sampled and appears to be an issue the appellation should address.) A baby brother to Le Clos de Gamot is Le Gamotin. Its grapes come from the second terrace; yields may be somewhat higher—at 40hl/ha—and the grapes are machine-harvested, before being fermented in stainless-steel tanks. The wine is meant to be a juicy crowd-pleaser, and the 2015, with 13% ABV, was precisely that.

The Jouffreaus' two high-end cuvées are Vignes Centennaires, from the clay-limestone soils of the third terrace, and the aforementioned Clos St Jean. The former has a real back-story: In the winter of 1883–84, as phylloxera was annihilating the vines of Cahors, Guillaume Jouffreau took cuttings from the last of his Malbec vines. He tried grafting them onto various rootstocks, ultimately succeeding with an obscure American hybrid called Herbemont, thus saving the Clos de Gamot vineyard, which was replanted in 1885. And the Jouffreaus are still able to harvest clusters from those ancient vines. The 2000 Cuvée des Vignes Centennaires, 12.5% ABV, had mellowing aromas of black cherry, spice, and graphite, as well as hints of licorice, tobacco, and mild oak. It was soft but structured and seemed somehow to embody the flavor of the countryside.

The Clos St Jean cuvée comes from a selection of that parcel's best vines. All of the work on this plot is done by hand—with pickaxes and shovels. Yields are limited to 30hl/ha. And the ripe grapes are so delicious that they are often eaten by epicurean forest animals, notably deer and wild boar, leaving precious little fruit for winemaking. The grapes ferment in small tanks for three to five weeks and age in used *demi-muids* for 18 to 24 months. The 2000, 13% ABV, exhibited a softening Burlat cherry color and a mellow attack of black fruit and mild tannins. It was a tender wine, with a lift of acidity on the finish and a sense of elegance characteristic of wines from limestone soils. There wasn't the merest whisper of decline. Instead, there was a juiciness that would have made the wine a perfect foil for a *magret de canard* (duck breast).

New Classics

Clos d'un Jour is another extremely promising domaine. And I'm keeping an eye on Haut-Monplaisir and Berangerais.

Château Combel-La-Serre

Vines have been in the Ilbert family since 1900. Before Julien took over in 1998, the wine was sold to the local cooperative. And until 2005, when Ilbert presented his first vintage, he sold his wine to Matthieu Coste (*see above*). The domaine comprises

22ha (54 acres) on the plateaux of Cournou, at altitudes slightly above 1,000ft (300m). Soils are mainly a mix of clay-limestone and siderite. Farming is organic, and Ilbert thins clusters and deleafs to reduce yields and develop concentration. He favors vinifying by parcel.

The wine range seems to change with some regularity, but for now I count six different bottlings, starting with La Vigne Juste Derrière Chez Carbo IGP Côtes du Lot, the name of which is both informational and playful. The grapes undergo carbonic maceration for six days before being pressed (thus, no Cahors appellation but a mere IGP), and the vines grow on a parcel abutting land owned by a Monsieur Carbonier, after which they are pressed and finish fermentation in concrete tanks. Carbo's label says it's a *vin du soif*. Well, the 2015 certainly was a thirst-quenching wine. And when chilled like a white, it's compulsively drinkable: fresh, grapey, and filled with cherry flavors and floral notes, as well as hints of red licorice—all too easy to drink but hardly anonymous.

Exclude the carbonic maceration, and you pretty much know the basics behind the making of Ilbert's next bottling, Le Pur Fruit du Causse, the 2014 of which was equally irresistible (and unspittable). It was a pure *vin de plaisir*, with its silken texture, its piquant tweak of tannins, and every variation on the theme of cherry: fruit, kirsch, coulis. Plus, it has a true sense of place, a pedigree.

Au Cerisier is a bottling made from grapes grown on siderite soils over limestone bedrock on a 1.2ha (3-acre) parcel that once had a large cherry tree. Yields are kept to 45hl/ha, and the grapes ferment and age for 12 months in cement tanks. The 2014, 12.5% ABV, had gorgeous jewel-cut black-cherry and kirsch flavors, lovely freshness, a metallic edge, and light tannins. I followed it over four days and found that, beautiful as it was, it would have benefited from additional aging.

The "Château" bottling comes from 40-year-old vines grown on clay-limestone soils. It ferments and ages in used 500-liter oak barrels. The finely tuned 2013, 13% ABV, as charming as Le Pur Fruit du Causse, added a note of gravitas, as well as suggestions of oak and minerality. It was delicious at the moment but could have used a bit of cellaring to allow time for all the elements to mesh.

I did not taste Ilbert's Les Peyres Levades bottling and sampled the 2014 Le Lac-aux-Cochons only at the blind tasting organized for me by the Union Interprofessionnelle des Vins de Cahors. It is made from the fruit of low-yielding 60-year-old vines grown on a single-hectare parcel with iron-rich clay soils over limestone. The grapes ferment in small tanks for 20 days, during which the mass is punched down four times. The wine ages for 24 months in a mix of old and new 500-liter barrels. Here was another fragrant, promising red that needed aeration. I look forward to meeting it again in 2020.

Château Les Croisille

In 1979 Bernard and Cécile Croisille acquired 7ha (17 acres) *en ferme* on the limestone plateaux of the Causses, near the town of Luzech. They cleared the land and replanted, delivering their first ten harvests to the *cave cooperative* in Parnac. They began bottling their own wine and building cellars and, over time, were joined by son Germain, his friend Nicolas, and another son, Simon, who came on board in 2015. They went on to acquire more land and now work 30ha (75 acres), having bought the land

they had rented, as well as a neighboring vineyard. Having converted to organic farming, the Croisilles maintain plants between rows, deleaf and cluster thin manually, and increasingly harvest by hand. In the cellar, they generally rely on indigenous yeasts and add a small dose of SO₂ during vinification.

The Croisilles aim to translate the diversity of their various terroirs—those containing traces of iron, those with an abundance of rocks, for example—into specific cuvées. An admirable goal, though, at least for the moment, that might result in one or two bottlings too many—an impression I've had regarding a number of other domaines. For the moment, the Croisilles make six different cuvées: Le Croizillon, Calcaire, Silice, and La Pierre, which ages in a rohl limestone "tank" (the last two of which I haven't tasted), as well as Divin Croisille and Grain par Grain.

Croizillon is the domaine's entry-level wine. Meant to be drunk young, it is made from 30-year-old vines grown on the limestone soils of the plateau and the clay and gravel of the second terrace. Yields are 50hl/ha, and harvest is early and conducted both by hand and by machine. The grapes are in vat for 10–15 days, with 20 percent of the harvest undergoing carbonic maceration. The finished wine spends six months in tank before bottling. Fragrant and deliciously inviting, the 2015, 12.5% ABV, was fresh and lively, mixing flavors of cherries and anise. A well-structured, nicely three-dimensional wine, perfect for comfy drinking.

The Calcaire bottling, unsurprisingly, comes from grapes grown on a limestone plateau, its soil interspersed with Kimmeridgian marl. The grapes are hand-harvested, then vatted for 20–30 days at 82°F in stainless-steel tanks with daily punching-down and light racking at the beginning of fermentation. The wine ages 18 months in old oak barriques on its fine lees. Rich black-cherry aromas mixed with plum, prune, and anise introduced the 2014 Calcaire. The wine was fresh, somewhat chewy, and lightly mineral. With aeration, acidity and herby notes developed, and the wine was somewhat reduced. More aeration would have helped, but I wondered whether the domaine—like many others—would benefit from making fewer bottlings with only their finest grapes.

The Divin Croisille bottling is made from 30- to 40-year old vines grown on the domaine's three best parcels on the plateau of Fages, joining Kimmeridgian limestone, siderolithic limestone, and clay rich in silica and iron. Yields are limited to 25–30hl/ha and harvest is by hand. The grapes then ferment in small, open tanks with punching-down at the beginning of fermentation and daily racking over the course of 30-day vatting. The wine ages for 24 months in either *demi-muids* or barriques.

A clear step up from the Calcaire bottling, the 2012 Divin mingled black-cherry, light oak, and cranberry flavors. Quite fetching, it became mellower and more integrated with aeration. The 2010, 13.5% ABV, was nuanced, precise, and subtle, with a metallic thread mixed with light oak and rich cherry, as well as a surprising note of peach.

The domaine's top bottling is Grain par Grain which, as its name suggests, is hand-harvested grape by grape. Made from selected 40-year-old vines from the best parcels, with yields kept at 30hl/ha, the grapes ferment in open new *demi-muids* with daily punching-down during the month-long vatting. The wine then ages for 30 months in the barrels—now

closed—in which it fermented. The 2010, initially dominated by oak, amply merited slow tasting. Pure and complex, it was, quite simply, breathtaking.

Château Ponzac

Château Ponzac was born in the 14th century. Matthieu Molinié's grandfather bottled his own wines, but his father sold his production to the cooperative. In 1998, Molinié took over, and in 2000 he was joined by his companion Virginie on the property, which now counts 30ha (75 acres) on a mind-bending mix of soils on the Causses. And the couple now bottle the wines they make.

While Molinié is considering organic farming, viticulture now seems more or less sustainable, with rows either planted with grass or tilled. Vines are deleafed, and there is regular cluster-thinning. Of the three cuvées, Molinié machine harvests the first two and picks the third, Eternellement, by hand and by *tri*.

The first bottling, *Maintenant*, comes from soils that are a mix of limestone and marl. The vines are an average of 25 years old, and yields are limited to 45hl/ha. The grapes vat in stainless-steel tanks formed like old wood casks for 12–15 days at 72°F (22°C), then age for eight months before being bottled in June. Substantial and quite tasty, the 2014 was chewy and lightly tannic, with rich black fruit. It was a very serious entry-level wine.

Yields for the second wine, *Patiemment*, are limited to 40hl/ha. The grapes grow on limestone soils and ferment in tank for 21 days at 82°F followed by six months of aging. The 2014 had nuanced dark-fruit aromas, mixing black cherry, licorice, and tar. A dense wine, it needed aeration, after which its handsome structure emerged, and it became smoother, velvety and sumptuous.

Eternellement, the domaine's top-of-the-range wine, comes from grapes grown on siderite soils. Yields are limited to 30hl/ha. The fermenting mass is punched down two or three times a day during a 25-day vatting, after which the wine ages for 18 months in barriques. The 2005, 12.5% ABV, demanded decanting. A deep, black-cherry color, it was tart and quite oaky. Some hours later, the oak was partially subdued and fruit notes emerged, as well as muted tannins and a grainy texture. Later still, the same notes pertained, but the wine's attractive perfumes surfaced and became more pronounced as the oak quieted down. Along with good structure, there was abundant flavor. As time passed, the wine revealed a surprising youthfulness—sappy, succulent, and potent.

Clos d'Audhuy/Benoit Aymard

For generations, the Aymard family had vines on the steep slopes of the third terrace of the Lot Valley. In 2014, when the property was put up for sale, Benoit and his wife decided to buy the best parcel, a 1.5ha (3.7-acre) plot, the soils of which were a mix of siderite and silica with outcroppings of limestone and laval residue. In 2015 Aymard acquired vines on an 850ft- (260m-) high summit with Kimmeridgian soils. And in 2016, Aymard extended his holdings further by planting 2.7ha (6.7 acres) of Malbec on slopes that are up to 460ft (140m) high.

When I met the thirtysomething Aymard in the spring of 2016, he explained that, for now, viticulture was conventional,



because he didn't have sufficient finances to farm organically. That would come in the future. But even with economic restraints, Aymard is making impressive wines.

At present, there are two cuvées. The first is Les Polissons Malbec de Cahors, whose grapes are harvested early in order to produce a light, fresh red. In keeping with that objective, vatting lasts for 18 days at low temperatures, and the wine is bottled early. The 2015 was smooth, rich, and structured, mingling flavors of blackberry and griotte, as well as black cherries, kirsch, anise, mint, and baking spices such as nutmeg and mace. A seductive, lip-smacking red.

Aymard limits yields for his signature cuvée, Le Clos d'Audhuy, to 35hl/ha. After being hand-harvested and sorted, the grapes are lightly pressed and put into 15hl temperature-controlled tanks for 25 days, during which they are punched down regularly and lightly racked. The wines age for a year in 400-liter barrels, a mix of new and used. The solid, coherent 2014 invites you in with notes of black cherry and mild oak. I followed it over six days. It became somewhat chunky and grainy but retained its scents of black cherry and anise, along with fleeting hints of flavors to come. Much like its author, it's a wine worth following. (Aymard has just written to me about new bottlings of Malbec and at least one Sauvignon. I long to taste them!)

The Rebels Parlange & Illouz

Jérémie Illouz, an enologist, met wine grower Paul Parlange as students. Their shared love for wine and winemaking led to a friendship that evolved into a partnership. Illouz works roughly 6ha (15 acres) in the hills around Cahors; Parlange

Above: Louis and Charlotte Pérot, "the flower children of Cahors. By any standards, their wines transcend the 'natural' label and would be more aptly termed 'spiritual.'"

has 7ha (17 acres) in the Côtes de Bordeaux (so his wines are not considered here).

Illouz intends to make natural wines. Farming is organic; grapes are hand-harvested; indigenous yeasts provoke the fermentation; wines are not filtered; and little or no sulfur dioxide is added. Currently, there are two cuvées of Cahors, La Pièce and Haute Pièce, each pure Malbec. The grapes for La Pièce come from 25- to 30-year-old vines on a plateau with clay-limestone soils. After destemming, the grapes are lightly pressed and ferment in concrete tanks. The wine is bottled after a year. The 2014, 13.35% ABV, dark and deeply saturated, had a smooth, silky attack, alluring floral and cherry aromas, and a streak of minerals.

The vines for Haute Pièce are more than 45 years old and grow on iron-rich clay-limestone soils. Whole-cluster fermentation takes place in oak barrels, where the wine evolves for a year before spending six months in tank. The 2014, 13.37% ABV, resembled a magnified version of La Pièce. It was a stately wine, statuesque even, with similar aromas and flavors to its predecessor but amplified threefold—a thing of beauty. The 2012, 12.75% ABV, was so alluringly aromatic it could be sold as cologne. Limpid, with fresh black cherry, mild oak, and Barolo-like tar notes, it was pure pleasure—structured, delectable, and all of a piece.

Illouz also makes wines from obscure grapes like Valdiguie, which he may blend with Malbec and Jurançon Noir. More pleasure for another day.

L'Ostal

Louis and Charlotte Pérot are the flower children of Cahors. By any standards, their wines transcend the "natural" label and would be more aptly termed "spiritual." And even when a wine reveals slight volatility or reduction, it is always touched by poetry.

Before moving to the Lot in 2012, the Perots worked in Paris—Louis, for Le Divan, a bookstore owned by Gallimard; Charlotte for Editions Classiques Garnier. Neither came from Paris, however, and wanted to return to the land, with an eye on the Cahors region. Louis spent a year studying winemaking and viticulture in Beaune. In 2012, Louis and Charlotte found a property consisting of 17ha (42 acres), 2.7ha (6.7 acres) of which are currently planted to grapes. These are spread over several parcels in three villages, with different mixes of soils. And they plan to have 5–6 hectares (12–15 acres) of vines in production in the near future. All the Perots wines are Vins de France. They eschew the appellation, as well as names like “château” and “domaine,” preferring the term “farm.” They also make apple juice and plan to extend their product line to jam and bread baked in wood-fired ovens.

Farming is organic. The Perots base the date for harvest by tasting the grapes and pips. Harvest is always by hand, as is destemming. Punching-down is performed by hand (with the smaller recipients), as well as by foot. Grapes ferment in *demi-muids*, vatting lasts for two or three weeks at 59–68°F (15–20°C). The wines age in old barriques in an 18th-century limestone cellar lit only by candlelight. Sulfur dioxide is never added, and the wines are neither fined nor filtered. Most are 12% ABV.

In 2012 Perot made his first wine, a single barrique. In 2014 he produced six cuvées of Malbec. By 2018, there were eight cuvées, including Spoon River, which is half Merlot and whose name recalls their love of literature. I’ve focused here on the five that seem to be the most representative. For now.

Perot’s entry level wine, EOSTal, is made from grapes grown on iron-rich sandy soils. The clusters ferment by carbonic maceration for seven days in tank before being pressed. The 2014 version aged for six months in barriques and *demi-muids*. The wine was refreshing, long, and quite gourmand, as floral aromas mixed with those of cherry pits. There was a curious hint of peanuts and lively acidity. Delightful.

The Zamble bottling comes from 15-year-old vines grown on silica and clay soils on a bedrock of limestone on the third terrace of the Lot. The grapes ferment in open *demi-muids* with light punching-down, then age in barriques and *demi-muids* for a year. The 2014 was so friendly and just-plain pretty, with its dark red fruit and tender aromas of fruit and cherry pit. It demanded to be enjoyed with good friends.

The 35-plus-year-old vines for the Le Tour bottling grow on sandy clay soils on the eponymous *lieu-dit*. Grapes ferment, with some punching-down and racking, in thrice-used *demi-muids*, in which they also age. The 2014, 12% ABV, the cuvée’s debut vintage, was so delectable that it was difficult to keep from finishing the bottle immediately. Interwoven with notes of mild oak and minerals, the cherry flavors were so pure, you seemed to be biting into the fruit itself. A lilting, airborne wine, it was as fresh as a waterfall. A joy.

The Anselme bottling was named after Perot’s great-great-grandfather. It comes from a vineyard called Baran, which sits at 650ft (200m) above sea level. The parcel’s sandy soils give a delicious freshness to the wine, which, like everything from this excellent domaine, is low in alcohol (12%) and very mineral. Harvested later than Le Tour, the grapes ferment in *demi-muids*, and the wine ages for 12 months in thrice-used barriques. A nuanced, fragrant wine, it revealed exotic notes recalling Syrah. Absolutely seductive.

Grown on the third terrace of the Lot, on a *lieu-dit* known as Boutiers, the grapes for Plein Chant are both youngish (15 years) and oldish (50 years). Yields are decidedly low—to wit, 10hl/ha. The grapes ferment in barriques with some punching-down, and age in both Bordeaux barriques and Burgundian *pièces* for a year. As pure and fluid as a mountain stream, the 2015, 12% ABV, had appetizing light saline and bitter notes interlaced with pure cherry fruit. It would benefit from cellaring or from decanting and pairing with a fresh *chèvre* or light, cool foods like a *tataki* of tuna with a soy and yuzu sauce.

Cot in the Loire Valley

The Touraine appellation—extending from the Sologne in the east to the borders of Anjou in the west—is a capacious umbrella embracing a multitude of vintners, grape varieties, and styles of wine. Cot, as it has historically been called here, was traditionally used as part of a blend but is increasingly bottled on its own, principally by producers between the provincial towns of Amboise and Blois. And the results have been so delicious that one subappellation, Touraine-Amboise, is changing its laws to make it the only red wine under its banner. (Currently, reds entitled to the Touraine-Amboise appellation are generally blends based on Gamay, Cot, and Cabernet Franc; whites must be pure Chenin.)

In principle, I agree. I’ve always been a fan of Loire Cot, and back before the turn of the century, when dinner-party chat propounded that Merlot be a possible addition to Cabernet Franc for the reds of Chinon and Bourgueil, I demurred, arguing that the grape should be Cot. But the powers that be in Amboise want to go further: By 2025 or 2030, they hope to drop the “Touraine” part of their name and be known solely as Amboise. The rub here is that in the redrawing of both the Touraine-Amboise and the Amboise AOPs, they propose to alter the zones so that out of 3,500 potential hectares (8,650 acres), only the best 750 (1,850 acres) will be retained. Those excluded may use the simple Touraine appellation. Some growers, however, are fighting the proposed delimitations and reclassifications. Their objections may well be justified. As they say, all politics is local.

Below, I’ve briefly profiled my favorite Loire Cot producers. All are in the Touraine appellation, with the exception of Domaine de la Pépière and, potentially, Philippe Durand. (It’s worth noting that all produce a variety of wines.)

Philippe Durand

I have long adored this small family domaine, which was created in 1910. The Durands work 15ha (37 acres), most of which are situated on the well-exposed first slope overlooking the Loire at the limits of the village of Mosnes. After having studied winery administration at Enith-Bordeaux, Philippe Durand succeeded Guy Durand in 2007, though he started working in the vineyards a good decade earlier.

Durand, for one, does not agree with the proposed changes to the Touraine-Amboise appellation described above. He is vehemently opposed to the elimination of such a large proportion of its vineyard land and has challenged the plan, demanding that the powers that be reveal their reasons for including certain parcels and excluding others, saying that the decisions were not based on soil analysis. If the new law passes without modification, he’ll sell his Cots as Vin de France. Let’s hope he wins. The domaine is exemplary.

Following the supple, eco-friendly guidelines of *lutte raisonnée*, the Durands leave natural growth between the rows of vines, prune hard, keeping yields under 40hl/ha to avoid chaptalization. (The last time the Durands chaptalized was in 2001.) Cot is picked by hand, and Chenin is harvested by successive passes through the vines. The Durands vinify by parcel, relying on natural yeasts, and ferment the lots in fiber-glass tanks with floating caps. The mass is punched down daily. The wines are bottled in June.

The Durand’s sweet Chenins (some are in the Touraine-Amboise appellation) rival the best of Vouvray, and their two bottlings of Cot are delightful bistro reds. The first version of Cot, La Huaudière, comes from 20-plus-year-old vines on a *tuffeau* slope overlooking the Loire. The 2015, 12.5% ABV, with its classic black-cherry fruit, was a compact, nicely structured red. Fresh and user-friendly, it developed subtle, alluring nuances, as well as an appetizing note of bitterness. It reminded me of quite a few of the less extracted wines from Cahors. The 2011, 11.5% ABV, revealed scents of black cherries, berries, and minerals, as well as a palate-cleansing kick of acidity, like the tartness of a crisp apple. Smooth and pure, it was satisfyingly deep and nuanced.

The vines for La Haie Bachelier were planted in 1969 on silex-rich soils. Tasted in 2009, the 2005, a deep purple tinged with crimson, needed serious aeration. After six hours it exuded black-cherry aromas and flavors. Succulent, with ripe tannins, it was gourmand, a perfect bistro wine. The 2002 was quite dry, its flavor evolving toward old wood, ash, dried fruit, dried berries, and spices, with high kirsch notes. A wine-bar delight, but you need to pay attention not to miss its subtlety. Tasted in 2017, the 2015 was smooth and lightly fragrant, with very pure fruit and an engaging sense of place. The 2010, 12% ABV, was sleek and light, with flavors of ripe cherries and minerals. The perfumed 2011, 11.5% ABV, virtually invited you in with its aromas of black cherries, scents of freshness, violets, and blueberries. The wine’s tannins were so ripe that they added complexity, not astringency, and its relatively long finish was surprising, its heft amazing, given its low alcohol content. And the wine was even fresher and smoother on day three. Cahors East.

Domaine Henry Marionnet

Henry Marionnet, an adventurer with a genius for innovation in the vineyards and in the cellar, put Touraine on the wine map. He and son Jean-Sebastien, with 57ha (140 acres) of vines, have perhaps the largest family property in the region. Their near-encyclopedia range of wines includes the Vinifera line, wines made from extremely low-yielding, ungrafted vines, vinified without added yeasts in stainless-steel tanks under a veil of CO₂ in what Marionnet calls *fermentation intracellulaire*. Whatever. These Cots are so silky and lip-smackingly yummy, you won’t be able to stop drinking them.

Jean-François Mérieau

In 2000, after traveling the world and working harvests in South Africa, Mérieau took over his family’s 32ha (80 acres) on well-exposed slopes overlooking the River Cher. Mérieau farms organically, keeps yields low, and ferments his wines using indigenous yeasts. His excellent Cot/Malbec is called Cent Visages. I’d have sworn the 2005 was a Syrah!

Domaine Jérôme Sauvète

Fourth-generation vigneron, Jérôme Sauvète, working with wife Dominique, has 40ha (100 acres) of vines on a stony plateau overlooking the River Cher that he has converted to organic farming. The Sauvètes produce two different versions of pure Cot. The more accessible, Antea, is a user-friendly charmer made by fermenting whole clusters in tank with indigenous yeasts. The 2015 Antea, 13% ABV, was floral, structured, and truly gourmand. Osmose is the name of a Cot made from a selection of the domaine’s best grapes. The 2014, 12.5% ABV, fermented and aged in barriques on a four-year rotation, needed time to digest the oak, but the fruit underneath was awfully pretty. Worth waiting for.

Domaine de la Pépière

Cot has leapfrogged across the Loire Valley to make a place for itself in the heart of Muscadet at Marc Olivier’s Domaine de la Pépière. And by all evidence, the grape can thrive and reach that Argentinian definition of perfection in an oceanic climate, on the granitic soils of the Massif Américain. The Oliviers are ardent biodynamists and rightly known for their stellar Muscadets. Now they’ll be obliged to meet the demand for their scrumptious La Pépière IGP Val de Loire. Harvested by hand, the grapes undergo four days of cold soaking. Only the free-run juice is used for the bottling, which ages in stainless-steel tanks for five months before bottling. The 2015, downright thirst-quenching, had delectable notes of dark cherries and licorice. Olivier claims that Cot was cultivated in the region in the 1920s and ’30s. I’m glad it’s back.

Le Rocher des Violettes

Xavier Weisskopf is one of the two best winemakers in the Montlouis appellation. I wrote about his Pétillant Originel in my pet-nat article (see *WFW* 52, p.127), and now it’s time for me to introduce one of the most miraculous wines I’ve ever tasted. (I weigh my words.) It’s Weisskopf’s Côt Vieilles Vignes. He sent me the 2014, since he made no wine in 2016 and wasn’t happy with his 2015.

Weisskopf, who farms organically, has 11ha (27 acres) in Montlouis and 3ha (7.5 acres) on clay-siliceous soils in the Touraine appellation of which 1.8ha (4.4 acres) are given over to Côt, 25 percent of which was planted in 1891, and 75 percent in 1950. Yields are limited to 25hl/ha, and harvest is by hand. The grapes ferment for three weeks in tronconic tanks and age for a year before bottling.

Do yourself a favor, and taste this wine quietly and calmly. Almost in a state of prayer. I did just that with the 2014, 12.4% ABV. I can talk about the wine’s haunting perfumes, both floral and redolent of black cherries and berries; about its lacy texture, its beautiful freshness; about the stunning clarity, depth, and precision of a Bach cello concerto. And yet all of those wonders are upstaged by the utter weightlessness of the wine. I can think of few, if any, red wines as ethereal, as transcendent, as otherworldly or awe-inspiring. On day two I sensed that the wine was wafting gracefully back into our stratosphere. Still, I marveled at it. And I believe that when that time arrives that my mind has emptied itself of the clutter of daily life, retaining only a handful of people, rooms, streetscapes, songs, and soliloquies, Weisskopf’s old-vines Cot, along with several other wines, shall be the starlight in that firmament. ■