



WINE CLUB JANUARY: SOUTH WEST FRANCE

South-West France really means all the wine regions in the south-western quarter of the country with the major exception of the most important one, Bordeaux. However, Bordeaux gets more than its fair share of attention all year round so this month's case is our attempt to address this imbalance and to introduce you to 6 wines, each of which not only give Bordeaux a run for its money, but also offer something entirely different. Jancis Robinson described, perhaps affectionately, this collection of regions as a 'ragbag' and we have selected 6 from it to explore this month: Jurançon, Madiran, Marcillac, Cahors, Bergerac, and Fronton.

Jurançon is to be found in the green foothills of the Western Pyrenees, not too far from Lourdes. This sub-region is known for its unique local grape varieties, Gros, and Petit Manseng, producing both dry and sweet wines.

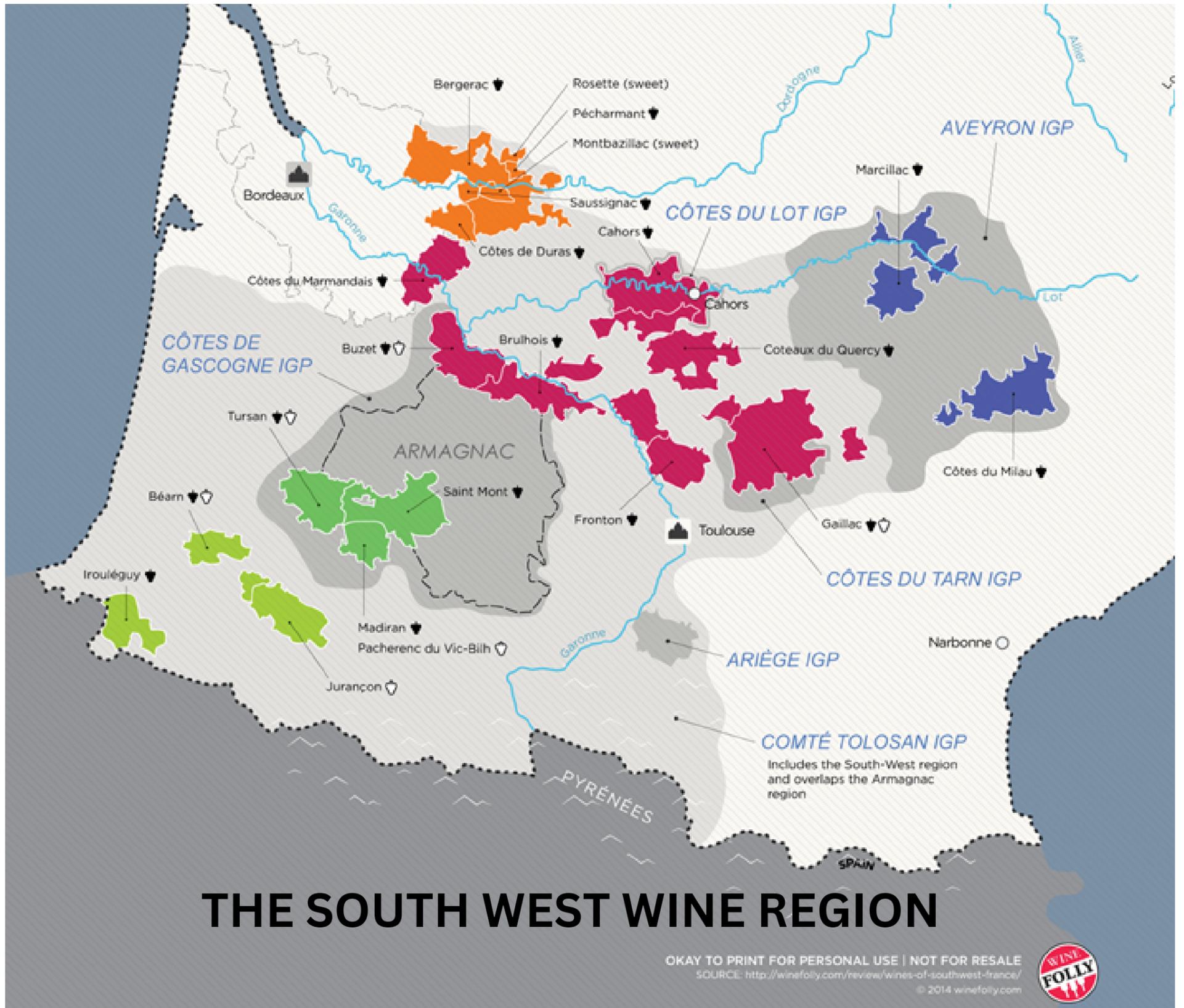
Madiran is the source of the region's richest and boldest reds, barrel-aged and made to last, using the native variety Tannat, these are wines that stay with you long after the last sip. The finishes are long, and the tannins are fine and grippy.

Marcillac is situated directly East of the city of Bordeaux, but up at a considerable altitude on the Massif Central – here the distinctive, peppery wines will tick the boxes of many a Syrah-lover.

Many producers from **Cahors** would be insulted to be categorised as a shadow of Bordeaux since the wines certainly have their very own distinctive personality. When devastating winter frosts hit in 1956, the entire region had to be replanted, and instead of going down the Bordeaux route (Merlot and two Cabernets), Cahors decided to specialise and focus solely upon Malbec with a little assistance in blending with Merlot. Cabernet Sauvignon is not an option in these parts, as it would not ripen reliably this far inland.

Bergerac has its work cut out to establish a truly independent identity from Bordeaux since it lies so close to the region – it is hardly 30 miles east of St-Emilion. The region is well worth exploring, as it tends to produce wines of higher concentration, similar to Bordeaux but without the price tag.

And finally, **Fronton**. This is a small but no less interesting appellation just north of Toulouse where the grainy local grape variety, Negrette has been nurtured and preserved. Producers in this region are forward-thinking and embrace modern winemaking techniques, but also like to preserve tradition, as you will see from the last wine in your case, it is anything but ordinary.



THE SOUTH WEST WINE REGION

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2021 Clos Lapeyre Jurançon Sec, Jurançon – 13.5%, £23.99

Jurançon is located in the foothills of the Pyrenees about 40km from the Spanish border and enjoys a large diurnal range (this is the difference between the highest daytime temperatures and the lowest temperatures experienced at night). This is moderated by the winds coming in off the Atlantic. Winemaker Jean-Bernard is the 3rd generation of his family to run the estate which was set up by his grandfather in 1920. His operation was certified Organic in 2005, and he practices a range of Biodynamic winemaking methods. He and his father also still practice 'polyculture' with their vines growing side-by-side with other plants such as fruit trees and strawberry fields. They are also known to graze cattle on the estate.

100% Gros Manseng, the grapes for this wine are hand-harvested from extremely steep slopes. These slopes are also south-facing, so have the best exposure to sunlight, therefore the grapes are perfectly ripe when harvested. The resulting wine has an intense nose of citrus fruits, white fleshed fruits such as peach, and hints of green hazelnut. The palate is crisp with a lot of freshness, fruitiness, a touch of spice and honey, and a great minerality on the finish.

This ripe and slightly rich white pairs well with curried monkfish, warm goat's cheese salads, platters of charcuterie.



2020 Berthoumieu Madiran Constance, Madiran - 14%, £21.99

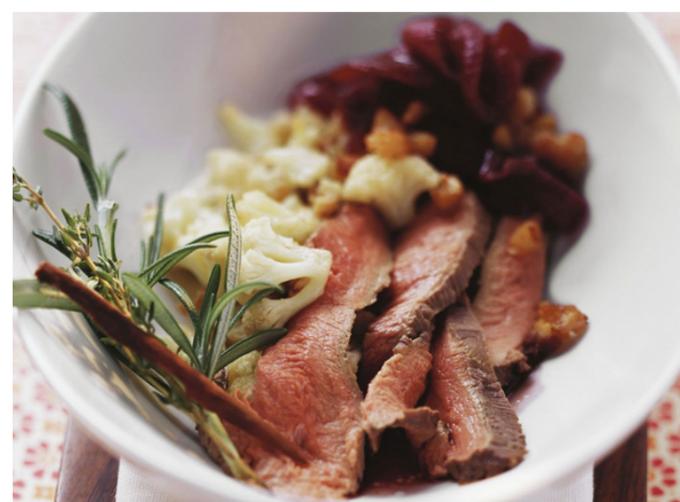
Viella AOC Madiran, is in the Gers region, and enjoys a hot, oceanic microclimate which promotes the ripening of the estate's fruit, especially Tannat, which requires a lot of time on the vine to become amenable to wine production. Winemaker Didier has been unofficially organic since 1993 which means that while he remains uncertified, his wines follow all the standards of certified wineries and yet do not attract the higher price point of their certified neighbours. This means the wines are top quality but not overly expensive. He uses an interesting method to improve his vineyard soil quality, called the PRP method ('Procédé Roland Pignon' after the chap who invented it) - this involves adding marine 'calcaire' (limestone) to the soil which increases its bacterial composition, making it more 'alive'!

While the Tannat grapes are always hand-harvested, the Cabernet Sauvignon for this wine are always harvested mechanically, for the simple reason that by the time this late-ripening varieties are ready to pick, it is too late to use the team of hand-pickers, as they have all left for the end of the harvesting season.

This hearty red is a blend of 60% Tannat, 30% Cabernet Sauvignon, 10% Pinenc – and is bottled with neither fining nor filtration, which helps retain the full character and texture of the wine. This one may be worth decanting as it is likely to throw a little sediment. Don't worry if you didn't get given a fancy decanter for Christmas, a glass measuring jug will do! Anything that allows you to see the sediment gather before you pour it in your final glass.

A dark and deep red, it has earthy aromas aplenty – blackcurrant, prune, liquorice, and fresh coffee grounds. Layers of black fruit flavours with the unmistakable Madiran mint and herbal garrigue character, indicative of the region, all held together with grippy tannins.

The perfect pair for wintery dishes such as roast pork, pan-fried duck breast, Truffled Beef Wellington, rack of lamb, and diverse cheeseboards. Basically, all the meats and all the cheeses!



2021 Domaine du Cros Marcillac Lo Sang del Pais, Marcillac – 12.5%, £19.99

Lo Sang del Pais is an Occitan dialect saying meaning 'the blood of the country.' This wine is a classic representation of the soil, the micro-climate and the Mansois grape variety.

Otherwise known as 'Fer Servadou,' Mansois is a dark-skinned variety notably associated with the Marcillac region. The variety thrives on the region's iron-rich ferrous soils, hence the name 'Fer,' though some think the origin of this name is more likely to come from the Latin word 'ferus' meaning feral as the variety is thought to have descended from wild grapes. Others believe that the grape has its roots in Spain's Basque Country. Modern genetic testing has recently placed the variety within the Carmenerre family tree.

Domaine du Cros' vineyards are located on incredibly steep slopes (up to 65% gradient!), with reddish, clay soils (called 'Rougier') that are iron rich and produce earthy yet fruity red wines. Because of the extreme gradients, the vines are all harvested by hand. This is also a gentler way to harvest grapes, which reduces the occurrence of any damage to the fruit.

Mansois produces reds at the lighter end of the scale, and this is no exception. Ruby red in the glass, this is light, crunchy and thirst-quenching with flavours of raspberry and plum mixed with spicy and peppery notes on a fresh finish. Pair with Lamb with aligot (a delicious, mashed potato dish combined with cheese) - pure decadence.



2016 Paillas, Chateau Paillas, Cahors - 13%, £18.99

Cahors is the historic and once world-famous home of Malbec; it was Cahors that gave Argentina its first Malbec vines, when French agronomists took cuttings over there in 1852. This migration of the variety to South America was not so much encouraged, but forced by the jealousy of the Bordeaux market, who blocked export of wines from the South-West of France for fear the Bordelais would be overshadowed by their wines. While the variety flourished in Argentina, the arrival of Phylloxera in mainland Europe in the 1860s sounded the death knell for the Cahors wine industry, destroying the entire region's vineyards over the course of the decade. Fortunately, in recent years, the variety has been nurtured and is making something of a comeback.

The 27 hectares of Chateau Paillas are based on the Floressas plateau, which has a brilliant terroir for Malbec, the main grape in this blend. The plateau is at high altitude (240 metres above sea level), so the vines are well-aerated which prevents damage caused by damp and mildew. It also avoids the low-lying morning fogs and in fact has full sunlight for most of the day which encourages the full and even ripening of the fruit.

Chateau Paillas Cahors is a blend of 90% Malbec and 10% Merlot. This is an expressive wine with a bouquet of violets, the bergamot of Earl Grey tea and soft red stone fruits such as cherry and plum. A rich and plump wine, it is powerful yet soft and rounded with fine tannins. Pair with cassoulet, breaded veal cutlets, and aubergine parmigiana.

2022 Albert de Conti, Cuvée Conti Blanc, Bergerac – 13.5%, £21.99

The de Conti family are originally from Italy – Vincenzo, the family's great-grandfather, left Italy in the 1920s when the country was suffering a catastrophic famine; both food and work was scarce. He settled in the village of Ribagnac and found work as a crop-sharing tenant farmer belonging to the chateau de Bridoire of Ribagnac. On his death in 1956, his son Primo took over the farm but refused 'the state of slavery' he viewed sharecropping to be and chose instead to rent his farm from the chateau. Over the rest of the family's history in the region, they have grown their business to such an extent that they were eventually able to buy their own land and move away from agriculture and into viticulture instead. The first wines were produced and bottled in 1986.

Descendent of the family, Luc de Conti, led the way in converting the estate to fully organic, and has been certified as such. He wanted to restore the natural balance of the terroir after centuries of over-farming, and instead work with the rhythms of the land to produce wines with more character. The region's soil is perfect for this style aromatic white, based upon a bedrock of Aquitaine clay-limestone. This soil provides perfect drainage which means the fruit flavours of the grapes are not diluted with too much water, and the limestone adds a generous amount of minerality and complexity to the finished wines also.

This wine is a blend of 50% Semillon, 40% Sauvignon Blanc and 10% Muscadelle. The grapes are macerated on skins for 48 hours before fermentation in stainless steel which retains freshness, and then the wine is aged on lees for 8 months, which adds rich texture and complexity to the finished wine.

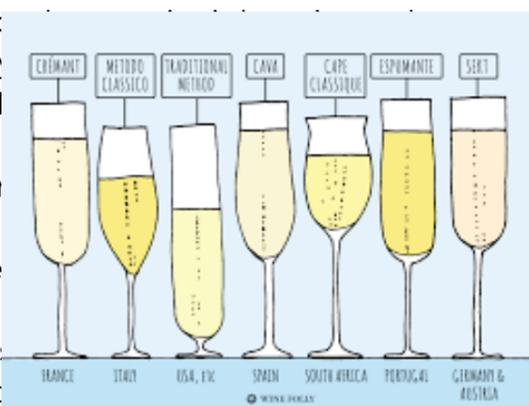
Pale gold in colour, with aromas of acacia, orange flowers and hints of white peach. Rich and rounded on the palate, well-balanced with aromatic complexity and length on the finish. Perfect with seafood, white fish with beurre blanc, or goats' cheese and caramelised red onion tartlets. Or simply enjoy on its own as an apéritif.





2022 Domaine le Roc, Roc' Ambulle, Fronton – 9.5%, £19.99

Domaine le Roc is a relatively young, family-run estate based in Fronton – it has only been going for the last 40 years or so with humble beginnings in the early 1980s. The estate has now grown into quite the family concern, with 7 members of the same family all having roles to play in the running of the estate. The estate was very recently certified organic (in 2022), even though they have been adhering to organic principles throughout their history, the sense that the land does not belong to them but is a gift from the beginning. The family philosophy has remained unchanged with respect for all living things, guided by the 'country common sense' that the land does not belong to them but is a gift from the estate in a better condition than in which they inherited it.



This is an interesting wine to try. It is produced in a traditional, first fermentation is complete in bottle. The CO2 produced creates bubbles. The resulting wine is a refreshing apéritif and a great

red (100% Negrette), it's low in alcohol (just 9.5%) and it's bubbly! The first fermentation takes place in stainless steel and just before the bottle seal is reabsorbed into the juice to create beautifully fine bubbles. The wine has notes of currant and blackberries, and the fine bubbles make this a very elegant aperitif such as Lardo.

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Join us in January and February for our Monthly Wine Tastings every 3rd Thursday, our Pop Up Restaurant, Champagne and Oysters and the always popular Fondue Night.

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