

PREMIUM

Variety in abundance: discovering the Languedoc's Côtes de Thongue

Rosemary George MW explores the Côtes de Thongue IGP in France's Languedoc-Roussillon, meeting a dynamic selection of engaged cooperatives, established growers and newcomers to the region. Finding a diverse range of grapes and styles, she recommends her top 12 below.



Rosemary George MW
September 30, 2022



The vineyards at the northern end of the of the Côtes de Thongue area, with characteristic 'puechs', or small hills, punctuating the landscape. Credit: Richard Holstein

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'Perhaps surprisingly for the Languedoc, Côtes de Thongue is developing a reputation for its white wines'

Scroll down to see tasting notes and scores for 12 top
Côtes de Thongue wines

The location

The vineyards are based on the Thongue, a small river which rises in the Faugères village of Fos and flows into the

Hérault near the village of St Thibéry.

Altogether the area covers 23 villages, with the heart of the vineyards at the northern end around Pouzolles and Abeilhan, and the historic town of **Pézénas** the nearest place of note.

The landscape is gently undulating, with stretches of flatter land interspersed with small hills, or *puechs* in Occitan, with none higher than about 175 metres.

The soil is mixed. Thirteen million years ago the sea was here, so there's plenty of limestone, with marine sediments. There are some volcanoes, with bauxite, as well as villafranchian pebbles, not dissimilar to the soils of **Châteauneuf-du-Pape**.

As Olivier Coste from Domaine Montrou explained, this diversity means that you can grow the same variety across different soil types, which gives different results and adds interest to the blend.



Vineyards around the village of Magalas in the Côtes de Thongue. Credit: Richard Holstein.

The grape varieties

The diversity of grape varieties is fascinating and inevitably the list includes some that are virtually unknown – maybe one grower with a few vines of something obscure managed to get it inserted into the *cahier des charges*. So there are varieties like Alphonse Lavallée, Aranel and Arinarnoa.

The Côtes de Thongue allows for three colours of Aramon, for Sciacarello (grown primarily in **Corsica**), for three colours of Piquepoul, and three of Terret. And the list will grow as, unlike the Pays d'Oc, they have not yet included any of the disease resistant varieties, but those are in the pipeline.

The flagship wine of Domaine La Croix Belle is No 7, made in all three colours, for the simple reason that the blend includes seven different varieties, some traditional to the Languedoc and some more international.

One estate in particular, Domaine de l'Arjolle, has led the way with experimental grape varieties, with Louis-Marie Teisserenc planting first **Zinfandel** and then **Carmenère**, and now his son, François, is pondering **Pinotage** and Petite Arvine. Neither, as yet, are in the *cahier des charges*, nor is Zinfandel, but that is in the pipeline for 2023.

Perhaps surprisingly for the **Languedoc**, Côtes de Thongue is developing a reputation for its white wines, which are increasing in production, while **rosé** is rather stagnant.



Bush vines in the Côtes de Thongue. Credit: Richard Holstein.

Côtes de Thongue at a glance

Location: 23 villages in the Hérault, based around the river Thongue.

Producers: 6 cooperatives and 65 independent estates

Production: 30% white, 30% rosé and 40% red

Soils: Varied – limestone and clay, bauxite, villafranchian pebbles

Grape varieties allowed: 110 varieties permitted, usually blends rather than single varieties. The most important are **Chardonnay** and **Syrah**, followed by **Grenache**, **Merlot**, **Sauvignon Blanc** and **Viognier**. Growing interest in **Cinsault**, Sauvignon Gris and Grenache Blanc. Less interest in **Muscat** à Petits Grains, **Mourvèdre**, Petit Verdot and **Pinot Noir**.

Most important producers: Domaine la Croix Belle, Domaine de l'Arjolle, Domaine Bassac, Domaine Montrose, Cooperative d'Alignan du Vent

Vintages: Quality is pretty consistent, but various factors have affected quantity. Frost in 2021, sunburn in 2019, drought in 2018, mildew in 2017 and drought in 2016. And 2020 was complicated by Covid.

Strong focus on the environment

One of the things that does unite the wine-growers of the Côtes de Thongue is a biodiversity programme, called Biodiv&Eau, focusing on sustainability, to which most of the wine-growers are committed. It has been in place for about 10 years and emphasises not so much **organic** viticulture but the quality of the environment – they are planting more trees and hedges and constructing more ponds, and there are nest boxes for bats.

Emilie Alauze from one of newer estates, Lou Belvestit, noted the proliferation of birds' nests, especially in gobelet bush vines, that provide lots of shelter.

There is also a strong commitment to organic viticulture – 80% of the vineyards are organic, **biodynamic** or certified Haute Valeur Environnementale.

Louis Delhon of Domaine Bassac was one of the very first pioneers of organic viticulture in the whole of the Languedoc when he took over the family vineyards in 1987.



Emilie Alauze of Lou Belvestit. Credit: Richard Holstein.

A like-minded group of cooperatives and independents

Altogether there are six cooperatives and 65 wine estates, but they don't necessarily make solely Côtes de Thongue wines if they have vineyards in adjoining areas and appellations.

Some are long-established, such as Domaine la Croix Belle, Arjolle and Bassac, while the area is also welcoming to new producers.

Some, like Emilie Alauze at Lou Belvestit and Delphine and Gilles Guiraud at Mas Delgi, took family vineyards out of the cooperatives, while Magali and Joël Larose of Domaine Larose bridge the gap between an independent and a cooperative. Magali is a trained oenologist and they wanted to do things that wouldn't be feasible in a large cooperative. So with 3ha of vines they experiment, using amphora and making orange wine, while they send their remaining 27ha to the competent Alignan-du-Vent cooperative where Joël remains vice-president.

And then there are the newcomers, such as Aymeric and Sarah Discours at Domaine les Robes Noires. Barristers from **Bordeaux** who long had a hankering to make wine, they finally took the plunge in 2021 when they bought the former estate of Domaine du Bourdic, arriving in July just in time to organise the cellar for their first harvest.

The style of Côtes de Thongue wines: success in diversity

I quizzed Olivier Coste from Domaine Montrose about the typicity of the Côtes de Thongue.

'There is not one style of the Côtes de Thongue; it's determined by a group of like-minded producers who want to differentiate themselves from the Pays d'Oc, and who concentrate on the traditional grape varieties, and those best suited to a warmer climate.'

François Delhon of Domaine Bassac says 'the soils give a certain acidity, which is good for white wines'. He enthused about Vermentino, and the return to original grape varieties such as Carignan. 'The whites have acidity; the rosés some fruit and finesse, while the reds are fresh, with some power'.

He also commented on the good camaraderie amongst the producers. Joël and Magali Larose also enthused about the enormous choice of grape varieties: 'There is a wonderful liberty, so you cannot really say that there is a typical Côtes de Thongue'.

What is clear is that these wines offer a mosaic of different flavours, with so much to discover.

See Rosemary George MW's tasting notes and score for 12 top Côtes de Thongue wines:

Domaine les Robes Noires, Hammurabi, Côtes de Thongue, Languedoc-Roussillon, France 2021

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A pure Cinsault vinified as a white wine with no skin contact at all. Light in colour, with quite a stony nose, and a certain weight on the palate, with some satisfying mouthfeel and good balancing acidity. They wanted to make a white wine, but simply did not have

Points 91



Domaine de l'Arjolle, Equinoxe Viognier-Sauvignon, Côtes de Thongue, Languedoc-Roussillon, France 2021

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The Sauvignon fruit profile dominates the blend, with some peachy notes from the Viognier. There's a good streak of acidity, the oak is well integrated, and the palate nicely textured, with a juicy finish. This should evolve nicely. It's a blend that they have made

Points 90



Domaine l'AB Tourrette, Cuvée Matéo, Côtes de Thongue, Languedoc-Roussillon, France 2021

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A blend of 30% Sauvignon Blanc and 70% Grenache Blanc. Nicely rounded nose, leading to an elegantly textured palate, with some Sauvignon acidity and pithiness tempered by the Grenache Blanc. Very harmonious. Aged partly in vat and partly in barrel with some lees

Points 90

Moulin de Lène, Cuvée Mademoiselle, Côtes de Thongue, Languedoc-Roussillon, France 2020

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An intriguing and unusual blend of 70% Chardonnay, 20% Petit Manseng and 10% Muscat à Petits Grains. Light in colour, with a nicely nuanced nose with hints of honey. The oak is well integrated, with a rounded and harmonious palate showing some honey, good acidity and a refreshing finish. An...

Points 90



Lou Belvestit, Blanc, Côtes de Thongue, Languedoc-Roussillon, France 2021

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Emilie Alauze's third vintage of her white wine. It is pure Carignan Blanc, from seven-year-old vines, as the Roussanne was frosted. Normally the Roussanne would add some weight. This, however, is firm and fresh with good acidity, with the austerity and stony

Points 89



Les Hauts de Montarels, Chardonnay Fût, Côtes de Thongue, Languedoc-Roussillon, France 2020

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A pure Chardonnay, and very successful, especially for a warm climate Chardonnay. A little colour. Lightly oaked and nicely rounded, with good texture on the palate. Some acidity on the long finish.

Points 88



Domaine Bassac, Icône Rosé, Côtes de Thongue, Languedoc-Roussillon, France 2020

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An original blend of Cinsault and Cabernet Franc. One barrique of each, fermented and then aged in barrel for six months, followed by a year in bottle before sale. It works extraordinarily well. Light in colour, with quite a firm, structured nose. Great mouthfeel; textured and vinous with some weight....



Points 93

Domaine Montrose, 1701, Côtes de Thongue, Languedoc-Roussillon, France 2021

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1701 was the year the original owner of the estate received his coat of arms. Made from 85% Grenache and 15% Roussanne from the same two plots each year, with volcanic soils – namely Grenache de la Croix and a north-facing vineyard of Roussanne in the garrigue



Points 92

Domaine Larose, Fruit de la Terre, Côtes de Thongue, Languedoc-Roussillon, France 2021

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Joël and Magali Larose are using amphora, which is still relatively rare in the Languedoc. The blend is half and half Carignan and Grenache. The grapes are all destemmed, with the Carignan macerated in old barrels, with a daily pigeage. The Grenache is fermented in



Points 93

Domaine Delgi, Carignan Vieille Vigne, Côtes de Thongue, Languedoc-Roussillon, France 2021

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Pure Carignan from 50-year-old bush vines planted by Gilles Guiraud's grandfather. Vinified by carbonic maceration lasting three weeks, with 20% of the blend aged in barrel. A touch of oak on the nose, which is well integrated on the palate. Structured with some firm fruit and a tannic streak. A...



Points 92

Domaine la Croix Belle, Cascaillou, Côtes de Thongue, Languedoc-Roussillon, France 2019

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50% Grenache makes it the dominant variety here, with 25% each of Syrah and Mourvèdre. Aged in an egg, this has a deep, youthful colour. Aromas of spicy red fruit, with notes of the herbs of the garrigue. Ripe red cherry fruit and supple tannins on the palate, with a...



Points 90

Domaine des Capriers, Les Larmes d'Ema, Côtes de Thongue, Languedoc-Roussillon, France 2020

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Pure Syrah that's seen 80% carbonic maceration and 20% traditional fermentation. Deep young colour. Quite a firm, fresh, peppery nose, and good peppery fruit on the palate. Good varietal character with a fresh finish. Youthful.



Points 89

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