

THE "BLACK" WINE OF CAHORS

BY TOM MARESCA &
DIANE DARROW



Sentimental journeys can take you into some out-of-the-way corners of the world: our pilgrimage took us back to Cahors, a delightful small city tucked into a horseshoe bend of the river Lot, in the Quercy region of Southwest France.

We happened on Cahors 12 years ago, and were at once charmed by its tranquillity and provincial sophistication, its medieval bridge and towers, its cathedral and old quarter. Fascinating in itself, the city also gives access to other intriguing sights, all an easy drive away: the crag-perched village of Rocamadour, the limestone caverns of Pech-Merle with their haunting neolithic paintings, the deserted fortress of Bonaguil—a miniature Carcassonne, solitary in the countryside.

This time we were drawn too by the food of the Quercy, a land of foie gras, of game, of mushrooms and truffles—Cahors was the first place in the world where we ever ate enough truffles. [For more on food of the Quercy, see "Learning French Country Cooking" on page 61.] But above all, its wine won us over, a deep, satisfying wine of great authority and quasi-legendary status, now almost unknown outside of France.

For centuries the vignerons of the Lot valley grew their grapes on the steep, stony slopes—the causses—of the high plateau that surrounds the town of Cahors. The wine they made was famous in medieval France and is still known today by its English name, "the black wine of Cahors." Black because the juices of the Malbec grape, the principal variety in Cahors, produce the darkest wine in France; and English because for years the English held Cahors, along with a great deal more of southwestern France, as part of the dowry that Eleanor of Aquitaine brought her English husband, King Henry II. When Joan of Arc was off battling for her Dauphin, the English were comfortably quartered in Cahors, defended by awesome fortified bridges like the still-standing Pont Valentré. They evidently came to love

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Cahors continued

Cahors's wine as well as its security, since they shipped the wine home in such quantities that until the 18th century the wines of Cahors were commercial rivals to those of Bordeaux.

But from that time on, the ascent of Bordeaux's reputation paralleled a decline in Cahors's foreign market, and the world seemed to be passing Cahors by. Unfortunately, the phylloxera didn't—and the epidemic of root lice that was proving lethal to vines all over Europe made its disastrous way to Cahors late in the 19th century. Not too far behind came World War I, and by the time the vigneron could replant with phylloxera-resistant rootstocks, the region was so impoverished that most of the new vines were set in on the easily worked lower slopes and valley floors instead of the by-then-overgrown and demanding higher slopes and hilltops. In consequence, the wine changed: The valleys make a wine no less dark than the famous black wine, but one much softer, fruitier and less complex. Cahors wines always show a deep ruby color and, when young, a big grapey nose. Those qualities, plus intense fruitiness and a kind of rustic vigor, the valley-bred Cahors has in abundance. But the big, authoritative wine of the past faded into folklore, another tale of the good old days that most people wouldn't have believed at all if not for the skill and stubbornness of an occasional winemaker, or the unexpected revelation of a particularly fine vintage.

Most Cahors came to be drunk locally in the Quercy and the nearby Périgord—pleasant quaffing wine for the most part, with enough spine to stand up to the local passion for *confit d'oie* and *cèpes* saturated with garlic and oil, but not a wine of distinction. The rule became to drink Cahors young, as opposed to the legendary black wine, which had been above all a *vin de garde*, a wine to lay down and keep until its maturity at 10, 15 or more years.

In the mid-1930s Cahors wine received the *vin délimité de qualité supérieur* designation, which in effect officially recognized its second-class status. A.O.C. (*appellation d'origine contrôlée*) on the label sells wines, but VDQS has always been a sort of consolation prize for wines of quality that couldn't make it into the first rank. After World War II, however, a

turnaround began in Cahors. Many small landowners organized themselves into cooperatives and adopted more modern procedures of vinification. This combined with the efforts of a handful of winemakers dedicated to the best of the old ways—the back-breaking high fields and long, costly slow fermentation and aging—sufficed to cause the authorities in 1971 to upgrade Cahors wine to *appellation contrôlée* status—the first time any VDQS wine had been so ennobled. The A.O.C. regulations in turn imposed tighter controls over the production of the wines, including restriction of yield, control of the blend and aging requirements for designations such as *vieille* or *réserve*, and the consequence of that was another rise in the general quality of the wine. The reputation of Cahors began to revive a little. Outside France it remained virtually unknown, but within France the general run of Cahors came to be thought of as a reasonably priced alternative to what Americans would call a decent shipper's Médoc—a pleasant, medium-bodied wine with nice fruit and just a hint of elegance.

But what of the old-style Cahors? Has all the famous black wine gone forever? There is, in fact, real hope that it too may be reviving on a significant scale. A few privately owned firms, individual châteaux in the Bordeaux sense, make a wine considerably more distinguished than the average Cahors. Clos la Coutale, Decas Robert, Clos de Triguédina, Château du Cayrou, Clos de Gamot, Clos des Batuts—all are estates producing more-or-less traditional Cahors: big, dark, long-lasting wine of great complexity. When young (two or three years old), such wines have a lot of tannin. Despite that, fruit may predominate: These are not feeble grapes. From the outset the wines display robustness and a forthright country charm. Older bottles—especially the barrel-aged reserves—seduce you with their polish, breeding and complicated personalities. They pass through the usual incarnation of Cahors—young, robust, “black”—and enter a sphere in which they compare with better Bordeaux. They metamorphose into wines that are elegant and well-bred, polished but not effete. They retain gracefully hidden muscle—which is the charm of all fine Cahors.

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Cahors continued

A few hardy winemakers have even begun the arduous process of reascending the heights—literally. Some 10 years ago M. Georges Vigouroux, an established *négociant* of high standards, purchased 80 hectares of land on a windy *cause* about four miles southeast of the town of Cahors. That is an enormous hunk of property in this corner of the world, especially for a nonvintner, nonfarmer to acquire. (By law, local smallholders have first refusal of all parcels of land that come on the market.) He got it because no one else would take it. It had once been a vineyard named Château Haute-Serre, but at the time he bought it, it was a jungle of scrub oak and juniper. M. Vigouroux—an aptly named gentleman if there ever was one—cleared 40 hectares (about 100 acres) for grapes and began installing modern vinification equipment and rebuilding the decrepit château.

Now, 10 years later, thriving vines sprout in orderly sequence out of an arid-looking field of rocks that range in size from peanuts to coconuts. Growing the traditional vines of the region—the Malbec (known locally as Auxerrois), Merlot, Tannat and Jurançon Noir—on one of the traditional sites of the region, and vinifying in a very controlled and careful manner, Château Haute-Serre produces a wine that has been widely hailed in France as the true taste of the old Cahors. The redoubtable French gastronome Robert Courtine has stated flatly that no other Cahors can even be compared to it. (Other tasters, ourselves included, agree that Vigouroux's wines are superb, but think that those of Jean Jouffreau and perhaps a few others are definitely in the same league.) Vigouroux himself is fond of observing that the old winemakers were no fools, and if they grew grapes on the backbreaking hilltops like Haute-Serre rather than in the yielding valleys, they must have had a reason.

Whether or not he is actually making the ancestral wine of the region (hardly a man is now alive who can recall the taste of a prephylloxera Cahors), Vigouroux is certainly producing a wine of distinction, a wine that justifies his claim that it would be a *premier cru* if such a classification existed for Cahors. Like the few other genuinely great Cahors wines we have tasted, Vigouroux's wines demand comparison with the heartier Médocs,

most especially St-Estèphe, though they remain quite distinct. They are neither Bordelaise nor Burgundian, though unmistakably French and unarguably fine. Moreover, being fermented on the skins for up to 24 days, they have great potential for aging.

Even in Cahors itself it is difficult to find truly old specimens of the wine. The oldest we tasted was a '66, and we got that by dint of artful negotiations with Patrick Lannes, the owner-chef of La Taverne, an excellent restaurant in Cahors with a fine selection of Cahors wines and a good range of vintage Armagnacs. La Taverne—41 Rue J.-B. Delpech; tel.(65) 35-28-66—is a Cahors institution. Now under its second owner-chef (Lannes succeeds the fondly remembered Pierre Escorbiac), it remains one of the great bastions of the local cuisine. Regional specialties such as *oeufs quercynoise* (an egg coddled with fresh foie gras, truffles and red wine—Cahors, of course) and *tourte quercynoise* (a pie of lamb sweetbreads, foie gras, *cèpes* and morels) are the natural accompaniments to fine old Cahors. In the United States, alas, anyone who wants to taste a mature Cahors will have to be very lucky or very provident.

Here are some tasting notes on a handful of wines currently imported into the United States. Prices for top Cahors range from \$7 to \$9.

Château Haute-Serre

1979: Smells rich, grapey. Tannic, with lots of fruit. Shows evident breeding despite its youth. Perfumed, fresh. Quite fine.

1978: Characteristic deep color. Spicy, fruity aroma. Big, full taste, a little raspy still from tannin. A *vin de garde* without a doubt.

1977: Perfumed, flowery. Like the '79, but further developed. Lovely.

1976: Deep color, perfumed, earthy nose. Flavor rounding toward maturity, but not there yet: still tannic. Massive fruit; this wine will go on forever, it seems. This was the first bottled vintage at Haute-Serre.

Clos de Triguedina

1978: Deep ruby color, full grapey nose. A fat and tannic wine, tasting a trifle discordant right now.

1978 Réserve: Color and nose like its brother wine, but showing more fruit and tannin in the taste. A more structured and harmonious wine. Fine, lean, muscular.

Château du Cayrou

1978: A wine from Jean Jouffreau, an excellent grower. Very dark. Weighty nose, basso profundo flavor: very mouthfilling. Brambly, with overtones of cassis. Not an elegant wine, but gutsy, with true black wine aging potential.

Cahors Côtes d'Olt

1971: The Cooperatives Côtes d'Olt is one of the best of the cooperative winemakers, and its younger vintages often show up in the United States at about \$5 a bottle. This 10-year-old had beautiful youthful color and a wonderful vinous nose. The flavor was dominated by fruit with a spine of tannin—a youthful taste that suggested good sour cherries as it opened. □

Tom Maresca and Diane Darrow write frequently on the wine and food of southern Europe.

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The Finer Things Shopping Sources

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