

## Outsiders make global inroads from France's unsung wine region

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### \* Outsiders turn Languedoc wine-making on its head

\* Flouting AOC rules can be a recipe for success

By Paul Casciato

LONDON, April 9 (Reuters) - Winemakers from Britain, Australia, the United States and even elsewhere in France are raising the profile of France's largest but most unsung wine region, Languedoc-Roussillon.

In southwest France bordering Spain and the Mediterranean, Languedoc used to be a byword for mass quantities of mediocre wine sold through local cooperatives or to wine industry merchants for blending with wines elsewhere.

But the poor cousin to France's Bordeaux and Burgundy wine regions is undergoing a transformation that has been attracting budding winemakers from around the world to a region that produces more than 180 million bottles of AOC wine a year.

Outsiders is a small group of winemakers in the region who hail from as far away as New Zealand and as close to home as Bordeaux. They provide a snapshot of the savvy new breed of Languedoc vigneron flouting the hidebound official rules governing French wine-making and applying scientific New World techniques to capture a bigger slice of the global market.

"I started the Outsiders group in June 2010 because I had met a number of people who were making interesting wines in Languedoc," said Louise Hurren, the founder and wine marketing executive. "I realized that what they all had in common was that they had come from outside the region."

One illustrative member of the Outsiders who was attracted to Languedoc's comparatively low vineyard prices, climate and a terrain that runs from rolling hills into wide plains and down to the coast is a 43-year-old former British pharmaceutical executive, **Charles Simpson**, and his wife, Ruth.

The Simpsons bought **Domaine Sainte Rose** in 2002 and have won more than a dozen international wine awards while building up sales across the United States, Britain, Canada, Ireland, Poland, Germany and Switzerland, which account for almost all of the 360,000 bottles they produce each year.

None of their wines are produced according to the strict rules which govern the making of French wines accorded the Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée (AOC) or Appellation d'Origine Protégée (AOP) designations.

That's a very different profile for traditional Languedoc, where only 34 percent of the AOC wine made goes to export, according to the Languedoc wine trade council (CIVL).

## NEW WORLD TECHNIQUE

After an exhaustive global tour of wine-producing regions, the Simpsons took a cursory look around the Languedoc "just to rule it out" and made the surprising discovery that an unloved region of the Old World was the best place for their new ideas.

Keen to buy a going concern in an up-and-coming wine region where they could build a unique reputation, plant what they wanted and make what they wanted, they found that New World wine regions had already become very established in their ways and had a stack of other would-be winemakers pushing up prices.

"By contrast, the Languedoc was the complete opposite," Simpson told Reuters by telephone from his vineyard near the village of Servian a few miles inland from the Mediterranean coast. "Everyone was trying to get out of it."

He said the combination of marketing skills and use of techniques such as picking grapes at different times, blending for taste rather than AOC rules and employing winemakers and oenologists has led to coveted export deals with high end UK supermarket Waitrose and the government alcohol monopoly in Canada's most populous province of Ontario, among others.

"One of the things we have done over the years is applied some New World thinking to everything that we do," Simpson said.

And the wine world's top writers, like Britain's Jane McQuitty in the Times newspaper and Jancis Robinson, who also owns a house in the region, are taking notice of the revolution at the hands of outsiders like the Simpsons.

"Leaving cold, old Blighty (Britain) to make wine in southern France was Charles and Ruth Simpson's best move," McQuitty wrote in August. "Their estate has produced a terrific run of Top 100-approved wines.

Robinson lauded the Languedoc's wide variety of wines from reds to fizzy Champagne-like Crémant de Limoux made in the foothills of the Pyrenees in a November note.

It said the number of vigneron in the Languedoc-Roussillon has plummeted from 43,000 in 2000 to 25,800 in 2010.

"But at the other end of the quality scale, the picture is much rosier," Robinson wrote.

"As throughout the world of wine, quantity has been swapped for quality and there seem to be more and more ambitious, well-trained smallholders in the higher, better vineyards of the Languedoc determined to make characterful wine. This is a place where an innovative gung ho winemaker can make a mark, but it will take 20 years to filter through to the outside world." (Editing by Mark Heinrich)

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