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# ROUSSILLON

## *Rancio Sec*

### A Catalan Tradition

Special Report by TARA Q. THOMAS

**T**he first time I tasted Rancio Sec, I was standing in the rain in a parking lot in Maury, where a klatch of vintners were putting on an alfresco tasting for the judges of Le Monde du Grenache. We'd spent two days tasting every permutation of grenache possible, from juicy just-pressed versions to deep, dark, concentrated reds, as well as a range of sweet fortified Banyuls and Maury. Yet I hadn't encountered anything like the wine that had just been poured into my glass: It was chestnut-brown, and smelled of salted nuts and caramel; the flavors were dry, saline and nutty, with translucent hints of red berries. It was almost like Sherry, but with more fruit to round the edges, and less alcohol. And it was one of the most delicious things I'd put in my mouth all year.

Flying home the next day, I was still thinking about it, and wondering where I could get another taste. With its saline, umami flavors and transparency, Rancio Sec seemed like a shoo-in for a tasting menu, not to mention aperitifs. But the only place in New York where I could find it was on Arnaud Tronche and Pascaline Lepeltier's list at *Racines*. How could something so delicious be so unknown?

I shot off an email to Alain Pottier of Domaine de la Tourasse, who'd written *Les Rancios Secs du Roussillon*, and he sent me the book in answer. A compilation of essays he gathered from Roussillon vintners, chefs and sommeliers, the book lays out Rancio Sec's place in Catalan history, and its near demise. Every family in Roussillon had its own stocks—some of it for everyday use, and a special glass *bonbonne* or barrel of long-aged Rancio Sec for festive occasions. Its structure and saline flavors made it a favorite with the anchovies that built the port town of Collioure; it was part of the *batterie* of every kitchen, used to deglaze a pan of mushrooms or to create a sauce for a *poulet*. Alexandre Dumas, in his seminal *Grand Dictionnaire de Cuisine* (1873), listed it among the wines a host should have on offer; the wine appeared on the tables of government officials, sharing space with the Château Margaux and d'Yquem.

Its popularity began to wane after the INAO created the appellations of Banyuls and Maury in 1936. The regulations decreed that, in order to earn the AOC, the wines must be fortified with the addition of alcohol, in the style of Portugal's Port wines. Historically, however, Rancio Secs come by their higher alcohol levels naturally. Made from late-harvested grapes, they are simply left to spontaneously ferment until dry—a process that can take months to years. To age the wines, the vintner might move the wine into different-sized barrels or glass demijohns, and put them outside, into “parking lots,” or stick them in a breezy section of the cellar where the fluctuating temperatures and wind encourage oxidation and aging; some vintners use a solera system, replenishing what they draw from the older barrels with younger wines. In some cases, the wines form a veil of yeast, as in Sherry.

But the new appellation rules left out Rancio, robbing it of the right to establish a place name on the label. Just as Port came to overshadow the Douro's tradition of dry wines, and fortified Sherries knocked out the tradition of non-fortified versions, Roussillon's fortifieds obscured Rancio Sec, so vintners began to phase it out of production.

It wasn't until 2004 that interest began to pick up again. That year, Slow Food International declared Rancio Sec an endangered viticultural tradition, and gathered the last remaining producers to establish the Roussillon Dry Rancio Wine Presidium. They showed their wines at Slow Food salons, catching the interest of people like celebrated Catalan sommelier Josep Roca. By 2012, producers had convinced the French government to create two PGIs (Protected Geographical Recognition) for Rancio Sec: Côtes Catalanes and Côte Vermeille.

Though a few Rancio Secs have made it to the US in the last decades through importers such as VOS Selections and Wineberry America, the vast majority are currently brought in by Haus Alpenz, a small company run by Eric Seed out of Minnesota. Seed, whose interest in Rancio Sec began after a visit to Roussillon in 2012, has since launched Sotolon Selections, a portfolio dedicated to oxidative wines.

It remains challenging to find a restaurant pouring Rancio Sec, but this is changing as word gets out. “Most people that are interested in oxidative wine are more than willing to add another vice to their list,” says Kai Valade at *Muse*, a wine bar in Portland, Oregon. His partner at the restaurant, Christopher Vazquez, agrees. “I have described it as a fresher, more rounded Sherry; but this is not trying to be Sherry, that is simply the jumping-off point,” he says. “They can be salty, cleanly earthy, a touch smoky, yet fleshy and oddly fruity, quite lively. Honestly my strongest selling point is to let the guest determine for herself.”

Patrick McDonald does the same at *Chaval* in Portland, Maine, presenting it in pairings with everything from thinly-sliced Bellota ham to their “bone marrow luge” and a dark-chocolate cake with *jamón serrano*-inflected ice cream. “Rancio wines work amazingly well with seafood, from Maine bluefin to Bangs Island mussels to boquerones,” he adds.

If you can find a copy of Colman Andrews' classic *Catalan Cuisine: Europe's Last Culinary Secret* (1997), it contains plenty of ideas for using Rancio Sec. Explaining that it is a wine “capable, at its best, of great complexity and finesse,” Andrews offers a recipe for *panellets*, marzipan cookies rolled in pine nuts or chopped hazelnuts, which he claims are a traditional accompaniment; he also calls for Rancio Sec in a recipe for duck braised with pears, and in a garlicky roast lamb. But you can also just set out some roasted almonds, olives and firm aged cheese; in general, Rancio Secs don't need any dressing up. They are compelling all on their own.



Our blind panels tasted **12** current-release Rancio Sec wines for this issue. Our critic for Roussillon, **Tara Q. Thomas**, rated **10** as exceptional (90+) and **1** as a Best Buy.

## FRANCE

**97 | Dom. Fontanel** \$25/500ml  
**2007 Côtes Catalanes L'Ancêtre Rancio Sec** Pierre and Marie Fontaneil sold this 74-acre estate in 2016 to Elodie and Matthieu Collet, a young couple fresh out of oenology school in Montpellier. The Collets, inspired by a cask of 2007 Rancio Sec that the Fontaneils left in their care, began making their own in 2018; in the meantime, they've bottled the 2007 to share with the rest of the world. Pierre Fontaneil based it on the fruit from two vineyards planted in 1908 and 1944 (mostly grenaches gris and blanc, with some macabeu, malvoisie du Roussillon, carignan blanc and other varieties mixed in), aging the wine in oak casks. This golden 2007 remains impressively fresh, with notes of salted cashews, saffron and curry leading toward a center that's plump and juicy with spicy pineapple flavor. Silky and lifted, it feels alive, with profound depths of umami-laden flavor to explore in the company of duck confit or miso-glazed black cod. *Haus Alpenz, Edina, MN*

**96 | Georges Puig** \$30/500ml  
**Vin de France Pyror** Georges Puig is the seventh generation to farm his family's land, 346 acres dotted with vineyards between Mount Canigou and the Mediterranean Sea. He's been central to keeping Roussillon's Rancio Sec style alive, tending the stocks that his ancestors have tucked away over the last hundred years. Pyror, short for Pyrenees-Orientale, is based on a solera that Georges' father and grandfather set up in the 1960s, the wine a blend of macabeu and grenaches blanc and gris. It's one of the most forceful Rancio Sec wines we tasted, clocking in at 18.5 percent, though it's not fortified. The alcohol adds fatness to counter the wine's salty, spicy tang; it also adds warmth that comes through in the red cast of its flavors. It tastes of red apples and caramel, chalk and salt, and moves like Zinedine Zidane charging up the soccer pitch, fleet-footed and powerful. You'll want a chunk of cheese to put in its path. *Haus Alpenz, Edina, MN*



**95 | Domaine Vial-Magnères** \$26/500ml  
**Côte Vermeille Tresmontaine Puits aux Souhaits** Based in Banyuls, producer Bernard Sapéras came to Rancio Sec in the 1980s through his love of Sherry. He developed a version aged under flor that his son, Oliver, still makes today; he also introduced this wine, a straight non-flor Rancio Sec. Made entirely from old bush-vine grenache, aged in casks that previously held the winery's Banyuls Blanc, it's one of the most delicate Rancio Sec on the market. The wine delivers an extraordinary array of flavors, plump and fresh, with pale-but-present red-cherry fruit surrounded by earthier notes of salt and spice, brioche and button mushrooms. "It's like a Sercial Madeira, but more delicate," said Craig Ganzer, an advisor to wine collectors, noting its clarity and ethereal feel. This would be delicious with foie gras on toasted brioche, especially with some cherry preserves to play up the fruit notes. *Haus Alpenz, Edina, MN*

**93 | La Cave de L'Abbé Rous** \$25  
**Côte Vermeille Matifoc Rancio Sec** Rancio Sec is so integral to Catalan winemaking history that even the cooperatives produce examples. This wine relies on members who grow grenache in the rocky sliver of land between the Pyrenees and the Mediterranean in the very southernmost reaches of France: Here, the warm climate, schist soils and old vines combine to produce fruit that can take the rigors of the Rancio process. This wine fermented until it was bone dry (less than one gram per liter of residual sugar), then aged outdoors, exposed to the elements, in old 600-liter barrels for close to four years. Back in the cellar, the team blended it with older wines and left to mellow until bottling; the wines in this bottling average 10 to 12 years. That aging regime has produced a wine in sepia tones, with notes of caramel and nuts, mushrooms and spice, along with

a ghosting of red-raspberry flavor. It's silky and lasting, with a saline tang that brings to mind a match with cured anchovies, a local favorite. *Haus Alpenz, Edina, MN*

**92 | Arnaud de Villeneuve** \$26  
**Côtes Catalanes Rancio Tresmontaine Tabacal** Now retired, Fernand Baixas is legendary for his work on Rancio Sec wines at this cooperative. He established the regimen still followed by the current team, fermenting grenache blanc in glass demijohns until dry and leaving it out in the sun for 18 months, then moving it inside and into old casks, where it rests for another ten years. It's surprisingly soft and mellow, with the sort of pleasant fatness to the texture that the French call *gras*. The flavors are equally sumptuous, with notes of roasted mushrooms, bacon, orange zest and brown sugar. Pour a glass after dinner with cheese. *Haus Alpenz, Edina, MN*

**92 | Dom. de la Rectorie** \$46  
**France Voile d'Argile** The Parcé family has been growing grapes on the steep schist slopes of Banyuls since the early 1900s. They never bottled wines, however, until 1984, when Thierry Parcé and his brother, Marc, began bottling an array of late-harvest wines from their old bush vines, including one from grenache gris that formed a veil of yeast while in cask. Today, Thierry runs the estate with his son, Jean-Emmanuel, and they bottle that wine as Voile d'Argile. It's not technically a Rancio Sec, as it's a blend of wines aged two, three and four years old, each aged on its own under a thin film of yeast, then blended before bottling; Rancio Sec regulations demand at least five years in cask. And it doesn't taste exactly like one, either: It's as bright and fruity as its yellow hue predicts, with soft, apple-like flavors and a saline, umami minerality. It's a perfect complement to *gildas*, those skewers of olive, anchovy and guindilla chiles served in tapas bars across northern Spain. *Wineberry America, Valley Cottage, NY*

**90 | Domaine de Rombeau** \$23  
**2009 Côtes Catalanes Rancio Sec** An umami-driven Rancio Sec, this is a deep-gold wine with notes of dried mushrooms and roasted pineapple giving it a meaty breadth. Its salty, nutty oxidative character and plump, layered flavors reminded Grande Cuvée's Michael Madrigale of aged Champagne. You could serve it in the same way, with, say, a Comté soufflé, or simply with a cheese course. Vintner Philippe Raspaud

makes this from a blend of white and gris grapes (grenaches, macabeu and sometimes a little malvasia) grown near his winery in Rivesaltes. He ages the wine outdoors in a mix of wood and glass vessels for 12 to 18 months, then brings some of the containers inside for further aging. He blends them all together just before bottling; the 2009 was bottled in 2016. *Haus Alpenz, Edina, MN*

**90 | Domaine de Saü** \$29/500ml  
**Côtes Catalanes Rancio Sec Grenache Gris**  
 Hervé Passama introduced his first Rancio Sec shortly before he passed away in March 2014; it's also the domaine's last, as his wife, Béatrice, has since retired and rented out the vines. A blend of wines from 2006 and 2007, it's based on a 70-year-old plot of grenache gris, the fruit fermented in epoxy-lined tanks and left for a week on the skins, then moved to Bordelais barrels in an old horse barn on the property, still exposed to the Tramontana winds that would sweep through the wooden walls and quicken the wine's evaporation in the casks. It's a concentrated Rancio Sec, clocking in at 18.5 percent alcohol, but the spicy heat works well in this context, cutting

through the nutty, butterscotch richness of the wine and drawing out its salty minerality. A bit of a brute, it's best matched with rich foods, like a dense, sweet alpine cheese or a chicken-liver pâté. *Haus Alpenz, Edina, MN*

**88 | Mas Peyre** \$18  
**Côtes Catalanes Le Démon de Midi (Best Buy)**  
 The Bourrels farm nearly 100 acres around their base in Saint-Paul-de-Fenouillet, working under biodynamics. They began a solera for Rancio Sec in 2005, creating Le Démon de Midi entirely from late-picked macabeu (they find that the wild boar prefer grenache, so there is more macabeu to work with come harvest time). This bottling, with an average age of six years aging (all indoors), tastes young and vibrant, with honey and floral notes and a yellow-plum plumpness. It turns dry and saline on the finish, a fruity, easy-drinking rancio to match with a salad or chill for an aperitif. *Haus Alpenz, Edina, MN*

## SPAIN

**94 | Espodol** \$23  
**Vi Ranci Sec L'Oxid Noble**  
 The vintners of the Celler Cooperatiu d'Espolla make Espodol from garnatxa blanca and garnatxa rosat on the southern side of the Pyrenees, where their old bush vines grow in rocky granite-and-black schist soils. The grapes ferment in the co-op's cellars in epoxy-lined concrete tanks, the juice then moved into large foudres for three or four years before it makes its way into a six-tier solera that dates to 1950. It's a dark, complex Rancio wine, fresh and aged all at once. It tastes of sweet and salty cherries, right down to the almond-toned pit; it's caramelized yet fresh, with bright acidity keeping it vibrant. Notes of maitake mushrooms and herbal spice give it an exotic edge, an otherworldly taste of a culture that values taking time both in the making and the drinking of its wines. Open this when you have time to take it in, whether it's over the course of days, in small glasses before dinner, or as part of a grand evening, where it can carry through the smoked almonds to the roasted bird and on to dessert. *Haus Alpenz, Edina, MN* ■

