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# Decanter

## 2017

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# Picpoul de Pinet

*Astonishingly popular with UK wine lovers, this southern French white has cornered the market for a number of reasons. Andrew Jefford analyses the secrets of its success*

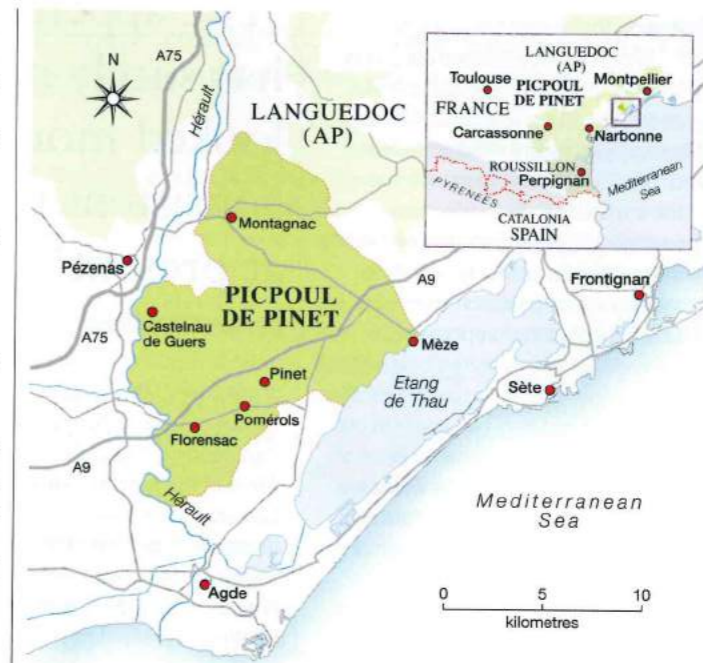
**B**ack at Christmas, we took my 89-year-old Dad for a pub dinner. He can't stay up late or move far, and we'd just been to visit my Mum in her nursing home, so the pub was chosen for nothing save proximity and convenience. It had one or two wines by the glass. Leading them off, in pride of place, in deepest mid-winter Oxfordshire... was Picpoul de Pinet.

This strange encounter underlines a most unlikely success story. Over the last decade, Picpoul de Pinet has been a smash hit with Britons, to the extent that today the UK accounts for a third of total Picpoul de Pinet sales. Why? How? What is this winning wine and where does it come from?

The clay-limestone soils of the appellation zone occupy 1,500ha close to the Etang de Thau: the coastal lagoon lying between Frontignan and Agde, dominated by Sète's Mont St-Clair. It's one of the oldest of France's wine-growing regions, dating back to the pre-Christian times of Greek settlement; a Gallo-Roman villa on the shores of the Etang contained presses, amphorae and a wine cellar. The first mention of 'Piquepoul', though, came later, in the 17th century.

## Modest origins

It was one of the three white grape varieties (together with Clairette and Terret) used for once hugely popular vermouth; indeed Noilly Prat, still made at Marseillan on the Etang de Thau, is based on 60% Picpoul. The appellation had modest origins (VDQS from 1954; Coteaux du Languedoc from 1985); there were just 15,000hl produced in 1992. Now production has quadrupled. The zone finally won its own AOP in 2013.



**'Picpoul's flavour style – fresh and lemony but not biting acid – is hugely likeable'**

Why the success? It's a cooperative-dominated region (the co-ops account for an impressive 82% of production) and is almost entirely machine-harvested, so its cost price is low, and large UK retailers and merchants can work successfully in partnership arrangements.

Recent technical advances in white-winemaking (especially high-quality pressing; cold, reductive fermentation with some lees contact; a blocked malo and bottling under inert gas) have sent quality soaring. It has an easy-to-pronounce name – and it isn't yet more Chardonnay or Sauvignon Blanc; this 'southern oyster wine' (90% of French Mediterranean oysters come from

the Bassin de Thau) has both gastronomic and terroir kudos. Most importantly, its flavour style – fresh and lemony but not biting acid, with 12.5% or 13% alcohol and a saline edge – is hugely likeable.

Its success, though, is also due to a cunning ploy by local producers – to exclude Picpoul wherever possible from the variety pool of local IGP and other AOP wines (it's long been allowed for white Châteauneuf-du-Pape, but is little-grown there). If you want Picpoul, in other words, it has to be 'de Pinet'. And we do.

**Andrew Jefford** is a *Decanter* contributing editor and columnist and is a co-Chair for DWAA

## PICPOUL DE PINET: KNOW YOUR VINTAGES

**2018** A very wet spring and a warm but moist early summer led to some downy mildew pressure in vineyards, but the sea breezes and quick action from growers saw it off, leading to an excellent quality harvest.

**2017** In general, Picpoul's coastal location means that it has few frost problems; nonetheless 500ha of the higher-sited vines were frost-affected in 2017's very difficult spring. After that, the summer was warm and dry, leading to a homogeneous, high-quality harvest, though quantities were much lower in 2017 than 2018.

**Older Vintages** 'Drink as fresh as possible' is the best advice for Picpoul de Pinet if you want to enjoy the wine before it loses its lemon-fresh, sea-salt charm.



## PICPOUL DE PINET: THE FACTS

**Production** 68,919hl in 2017; 90,000hl in 2018 (the AOP's biggest-ever vintage)

**Area under vine** 1,500ha

**Producers** Four co-ops make 82% of production; there are also 24 private cellars

**AOP** since 2013

**Exports** 60% (over half of that to UK)

Robert Parker:

*"Absolutely fabulous... A success!"*

2005 Vintage: 95/100

*"A beauty!"*

2012 Vintage: 94/100



www.malartic-lagraviere.com

# The verdict

The large number of high scores in this tasting proved that Picpoul de Pinet is a reliably consistent choice – with wallet-friendly prices. Andrew Jefford shares the highlights

Picpoul's final secret, in addition to those already outlined on the previous page, is consistency. With 49 out of 57 wines tasted achieving a rating of Recommended, Highly Recommended or Outstanding, the appellation has surely never looked more consistent than at present. Technical standards in this technophile zone of Languedoc are high; youthfulness is all; and more producers than in most parts of France are now prepared to use screwcap closures in place of cork (48 out of the 57 wines we tasted).

How, though, do you lift Picpoul de Pinet from a 'good' rating to an 'outstanding' one? Could Picpoul ever be regarded as a 'fine wine'? Could it ever win a perfect score?

These are important questions to address before embarking on a panel tasting of this sort. I well recall discussing them with my fellow Languedoc-Roussillon panellists during the 2011 edition of DWWA: that was the year in which Picpoul de Pinet surprised us by winning both the 'Under £10' and 'Over £10' Regional Trophies for white wines.

All three panellists in this tasting agreed that perfection was theoretically attainable for a Picpoul de Pinet – though we also agreed that this would mean something different to perfection for a Montrachet or for a

grand cru Gewurztraminer from Alsace, for example.

In particular, we asked ourselves whether it would mean complexity, depth, density, evident use of lees, and maybe even a very light oakaging? Or would it simply mean incarnating the appellation ideal of lemony freshness and fugitive, teasing salinity better than any other wine on the table? As you'll see from our notes, we favoured the latter approach – or perhaps we simply weren't exposed to many wines crafted in the former style. They exist, but only two wines in our tasting carried an estimated price of £15 or over, so most of the wines we tasted tried to do no more than sing the appellation song with maximum gusto – and in tune.

Those two more expensive wines, by the way, were Cap Cette, an export brand from the large Cave de Pomerols (Beauvignac) and Justin Howard-Sneyd MW's only 95-point scoring wine; and La Viste, an export label from another of the three cooperative giants, the Cave de l'Ormarine. (Domaine St-Peyre is also from Beauvignac.)

An enigmatic feature of Picpoul de Pinet from the consumer's point of view is that it's an appellation which every Languedoc exporter wants to offer, but where almost no land is at present for sale (I told you the locals are canny). The result is a proliferation

## 'The appellation has surely never looked more consistent than at present'

of outsiders' labels sourced from the co-ops or leading domains. Our two 'Outstanding' Picpouls were both wines of this sort, from the Carcassonne-based LGI wines (Belardent) and from the small SO Vignerons team at St Rémy de Provence (Villa des Croix) – both, significantly, oenologist-led. Note, too, the high placing for the Moulin de Gassac version and, further down the field, wines from Domaines Auriol, Calmel & Joseph, Castel, Gérard Bertrand and Maison Lorgeril.

The leading private domaines of Picpoul are well worth following in their own right, of course, and no fan of Picpoul will be surprised to see the Cuvée Classique from Félines-Jourdan (the largest private producer of all, producing up to 250,000 bottles a year) figure at the top of the Highly Recommended cohort. The ever-excellent Font-Mars wasn't far behind.

### THE SCORES

57 wines tasted  
**Exceptional** 0  
**Outstanding** 2  
**Highly Recommended** 22  
**Recommended** 25  
**Commended** 5  
**Fair** 3  
**Poor** 0  
**Faulty** 0

**Entry criteria:** producers and UK agents were invited to submit their latest release of Picpoul de Pinet

## OUTSTANDING 95–97pts



**Belardent 2017** Decanter average score: 95/100pts  
 Individual judges' scores: 95 Andrew Jefford 97 Justin Howard-Sneyd MW 92 Marcel Orford-Williams 95

£10.95 Davy's  
 Belardent is part of the portfolio of the Languedoc group LGI. Founded in 1999 by Alain Grignon, LGI focuses on producing brands specifically for the export market, often from high quality co-ops working throughout the region. Since Grignon's retirement in 2013, operations are now overseen by MD Xavier Roger and sales director Cédric Duquenoy, who have been at LGI since its formation and have evidently been successful in maintaining the organisation's excellent quality-to-price ratio.

**Andrew Jefford** Silver-green, bright and alluring. Sweet, fresh and stony aromas, achieved with grace and finesse; elegant and enticing. Mouthfilling, pithy flavours of lemon and grapefruit with a stony edge. Lots of concentration and drama here. Excellent Picpoul.

**Justin Howard-Sneyd MW** Pale greeny-yellow. Mild, easygoing, rounded, middle-of-the-road mouthful of stewed apple and plum. Some nice freshness and pith on the finish

**Marcel Orford-Williams** Has complexity. Minty, herby, fennel notes, with a long finish that lasts and lasts.

Drink 2019 Alcohol 12.5%



**SO Vignerons, Villa des Croix 2017**

95 AJ 97 JHS 90 MOW 98

£10.35 Exel  
 Founded by Daniel Orsolini and Claude Serra, So Vignerons has been vinifying wines from around the Languedoc since 2005. The company looks to forge close relationships with the growers it works with, by signing long-term contracts and providing expert viticultural advice. This consultancy service is managed by Serra, who as well as running the winemaking for the group, is also a professor at Montpellier University of Oenology.

**AJ** Steel-green; just off water-white. A sweeter, shellier aroma than many, fresh and marine: very attractive. Clean, lively, mouthwatering, lean and long: classic Picpoul in very good shape.

**JHS** Some class here. Slightly green-edged, but with precision and delicacy. Nice fresh acidity lifted by a hint of pith.

**MOW** Super fruit. Still bags of life. A stunning example of Picpoul de Pinet.

Drink 2019 Alc 12.5%

## HIGHLY RECOMMENDED 90–94pts



**Domaine Félines Jourdan, Cuvée Classique 2017** 94 AJ 93 JHS 94 MOW 94

£11.95 Berry Bros & Rudd  
 Fresh, sweet, lively and enticing, with creamy lemon notes and a little floral freshness. Soft though prominent acidity and citrusy fruits.  
 Drink 2019 Alc 13.5%



**Les Costières de Pomérols, Cap Cette 2017** 94 AJ 93 JHS 95 MOW 95

£10.95 Jeroboams  
 A serious style of ripe and rounded wine, with some oyster-shell marine notes. Powerful mango and lemon zest palate full of complex weight and length. Drink 2019-2020 Alc 13%



**Domaine St-Peyre 2017** 93 AJ 95 JHS 92 MOW 91

£10.45 Christopher Piper, Lea & Sandeman  
 Bright and saline nose, with a delicate note of briny lemon and grapefruit. This has real class, brightness, salinity and precision.  
 Drink 2019-2020 Alc 13%



**Moulin de Gassac 2017** 93 AJ 95 JHS 90 MOW 95

£11.35 Frederic Robinson  
 Fresh, soft lemon and the smell of rain on the sea breeze. Pronounced though ripe and rounded acidity. Bracing and refreshing; stony on the finish. Drink 2019 Alc 12.5%



**Cave de l'Ormarine, Les Prades 2017** 92 AJ 92 JHS 90 MOW 95

£10.35-£11.50 Exel, Great Western Wine  
 Fresh, sweet and sappy scents, with lots of plant-like or seaweedy complexities. No shortage of classic seaside freshness here.  
 Drink 2019 Alc 12.5%



**Cave de l'Ormarine, La Viste 2017** 92 AJ 90 JHS 92 MOW 95

£9.95 Jeroboams  
 Complex aromas, broad, intricate and enticing. Some lime and peach juice freshness, along with a little cream and salted caramel.  
 Drink 2019-2020 Alc 12.5%

### THE JUDGES

#### Andrew Jefford



Jefford has been writing about wine since the 1980s, winning many awards. He writes a monthly column for Decanter magazine and a widely followed blog for Decanter Premium.

After working as a senior research fellow at Adelaide University between 2009 and 2010, he now lives with his family in the Languedoc.

#### Justin Howard-Sneyd MW



Howard-Sneyd passed the MW exam in 1999 and has worked as a buyer for Safeway, Sainsbury's and Waitrose. He is now global wine consultant to Direct Wines and founder of The Hive

Wine Consulting Limited. He also makes 4,000 bottles a year of Domaine of the Bee, a blend of Grenache and Carignan from Roussillon.

#### Marcel Orford-Williams



Orford-Williams joined The Wine Society as a buyer in 1986, with a particular interest in Alsace, Rhône and southern France. He writes extensively for The Society, including The

List, offers and the blog. For services to French wine, Orford-Williams was made Chevalier de l'Ordre du Mérite Agricole.