

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

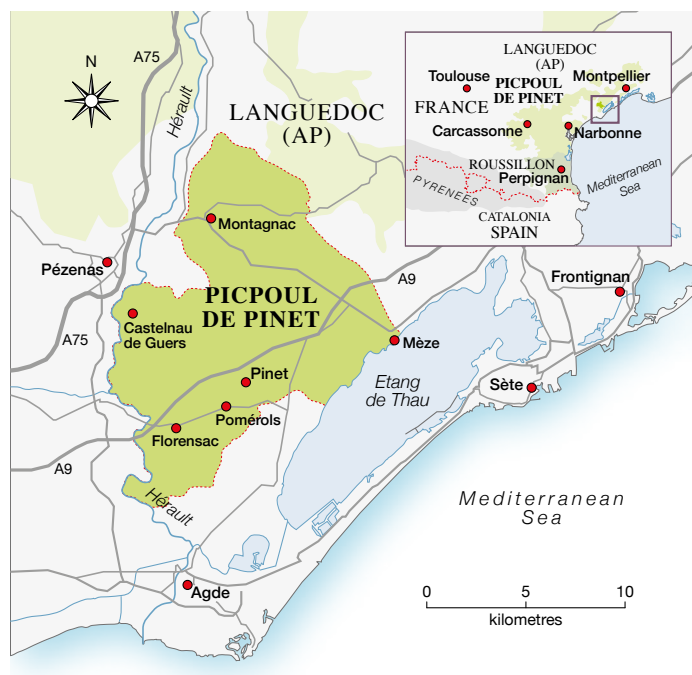
Back at Christmas, we took my 89-year-old Dad for a pub dinner. He can't stay up late or move far, and we'd just been to visit my Mum in her nursing home, so the pub was chosen for nothing save proximity and convenience. It had one or two wines by the glass. Leading them off, in pride of place, in deepest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

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)

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 DWAA: 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 oaking? 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

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.

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% >

HIGHLY RECOMMENDED 90-94pts



Font-Mars 2018 92 AJ 95 JHS 92 MOW 90

£12.90 Le Vignoble
Mouthfilling, lively and long, with leesy notes helping to build and fill its character. There's fresh acidity, grapefruit as well as lemon citrus, and some stony 'otherness' too. **Drink** 2019-2020 **Alc** 12.5%



Les Domaines Auriol, Blanc de Blancs Les Flamants 2018 92 AJ 93 JHS 92 MOW 92

N/A UK info@les-domaines-auriol.eu
Very marine and sandy seashore in aromatic terms. Not fruity, but articulate and characterful. **Drink** 2019-2020 **Alc** 12.5%



Famille Morin, Cuvée Caroline 2017 91 AJ 90 JHS 90 MOW 94

£10.99 Alliance Wine, East Street Wine Company, Oxford Wine Company
Sweet and fresh; lemon with a vanilla edge to it. Bright and lively palate, with plenty of lemon fruits and a little grapefruit pith to finish. **Drink** 2019 **Alc** 13.5%



Les Vignobles Foncalieu, Les Cazalets 2017 91 AJ 91 JHS 91 MOW 90

£9 Inverarity Morton
Clean, fresh, stony, sappy and leafy. Fine, classic aromas of great charm and intrigue. Intense and clean, with lemon and grapefruit. **Drink** 2019 **Alc** 12.5%

‘Picpoul de Pinet is an appellation every Languedoc exporter wants to offer’



Calmel & Joseph, Villa Blanche 2018 90 AJ 91 JHS 91 MOW 89

£11.99 Daniel Lambert
Very appealing nose that promises plenty of ripe, juicy mouthwatering stone fruits and zing. Clean, lemony notes with a little leesy tease; fresh and mouthwatering. **Drink** 2019-2020 **Alc** 12.5%

HIGHLY RECOMMENDED 90-94pts



Maison Castel, Vignoble du Languedoc 2017 90 AJ 90 JHS 92 MOW 89

£9.99 Castelnaud Wine Agencies
Lots of sandy seashore and lapping lagoon aromas here. Intense, deep and mouthfilling on the palate. Developed and secondary in expression. **Drink** 2019 **Alc** 12.5%



Maison Duroc, Réserve Roquemolière 2017 90 AJ 88 JHS 89 MOW 92

£9.95 Great Western Wine
Quite mineral in the oyster-shell style, this takes saline freshness to an extreme! Mouthfilling and pure on the palate. **Drink** 2019-2020 **Alc** 12.5%



Mas St Laurent, Le Ginestet 2017 90 AJ 89 JHS 89 MOW 91

£9.48 Georges Barbier of London
Honeyed and full, with a faint scent of aniseed. Intense, concentrated, vivid and ripe. **Drink** 2019 **Alc** 12.5%



Terre de Roqueloupie 2017 90 AJ 90 JHS 87 MOW 92

£10.50 Genesis Wines
A touch of mature pollen and honey on the nose; floral notes, too. Structured, deep flavours, quite evolved, but still aromatic and full of interest. **Drink** 2019 **Alc** 13%

‘The leading private domaines are worth following in their own right’



Vignerons de Florensac, Ornezon 2017 90 AJ 87 JHS 91 MOW 92

£9.99 Alliance Wine, Davis Bell & McCraith, The Vineking
A fresh and zippy mouthful of concentrated and fragrant lime peel and grapefruit. Lovely balance and concentration. **Drink** 2019-2020 **Alc** 12.5%



Domaine A Morin 2017 90 AJ 89 JHS 90 MOW 91

£11.95 Ellis Wines
Lively and long. The palate is brightly concentrated and full with complex saline notes. **Drink** 2019 **Alc** 13.5%



Domaine Belle Mare 2018 90 AJ 88 JHS 89 MOW 92

£13.60 Enotria&Coe, Exel, Portal, Dingwall and Norris, Rodney Fletcher Vintners
Density and detail on the palate with pears and star fruit, then quite pithy and pleasantly bitter on the finish. An attractive wine with lots to say. **Drink** 2019-2020 **Alc** 13.5%



Domaine de Camp Aucels, Jean le Blanc 2017 90 AJ 92 JHS 89 MOW 90

£13.95 Bancroft Wines
Very mouthfilling and vigorous; still amply fresh and in style a cascade of pure, taut and lean citrus. The crunchy, fresh acids are crucial here. **Drink** 2019 **Alc** 12.5%



Domaine de Montredon 2017 90 AJ 90 JHS 88 MOW 93

£11.49 Alliance Wine, Drink Warehouse UK, Regency Wines
Lemon jelly nose along with a hint of summer meadow flowers – even some hay. Very poised and subtle. **Drink** 2019 **Alc** 12.5%



Domaine des Lauriers 2017 90 AJ 90 JHS 87 MOW 92

£9.50 Tanners
Lots of character here – a much sweeter style of lemon, and plenty of it – backed up by some Asian spice. Deep, long, firm and sustained. **Drink** 2019 **Alc** 13%



Domaine Morin-Langaran 2017 90 AJ 90 JHS 87 MOW 92

£9.95 Corney & Barrow
Good concentration and intensity here, and a nice stone character to back up what is still some sustained lemon. **Drink** 2019 **Alc** 13.5%

RECOMMENDED 86-89pts

Wine	Score	AJ	JHS	MOW	Tasting note	Alc	Drink	Price	Stockists
Cave de l'Ormarine, Carte Noire, 2018	89	88	89	89	Classic southern French notes with a saline lick and a hint of citrus peel. Quite a tight phenolic finish.	12.5%	2019-2020	£9.99	Boutinot, Nickolls & Perks
Château Morin Langaran, Beaugaran, 2017	89	86	87	93	Balanced, fresh fruit salad with some melon and ripe pear. Sustained with a touch of seaside.	13.5%	2019	£10.95	Great Western Wine
Domaine Félines Jourdan, Féline, 2017	89	89	89	90	Vivid, clean and lively, with attractively ripe, almost savoury acidity. A complete and intense style.	13%	2019-2020	POA	Berry Bros & Rudd, The Wine Society
Domaine La Serre, 2018	89	85	89	93	Nice fresh, earlier-picked, green and zingy fruit. Pretty tasty, with fresh apple-skin notes, and some fresh pear and lime delicacy.	12.5%	2019-2020	£11.10	Nickolls & Perks
Gérard Bertrand, Terroir, 2018	89	89	90	89	Sweet, fresh, creamy and sappy – this is a Picpoul with real presence as well as classicism.	13.5%	2019-2020	£12.99	Corking Wines, Hallgarten, Strictly Wine, Wineman
Les Vignerons de Florensac, Cuvée Ressay, 2018	89	90	88	90	Primary lemon fruit and some leafy freshness too. Ample, vinous and structured in style. Attractive lemon complexity with a stony finish.	12.5%	2019-2020	£8	Alliance Wine
Maison Lorgeril, Les Mouettes, 2017	89	90	89	87	Good breadth adds rich, sweet support to the gentle and creamy apple and yellow plum fruit.	13%	2019-2020	£10 (2016)	Majestic
Vignobles Canet, 2018	89	89	89	88	Ample lemony fruit and stony mineral presence, as well as soft and charming acidity.	12.5%	2019-2020	£11.99	Laitwaite's
Vignobles Canet, Tête de Cuvée, 2017	89	87	89	90	Fresh, pineapple and Chartreuse herbal notes. Clean and open with lovely freshness and some saline zip.	12.5%	2019-2020	£10.40-£11.99	Gerrard Seel, Laitwaite's
Château St Martin de la Garrigue, 2017	88	84	90	90	Nice, fresh, aromatic style. Lovely balance, with great freshness of lemon and salted lemon peel.	12.5%	2019-2020	£10.99	Laitwaite's
Domaine de la Madone, 2018	88	87	87	90	Very fresh and leesy on the nose. Vivid on the palate with a lean line running through.	12.5%	2019-2020	£9.99	Ocado

RECOMMENDED 86-89pts

Wine	Score	AJ	JHS	MOW	Tasting note	Alc	Drink	Price	Stockists
Domaine de la Mirande, 2017	88	84	90	89	Nice green edge ensures that this has a life ahead of it. The twist of lime pith and sea spray will lift any dish you serve it with.	13%	2019-2020	£10.99-£11.75	Beacon Wines, Bijou Bottles, Ellis Wharton Wines, Harvey Nichols, Les Caves de Pyrene, The Good Wine Shop
Guillaume de Guers, 2017	88	88	88	88	Mouthfilling and fresh, with both cool citrus and leafy notes complemented by a saline lick.	12.5%	2019	£11.95-£13.95	Eurowines
La Croix Gratiot, Domaine de Ste Croix, RC, 2017	88	90	91	82	Sweetly fresh in scent, followed by a zesty and pithy character.	12.5%	2019-2020	£9.99	Cambridge Wine Merchants
Baron de Badassière, 2017	87	85	86	89	Plump, oily and savoury, with notes of lemon jelly.	12.5%	2019-2020	£10.49	Bay Tree Wine, Drinkmonger, Eton Vintners, In Vino Veritas, Liberty, Nickolls & Perks, Noel Young, Satchells of Burnham Market
Cave de l'Ormarine, Cuvée Prestige, 2018	87	85	85	92	Generous on the nose. with expressive fruit. Long and rich to finish.	13%	2019	POA	Boutinot, Nickolls & Perks
Château de Pinet, Gaujal, Cuvée des Comtesses, 2017	87	86	92	84	Excitement on the nose and rewarding on the palate. Lush and precise, with a good deal of length and lovely weight.	13.5%	2019-2020	£13.20	Champagnes & Châteaux
Domaine de Castelnaud, Les Grands Bouillons, 2017	87	85	89	88	Pleasant with good freshness and some weight on the palate.	13%	2019	£9.99	Cambridge Wine Merchants
Domaine Félines Jourdan, 2017	87	89	88	84	Sustained fruit on the palate, with a touch of seaside charm rounded off with good length and intrigue.	13.5%	2019-2020	£10.50	Goedhuis & Co
Les Vignobles Foncalieu, Domaine Combe Rouge, 2017	87	87	85	88	Clean and fresh, with a touch of oyster shell on the finish.	12.5%	2019	£9	Inverarity Morton
Savary de Beauregard, 2017	87	84	88	89	Ripe, flavourful nose with a lemony leanness to the palate.	12.5%	2019	N/A UK	www.savarydebeauregard.com
Cave de l'Ormarine, Duc de Morny, 2018	86	85	84	88	A vivid cascade of ripe, softly green acidity, with some vinosity and a faintly bitter finish. Tasty drinking.	12.5%	2019	£9.99	Auriol, Bacchanalia, Boutinot, Camber Wines, Cellar Twelve, D Byrne & Co, Great Grog, Hercules, Houllts, TJ Wines
Gérard Bertrand, Terroir, 2017	86	82	88	88	Taut and herbal, with lime-leaf and savoury soy notes.	12.5%	2019-2020	£10.99	Corking Wines, Hallgarten, Strictly Wine, Wineman
La Croix Gratiot, Bréchallune, 2017	86	86	86	86	Vivacious, perfumed and lifted, with lots of fruited intrigue. Vivid and full on the palate.	13%	2019	£17.99	Majestic
Terra Viva, L'Autanel, 2017	86	84	85	89	The palate is freshly acidic, though with rather an earthy green cast.	13%	2019-2019	£13.50	Roberson

COMMENDED 83-85pts

■ Château Petit Roubié 2017 85, 13%, 2019, £9.99-£10.25 Amathus, Vinceremos, Vintage Roots ■ **Domaine des Lauriers, Cuvée Prestige 2017 85**, 13%, 2019, £11.30 L'Art du Vin ■ **Domaine Gaujal, Cuvée Ludovic Gaujal 2017 85**, 13.5%, 2019, £11.75 Yapp Brothers ■ **Domaine Gaujal de St Bon, Cuvée des Dames 2017 85**, 13.5%, 2019, N/A UK +33 (0)4 6832 1667 ■ **Château de Castelnaud 2018 84**, 12.5%, 2019, £9.76 (2017) WoodWinters

FAIR 76-82pts

■ **Domaine La Grangette, Poule de Pic 2017 82**, 12.5%, 2019, N/A UK www.domainelagrangette.com ■ **Société La Cave, Grain Marin 2018 82**, 13%, 2019, N/A UK lacave.nicolas@wandoo.fr ■ **La Croix Gratiot 2017 80**, 12.5%, 2019-2020, £11.99 Liberty Wines

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