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Times Online

From **The Times**

March 4, 2010

Wine: Is it the real thing?

Pinot noir or low-grade plonk — can you trust the wine in your glass?



Tim Atkin

(8)

How could they tell? The recent kerfuffle about fake pinot noir in the Languedoc reminded me of Dorothy Parker's quip about the death of President Calvin Coolidge. If you missed the news, a dozen Frenchmen were found guilty of selling 16 million bottles' worth of incorrectly labelled wine between 2006 and 2008 to the E & J Gallo Winery for its lacklustre Red Bicyclette brand.

The Languedoc is not exactly famous for pinot. If you put a bottle of Red Bicyclette in front of most experts, I suspect they'd have trouble identifying it as an example of the world's most beguiling grape. Most of the Gallo "pinot" has disappeared from shelves, so it's difficult to know what it tasted like. But my hunch is that beefing it up with merlot and syrah, as the Frenchmen did, probably improved it.

The *affaire* Gallo is not the only recent scandal involving France's largest wine region. Nearly half a million bottles of counterfeit Fitou were rumbled in China last week, although this time the fraudsters appear to have been Chinese, not French. The labels of the Mont Tauch Réserve des Tamaris looked legit, but when the Fitou co-operative analysed what was supposed to be its own wine, it discovered low-grade plonk from South America. This time, anyone

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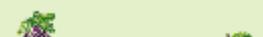


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could tell.

There's a long and seedy history of what Italians call "sostificazione" in the wine business. The illegal blending of wine from different regions or countries is more common than you'd imagine. I've occasionally considered doing an investigative piece about the movement of bulk wine around the world, but I'm a little too fond of my kneecaps and fingernails.

Allegations of nefarious goings on are numerous, but proof is hard to find. Examples include the legendary and surprisingly elastic 1970 vintage in Rioja, which some estimate was sold at least twice over; cheap Italian pinot grigio, cut with everything from trebbiano to tap water; and the Aussie chardonnay that was sweetened up with tins of peaches. Then there's the famous, never-proven story of South Africa shipping tanker-loads of wine to Bulgaria in the days of the anti-apartheid boycott, where it was blended with local cabernet sauvignon and merlot and re-exported.

The profits available to miscreants at the bulk end of the market are relatively small, at least on a per bottle basis, compared with the large sums of money washing around the fine-wine world. When you consider that even young vintages of First Growth red bordeaux change hands for as much as £10,000 a case, you can understand the temptation to cheat. Benjamin Wallace's brilliant book, *The Billionaire's Vinegar*, contains several hilarious examples, including the jeroboam of 1869 Mouton-Rothschild sold at auction that turned out to contain coloured water.

When adulteration comes to light, it's for a variety of reasons. Sometimes, as happened with Gallo's fake pinot, it's the local fraud squad, sometimes it's a nosy, or more often jealous, neighbour and sometimes it's pure chance. One of the most famous wine scandals of all, the Austrian "anti-freeze" affair in 1985, was discovered only when a local wine merchant tried to claim back the VAT on the suspiciously large quantities of diethylene glycol that he'd bought.

This was only a misdemeanour, although the damage it did to the image of Austrian wine was considerable. Much worse was the 1986 Italian methanol scandal, which killed 21 people. No one has ever proved what happened. Theories range from a Mafia plot to a botched attempt to claim extra subsidies based on alcohol content for wines destined for the EU wine lake. *Sostificazione* indeed.

So can you trust the wine in your glass? Yes, most of the time. The wine business is highly regulated, but even without the threat of legal sanction, most winemakers are honest. Wines generally come from the place, or places, that appear on the label and are made from the advertised grape varieties, too. When someone gets caught, as they did in the Languedoc, it attracts a huge volume of bad publicity. Fortunately for wine drinkers, it's the exception, not the rule.

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Wines you can trust

2008 La Différence Carignan, Vin de Pays d'Oc (£5.80, 13.5 per cent, Tesco) Carignan has a bad reputation in the South of France, largely because it's over-cropped and planted in the wrong place. When it's made from old vines, such as this unoaked version, it can be wonderful: juicy and brambly and spicy.

2008 Domaine Ventenac Chenin/Colombard, Vin de Pays des



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2008 Domaine Venerac Chenin/Colombard, Vin de Pays des Côtes de Lastours (£6.99, 12.2 per cent, Waitrose) You'd be much more likely to find chenin blanc in the Loire Valley than close to Carcassonne, but it works brilliantly with lesser colombard here. This is tangy and refreshing with notes of apple, pear and pink grapefruit.

2008 Cornet & Cie Collioure Blanc, Cave de l'Abbé Rous (£9.99, 14 per cent, Marks & Spencer) If this came from Burgundy, it'd cost £25 or more. Instead, it's a barrel-fermented blend of grenache blanc and gris, with vermentino, marsanne and Roussanne from the Roussillon. Mealy, aniseedy with oak flavours.

2007 Blason d'Aussières, Corbières (£9.99, 13.5 per cent, Majestic) Typical of the improved corbières in the past decade, this sweetly oaked blend of syrah, grenache, mourvèdre and carignan is aromatic and stylish, with polished tannins, abundant black fruits and hints of rosemary and thyme.

2007 Château Les Ollieux, Corbières (£18.99, or £15.19 by the mixed case, 14 per cent, Oddbins) Based on carignan and grenache, with smaller quantities of mourvèdre and syrah, this is a more traditional languedoc blend, albeit smooth. White pepper, red fruits and notes of clove and ginger are intertwined.

2007 Coume del Mas Quadratur, Collioure (£22.73, Clark Foyster Wines, 020-8567 3731) It may sound pricey, but it's a snip when judged alongside a top Châteauneuf-du-Pape, and it's definitely in that league. Inky black and profound, this shows complex, age-worthy flavours of black olive, blackberry and liquorice.

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