The medieval village of St-Cirq-Lapopie, perched on a cliff above the Lot river about 40 minutes' drive east of the town of Cahors

The different shades of Cahors

If the name of this picturesque corner of southwest France conjures up the rustic 'black wines' of tradition, then look again: times have been changing, and wine styles with them, in the homeland of Malbec

STORY & SELECTION ANDY HOWARD MW

Cahors is undergoing a quiet revolution. This beautiful part of southwest France – renowned in the past for sturdy, traditional, long-lived, dark-coloured red wines – is benefiting from a new wave of independent winemakers who are applying the latest approaches to viticulture and vinification to the complex geology of the Lot valley.

Today, there are many different styles coming out of Cahors, famed as the home of the Malbec grape. They range from bright, fruit-focused, early-drinking wines to those capable of extended ageing. Rustic tannins and the heavy use of oak have been replaced with a defter touch, and alternative maturation vessels such as amphorae, acacia wood and limestone tanks are now much more in evidence.

Cahors is unusual for a French wine region, given its reliance on a single appellation and wine style (dry red), combined with the dominance of Malbec, known locally as Côt, or Auxerrois or Pessac. By whichever name, the grape is perhaps Cahors' greatest strength, yet also a major weakness. Driven by the popularity of weighty, deep-coloured, fruit-driven wines from Mendoza in Argentina, 'Brand Malbec' is now so strong that it's understandable that many consumers expect the wines of Cahors to be similar in style.

Although a few estates in Cahors have attempted to mimic the Mendoza Malbec style, the complexity of geology, soil types and winemaking philosophies is now resulting in a diversity of exciting, vibrant and good-value wines.

A recent blind tasting *(see p82)* revealed that it would be far too simplistic to label a particular estate as 'traditional' or 'modern'. Many produce a range of wines that display the full breadth of styles that the Côt of Cahors can provide.

A question of terroir

The Cahors region is located on the southwestern edge of the Massif Central, lying to the east of the greater Bordeaux region. The dominant geological features here are the alluvial terraces of the meandering Lot valley, and the limestone plateau that rises on either side of this river valley. The evolution of the latter's many graceful curves has resulted in a variety of soil types. The first terrace, lying closest to the river, is home to young, fertile soils, often dominated by sand, which promote fruity, early-drinking wines.

The second terrace, composed of shallower soils with pebbles and clay, produces wines with more intensity; while the third terrace combines clay-silica soil with a higher proportion of limestone as elevations increase. The terraces range from 90m to 250m; above them (up to 350m) lie the vineyards on the limestone plateau (*causse*). Here, a greater proportion of Kimmeridgian clay marls results in wines that show freshness and minerality, while pockets of iron-rich clay add power and weight.

Sébastien Bernède, vice president of the Cahors wine syndicat and winemaker at Clos La Coutale

Yet the blind tasting also showed that it's misleading to pigeonhole a wine simply on the basis of soil type. It's the complex interplay of the different elements of terroir that generates the wide variety that Cahors offers.

Sébastien Bernède (*above*, vice president of the Cahors wine syndicate, as well as winemaker at the substantial 100ha estate Clos La Coutale) proudly highlights some of his vineyards situated on red sand. 'These are soils from the Massif Central, just like those of Château Rayas [in Châteauneuf-du-Pape in the southern Rhône],' he says. 'Like Rayas, you can make great wines here on sand.'

While Clos La Coutale is a relatively traditional estate, a striking contrast is provided by the youthful figure of Fabien Jouves at Mas del Périé *(pictured on p80)*. His estate is located high on the limestone plateau southwest of the town of Cahors. Jouves is viewed as a champion of natural wines, but even this label is far too simplistic.

Mas del Périé produces wines with immediacy and freshness, combined with depth of colour and lingering purity. One of the lightest wines tasted (Jouves' Les Acacias; *see p83*) comes from 40-year-old Côt vines on limestone-rich soil interspersed with deposits of iron, and combines power with drinkability, yet is only 11.5% alcohol.

Historical presence

Cahors has been a significant wine-producing region since the Middle Ages, often commanding a higher reputation for its wines than those of Bordeaux.

Deep in colour, the wines were revered in the UK, as well as by Pope John XXII – a native of the Lot. ►

Clos La Coutale, near Vire-sur-Lot

Left: the soils in Clos La Coutale's vineyard on the so-called second terrace are a mix of sand, gravel, pebbles and clay

'It's the complex interplay of the different elements of terroir that generates the wide variety that Cahors offers'

Cahors at a glance

Planted area 3,323ha (2020, Vins de Cahors)
Producers 220 independent wine-growers, one cooperative
Classification Became an AP in 1971
Restrictions Only red wine permitted; minimum 70% Côt (aka Auxerrois/Pessac/Malbec), with up to 30% Merlot/Tannat; maximum yield 50hl/ha
Average annual rainfall About 750mm

Subsequently, Cahors became associated with the name 'black wine' – a reference to a time when grapes were baked in ovens for concentration, before being blended to bolster paler, lighter wines.

The region prospered for several centuries before increasing commercial pressure from Bordeaux merchants and cheaper wines from the Midi region compromised the wine trade.

In the late 19th century, phylloxera ravaged the region, a calamity from which it didn't recover for 100 years. What could have been the final straw came with the great frost of February 1956, which almost completely destroyed what was left of the vines. In the subsequent replanting, Côt's dominance increased.

Following the granting of AP status in 1971, Cahors maintained its reputation for structured, sturdy, long-lived red wines that spend considerable time in oak and require lengthy bottle ageing. Under the AP rules, wines must be made from at least 70% Côt; Merlot and Tannat are also permitted, the latter adding further concentration. Today, most of the top wines are 100% Côt, still with plenty of depth of colour, a violet-driven perfume and flavours of blackberry and cherry.

Fabien Jouves, Mas del Périé (see p78)

'The quality of Cahors has been on a steep upward curve for several decades'

The change-bringers

Initially driven by inspirational producers such as Jean-Luc Baldès of Clos Triguedina, as well as significant investment from outsiders such as Alain-Dominique Perrin (Château Lagrézette), the quality of Cahors has been on a steep upward curve for several decades. This process has been accelerated with the arrival of a new wave of winemakers.

Benoît Aymard is a typical example. Since taking over as the third generation at the 14ha Domaine Clos d'Audhuy in 2014 he has transformed the estate's approach in terms of viticulture, winemaking and marketing. In 2018, a new gravity-fed winery was installed.

Aymard says: 'The old Côt clones were high-yielding and lower in quality. Since 2015, we've planted six new clones with more open bunches, small berries, lower yields and higher quality.' His focus is on individual parcel vinification, the estate's varied terroir and low intervention.

Clos d'Audhuy's La-O *(see p82)* stands out, with its intense, linear palate demonstrating the high limestone content of this vineyard; Cuvée Clos d'Audhuy displays a more traditional approach, with two years maturation in barrel; while On a Pris le Temps combines the best parcels from both, producing a rich yet serious Côt on a par with the region's best.

At Château Famaey and Château les Croisille, a younger generation is in charge, albeit with fewer traditional winemaking links to the Cahors region.

In 2007, Belgian Maarten Luyckx *(pictured, p82)* took over from his father Luc at Château Famaey in Puy l'Evêque, where he creates a range of styles. 'We are focused on sustainability – respect for the vines and nature is at the core of what we do,' says Luyckx.

Famaey's Cuvée F is aged in ovoid vats, allowing further micro-oxygenation to promote fruit characters. Cuvée X – a 2023 DWWA Platinum medal winner with its 2022 vintage, produced from the same plots – spends two years in new oak barrels. Le Grez is aged in clay amphorae to emphasise the imprint of the clay-rich vineyards. From plots on the pebbly second terrace, L'Impression is unoaked – it's aged for 12 months in concrete vats 'to emphasise fruit and silkiness', says Luyckx.

Château les Croisille is located north of the Lot, on the *causse*. The Croisille family started as grape-growers in 1979 before creating an estate that produces its own wines. Brothers Germain and Simon are now pushing the estate to greater heights. Cuvée Silice (from silica-rich clay-iron soils; *see p82*) is aged in concrete, which contrasts with Calcaire, which is aged in foudres for 15 months. Divin is a blend from the best plots of the estate's sand, clay and limestone soils, and Le Grain is a micro-cuvée aged in demi-muids for two years. Both are complex, ageworthy Côts that would more than hold their own against the best of Argentina's Malbecs.

Modern outlook

The iconic Clos Triguedina estate – which lays claim to being the first to produce an AP Cahors from 100% Malbec – continues to be a standard bearer. In 2023, Jean-Luc and Sabine Baldès passed the baton to their daughter Juliette *(pictured, p83)* after she trained in New Zealand, Spain, Argentina and Italy. She's focused on a better understanding of Triguedina's complex geology, soil types and the influence of elevation, while continuing the estate's drive to respect both nature and tradition.

Triguedina's top wine is Probus *(see p82)*, paying homage to the eponymous Roman Emperor who replanted vines in the Quercy region during the 3rd century. Produced from 100-year-old vines on the third terraces, this is a selection from the best parcels and continues to set a benchmark for AP Cahors.

Intriguingly, within a red wine-only appellation, Triguedina is making an elegant white wine (labelled under IGP Comté Tolosan) from Viognier and Chardonnay planted on the highest terraces. There's also a fine rosé (aged in acacia barrels), while its New Black Wine is a clever reference to the wines produced several centuries ago, using a disused prune oven to gently heat and dry some of the grapes, yet delivering a much more sophisticated wine than its historical counterpart.

The wines of Cahors are certainly changing. A new generation is at play, producing the full gamut of wines, from fruit-driven to structured. New oak is being toned down with increased use of larger oak casks, amphorae and alternative maturation vessels. Combine all this with the complex geology of the Lot valley, together with many keenly priced wines, and Cahors looks to be a very exciting source of fine Côt/Malbec wines. ►

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Benoît Aymard, Clos d'Audhuy

From left: Nicolas Bach, Germain Croisille and Germain's brother Simon, Château les Croisille

If you want to better understand the terroirs and topography of Cahors, there's an excellent video at vindecahors.fr/en/cahors-vineyard

Cahors to the fore: Howard's pick of 12 to try

'Respect for the vines and nature is at the core of what we do'

Maarten Luyckx, Château Famaey *(pictured with his father, Luc)*

① **Clos d'Audhuy, La-O 2022** 94
£27 **Swig**
Youthful Benoit Aymard is really driving this 14ha family estate in Lacapelle-Cabanac forward. Aged 10 months in older 225L barrels, La-O shows ripe, weighty, fleshy dark plum and blackberry fruit. Notes of violets and rose rise from the glass. Earth and dried herbs combine with freshness and crisp acidity on the finish. A style that marries elegance and purity with just the right amount of fruit weight. Complex and stylish. **Drink** 2025-2028 **Alcohol** 13.5%

② **Clos Triguedina, Probus 2023** 94
famille-baldes.com
A fragrant, complex nose with hints of spice and wood, and floral notes as well. Plenty of weight and ripeness to the fruit, with black plum and blueberry characters plus a touch of dark cherry and liquorice. Concentrated palate with flesh, density and ripeness. Matured in new oak barrels for 12 months. Ready now but there's no hurry. A fine Cahors wine from one of the appellation's top producers. **Drink** 2025-2032 **Alc** 13.5%

③ **Château Famaey, Cuvée X 2022** 93
US$31-$35 **City Vino, Yiannis**
Lovely balance between generosity of fruit and ageing in wood (24 months in new oak barrels). Many elements, all working in harmony. Dark cherry and plum fruit, a hint of spice and a fine grain to the tannins. Spice notes add complexity on the finish. All the components in equilibrium. Fresh and elegant, it has more to deliver with time in bottle. A very appealing cuvée from Belgian Maarten Luyckx. **Drink** 2025-2030 **Alc** 14%

Clos la Coutale, La Griotte Malbec 2023 93
£20 **Bubble Brothers**
Clos la Coutale is a substantial, 100ha estate, owned for six generations by the Bernède family. This wine undergoes slow fermentation at temperatures of 15°C-20°C. Lifted, floral notes on the nose with a fresh, brambly edge adding an extra layer. Luxurious and voluptuous on both nose and palate, with black and blue fruit to the fore. Crisp dark cherry acidity keeps the palate fresh. A very clean, vibrant, well-judged wine that has lots to enjoy. Some herbal and mineral notes to finish. Bottled unfined and unfiltered. **Drink** 2025-2029 **Alc** 13%

Domaine la Bérangeraie, La Gorgée de Mathis Bacchus 2022 93
berangeraie.fr
Powerful, weighty, concentrated and fleshy, this was aged for 30 months in new oak barrels. Dark berry and plum fruits are to the fore, with a berry conserve character. Burly and powerful. The new wood is evident but all is in very good balance, with crisp acidity, fine tannins and good concentration and ripeness. Showy and glossy. A lot of effort and skill has gone into this. **Drink** 2025-2030 **Alc** 14%

Château la Croisille, Silice Malbec 2022 92
£23.50 **Bottle Apostle**
Classic Cahors Malbec nose: dark berry fruits with a touch of violet and rose petal, and a hint of spiciness (balsam) as well. Generous, mouthfilling palate. Crisp, dark cherry fruit with lively acidity. Plenty of weight but balanced with freshness and a very pure, elegant line to finish. Aged for 12 months in concrete tank to accentuate the fruit and floral notes. **Drink** 2025-2028 **Alc** 12.5%

Château Lamartine, Cuvée Particulière 2022 92
cahorslamartine.fr
A cool, elegant and fresh nose. Dark fruit characters with generosity and ripeness. There's a mineral edge to the finish and lots of purity and drive. An energetic wine with extra lift and a vibrant, briary finish. It's all very nicely done, clearly by a winemaker who cares. Half aged in 5,000L and 9,000L oak casks, half in two- to four-year-old barrels. **Drink** 2025-2029 **Alc** 13.5%

The Gayraud family, Château Lamartine

Juliette Baldès, Clos Triguedina

④ **Clos d'un Jour, Un Jour sur Terre 2022** 92
leclosdunjour.fr
A more serious style with quite a nod towards Bordeaux structure. The Malbec has floral notes reminiscent of a red from the Madiran region. Intense, concentrated; plenty of ageing potential. Acidity is evident, tannins are quite firm and will support the wine's development for many years. Aged 12-14 months in 140L-160L amphorae. **Drink** 2025-2030 **Alc** 14.5%

⑤ **Domaine la Calmette, Trespotz 2023** 92
domainelacalmette.fr
Appealing, complex and layered nose with floral characters combined with a touch of spice and red/black fruits. Palate marries elegance with fresh, vibrant acidity, smooth, ripe tannins and a fleshy mouthfeel. Loads to enjoy. Real crunch to the black fruit notes. Balances being a more serious, structured wine with generous, fruit-driven succulence. Aged on lees in concrete, steel and large oak foudres. **Drink** 2025-2028 **Alc** 13%

⑥ **Mas del Périé, Les Acacias Malbec 2022** 92
£31.30-£38 **Millésima, The Sampler**
Complex nose: a melange of dark fruit, a hint of wood and spice notes. Doesn't possess the fleshiness of some, yet has excellent freshness and drive. Tannins are evident still, but there are no harsh edges. Crisp, linear, elegant, very nicely made. Aged for 18 months in large old barrels. **Drink** 2025-2029 **Alc** 11.5%

Stéphane Revel, Amphora 2023 92
revel.vin
Dark cherry notes dominate the nose. Some conserve-like characters. Cool. fresh palate but the tannins are ripe and luxurious. Intriguing. There's something a little different that adds an extra dimension to the mouthfeel. Crunchy, bright and lively finish. Aged 12 months in Tuscan amphorae. A fine, individual, modern style of Cahors from the Château de Rouffiac estate. **Drink** 2025-2028 **Alc** 13.5%

Vinovalie, Paradis 2022 92
vinovalie.com
Approachable, enticing nose showing dark cherry and berry fruit, and a floral lift, with notes of violets to the fore. Plump, plush and fleshy on the palate with bright acidity to keep everything in check. Some ageing in cement tanks and a touch of oak. Dusky, crisp acidity and fine-grained tannins. Typical, with plenty of character. 25 days' maceration, aged 18 months in new oak barrels. **Drink** 2025-2029 **Alc** 15% D

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