



Mas Janiny Vineyard in the Languedoc countryside

wandering the globe for wine

Touring the South of France

European wine travel is significantly different than the tour buses, crowds and even prices of California's Napa Valley.

Wine tourism remains a relative new concept in Italy, Spain and France. It's one area where Europe has traditionally lagged behind the United States. But that doesn't mean wine tourism doesn't exist.

Wine travel does not require signing up for an expensive tour or even a day-long winery visit. Those one-day, two-winery visits just outside a major city can cost as much as \$200 to \$400 per person.

Wine tourism is growing in Bordeaux, Burgundy, the Rhone Valley and Loire Valley. Wine tourism has been slow to take off in the Languedoc.

I recently visited Montpellier in southern France in the Languedoc-Roussillon region.

First, the Languedoc is about 4 percent of France's total surface area. About 2.5 million people live in the region. The Languedoc is along France's south coast and Mediterranean Sea. The area is also bordered by two mountain ranges, the Pyrenees and Cevennes.

A historical strike against the region is that it was long known for producing bulk wine. It provided the tons of grapes for boxed wine,



Howard Hewitt

non-descript jug wine and lower-end table wines. That has all changed in recent years.

The Languedoc is France's leading region for organic wine. Organic wine producers are leading world winemakers in production that respects the land and the grower.

There are a few options where a wine traveler might anchor an adventure but none offer better amenities than the city on the sea, Montpellier. It's the eighth largest city in France and one of the country's fastest growing metropolitan areas. It is a college town. It has a distinct modern feel with marvelous public transportation and a wonderful historic old town with incredible plazas, its own Arc de Triomphe and a Roman aqueduct.

But beyond the tourist sites touted in brochures, any visitor will find charming shops, fabulous brasserie eateries, history and architecture.

Visits to wineries take some planning. Most French wineries do not have traditional tasting rooms and certainly not in the Languedoc. More often than not your tasting will be in the winery or even in the winery owner's home. There is seldom a tasting fee, though that may change in coming years. One of the real upsides is that the wine will probably be poured by the winemaker or a family member.

It has taken some outsiders to stir the idea of wine tourism. Ryan O'Connell and his family moved from Florida to the Languedoc in 2004 to start a winery. O'Connell, a mid-20s bundle of energy and ideas, has taken the area by storm with marketing ideas and social media smarts. He also feels it's time to develop Languedoc tourism.

"We're trying to develop consistent tourism in the region," he said. "It's tragic; we're a region with thousands of wineries, thousands. It's beautiful here. It's easy to have a good time visiting one or two wineries and that's all people need. They don't need a wine trail of 75 wineries; they need one or two good addresses."

O'Connell's family winery, O'Veyards, has a bed-and-breakfast and welcomes visitors. Still, O'Connell wants to share the model with neighbors.

"I'm trying to develop as many like-minded people as possible," he said. "We don't have a dedicated tour guide. We spend a fair amount of time with the customer. We charge a tasting fee, which is also against the French thoughts. We charge 25 Euro per person for a two-hour visit with the winemaker. But visitors get to taste barrels, bottles and get a real insider tour."

"With many people, it's often the first time they've ever visited a vineyard. We're trying to develop our bed-and-breakfast to a point where it makes enough sense to show other people what we're doing."

Lining up your own wine tour can take an investment of time but it is doable. The French have marvelous tourist bureaus and websites. And, if you contact most wineries they will accommodate your visit. Just don't expect it to be like visiting Napa or any other real wine tourist destination.

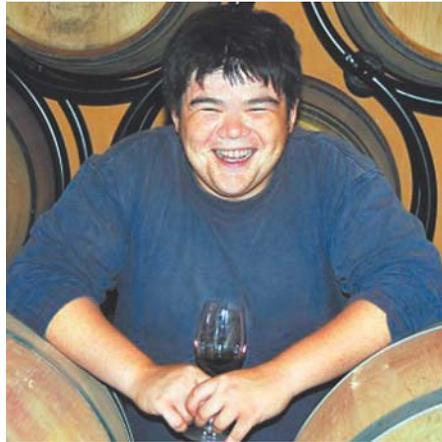
In France, your experience will be more authentic and you'll probably get a better experience learning about vineyards and wine.

There are great resources available.

Tourism Offices:

- www.ot-montpellier.fr (Montpellier)
- www.herault-tourisme.com (Hérault tourism center)
- www.saintguilhem-valleeherault.fr (Hérault)

Hotel Mercure is a large French chain with locations across the country. There are two Mercure locations in downtown Montpellier



Ryan O'Connell

that have affordable rates (starting at 79 Euro or just over \$100).

The climate is mild to warm but keep in mind you are visiting the Mediterranean Coast and it can get hot in summer months. The food is outstanding and fresh. The wine is abundant. Try the beautiful Languedoc red blends, the white Grenache Blanc, and there are plenty of stunning Rosé wines from neighboring Provence.

Montpellier has daily flights from Paris. You can take the one-hour Air France flight, or spend a few more bucks and take the TGV, France's high-speed rail service for a three-hour trip through the French countryside. ■

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Montpellier's most popular gathering spot, Comédie à Montpellier, is a great example of the gorgeous French architecture in the city.

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