

# Carignan: *An identity crisis worth investigating*

Written by Scott Harper, Master Sommelier



Gravillas mantis on Carignan grapes.  
Photo courtesy of Clos du Gravillas.

Not many have heard of the grape Carignan, and it doesn't appear on very many wine labels. It is often underappreciated and misunderstood.

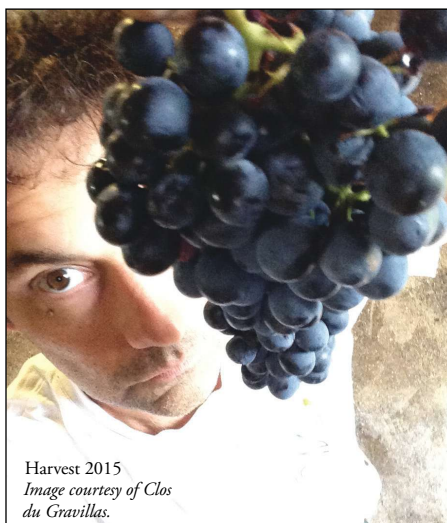
While Carignan is the French name for the grape, in the United States it is referred to as Carignane and in Italy as Carignano. For added confusion, Carignan has at least three synonyms in Spain: it is called Samso in Catalonia, Mazuelo in Rioja, and Cariñena in Aragón. Talk about the pain of an identity crisis!

Somewhat deserving of its pejorative reputation, Carignan was, and still is to some extent, responsible for the enormous quantity of low quality wine in the southern region of France called Languedoc-Roussillon, as well as other parts of the world, due in no small order to its ability to produce yields of nearly four times higher than other "superior" wine grapes. If you want to make a great deal of red wine in a warm climate, a savvy winemaker would invariably choose the late-ripening, high-output grape Carignan. Historically, this is exactly what happened, making Carignan one of the most planted grapes in

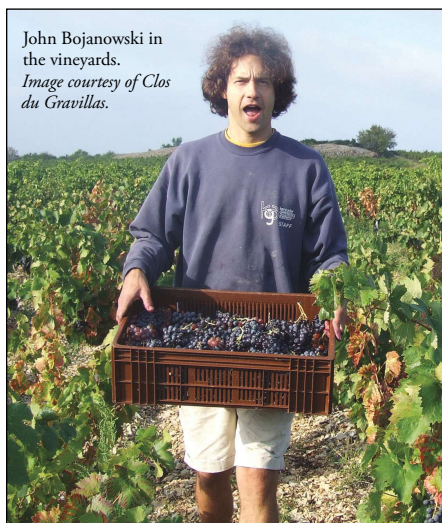
France. Expect harsh, rustic tannins, under ripe green flavors, lack of complexity and zero finesse. But this has changed, at least to some degree, and in recent years Carignan has quietly been shedding its poor reputation.

A lot of Carignan has been pulled out of vineyards in favor of "better" quality grapes, but if you tame the gigantic yields, you can make a very nice wine of concentration, complexity and finesse. Old vines naturally produce lower yields, and hence, the quality leaders are producing Carignan from older, low-yielding vines in France and other areas of the world, such as Priorat, Spain; Maule Valley, Chile; and Sardinia, Italy. These areas also may employ techniques such as dry-farming and head-pruning bush vines, which help reduce yields. Additional areas certainly grow Carignan; it is believed to originate in Spain from the eponymous region of Cariñena, Aragón. Ironically in Cariñena, it is the second most planted red grape after Grenache.

While the Spanish region of Priorat may be the best-known area for quality Carignan blends, I want to highlight the Maule Valley, Sardinia and Languedoc-Roussillon.



Harvest 2015  
Image courtesy of Clos  
du Gravillas.



John Bojanowski in  
the vineyards.  
Image courtesy of Clos  
du Gravillas.

### MAULE VALLEY CARIGNAN

In Chile, they love their small quantities of Carignan so much that a group of producers have formed a quality association called Vigno “Vignadores de Carignan.” Vigno wines are a minimum 65 percent Carignan from old vines that are dry-farmed, head-pruned bush vines from the Maule Valley. Vigno has helped push Chilean Carignan forward and has done a great job preserving the vineyards and promoting the quality of Carignan.

Carignan Garcia & Schwaderer Vigno 2011  
(Crucecillas [Maule Valley], Chile)

With an average vine age of 54 years, this wine more than qualifies for old vines. The wine is aged in 20 percent new French oak and 80 percent used French oak for two years. It is almost opaque purple and full-bodied with the flavors of violets, pepper, earth and black fruits. Tannins are well integrated and would stand up nicely to grilled rack of lamb.

### SARDINIAN CARIGNANO

The name “Isola dei Nuraghi” literally means the Island of the Nuraghi. Sardinia's nuraghi are conical stone towers that speak to the island's strategic position in ancient times, and there are estimated to still be 7,000 or so nuraghi on the island, making it a symbol of Sardinia. While Carignano is not the most important grape of Sardinia, it may very well be on the way to becoming its specialty.

Argicola Punica Barrua 2011  
(Isola dei Nuraghi [Sardinia], Italy)

Made from a blend of 85 percent Carignano, 10 percent Cabernet Sauvignon and five percent Merlot. The wine spends 18 months in French oak: 50 percent new and 50 percent year-old. Medium purple color, with a beautiful old-world nose of sweet leather, blackberry, cherry, baking spices, notes of licorice

and hints of purple flowers. Try with bone-in strip steak seasoned with ample fresh black pepper and sea salt.

Argicola Punica Montessu 2011  
(Isola dei Nuraghi [Sardinia], Italy)

Made from 60 percent Carignano, 10 percent Syrah, 10 percent Cabernet Sauvignon, 10 percent Cabernet Franc and 10 percent Merlot. Aged in French oak barrels, two-to-three years old, for up to 10 months. Medium purple, with the scent of black fruits, wild strawberries, forest floor, licorice and lavender, with balanced tannins and a freshness and verve. Perfect with herb-crusted, roasted pork loin.

### LANGUEDOC-ROUSSILLON CARIGNAN

If you surveyed the French regarding their opinion of Carignan, you may come to the conclusion that they are ambivalent. They either love it or hate it. Vignerons that love it make delicious Carignan that will prompt you to forget about those who hate it. If there were Carignan evangelists, it would likely be John and Nicole Bojanowski, a Franco-American couple that have been making world-class Carignan in the area around Saint-Jean-de-Minervois at Clos Du Gravillas.

Clos Du Gravillas Lo Vièlh 2007 Carignan  
(Vin de Pays [IGP] Cotes du Rhône, France)

By French law it must be at least 85 percent Carignan. The oldest vines date from 1911 to 1970. The wine is produced organically and is foot crushed and aged in 400-litre French barrels. The wine tastes of black cherries, plum, saddle leather, Provencal herbs, lavender, violets and pepper with a medium to full body, and well-integrated tannins. Try with grilled duck sausage. **sl**

*A Certified Wine Educator, Harper is one of 140 professionals in North America and 220 worldwide who have earned the title Master Sommelier.*