

The latest news from the Languedoc – September '09

Bienvenue !

A hot and dry Summer with the average high temperature during July and August in Montpellier of

29°C

with a recorded high of 39°C



The summer has been long and dry with August hitting highs of 39°C – everyone took to the beach, their pool, the lake or the river. Temperatures in September are still in the high 20s and low 30s with the odd evening starting to get just a bit of a nip.

This month we have included some topical articles on the grape harvest or vendange and the vinification process, ideas for walks as the temperatures drop a little and an article on the Domaine de Magellan. Enjoy !

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The 'vendange' or grape harvest

Last year the vendange was later than usual and then hampered due to rain. The grapes were ripe and ready for picking, but at risk of rotting on the vines in the damp conditions.

This year, however, the vendange is early by about a week or so, but all is going well in perfect harvesting conditions. Many vigneronns were up at three in the morning in August picking the white grapes while it was still dark and cool as it produces better quality wine than if picked in the blistering heat of the day. September sees the harvest of red grapes which can be picked during the day.



Each cepage or grape variety is ready at different times; the white grape varieties first followed by the red – starting with white Chardonnay and finishing with red Cabernet Sauvignon. This is why there seems to be activity in the vineyards from mid-August all the way through to the end of September and sometimes the beginning of October.

So far results are good. Due to the long, dry summer the grapes are smaller so the yield, or amount harvested, will be less than last year's grapes that had been gorged in the rain. However, the quality is better with a higher concentration of alcohol and taste in the smaller grapes.

A note on the vinification (or winemaking) process

After the grapes are harvested, the stems are removed and the grapes are then slightly crushed, allowing the skins to pop open rather than mash them up. This produces a mixture of juice, skin, pulp, and pips which is allowed to ferment using the natural yeast present which converts the natural sugar of the grape into alcohol, although cultured yeast is often added to produce more consistent results. This normally takes between one and two weeks, after which the liquid is transferred to vessels for the secondary fermentation where the remaining sugars are slowly converted into alcohol and the wine becomes clear. Some wines are then allowed to age in oak barrels before bottling, while others are bottled directly.



Red wine is made from black grapes where the grape skins are left in during fermentation. White wine is usually made by fermenting juice pressed from white grapes, but can also be made from the fleshy bits of black grapes with minimal contact with the grapes' skins. Rosé wine is made from black grapes where the juice is allowed to stay in contact with the dark skins long enough to pick up a pinkish color (usually just a day or two), but little of the tannins contained in the skins are transferred making it a lighter wine to drink.

The winemaker can correct perceived inadequacies by blending (mixing different batches of wine from different grapes) or adjusting the acid or tannin levels. Fining agents are used to remove tannins, reduce astringency and remove microscopic particles that could cloud the wine.

Recession ends in France



Economic growth in France is set to stabilise in the three months from July to September, according to French Finance Minister Christine Lagarde. The French economy emerged from a year-long recession in the second quarter of this year. Good news for those who are hoping to sell property but it will mean that prices will start to rise again for those wanting to buy.

To tip, or not to tip ?

It seems it is not generally in the French culture to tip. If they do leave something, it's not very much, and tends to be in centimes rather than euros. For a coffee or a drink in a café they would typically leave about 20 centimes or for a meal for four people a tip of one or two euros. Most bars and restaurants automatically include service in the bill – but this must be written on the menu. If you are happy with everything you are not obliged to leave anything extra, but if you are dissatisfied you cannot deduct the service charge.



The effect of the smoking ban on France's 'café culture'

The stereotypical image of the French as a nation of smokers will be an enduring one but in February 2007 a smoking ban came into force in France in workplaces with fines levied at individuals and companies who did not comply. Restaurants and bars, however, had until December 2007 to comply with a full ban effective from January 2008.

There was much speculation at the time about the effect on the 'café culture' in France and opposition was expected. Surveys at the time, however, suggested that most people were in favour including half of all smokers.

The rationale for smoke-free laws in France is the same as other countries; to protect people from the effects of second hand smoke (or passive smoking), reduce health care costs and improve work productivity.

It is hoped that smoke-free laws will create an environment where smoking becomes increasingly more difficult and not the accepted norm, causing a reduced demand for tobacco. The increase of taxes on tobacco, education and help with quitting should drive home the message about a healthier lifestyle.

Several studies have documented the health and economic benefits related to smoking bans.



In America since 2003 with hospital admissions for heart attacks dropping by 27% - 40%. In France it appears the smoking ban has lowered cardiac emergency admissions by 15%. Whether this is really due to the introduction of the smoking ban in bars and restaurants will need to be confirmed by follow-up research in the future. However, sales of cigarettes remains stable suggesting the effect is on the non-smokers or passive smokers and that smokers are continuing as before – only outside.

Prof David Thomas, of the European Society of Cardiology and a Senior Cardiologist in the Centre Hospitalier in Paris says, 'Although further studies are needed all over France to confirm the strong decrease in smoking related deaths over time, these statistics show the same tendency professionals have already observed in Italy, Ireland and Scotland when these countries introduced their own bans on tobacco. To me, the most striking aspect in this study is the reduction of pollution inside cafes and restaurants by over 35%. Passive smoking has been shown to increase the risk of coronary heart disease and the recent smoking ban is obviously having a beneficial effect on both smokers and non-smokers.'

There was concern from bars and restaurants that the smoking ban would have a negative effect on profits but the counter argument was that more non-smokers would frequent such places.



It is thought the smoking ban could be a factor to the increase in bar bankruptcies in the first half of 2008. But then could that be attributed to the general economic crisis ?

Certainly in our little café in the village, all the old regulars are still there propping up the bar and huddling together in the doorway in the chillier months. However, all summer long there hasn't been an issue with the tables sitting outside. Only time will tell if there will be more longer-term effects on health and social norms.

Hiking (randonnée), biking and pleasant strolls



The circuit around the man-made lake is about 7.5 miles long and will take 1½-2½ hours depending on your speed of walking and how often you stop to admire the scenery along the way. It is generally fairly flat and easy-going. Take a picnic and sit on one of the many beaches around the lake or under the trees at one of the designated picnic areas with tables and chairs, and even BBQs.

If you fancy something a bit more challenging (and longer) then the lesser known Gorges du Colombers not far from Lamalou les Bains offers two circuits taking between 5 and 8 hours. Some parts of it are quite challenging, but the routes are well marked and the views are breathtaking.

So, dig out your ruck-sack and a cool bag to keep your rosé or white wine nice and chilled for your picnic lunch, and get out there and take in all that lovely fresh air and fantastic scenery!

As the temperatures begin to gently fade and signs of Autumn appear, now is the ideal time to reach for your walking shoes, hop in the car and enjoy the beautiful countryside that abounds in Languedoc-Roussillon.

There are numerous guide books and sites on the internet, for example, www.everytrail.com, that list out various trails, their length, difficulty and an approximate time to complete it.

In Hérault you can have a super day out at the Lac de Vesoles at Baisseseures in the Espinouse Mountains just north of St Pons.



Town feature – Magalas



Magalas in Hérault, has a population of about 2,000 people and those who live in Magalas are called Magalassiens. It is famous in the locality for its wine and sun.

It is one of the larger villages found north of Béziers and offers a choice of three restaurants and two bars. There are all the essential 'commerces' to be found there, such as bakers, newsagent, hairdresser, pharmacy, corner shop and more. A short drive away there is the industrial zone with two supermarkets, a DIY store and garden centre.

It is well located for easy access to the Mediterranean beaches to the south and the beautiful mountains and lakes to the north. Béziers is just 15 minutes drive away, offering all the conveniences of a big town, including an airport and TGV rail station.

Property here is reasonably priced and offers great potential for both holiday and permanent homes.

Domaine de Magellan gains AOC recognition



Bruno Lafon and his sister-in-law Sylvie Legros travelled all around Languedoc-Roussillon in search of a wine estate with a great terroir and a vineyard in good condition. In early 1999, they found a property in the village of Magalas with great potential.

The domaine has 42 hectares of vines (with thirteen different grape varieties) on two hills that offer a magnificent view of the region. The two hills have two very different and great 'terroirs' – one is clay and pebbles and the other sandstone.

Bruno's family own the Domaine des Comtes Lafon in Burgundy and these burgundy roots influenced the early years of Magellan, i.e. one terroir, one wine. However, much careful experimentation has convinced them that they should move away from these influences and produce wine that is typically of the South.

The wines that now best represent the domaine are carefully blended using different terroirs and grape varieties.

With great respect to the environment and their vines, no weed-killers, synthetic chemicals or excessive use of machinery are used. All pruning of the vines and picking of the grapes is done by hand to preserve the quality. The wines are made simply, without technology and added yeasts. The result is a wine that is smooth, balanced and both fine and structured.

Their enthusiasm, hardwork and dedication have paid off as the domaine has been awarded the much prized AOC this year (Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée). Appellation rules closely define which grape varieties and winemaking practices are allowed and links the style of the wines to the specific locations where the grapes are grown and the wine is made.

For further information please feel free to contact Sylvie (who speaks excellent English) on +33 (0)4 67 36 20 83 or email her on sylvielegros@domainemagellan.com



A selection of Featured Properties



A typical semi-detached stone village house, 220m² living space (unusually spacious), 5 bedrooms, beams and exposed stone walls, garden, pool and large outbuildings to convert

403 000€ AFI **Ref 980**



Manor type village house to restore 220m², independent apartment, garage and large mature garden 1881m² with room for a pool, walking distance to shops in lively village, a jewel!

371 000€ AFI **Ref 985**



Original, beautifully renovated, farmhouse, dating from 1810 with stunning views. Situated on a gently sloping hillside at the end of a long, private drive, surrounded by ten hectares of pasture and woods

898 000€ AFI **Ref 991**



Very charming village house, tastefully renovated, three bedrooms, garden with swimming pool and garage, with a further 55m² that could be converted, in a lively village but a quiet location

450 000€ AFI **Ref 931**



Unique, former 12th century fortress Château converted into an exceptional home, 4-5 stunning bedrooms, 1400m² grounds, panoramic views and very quiet, only 15mn from Montpellier, an impressive property!

1 300 000€ AFI **Ref 975**



Stunning 19th century Mas with visible stones in- and outside, 6 bedrooms & care takers apartment, 46.7ha meadows & woods, panoramic view, absolute peacefulness, no neighbour in view

742 000€ AFI **Ref 811**



Lovely stone house full of character (currently Chambres d'Hôtes and Gîte), garage, workshop, lovely private garden with mature plants and shady corners, pool, located in the centre of a pretty village

580 000€ AFI **Ref 962**



Unique villa with beautiful view of the Canal du Midi, the city with its Cathedral and the mountains. Perfectly designed pool, mature garden, private & quiet, near shops and restaurants, close to the sea

865 000€ AFI **Ref 880**

À Bientôt

I hope you have enjoyed our newsletter. Please do let me know if you have any ideas for articles of interest for future editions, or anything you've often wondered about and would like to know the answer to.

The weather is starting to change here and our thoughts are turning to Autumn. Confidence is returning to the housing market and we are getting increasingly busy. If you are thinking of buying in the South of France the general consensus is to buy before this winter is out as prices will gradually start to increase again as sales pick up.

Please don't hesitate to get in touch if you have any queries regarding the sale or purchase of property and also now holiday rentals and property management.

Have a great Autumn and we will be in touch again in the winter.

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With best wishes

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