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The Bergerac-Duras wine region is rich in history and home to inspired wine producers and delicious regional delicacies, as **Paola Westbeek** discovers

The medieval town of Bergerac glows with soft sunlight that casts a golden veil over its amber-coloured stone buildings and rustic half-timbered houses.

On Place Péliissière, the largest and most attractive square, restaurant terraces are abuzz with the good life as waiters balancing carafes of wine whizz past local hero Cyrano de Bergerac's famed long nose.

A little farther uptown, there's a market being held at the foot of the towering 19th-century Église Notre-Dame. Stalls lure you in with regional delicacies such as tinned duck, fragrant walnut oil, zingy goat's cheeses and Périgord strawberries so ripe and aromatic you can smell them from afar. Not only does every corner of Bergerac ooze *joie de vivre*, but the town also boasts a rich wine history that dates back to Gallo-Roman times.

Discovering the wines

Though Bergerac was founded in the 11th century, the first grapes were planted in the area towards the end of the 3rd century. Because of its strategic location on the banks of the Dordogne, wine trade blossomed and by the 13th century, Henry III of England had granted Bergerac the right to export its wines.

Today, the wine region attracts more than 400,000 visitors annually and there's no better place to embark on an oenological journey than at Bergerac's old port, or more specifically, at Quai Cyrano.

The new Masion des Vins et du Tourisme opened in July last year in an attractive building complete with a spacious and inviting wine bar on the second floor. I met with Marie-Pierre Tamagnon (from the Interprofession des Vins de Bergerac et Duras) last August for an *apéro* at the wine bar's panoramic terrace, and while





enjoying an aromatic glass of the 2005 Château Les Côteaux de Larchère Monbazillac with *assiettes* of local cheese and charcuterie, I took in the magnificent views over the Dordogne and realised once again why this has become my favourite region.

It's more than the wines. The food, landscapes and fascinating cultural heritage are all impressive, too.

Above:
Assiettes of local cheese and charcuterie at Quai Cyrano

Below:
Château de Duras

Great diversity

The Bergerac-Duras wine region (the Côtes de Duras appellation joined in 2014) is divided into seven unique terroirs (Bergerac, Duras, Monbazillac, Saussignac, Rosette, Pécharmant and Montravel) stretching out over an area of approximately 11,500 hectares located on both banks of the Dordogne.

It counts 17 AOP wines (red, white, rosé, moelleux and liquoreux) available in a broad range of styles to please every palate and perfectly complement the region's hearty cuisine. In terms of history, soil, climate and grape varieties, the wines are similar to those of the prestigious Bordeaux region to the west, yet each appellation has its own distinct character and each estate its own personality.

Montravel, the king of dry whites, is in the far west of the region, on the right bank of the Dordogne and directly bordering Bordeaux. At Château Puy-Servain in Ponchapt, I met with passionate winemaker

Daniel Hecquet. His elegant and mineral dry whites are made from sauvignon blanc/gris, sémillon and muscadelle grapes which grow on water-retaining, chalky-clay soils.

Especially noteworthy is the beautifully expressive and refreshing Marjolaine Blanc 2018, made from 80% sauvignon blanc and 20% sémillon fermented and aged five months in new French oak.

Daniel, an oenologist, worked at the renowned Château d'Yquem in Sauternes and speaks with great enthusiasm about creating his Haut-Montravel *liquoreux* wines made from 100% sémillon. He said: "I am fascinated by the transformation of the grapes with noble rot, which gives a special taste and aroma to the wines."

Spending time with Daniel, a wise, spirited storyteller whose motto is "*le meilleur à la limite du possible*" (the best at the limit of what's possible), will not only enrich your wine knowledge, but leave you feeling inspired.





Above;
Quai Cyrano's
panoramic
wine bar

Pécharmant, north-east of Bergerac, is home to some of the region's finest reds. The sloping vineyards face mainly south and profit from warmer temperatures and a drier climate, essential for robust, concentrated wines replete with ripe tannins.

The soil, similar to that of Pomerol, contains iron-rich clay which aids in the development of tannin and gives the wines supple flavours. At Domaine du Haut Pécharmant, owned by the Roches family since 1929, I took a tour of the *chai* (wine store) followed by a walk to the top of the hill where I revelled in the views over the vineyards, extending into neighbouring appellations Saussignac and Monbazillac.

A tasting was also part of the visit and certainly worth mentioning is the Prestige 2015, a well-structured wine aged in oak barrels, balanced and with plenty of fruit. Pécharmant wines have a long storage potential and good vintages can be aged for 12-15 years.

The Bergerac-Duras wine region is intent on moving

towards a greener viticulture, 19% of its vineyards are certified organic and in Saussignac, most winegrowers have rejected chemical farming.

Château le Tap, owned by Olivier and Mireille Roches, counts 15 hectares and has been completely organic since 2007. For the couple, the choice to go organic seemed logical.

"We had small children when we settled here and I thought it was the best choice for the future," explains Olivier. Their dedication to creating quality, sustainable wines paid off. Soon after being certified organic in 2010, they received the first of many awards and their Saussignac 2016, a silky *liqueux* packed to the brim with intense aromas of exotic fruit, has been awarded a gold medal. Besides making wine, the family also offers secluded holiday homes in the heart of their vineyards.

Taste of Périgord

The Bergerac-Duras vineyards are situated in the Périgord-Agenais region of Dordogne and

Lot-et-Garonne, an idyllic part of the country characterised by gentle landscapes of rolling hillsides, sunflowers, historic châteaux and bastides.

In the summer, the area blossoms with vibrant events that give visitors a chance to taste the region's culinary bounty and experience its conviviality. *Apéros*, picnic dinners with farm-fresh products and barbecues with music and dancing are held on many estates.

You'll definitely want to make stops at pretty towns and villages such as Duras which overlooks the Dropt valley and is home to a handsome 12th-century château. The medieval village of Issigeac holds one of the liveliest markets every Sunday on charming streets that look like they came straight out of a fairy tale.

If you like history, head to Saint-Michel-de-Montaigne and visit the tower where French philosopher and politician Michel Eyquem de Montaigne (1533-92) wrote his famous *Essais*. The park surrounding the monumental 19th-century castle is perfect for shady strolls and peaceful picnics.

For more active pursuits, why not go canoeing on the Dordogne, cycling on the Véloroute Voie Verte V91 (it passes by Quai Cyrano!) or practise your golf swing in the grounds of Château les Merles in Mouleydier or Château des Vigiers in Monestier. Both estates boast four-star hotels with excellent restaurants and are less than 30 minutes from Bergerac airport, which is just an hour and a half from London.

Visiting Bergerac is so much more than indulging in an enchanting region steeped in wine history. It's savouring the art of good living, known here as 'Périgord attitude' and practised so exceptionally well. ♥