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## Languedoc: The Biggest Vineyard in the World

### **The ebb and flow of Languedoc's past**

The Languedoc vineyard is a vast swathe of land with a climate that is perfect for growing vines. The area stretches from Narbonne to the outskirts of Nîmes. It came into existence thanks to the Greek and Etruscan settlers who planted the first vines there in the sixth century BC. The Romans continued to develop wine-production in this region, which was then called the Narbonnais. In order to distribute all this wine, made famous by great authors such as Pliny and Cicero, they developed a remarkable commercial network, exporting as far as Greece, the Turkish coast and Egypt. On the strength of this expansion, the Narbonnais region became one of the main suppliers of wine to Rome. Many amphoras (two-handed jars for oil, wine, etc.) manufactured in the workshops in Béziers at the time of the Romans have been found in Italy, proof of this glorious period.

Such success, however, was not without problems of its own. The wine wars that today set the wines from the New World countries against those from traditional wine-producing countries are nothing new. Doubtless in a fit of protectionism, the Edict pronounced by the Emperor Domitian in AD 92 brought to an end the wine-producing prosperity of Languedoc by forbidding anyone from planting any further vines in the empire and, above all, imposing the uprooting of half of all vines in the provinces. Almost 2,000 years before the uprooting policy imposed by European construction, the Narbonnais region was already obliged to lose part of its vineyards.

It was not until the eighth century that the Languedoc vineyards underwent a renaissance. The Church, particularly thanks to the enthusiasm of St Benedict of Aniane, the son of the Count of Maguelonne, developed in the region a real network of abbeys and monasteries with their own vineyards: St Guilhem le Désert with St Saturnin and Cabrières, St Chinian, Valmagne, .... The magnificent buildings, which became genuine poles of development, were used as cultural centres where the science of the vine became an integral part of the heritage taught, and where wine was an essential exchange currency, a source of both wealth and power.<sup>1</sup>

From the eighth to the fifteenth centuries, Islam was a danger to Mediterranean wine-production. At the same period, the British and Dutch passion for wine pushed wine-trading into the Aquitaine region. It was at this time that the rivalry between the Languedoc and Bordeaux vineyards came into being.

From 1432 onwards, Jacques Coeur gave new impetus to the commercial opening on the Mediterranean and encouraged prosperity in the region. Wines, muscats, spirit wines, wools and fabric all headed towards Alexandria to be exchanged for spices, herbs and gold. In 1680, Paul Riquet's Canal du Midi was opened and became a key link in the chain between the Mediterranean vineyards and the Atlantic.

In 1729, the states of Languedoc succeeded in obtaining a royal signature on a ruling dated 27 September. The ruling organized the production and trade of Languedoc wines and spirit wines, and established specific manufacturing methods and cask contents, production control and the brand to be placed on the bottom of the barrel. It was one of the first examples of regional organization for wine production in France.<sup>2</sup>

In 1776, Anne Robert Turgot brought an end to the quarrel that had opposed the Bordeaux and Languedoc contingents for two centuries by suppressing the Bordeaux 'privilege' which had made the city an obligatory commercial intermediary for sales to England. 'The powerful corporation that filled its coffers on a daily basis by exporting Bordeaux wines multiplied the obstacles and dreamt up a thousand different ways of paralysing the competition.'

By suppressing this privilege and freeing up trade, the country went through a period of untold wealth. In the last quarter of the eighteenth century, from Béziers to Sète, the wealthy merchants and royal officials built 'follies', a cross between a château and a mansion, which flattered