

# WHERE THE SOUTH-WEST MEETS: THE SINGULAR SPIRIT OF FRONTON

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PHOTOGRAPHS: COURTESY OF THE ESTATES

*The Fronton wine region spans 1,200 hectares with its namesake town at its centre. Although it belongs to the vibrant vineyard landscape of South-West France, it tends to keep a relatively low profile, preferring to nurture its own unique personality.*

CHÂTEAU CLAMENS WAS AMONG THE FIRST TO PRODUCE PALE ROSÉS



## SOUTH WEST APPELLATION

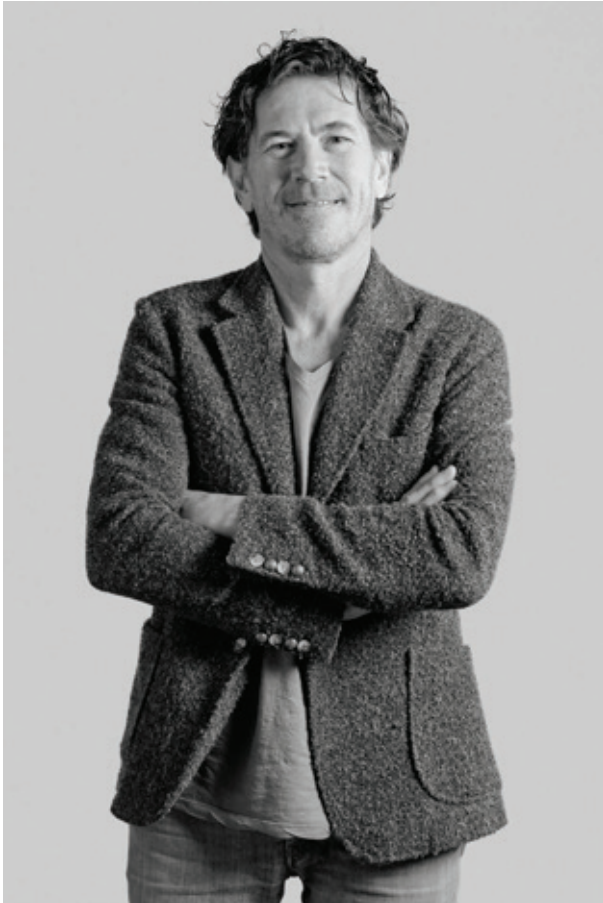


DUE TO ITS PROXIMITY TO THE CITY OF TOULOUSE, THE APPELLATION DESCRIBES ITSELF AS THE SIGNATURE FOR TOULOUSE LOCALS

It is often described as Toulouse's go-to wine, lending it a reassuring, homely feel that has proven effective. The description evokes leisurely, laughter-filled dinners, casual meals with friends and crowds that throng the pavement cafés when warm weather returns. However charming, though, the image fails to fully capture the spirit of Fronton. Behind this low-key appellation lies a much more singular wine region than appears at first glance. Firstly for its geology: following the left bank of the Tarn down river towards the Garonne, the vineyards rise up in three tiers over ancient terraces. The first comprises silty-clay loam known locally as bouldènes along with alluvial pebble deposits, gravel and sand. The second is home to red, iron-rich soils called rougets and clay-silt, while the third is formed of stony gravel layered over deep clay sub-soils. The second unique aspect of Fronton is its climate: it stands at the point where Atlantic, continental and Mediterranean influences converge, bringing with them the Autan, a warm, dry wind that keeps the vines healthy and coaxes the grapes to perfect ripeness. Fronton also stands out for its vine heritage: its rare Négrette grape variety – known as Négret in Occitan for its dark colour – is a native cultivar found virtually nowhere else. Its aromas of violet, black fruits, liquorice and pepper lend its wines an inimitable signature style. It dominates blends of both reds and rosés and since 2009 has also been permitted as a single varietal. Though it is the soul of Fronton, Négrette has not always been celebrated as an obvious choice of grape variety. For many years, it was considered too pale, too floral and lacking the tannins to resonate with tastes in the 1980s and 1990s, when consumers favoured dark, oaky, robust reds. To overcome this, many Fronton wines were blends, often including Syrah, Cabernet, Côt (also known as Malbec) and Gamay, in a bid to lend the wines greater structure. The jury is still out on whether this was a good, or a bad idea.

**SOUTH WEST  
APPELLATION**

OLIVIER CABIROL, DEPUTY MANAGING DIRECTOR OF THE  
VINOVALIE CO-OPERATIVE WINERY



VINOVALIE IS AN OCCITAN POWERHOUSE, PRODUCING HALF OF FRONTON'S WINES



**VINOVALIE:  
“TYPICITY AND SIMPLICITY DO  
NOT ALWAYS GO TOGETHER”**

The Vinovallie co-operative winery, established in 2006 from the merger of four South-West France co-operatives, is the appellation's leading producer, accounting for approximately half of Fronton wines. Its deputy managing director, Olivier Cabirol, explains how his narrative on Fronton has changed.

“Traditionally, we always introduced Fronton through its grape variety, until I realised this was not the easiest way of deepening understanding of our wines”, he says. “Typicity and simplicity do not always go together. Someone who is used to drinking a blended wine is not accustomed to drinking Négrette and that can throw them off balance”. Consequently, Cabirol now prefers to highlight Fronton's ability to provide “wines that are easy-drinking yet elegant for casual fine dining”. He also notes that international consumers tend to be more adventurous, with half the AOC Fronton wines produced by the winery shipped to export markets. The United Kingdom, Netherlands and Northern Europe lead the way, with 53% of revenue generated by exports. “New World wines take more of a varietal approach than we do. The French domestic market requires more education”.

One wonders whether the mandatory majority share of Négrette in blends is too restrictive. Cabirol believes the opposite is true: “Négrette yields different styles depending on the vineyard sites and winemaking methods so there is plenty of scope to experiment. Some styles quite naturally align with today's expectations such as less extraction, more fruit, supple tannins, clean aromatics and instant accessibility, without compromising on personality”. There is a caveat: accessibility does not mean triviality. The risk is there. The appellation certainly offers excellent value for money but that strength can rapidly create a glass ceiling. “As soon as a wine breaks through the ten to fifteen-euro-barrier, the stakes are much higher”, warns Cabirol.



SÉBASTIEN DUBUISSON, SALES DIRECTOR AT CHÂTEAU CLAMENS



SINCE 2012, CHÂTEAU CLAMENS HAS BEEN LED BY STEFAN HEPPELMANN  
WHO HAS A PASSION FOR WINES FROM SOUTH-WEST FRANCE

**CHÂTEAU CLAMENS:  
“YOU HAVE TO BE UNCONVENTIONAL”**

Château Clamens was established in 1868 but its current signature style dates back to 2012 when German entrepreneur Stefan Heppelmann purchased it. Sales director Sébastien Dubuisson is disarmingly blunt when he explains how the estate is carving out its own distinctive path: “We make Clamens, not Fronton”. His candid admission might come as a surprise, but it reveals a determination to avoid becoming an undistinguishable part of a standardised collective narrative.

“Our goal here is to reach levels of concentration that are worlds apart from common standards in the Fronton area. We take chances, admittedly, but we strive for quality at all costs”, he adds. Regarding the thorny issue of single varietals, he explains: “The appellation now authorises 100% single varietal Négrette wines, but we have always favoured blends, particularly with Syrah, because our aim is to produce wines showing the highest level of balance”.

The estate's twenty or so hectares under vine form an intricately woven patchwork, imbuing each wine with a distinctive identity. And that's exactly what appeals to consumers who “have never tasted anything like this”, smiles Dubuisson.

The estate has also shaken up established conventions for rosés. In an appellation long known for its vinous rosés, Château Clamens was the first to lean into wines with a pale pink hue. “Again, the issue is about creating a point of difference”, claims Dubuisson, who concludes: In a challenging marketplace, you have to be unconventional”.

**SOUTH WEST**  
**APPELLATION**

**CHÂTEAU BELLEVUE LA FORÊT:**  
**“NÉGRETTÉ IS WHO WE ARE”**

“Négrette is a very fickle grape variety which is prone to mildew, but it is who we are”, says Paul Cachenaut right off the bat. Cachenaut is a member of the management team of Château Bellevue La Forêt, an extensive and historic Fronton estate. The appellation’s flagship grape variety is grown over half of its 57 hectares and lends itself to a bold array of wine styles. These range from a single varietal Négrette, that belongs to the Collectif Négrette<sup>1</sup> and sports a disruptive label designed by art students, to Ultra-Violet, a cocktail that skilfully blends Négrette, Gamay and Violet and was created in conjunction with the Maison de la Violette<sup>2</sup>. Both enable the variety to chime with new drinking occasions but without betraying its identity. However innovative, though, Négrette does not sell itself. All the wines are marketed in bottles and 60% of revenue is generated by exports, with rosé leading the way. The estate is currently looking for new growth opportunities. “In the French market, we face a real challenge: wine no longer sells as a food product – you have to provide a full-fledged experience”. The cellar door is therefore the focus of attention, accounting for a tremendous 40% of sales in the domestic market.

CHÂTEAU BELLEVUE LA FORÊT IS HOME TO ONE OF THE MOST EXTENSIVE  
VINEYARDS IN SOUTH-WEST FRANCE



1. Launched in 2019, the Collectif Négrette unites around a dozen estates committed to more restrictive production rules: at least 70 % Négrette, yields capped at 35 hl/ha, at least fourteen months’ ageing and environmental certification. 2. A Toulouse company that specialises in selling violet-based products.



THE ESTATE IS MANAGED BY A TIGHT-KNIT TEAM COMMITTED TO PROMOTING FRONTON WINES

**BOUYSSSELET: WHITE ON THE HORIZON**

Officially, AOP Fronton is still reserved for red and rosé wines. In recent years, though, a rediscovered variety has sparked excitement across the wine region. Bouysselet faded into obscurity, was rediscovered, identified and then registered again. This local heirloom white grape variety may well become another feather in Fronton’s cap. A late-ripening variety, it produces dry, clean, ample wines with good palate weight, citrusy sourness, pear, apple and Mirabelle plum notes, and occasionally some dried fruit and gunflint. These are food-friendly wines that bear no resemblance to standardised varieties.

**A WINE REGION WITH PLENTY TO OFFER**

The Fronton appellation boasts numerous strengths: its terroir is easy to comprehend; it is home to a rare grape variety – two even – its prices are still accessible; its winegrowers enjoy experimenting; it has a powerful co-operative winery; and the upcoming generation is less bound by convention. The real sticking point, however, is that with red wine sales declining, identity alone is not enough: a story has to be told, staged and sold, offering as much as an experience in its own right as a wine. Ultimately, the tallest order for Fronton is not producing unique wines, but introducing consumers to its singular spirit.