

Liz Sagues: **Wine**

■ Vineyards in cool, hilly Limoux and Clos Rocaillieux mauzac blanc sec

Limoux is summer meadows in a glass

Limousin monks were first to use the fizz making method credited to Dom Perignon

Wine can be a vanity business, for there is no shortage of companies ready to put individuals' names on bottles to mark special occasions. On my desk today there's an example: "Cuvée Prestige Liz Sagues 1994". Not a year I'd planned to celebrate (despite a major birthday), just the vintage of a case of fizz I happened to win in a consumer competition.

The first five bottles had been despatched way back, but this one was overlooked – until a few days ago. Though made like champagne, it wasn't a posh wine. It came from southern France, from cool and hilly Limoux just north of the Pyrénées, not the hotter, flatter vineyards close to the sea. So how would it be, two decades on?

Remarkably good, surprisingly. While the intense golden colour and nutty edge to the flavour indicated oxidation, there were some decent fine bubbles and a touch still of fresh fruit.

That freshness was largely due to the predominant grape, mauzac, used since the early 16th century when the monks of the Abbey of Saint-Hilaire in Limoux discovered that if newly-made wine was bottled before

fermentation was complete, the bubbling would start again once spring sunshine banished the winter chill. Thus second-fermentation-in-the-bottle fizz was born, more than a century before Dom Pérignon was popularly credited with its discovery. Limoux legend even says that champagne's hero learned his vinification techniques at Saint-Hilaire.

Mauzac is native to Limoux and nearby Gaillac. The grape has green-apple flavours and high acidity which contributes to its potential for ageing and bubble-creation. But those characteristics also mean that young mauzac wines can be crunchingly engaging – proved by the popularity here in the 1980s of Gaillac perlé.

That wasn't proper fizz, but had a lightly petillant character which made it a good aperitif, and The Wine Society's current Gaillac Perlé Esprit de Labastide (£5.95) is a happy re-creation: zesty and refreshing, low in alcohol and utterly summery.

But there is serious champagne-method mauzac around, also at bargain prices. Like the Esprit, Chateau Martinolles Blanquette de Limoux (JeroBoams, £10.95) includes just a little of other grapes, chenin blanc and chardonnay rather than the former's loin de

l'oeil and sauvignon blanc. It's a thoroughly charming fizz, light and pretty, with generous mousse, scents of a meadow of summer flowers and lingering freshness.

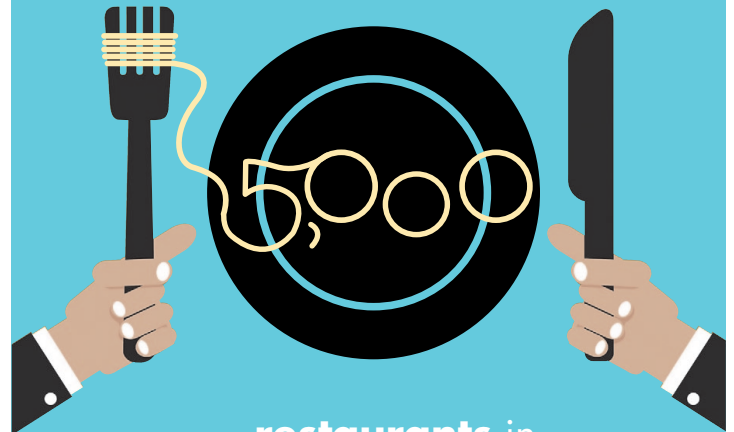
Martinolles is one of the newest estates in the Paul Mas empire, and it's a shame that the bubble-free pure mauzac, a fascinating, grown-up and very drinkable wine, isn't yet available here.

But there's a rival from Gaillac. English emigrés Jack and Margaret Reckitt are fans of the grape, important among a number of heritage varieties on their 13-hectare estate: "It makes brilliantly dry, fresh wines that have a floral complexity and subtlety." Their Clos Rocaillieux 2013 mauzac blanc sec (redsquirrelwine.com, £13) has hints of herbs alongside the flowers, combines delicacy with depth of flavour and again is characteristically fresh.

There are further sources of mauzac-rich blanquette de Limoux, both dry and sweeter méthode ancestrale (the region's other fizz, crémant, is a more conventional chardonnay-based blend). Try these: stonevine.co.uk (Laurens, £12.75), goodwineonline.co.uk (Mayrac, £13) tanners-wines.co.uk (Rives-Blanques, £14.30), sohowine.co.uk (Prima Perla, £12.50) thewinesociety.com (Antech, £9.95).



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