

Bandol Wine and the Magic of Mourvèdre

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By

Andrew James

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FOREWORD

Little streams run along to join rivers, and rivers flow out to the sea! So what do Košice, Tokay wine, Furmint, Lipovina and the Yellow Muscat grape have to do with the present volume on Bandol wine and Mourvèdre? The answer lies in the genesis of this book which dates back to practically a decade and lies 1706.5 kilometres away from Bandol, in a town called Košice in the Eastern European republic of Slovakia, one of the capitals of Tokay wine.

In 2014, the organisers of an international conference of English language and literature researchers arranged a dinner/wine tasting session at one of the famous Tokay wineries just outside the university town of Košice. During the dinner at the winery, a charming Canadian named Andrew James, who lived in Japan and worked at Meiji University in Tokyo, came up to a group of French conference members talking amongst themselves in English and asked if he could join the group. And that was how Andy, the academic in “Eng Lit” who is passionate about wine, entered our lives.

Andy’s vocation in life is teaching English literature in a Tokyo university. But avocations exercise a greater pull than vocations, they grip, fascinate and enthrall – we just need to ask Sir Arthur Conan Doyle why he gave up ophthalmology to create Sherlock Holmes! In the same vein, if Andy’s intellectual affinities lie with authors like Kingsley Amis and Graham Greene, his passion in life is wine.

Conference venues are wonderful windows of opportunity! They take one to places one would never have thought of visiting through choice! If little-known Košice in Slovakia is where Andy entered our lives, little-known Toulon in France, is where he renewed ties the following year, in 2015, at yet another conference. And, contrary to Košice, the distance between Toulon and Bandol is a mere 17-km, 18-minute drive.

During the inevitable visits to some of the Bandol wineries during this trip to France, Andy discovered and fell under the spell of a wine which, for all his immense knowledgeable ability of the subject, he was not familiar with: Bandol wines with their mandatory 50% of “growling” Mourvèdre! That was when avocation began to take over from vocation and the idea germinated that Bandol wine was worth a closer look. Perhaps he just might

like to take sabbatical leave of his university to settle in the area for a time and explore the mysteries of this comparatively unknown, dark and brooding varietal...

But we still needed a few more streams to make up the river! Another conference on wine-tasting, in Grenoble this time, followed by a publication on a unique Japanese wine manga called *The Drops of God*, all led up to the momentous decision to apply for the sabbatical... in 2020 – that apocalyptic year of the Covid-19 global pandemic when the entire world ground to a halt and stood still in fear.

But Andy persevered. Surmounting the multiple pandemic, administrative, logistical, academic and personal obstacles, he arrived in Bandol at 11 pm on the 2nd of April, 2021 to begin his incredible 2-year Bandol wine odyssey: the conference venue streams and rivers had all merged together to wash him up on to the mythical wine-soaked shores of the Mediterranean Sea.

However, getting there wasn't going to be enough. To get to the heart of the matter – understanding the magic of Mourvèdre and penetrating the mysteries of Bandol wine – Andy would have to learn to talk the talk and walk the walk of the principal actors involved in his quest: the hardy winegrowers of the Bandol terroir.

Even though a number of the Bandol winegrowers did speak some English, Andy's native English and fluent Japanese were not going to be enough to allow him to interact with all those who didn't. Undeterred, he took up the challenge to learn the language of Molière and for three months, he immersed himself in French and, more specifically, in the specialised language of wine in French. Hard work and perseverance paid off and he was soon functional when talking to the *vignerons* and *vigneresses* about their wines in their own language – not to mention the *négociants*, *cavistes*, *restaurateurs*, *sommeliers*, *serveurs* and *serveuses* and even friends and random fellow wine aficionados. Quite a feat!

Having learnt to talk some of the talk, Andy now had to learn to walk the walk, i.e. gain access to the relatively closed winegrowing community of Bandol. Combining his specialised knowledge with the direct approach, method, methodology and fieldwork of what we may call an anthropological approach, Andy visited almost all of the many wineries within the Bandol appellation. He talked to producers, big and small, not once, but again and again; he tasted and discussed their wines and their histories; he sat at their tables and they sat at his; he attended their summer cultural events (opera, jazz and classical music summer concerts held in the vineyards, preceded and followed by wine-tasting); and, perhaps most

importantly, in autumn 2021, he volunteered as a vendangeur for some of the local vendanges, i.e. the legendary back-breaking, muscle-twisting ordeal which consists of squatting for hours at the foot of row after row of vines, harvesting the precious grapes by hand. This is something one does only for love or money. That he made it through the first day, came back for more, endured the punishing heat, the aches and pains, and the humiliation of a lady foreman bellowing at him from the far end of the vine row to get off his butt, can only mean it was a sheer labour of love.

Andy also spread his oenological wings. Bandol became the centrifugal point from which he pursued his passion for wine to other French wine-growing regions. He ventured to nearby Cassis, Crozes-Hermitage, Gigondas, Châteauneuf-du-Pape and Côtes du Rhone; then further afield, northeast, to Alsace to explore the wonders of Gewurztraminer; to Vertus in Champagne — have you ever heard of a “red” champagne? —, then westwards to Bordeaux to pay tribute to a certain Mademoiselle – or is it Madame? – Margaux. He then crossed the Alps into Italy, bound on a pilgrimage to the Piemontese realms of the Nebbiolo grape and Barolo and Barbaresco wines, the highlight of which was getting to meet one of his heroes, Angelo Gaja, a life-defining person in Andy’s wine life.

Red, white ... and rosé, the wine that so conjures up the essence of Provence and le midi de la France. Although quality rosé has been around for some time now, it still suffers from its widespread reputation amongst the general public, French or otherwise, as a somewhat light and frivolous wine to be enjoyed in the heat of Provençal summers – how about *un rosé piscine* or *un rosé pamplemousse* accompanied by the sound of ice-cubes tinkling in the wine glass while lounging round the pool? Anathema to Andy, who took up arms in defence of quality rosé and launched a single-handed campaign to convince people around him – starting with the circle of his own friends and acquaintances, all long-standing supporters of rosé as “a nice light summer drink” to be drunk from 1st May to 1st October – about quality rosé, its varied and subtle aromas and its fifty enchanting (but often misleading) shades of “pink”, ranging from quasi-blood red, to delicate shell pink, and even the colour of moonlight.

A parallel challenge was to persuade his dinner hosts and guests against either serving or expecting very chilled champagnes, whites and rosés, all nicely bundled up in their “freeze sleeves”, explaining again and again that over-chilling kills the subtleties of wine aromas: serve it frais but not frappé! Rome wasn’t built in a day and habits and expectations of a lifetime don’t die out in one either. And though it’s not yet quite established that the message did get through, it is gratifying to see that Andy, *le Canadien de*

Tokyo, is often quoted amongst French friends and acquaintances as the voice of authority on not chilling your champagnes, whites and rosés to death, *s'il vous plait!*

To conclude on this amazing one-man one-wine odyssey, we often wondered how Andy, the wine-loving Canadian from Tokyo, got away with preaching the new rosé gospel to people, from all walks of life, whose entire lives had been spent awash in the stuff. The principal explanation is, undoubtedly and quite simply a certain respect for his knowledgeability about wine in general and Bandol wine in particular. And his natural willingness to share it. There is something surrealistically fascinating about listening to a man from the other side of the world talk to you intelligently, interestingly and inventively about a wine you've been drinking all your life as a matter of course. And such is his authenticity and persuasiveness that when he talks dreamily about there being a Bandol rosé Grand Cru one day, people want his dream to come true.

Another reason why Andy managed to get through to so very many different people is that he is not a wine snob or ayatollah. Even in delicate situations, he remained quintessentially pleasant and courteous, as, for example, when confronted with an inferior wine which offended his wine palate. On his very first lunch in France, for example, he was offered a Bandol white for lunch by his hosts. It turned out to be underwhelming. The hosts rejected it outright. But ever the pleasant guest, Andy humorously side-lined any criticism by declaring that it would be a great wine to serve ice-cold – heresy in his eyes, as we know! – with a very spicy fish dish! A wine lover yes, but as elegant a person as the wines he so appreciates!

Shaeda Isani
Bandol / Grenoble 2023

PREFACE

This book was written between April 2021 and January 2023 in Bandol, France, during sabbatical leave from Meiji University in Tokyo. The information gleaned from books, journal articles, promotional pamphlets and newspapers has been documented, but I have also drawn heavily on personal interviews and emails, and these are referenced in notes. All of the interviews were recorded with the subjects' knowledge and permission. When the interviewee spoke in French, I listened to the recording, translated and transcribed into English without guessing at intended meanings. Inaudible or incomprehensible passages were left blank in the transcription. As the recordings were done during visits that sometimes lasted several hours, content was edited for clarity. Many of my subjects spoke English, and I have taken the liberty of correcting errors in grammar and syntax, while eliminating unnecessary repetition without improving on word choice.

When I refer to particular tenets in any of the French wine rulebooks, neither references nor notes are given. Each wine region in France has its own *cahier des charges* which is freely available on the Internet as a PDF file. Simply do a search for “Bandol *cahier des charges*” or “Gigondas *cahier des charges*” and you'll find a 7-15-page file with historical information, the local geological and climatic features, and specific rules governing viticulture, winemaking and commercialisation.

Some of the personal and historical information about the producers has come from their own websites, and this is not referenced in the text. There are producers who do not update their sites or offer incomplete English translations and readers should be particularly wary of information on the Internet about the percentages of different grapes in blends. Even though these can and do change from one year to the next, many wine merchants simply reproduce old statistics. During my winery visits, I habitually asked for varietal breakdowns in order to be able to present readers with the correct numbers for each vintage.

The use of French in an English book is rather tricky. While some readers may prefer English equivalents, French wine terminology is widely understood by aficionados and professionals. I have provided a glossary, though its usage necessitates flipping back and forth in the text. You may find it easier to simply google “*foudre*” or “*pigeage*” if you're unsure of

their meaning. Comparing definitions on the Internet can be instructive, and one good photograph might be even better.

My intention in writing this book was to bring Bandol to life for readers. To this end, I've explored the past, investigated and analyzed the present and tried to divine the future but, whenever possible, I let the people tell their own stories. I hope that when you read them and look at the faces in the photos the wines taste even better. My wife and photographer, Lixia Chen, was with me every step of the way through Bandol's vineyards and cellars. This is our vision of the region, expressed through her images and my words.

Our wine journey continues and we are happy to communicate with fellow wine lovers via Instagram at [andywine2021](#).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book was written with the support of Meiji University in Tokyo, Japan. My institution granted me two years sabbatical leave, and the University of Grenoble-Alpes graciously accepted me as a visiting scholar for this period. On the French side, Séverine Wozniak and Caroline Rossi navigated the administrative waters in order to secure invitations and complete the requisite paperwork. Thanks to the expertise, perseverance and friendship of professor emerita Shaeda Isani and Aziz Houadria, my wife and I landed on our feet in France and were able to make the most of our stay.

Shaeda and Gyöngyi Somlai read the book in manuscript form and provided invaluable editorial advice.

Of course, there wouldn't have been a book without the wine producers, cellar masters, technical directors and viticulturalists who took time out of their busy schedules to satisfy my thirst for knowledge and good wine. Olivier Colombano is the director of Organisme de Défense et de Gestion (ODG), the Bandol wine association, and I would be amiss if I didn't express my appreciation for his assistance. He organised wine tastings and provided up-to-date information on the Bandol appellation.

And, finally, I wish to thank my wife Lixia Chen, who served as the photographer for this book, putting her own professional life on hold for two years to join me in Bandol. This book wouldn't exist if it weren't for her love and support.

CHAPTER 1

A HISTORY OF BANDOL: FROM MASSALIA TO PHYLLOXERA

Bandol's wine history starts around 600 BC, when Greeks from Phocaea arrived in Marseille.¹ They called the settlement Massalia and planted grapevines around their new home. A century later another group of Phocaeans aboard a ship with a bull figurehead ran aground 50 kilometres east of Marseille, between La Ciotat and Les Lecques. They found this protected bay at the northwestern tip of the current Bandol wine appellation to their liking and, according to legend, decided to stay, naming it Taurois out of gratitude to their guiding deity. The settlement prospered until the Romans arrived in 49 BC, bringing their own wine culture and changing the name to Tauroentum, or Torroentum.² Numerous artifacts from this era have been discovered in Le Castellet, a village located 11 kilometres inland from the Mediterranean that is one of the eight Bandol wine communes. When the owners of Château Canadel decided to build a new cellar in 2012, they uncovered the ruins of a Roman villa, complete with vinification tanks and amphorae for storing olive oil and wine.³ Roman coins and relics have been unearthed on the sites of many other Le Castellet wineries, some of which have chosen to market antiquity. Just around the corner from Canadel you'll find Domaine Ray-Jane, whose labels depict a golden amphora and all of Domaines Ott's bottles are made in the shape of this receptacle.

When the Romans shipped wine from Bandol or Les Lecques Bay to other parts of the empire, they used clay pots to keep the contents cool, though the pots were fragile and had to be wrapped in protective straw. Two thousand years later, there has been an amphora revival in France and Italy. Several wineries in Bandol and the neighbouring town of Cassis prize them for the porosity of clay, sandstone and terracotta. When the wine is able to breathe, reductive red wines become less so in their youth. A touch of earthy freshness can also reveal a side of the wine that is sometimes obscured by

¹ *AOC Bandol.*

² Musée Gallo-Romain de Tauroentum.

³ Benoist, "Château Canadel Bandol."

oak-ageing.

Long after the Romans had gone, between 800 and 1000 AD, waves of marauders and invaders swept through the area. The unexpected arrival of Visigoths, Franks, Ostrogoths and Barbarians encouraged local inhabitants to settle on hillsides and in wooded areas, which were safer than the open plains and exposed sea coast. This is how the village of La Cadière d'Azur developed between 1000 and 1300, a period in French history marked by agricultural advances. The growing bourgeoisie had an appetite for the finer things in life, one of which was wine. Since it was easier to make wine in the sunny south than in cooler, damper parts of the country, Bandol became a major supplier of wine throughout the Middle Ages.⁴ The abbey of Saint-Victor in Marseille set about improving viticultural standards in La Cadière d'Azur in 1363⁵ and by the end of the 15th century Bandol wine was being served at the French royal court.⁶ 100 years later Henri IV probably tried a few bottles during his reign, for it was his connection to a local military captain that would change the course of Bandol's history. A native of Ollioules, captain Antoine de Boyer, rendered services to the king in the religious wars and in compensation received nearby Bendort as a fiefdom. On the orders of the Duke of Epernon, Boyer constructed a fort at Bendort in 1594⁷ and a castle in 1610, the same year Henri IV was assassinated. From then on wine and olive oil flowed from the bustling Bendort port. Fishing became particularly lucrative for the seigneur, who had been awarded exclusive rights to the tuna between La Ciotat and the Antibes.

In 1715 Bendort separated from the commune of La Cadière d'Azur and the town of Bandol was born, with the castle serving as its administrative centre.⁸ The town's seal and coat of arms date to 1751.⁹ As a geographic place name, Bendort no longer exists, though a tiny island off Bandol's coast has the same name, minus the final letter. Throughout the 1700s Bandol was a centre of trade with an estimated 60 000 hectolitres of wine shipped annually from its port. Because it was too shallow for mooring and the town lacked a jetty, barrels of wine stamped with a red B were dropped into the water and guided by small boats out to larger ships waiting offshore.¹⁰ With wine production and exports booming, coopering became

⁴ Marchandiau, *Gens et vins du Bandol*, 41-42.

⁵ Fernand, *Les Vins de Bandol*, 12.

⁶ "Bandol Tourisme: the Historical Route."

⁷ Tessier, *Histoire de Bandol*, 8-9.

⁸ "Bandol Tourisme."

⁹ Marchandiau, *Gens et vins du Bandol*, 45.

¹⁰ Perier and Citerne, *Patrimoine du vin: le Bandol*, 33.

a key industry in Bandol in the 18th century. More than 300 barrel-makers worked at 15 cooperages, crafting *tonneaux* and *barriques*,¹¹ and they outlasted the Boyer family, which ruled Bandol for almost 200 years until the Revolution. In 1789 the mayor of Bandol ordered the sale of the seigneur's land and property and in 1795 the long-abandoned castle was destroyed.¹²

For the first half of the 19th century barrels stamped with red Bs continued to float out of the Bandol harbour because plans to construct a long jetty came to nothing. Finally, in the 1840s the process of quarrying large boulders from the island of Bendor began. Due to financial difficulties construction stopped in 1850, then resumed a few years later and in 1858 the jetty was completed.¹³



Figure 1-1. The island of Bendor

The true symbol of Bandol wine and what sets it apart is not the B stamped on a barrel or bottle but the terraced vineyards known as *restanques*. Their construction goes back to the 16th century¹⁴ when farmers discovered an ingenious means of making the rocky hillsides suitable for agriculture. Collectively the *restanques* are recognized as a World Heritage Site, but to build one you first remove the large stones deemed impediments to cultivation. Then the slope is leveled to a manageable 30-degree angle

¹¹ Fernand, *Les Vins de Bandol*, 13.

¹² Guillot-Soupez, *Memoire en Images: Bandol*, 33.

¹³ "Bandol Tourisme."

¹⁴ Marchandiau, *Gens et vins du Bandol*, 182.

and retaining walls are constructed from the stones to combat erosion.¹⁵ When I first saw the *restanques* I immediately thought of the terraced rice fields that dot Japan's countryside because for 15 years, living in mountainous Kyushu in southwest Japan, I woke up with one just outside my bedroom window. After the rice has been planted in late spring, the paddies are turned into square bathtubs in which the seedlings happily soak their feet with the water level closely monitored and controlled by addition and subtraction. In building the *restanques*, however, I learned that the goal was never to create an impermeable enclosure. First of all, there is that 30-degree slope, but the retaining walls are made from large, jointed stones with fissures, and smaller stones piled up behind them facilitate drainage.¹⁶



Figure 1-2. The vineyards at Château Canadel

Bandol's annual rainfall of 400 or 500 millimetres collects in just a day or two during Japan's rainy season, so there isn't much water to save, even if that was the French farmers' aim. It isn't since most of the grapes grown on the *restanques* are varieties that can live without much water. While terracing in Bandol helps to retain some moisture, the more important purpose is to enable the roots to probe deep enough to enable the plants to withstand storms and high winds.

¹⁵ *AOC Bandol*.

¹⁶ Marchandiau, *Gens et vins du Bandol*, 181.

In the summer of 2021 I was on a vineyard tour with winemaker Jean-Pierre Pieracci when we happened upon his uncle, Tonton-Jo, a stone mason in his 70s.

“He’s been a silent partner, building the vineyards of Bandol,” said Jean-Pierre, who then listed all of the top wineries whose *restanques* he had built or repaired.

“So you’ve got the right person helping you,” I said.

“Yes,” Jean-Pierre agreed.

On the hills of La Cadière d’Azur, Le Castellet and Saint-Cyr-sur-Mer, where you’ll find some of Domaine Pieracci’s vineyards, the *restanques* rise like steps on a ladder. In the 1700s grapevines were planted near the top, along with olives, almonds and figs, while walnuts and hazelnuts were reserved for the lower terraces and plains.¹⁷ The *restanques* are an ingenious way of overcoming one natural challenge, but little can be done to combat another: frost. Though it rarely appears in Bandol now thanks to climate change, frost devastated the vines, fruit trees and olives in 1709. Other damaging years include 1745, 1748 and 1755.¹⁸ Still the production of olive oil and grain remained essential in the 18th century and the villages around Bandol prospered until the Revolution. While another kind of damage was inflicted by the bandits active on the road between Marseille and Toulon, who raided churches for clocks and chandeliers,¹⁹ the Bandol area was not seriously affected.

Up until the Revolution, vast quantities of wine were sent from Bandol to America and other countries in part because of a restrictive tax levied on all wines except those produced in La Cadière d’Azur. After the Revolution the annual level of wine production held steady at 9 000 hectolitres. In 1813 wine was sold at 4.5 francs per hectolitre and there were 1 200 buildings registered in Bandol in 1819, which suggests the area was flourishing. But then something curious happened. Although agriculture would continue to proceed on a polycultural model, wine production exploded over the next 50 years with 60 000 hectolitres of wine made annually in Le Beausset, La Cadière d’Azur, Le Castellet, Saint-Cyr-sur-Mer, Saint-Nazaire and Signes to be shipped to Northern Italy, Europe and America.²⁰ To put that into perspective, in 2020 all eight of the Bandol communes combined only produced 55 149 hectolitres.²¹

¹⁷ Marchandiau, *Gens et vins du Bandol*, 48.

¹⁸ Fernand, *Les Vins de Bandol*, 12.

¹⁹ Marchandiau, *Gens et vins du Bandol*, 52.

²⁰ Cayol, *Histoire de Bandol*, 251.

²¹ *AOC Bandol*.

Everything continued to go well for the wine industry until the middle of the 19th century, when oidium arrived in the vineyards in 1847.²² Sulfur treatments against this fungal disease proved effective in 1855, though many farmers feared the smell would permeate the grapes. By the 1860s, once everyone recognized that sulfur did not negatively affect wine, oidium was brought under control,²³ but phylloxera was a different matter. This louse of American origins came to Bandol in either 1869 or 1870 and it set about attacking rootstocks and killing vines. The economic damage was severe, as the cost of a hectare of farmland in Bandol plummeted from 3 000 francs in 1870 to 600 francs in 1884.²⁴ Ironically, the phylloxera louse feasts on European *Vitis vinifera* roots, but not those from its native country, which include *Vitis aestivalis*, *Vitis riparia*, *Vitis rupestris* and *Vitis berlandieri*.²⁵ It took 10 years but the French eventually discovered that vine cuttings grafted onto American rootstock were resistant to phylloxera, and the practice continues today, since there is still no known means of eliminating the louse. Phylloxera completely changed the face of Bandol wine. Prior to 1870, half of the vineyards in the eight communes that would become the Bandol wine appellation were located in the port town after which it is named.²⁶ However, the vast majority of those vineyards were never replanted, and all of the coopers left to find work in Toulon and Marseille. Though it would take several more decades, Bandol's transformation into a seaside resort had begun.

²² Fernand, *Les Vins de Bandol*, 13.

²³ Brook, *The Complete Bordeaux: The Wines, the Chateaux, the People*, 26.

²⁴ Perier and Citerne, *Patrimoine du vin: le Bandol*, 42.

²⁵ Puckette and Hammack, *Wine Folly: Magnum Edition*, 303.

²⁶ *Educ' Guide*.

CHAPTER 2

THE BELLE ÉPOQUE AND THE IMPACT OF TOURISM ON WINE

Bandol Today

Daniel Ravier, the technical director at Domaine Tempier, remembers there being a dozen nightclubs in Bandol's downtown in the late 1980s. Now there aren't any. When Kermit Lynch wrote that Bandol was "far from being a Riviera hotspot" he was right.²⁷ It is a town full of elderly people, and the American importer is just one of many who have chosen a Côte d'Azur retirement. In 2019 there were twice as many deaths (142) as births (56) and 44% of the population was over 60. The Lehmann Shock in 2008 precipitated a loss in population that continued until 2014, when there were 1 200 fewer residents than there are today. But the population has been stable for the last several years and the latest census figures show that the town has 8 404 inhabitants.²⁸ Each summer Bandol fills up with tourists of all ages, though the partying goes on in holiday homes with swimming pools along the shoreline, since all the discos are gone. There are plenty of seasonal apartments and quaint Belle Époque hotels available for six months of the year, then the shutters go down in November. When I arrived in Bandol in April 2021 for a two-year stay, it took three weeks to find permanent lodgings. Landlords don't need to commit to long-term tenants when they can get a few thousand euros a week in high season. Finally, my wife and I settled on half of a stately two-storey home on the western edge of town, and that's where I wrote most of this book. The house was located at the end of a cul-de-sac, just across from the Mediterranean and one of Bandol's top viewing points. At all hours of the day the young crowd arrived on motorcycles and in cars, bringing beer, music and high spirits, though we hardly noticed since the house was set back from the road behind a gate and spacious garden. The viewing point represents a slight breach in the *chemin du littoral*, a craggy, sometimes treacherous path spanning 12

²⁷ Lynch, *Adventures on the Wine Route: A Wine Buyer's Tour of France*, 85.

²⁸ "Population de Bandol."

kilometres of coastline between Bandol and Port d'Alons. The customs officers and smugglers who used it a century ago have been replaced by hardy hikers equipped with ski poles.

For half of the year almost every day in Bandol is like a picture postcard. Occasional forecasts of rain are, for the most part, erroneous. By mid-May the weather is warm enough to attract weekend tourists. This influx of visitors can be problematic for residents because there isn't much parking in downtown Bandol, aside from the two lots next to the waterfront casino. Usually my wife and I left the car at home and walked to the port. It took ten minutes from the viewing point to the end of the coastal path at Barry Beach, a pebbly stretch where Jacques-Yves Cousteau tested the first autonomous diving suit in 1943. Then you follow Avenue Albert 1 east for a half-kilometre, passing the art deco Hotel Splendid and a long staircase leading down to Renecros Beach. The road then merges with Boulevard George Clemenceau, and the beach finally becomes visible through wrought-iron bars encircling a palatial villa on the corner of Rue Raimu, the street named for the beloved French actor from the 1930s and 1940s. During



Figure 2-1. Renecros Beach in high season

the pandemic summers, with most French unable to go abroad for vacations, the beach was packed. When you looked down through the bars, you needed to have faith that there really was sand beneath all the bodies, towels and umbrellas on the horseshoe of beach stretching from the Splendid to the Golf Hotel.

Continuing on our walk, the road then descends into town and a right turn at the bottom of the slope at Maison Tholosan leads to the port. There is a morning market where vendors sell fresh fish, artisanal cheeses and local produce and a string of bars, cafés and restaurants line the boardwalk. You can have a glass of rosé with oysters and shrimp at the top of the market at the Narval café or wait for an evening cocktail and watch the sun set. Either way, Bandol is beautiful in the summer.

The Belle Époque

In 1868 a French journalist characterized Bandol as a charming, undiscovered town,²⁹ but things began to change in the Belle Époque. This is the period of relative prosperity and optimism wedged between the end of the Franco-Prussian War in 1871 and the start of the First World War. At Bandol's eastern tip, Le Grand Hotel des Bains opened its doors in 1887, receiving mention in tourist guides,³⁰ and in the 1890s, at the invitation of the island's owner, Alexandre Dumas spent a well-documented winter on Bendor.³¹ With a flurry of hotel construction, mass tourism took off from 1911, but for more than 40 years growing immortelles for use as dried flowers remained Bandol's primary industry, as evidenced by the story of Isidore Brun. He was one of the only coopers to stay in Bandol post-phylloxera, maintaining a wine cellar on the corner of what is now Rue Gabriel-Péri in the town centre. In 1923 Brun's son gifted the cellar to the Tholosan family, who used it as a workshop for fresh and dried flowers. In 1977, the building was purchased by the municipality and turned into a cultural centre called Maison Tholosan.³²

Immortelles filled the commercial void created by the departure of the coopers, with flowers planted in the fields where vines used to grow. The first immortelles were imported from Asia around 1854 and planting intensified after 1865.³³ They have come to be valued for their therapeutic and medicinal properties,³⁴ but in the 1870s they were dried, then woven into wreaths to be sent by rail and sea to Germany and England. Four flower workshops in Bandol employed more than 100 people.³⁵ Early in the 20th century production spread to the island of Bendor, which had previously contributed the rocks for Bandol's jetty.³⁶ Dependence on immortelles and narcissi increased after a frost in 1929 severely damaged olive and fruit trees but spared the flowers. They would remain the most profitable crop in Bandol until 1952.³⁷

²⁹ Tessier, *Histoire de Bandol*, 68.

³⁰ Guillot-Soupez, *Memoire en Images: Bandol*, 116.

³¹ Thomas, *Bandol d'hier à aujourd'hui*, 35.

³² "Bandol Tourisme."

³³ Cayol, *Histoire de Bandol*, 252.

³⁴ "Rose et Marius."

³⁵ Thomas, *Bandol d'hier à aujourd'hui*, 55.

³⁶ "Bandol Tourisme."

³⁷ Marchandiau, *Gens et vins du Bandol*, 145, 153.

The arrival of phylloxera didn't put an end to viticulture in the villages surrounding Bandol. It was more like nature had pressed the reset button and, when the wine industry made its comeback, it was in a vastly different form. In 1880 experimental grafting of local grape varieties onto American rootstock began and two years later a committee was established to distribute American cuttings. By 1900 there were 80 hectares of new vineyards.³⁸ Wine no longer flowed in vast quantities down towards the Bandol port, where it was put into barrels marked with red Bs and floated out to sea. For one thing, they had a serviceable jetty in Bandol, allowing large boats to moor. But grape growing became part of a decidedly polycultural approach to farming, the goal being self-sufficiency rather than profit. The inhabitants of the villages around Bandol lived simply, making their own clothes, often from the wool of their sheep. Grains were planted under the olive trees and in between the rows of vines, and the people and their animals subsisted on wheat, oats and barley. The staples in their diet were bread, soup, potatoes, rice and beans, with olive oil and salt for seasoning. Rabbit or chicken appeared on the table once a week and, with the exception of Easter and Christmas, meat consumption was limited to mutton and pork.³⁹

Bandol's Celebrities and Defenders

At the end of the First World War Bandol was ready to welcome the rich and celebrated, though writer Katherine Mansfield came earlier and spent December 1915 at the waterfront hotel Beau Rivage in recovery from the shock of her brother's death at the front. The Golf Hotel on Renecros Beach became the first licensed casino in 1920.⁴⁰ Three years later the Bandol tourist bureau opened and the town was accorded "*station climatique*" status, making it eligible to collect a seaside tourist tax.⁴¹ After the publication of *Lady Chatterly's Lover* caused a scandal in England in 1928, D.H. Lawrence and his German wife Frieda sought refuge at the Beau Rivage for four months. They returned the following winter, staying at a villa next to Barry Beach until February 1930. A month after they left Bandol, Lawrence

³⁸ Perier and Citerne, *Patrimoine du vin: le Bandol*, 44.

³⁹ Marchandiau, *Gens et vins du Bandol*, 54-55.

⁴⁰ Guillot-Soupez, *Memoire en Images: Bandol*, 27.

⁴¹ Guillot-Soupez, *Memoire en Images: Bandol*, 117.

died of tuberculosis in a sanitarium outside of Nice.⁴²



Figure 2-2. The view of Barry Beach enjoyed by D.H. Lawrence

One of France's biggest turn-of-the-century stars, the singer and performer Mistinguett, stayed at the Grand Hôtel des Bains several times in the 1930s, bringing her entourage so she could prepare her shows. She liked Bandol so much that she purchased the grounds of the Île Rousse Hotel, which had been used as an animal pasture, and built a villa called Youp La La.⁴³ Over the next few decades, urban development would swallow up most of Bandol's agricultural land. In 2022, Château de Pibarnon and Domaine Le Galantin were two of the last wineries with vineyards inside the town's limits. Le Galantin's 1.5 hectares are in Poutier, an area just east of the supermarket, Carrefour Market Bandol. According to the winemaker, Céline Devictor, the vineyard doubles as the area's biggest restaurant—for wild boars. Without any others to choose from, Le Galantin's has become their favourite haunt.

⁴² Grillon.

⁴³ Thomas, *Bandol d'hier à aujourd'hui*, 45.

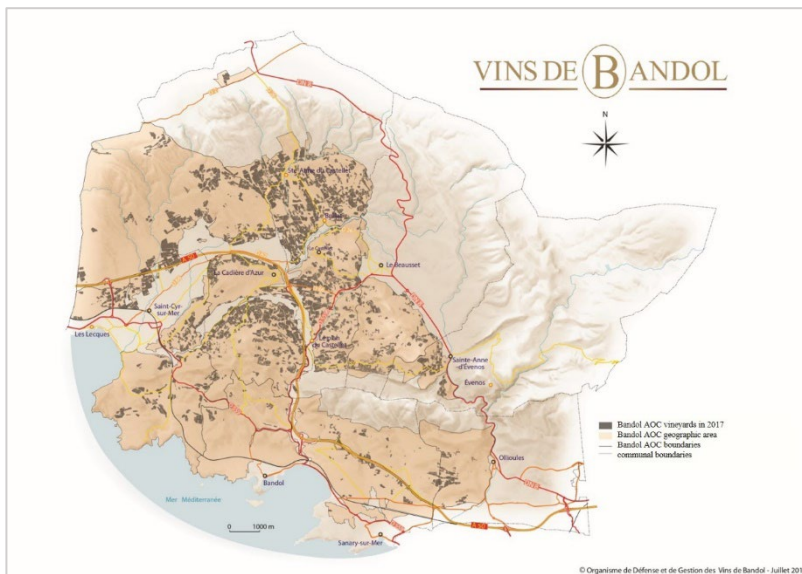


Figure 2-3. The map shows the coastline is classified as Bandol land but devoid of vineyards due to urban development

Over the last 50 years, Bandol wine has had celebrity advocates, like American writer, epicurean and boozier Jim Harrison, who declared:

I rather like this sturdy suggestive red with everything, and often with nothing at all. It invariably has made me happy, recalling as it does the primal flavours of sun and earth, rather than lightbulbs and supermarkets. It is also affordable if you can withstand the usual nagging of your accountant. Whenever life begins to crush me I know I can rely on Bandol, garlic, and Mozart. It will also be served in vast quantities at my funeral.⁴⁴

To be honest, Harrison can't really be called an advocate of Bandol wine, because he only recognized the existence of a single producer. "I have drunk more Gigondas than any French wine except Domaine Tempier Bandol," he wrote in one essay. In another, he declared: "A glass or two of Collioure or Domaine Tempier Bandol defends my body from viral intruders." And, perhaps, most convincing of all: "If guests don't like the Domaine Tempier

⁴⁴ Harrison, *A Really Big Lunch*.

Bandol I serve them they're no longer welcome in my home."⁴⁵

Although the subject of his novels was never wine, Harrison usually found a way to get in a plug for Tempier. In *The English Major* a teacher-turned-farmer's marriage is failing and he finds comfort in drink. At one point when he is served a wine, he reports: "I studied the label of the bottle which read Domain [sic] Tempier Bandol, and despite the wine being red it tasted as if sunlight had been captured in the bottle."⁴⁶

With his left-of-centre politics, predilection for anti-American diatribes and fascination with French gastronomy, Harrison has plenty of appeal for French readers. Once, in a Tain l'Hermitage bookstore, journalist Bernard Pivot's whimsical *Dictionnaire Amoureux du Vin* caught my eye. Scanning the table of contents, I saw numerous entries for French wine regions. Since Jura and Jurançon had made the cut I held out hope for Bandol. Alas, I found only Beaujolais, Bordeaux and Burgundy under B. Then it occurred to me to check the P's for Provence, where I discovered a few lines of praise for Bandol's strict quality regulations, followed by a footnote directing readers to a much longer entry. That one was under H and it was dedicated to the person who had introduced Pivot to Bandol: Jim Harrison.⁴⁷

The equation of Bandol with a single producer is misleading. More than 60 other producers are entitled to put the Bandol name on their labels, so it is not the exclusive property of Tempier. While Harrison encouraged readers to try the wines from Tempier and, by extension, Bandol, he did so through the force of his personality rather than logical persuasion. In other words, some people like Tempier just because they like Harrison. In the spring of 2021, I met with Laurence Minard, the winemaker at Domaine Dupuy de Lôme and, at the end of our interview, I asked her a rather unfair question. Which Bandol wines would you buy with your own money? Wine professionals usually trade bottles with colleagues, so there is no need to exchange money but I asked the question in order to find out which Bandol wines were valued by the insiders. It elicited a variety of reactions. Many winemakers demurred but some rattled off one name after another. Occasionally I heard about influential neighbours mentoring young winemakers and these stories were helpful for my research.

Laurence thought for a moment before naming two producers. The second one, she said, is chosen "for more intimate reasons. I love Jim Harrison and because of him I would like to taste the old cuvées from

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Harrison, *The English Major*, 143.

⁴⁷ Pivot, *Dictionnaire Amoureux du Vin*, 334.

Tempier. Writing and speaking about Bandol wines, he has been a very important writer in my life. I would like to drink those wines and think about him.”⁴⁸

Today in France non-wine professionals know very little about Bandol wine. Some are aware of Bandol as a holiday destination where large quantities of rosé are made and enjoyed, with or without ice, though few consider it worthy of serious attention. The problem is partly historical. For a long time there just wasn't much good wine being made in Bandol. A French commentator has said that the number of quality-conscious producers in Bandol in 1960 could be counted on the fingers of one hand.⁴⁹ Writer Jean Giono (1895-1970) liked wine and was an ardent defender of Provençal culture. He came from Manosque, just 130 kilometres north of the Mediterranean, and must have tasted Bandol wines. His daughter Sylvie compiled a cookbook from the family's recipes and in it she recalls her father's well-stocked cellar, which was reserved for dinners with friends and for special occasions. Aside from Champagne, she writes, he valued Bordeaux reds for their curative powers. A large glass with a meal always helped after a bout of angina.⁵⁰ Some of the Giono family recipes include wine as an ingredient, like peaches in Châteauneuf-du-Pape, but there is not a single mention of Bandol.

By the late 1970s the situation was improving. American chefs, wine writers and importers waxed poetically about Bandol and once again bottles embossed with the famous B were prepared for export. Most of the attention was given to two producers, Domaine Tempier and Château Pradeaux, the star clients of importers Kermit Lynch and Neal Rosenthal, though Domaines Ott and Château de Pibarnon also enjoyed popularity abroad. Tempier's history is richer than most and Lynch was right when he said an entire book should be devoted to this producer.⁵¹ Richard Olney did just that, writing *Lulu's Provençal Table: The Food and Wine from Domaine Tempier Vineyard* (1994), an excellent work that pays homage to the Peyraud family.

For my part, I have tried to introduce all of Bandol's producers because even if the Mourvèdre grape is reductive, a book about a wine region shouldn't be. The diversity and complexity of Bandol cannot be conveyed through a handful of producers. Each winery has its own story and, when

⁴⁸ Laurence Minard, in conversation with the author, 28 May 2021.

⁴⁹ Marchandiau, *Gens et vins du Bandol*, 151.

⁵⁰ Giono, *Le goût du bonheur: la Provence gourmande de Jean Giono*, 23.

⁵¹ Lynch, *Adventures on the Wine Route: A Wine Buyer's Tour of France*, 86.

the producers have been willing to share, I've listened. Sadly, most visitors to Bandol never know how good the wine can be. They might hear something about the *restanques* during a tasting at La Maison des Vins de Bandol, but the tourists seem content to lay in the sun on Renecros Beach and gaze up at the villas where the rich and famous lived or stayed, or simply to drink rosé on ice poolside. The local restaurants are partly to blame for the situation, as viticulturalist and artisanal winemaker Jean-Philippe Fourney pointed out:

I come from Burgundy and I know how good my region of origin is, but here there is no general wine philosophy. Some restaurants are not bad but the majority you drink the white at 5°C and the red at 23 °C in a bad glass. It's catastrophic. You go to Burgundy and the restaurants serve the red and white at good temperatures. I am surprised that there isn't a wine philosophy here because it is a wine region. But it seems to be a region of table wine, not good wine. People don't come here for the wine. They come for the sea. In Burgundy people come for the wine.⁵²

Even at some of Bandol's better restaurants, the wine isn't taken quite as seriously as I would like it to be. One restaurant offers nine varieties of cheese at the end of their dinner course and, as I was struggling to finish, a fellow diner approached my table and said, "The cheese plate here is the best in France. You won't find anything else like it."

The food was superb too, and the wine list included some of my favourite selections from Château Sainte-Anne. But when I ordered a bottle of white wine it arrived in an ice bucket and was served in disappointingly small, chunky glasses. Why? The president of the ODG, Cédric Gravier, offered the following analysis:

In Bandol, the town that has the same name as the wine, some of the restaurants don't even have any Bandol wines on the list. Côtes de Provence, IGP, the wines they can buy for less and sell really high. They don't care. I think it's a region that has no tradition of consuming wine. I'm from Marseille and most of my friends there don't care about wine. They drink it because in France we drink wine with food but, really, they don't care. If you go to other regions—the Rhône Valley, Alsace, Loire, Bordeaux—all the people around the vineyards have this culture of wine. They appreciate it, know how to talk about it, they know about production. And the

⁵² Jean-Philippe Fourney, in conversation with the author, 24 July 2021.

restaurants are doing their job of selling wine at a reasonable price so people can buy it. Here you buy something to eat. It's more expensive to drink than to eat. It's impossible. That's a big problem and I have no idea how to resolve it. It's very difficult to get in contact with the restaurants. They don't care. It's something we often talk about. People in restaurants who are ordering wine say, "Sorry, it's too expensive." For me it's a shame. We have everything here for people to come and visit.⁵³

Conflict in Bandol between a few ambitious visionaries and those interested in immediate gain is nothing new, as the story of the Mourvèdre grape reveals.

⁵³ Cédric Gravier, in conversation with the author, 27 April 2022.