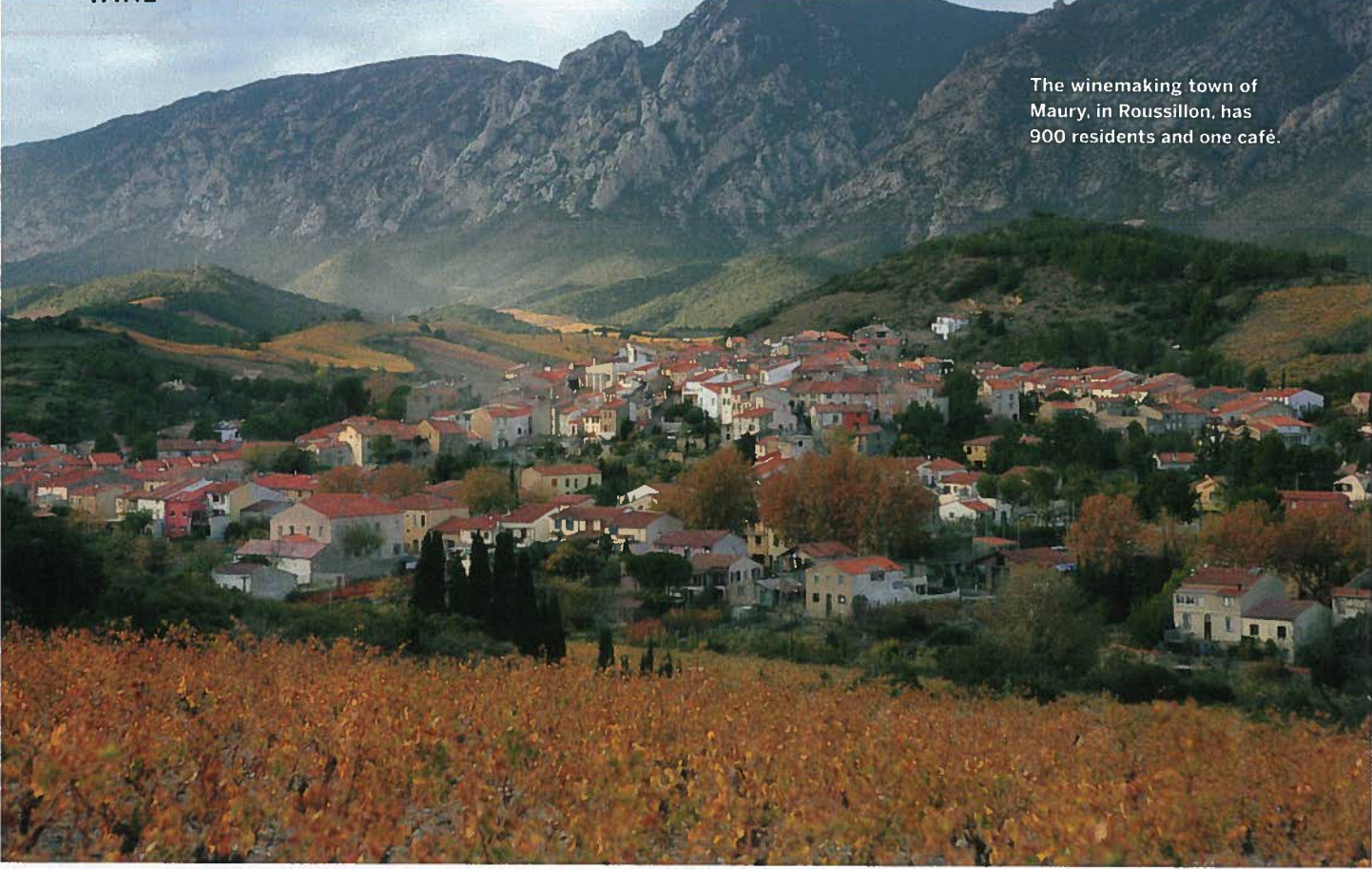


WINE



The winemaking town of Maury, in Roussillon, has 900 residents and one café.

## Finding Roussillon, Before Everyone Else Does

France's Roussillon region is known for dessert wines—to the extent that it's known at all. Yet it's becoming a source for bottlings that compare to the world's best reds, thanks to visionary winemakers like California's Dave Phinney.

BY ROBERT CAMUTO

**C**AN WE BUY THIS?" Dave Phinney asked, pointing to a Grenache vineyard clinging to soil so dense that it looked more like rock.

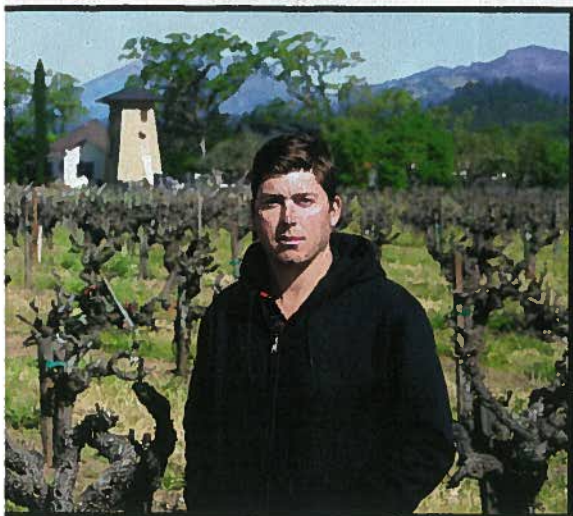
Phinney, a 38-year-old Napa-based winemaker, was riding around in a truck on a steep hillside in the southern French region of Roussillon. Neither of the other two men in the car, both of whom work for Phinney, seemed surprised by his question; they'd spent much of the past three years watching him amass 300 acres of vineyards in the Roussillon; small plots of vines scattered miles apart across the rocky hills.

But 300 acres still isn't enough. Phinney has big plans for the new wine he's making, a potent old-vine Grenache called D66. He wants more of Roussillon's vineyards, the older and more difficult to work they are, the better. Phinney is a talented winemaker with a finely tuned sense of what Americans will drink; his first big success was a California Zinfandel blend called The Prisoner, which grew from producing 385 to 70,000

cases a year in the past decade. His presence in Roussillon, checkbook in hand, says a lot about the ongoing transformation of this ancient wine region into France's next wine frontier.

Roussillon stretches inland from the French Mediterranean coast near Spain's Catalan region, running along the foothills of the Pyrenees. It's often lumped together with the adjacent and much larger Languedoc, but the two are distinct in soil and microclimates. Together, however, Languedoc-Roussillon comprises the world's largest wine-producing area. Twenty years ago it produced mainly bulk wines; Roussillon was also known for *vins doux naturels*, port-like dessert or aperitif wines. But when demand for sweet wines began to plummet in the 1990s, Roussillon winemakers needed to find an alternative.

Today, young winemakers from around the world—South Africa, California, other parts of France and Europe—along with forward-looking locals are creating world-class wines in Roussillon. The region's old vines, its dry, hot climate



Napa-based star winemaker Dave Phinney is using Grenache to make a potent red, D66, at his sleek new Maury winery, RIGHT.



(there are, on average, 325 sunny days per year) and its relatively loose regulations for approved grape varieties and viticulture techniques give winemakers lots of freedom. And the wines show that. Some, like Phinney's, are powerful reds that could be mistaken for a Spanish Priorat or California cult wine; others are more elegant and balanced, reminiscent of Pinot Noir. The best examples of either style are extraordinary, equal to almost any other wine in France.



#### MAURY WINES TO TRY

##### 2009 D66 (\$38)

The first vintage of Dave Phinney's robust New World-style red blends 80 percent old-vine Grenache with Syrah and Carignane.

##### 2009 DOMAINE DE LA PERTUISANE

**LE NAIN VIOLET (\$24)** Although its name means purple dwarf, Richard Case's soft, juicy 100 percent Grenache bottling is a big, powerful wine.

##### 2009 DOMAINE THUNEVIN-CALVET CUVÉE CONSTANCE (\$17)

The anthesis of Jean-Luc Thunevin's wines from Bordeaux, this affordable Grenache-Carignane blend is medium-bodied and fermented in cement tanks rather than oak.

a 35-year-old Audrey Tautou look-alike and fourth-generation Maury grape grower; the other was Richard Case, a 37-year-old Englishman with neatly slicked-back hair and sky-blue eyes who makes wine for his own property, *Domaine de la Pertuisane*, and is the general manager for Phinney's project. Since even the recent history of Maury takes some untangling, he and Calvet gave me a friendly lesson.

In 2001, Calvet said, she and her husband, Jean-Roger, looked for a partner who could give them direction in making dry wines and an entry into the export market. "In Maury, we had no experience making dry wines," she told me. They found that expertise in Bordeaux-based Jean-Luc Thunevin. Thunevin was one of the first Bordeaux *garagistes*, crafting small-production, very expensive, New World-style wines in St-Émilion under the name *Château Valandraud*. His success with that project, the Calvets felt, would make him a great partner.

With Thunevin's investment and guidance, the Calvets began working in their monumental new winery at the edge of town. The resulting wines, made with Grenache, Carignane and Syrah and sold under the name *Thunevin-Calvet*, are intensely fruity. "Big" is definitely a fair way to describe them.

Case told me his own story. He was just out of wine school in England, traveling from working the harvest in Languedoc to scouting vineyards in Spain, when he and his wife, Sarah, came upon

**W**HEN I VISITED Roussillon in June, I set my sights on Dave Phinney's adopted village of Maury, a tiny town of 900 that has quietly become one of the hubs of the new Roussillon. Maury sits in the rugged Agly valley, west of the city of Perpignan, amid Mediterranean *garrigue* (wild scrub) and hillsides known as the *Fenouillèdes*, for their wild fennel.

Maury's hills experience some of the hottest, driest weather in France. They're mostly composed of schist, a flaky, slate-like rock. Conditions are hard, but that's what has attracted winemakers: Schist and arid, furnace-like heat are ideal for pushing Grenache, the main red grape in the area, to full, luscious ripeness. The result is that Maury's reds fall into three categories: big, bigger and biggest, with Phinney's wines the most massive of all.

A few days after I landed in Roussillon, I was sitting on the terrace of the only café in town with a couple of Maury pioneers. One was Marie Calvet,

Maury. It was soon after the Calvets had started their winery. The two couples met and began discussing their winemaking aspirations, and the Cases never left.

With the help of the Calvets, the Cases began buying up steep, 60-year-old Grenache and Carignane vineyards that locals were glad to unload, some so steep and rocky that they have to be plowed by mule. For the farmers, the low productivity of these old vines was economically problematic, but for Case, it was critical for making the intense, mineral-rich wines he wanted. He, like the Calvets, stopped using chemical fertilizers and herbicides and started farming his vineyards as organically as possible. Case's Domaine de la Pertuisane wines, inspired by Spain's Priorat, are even blacker and richer—and bigger—than Thunevin-Calvet's.

These wines began to draw international attention. One of the first Americans to recognize how good they were, and to see the potential in Roussillon, was the quirky California cult-winemaker star Abe Schoener, who teamed up with several partners and Case (as winemaker) to create the Clos Thalès winery in Maury. Then, in 2008, Dave Phinney turned up, and the scene took a multimillion-dollar leap.

Phinney heard about Maury from his California distributor and decided to check it out. He was amazed by the gorgeous sloping vineyards of ancient Grenache vines, in a hot climate not unlike Napa, which could be had for a song. "It would be impossible to do in Napa what we've done here," Phinney says.

When I first met Phinney, it was on the same café terrace where I'd met Richard Case and Marie Calvet. (As the only café in town, it's become a bit of a hangout.) To mark the first day of summer, a DJ was playing a loud disco mix for *tout* Maury. Phinney, just off an airplane, had joined Case and their shared vineyard team for beers and whiskey shots. Phinney speaks no French, yet somehow he gets along magnificently with the locals.

"I didn't 'discover' anything in Maury, I stumbled on it," Phinney said with a shrug, describing his first trip to the area. "I wasn't supposed to buy any land on that trip, but by the time I left I'd already committed to 30 acres. When I got home to St. Helena, I told my wife, 'You can't tell anybody.' I was afraid if people in Napa heard about Maury, they would buy up everything."

Phinney is unquestionably the most commercially successful winemaker to land here. At 38, he has the easygoing charm of a young man who has succeeded by embracing happy accidents. He began his career in the late 1990s in Napa, working the harvest at Mondavi, launched his own Orin Swift Cellars soon thereafter, and saw his fortune made in 2000 when he instinctively blended some Zinfandel that had gotten stuck in its fermentation (that is, it was still a bit sweet) with Cabernet and other grapes. He called it *The Prisoner*. The bottles—probably aided by the macabre Goya print on the label—sold out instantly. Phinney

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Maury's old Grenache, Carignane and Syrah vines produce robust reds.

“I wasn't supposed to buy any land on that trip,” said Phinney, “but by the time I left, I had 30 acres. At home, I told my wife, ‘You can't tell anybody.’ I was afraid if Napa people heard about Maury, they'd buy up everything.”

kept making the wine, and by 2009, when he sold the brand (he's still the winemaker) to Napa-based Huneus Vintners, he was selling 70,000 cases a year of it.

Over at Phinney's sleek new winery, designed by the same Bordeaux architect as the Calvets', Case opened a bottle of D66's first vintage, the 2009. (D66 is named for the French *département*, or county, where Maury is located.) The color was nearly black, the flavor so dense with fruit, spice and oak that it almost tasted sweet. The heat of the Maury sun was reflected in its soaring alcohol level—15.2 percent. Forget the trend toward lighter, food-friendly wines: Even the D66 bottle is massive, still hefty when empty. It's a wine that demands attention.

Phinney said, “It's a serious, serious wine. I would put it up against any wine, from anywhere.” He's standing behind that statement: For the 2010, only the second vintage, there will be 7,000 cases of D66 coming to the US this spring.

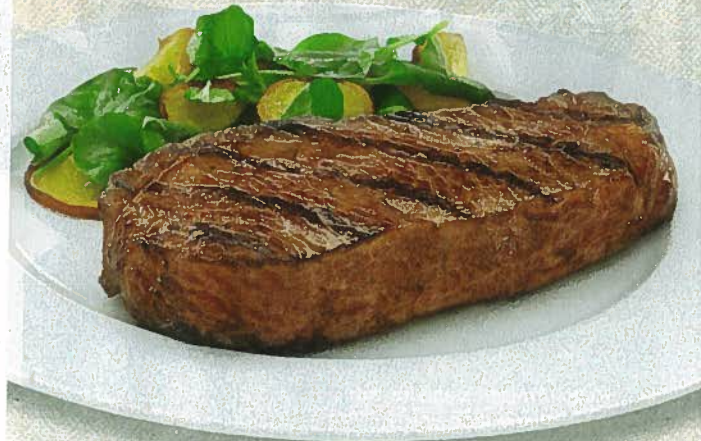
Still, Maury itself isn't likely to change quickly: It lives on rural time. That's part of what Phinney and all the other expat winemakers like about it. To get land for his new winery where he wanted it, for instance, Phinney did a friendly land swap with the Calvets. “In Napa, there's such a disconnect,” he says. “To get anything done, you have to call the general manager, who calls the secretary, who calls the owner...” In Maury, it turns out, you don't even have to get on the phone; you just have to go to the café. ●

France-based writer Robert Camuto's most recent book is *Palmento: A Sicilian Wine Odyssey*.

PHOTOGRAPH: ROBERT CAMUTO



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