

DIVERSITY IN ONE PLACE

The Languedoc-Roussillon is the biggest wine region in the world. Any-body who's interested in their wines has had to travel across vast distances – until now. Jürgen Mathäß reports on a concept that brings winemakers, tourists and the wine trade together under one roof.



Vinauberge in the Languedoc.

The idea is striking: a kind of permanent wine fair, located in the former Poilhes Cave Cooperative buildings, offering the chance to taste a large variety of Languedoc-Roussillon wines in one place. It solves the problem facing wine buyers, journalists and wine tourists: anyone interested in finding out about Languedoc wines needs significant time to visit the vast number of wineries scattered over the region, one of the largest in the world.

The four pillars

Opened in December 2011, Vinauberge is situated in Poilhes, 10km west of Béziers. Created by German promoter Günter Hutter, along with several associates, it's a place where members of the wine trade and wine lovers alike can try hundreds of different wines within a generous and congenial space.

The centre was developed on the site of the former Poilhes wine cooperative and looks like a well-kept Château seated on the banks of a World Heritage site, the Canal du Midi. The property boasts 400m² of presentation and tasting space, technically perfect storage facilities for more than 250,000 bottles, a tapas bar, seven modern self-catering apartments and an elegant terrace and garden, equipping it for a range of activities. To create such a facility cost about €2.5m (\$3.1m) and it employs seven people at present.

Vinauberge's concept is based on four pillars: trading, culinary, the events centre and the hospitality service. Each component is managed as its own profit centre.

The international trading centre organises the supply and demand of Languedoc-Roussillon wines in a unique way. A vast selection of wines are brought directly from producers and presented in one location, Vinauberge, where wine buyers and traders can then spend a day, or even a few days and nights, to select wines that might otherwise have been too far away to discover. Every winemaker in the region has the opportunity to exhibit some of their wines. All they have to do is supply their bottles to be stocked, and pay a fee of €10.00 for one wine, €18.00 for two and €23.00 for three wines per month. Every appellation of the Languedoc-Roussillon and all its grape varieties and wine types are present in a representative quantity, from large and well-known wineries, and small and lesser-known wineries, as well as newcomers. The trading centre does not choose which wines to exhibit, so everyone has the same chance. The wines are displayed in special cabinets in the centre, and at the moment there are about 400 wines presented from about 180 wineries.

Didier Fenoll, co-owner of Domaine Chai César in the village of Nissan-Lez-Enserune, is positive about the concept. "When I did one

of my trips to visit customers – wine shops around France, Belgium and Germany – I asked them what they thought of the idea," he says. "Most said it was super and that it would save them a lot of time they'd otherwise spend searching the region for new domains." Fenoll says the only surprise is that no one has done something like this before. "I don't know if the fact that Monsieur Hutter is a foreigner helped to make it happen, but the strength of the German economy and German interest in our region's wines probably were quite important."

Professionals of the wine trade are invited to taste their choice of wines, free of charge. Personal meetings with chosen winemakers can also be organised in the centre. There's also a tapas bar that's available to provide catering for professional clients, and accommodation is available in the on-site apartments.

Even if a winery's wines aren't chosen by buyers, having a presence at Vinauberge is still worthwhile. The tasting notes of the wine buyers and importers are gathered and presented statistically, along with evaluations and comments, provided the taster agrees to it. The data-crunching of the notes offers an analysis of the market's reaction to the wine.

"Undoubtedly, bringing together buyers and wineries is the heart of Vinauberge," says Günter Hutter. "And, to be frank, it took time to convince the wineries." He says that people in the region are not particularly open to untested ventures and costs that can be avoided. "Some of them wanted to see the international buyers already here before they start to participate. I had to explain to them that no customer enters a jeans boutique if there are no clothes in it." But, he says, things are getting better every day as the centre becomes successful. "Even famous wineries like Domaine Gauby are now present. We had to slow down some of the very big players with a number of wineries, because we don't want to be dominated by big ones. We want to give unknown wineries a chance too."

As for professional visitors, Hutter says that Vinauberge only began real promotional activity in May. "But we already had people here,

from China to Germany. They really liked it very much, but they also liked an effect we didn't have on our list - they told us this concept makes it very easy to present their business costs to the tax man!"

The response from those who have visited has been, so far, enthusiastic. Axel Rose of Altstadt Weingalerie in Germany's Speyer, which specialises in wines from the Languedoc, says the only issue he can see with Vinauberge is that it will, unfortunately, "reduce the number of good excuses for visiting the Languedoc". Rose, who has watched Vinauberge with interest since its planning stage, says there are several benefits, including it being easier to find new and interesting wines, particularly in the years when Vinisud doesn't run. "The often non-trivial problems associated with the consolidation of the shipments are greatly alleviated," he says. "In the past I have spent a great deal of time driving around from one winery to the next, picking up wines and then packing the pallets." He says that on his next trip to the region in August, Vinauberge will be his first stop.

Andrew Holloway, owner of regional wholesaler Rotweiss in Düsseldorf (of which Hutter is a shareholder), says that when he's been to regional events in the past, he's found them awkward. "Sud de France has an event to put buyers and sellers together in the same room and get conversations going," he says. "I found that a little stiff. Vinauberge works more like a natural process of discovery, where you can browse as though you're in a huge library of really good wines."

The fifth element

Following tastings, open bottles are available to try in the wine bar, which is the second pillar of the concept. Vinauberge has got its own food service, which is separate to the trading centre. The wine bar is open to the public, where visitors can taste a large range of wines by the glass, at a range of reasonable prices. They can also have a themed wine tasting chosen by the resident sommelier. The whole range of stocked wines is available for tasting, giving visitors the chance to really get to know the wines and wine culture of the Languedoc Roussillon. Small quantities of bottled wines can be bought directly at the same price that consumers can buy them at the winery. Enjoying refreshments on the large terrace or in the blooming garden can also be the focus of a visit.



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Günter Hutter,
owner, Vinauberge

The wine bar is run by a local cook and seems to have been successful from the very first days of spring. Not only is the setting pretty, but the possibility of tasting and having small, tasty dishes seems to attract tourists along the Canal du Midi. "The first Sunday with really warm weather, they overran the place," says Hutter. "After 2pm, the kitchen ran out of food."

The third pillar of Vinauberge is that wine lovers and tourists can also participate in events, tastings and seminars offered by the events centre. These events are sometimes created by external organisers. "This pillar needs time," explains Hutter. "The yearly reunion of the different AOC of Languedoc was held here for example. We do some wine tastings." But more will be offered after the rest of the centre is up and running.

Hutter believes that the best work environment for wine professionals is one where all clients are well cared for in a relaxed atmosphere. Therefore Vinauberge offers its guests a comfortable ambiance with excellent customer service - pillar number four. At the centre of Vinauberge's hospitality are seven modern apartments, rented mainly to professional visitors, who can make the most of their time by staying on-site. In addition to their own apartments, Vinauberge can also organise other accommodation like gîtes - self-catering apartments - in nearby wineries or on charming

houseboats that are moored on the Canal du Midi, only 50m from the property. Winery visits can also be arranged. At the end of April, the guest house had about 400 bookings.

Shortly after the opening, it became clear that a fifth pillar could be interesting. Vinauberge already offers buyers a logistics service. This includes delivering mixed pallets from different wineries all over the world. But there is another possibility, says Hutter. "Tourists asked so often for wines to take away, that we now do business selling wines, in smaller quantities, at the same price they get it in the winery." He says that wineries can use their facilities to store wines that can also be sold from Vinauberge. "So Vinauberge will act as a wine shop, too."

The risks

Vinauberge seems to be a very good business idea because it combines gastronomy, hotel service, education, trade services and tourist opportunities in one concept. But it is not free of risk. Hutter says the first three months were difficult. Although it was open, there was still a lot of work to be done, from gardening to wall painting, and they needed to finish all the details before beginning to invite international buyers in May. This, of course, is the most important group if the concept is to be successful in the long run. Vinauberge are in contact with tourist offices and AOC offices and although this has already attracted some buyers, the numbers are not yet high enough to determine if the trade centre will become as successful as the gastronomy and hotel. At present, there are about 400 wines from around 180 wineries present, which is half of what Hutter thinks would be optimal. So there is still some work to do to attract both wineries and buyers.

Looking at the place, there will not be a problem to make the gastronomy and hotel into good profit centres. But that is usual business, combined with some special services. The central idea of Vinauberge is the trading; eventually, the wineries will begin to ask themselves if being present there gets them results. Nobody knows yet how many professional buyers will come during the year, and if a winery doesn't get new contacts, it may not be willing to pay the €23.00 per month. And, of course, if the wine selection is not good because there aren't enough wines, no buyer will come again. There has to be success on both sides, just as at a wine trade fair. In two or three years, the situation will be clear. ■