Decanter

France’s earliest winery found

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Roman ruins found in southern France have been declared remnants of the country’s earliest known winery.

The large site, built around 10AD, is still surrounded by vines today on the outskirts of Clermont l’Herault, in the heart of Languedoc wine country.

‘It’s really exceptional, and very elaborate,’ Stephane Mauné, head of the site and archaeologist with France’s CNRS research institute, told **decanter.com**.

Mini craters that once formed the bases of huge pottery wine vessels sit in neat rows where the old winery building stood. Each one held up to 1,800l, while irrigation channels show how winemakers used water to maintain a constant temperature.

A villa, complete with 200m² swimming pool, was attached to the building.

Mauné said inscriptions named the founder as Quintus Iulius Primus, who probably came from southern Italy to invest in the region’s burgeoning wine industry.

Romans arrived in Languedoc Roussillon via Narbonne around 118BC. Historians know that after subduing local tribes the Romans cultivated vines to send wine back to Italy.

‘There was lots of economic development in this area. You have good access into ancient Gaul and there were ports close by,’ Mauné said.

But, in a story reminiscent of France’s wine market problems today, it is thought greater competition eventually sent the winery near Clermont l’Herault out of business.

Local winemakers now hope to profit from the tourism and prestige the ancient site could bring. A tourism centre is set to be built, and a special public viewing will take place on 11 July.

Written by Chris Mercer