

ANDREW JEFFORD DRINKS LA PÈIRA EN DAMAISÈLA

Moroccan coffee and clean *cagettes*

The most apt analogy, perhaps, is the publisher's slush pile—that legendary stack of unsolicited manuscripts where, sandwiched between laborious first novels, eccentric diets, and the childhood reminiscences of the elderly, the house reader dreams of finding a golden text to wave at cynical seniors. So with the samples delivered to the homes of those who write about wine. All deserve a taste, most a note, but I've never come across one that rearranged my inner pantheon in the way that truly great wine can.

Never, that is, until a few weeks ago. Then it was that a relatively ramshackle package of boxes arrived from the Languedoc containing 11 bottles and a text. The bottles (cask samples, in the main) had beautiful, austere labels with puzzling, hard-to-pronounce names. No UK importer, let alone retailer. Just an apologetic e-mail, a few days earlier, from one of the wine's creators, Rob Dougan, alluding to their presence a year before at a tasting in Bordeaux that I'd been unable to attend.

Enough waffle. These are the best unsolicited samples anyone has ever sent me. My pantheon has been rearranged. I've told Rob I think that he and his team are geniuses. Rob says that he only washes the *cagettes* and that it's all down to the quality of the coffee their Moroccan vineyard workers brew. The winemaker, Jérémie Depierre, is advised by Claude Gros, who has a hand in many of today's Languedoc greats. Claude in turn, according to Rob, "allows Jérémie a lot of leeway to explore." Moroccan coffee, sane advice, exploratory winemaking, super-clean *cagettes*: whatever it is, it's working.

The series consists of three red wines in three vintages (2005, '06, and '07), together with one white in two vintages (2005 and '06). As of June 2008, only the debut 2005 red vintage plus both vintages of the whites have been bottled...From which you might correctly deduce that the approach is a gentle and patient one and that the wines aren't being hurried along for commercial ends. When you learn how small the yields are (7–26hl/ha, depending on wine and vintage), and when you consider the investment in



equipment and labor (hand-picking, of course, plus sorting tables, oak vats, and new barrels in a wide range of sizes), then you hope that the infant enterprise is well financed. These bottles, though, should spring like grasshoppers from shop shelves and Web pages. Allocation, I hope, will be the long-term challenge.

Since this column is called "One Bottle," I feel duty bound to pounce on just one of the 11, though I would happily have sung the praises of any of them. Which one? Obriers de la Pèira is a savory Cinsault/Carignan blend aged in large wood. Las Flors de la Pèira is a GSM (Grenache/Syrah/Mourvèdre) aged in smaller new barrels with lees (there is no racking of any of the wines "unless strictly necessary"). It's a kind of liqueur of the garrigue. La Pèira en Damaisèla is Syrah/Grenache (ditto) and has the lowest yields of all: It's even more mouth-entrancingly concentrated than the Flors, but with a more ethereal, perfumed style. The white (of which there are fewer than a hundred cases) is a succulent, glycerous, gently scented Viognier/Roussanne blend sold as Vin de Pays de l'Hérault. So... one bottle? I'm torn between the 2006 Las Flors and the 2007 La Pèira. Let's take the former, even though I've given both the 2006 and 2007 Pèira slightly higher pre-bottling scores because I have such a soft spot for grumpy old Mourvèdre.

Aromatically, the bottle will need stowing for a while. There are creamy black-fruit characters but just a touch of reduction (thanks, no doubt, to the grumpy one). Comparison with the 2005 shows how this will slowly blossom into

something teasingly complex, with all manner of warm-evening nuances. One sip of the 2006 and you realize that those black fruits have untrammelled purity and depth. The sip's a dive. Not only that, but the dream of the Languedoc—wine that, although busy with fruit, still succeeds in gathering scents of the hills into itself, like shadows into night—is brilliantly realized here. All of these wines have substance, but this more than most. There's fresh acidity, too, unpinning that fruit with appropriate discretion. The result is a balanced, thrilling, vivacious, deep, creamy, and perfumed red wine, but one pregnant with a sense of origin as few are. It's shot to the center of my Languedoc orbit.

What I don't yet know is whether or not there is something unique about this gravelly limestone site underneath the plateau of Larzac (where sheep nibble thyme to make Roquefort), or whether wines rich with this level of beauty would be possible elsewhere in the region given equivalent levels of care and attention from the same team. The vines, at between 10 and 40 years, are not notably old. Watching the terroirs of the Midi slowly acquire color and character as the years go by is a privilege given to those of us alive now. The flavors here seem to have slightly more intrinsic austerity than in warm La Clape, more flesh and a different style of perfume than in Pic St Loup, more overall generosity than in rugged Corbières, and greater freshness than in sweet Roussillon, though I have tasted great wines from both Minervois and St Chinian that have a similar profile. Mas Jullien, whose 1998 is the best mature Languedoc in my notebook, lies nearby.

As, of course, does Mas de Daumas Gassac and Grange des Pères. Languedoc varieties like those used in La Pèira seem to me to be what the stones long for, and it is with them that wine from these old Roman roads can best rival wonderful but overadulterated Bordeaux. If I had land here, I wouldn't plant Cabernet. Perhaps, though, we are lucky to have both, and lucky to be able to make the comparison. In that sense, Languedoc leads the rest of France. ■