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The Grand Cru of Languedoc

By NEIL ALLANBY



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Tucked away in a ravine at the foothills of the Cévennes mountains, about 45 minutes from Montpellier in the south of France, is the medieval village of Saint-Guilhem-le-Désert.

After a stroll around the village, we had a very pleasant light lunch of omelette, crepe and salad in the village square under the shade of its 170-year-old plane tree, before heading off to Aniane and the famous *grand cru* of Languedoc that is Mas de Daumas Gassac (daumas-gassac.com).

The original vineyards on the site of Mas de Daumas Gassac were created in 780 AD by Saint Benedict of Aniane, the same Benedict who guided Guillaume of Aquitaine in setting up the monastery in Saint-Guilhem-le-Désert. Benedict was a counsellor to Emperor Charlemagne.

The vineyards had long since disappeared by the 1970s. At this time in the Languedoc region there were high-yielding vines and grapes were over-produced, with no market for the poor quality wine produced. The situation culminated in riots and violent confrontations between farmers and police, which were finally resolved when the European Union began paying farmers to uproot vines in Languedoc. Times for winemakers were tough. >>

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HOW THE VILLAGE BEGAN

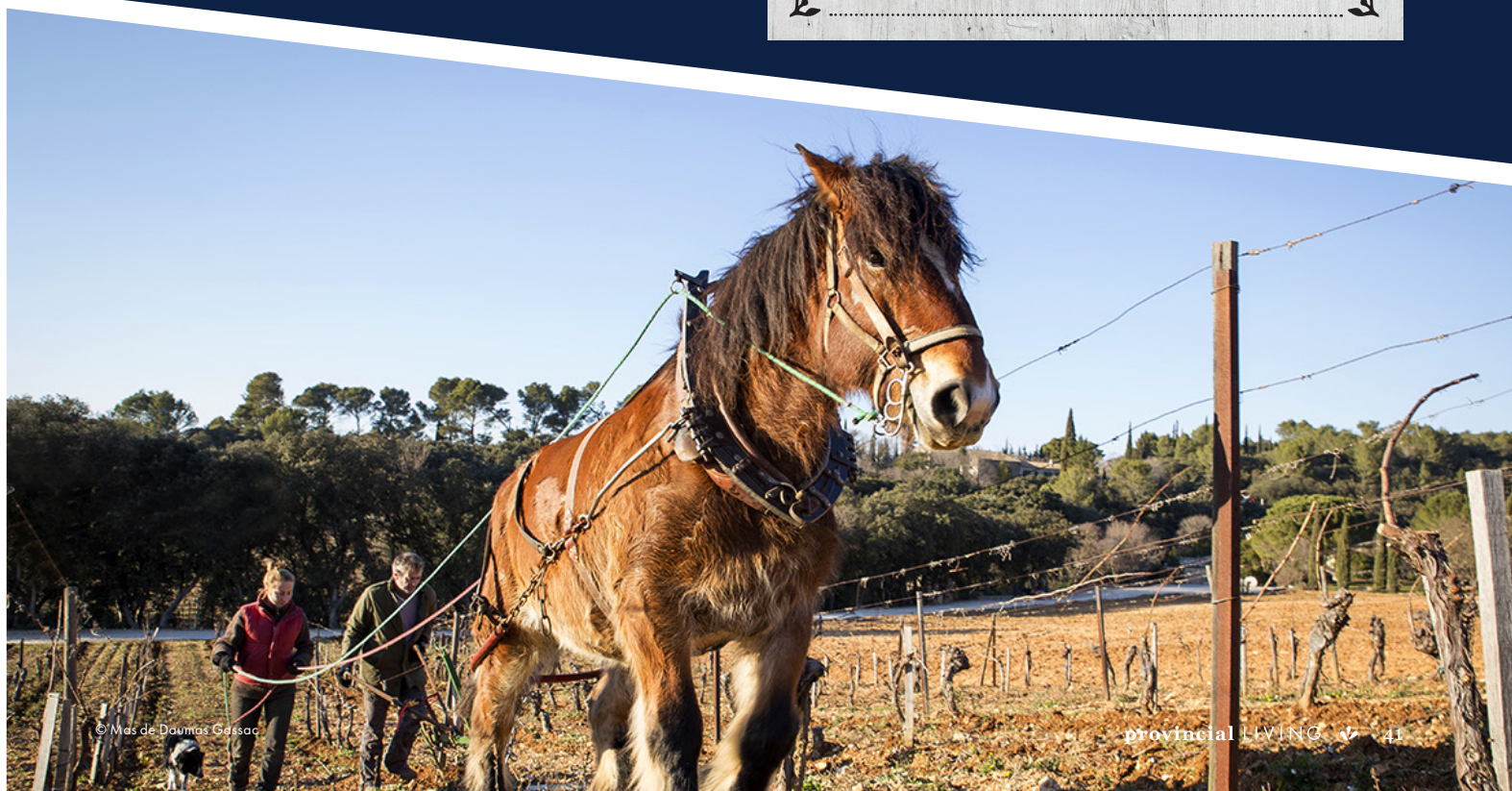
After a lifetime as a soldier, Guillaume of Aquitaine retired after his last victory over the Moors at Barcelona in 801 AD. He received a fragment of the True Cross from his cousin Charlemagne, Holy Roman Emperor and King of the Franks, and decided to set up a monastery called the Abbey of Gellone.

In setting up the monastery, Guillaume was guided by Saint Benedict of Aniane, founder of a monastery in nearby Aniane and reformer of the Benedictine Order.

The village of Saint-Guilhem-le-Désert (saintguilhem-valleherault.fr/en) was built around the monastery. In Occitan (*la langue d'oc*), the local language, Guilhèm is the equivalent of Guillaume. Le Désert pays homage to the fourth-century monks who lived in Egypt.

The monastery became a stopping point on the St James Way to Santiago de Compostela, the pilgrim route to the burial place of St James the Apostle. By the 16th century the monastery was in gradual decline, the French Revolution and a terrible flood finished things off. Restoration began in 1840, resulting in the beautiful abbey and village we see today.

Many of the sculptures from the monastery are now on display at New York's The Met Cloisters museum (metmuseum.org/visit/met-cloisters). Saint-Guilhem-le-Désert boasts a population of 270 people, and the Abbey of Gellone is listed as a UNESCO World Heritage site. The village is also recognised as one of the most beautiful villages in France.





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Concurrently, in 1970 Aimé and Véronique Guibert fell under the spell of an abandoned farmhouse then owned by the Daumas family. The River Gassac passed through the property and the word *mas* in Occitane means domaine; thus Mas de Daumas Gassac was born.

Lovers of wine yet strangers to the world of winemaking, the Guiberts called upon friend Henri Enjalbert, professor of geology at Bordeaux University, who quickly determined that the very particular terroir and special microclimate of the property would be excellent for making a *grand cru* wine. It was decided that Mas de Daumas Gassac should become a premium vineyard again.

In going against the trend of the region by planting vines, creativity and differentiation were definitely called for. Aimé chose to use uncloned vines of cabernet sauvignon from the 1910s to produce low-yielding vines of quality grapes. The special microclimate ensured that these vines were the perfect grape variety for this vineyard. Vine clones had been developed in the 1950s to



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increase grape yields and increase resistance to disease at the expense of colour and depth – the opposite required for a *grand cru*. With his mantra of “uniformity is the enemy of quality”, Aimé also set about collecting vines from many different grape varieties across Europe. Planting began in 1972.

In 1978, the Guiberts asked Emile Peynaud from Bordeaux, the genius behind classic winemaking, to guide vinification and maturation procedures in order to make the first vintage of Mas de Daumas Gassac Rouge. Emile is quoted as saying “I’ve advised the greatest producers in France, but never before been lucky enough to be present at the birth of a *grand cru*.” Commercialisation began in 1980.

The use of cabernet sauvignon grapes is clearly the most notable differentiation. They are native to Bordeaux and responsible for its great reputation. The use of cabernet sauvignon is outside the Languedoc appellation system, so Mas de Daumas Gassac has always been marketed independently of the collective wine names of the region. As such, there are no rules to follow, allowing for maximum creativity.

While Mas de Daumas Gassac Rouge is 70 to 80 per cent cabernet sauvignon, there are in fact 25 different grape varieties (eight classic and 17 rare) present, some at quite small levels. “We use the grape varieties like spices in cooking,” says winemaker Samuel, who is Aimé and Véronique’s son. “We add these ‘spices’ to awaken the flavour – a little of each variety brings the various and different aromas and flavours to the wine.” Certainly it adds great complexity and depth to the wine, plus incredible interest – it is very multi-dimensional. >>

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In the same search for complexity and balance, the use of oak barrel maturation is reviewed each year and adapted to the vintage in a very creative manner. Typically about one third of the wine spends three to four months in aged oak barrels, and is then returned to the balance that has remained in stainless steel vats. After re-blending, another one third to half is put into oak barrels for three to four months. This process is repeated for a period of around 16 months. After experimentation over the years, it was deemed that oak from the forests of France provides the best results. Different coopers have also been trialled. This process produces a complex and subtle wine without an overpowering taste of wood.

Mas de Daumas Gassac is located in the forests of the Gassac valley. The total area of the property is 150 hectares yet only 50 hectares are under vine – the balance remains garrigue forest, typical of Languedoc. No chemical fertilisers or pesticides are used – an organic farming philosophy is mandated although the Guiberts haven't seen the need for certification. Horses are used in the vineyards in place of tractors. The grapes are hand picked and vines from before the cloning period are used. Every aspect is done with care and attention to ensure that a complex and noble wine is produced.

Mas de Daumas Gassac also makes a white wine from viognier, petit manseng, chenin, chardonnay and a further 20 different grape varieties. It is vinified with skin maceration at 5 °C to 10 °C for five to seven days, aged in stainless steel and filtered through fossilised sea shells, producing an excellent, pure, fresh wine.

Back in 1980, commercialisation was certainly off to a slow start for such a differentiated wine. However, with certain wine critics of the day making comparisons to Bordeaux's famous chateaux Lafite and Latour, interest soon picked up. Aimé became the first to prove that a wine from outside the French appellation system, labelled simply as Vin de Pays d'Hérault, could be an extremely serious, long-living red wine capable of fetching the same prices as some Bordeaux classified first growths. It is truly the *grand cru* of Languedoc. ♣

FOOD MATCHES

Try Mas de Daumas Gassac Rouge with stuffed red capsicums and aubergine, leg of lamb with garlic, lamb tagine, roast duck or guinea fowl, or with your favourite cut of beef. You won't be disappointed!



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