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Vacqueyras

Blood from Stones

By NEIL ALLANBY

Tucked away in the Southern Rhone Valley at the foothills of the Dentelles de Montmirail, stretched out in the baking sun, we find the cru wine appellation of AOC Vacqueyras. This geographic area is centred between the town of the same name and that of Sarrians, and neighbours the region of Gigondas.

Vacqueyras takes its name from the Latin *vallée quadreria*, which translates as valley of rocks. Ask any winemaker from the region and they will tell you why – the main growing area is the Plateau de Garrigues, which is covered by the same type of rolled stones as the Châteauneuf-du-Pape vineyards.

The wines of Vacqueyras are predominantly red; about 95 per cent of production. The principal grapes are grenache, syrah, mourvèdre (GSM) and cinsault. In Australia we know syrah as shiraz. In addition to red wine, a little white and rosé is produced. The climate is definitely Mediterranean, with long hot sunny summers tempered by the overriding influence of the Mistral winds. The soils are clay-limestone and sand beneath these rolled stones. This is GSM wine country *par excellence*, in the heart of rural France.

The beauty of Vacqueyras wines lies in their balance and personality. They are concentrated with colour and depth, full of ripe black fruit flavours, spices, herbs and pungent *garrigue* scents. These wines are often looked upon as the little brother to Châteauneuf-du-Pape. They are the perfect accompaniment to lamb, either roast leg of lamb or Moroccan lamb tagine.



Arguably, the most prestigious vineyard in AOC Vacqueyras is Domaine le Sang des Cailloux (sangdescailloux.com) – literally translated as blood of the stones. After 10 years working at the *domaine*, Serge Férigoule purchased the vineyard in 1990 and set about making it his own. Serge is fiercely proud of his Provençal roots and, with his barbell moustache, is distinctly one of the real characters of the Rhone Valley. >>

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“We do the maximum possible here so that there is minimal intervention in the cellar”

Covering 17 hectares, the Sang des Cailloux vineyards located on the Plateau de Garrigues have been farmed organically for years. The aim has always been to grow the best grapes possible, in order to make excellent wine with minimal intervention in the cellar. Serge is also quite sentimental – each year the *cuvée traditionnelle* is named after one of his three daughters – Floureto, Doucinello and Azalaïs – in rotating order. These are all distinctly Provençal names. The premium old vine wine is called Lopy, after the farm where Serge was born. In 2003, Serge was joined by his son Frédéric and they now run the vineyard together.

“It all begins in the vineyard,” says Frédéric as we tour the vineyards, “We do the maximum possible here so that there is minimal intervention in the cellar. We highly respect and look after our vines.”

Sang des Cailloux has been certified biodynamic for more than 10 years. The vegetation between the vines is deliberately left in place in order to encourage the vines to send their roots deep into the soil in search of water. As in Châteauneuf-du-Pape, the rolled stones absorb heat during the day providing a heat sink that then radiates back during the evening, encouraging perfect ripening of the grapes. The vines are bush-trained and often staked for support. Yields are low – on average 30 hl per hectare – which gives the wines greater concentration.

During a recent visit to France, I caught up with Serge and Frédéric and they showed me around their vineyards and cellars.

Frédéric is very fond of a plot of the old vine, *cinsault*. “They are particularly low yielding, but they bring so much character. Not so profitable though; however, we are always looking for ways to bring character to our wines.” Frédéric also shows me a graft that he has done himself – grafting over a Picpoul vine onto an old American rootstock. Just one vine. When I ask why, he simply replies, “Why not? It adds further complexity and character to the wine.” Frédéric’s love of the vineyard and desire to create complexity and finesse from it clearly shines though.

As we drive around, I notice the distinct changes in the soil types. As Frédéric explains, each soil produces grapes of different characters, and so are vinified separately before making the final blend.

Clearly there is maximum effort in the vineyard. >>





Moving on to the cellar, Frédéric explains that at harvest time they pick one plot per day, by hand, in the cool of the early morning. The cellar is designed to ensure maximum use of gravity in order not to bruise the wine. The grape bunches are de-stemmed and enter into one of a row of 12 cement tanks for the alcoholic fermentation. Each day's harvest goes into its own tank; the plots being vinified separately. Maceration takes around 12 days with a once-daily pump-over to keep the cap moist (this reduces the need for SO₂) – but there is no punching down of the cap. After fermentation, the wine passes by gravity to the lower cement tank for the malo-lactic fermentation. This is followed by blending and maturation in oak barrels.

Clearly there is minimal work in the cellar.

Each vintage Frédéric and Serge select three barrels to be kept apart, which will give a wine characteristic of Domaine le Sang des Cailloux. These barrels will become their flagship wine, called Oumage. *Oumage* is a Provençal word that translates as homage; a tribute to their vineyard, region and language.

The balance of their production goes into either the old vine blend called Lopy, or their traditional blend named after one of Serge's three daughters depending on the year.

As I prepare to leave this wonderful vineyard and the warm friendship that I feel, Frédéric stops me and points to a small plant growing on the side of the plateau. "Do you know what that is?" he asks. Yes, it is thyme, the herb that goes so well with roast lamb. "And do you know what it is called in Provençal?" His totally unexpected reply: "*Férigoule*" – his family name.

I leave dreaming of a dinner of roast leg of lamb with thyme and a glass or three of Oumage. I wonder how easy it would be to learn to speak Provençal, and give a special toast to Frédéric and Serge. ♣

DID YOU KNOW?

Occitan is the historical language of the south of France, a region known as Occitania. In fact the name for the Languedoc region comes from *langue d'oc*, which translates as the language of Oc (Occitan).

The local dialect of Occitan spoken in the Southern Rhone is called Provençal.

From the 1880s through to the mid-1960s, strong attempts were made to suppress and kill off the regional languages of France (Breton, Catalan, Niçois and Occitan among others). Children at school were punished for speaking these languages in an attempt to make French the only language of the country.

However, Occitan and Provençal persisted and there are now about half a million native speakers and a million more who have notions of the language. It is growing in popularity.

IMAGES

All images in this article are of the Sang des Cailloux vineyards © Rowen d'Souza.