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Vin de Sable

NEIL ALLANBY discovers wine produced from grapes grown in the most unlikely place – the sands of the Camargue.



Situated between the two arms of France's Rhone River at its delta to the Mediterranean is the haven of peace and great natural beauty that is the Camargue. This nature reserve is a plain comprising large brine lagoons divided by sandbars and encircled by reed-covered marshes. The larger arm of the Rhone is called the Grand Rhone, passing through Arles, and the smaller one to the west is called the Petit Rhone.

Just to the west of the Petit Rhone is the Petit Camargue. It is home to more than 400 animals including its signature animal, the pink flamingo, and the famous white Camargue horses. The Petit Camargue consists of four large sand bars, with an average height of 1.5 metres, that separate the marshes and lagoons. It is here that salt has been recovered from seawater for centuries.

Nestled between these impressive salt fields is the famous medieval city of Aigues-Mortes, built here in 1240 at the orders of Saint Louis – King Louis IX of France. Louis needed a Mediterranean port from which to sail to fight the Crusades. His kingdom had a very narrow direct coastline – Provence was ruled by the Holy Roman Empire and Languedoc ruled by the Kings of Aragon. At the time of Saint Louis, there being no refrigeration, one way of preserving food was to salt it – so the salt fields were very valuable and a strong source of taxation revenue for the king and, consequently, needed defences against enemy attack.

The name Aigues-Mortes comes from the Occitan *aigas mortas* meaning dead waters, referring to the surrounding lagoons and marshes. The king attracted residents to the new city by granting them exemption from the salt taxes. The city became a major trade centre and Louis set sail from here for the seventh and eighth Crusades. For his cavalry Louis chose the white horses of the Camargue.

Aigues-Mortes was a fortified and walled city carefully sited at the edge of the Petit Camargue, where it was quite safe and healthy. The surrounding lagoons and marshes of stagnant water attracted mosquitoes and, consequently, malaria and other diseases, making them doubly difficult to cross and providing natural protection against enemy attack from any approaching armies. >>

The vineyard blends all the elements of history with the Camargue, the vines and the natural landscape



Today the salt marshes are home to Groupe Salins, producers of La Baleine salt. They span 9,800 hectares, where pumped sea water circulates through a series of lagoons over a five-month period to gradually concentrate the salt, forming crystals that are collected, packaged and sold. These lagoons are up to sea level.

The sandbars rise up to 1.5 metres above sea level and separate the lagoons of concentrated salt water. One of the few crops that will grow on the sandbars, and thereby stabilising them, are grape vines. Of course local wine was necessary for Louis' growing city of Aigues-Mortes and hence the birth of Domaine Royal de Jarras (vrankenpommery.com/en/marque/domaine-royal-de-jarras). The domaine is now owned by Vranken Pommery and makes wines under the denomination Sable de Camargue. During a recent visit to France I was fortunate to be invited to lunch on the vineyard by the deputy CEO, Bruno Mailliard.

“The whole ecosystem is interrelated and interdependent. The terroir, nature and human activity must live together in a sustainable way, otherwise the region will go back to nature,” explains Bruno. “The vineyard blends all the elements of history with the Camargue, the vines and the natural landscape.”

The current vineyard dates to 1883; however, there are remnants on the domaine of vines and winemaking dating back to the monks of the 12th century. During World War II, the Camargue was heavily mined to prevent beach landings, making vine cultivation impossible – the land reverted to nature. After the war the mines were cleared and the vineyard was completely remodelled, with the installation of a vast system of canals. Vines were replanted in long straight rows to reduce salt uptake. “At 2.8 kilometres, we have some of the longest rows of vines in the world,” says Bruno.

Vines will not grow in salt water. Being so close to the Mediterranean, the sea breezes bring salt >>





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grapes. These wines have colour even lighter than a Provence rosé, the nose is of strawberry, peaches and citrus, and the palate is open, round and rich, with a hint of saltiness for extra flavour.

And how was lunch, you ask? A fabulous and educational experience. Entrée of tomato and olive salad with the 2017 Pink Flamingo Vin Gris, which was also a great aperitif. Main of potato omelette with 2017 Domaine Royal de Jarras Gris de Gris. This wine has the richness and flavour to equally match grilled Mediterranean fish like bream or sea bass, and even lobster. Then to accompany the cheeses, their fabulous top-of-the-range 2016 Commandeur de Jarras Gris de Gris – that year of bottle age making all the difference.

As I reluctantly drive away, I reflect on what a haven of peace, serenity and tranquillity is Domaine Royal de Jarras, and what a charmed life I lead. Thank you so much Bruno for your hospitality and I'm looking forward to returning some day. ♣

IMAGES

Page 50: nature reserve • Page 51, top to bottom: Saint Louis statue • standing flamingos • shopping alley with postcard rack in front © OT-aigues-mortes • fortified city wall • Page 52: vineyards • Page 53: Aigues-Mortes street • flying flamingos © OT-aigues-mortes • famous white Camargue horses • Domaine Royal de Jarras • Page 54: wine tasting • Page 55, top to bottom: winter vines • tasting rooms at entry to domaine • old vine • tomato and olive salad entrée. All other images in this article © Neil Allanby

with them to the vines. The soil is mineral sand with no clay, so rainwater collects this salt and drains into the freshwater canals. These freshwater canals must remain separate from the saltwater waterways concentrating the salt, so the two systems are intertwined throughout the domaine. "In the vineyard, it is a constant battle against salt," admits Bruno.

The vine louse phylloxera does not survive in sand, so the vines of Domaine Royal de Jarras can grow on their own roots, ungrafted. The main grape variety grown here is grenache *gris*. In common with pinot, grenache comes in three forms – *noir*, *gris* and *blanc*. Grenache *gris* has clear juice and a light skin colour, so wines produced have quite a light colour. The secondary grape grown is cinsault, another red grape of light skin colour. In using these same grape varieties, there are major similarities between *vin de sable* (wine from the sand) from Sable de Camargue and rosé from Provence.

"The vines stabilise the dunes during the summer when they are growing," explains Bruno, "At the end of

harvest, every September, we plant a cereal crop between the vineyard rows which grows over winter, helping with stabilisation. We have a contract with a local farmer to allow 3,000 sheep to graze on the vineyard until budburst the following summer. Everyone wins – the farmer is happy, the salt company gets stable dunes and we get sheep manure for the vineyard." Compost from wine-making and vine-growing are also used. "We have long used organic vineyard management methods. We have a total of 900 hectares, of which 420 hectares is planted with vines. We are the largest organically farmed vineyard in France.

"We essentially make white wine from red grapes, which we call vin gris," says Bruno. The wines are made by direct pressing the grapes, and have very minimal skin contact. This gives a wine from grenache of very light colour. "When you compare grenache grown in Châteauneuf-du-Pape some 100 kilometres away, you realise what a unique wine we have here; a totally different expression of terroir," claims Bruno. A *gris de gris* wine is a *vin gris* made from grenache *gris* and/or other *gris*

