

SÉMAPHOR

Les Pallières Special
N°9 - FEBRUARY 1999

THE NEWSLETTER OF LE VIEUX TÉLÉGRAPHE, DOMAINE LA ROQUETTE AND DOMAINE LES PALLIÈRES



A FABULOUS GARDEN OF VINES
When our friend and legal advisor came into the Vieux Télégraphe office in May and said, "If you want to buy Les Pallières in Gigondas, now's the time to throw your hat in the ring", the situation seemed very confused and yet crystal clear: We could work in this fabulous garden of vines, and give our all to coax our favourite kind of Gigondas from this exceptional terroir. Instantly the beauty of the site, so vivid in my mind, swept aside the swarm of questions occurring to me even as he finished his sentence. But good grief, was it really possible? Yes, provided we could find one or more partners who had the same outlook and could, without hesitation, toss their hats in with ours.

Ten days later, I was at table Chez Panisse, the famous restaurant in Berkeley, California, with Kermit Lynch and Bruce Neyers (the two faces of Le Vieux Télégraphe in the United States), seeking our first partner. Kermit's enthusiasm was so surprising, and so immediate, that it dispelled any need I had to ponder the matter: Let's go!
And that is how we became the owners of 25 hectares of vines to the north of the range of hills dubbed "Les Dentelles de Montmirail" ("The Lacework of Montmirail"), and of a name steeped in history. But from starter's gun to finishing tape, it wasn't all simple, unalloyed pleasure. From twist to turn, and through all manner of trials, we grew to know the people who, long previously, had decided to choose their successors not only by the size of their wallet. We have learnt a great deal during this period, definitely. But above all, we have also made two new friends: Pierre and Maxime Roux of Les Pallières.

Daniel Brunier

1998 Vintage: a year for Grenache

Unlike 1997, which was full of incident (frost, hail), 1998 was quite restful from a climatological standpoint! A delightfully ordinary year, in fact. Despite some fairly low temperatures in January and February, the winter of 1997-98 was generally fairly mild and dry until the end of March.

Then came a very wet April and May, just the way we like them in the South of France, even though it feels as if spring has passed us by. "Thirty days has April," a local saying goes, "and if it rains for 31 it does no one any harm." In fact it's beneficial: springtime rains cannot replace those of winter, but they are one of the indispensable factors in structuring a great vintage. The summer heat started to build from June onwards, and the summer was particularly hot, punctuated by small, timely showers that always provided the spur needed for balanced maturing. In early September, all the ingredients for a great vintage were in place; we just had to wait a few more days to reach the concentration phase that only the best years offer.

Generally speaking, the "vignerons" view is that 1998 in the Rhône Valley is a great year, in the style of the '89 and '90, or the '95. Its special trait is the extraordinary level of maturity achieved in all the appellations! - and wherever you find high maturity you also find beautiful colours, ripe tannins, richness and aromatic complexity: 1998 was a generous year right down the valley, and Châteauneuf-du-Pape is no exception. After two vintages best for simple drinking pleasure, 1998 in our appellation is the archetype of a wine to be laid down. At Le Vieux Télégraphe and La Roquette, harvesting began on 7th September under the best auspices, given the grapes' perfect healthiness and excellent maturity, which kept on improving right up to the last day - to such an extent that several times the records for natural sugar potential were broken. Today, now that malolactic fermentation is over and the wines have been clarified by winter, we can confidently announce that we have in the cellar a very fine 1998 red vintage that bears comparison to the '95. The vats of Syrah are dense in colour, vivid, with an extravagant nose and ripe, refined tannins. The Mourvèdre is superb, creamy, still at the fruit stage, with velvety tannins. The Grenache, meanwhile, may be

termed full, generous, elegant and immensely rich, all at the same time: it is years like these that make you want to bottle pure Grenache. Even the wine from the young vines is concentrated, and of interest: Le Vieux Mas des Papes, made with vines under 20 years old, will be of remarkable quality.

As for the Châteauneuf-du-Pape whites, one might think that such maturity would affect their balance, but not at all: we even recorded higher-than-average acidity. All the white varieties were, it should be said, picked before the reds, at the very start of September. The result is exceedingly fine, very lively, rich, creamy; the vintage's personality definitely held sway over the wood during fermentation, and the resulting balance is most interesting. For this vintage of Le Clos la Roquette white, we have started vinifying 20% in "barriques", which afford an extra dimension and complexity.

*1998 is truly
a gift from Mother Nature.*

We cannot say too often how lucky we were, at Les Pallières in Gigondas, to start under such good auspices.

Here too, the '98 will be a remarkable vintage: packed with aromas, fruit and freshness, a richness quite peculiar to this appellation - with the added bonus of elegantly structured tannins, well blended with the wine to give a sensation of sheer velvet on the finish. It will need watching as it matures, for sure, but its foundations are solid.

Let's turn finally to Le Pigeolet; which resembles all the 1998 stable: the rosé is lovely and fresh, with bags of fruit and remarkably fleshy; the red offers a degree of concentration, volume and creaminess never previously attained. Adding extra Grenache has done it a world of good. We are now in a totally different sphere, in a tasting register worthy of certain appellations.

To sum up, 1998, Le Vieux Télégraphe's centenary vintage is - as we had hoped all through the year - truly a gift from Mother Nature.

**Sémaphore*: n. (from *sema-* and *-phore*). In days gone by, an arm-waving transmitter of Claude Chappe's aerial telegraphy.

DOMAINE LES PALLIÈRES - GIGONDAS

SNAPSHOT TAKEN ON 25TH SEPTEMBER 1998.

It's inevitable: anyone arriving for the first time in this magical place will be spellbound. The countryside exerts astonishing charm: 25 hectares of vines grouped on slopes round the buildings, and dotted with cherry, olive, peach and walnut trees, besides the natural trees that form the surrounding forest.

All the charm of the spot stems from the happy marriage between the crops and the Southern forest, composed mainly of pine and oak.

The estate covers 100 hectares of forest, which serves as a belt protecting the vineyard and has preserved its aspect over the years. But no portrait would be complete without mentioning the spring that fills up the tubs and adds a year-round touch of freshness which, in summer, takes on a purely magical aura.

The vineyard, whose most recent parcels were planted 30 years ago, comprises 70% Grenache, 15% Syrah, 10% Mourvèdre and 5% Cinsault.

Their roots reach down into a chalky-clay soil that is averagely stony in content and sits on a very homogeneous layer of clay; this affords quite perfect resistance to periods of drought. The site has north-west exposure, which in a hot region can help substantially in developing a well-defined personality, if you can wait for full maturity. Indeed the estate's situation is reminiscent to that of a certain château estate in Châteauneuf-du-Pape whose wine, some journalists

feel, is the acme of elegance and power combined.

In the cellar, things are less utopian: the vat room is one of those old cellars filled with tanks of rough-cast concrete blocks. Its sole advantage is the natural gradient in the system; the equipment is of no interest. Likewise for the maturing cellar: a surplus of old barrels which tend to confuse maturing and oxidation, such were the demands made on them and with no one really worrying about the build-up of tartar.

But, as everyone knows, cellars are merely a detail (they can be improved, or changed). The essence of the philosophy we advocate lies in the natural, irreplaceable consonance of soil, climate, orientation and old vines. And in that respect, we couldn't ask for more.

PROJECTS

Before embarking on fully-fledged projects, we instinctively made a few basic alterations to the fermentation room, so that we could vinify the 1998 vintage in almost normal conditions. It was essential to revise the crop intake system: using the old crusher and piping, installed decades ago, was out of the question; rather, the grapes would be conveyed on a belt, aided by gravity, and selectively destemmed along the way. Like this, we could get the best from the Mourvèdre, Syrah and Cinsault. Another priority was to control, as best we could, the must and tank temperatures during fermentation, by fitting stainless steel heat exchangers. Lastly we focused on the old horizontal mechanical press: we couldn't resign ourselves to nurturing even a single year's wine in its presence, keenly aware of the tannic imbalance it gives to press wines. It was swiftly replaced by a pneumatic press, whose qualities are beyond discussion. Until we are able to fully refit the fermentation room, and thus help Les Pallières benefit from all our winemaking experience, these few basic investments have let us tackle our first vintage in a far



calmer state of mind, and done much to remove the unpleasant feeling of powerlessness that was eating away at

us. Gradual improvements are still on the agenda, but our true goal for the coming years is of the viticultural variety: to restore, parcel by parcel, the vine-plants' morphology. Giving each one a shape and balance that lets them regulate their production naturally is a long-term job, and its effects should certainly not be minimised. Neither should the judicious spreading of organic compost, debudding in spring, removal of surplus unripe grapes... all these simple tasks that aim solely to give the vine-trunk maximum independence as it does its daily work: producing healthy, flavoursome grapes as late as possible.

We are profoundly convinced that, in view of the micro-climate at Les Pallières, the key to making a great wine here, more than elsewhere, lies in the perfect maturity of the crop.

Our grand design is therefore to take the steps necessary to achieve this as often as possible.

Le Pigeolet des Brunier
VIN DE PAYS DE VAUCLUSE

PRODUIT ET MIS EN BOUTEILLE
PAR F. ET D. BRUNIER À SÈZE - FRANCE
PRODUCE OF FRANCE
RHÔNE WINE - 1998
ALC. 13% BY VOL. - 750ml.

FRESH PRESENTATION FOR LE PIGEOULET.

AS WE TOLD YOU IN ISSUE EIGHT OF "SÉMAPHORE", LE PIGEOULET IS GROWING IN VOLUME AND SELF-ASSURANCE, WITH THE ADDITION OF SIX EXTRA HECTARES OF GRENACHE GRAPES. TO MARK THE OCCASION, WE WANTED TO REDEFINE ITS PRESENTATION: EMPHASISING ITS AREA OF PRODUCTION (WITH A BURGUNDY BOTTLE, AS THE RHÔNE VALLEY HAS ALWAYS HAD LINKS WITH THIS REGION); SPECIFYING ITS CELLAR OF ORIGIN IN ITS NEW NAME, "LE PIGEOULET DES BRUNIER"; AND ADDING A MODERN TOUCH WITH A NEW LABEL.

SÉMAPHORE

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