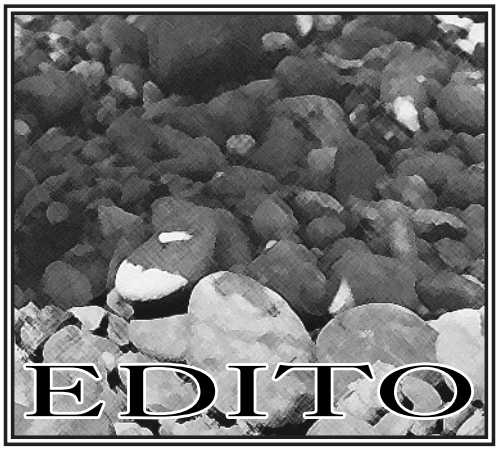
Soil Special
N°10 - JULY 1999

SÉMAPHORE*

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



WHAT'S UNDER THE PEBBLES?

We are often asked the question. And our replies – expressed in rather vague, merely empirical terms – did not always give satisfaction.

But under the stony covering, what makes up the soil? Where do the vine roots go? How far down do they stretch? And how can the vine endure such a hot, dry summer without needing water to bring its crop to maturity? Why do the vines age so well in such a harsh environment?

And what about the stones... have they always been there?

No, not always.

So that we could ourselves grasp the main principles of how this soil – so thankless at first glance, so superficially poor and yet so rich in history and in all manner of detail – actually works, we commissioned a full geological survey, whose primary focus was the movement of air and of water through the various layers that compose the soil.

Here, then, are the pedologist's comments, served up raw, "with no destemming or filtration". They may appear a little unyielding and complex, but had we tampered with them, the vines would surely have been displeased.

So we had to choose!

Daniel Brunier

STILL THE SAME PLEASURE.

As we write these lines, the bottling season is barely over and the cellar team will have just two months to clear the decks, prepare the cellars and take a well-earned summer break, before tackling the last harvest of the millennium.

Two very different vintages have been bottled this year: the 1998 Le Pigeoulet and Châteauneuf-du-Pape whites, whose potential looks to be very high; and the 1997 Châteauneuf-du-Pape reds, the easy-drinking wine *par excellence*.

The 1998 Pigeoulet rosé, which has a substantially deeper tile colour than its predecessors (a sign of extremely mature grapes), offers a discreetly floral yet vinous nose that ushers in an elegant, velvety, well-balanced character on the palate.

The 1998 Pigeoulet red (bottled far too early, given its structure and the year's promise) is simply beautiful. The addition of Grenache grapes from the Caromb area (at the foot of Mont Ventoux) has been wholly beneficial: the nose is fresh, powerful and laced with liquorice; on the palate, a rich fresh creaminess, with aromas of well-ripe red fruits that have kept enough acidity to make them gourmand and lively. The tannins are naturally in evidence but well blended, and suggest the vintage should age for several years. It's only fault is its rarity: after four months on the market, stocks have just about run out.

The 1998 Châteauneuf-du-Pape whites, bottled in April and May, combine hugely generous fruit and volume with good nervy tone, which is quite unusual.

The Clos La Roquette is appealing, upfront and vinous, and has an extra dimension in complexity and creaminess on the palate, doubtless provided by the 20% vinified in casks for the first time. It has now reached a higher plain.

The 1998 Vieux Télégraphe white is no surprise: fresh, complex, creamy, with a slight tannic pinch for the moment, confirming our decision to postpone its sale date to late summer 1999. Indeed tasters' comments concur: it only becomes truly interesting to taste after a patient 12-month wait, at the very least.

In addition, between 15th May and 14th July, the 1997 Châteauneuf du Pape reds were racked for the last time – bottled, in other words –.

It is what some like to call a "transitional" vintage, as if wine can only procure intense joy in the great years. But, we should point out, these years only exist thanks to the easy-drinking vintages, and a true wine's fundamental vocation is to give pleasure.

It should also be pointed out that so-called "average" vintages embody all the personality of a true terroir, and, by extension, show that the terroir exists (a terroir exposed to the influences and whims of the weather). But the vigneron's art, of course, is all about turning an average vintage into an appealing wine able to find a place in enlightened enthusiasts' lives.

The 1997 La Roquette red is a consummate charmer: an attractive ruby-red colour and a nose of fresh fruit, straight and clean. The attack is quite peculiarly supple; the middle is creamy, silky, and finely elegant; and the velvety finish reveals practically no hint of tannin, just a sensation of ripe cherries and kirsch, not especially complex but of rare balance.

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Likewise, the 1997 Vieux Télégraphe red offers an impression of maturity: it surrenders without a struggle. The colour is subtly shaded, though lacking in intensity; the nose evokes very ripe fruit, prunes, crushed strawberries, together with cherry nuts and smoky notes.

It is engaging overall: on the palate it is vinous, creamy and full, though no single perfume dominates. The velvety blend of fruit, zan, liquorice and caramel dominates very discreet tannins, and the finish is almost sweet. This is an elegant wine, harmonious and *gourmand*, which will afford pleasure without gracing the history books.

As for Les Pallières, we have decided to bottle, and to offer simply a very stringent selection of the '94 and '95 (30% of each vintage), and to wait until the latter half of 2000 before releasing the 1998 vintage.

But it is high time to rest up a little; the harvest is fast approaching.

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

LE VIEUX TELEGRAPHE: A VERY STONY, FERSIALLITIC SOIL

It took a ditch three metres deep to lay bare the profile's stratification, in four very distinct horizons that characterise the soils and high terraces from the Villafranchian age found in Châteauneuf-du-Pape (deposited by the Rhône over a million years ago), and to easily view the vines' extraordinary root structure.

The profile clearly shows the substantial vertical evolution undergone by these very old sediments, which have created the stony-sand alluvium with mixed stone (chalk-silica pebbles).

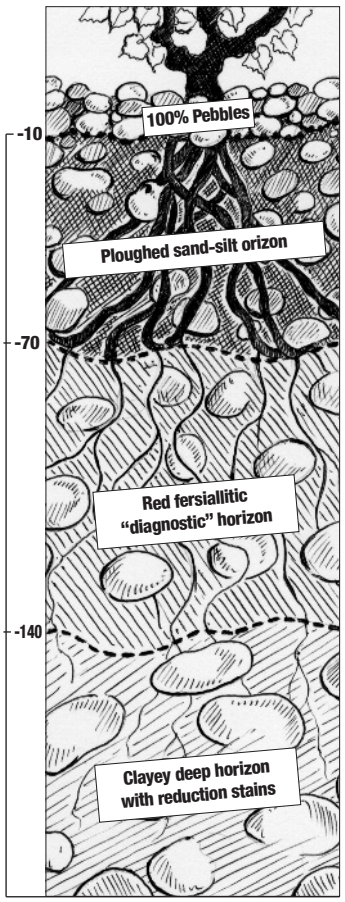
0-10cm: 100% pebble mulch; and 10-50cm: ploughed sandy A horizon, 60% pebbles.

Under an unbroken natural mulch of pebbles, some of them large in size (10 cm thick), lies the first horizon: brown, sandy and pebble-rich (55-60%), with extensive root exploration. This is of neutral pH and slightly carbonated, which is probably due to the human addition of fertiliser at vine planting. For a sub-surface horizon, it contains little organic matter (OM*100/a=5).

50-70cm: "Transition" horizon, depleted, ploughed, sand-silt, 60% pebbles.

As the first horizon merges into the second, the soil becomes gradually lighter in colour, though the clay content remains low.

It is still pebble-rich, has fewer large roots, and is unsound in structure (friable clods).



70-140cm: B (or "diagnostic") horizon: fersiallitic, red, clayey, structured, 70% pebbles.

Very distinct "fersiallitic" horizon: red and far more clayey than the upper horizons. The texture differentiation index is 4.78 (ratio between the lower and upper clay content values). This horizon is naturally well-structured (poly-hedral clods), with a slightly higher stone content than the upper horizons (60% pebbles, with veins of 90% content and gravel lenses). Fine roots and rootlets pass through it. Very slightly acid pH; no carbonates.

No traces of reduction, discoloration or ferromanganic accumulations. This horizon, which plays an essential role in summer water provision, is thus well oxygenated, despite its high clay content, because of its naturally strong structure and high pebble load.

140cm to over 300 cm: C (or"deep" horizon) with clay accumulations, with local reduction stains.

A deep horizon, which is not yet the soil's parent rock but actually the lower part of an accumulation horizon which has undergone iron-reduction phenomena. Discoloration stains, which are particularly concentrated round the fine roots and root hairs, are visible down to 250 cm: this reflects the tendency of iron to solubilise in the form of ferrous compounds, an action linked to the winter saturation of the deep soil layers. This saturation is temporary, thus allowing partial reoxydation of the iron, and gives this layer a mottled aspect.

Pebble content remains high: the pebbles are large (10-20 cm), and some of them have decayed, disaggregating to create sandy seams. The water pH is slightly acid, but the horizon remains saturated, though still decarbonated. There is a very high level of magnesium, which may be explained by the decay of dolomitic pebbles (double carbonates of calcium and magnesium).

It is interesting to analyse the water reserves of such a profile. The supply is good because of the depth of rooting, despite the high pebble content. However, it is localised in the intermediate and lower soil horizons; this has the effect of providing a moderate supply in spring, and then a continuous supply during the summer period, with gradual rationing, until the grapes have fully ripened (except in particularly rainy summers).

The estimated effective reserves are 140-150 mm, spread along the root profile, i.e. a depth of 250 cm. This assures a daily supply over the three summer months of 1.4-1.8 mm, which is quite acceptable. The pebble screen enables full penetration by the rain, while providing effective protection against evaporation on days when the Mistral howls.

Average winter rainfall (200 mm) is enough to remoisturise this type of profile, which suffers low loss by run-off (given the only slight slope of our plateau) or by direct evaporation.

VILLAFRANCHIAN: a geological stage between the Pliocene and Pleistocene epochs, about 1.5 million years ago.

FERSIALLITIC: said of a soil resulting from weathering and evolution characteristic of the Mediterranean region. This soil type is generally rich in clay and associated with iron oxides. The fersiallitic soils observed in the Rhône Valley testify to hotter climates further back in time.

B (OR "DIAGNOSTIC") HORIZON: the decisive layer in soil analysis.

MULCH: covering

SHEER MAGIC: it is, of course, in the warm, dry, windy Mediterranean climate that the full potential of this soil type will be exploited. It is sheer magic to see leaves turn green and grapes grow ripe in an environment of drought and extreme heat. One can imagine the old vine-plants stretching several metres down, to the tips of their very finest roots, to draw the tiniest trace of moisture; and, on the way, assimilating the vast complexity of a soil that is one and a half million years old.

SÉMAPHORE

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