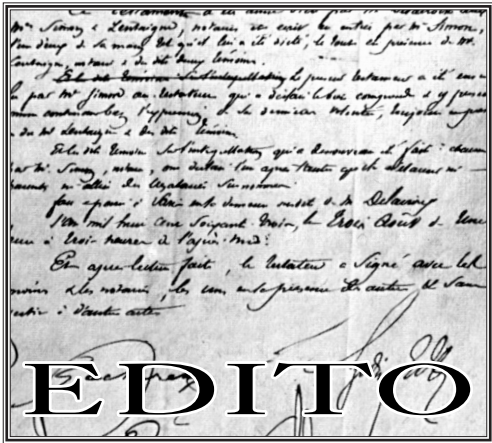


SÉMAPHOR*

N°15 - JULY 2004

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



SUPER AOCs? LET THE GROWERS DECIDE!

The Institut National des Appellations d'Origine (INAO) has decided of its own accord that it wants to introduce an "AOC of excellence" label, which would be awarded only to the most respectful appellations and growers...

But respectful of what? Why make new, stricter rules when the current ones are not always observed? Consider for a moment our current AOCs: how many of them can say that all of their producers comply with their basic philosophy? One need look no further than Châteauneuf-du-Pape and Gigondas, where we work daily and which are among the most serious appellations. Over the years, we have let some fairly unscrupulous working methods develop, such as the drip irrigation of certain parcels of vines – the very antithesis of *vin de terroir* practice because, as you know, it substantially reduces the soil's influence on the personality of the grapes. The INAO turns a blind eye to miles of black hosepipes. Parcels created by earthworks – and we have seen them – are not fit to provide grapes for the wines of our AOC. So why does the INAO – suddenly so punctilious – give these vineyards its blessing? In some parts of Gigondas harvesting machines are used, whereas the appellation decrees that grapes must be sorted by hand: why does the INAO not crack down on such activities?

These examples tend to prove that the future of AOC growers is in their own hands, and that whatever the authorities do they are responsible for their own acts: (continued over)

2003 - GREAT TERROIRS AGAIN THE BIG WINNERS

Let's delve for a moment into the origins of the earliest vintage ever seen at Vignobles Brunier. As you all know, the grower's year starts in autumn, just after harvesting. We didn't know it at the time, but autumn 2002 laid the foundations of the 2003 vintage, with rainfall four times the normal level – providing the year's only sizeable reserves. For the winter was dry and cold; spring was dry and hot, except for April 2003, when there were a few decent downfalls (50% above the monthly average); and summer was, of course, an excessively dry heatwave (a mere 21mm of rain in three months!). By late July, although the vines were still green and displaying no alarming signs, we were beginning to ask ourselves plenty of questions. What about balance, structure and maturity? Harvest dates? Tannin? We knew our terroirs could withstand a great deal, but how much? Each year brings its share of surprises, lessons, worries and happiness, and 2003 was no different: the sample maturity check on 18 August, in early-ripening parcels, told us we would have to pick the white varieties and then the reds. And so it was that we broke the early harvest record: picking began on 20 August, with the Vieux Télégraphe white grapes, and ended at Les Pallières on 20 September. A month of good weather, dampened only by two days of rain on 8 and 9 September – an ideal harvesting backdrop.

Results across the southern Rhône Valley were good to very good. True, some terroirs suffered from the drought and yielded wines of astringent and imbalanced structure. This is not at all the case for our growths: once again, thanks to our old vines (with their far-reaching roots) and our exceptional terroirs, the 2003 vintage will rate among the very finest of the past decade.

In the Vieux Télégraphe and La Roquette reds, the Syrah is fresh and rich to a rare degree; the Mourvèdre

achieved exceptional maturity and is full-flavoured, grapey, velvety and tannic all at the same time; and the Grenache bears comparison with the '98: chewy, complex, elegant, rigid, slightly sweet, rich and airy.

Against all expectations, the whites are appealingly fresh, lush, long, very grapey, and well balanced. The Clos La Roquette, which has just gone to market, is our best white yet from the estate. The Vieux Télégraphe, which needs further ageing, will come later and certainly rival the superb 2001.

At Les Pallières, given the structure of the terroirs, we have managed a high-quality result. It's worth pointing out that, taken together, our three estates had an average yield per hectare of 32hl

– a perfectly balanced output that reflects our soils' ability to nourish the vines in extreme conditions. Our Gigondas cuvées are rich, creamy, fresh and velvety, with pleasing structure, and reflect the tranquil emergence of the vintage. This was all the more enjoyable and interesting because the 2003 vintage was the first to be vinified in the upgraded winery. The ageing process will, of course, influence the vintage even more than usual. We will need to take our time, letting harmony set in naturally and giving the wine's structure time to develop... in other words, we need to be patient until it is time for bottling.

By the way, we are currently bottling the 2003 red Pigeoulet. This year it is back on form, with the fruity freshness, body and personality it is known for. But a number of parcels in the *commune* of Caromb suffered from the drought, so the harvest is about 20% down.

To conclude, we can simply say that after the troubles of 2002, last year's vintage is a sheer joy!

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

SCHEDULE & AVAILABILITY

One consequence of the 2002 vintage was to disrupt our usual marketing schedule, and we thought we should tell you what will happen from 1 September 2004.

At present the 2002 *Télégramme* is monopolising our efforts – marketing has been going ahead quietly since April. The wine has the problem of being compared to *Vieux Télégraphe*, but when placed in a summer Châteauneuf context of straightforward, easy-going Grenache, it fits the bill admirably as a purveyor of pleasure.

The 2003 white *Clos La Roquette* also made its entrance this spring; as we say in the 2003 report, we sincerely think that this wine

deserves very special attention: it has many qualities that offer immediate pleasure and also merit further consideration.

As for the Traditional Reds, marketing of the 2001 *Vieux Télégraphe*, *Roquette* and *Pallières* continues, and generally speaking the vintage is acquiring a real personality compared to its predecessors. Availability is, of course, highly variable, from one product to another.

In September, which is when we generally bring out the two-year-old Traditional Red vintages, the only new issue this year is the 2003 red *Pigeolet*; we discuss it in the 2003 report. It's a very fine

Pigeolet: a nose of subtle fruits, and on the palate a nice balance of rounded flavour and structure.

Only in January next year will the 2003 red *Vieux Mas des Papes* go to market, its qualities echoing the

vintage as a whole: enjoyably fruity, an attractive sensation of Grenache, fatness and a lovely full flavour. At the time of writing, the blend has just begun its second phase of ageing in foudres, which will run until the end of 2004.

The very first days of next year will also see the launch of the 2003 white *Vieux Télégraphe*, an exceedingly traditional vintage made for laying down, and which offers all the traits typical of our grape varieties on Plateau de la Crau: white flowers, minerality, broom, anise, freshness, richness, vanilla, citrus, an initial austerity, "pebble juice"...



La culture raisonnée: our growing philosophy

We have already touched on this topic in a previous issue of *Sémaphore*, but we felt it opportune to explain how we work in the vineyards, at a time when the organic and bio-dynamic concepts are attracting more and more followers – not necessarily convinced by the commendable aim of producing natural wines, but swayed by a new way of promoting them. So what are *Vignobles Brunier* doing? What is our everyday approach to our vineyards, and just how respectful are we of the environment?

Our growing method goes by the name of *la culture raisonnée* ("reasoned growing"), which means both a lot and not very much. Yet since March this year drafting of an official charter has been under way, and this will precisely define the content and scope of the philosophy.

Let's hope a whole population of growers don't climb on the bandwagon with the sole objective of creating a selling point at the expense of a deep respect for the terroir under their stewardship. But motives matter little; the result can only be positive.

Our general philosophy is to weigh the pros and cons of each of our everyday tasks, of their effects on the quality of the grapes, and to tolerate a number of vine predators.

As fertiliser we use natural humus, spread where necessary in line with our observations, soil and root analyses, and of course with the low yields we wish to maintain naturally (with a 10-year average of 30hl/ha).

Pruning also depends on the parcel: it takes account of the vine's age and vigour, and of the variety. The soil is worked in traditional ways, and some moisture-sensitive parcels are naturally grassed to try and regulate the vines' water requirements.

In springtime, manual debudding involves selecting the young fruit-bearing twigs in order to optimise crop quality and distribution. This is done on the goblet-

pruned vines and on the varieties that are allowed to be wire-trained (the *Syrah* and white grapes), the better to expose and ventilate the fruit.

In July a first harvest is conducted, mainly on the youngest and most productive parcels. The idea is to sacrifice part of the crop in order to increase the chances of producing a quality juice.

As for treatments, years of experience mean these can be considerably reduced through far more precise observation, and integrated into a holistic approach that respects the neighbouring vegetation. To help us we have a complete weather station, sited at the heart of the *La Crau* vineyards, which provides direct meteorological information but also, and especially, is building up a memory and "models" that will enable us to anticipate climatic effects and thus decide whether action is needed – so that our vineyard management is as "reasoned" as possible.

For the past 10 years, the famous grape worm has been combated using a technique called sexual confusion: this aims to stop the male and female *Eudemis* butterflies from mating, so no eggs are laid and no larvae hatch. All it takes is to scatter about 500 capsules of female pheromones per hectare in the spring: these diffuse their imperceptible smell through until harvest time, making it very difficult for the male to find a mate. Indeed we have converted practically all of our neighbours to this technique, which is an extremely important factor in proper management of the appellation.

Which brings us to harvesting. The grapes are picked by hand, as in all of the great AOCs, which insist that the grapes can be sorted before vatting.

One last detail, which is less an action than an AOC state of mind: we never irrigate. Our grapes ripen naturally, which is essential if we are to respect the complete character of each vintage, and the absolute prerequisite for a soil to merit the name terroir.

(Edito continued) either they decide to play by the rules – whatever these may be – or they don't.

We should remain craftspeople at the service of the soil. We should continue to respect what makes our terroirs strong, and those who go down a different path and bypass the rules laid down by the "family" should leave. Before the INAO starts dreaming up a regulatory labyrinth for our customers, it should enforce the decrees embodying the spirit of our ancestors, who originally passed them. Maybe that's what "AOCs of excellence" are all about, so let's be frank: *Vignobles Brunier* is already up to the mark.

Daniel Brunier

SÉMAPHORE

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