

The Parts Prove Better than Their Sum

Daniel Brunier unlocks the potential of Domaine Les Pallières in Gigondas



Photo by: Jon Wyand

Daniel Brunier's path to success with Domaine Les Pallières wasn't easy.

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In the late 1990s, Daniel Brunier was expanding his family's holdings. Along with his brother Frédéric, Daniel had [Domaine du Vieux Télégraphe](#), the family's flagship property in Châteauneuf-du-Pape, humming along. Vineyards in the Ventoux had been acquired for additional bottlings and he had set up his Massaya venture in Lebanon.

"We were looking to expand a bit more, maybe [50, 75, 100 acres] of Côtes du Rhône vines somewhere," he says. "To be honest, at that time, even though Gigondas was not a big name, it was a little too expensive for us."

But one day Brunier got a call to come visit [Domaine Les Pallières](#), a Gigondas estate with 60 acres of vines, and a big problem: It wasn't selling any wine. In the cellar, still in [foudres](#) and vats, were

five vintages' worth of wine, from 1993 through 1997. The 1998 harvest was hanging on the vine, and there was literally nowhere to put it.

"They would bottle to order, from *foudre*, and just ship the wine as needed," says Brunier. "But they hadn't gotten any orders and they never bothered to deal with the problem, and now they were stuck."

Brunier was able to strike the deal, teaming with his longtime U.S. importer Kermit Lynch. Brunier sheepishly admits it was not the easiest purchase to justify.

"The winery was missing temperature control, a [destemmer](#). The vineyard wasn't in the greatest shape either," he says with a light shrug. "To be honest, we didn't see the future clearly. Looking back, we were a little lucky it worked out."

Driving up and around the steep, terraced vineyards of the estate though, it's easy to see how Brunier came to fall for the place. Low-yielding, *gobelet*-trained Grenache clings to crumbled pieces of limestone and marl. Logistically it's a difficult site to manage—even just getting pickers and the grapes in and out of the vineyards is a process. It's a jigsaw puzzle of parcels and vines and, consequently, it's taken some time for Brunier to figure out.

The estate can be divided into two portions, upper and lower. The upper terraces are over 1,000 feet in elevation, average about 45 years of age and are planted primarily to Grenache with some Mourvèdre. The parcels around the winery itself range from 650 to 800 feet, and the Grenache, along with a mix of Cinsault and Syrah, are markedly older, at 70 years and up. Brunier vinified these two portions separately, then eventually blended them to make a single estate cuvée. But he kept finding the tannins a bit tight, even "rude," as he puts it.

"Every year, we would vinify the two sides and they would show finesse in the tannins. Then we would blend and, afterward, the blend would be hard," he says. "It was really very frustrating."

So, starting in 2007, Brunier figured the parts were better than the whole, and he began to bottle them separately. The higher-elevation vineyards went in the Terrasse du Diable cuvée, the lower into the Les Racines bottling. Since then the wines have shown steady improvement, culminating in the 2016s that were bottled in May.

The **Terrasse du Diable 2016** shows alluring cherry and damson plum fruit, and is focused and racy, all without the dusty structure that often lingered in earlier vintages.

The **Les Racines 2016** is juicier in feel, with more succulent cherry, plum and blackberry fruit that gets an energetic kick of anise at the end. Both are lovely wines.

"Freshness, delicacy, but still ripe, of course, yet without feeling the alcohol," says Brunier. "2016 is what we had in mind for Pallières since '98. But having it in mind and having it in the tank are two different things," he says with a wry smile.

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