

SÉMAPHOR

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



A NEW ERA FOR OLIVE OIL

One wonders why the craze for olive oil has been such a long time coming. Right now, it seems as if the entire world is rediscovering one of the oldest and most natural kinds of farm produce.

Why wait until the late 20th century to pay tribute to this fabulous liquid, thanks to which even the simplest dishes gain a third dimension, and win a place in food-lovers' hearts?

Maybe people had been waiting for a few renowned scientists to find time to write what our grandfathers used to say: "Olive oil and red wine should be available on prescription."

But without going that far, it is true that the accolade now being paid to this flawless liquid is richly deserved.

In the coming years we will definitely see the sector thrive, and - as has happened in the wine world - substantially push up average quality and the quantities produced worldwide. As a result, this will broaden consumer choice, rightly increasing consumption and consecrating historic terroirs - or not.

For as the emergence of new production areas and techniques brings olive oil within general reach, the big question for the AOCs is going to be: will they keep their leading status? I am profoundly convinced that they will, but only the future will tell.

Daniel Brunier

The 1999 Vintage

Once again, the year reminded us that the vigneron's life isn't always plain sailing; and especially that, despite our store of experience, we must be vigilant daily as we grow our grapes and make our wine.

It all began with a fairly wet January, though not enough rain fell to offset the lack of water caused by the particularly dry autumn of 1998; and a February with not a single drop of rain.

Throughout this time, temperatures were quite low but not excessive.

So we moved into spring, feeling that winter hadn't done its job of storing up water. This was soon forgotten though, as the springtime rains through to 15th June were quite abundant, regular, and accompanied by temperatures well above normal.

The combination of these two factors served to remind winemakers that mildew can still create big problems when conditions favour its development.

And that was the year's lesson: despite our great efforts, 1999 was marked by a serious attack of mildew which in some instances affected the grapes.

And we thought the disease was beaten.

Very luckily, a dry stretch from 15th June to 15th

August helped us forget the mildew-induced pressure but also to build the vintage's quality and structure. We have noted that the month of July is fundamental in forming the structure and depth of a vintage: ideally, July would consist of two dry fortnights split by a good summer storm; likewise for August.

The year 1999 was ideal until 15th August, after which regular rain slightly disrupted the scheme of things, without compromising it.

In the southern Rhône Valley, the vintage was strongly characterised by fresh fruit, with appealing colours - the sign of ripened grapes.

Owing to the vines' average age, output in the Châteauneuf-du-Pape appellation was normal to low compared to the region as a whole, whose yield was abundant.

At Le Vieux Télégraphe and La Roquette, the harvest began on 7th September and lasted a fortnight, with a few rainy intervals; at Les Pallières picking got underway on 28th September and lasted about a week, again punctuated by several showers.

The rains hindered the harvest, certainly, but had no real influence on the quality of the crop, given the level of maturity already reached and the vintage's outline, already sketched by a practically perfect summer.

The Châteauneuf-du-Pape red is a vintage of

exuberant fruit: the Syrah grapes are black and bursting with vivacious freshness; the Mourvèdre are fully ripened, clean, vinous and dense; and the Grenache, mostly picked at over 14.5% sugar content, are beautifully full and generous, but at the same time fruity and complex.

Common to all the red grapes is a nervy lively character, coupled with attractively mature fruit, which gives the '99 vintage all its sparkle.

The whites are similarly fresh, evoking citrus fruits and vine peaches: discreet, elegant, balanced. We are clearly in Châteauneuf-du-Pape country, for there is no hint of "acidity" as such; rather, a very pleasant sensation, a light touch wedded to a long, creamy finish.

But whether the grapes are red or white, the '99 vintage - Le Vieux Télégraphe and La Roquette - was hit by a big shortfall in the harvest, cutting the average yield per hectare to 29hl. The yield at Les Pallières was exactly the same; there too, the old Grenache vines were a little weary.

...a vintage of exuberant fruit...

At Les Pallières, 1999 was our first real vintage, the first year we were able to do all the vine-growing and, of course, oenological, tasks.

We are fully satisfied with the result: superb colours in all the varieties, plenty of fruit and pleasure, a chewy texture, elegance, length, fine tannins. The prominence of all these features varies among the varieties and tanks, but blending should assure an inclusive final nose.

We are happy to observe that the terroir of Les Pallières does indeed live up to what we had imagined.

Let's turn finally to Le Pigeolet: the red wine is appealing, with strong Grenache notes, elegant and well-balanced. It doesn't have the concentration of the '98, but its personality is indeed present, respected and maybe even refined in comparison.

Bottling has been pushed back this year, with the obvious aim of giving the wine a few extra months' maturation, and avoid a certain reduction that affected the nose of the '98.

The '99 rosé, however, is already available. It reflects the vintage with its bright and noble colour, its barely-ripe fruit freshness: slightly acidulous, thirst-quenching, a forthright attack and a faint hint of menthol. The finish has length without being heavy. All in all 1999 was a fine year, though not in our view a rival for its predecessor. Even so, it will easily rank among the leading group of the past decade.

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

WHAT EUROPE WANTS, GOD WANTS TOO

The EU wants all villages, industrial businesses and wineries making over 1,700hl to install equipment for treating their wastewater, or be connected to a communal treatment plant, by 2002.

Le Vieux Télégraphe is one of a cluster of winemakers being eyed, and Bédarrides, the village where the estate is sited, has certainly not designed its treatment facilities with a view to integrating us some day.

So we had to go it alone, though our responsibilities are lighter than any small factory using chemicals, because the only polluting residues we release are natural (tartaric acid, lees, etc.) and can therefore be eliminated biologically.

To do so, early this year we built our own miniaturised treatment plant, while Europe is still giving us the means to meet its requirements.

Such requirements are certainly justified, though, because talk of technological progress, natural produce or even organic farming makes no sense if, in reaching a politically correct result, we forget to treat the residues produced, cellar effluent in particular.

But how does the system work, since a cellar's production of wastewater is anything but consistent?

All we had to do was install a storage tank for the water, and to run a steady low flow off it into an open treatment

tank in which a large, very special wheel turns, oxygenating the liquid to a high degree.

Oxygenation actually boosts the growing of natural bacteria, whose job it is to digest the pollutants in the effluent.

Settling completes the process: the cleaned water at the surface can then be removed, as can the bottom layer of sludge; this will be partly reused in the treatment cycle, and partly stored until composted with other natural residues and turned into fertiliser.

Our private waste treatment plant is the first in the Châteauneuf-du-Pape appellation.



CASTELLAS OLIVE OILS, A FRESH FAMILY STORY!

We're seeing more and more major winemakers add to their range one or more olive oils from French AOCs or elsewhere. The move aims to meet the current international demand for the product: in terms of its philosophy of enjoyment, olive oil bears a close resemblance to wine, so they can quite easily share the same catalogue.

At Vignobles Brunier, we've been lucky to see our closest family establish an olive oil farm of about 10ha - century-old orchards on the south-facing slopes of the famous Baux Valley - where since the first harvest in 1999 the aim has been to make an "extra virgin" oil fit for the finest connoisseurs.

The methods used are identical to those we advocate: collect the finest possible fruit, in the best possible conditions, and compose a good blend of the local varieties. Salonenque, Beruquette, Grossane and Verdale each contribute different aromas and structure to achieve the desired complexity and balance.

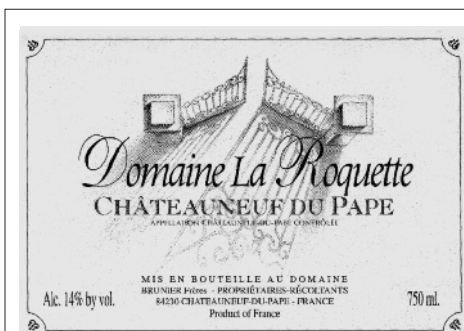


Naturally, grinding and pressing are done the traditional way, in as short a time as possible, and the oil is protected from oxidation until it is bottled, unfiltered.

The result is a 1999 "Castella" oil, which has already earned a silver medal at the Concours Général Agricole in Paris (the gold wasn't awarded). The tasting notes could be as follows: fine golden colour with tints of green; a fresh nose of just-cooked artichokes and green-olive stones. Artichokes and spring vegetables on the palate, and sweet white flowers on the finish. It lingers on the palate, with no oily residues; a delightful glow delicately builds during tasting, gradually warming the back of the throat but with no initial scorch.

It is a masterstroke by Jean-Benoît and Catherine Hugues-Brunier (brother-in-law and sister of Frédéric and Daniel), who, besides attaining superb quality, are kindly offering their product first to customers of Les Vignobles Brunier.

If you're interested in a direct partnership with Catherine and Jean-Benoît, feel free to call us and we'll put you in touch.



A VINTAGE PACKED WITH PLEASURE

1997 LA ROQUETTE RED

THE BRUNIER BROTHERS, FROM THE FAMOUS VIEUX TÉLÉGRAPHE ESTATE ON THE EDGE OF THE VILLAGE, MAKE A CRU THAT IS GENERALLY LIGHTER AND MORE CHARMING THAN TYPICAL CHATEAUNEUF, AND THIS VINTAGE DEFINITELY FITS THE BILL: MADE FROM 70% DESTEMMED GRENACHE GRAPES, IT IS NEITHER FINED NOR FILTERED - SMALL DETAILS THAT ACQUIRE IMPORTANCE IN A MODEST YEAR SUCH AS 1997. THE RESULT IS AN AMPLÉ AND FLESHY WINE, PLUMP LIKE A RUBENS PAINTING, AND QUITE FULL TOO, WITH LITTLE WOODY NOTES. A PLEASANT, WELL-BALANCED COMPOSITION, TO BE DRUNK SOON WITH A LAMB EN CROÛTE.

Saveurs Magazine March 2000 *Michel Smith*



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