

SPOTLIGHT ON A DOMAINE

CLOS CENTEILLES

The Lost Grape Society

For more than twenty years, Patricia Boyer-Domergue has devoted herself with passion to this ancient grape variety in the Minervois. Here, she has succeeded in creating original and fine wines.

Report and tasting by Pierre Casamayor

"These are bloody lousy vines", responded Pierre Galet, the pope of ampelography, to Patricia Boyer-Domergue who was questioning him on the pertinence of replanting long-forgotten native Languedoc grape varieties.

After the phylloxera catastrophe, the old native Languedoc vines were not reintroduced into the vineyards. Of those grapes which reign today, Grenache, Carignan, and Mourvèdre are all originally from Spain, and the invasive Syrah is from the Côtes du Rhône. The true Languedoc grape varieties of yesteryear are mostly only found in the collections of the Vassal domaine within the French National Institute of Agronomic Research.

In the era of reconstruction after the calamitous hybrid episode, we neglected the old vines (Riveyrenc, Araignan and Picpoul etc.) essentially for cultural and economic reasons. The wine had to be produced; and in large quantities, but with a low yield, a low alcohol content, low resistance to disease and difficult to graft, these varieties had no real desirable qualities.

Others, it should be said, only produced uninteresting or poor quality wine. We also should be wary of old fashioned customs and the "wisdom" of the elderly, because these are the same people used to who nail owls to their barn doors to ward off evil spirits !

Some vigneron refused to be dissuaded and we have to salute them, because either by conviction or curiosity they have made the effort to restore the viticultural heritage within their regions. Especially as the known problems with these vines are today quite possibly their acknowledged qualities, particularly their low alcohol content in an age where everyone else is only interested in other varieties.

Patricia Boyer-Domergue in her Clos Centeilles is one such vigneron, following the example of a Plageoles at Gaillac, or a Navarre at Saint Chinian or a Count Abbattucci in Corsica. Her story starts in 1990 when Daniel Domergue and Patricia Boyer fell madly in love with this little patch of land in the middle of nowhere, which is suspended above the terrain of La Livinière, and leans against the Black Mountains.

Everything here had to be restored; buildings, cellar, and of course the vineyard, but the 13th Century Chapel nestling in the middle of the vines attests to the perenniality of this vineyard which is almost prehistoric; for instance the Carignan vines here are over 100 years old. The domaine was originally occupied by an ancient order called in Occitan "*Les Centeilhas*", or "The Hundred Widows" in English. They were an ancient female order who amongst their daily duties welcomed travelling pilgrims. Because of their predicament, they also wanted to have children and according to legend, to increase the possibility of conception they had to show devotion to the Virgin by going round the chapel nine times. Quite obviously, this place can only be fertile.

A vineyard with 20 grape varieties

The vineyard is divided into small parcels, with south facing terraces surrounded by dry stone walls, in a natural and isolated environment. The microclimate is particular to here,

both sunny and cooling at the same time, with the soil made up of siliceous sandstone which has an ample natural water storage capacity. Tasting of the 2003 demonstrates that water stress doesn't exist here. Patricia, today alone at the helm, clearly doesn't believe in high densities in the Languedoc climate, and the 12 hectares have been planted with between 2,500 and 3,300 vines per hectare. Twenty different varieties have been planted, so the work is long and hard: It takes four weeks for the harvest, all by hand of course, with the maturity times spread out.

Here, they don't hesitate to wait for the optimal maturity, even if it means picking off the leaves to preserve the growing conditions, and it means that they can collect the grappillons – the small unproductive grape bunches, to increase the acidity. The soil is worked. A part is pruned back to lyre, which is ideal for periods of drought, and the rest is pruned back to either gobelet or *palissage* (trellised). The vines in the domaine are carefully managed, but since Patricia is frightened by the condition of "organic" vines and the diseases which go with them, she has to treat them - but it's kept to a minimum. "*I treat with sulphur and copper, but I'm struggling against the flavescence dorée !*" says Patricia.

Riveyrenc (or Aspiran), Oeillade (or Araignan), Black, Grey or White Picpoul are next to Cinsault, Carignan, Grenache, Syrah and Mourvèdre. The average yield is 32 hl/ha. The Cinsault in the La Capitelle parcel is singular, and these vines are pruned very low and produce small seeds. These last-mentioned produce a wine surprising in its finesse which restores to favour this variety, often held in contempt. Patricia had a brainwave while tasting a Rayas Cinsault at 8hl/ha which made her decide to see how far she could go with this variety.

The winery reflects the site; biblical. The steel vats with their various contents, a refrigeration unit and a small press. It's necessary to juggle between the different cuvées and vinifications. The whites are pressed immediately, open to ambient temperature, vinified without yeasting, extracted and kept on fine lees with regular *batonnage*, or gentle agitation. Malolactic fermentation isn't systematic, and bottling takes place in June.

The claret comes from a night's maceration of Riveyrenc, with juice from the carbonic fermentation of Carignan. It is then vinified like the white. The reds are destemmed or vatted as whole bunches for carbonic maceration, punched down and racked & returned, then fermented on wild yeast – Patricia cultivates her own leaven. The alcoholic fermentation period or vatting is long, from one to two months. The wine is then run off and racked by gravity every three months, because here, we don't like reduction. It is then kept for two years and finally lightly fined and bottled at the domaine. A portion of the Clos Centeilles is aged in casks.

Vines pruned to last

Despite the long alcoholic fermentation period (recommended by Prof. Yves Glories, former dean of the Bordeaux Faculty of Oenology), and the long vatting time, the wines from Clos Centeilles suggest keeping before opening. They can sometimes be quiet when young. Even the 2012 white (Riveyrenc and Araignan) is reserved; however the 2008 has a finesse and an aromatic complexity with a fruity freshness.

The *La Part des Anges* Claret (Riveyrenc, Carignan, and Black Picpoul) is a real pleasurable wine, and well structured.

The pure Carignan wine undergoes carbonic maceration, *Carignanissime*, is both rich and energetic, with a fruity crispness from the grape, but without producing the rustic notes which often accompany it.

The Campagne cuvée (Cinsault and Syrah) is full bodied, with refined tannins. However we have to wait until the 2004 vintage for smoothness and a length of pure fruit and spice.

It's the C de Centeilles cuvée, produced from old varieties (Black Picpoul, Black Riveyrenc, Oeillade, and Morastel) which possesses notes of wild berries and small cherries with a refined texture and expressive with a complex finish. This wine sets itself apart as delightfully easy to drink.

The Clos Centeilles cuvée (Grenache, Syrah, and Mourvèdre) is a delightfully complex Minervois-la-Livinière, with smooth tannins and substantial notes of spice. It's a cru which reveals itself slowly, promoting its intensity.

The pure Cinsault *Capitelle de Centeilles*, stands out in the Languedoc. This wine echoes Pinot with an inimitable fruitiness, a complex aromatic finish, and a smooth and satin texture which places it in the category of wines of grand finesse. This wine will surprise those that think Cinsault produces wines of poor quantity.

Identity Card

Terrain: 10.5 hectares for red (20% Picpoul, 7% Syrah, 10% Mourvèdre, 10% Grenache, 20% Carignan, 27% Cinsault, 6% others).

1.5 hectares for white: (40% Grey Grenache, 60% others)

Average Annual Production: 54,000 bottles

Type of Agriculture: Sustainable viticulture

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Owner: Patricia Boyer-Domergue

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3 Questions to Patricia Boyer-Domergue

What has been your approach to wine ?

I started my pharmacist studies, and then I swung towards wine with a two year technical degree (*BTS*) at Montpellier and another as an unregistered student at Bordeaux, but always with inspirations during wine tastings. I moved here after buying 9 hectares at Centeilles.

What do you most remember about your time as President of the La Livinière cru ?

I tried to advance things, but my actions were limited. We created a collection of old grape varieties supervised by Jean-Michel Boursiquot, and selected healthy vines for future replanting.

What's the future of Le Clos ?

I almost had to sell it on. The work here is very hard and my style of finesse and sensuality is different from that of local enthusiasts, who are fond of power. But my daughter Cécile wants to come back to the domaine, and so I have to invest in order to hand it over to her. I have built a cellar to keep the old vintages.

Clos Centeilles: The Spirit of La Livinière (Grenache, Syrah & Mourvèdre)

- 2010** (16 / 20) Intense black fruit. Notes of liquorice, spices, peppers. Smoky and lightly woody. Soft on the palate and very aromatic. Tannins still present. Needs time.
- 2009** (16½ / 20) Toasted nose on mature black fruit. Dense and well structured on the palate, aromatic, with notes of very ripe fruit, spices, and leather: Peppered tannins. Is beginning to open.
- 2007** (17 / 20) Smoky nose, peppery, wild black fruit. Notes of scrubland, rosemary and truffle. A dense palate, deep. Tannins refined but with a certain vitality. A long and expressive length.
- 2005** (17 / 20) Not classified as La Livinière as is light in colour and too fine ! Nose of roasted red fruit. Very aromatic on the palate with a fruity finesse. Spicy tannins and refreshing bitterness.
- 2003** (16½ / 20) Ripe nose but not over sweet, spicy, with a hint of menthol. Ample and rich on the palate, but held together by its nervousness. Very fruity finish.
- 2002** (17 / 20) A secondary nose of mineral notes, hot pebbles, undergrowth, truffles. Dense palate, expressive, smooth tannins. Good length, complex aromatic expression.
- 1997** (17/20) Nose on secondary notes, spicy and undergrowth, with truffles and leather. Fresh palate, elegant with a complex length. The revenge of the cold years in the Languedoc.

Capitelle de Centeilles, the pure Cinsault choice.

- 2010** (16 / 20) Red Fruit still very young, with a note of fermentation. Surprisingly natural. Rich on the palate, suave, We could say that this wine has just been racked. Wait, naturally.
- 2005** (16 / 20) A complex palate, with red fruit, scrubland and leather. Still a little timid. Aromatic on the palate, hints of toast with prominent spices. Tannins already well integrated.
- 2004** (17 / 20) A good, complex palate, with toasted red fruit, scrubland, sage. Generous on the palate, with a soft, developed tannic structure. Rich and spicy finish.
- 1997** (17½ / 20) Smoky nose of minerals on roasted red fruit. Notes of menthol and undergrowth. Ample and rich with a fresh Pinot palate. Strong tannic structure. Toasted and spicy finish. A good wine.
- 1995** (18 / 20) Large ripe red fruit, on cooked strawberries, spices, pepper. Structured on the palate, tannic, Imposing but refined structure. Good long finish, powerful and spicy.
- 1992** (17 / 20) Secondary notes of varnish, dry fruit, undergrowth and truffles. Very refined, with prominent yet balanced tannins. A good expression of cherries. A very original wine which is superbly pinot-like.

Photograph Descriptions:

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A SACRED DOMAINE

On La Lavinière terrain in the Minervois, the Clos vineyard prospers under the watchful eye of the 13th Century Notre-Dame de Centeilles Chapel.

PATRICIA BOYER-DOMERGUE

Who originally wanted to be a pharmacist, but now produces intriguing wines is not always understood in the Languedoc, but her determination has been worthwhile. She represents an elegant style, with a melange of the terrain and haute couture.

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A CALLING

With managed viticulture, the vines of the Clos Centeilles require a lot of work. They are comprised of twenty varieties with different maturity times, all harvested by hand.