
ON WINE

Provence's sunny wine

A family follows a dream to the south of France

By Stephen Meuse, Globe Correspondent, 4/17/2002

LA CADIÈRE D'AZUR, France - In early spring, the sun above France's Mediterranean coast is already startlingly intense. Provence has long been a mecca for sun worshippers, and in resort towns like Bandol, just south of here, the sunny seaside benches are filled all afternoon with Chanel-clad seniors. Heads tilted slightly back, they gratefully soak up the warmth. High above them, couched in a semicircle of low hills, vines now dormant will soon be turning leaves toward a sun grown fierce by summer. Here winemakers must be sun worshippers, too - or quit. No doubt that's why long ago they welcomed the robust, heat-loving mourvedre grape.

Bandol and mourvedre may be as perfect an alignment of geography and varietal as the wine world has to offer, but the full potential is being realized here only at a few elite properties. Among these is Chateau de Pibarnon, set 300 meters above sea level - one of Bandol's highest vineyards.

According to the winemaker, Eric de Saint Victor, whose parents, Henri and Catherine, bought the run-down property for a song in 1977, those 300 meters are critical to producing quality red wines. "To become fully ripe, mourvedre must almost roast in the sun," de Saint Victor says. "But the altitude here makes our vineyards a bit cooler, just enough to ensure that the grapes don't become too ripe too quickly. It's overall maturity we're interested in, not just sugar content. We can leave grapes on the vines longer because the wind keeps the mold away."

And it is windy here. The stone wall of the restored Renaissance-style bastide that overlooks the Mediterranean, and the massive hump of a mountain known as the Le Gros Cerveau ("the big brain"), isn't protected from a steady breeze. From here, there's a panoramic view of some of the property's lower vineyards, which look as though nature had dug them out with an oversized ice-cream scoop.

De Saint Victor calls these small solar amphitheaters his "circuses," and they're characteristic of the terrain. There are more than a dozen, each with a distinctive name, like Jourdan, Bel Air, and Pointe Blanche, and each with a wine distinguishable from its neighbors'. Within the circuses, it's easy to imagine grapes cooking into a kind of confiture, but Pibarnon's wines are hardly what you'd call jammy. Red Bandol, made from fully ripe mourvedre grapes, is sturdy stuff, long-lived with plenty of texture and grip.

The stylish de Saint Victors seem to run the vineyard effortlessly. Eric, 38, was a teenager when his parents moved the family from the city to the south of France. In the mid-1970s, Henri de Saint Victor was a successful 50-ish Paris licensing attorney who loved good wine - and longed to make it.

He looked first at property in Bordeaux, which he couldn't afford. Then, on a vacation on the Cote d'Azur, he and Catherine tasted Pibarnon wines at a restaurant in Toulon, and decided to visit the property to buy some.

"The man who had just bought the property was complaining to us that the wine `did not sell itself,'" Catherine de Saint Victor recalls. "So I said to him, `Well, if you don't like what you're doing here, let us know. We may be interested in buying the place.'"

Two years later, they moved into the rough-hewn property with Eric and his sister, Caecilia. There were three hectares (about 7 1/2 acres) of producing vines then. The former owners just drove away, leaving Henri and Catherine with no clear idea about how actually to make the wine.

An Italian winemaker who had been helping the former owners was pressed into service. He was a gifted, intuitive winemaker - "*un magicien du vin*," the family agrees. But he couldn't quite explain how he had made the wine. To the critical question: "How does one know when the wine is ready to bottle?" the Piemontese replied, "When you see that the wine is ready to bottle, then you put it in the bottle."

Today, of course, the de Saint Victors laugh about this. Retelling stories about those years seems to please Catherine de Saint Victor, who did physical work at the beginning. "We were lucky because for the first few years the growing seasons were very good and the weather fine right through harvest." Those first wines won medals at the Concours General Agricole in Paris. "*Les innocents ont les mains pleines*," her son adds - a case of beginner's luck. In the 17th and 18th centuries, Bandol wines, (then known as Rouve) were celebrated, and were said to be personal favorites of Louis XIV. When the vineyards were devastated by phylloxera in the late 19th century and replanted with inferior hybrid vines, their reputation was eclipsed.

Lucien Peyraud of the nearby Domaine Tempier is often credited with kicking off the Bandol renaissance in the 1950s. Current rules require that red Bandol contain at least 50 percent mourvedre, and yields are now set at a very low 40 hectolitres per hectare. That effectively limits production to about one bottle per vine.

There are no legally designated crus here, as there are in Burgundy, Bordeaux, and elsewhere, and the de Saint Victors hew to tradition by making only one red wine, known simply as

Pibarnon. It's a blend of multiple vineyard lots, each vinified separately to monitor quality. The recipe varies from year to year, but the final composition will always be overwhelmingly mourvedre, with 5 percent to 12 percent grenache added, says Eric de Saint Victor, to help make the tight lipped mourvedre "more chatty," as he calls it, meaning more accessible.

There is no second label, hence nowhere to hide weaker wines - a fact that makes each addition of Pibarnon representative of its season. Younger vines make their own contribution to the estate's sturdy and flavorful rose, which is often paired with Roquefort cheese at the de Saint Victor table.

Pibarnon is not a technical or academic wine, de Saint Victor says. Pulling the cork on a 1996 bottle in the new tasting room, de Saint Victor says: "We use no new oak and we're not looking to produce a particular taste. We prefer to let the vintage make the wine."

Another *magicien du vin* at work.

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