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# THE LAFITE OF THE LANGUEDOC

## CLIVE PLATMAN



Any self-respecting wine region has its own iconic wine. In Sauternes, there is d'Yquem; South Australia, Penfolds "Grange"; and Burgundy, Domaine de la Romanee-Conti. These wines represent the pinnacle of what can be achieved, and set the standard for local producers to follow. They are the locomotive that drives the train.

Thirty years ago, the Languedoc possessed no such icons. The wine was produced in bulk for the French mass-market, had never seen the inside of a barrel, and the idea of chateau bottling almost unheard of. Nevertheless, there were pioneers willing to tap into the potential, and one such estate was Mas de Daumas-Gassac (MdDG), since dubbed, "The Lafite of the Languedoc".

The story began when Aim Guibert, a leather manufacturer, bought the property in the late 1960s. The old farmhouse lay on a ridge surrounded by garrigue (Mediterranean scrubland), affording magnificent views of the l'Herauld departement.

The estate was not known for its wine, and its potential only discovered by chance. Early on, a family friend, a Bordeaux geologist, identified an unusually high mineral content in the reddish-brown soils and, over dinner, remarked: "You have the potential to make grand cru Wine." So rich, in fact, that the Canadian authorities once believed the wine was adulterated with gold, as traces of the element were subsequently identified in a sample.

In addition, the Gassac Valley has a relatively cool micro-climate, created by a cold air flow from the Massif Central to the north. This causes significant day/night temperature variations, slowing down the maturity of the ripening grapes, to the extent that they are harvested between two-three weeks later than average. The phenomenon also tends to toughen the grapeskins, providing added texture and freshness.

There is more, too, and this lies with the sympathetic and environmentally-friendly development of the estate. Rather than create a continuous vineyard, some 50 separate parcels have been formed, covering an area of approximately 50 hectares, within 100 hectares of garrigue, comprising evergreen oaks and wild herbs. The pollen and scents from this wilderness attach themselves to the surface of the grapeskins, that result in a subtle infusion of aromas and flavours in the finished wine.

The next stage of the story required the involvement of a leading Bordeaux oenologist, to show the family how to make great wine. The late Professor Emile Peynaud had rebuffed several advances before accepting the challenge, but laid down two conditions. Firstly, he would only visit twice a year, and secondly, they would never discuss money.

The Peynaud trademark is still there for all to see. A believer in slow fermentation and long maceration, the wines achieve a finesse and complexity seldom encountered in the

Languedoc. The reds, in particular, have a capacity to age gracefully over a period of 25 years.

Although it has now realized its grand cru status, MdDG is very much a lone-wolf, operating outside the system. Its official classification is merely vin de pays (country wine), as they use strictly unauthorised varieties such as cabernet sauvignon for the red, and chenin blanc and petit manseng for the white. The irony is that, to obtain official appellation controllee status, it would be necessary to grub up the vines.

Aim Guibert has now been succeeded by his eldest son, who learned his winemaking craft in New Zealand. Samuel recently visited Birmingham to present a vertical tasting of their wines.

The MdDG white is primarily a blend based on chardonnay, viognier, chenin blanc and petit manseng, in equal proportions, amongst others. From 1986-99, it was matured in new oak, but this practice has now stopped, to permit greater fruit expression.

Tasting a 2005 cask sample, viognier dominates, with apricot and lime-blossom flavours, but when left in the glass, the 2004 develops an oily-rich riesling character, truly evident in the 1996 vintage.

Samuel advised that the white is best enjoyed within its first three years for its fruit and freshness, but then closes down to re-emerge after six years, into something more sophisticated.

Cabernet sauvignon accounts for between 75-80% of the red, with the balance comprising an assortment of 15 other varieties, including oddities such as tempranillo and nebbiolo.

The 2004 cask sample had sweet, juicy bramble fruit, initially supported with firm tannins, melting away to a long, red-fruit finish. The product of a hot, dry vintage, the 2003 is altogether rounder and more concentrated.

A little finer, but lighter and fresher on the palate, the 2002 is beginning to close down, but shows great promise. In contrast, the 2000 is starting to open up and develop smooth and silky characters.

It takes around six-seven years to achieve maturity and the 1996 is a classic example of ripe cabernet, with smooth black fruit and melting tannins. Taking more time to emerge, the 1994 revealed creamy and nutty flavours.

Finally, the 1986 was more assertive and more akin to a Bordeaux, with firmly structured cassis fruit. The difference in style is explained by a greater proportion of young-vine cabernet. As the vineyards have matured, the fruit produced is more mellow, complex and rounded.

MdDG is a complete one-off. The red has the ripeness and softness of an Australian cabernet, yet the structure and balance of a fine Bordeaux, and the white is simply unique. Both are beautifully crafted and, if allowed, have terrific ageing potential.