

The family of wines

UNDER A CLOUDLESS BLUE CANOPY, the landscape shimmering in the hot afternoon sun, it is easy to believe all is well with the world. Peace reigns across the fertile plain of the Languedoc.

The green of the garrigue (trees and scrubland) and the openspaces of vineyards and orchards contrast sharply with the distant foothills of the limestone beauty that is the high Cevennes to the north.

Barely an hour south lies the resurgent city of Montpellier, lying just back from the Mediterranean itself.

It is here, in a relatively unexplored part of the southern France, one not historically noted for its wine, in what is truly a slice of heaven, up a dusty drive past rows of vines to a once tumbledown mas (farmhouse), that one of the most extraordinary stories in the history of wine unfolds. The story of the birth of a wine, now rivaling the best that Bordeaux or Burgundy has to offer.

Just 30 years ago, this mas was discovered by Aime and Veronique Guibert, not long married, drawn to the land, house-hunting for somewhere to raise the family. They were enchanted - and so the scene was set for a veritable fairytale.

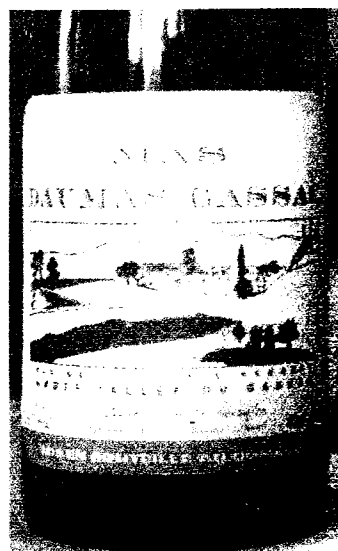
Cut to the Midi to a spring morning Southwold where Samuel Guibert, 28, and eldest of five sons, is talking passionately about why Daumas-Gassac is perhaps the best wine you will ever drink.

We met in the crown before he co-hosts lunch next door at the Swan with Simon Loftus and members of the Adnam's wine team: A chance for guests to compare some of the growers' best years. It transpires that some have not yet

heard of the wines of Daumas-Gassac.

One-to-one and on show, M. Guibert is

Their wine has been described as "one of the best" So when Samuel Guibert came to East Anglia to



charming, expressive in a typically French way, his English fine-tuned by five years in New-Zealand where he helped to promote French wine sales and links with the Montana labels.

He is commercial director and travels the world promoting Daumas-Gassac. Numerous dates, including North America, Europe and the London Wine Fair, beckon before, mid-June, he will be able to relax at home in the valley of the Gassac, getting in the summer mood and preparing for the vendange in

September.

Saturday lunch is the last of the three events he has done for Adnams before heading back to London "to meet some Kiwi friends" and then a flight home.

"My parents bought the old farmhouse as a place to live. What followed was a stroke of luck" he tells me.

They had no experience of wine-making. Aime Guibert was head of family glove and leather goods firm (which supplied the British Royals for 300 years) in Millau, in the Tarn Valley on the western edge of the Cevennes as the N9 winds its increasingly dramatic way north.

His wife, Veronique, was studying ethnology - she is an expert on the Celts - at university in Montpellier.

What they had was vision.

M. Aime - "he is green-fingered and loves his vegetable garden" - had come across Henry Enjalbert, greatest wine geologist of his day, and sought his advice.

"He said the conditions were unique. If my father had the passion to see it though, he could produce a grand cru from this soil. And that is how it all began."

There was no turning-back. Next he sought the help of the distinguished œnologist, Emile Peynaud - if Enjalbert had fired them with ambition, it was the second professor who inspired them to become serious, and great, wine-makers.

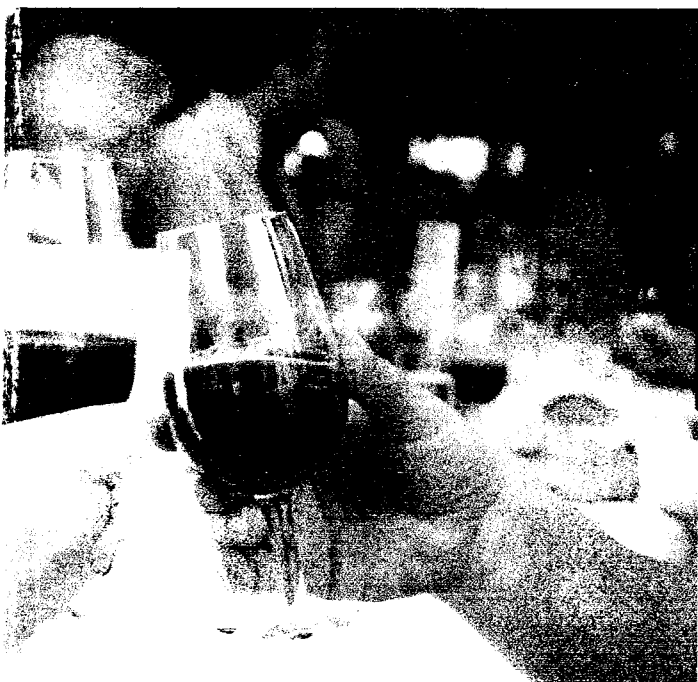
This place has two natural advantages - the soils and a perfect micro-climate - that were to make all the difference. Key to the quality of the wines is the mixed soils, low in organic matter and rich in minerals, in which the vines root deeply with just the right conditions to bring out concentrate flavours in the fruit. The climate, too, is special. Temperatures rise to 35-40 degrees in the summer and fall to 10-12 degrees at night, crucially allowing the grapes to cool.

They found, too, that the river that supplied the watermill helped provide a natural cooling system, and the



ten in the world”.

promote his family's Daumas-Gassac, Peter Hannam went to see him. Photographs : Bill Darnell



water tank would become the underground chai (store). But success did not come without years of acquired knowledge, occasional disasters skill and determination, and sheer hard work.

One other thing marks out the Guiberts. “We do everything naturally,” says M. Samuel. “My parents were conservationists before it became trendy. They refused to buy cloned vines.

“We do not use fertilisers or chemicals. We use the natural life in the soil, the grass. Genetically-modified is forbidden. The vines grow closer together and at harvest we use no machines.”

The family cultivates 35 hectares, cut into the natural garrigue, and do nothing artificially to increase yield - which equates to 110,000-115,000 bottles of red and 40,000-50,000 of white a year.

“We take what nature gives us. Each year is different. And we do not try to correct what the wine tastes like,” he enthuses.

Traditionally, the Languedoc has been the poor relation of French wine, producing what he simply calls ‘plonk.’

But the last five-10 years have seen a big change with better sites and vinification and a sense of regional pride leading to better products - from maybe 30 growers, of which Daumas-Gassac is the undoubted star; 1998 was such a good year, in fact, that it surpassed by general consent all other French regions.

Descriptions like “the only grand cru of the Midi” (Hugh Johnson), “major grand cru” (Oz Clarke) and “one of the 10 best wines in the world (Michael Broadbent) do not

come easily.

It is hard to think that the first white appearing in 1986. Visit Daumas-Gassac, as I have, and you may be offered a taste of that debutant year. Reds are based on Cabernet-Sauvignon, while fabulously scented whites are strong on Viognier, Muscat and Chardonnay. It is the red that is regarded as the grand cru, but the white is catching up.

The years 1982 and 1988 were excellent but pride of place now goes to 1998, the red having

exceptional power and ageing potential of 15-20 years. The 1998 red is now hard to find and will set you back quite a few pounds - thought it is well worth the price.

By the way, do not be put off by the absence of an appellation. It is not a certification of quality; only that a wine has technically passed certain tests. “It is our ambition”, says M. Guibert.

The Mas de Daumas-Gassac is about a mile and a half out of Aniane, a quiet town most of the year, dependant heavily on wine, which has recently been the scene of one of those classic trials of strength, pitting local growers against the mass interest of the Californian Mondavi company which sought to move in with no regard for tradition or the environment. It was repelled; the mayor who encouraged Mondavi having been overwhelmingly voted out of office.

Daumas-Gassac is truly exceptional. Like much of the Midi itself, it remains a surprise but worth seeking out. You will not be disappointed.

If you want to know more about the treasures that is Daumas-Gassac wine, cast an eye over their website at www.daumas-gassac.com

Daumas-Gassac wine is sold by Adnams. Adnams is again presenting a series of wine events, details of which are available on 01502 27222 or at their normal outlets.



“We take what nature gives us. Each year is different. And we do not try to correct what the wine tastes like”, says Samuel Guibert.