

Meet the Winemaker: Mas de Daumas Gassac



Samuel Guibert is the owner and head winemaker of Mas de Daumas Gassac, home to some of Languedoc's most iconic wines. Born and raised on the Gassac estate, he has spent 25 years working with and evolving the Daumas Gassac we know today, reminding the world that exceptional wines can and do come from this underrated region.

MV: YOUR PARENTS STARTED THE VINEYARD AND DOMAINE; WHAT MOTIVATED THEM TO DO SO, AND HOW DID THEY PASS ON THEIR PASSION AND KNOWLEDGE TO YOU?

SG: The birth of the Mas de Daumas Gassac estate (in the late '60s) was not intentional from the outset, as my parents purchased an old farm with the idea to renovate the house to live in. It was only after a couple of years that they discovered that there was a unique and singular soil in the Gassac valley leading them to create the Daumas Gassac we know today. I was born on the estate, so I have been lucky to experience the evolution of Mas de Daumas Gassac from the very beginning. One could say that Gassac is in my blood!

MV: WORKING WITH FAMILY CAN BE BOTH REWARDING AND CHALLENGING. HOW DO YOU NAVIGATE THE DYNAMICS OF A FAMILY BUSINESS, AND WHAT ARE SOME ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES YOU'VE ENCOUNTERED?

SG: This is my 25th year at Daumas Gassac, over that time I've worked with three of my brothers (for at least 20 years!). As you said it can be both very rewarding and challenging - someone told us at the beginning "you either get on very well, or... you won't!". I believe this is totally correct. Basically, we have learned to work alongside each other and more importantly have created a system where we each have an area of responsibility for which each of us is the sole decision maker. And of course, lots of communication, we meet and discuss things regularly in order to keep the information flowing.



MV: CAN YOU ELABORATE ON HOW THE "FORÊT DE GARRIGUE" INFLUENCES YOUR WINES? WHAT SPECIFIC CHARACTERISTICS DOES IT IMPART, AND HOW DO THESE TRANSLATE INTO FLAVOURS AND AROMAS?

SG: With over 3ha (7 acres) of Garrigue forest surrounding the 69 plots of vines that constitute the Gassac estate, our vineyards benefit from a major interaction with Mother Nature. The wild herbs that fill the garrigue (Thyme, Rosemary, Sage, Lavender etc.) have a huge impact on the scents of the wines produced at Gassac. Each year during the fermentations and the maceration of the wines, spicy, wild, smoked flavours come through the tanks of the grapes that are picked from the vineyards that are closest to the forest.

MV: THE LANGUEDOC REGION WASN'T TRADITIONALLY KNOWN FOR QUALITY WINE, YET YOU SOUGHT TO CHANGE THAT PERCEPTION. HOW DID YOU MANAGE TO SHIFT THE TREND, AND HOW HAS THE REGION'S WINE SCENE EVOLVED SINCE THEN?

SG: Languedoc has always been a land of vines and wines - the main challenge is that during the most part of the early 20th century our beautiful region focused on bulk wines as there was a real need for that kind of wine at the time. As a result, the reputation of the Languedoc was tarnished as it became known for producing average everyday wines rather than quality ones. When Daumas Gassac was created by my parents it became a unique flagship for the region and the living proof that exceptional wines could be produced from that underrated region of the world. Thirty years ago, 90% of the wines produced in the region came from Cave coop - today when one travels through the Languedoc one can experience twenty to thirty independent wineries in every village of the region!



MV: THE FAMOUS OENOLOGUE EMILE PEYNAUD PROVIDED ADVICE FOR YOUR PARENTS' FIRST VINTAGE; DID HIS GUIDANCE INFLUENCE SUBSEQUENT VINTAGES AS WELL, OR DID YOUR APPROACH EVOLVE OVER TIME?

SG: The winemaking philosophy of the Mas de Daumas Gassac wines was inspired by the late Professor Emile Peynaud, whom, after meeting my parent in the mid-'70s accepted to become their mentor. He spent the first two harvests at Gassac to vinify the 1978 and 1979 vintage with my dad at his side as an apprentice. For the first 20 years of the estate, the Professor Peynaud was a mentor and a true friend to my parents, never accepting any fee for his assistance (aside of course from a few cases of Daumas Gassac each year), but always available for advice and answers. Since his death in the early 2000's, my main concern has been not only to honour the past but more importantly respect the philosophy both Peynaud and my parents had installed. Having said that, every generation has to bring its own addition and I have also made some very soft evolution to the way the Gassac wines are crafted over the past 25 years.

MV: IT'S INTRIGUING THAT YOU COLLECT UNKNOWN GRAPE VARIETIES AT YOUR DOMAINE. DO YOU CONTINUE TO ADD TO THIS COLLECTION, AND IF SO, HOW DO YOU DISCOVER THESE GRAPES, AND WHAT EXPERIMENTS DO YOU CONDUCT WITH THEM?

SG: Most of the forty-plus varieties that are currently growing in the Gassac valley have been planted there by my parents between the '70s and '90s. Today our main challenge has more to do with preparation to ensure a fifty year old vineyard can still be healthy and in production for the next fifty years. Having said that we do continue to experiment with some new grape varieties, especially when finding some are more suitable due to the changes in climate.

MV: LASTLY, I'VE HEARD YOU HAD A PERSONAL CONNECTION TO NEW ZEALAND. CAN YOU SHARE HOW THIS LINK CAME ABOUT AND WHETHER IT HAS INFLUENCED YOUR APPROACH TO WINEMAKING OR BUSINESS PRACTICES?

SG: I came to NZ in 2012 to research the NZ wine industry as it was the subject I chose for my Master for La Sorbonne University in Paris. I initially intended to spend nine months but fell in love with the country and ended-up staying there for seven years! The influence I got from the NZ industry at the time (in the '90s) was not so much on the winemaking side but more on the capacity to innovate, from the commercial and marketing point of view. NZ will always be my second home, a place where I have many friends and love to visit.