

How Mas de Daumas Gassac elevated Languedoc's winemaking practices



The family-owned estate has boosted the reputation of the Languedoc region – once known for its low-quality table wines.

For wine lovers, a good story can be as important as authenticity and typicity. Mas de Daumas Gassac offers all three.

Even the estate's founding was serendipitous. When Aimé and Véronique Guibert, a tanner and glove manufacturer, and his ethnologist wife, were out walking in rural Gassac Valley in the late 1960s, they came across an abandoned farmhouse near the abbey of Aniane. It was surrounded by wheat fields, oak trees, mulberry, olive trees, and some vines. For the Guiberts, it was love at first sight. Despite having no agricultural experience, except for a vegetable patch in their garden in Millau, they decided to purchase the estate from its retired owners.

Unsure of what to cultivate, the novice farmers invited Henri Enjalbert, a geographer at the University of Bordeaux to help them decide. To their surprise, Enjalbert discovered that the site's perfectly drained soil consisted of glacial sandstone comparable to the best terroirs of Burgundy's Côte d'Or. Without a doubt, their destiny lay in those vines.

Cabernet sauvignon was planted in 1972, and in 1978 oenologist Emile Peynaud, who consulted for Bordeaux first growths Châteaux Margaux and Haut-Brion, was hired to advise and mentor the

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family. Later, when asked by journalists why he chose to advise an unknown property in the Languedoc, he replied: “There, for the first time, I had the good fortune to be present at the birth of a grand cru”.

The history behind Mas de Daumas Gassac

Bottled under the Vin de Table label (now IGP Saint-Guilhem-le-désert cité d’Aniane), the 1978 vintage — their first — was blended from 80 per cent cabernet sauvignon and 20 per cent malbec, merlot, syrah, cabernet franc, pinot noir, and tannat. In total, 1,400 cases were produced, but the Guiberts quickly learnt that merchants would not stock the wine because of the region’s reputation for low-quality plonk. As a result, they sold to family, friends and a handful of restaurants, introducing an en primeur system they still use today.

A few short years later, the 1982 vintage was recognised by Gault&Millau as “Languedoc’s Château Lafite”. According to the press, Mas de Daumas Gassac had arrived.

In 1986, a white Mas de Daumas Gassac, primarily a blend of viognier, chardonnay, petit manseng and chenin blanc, with a rich aromatic complexity, made its debut. The delightful rosé Frizant followed in 1990. Aimé and Véronique started Mas de Daumas Gassac, but now the legacy continues through the second generation.

With Aimé’s passing in 2016, the domaine is now run by four of their five sons — Samuel, Gaël, Roman and Basile. Samuel, the eldest, is in charge of vinification. Gaël manages the vineyard and accounts, Roman looks after their French distribution network, and Basile juggles Asia exports with winemaking duties.

We spoke with Basile Guibert, the youngest brother, who is based in Singapore.

The story of how your family got into winemaking is quite romantic. What can you tell us about the early years of Mas de Daumas Gassac?

In 1969, my parents purchased an old farm that had been owned by the Daumas family for the last 400 years, with traces of viticultural roots dating back to Roman times. The estate was self-sufficient with sheep, olive trees, fruit trees, a vegetable garden, some vines, an oak forest with wild Mediterranean herbs, and an old flour mill by the Gassac River. It was wild and magical — and still free of pesticides today. My parents built an underground cellar and planted vines. There were many challenges in those first few decades, but it was also an amazing time that saw the birth of a first growth at the heart of our family life. Being out in the vines is one of my most vivid childhood memories.

When the family entered winemaking on a clean slate, was it more difficult or more advantageous?

When they purchased the farm, my father was still working in the leather industry and my mother was completing her PhD in ethnology. Their only concern when they settled in this wild valley was having a place for their growing family. It was my mother who suggested winemaking to my father who had always dreamed of becoming a farmer. I believe their lack of wine background prior to

creating their wild Gassac dream was one of the main reasons for our success. Making unconventional decisions was possible because they lacked the weight of tradition. To this day, we keep creating traditions.

What is the philosophy of Mas de Daumas Gassac?

Mas de Daumas Gassac follows the Emile Peynaud style: traditional Bordeaux from the '80s; pure elegance and finesse. We make our wines with as little intervention as possible. Ultimately, they must give pleasure. The same is true of my mother's cuisine. Her recipes are based on the best raw produce, either from our garden or locally sourced meat and fish, combined with love and never-ending inspiration from her travels to India, Ireland, Iran, the Mediterranean countries and across Asia. True paysan values include cooking and nourishing, growing grapes and feeding souls with simplicity.

Have you always wanted to work in the wine industry? Did you train for this?

My parents taught me what it is to be a farmer and to listen to Mother Nature. My mother understands the importance of wilderness, and my late father learned winemaking from the greatest winemaker, Emile Peynaud. With my "life education", I chose to study social sciences instead of oenology. My farmer foundation gained vision from this decision.

Mas de Daumas Gassac is Languedoc's grand cru. What else is there to strive for?

As a 50-year-old estate, our wines have reached cult status. Our terroir is unique, our wines are rare, and we do not have wines for everyone. Nevertheless, we are still in our infancy. My dream is to ensure the estate will produce 100 vintages with the same ageing potential and pleasure factor as our current vintages. So we still have quite a few mountains to climb. My family works hard to create wines that will make whoever tastes them dream.

When you moved to China, then to Singapore, you were in your 20s. As a next-generation co-owner, why did you decide to base yourself in Asia?

Increasing the awareness of our estate is one of my life goals. In the past 14 years, I've visited over 25 cities in China, and many more cities across the rest of Asia. What I love most about my job is connecting with people I meet. It goes two ways. Of the pieces that make up Mas de Daumas Gassac, I receive as much as I can give. Making life connections is the very definition of wine.

Every year, you return to Aniane for the harvest. What's it like being home with family?

Each harvest is a celebration of life. Being part of the birth of the vintage and being in the Gassac valley with my family are two of my greatest joys. It means 80 hours of work per week for three weeks. The brain is constantly working and your senses and taste buds are highly alert. Surrounded by an amazing team and our family, the energy is powerful. Since there is only one harvest per year, every winemaking year brings wisdom and experience.

What is the potential of the 2022 vintage?

Rich and light — superb. It is a glorious return to the balance between acidity, alcohol, and sugar that was popular in the '80s, and it was provided on a gold plate by nature. However, we only realised

how great the 2022 vintage was after the harvest because the 2022 climate generated so much fear during every step of the process.

The winery offers tastings to visitors. You even host jazz concerts and the occasional vineyard walk. What makes receiving visitors so important?

My brothers and I see Mas de Daumas Gassac as more just than a wine estate. We want to share and convey the wild natural beauty of our small village. Once unknown, Aniane has now emerged as one of South France's most famous wine regions due to its terroir. When you visit, drive around, get lost, explore farmers markets, taste produce, and even visit Saint Guilhem Abbaye, one of the oldest monasteries in Europe, very close to Aniane.

Can you recommend some food and wine pairings here in Singapore?

Like all Singaporeans, I love food! So many beautiful places and memories come to mind: Wee Nam Kee, Lerouy, Gaston, Les Amis, Muthu's Curry ... Chef Julien Royer and his teams at Odette and Claudine have created some unique pairings I will never forget, thanks to their creativity. Odette's Kegani Crab is a dream with Mas de Daumas Gassac 2021 Blanc; Claudine's Stuffed Cabbage is heaven with Mas de Daumas Gassac 2018 and 2019 Rouge; and Moulin de Gassac Cabernet Sauvignon 2021 from my second estate pairs perfectly with Tiffin Room's North Indian cuisine.