

# The Legacy of a Languedoc Patriarch



**RUMA SINGH** *On the story of Mas de Daumas Gassac, in the Aniane commune of Languedoc and its founder, Aimé Guibert*

Ten years ago, on a driving holiday around the south of France, I visited Mas de Daumas Gassac, in the Aniane commune of Languedoc. Whizzing around the estate in a jeep I was stunned by its lush, un-manicured beauty with scattered vineyards nestled in between abundant bushes and shrubs. There was an unforgettable, untamed wildness about this unique piece of terroir. The Daumas Gassac wines we tasted after that underlined this; here was majestic structure overlaid with delicate purity of fruit.

Cut to last month and the launch of Daumas Gassac wines in India in the presence of Véronique and Basile Guibert. Though the legend of Daumas Gassac's patriarch, the late Aimé Guibert has not truly pervaded these shores — the time was ripe to understand the potential of Languedoc as a region capable of producing fine wine.



The Guibert family

First, an introduction to Aimé Guibert, the patriarch whose towering personality and ardent beliefs have dominated Languedoc wine since the 1980s, and to Véronique his wife. Basile, the youngest of their five sons, who oversees the Asian market acknowledges, "Daumas Gassac would not exist if not for the tremendous effort — physical and mental – they both put in."



Aimé Guibert, the family patriarch, who founded Mas de Daumas Gassac.

The fable of Daumas Gassac, a mere 50-year-old upstart in the Old World, is remarkable. The Guibert's intention to buy a countryside property in the 70s led them to a farmhouse or 'mas' in Languedoc, a region hitherto known for making vast quantities of unremarkable wine. They had little intention of becoming vintners, a profession they knew nothing about as Aimé came from a family of noted glovemakers while Véronique was a professor of ethnology at Montpellier. One day, friend and noted geologist Henri Enjalbert visited them and went for a walk with Aimé. He stopped in his tracks at the sight of the soil — a rare Ice Age scree strikingly similar to the soils of Burgundy's Cote d'Or. "This is a geological miracle!" he exclaimed.

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Thus, viticulture became their sole option. Work began, with famous Bordeaux oenologist-researcher Emile Peynaud assisting them with their initial vintages. Today, Daumas Gassac's three main wines, all blends, a majestic red, a textured white and a unique rosé frizzante sell in a few chosen markets on strict allocation. Yet the addition of non-authorized grapes means it falls outside appellation rules and Daumas Gassac is labelled simply Vins de Pays de l'Herault.

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Moulin de Gassac – Grands Terroirs with striking hand-drawn labels from Daumas Gassac's second portfolio

Says Basile, "Aimé intuitively felt that a great wine had to be based on Cabernet Sauvignon — strong, powerful and ageworthy. He loved the grand crus of Bordeaux." Unsurprisingly, most media references of Daumas Gassac refer to it as the 'Grand Cru' or 'Lafite' of the Languedoc — a pithy phrase bestowed first in 1985 by French magazine, Gault Millau when murmurs about the estate's quality started spreading. Despite having no winemaking background Aimé was a consummate businessman.

"He was a gifted man, compelling and seductive to listen to, curious about everything," says Véronique, as we sit to chat before a sold-out wine dinner in Bangalore. "A brilliant, creative

mind,” agrees Basile. Every decision the Guiberts made was reasoned and researched — a selection of ungrafted clones from Bordeaux took Aimé five years to source. His foresight drove him to build cellars underground where they were naturally cooled by the Gassac river. “He would go deep into wine knowledge. Winemaking is a combination of multiple factors, and he bound them all together with his vision.”

Truly pioneering, Daumas Gassac was organic before it became fashionable, producing low yields of exceptional quality, and harvested grapes in tiny crates to prevent spoilage. Zero pesticides were used from the onset.

Aimé’s love of reading — often about botany and history — added to his knowledge bank and led to the creation of Daumas Gassac’s historic nursery of rare vines. “He would read a lot about wine and its wine culture. He would pore over books by Olivier de Serres, the famous 17th-century French agronomist. And from travels around the world, he would collect rare vines to bring back and plant in his nursery, often smuggled in his bags,” reveals Véronique. These included Neherleschol from Israel, Sercial from Madeira, Petite Arvine and Amigne from Switzerland, Khondorni, Tchilar from Armenia, Georgia’s Saperavi, and a slew of Italian grapes.

Of the 50 grape varieties grown at Daumas Gassac, 25 are rare historical grapes. The main grapes used in their flagship white include Viognier, Chardonnay, Petit Manseng and Chenin Blanc, all from old, uncloned vines. Besides their own uncloned Cabernet Sauvignon planted in 1972, the red wine boasts of Cabernet Franc, Malbec, Merlot, Tannat, Petit Verdot, Carmenère, Syrah and Pinot Noir in varying quantities according to the vintage. And the rare grapes? They are added to the wines like a dash of salt and pepper or, as Basile describes it, “The way colours are blended and used in a painting — sometimes invisible, but adding to the whole.”

Basile explains that the Moulin or Daumas Gassac’s second portfolio was born in the 1990s, when the EU’s vine-pull programme spurred vine growers in the Languedoc to uproot their vines.

In order to preserve Languedoc viticulture, Aimé offered to help them continue growing their vines by buying their grapes, and so the brand Moulin de Gassac was born.

“We joined hands with 120 vine growers situated around our estate — an amphitheatre of vineyards facing the Mediterranean — all grown to Daumas Gassac’s high standards,” explains Basile. Today 2.4 million bottles of Moulin de Gassac wines go out to 70 countries around the world, amounting to 40% of Daumas Gassac sales. “These are”, says Basile, “wines born of hard work, environment-enriching practices and for giving pleasure!” The Moulin portfolio includes five individual sub-brands of which the Grands Terroirs selection with their arresting hand-drawn labels by artist Florence Billet, includes Faune and Albaran, now in India.

Aimé and Véronique's sons co-own the property and guard their parents' heritage — a decision each has made of his own volition, Véronique affirms. Each handles a different responsibility but all are united for a single cause — the legacy they have inherited. Adds Basile, "We know we are not looking for the good. We are looking for the great."