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Genius of Gigondas

Louis Barruol brings a sharp mind and a deft hand to Château de St.-Cosme

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It was the most frantic year of Louis Barruol's life. In 1992, he was 23, and pursuing an MBA in Paris, far from his home in the Southern Rhône Valley town of Gigondas. But his father, Henri, who had managed their family winery, Château de St.-Cosme, for 35 years, had suffered a stroke two years earlier and could no longer do the job. The economy was in a slump, and prices for bulk wines like the ones St.-Cosme produced had crashed.

"I had to take over," says Louis Barruol. "I had wanted to finish school and take a few years to travel and try things. A couple more years, and we might have been bankrupt." He quickly shifted how his father's team worked in the vineyards, changed the aging regimen in the cellars, and began bottling St.-Cosme's wines. He hustled to sell them in France and abroad and also managed to earn his degree by commuting weekly between Paris and Gigondas for a year. "It was difficult—there were so many things I did not know," he says. "It was great!"

Barruol loves a challenge. Fast-forward to 2013 and he can be proud of what he has accomplished so far: He has transformed St.-Cosme from an anonymous bulk wine source to the top winery in Gigondas, and arguably into one of the best estates in the Southern Rhône. Building on his father's work, he has allowed his vineyards to sing. In the cellars, he has not been afraid to innovate, incorporating ideas from other regions. And at age 44, he has plenty of time to build on his projects outside of Gigondas, with wines from the Northern Rhône, neighboring districts in the Southern Rhône and even New York's Finger Lakes region.

The results speak loud and clear: Château de St.-Cosme's 2011 estate Gigondas earned an outstanding 93 points on *Wine Spectator's* 100-point scale. The single-vineyard wines Le Claux 2011 and Hominis Fides 2011 each received 95 points. The 2011 Le Poste earned 96 points; the 2010 Le Poste earned 99 points. (For a look at more recent releases from Barruol, see the chart below.)

Barruol's wines alone are a gift to Gigondas, proof that this appellation, long in the shadow of nearby Châteauneuf-du-Pape, is capable of greatness. But Barruol isn't content just setting an example. He is a team player, sharing ideas with other promising young producers. He even helped write the book on Gigondas—he was a driving force behind a recently published, 500-page guide to the appellation.

Louis Barruol is still frantic. And he thinks that's great.

Standing 5 feet 9 inches, with a lanky build, Barruol wears spectacles and keeps his black hair closely cropped. His green eyes and arching eyebrows move quickly when he talks animatedly, which is often, happy to chat about anything from history to geology, chemistry, politics, rugby or music. And he usually knows what he's talking about.



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When he's not making wine, he's practicing his cello or playing on a local rugby squad.

Surveying Le Poste, the terraced vineyard perched uphill from the winery, Barruol shows no signs of tackling anyone, though perhaps he'd reconsider if someone called Gigondas "the poor man's version of Châteauneuf-du-Pape." It's a common misperception. The villages sit just 15 miles apart, and the red wines of each are made primarily from Grenache, with smaller doses of Syrah, Mourvèdre and other grapes.

But Châteauneuf lies on the valley floor, on the banks of the Rhône. Its soils were shaped over centuries by the river's waters. The *terroir* of Gigondas was created by the violent birth of the limestone peaks known as the Dentelles de Montmiral, which rose up some 50 million years ago.

St.-Cosme's 44 acres lie in a small valley formed by a stream—the topography helps pull a breeze down from the mountains, keeping the grapes dry. The exposure is north by northwest—a good thing in sunny Provence. "We lose two hours of sun every morning, as it rises behind the Dentelles," says Barruol. "This slows ripening. We pick our grapes in October, while in Châteauneuf they pick in mid-September. We get mature tannins, while our sugars are lower."

Barruol can spend hours explaining the differences among his terroirs—from soil to microclimate to history. His passion is understandable and fueled by a voracious curiosity. He has devoted his life to Gigondas, and to St.-Cosme. For 18 generations, since 1590, his family has lived here and maintained this place. "I don't feel like I own this estate," he says.

Much of St.-Cosme has a unique soil type, even for Gigondas—Tortonian marl, a mix of clay and limestone laid down 11 million years ago. This is the only place it has come to the surface in the Rhône. The next example can be found in Barolo and Barbaresco, on the other side of the Alps. "When I learned that, it was a light going on. I often taste saltiness in my wine, the taste of the sea. I had no idea why. The other day, I was tasting with an Italian friend from Barbaresco and he said he tastes the same in his wines."

As Barruol started getting to know his vineyards' character, he began creating cuveés. Valbelle, first produced in 1993, is 90 percent Grenache and 10 percent Syrah from five 80-year-old parcels on various parts of the estate. Hominis Fides, which he added in 2003, comes from a parcel on the estate's southern edge containing Grenache planted in 1902 in a few feet of sand, with solid limestone underneath. The sand drains quickly, giving the wine finesse.

Barruol believes Le Claux has elegance too, but also plenty of power. This Grenache was planted in 1870 on limestone and marl. Barruol first made it as a separate wine in 2006. The Le Poste bottling was also added in 2006. Its soils are similar, but it sits higher up the hill. Henri replanted it in 1963; Louis believes it is the best site on the property and will only improve as the vines age. Le Poste also produces white grapes, from old Clairette vines; the wine is labeled Côtes du Rhône because there is no official white Gigondas.

In the vineyard, Barruol practices organic viticulture, and recently he's been experimenting with biodynamics, though he does not follow it strictly. He plans to try it for a few more years. And while his estate is certified organic, it doesn't appear on his labels—what matters to him is that his vines are in good health. He tries to spray copper sulfate (to prevent mildew) as little as possible.

Barruol is not the first to believe this is special ground. He has unearthed a 5,000-year-old ax in one of the vineyards; part of his cellars were built by the Romans in the year 100. Gigondas was a popular spot for retired legionnaires, who built villas on the hillsides and planted olive trees and vines. Barruol has uncovered 25 vats carved out of stone for winemaking—small channels connecting them show that Roman winemakers used gravity to move their wines too.

Just uphill from Le Poste sits another sign of St.-Cosme's history—the chapel it's named for. Dedicated to Saints Côme and Damien, Greek physicians and early Christians, the chapel was built in the early 12th century. Barruol's

great-great-uncle restored it in 1927, and Henri restored it again in the 1970s. (Henri also drew a sketch of the building for the winery's labels.)

When he was 15 years old, Barruol decided that he would live in Gigondas and follow in his father's footsteps. "I was in love with this place," he says. "It was not a wine decision—when I was 15, obviously, I was drinking almost no wine. I was in love with our history, this culture we have." It was also partly due to necessity; none of his four siblings expressed an interest in the winemaking life—he was the youngest, and the last chance.

Henri offered sage advice. "[My father] had an artisanal approach," says Barruol. "But he married that to a sound technical background. So when I decided to take over, he said, 'You don't need to go to school for winemaking or grapegrowing. You'll learn that from me. We need you to go to university to learn how to develop this business.'" Henri already knew that the future lay in bottling the wines.

While he spent the early years simply trying to keep St.-Cosme afloat, Barruol did eventually journey to other wine regions. "The more you travel, the more you love home," he says. And what started as a sense of duty for his home developed into an appreciation for wine, too. "I began to think for myself and drink and learn to appreciate wines from everywhere. I began to understand how fantastic wine is. I thought, 'Huh, I may have made a great decision.' If this had been a vegetable farm, I still would have taken over. I loved the place. But I was lucky it was wine."

A region to the north especially inspired him. "Burgundy is a place where you learn. Pinot is the most difficult grape to handle; the winemaking has to be perfect. As for Gigondas, I realized the potential was very high, but I had a lot to learn." He also faced challenges in spreading the gospel of Gigondas. "Back then, Gigondas was nothing," says Barruol. "When I visited England early on, trying to sell my wines, they asked if I could put 'great wine of the Rhône Valley' on my labels, because Gigondas meant nothing."

St.-Cosme has seen centuries of ups and downs. Two of the oldest vineyards Barruol cultivates—Le Claux and Hominis Fides—were almost ripped out by some of his relatives at the start of the 20th century because the vines were not producing high yields. But when all three of those brothers died fighting in World War I, the property passed to their sister, who spared the vines. Later, in 1949, Louis' grandfather was killed, leaving the estate in his grandmother's hands. The men she hired to manage it robbed her blind until 1957, when a young furniture maker named Henri Barruol married her daughter Claude and told the caretakers to leave quickly and never come back.

From the top of the hill, St.-Cosme appears orderly and tidy. Vines dot the hillsides on both sides of the valley. Three buildings—the winery and two houses—stand on the northern side, with a green lawn and a playset Barruol and his wife, Cherry, bought for their three kids in front of the lower house.

But as Barruol heads into the winery and then downstairs to its lower level, it becomes clear the heart of his operation is the maze of chambers underneath. The latest addition was finished just a few years ago, the family built other parts in the 17th century, and of course there are the Roman cellars. The architecture mirrors his winemaking, a mix of tradition and innovation. Barruol believes most of the things his father did are sound, but he had to test them all first to see for himself. And he has incorporated other ideas picked up on his travels.

For the red wines, he puts whole clusters into concrete tanks and a few wooden vats, mixing the grape varieties. "I have not destemmed anything since 1994—I experimented with destemming for one vat that year. My father said, 'Don't do it. It will be the worst vat in the cellar.' It was so uninteresting. It had no soul of Gigondas." Green stems can make wine bitter, but the slow ripening in Gigondas allows stems to turn brown before harvest; in the vat, they soak up some alcohol and add tannins. The wines are a bit more elegant and spicy than those made from destemmed grapes, Barruol believes.

During fermentation, Barruol leaves the wine on the skins for three weeks, doing daily pump overs. He also performs *pigeage* (punching down the cap) two to four times, something he learned in Burgundy. "There's no *pigeage* [in Gigondas]. Of course, I learned quickly you can't do 15 *pigeage* here—in Burgundy they do 15 to 20.

You can extract too much here."

Barruol also consulted with friends in Burgundy on how to age wines and source oak barrels. He matures his estate Gigondas, which represents two-thirds of Château de St.-Cosme's 8,000 cases a year, in used barrels. The single-vineyard wines go into a mix of new and old oak. He ages his wines on the lees, which can help integrate the flavors more rapidly and protect the wine from spoilage.

Upstairs in the new cellar, there are several large stainless-steel tanks. Barruol built this part in 1997 as he started his négoce business. A key reason was financial. His siblings each owned an equal share of St.-Cosme and paid taxes on them. Louis wanted to reward their loyalty and safeguard the estate's future by buying them out. "I had to restore the buildings too, replant vineyards," he says. "St.-Cosme was a big boat with a very small mast. No power."

The majority of the 11,000 cases he produces for the St.-Cosme label (Château de St.-Cosme is the label for the estate wines) is Côtes du Rhône—two reds and a white—but those are recent additions. The wines that inspired the project are Northern Rhône. "I liked the challenge of Northern Rhône wines—all these new *terroirs* I had never tried. I like to be creative and take on new projects."

In Gigondas, Syrah typically works only in later-ripening spots, but in the cooler Northern Rhône, with its schist and granite soils, the variety sings. "I am passionate about geology and finding great places combined with the right growers is a puzzle I like," he says.

Today, St.-Cosme offers a Côte-Rotie, Crozes-Hermitage, Hermitage, St.-Joseph and a white from Condrieu, all made in leased space up north and moved in barrel to Gigondas the following spring.

It sounds like sacrilege for him, but Barruol even added a Châteauneuf-du-Pape to the négoce a few years ago. He sources the grapes from La Crau, the famous rocky vineyard west of town.

Then there are the wines that let Barruol play. In 2011, he began producing a Riesling and two Pinot Noirs in New York's Finger Lakes, sourcing grapes from the east side of Seneca Lake. Why? Because he loves Riesling and Pinot and wanted to try working with them. For a few years, he also produced some wines with three fellow Southern Rhône winemakers. And he has partnered with importer Kermit Lynch to produce a line of Northern Rhône wines from small vineyards. Lynch helps with the final blend, and the wines are bottled under the Louis & Cherry Barruol label.

Then there's his vin de France, called Little James' Basket Press. From a *solera* system, each bottling contains 50 percent of the newest vintage, plus a blend of previous vintages, dating to the initial 1999. "It's my wine of freedom," he says.

For Barruol, there is always time for an intellectual challenge, whether a book, a *terroir*, a cellar technique. He may be safeguarding centuries of tradition, but that doesn't mean he can't push the envelope and have fun. It's another chapter in St.-Cosme's history.

Little James is named for Barruol's son, now 15, the same age Louis was when he decided to stay at St.-Cosme. "He has no idea what he wants to do," says his father, walking past the playset his son used to swing from. "But he has time. You cannot force your children—they have to want it. James is great—really smart."

Knowing his father, that's hardly a surprise.

Recent Releases From Louis Barruol

Barruol makes wine under three labels: the estate label Château de St.-Cosme; the négociant line St.-Cosme; and his New York project, Forge Cellars. WineSpectator.com members may access complete reviews using the online Wine Ratings search.

Score Wine Price

Château de St.-Cosme

- 97 Gigondas Valbelle 2010 \$65
- 96 Gigondas Le Poste 2011 \$117
- 95 Gigondas Hominis Fides 2011 \$117
- 95 Gigondas Le Claux 2011 \$102
- 93 Gigondas 2011 \$47

St.-Cosme

- 95 Châteauneuf-du-Pape 2009 \$51
- 93 Condrieu 2011 \$84
- 93 Côte-Rôtie 2011 \$78
- 92 St.-Joseph 2011 \$39
- 91 Côtes du Rhône White 2011 \$22
- 90 Côtes du Rhône 2011 \$16
- 90 Crozes-Hermitage 2011 \$34

Forge

- 91 Riesling Finger Lakes Dry 2011 \$25