



CHATEAU DE SAINT COSME

6th newsletter by Louis Barruol 2017

For the first time in a long time, we have two stellar vintages in a row – the 2015 and 2016 – at least in Gigondas. It is such a rare occurrence that it deserves to be mentioned and it feels like having neatly stacked away two large and magnificent piles of wood for the winter. But more of that later. Although great vintages are perhaps the least challenging, they are not necessarily those that help the wine grower progress the most. As they say, when the going gets tough, the tough get going and the lack of a challenge often fails to spur people on to give their best. Cutting to the chase, being able to discipline oneself when everything is easy is absolutely vital. Finding new ideas, improving upon those tiny details – all of which are important – when the wine virtually makes itself, is the right attitude to have. Not being quite satisfied with what nature has given us, even when it has been generous, is the most worthwhile tack to take, and ultimately shows deference to nature. Anyone who claims to be a good wine grower must be thoroughly consumed by the desire to learn. We must want to learn over and over again, right through to the end. This initially implies knowing how to ‘take’ and setting store by what others tell you, whatever their age or background. The desire to learn logically goes hand in hand with the ability to ‘give’ and share. The learning process, which is the ultimate way of sharing, obviously overlaps the wine grower’s own, much more personal, learning curve that stems directly from his vineyards and is therefore unique. To sum up, the learning process involves speech, whereas the grower’s learning curve is achieved through thought.

My father, who taught me almost everything (the ‘almost’ will make him smile!), began at the beginning, i.e. by passing on his sense of observation to me. In more academic disciplines than wine, this would be referred to as a ‘spirit of analysis’. It helps us to be inquisitive about everything and perhaps, one day, to have a good idea. The focus is not on the wine grower but rather on how the wine grower tends his vines and cares for his wines. I am truly grateful to the people who have been generous enough to share their experience with me and thus helped me to grow.

For the first time this year, we produced wines from our Viognier and Picpoul vines planted on limestone soils in Violès. There is always a measure of uncertainty when you make your first wines from a specific site. In this case, the initial results are very compelling and full of promise for the future. The wines already display the archetypal finesse, balance and drive of limestone. In 2017, we will be producing the first wines from our field selections of Marsanne and the results will probably be very interesting too.

The first shredded organic plant material and organic matter were taken to our recently completed composting area. We will of course be using biodynamic techniques on the 200 tonnes of compost. The first few weeks alone produced some amazing results with the compost fermenting at 70°C. We will be working on it for 11 months, during which time it will lose 30% of its volume through dehydration. This is the kind of compost we were lacking at Saint Cosme and it will be another step forward for the life and structure of our soils.

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**Découvertes en Vallée du Rhône 2017, 10 avril 2016, AVIGNON, Palais des Papes, Grande Audience, A101
Prowein 2017, du 19 au 21 mars, Halle 13-B54 , DÜSSELDORF , Allemagne**

Wines from the southern Rhone in 2015

The wine grower's life is one of constant adjustment to what nature provides. And Mother Nature certainly knows how to spice things up, just to remind us that she is the one calling the shots! Working in cycles, whose length depends on the distance we observe them from, nature plays with our morale, our jubilations, our frustrations and our hopes. After an unbroken series of good vintages (2009-2010-2011-2012), we had a couple of cold, late-ripening years (2013-2014) then two more very good vintages, in 2015 and 2016. This succession of cycles is unnerving and reminds us that in the universe, everything is cyclical; it is a kind of microscopic image of a much wider picture. Over several decades, these cycles strangely recur in a fairly regular pattern. Could 2015 be an accurate rendition of a very good vintage nowadays despite the fact that the weather has very little in common with that of the southern Rhone in the 1960s-1970s? The wines show ripeness, fullness, length, fruit, aromatic intensity and balance. They are also very elegant. 2015 Gigondas were obviously wines for ageing and although we saw them progress significantly, there is nothing like the final verdict that comes after blending with wines in the tanks ready to be bottled: they have regained all the fruitiness and soil expression revealed during fermentation. The site-specific wines reveal their inherent character to perfection and the classic Gigondas has all the fleshiness and depth of the 2010s.

Ultimately, the 2015s remind me of the excellent 1990s, a year that also produced some lovely fruit. Both vintages have the same power of seduction combined with the structure, texture and depth of great years.

Wines from the northern Rhone in 2015

2015 was an excellent vintage in the South, and particularly in Gigondas, but the northern Rhone also enjoyed a fantastic year. Deeply-coloured, fleshy, complex and profound Syrahs abound in the cellars of the good estates. When I look at the weather patterns in great vintages in the northern Rhone, it strikes me that, contrary to conventional wisdom, this region likes the heat. The hot, dry summers of 1997, 1999, 2003 and 2009 produced some absolutely magnificent wines, especially in Côte-Rôtie. Syrah, which can occasionally be a little austere, is completely transformed into a varietal with the ability to develop amazing softness. At the start of the maturation process, the 2015s seemed quite upright and tannic but ageing rounded them out considerably and made them more civilised. In fact, it would even be fair to say that they gained body and exuded a greater impression of concentration than when they started out in life. I have often witnessed this phenomenon with the top Hermitage and Côte-Rôtie wines. It always amazes me and I have come to the conclusion that we have to learn to trust vineyard sites with a good pedigree. Years like this are often associated with high alcohol content but in actual fact, this was not the case. I think the dryness slightly slowed down the ripening process in the Syrahs, which must have felt a little challenged: when the roots have to survive in granite or schist soils, lack of water can soon become restrictive. Aromatic expression in the 2015s was shaped by the weather: the wines reveal themselves seamlessly and are multidimensional, with intensity and precision. Texture on the palate is incredible, especially in Hermitage where the softness reached by the Syrahs is a true celebration of pleasure. Truly, the 2015s will go down in history in the northern Rhone Valley.



A cursory glance at the 2016 vintage

Whereas the 2015 vintage was a fairly prolific, superlative vintage, 2016 was a great but low-yielding harvest, at least in Gigondas. After an unusually dry, temperate winter, spring was a little fickle. It wasn't really a bad spring, but switched constantly from heat to rain, which didn't make our job any easier. Bud burst was wonderful, and in a way reminiscent of what we had witnessed in 2014 and 2015. But at the end of spring, flowering suddenly reminded us that Grenache is a fickle grape variety which often flowers very badly. The resultant crop was therefore small. Obviously it wasn't as awful as 2013 and we are not complaining: our primary concern is that we have a very good vintage. As it happens, it is difficult to say whether the 2015 or the 2016 will be the best vintage in Gigondas. As always, time will tell. In Châteauneuf-du-Pape, there is no doubt that 2016 is a better vintage than 2015. An exceptionally dry summer – with no rain from July 22 to September 25 – paved the way for impeccably healthy grapes, but reduced the amount of juice, which explains why this year's wines are firm and dense. The firmness prompted us to seek out roundness in the wines. When you ferment whole clusters, you need to be mindful in years when the ratio of juice-to-skin-to-stems is slightly different. Ultimately, the wines show wonderful freshness and I believe they have the capacity to develop during maturation.

In the northern Rhone, yields were higher than the ones we witnessed in the South, aside from Hermitage hill which was affected by hail. Côte-Rôtie wines show lots of balance and length and schist expression is perfect. They should truly reveal their magnificence during maturation. Saint-Joseph may well scale the heights of quality this year but the most extraordinary northern appellation in 2016 is certainly Condrieu, and what wines they are! Slightly higher yields were very beneficial to Viognier which ripens too fast when yields are too low. Consequently, I was able to produce the best Condrieu ever in the twenty years I have been making it. 2016 is indeed my twentieth vintage of Condrieu and I have never seen such quality – it is truly marvellous.

You obviously now realise that the 2016 vintage, and its stable mate, the 2015 vintage, were a real joy for us and I hope this feeling will be accurately reflected in the wines you will taste.

News of Forge Cellars, our American estate

You probably know that in 2011, I created a small wine estate in the United States, called Forge Cellars. It is located in the North of New York State, in the Finger Lakes, home of the extensive glacial lakes shaped by an abundance of granite and clayey shale soils. I started the estate from scratch with two American friends, Rick Rainey and Justin Boyette. We identified the magnificent potential for Riesling and Pinot Noir in a region that is cold yet nevertheless boasts a fairly long-standing tradition of wine growing. We built our winery and are gradually planting a magnificent hillside of clayey shale known as Matthews Road, located on the eastern shores of Lake Seneca. Our vines face towards the sunset and enjoy a unique micro-climate for the region – a continuous north-westerly wind provides healthy conditions and prevents frost. We grow field selections produced from old vines. We use whole cluster fermentation and native yeasts. We are driven by the same overriding respect for the soils and sense of place here as we are in Gigondas. The cool climate allows for lengthy 'hang-time' on the vines, mirroring the guiding principle of my grandfather who believed that without this, a consummate wine could not exist. We pick our Rieslings around October 25 – their potential alcohol level barely reaches 12.5° but they are golden and magnificently ripe, enabling us to ferment them as dry wines; our Rieslings contain no residual sugar. This is of paramount importance as it means they show clear, pure sense of place and age incredibly well. Our Pinot Noirs are fermented as whole clusters in large wooden tanks and matured in small Burgundy casks. The wine is not filtered and it fully encapsulates the charm of good Pinot with a freshness that only cool climates can produce...

Some of you already buy these wines. My wish henceforth is that all my customers buy Forge wines – available 'ex-Saint Cosme' – because I am as dedicated to producing them as I am to making my Rhone wines. For 2017, we are offering the 2015 Riesling Classique and the 2015 Pinot Noir – both from a very ripe and highly expressive vintage. Enjoy!

Louis Barruol, January 2, 2017

