Oratoire St-Martin

Domaine de l'Oratoire St-Martin, Cairanne.

St-Martin's Oratory! Photo by Maya Pedersen.

Profile

Brothers Frédéric and François Alary are the tenth generation of winemakers to tend this estate in the Côtes-du-Rhône over the last 300 years (the family history goes back to 1692). They succeeded their father in 1984, and cultivate 27HA of some of the best plots in Cairanne.

Cairanne is a village north of Gigondas blessed with good terroir and a group of tremendously talented and hard-working winemakers. The Alarys' vineyards are located on steep hills of two main lieux-dits, les Douyes and St-Martin.

The estate takes its name from the small chapel (oratoire) that stands in this last plot. The soil is very rocky, with a high proportion of limestone and two types of clay, yellow on the surface and blue deeper down. Les Douyes' exposure is east, north-east and well-suited to growing white grapes and Syrah, all early maturing varietals. St-Martin is warmer, facing south, south-west and that's where Grenache and Mourvèdre grow. Most of the vines are over 40 years old and some are reaching their 100s.

The estate produces mainly red wines, from the varietals 60% Grenache, 30% Mourvèdre, and 10% Syrah. The proportion of Mourvèdre is unusually high for the region, but this very late ripening grape is key to balancing the high alcohol often reached by Grenache, and brings aromatics and structure to the wines. 18% of the wines made are white, and the varietals are 50% Marsanne, 30% Roussanne, 15% Clairette and 5% Viognier. A little bit of Rosé is made every year from saignées of the red grapes.

Vineyard work is organic, although the Alary brothers may prefer the term traditional, since they just continue to plow as their father did, and use no pesticides, herbicides or chemical fertilizers. They plow every other row to deepen the root system, and the second row is sown with grass that competes with the vines and reduces their vegetation.

They prune short and, with old vines and green harvests if necessary, get low yields: 30HL/HA in 1998, 25HL/HA in 1999, 32HL/HA in 2000. The harvest is picked by hand with strict sorting in the vines and on a sorting table at the winery. The grapes are destemmed, crushed and macerated with pigeages for the Cairannes and pumping over for the Côtes-du-Rhône.

Interview

This interview with Frédéric Alary took place at his home in Carainne in July, 2012.

Tell us about *Oratoire St-Martin*'s history.

The Alary family has been in Cairanne for 300 years. 10 generations can be traced back to 1692, each one contributing to who we are today. Over the years the estate has grown, and we are the third generation to live only off of viticulture and wine. I work with my brother François, who spends the majority of his time in the vines. I'm more present in the cellar, but we are both very polyvalent and share all of the work. We both came back to work with my father in 1984. François had studied mechanics (which ended up being great for tractor maintenance), and I had studied viticulture/oenology.

We work 27 hectares of vines, all in the commune of Cairanne. 6 h are in white, the rest is in red. The whites (Marsanne, Roussane, Clairette and Grenache Blanc), are mostly on siliceous clay and exposed to the East and North. All precocious red grapes are exposed to the East, the rest full South or South-West. We have a majority of Grenache, but also a lot of Mourvèdre. We're also replanting a lot of old varieties like Vaccarèse, Counoise, Muscardin and Terret Noir. These are some of 13 Chateauneuf grapes, and we feel they bring complexity to the wines.

How did the estate shift from polyculture to viticulture?

Before my grandfather, the family did all types of stuff. For example, at one point they cultivated the garance plant, which was used as a natural red dye. My great-great grandfather also cultivated silk worms before synthetic silk existed. But my grandfather found his passion in the vineyards, and things haven't changed since.

Did anything significantly change when you got involved?

We've always been attracted to a more natural style of agriculture. At the time, the term organic did not exist. My father and grandfather had worked this way, and after some trial and error on our part, we realized this was the best way to do things. We use copper and sulfur in the vineyards to combat

mildew and odium, but use absolutely no herbicides or pesticides, and only use organic fertilizers. In the cellar, no sulfur is added during vinification, we never add commercial yeasts, tartaric acid or tannins. We don't filter because we don't want to damage the wines, and we only add a tiny dose of sulfur at bottling so the wine can preserve itself while shipped.

And you've worked this way since your beginnings?

When I got out of oenology school, I thought I was really good at making wine! I applied this knowledge in the cellar, only to realize that my wines were way worst than my father's! My dad, who had studied philosophy and literature, was making a better wine than me! It took me a year to understand that I needed to unlearn everything I'd been taught in school; I asked my grandfather and father how they worked, and followed in their footsteps.

In the end, wine makes itself in the vineyard, not the cellar. I'm here to recuperate the grapes, and if the work in the vineyards was good and the climate was favorable, you will always produce something authentic.

You've been working biodynamically for the last 6 years. What made you take that decision?

The first time I read a Rudolph Steiner book was about 15 years ago. At first I really disliked it, because of how esoteric it seemed. It felt like if you worked in biodynamics, you were in a sect. But many incredible vignerons -whose wines I love- work this way, so it made me more open to the idea. I consider us to be pragmatic biodynamists: we see what works and what doesn't, but we aren't too caught up in the philosophy. We believe in what we see, and we see the wines becoming more mineral and acidic, so we're happy. We're not trying to push things much further though; organic and biodynamic agriculture is not our goal, it's our tool. If this is the way to make the best wine possible, then we will continue to do so.

You have a pretty elaborate way of sorting out grapes...

We think it's very important to select the best grapes, so we sort them three times. The harvester makes his initial selection, then puts their grapes on a table where two or three people go over them again. Whatever they've selected, we put on a vibrating table and really make sure we've only got the best of the best going into the tanks. We're perfectionists!

How do you feel about your A.O.C? Do your wines fit? Does it matter to you?

Our grandparents created this A.O.C, so we don't want to abandon it. At the same time, you need to avoid getting bogged down by useless rules and regulations. So it then becomes important to try and change these rules: we're trying to eliminate machine harvesting, lower allowed sulfur levels, diminish pesticide use...

How do you feel about "*natural wine*"?

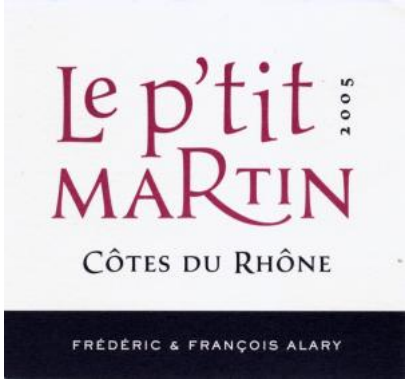
Ahhhh, good question! "*Natural Wine*" means everything and nothing all at once! My definition is: wine that comes from grapes. But I'm not part of the whole sulfur debate; we actually make a sans souffre cuvée, but adding minimal sulfur at bottling to protect the wine a little is not something I'm against. The more grapes you have in the bottle, the better! But the most important is terroir: I don't think ours are better than anyone else's, but they are certainly unique and we want the wine to reflect them as authentically as possible.

What do you like to drink?

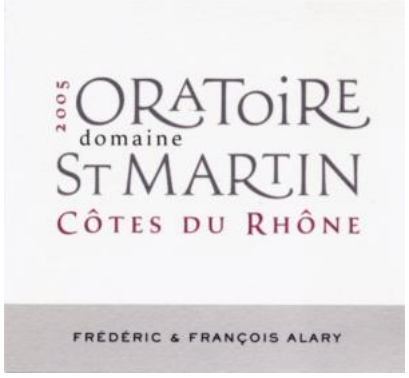
I like everything that's good! But I must admit I like easy drinking wines. I like it when you drink a glass and it makes you want to drink another. I know that makes me sound like an alcoholic, but the point is to take great pleasure in each sip! I love smaller appellations like the Jura and the Beaujolais.

We never drink our wines during meals. They stay in the cellar, where we taste them and observe their evolution. It's fun for us to drink wines from other appellations or countries; it keeps your mind open, and your palate fresh. It's great to see what others are doing.

Wines



Côtes-du-Rhône P'tit Martin rouge:
60% Grenache, 30% Cinsault, 10% Syrah, 20 yrs old vines, 45HL/HA, aged in vats for 8 months, meant for early drinking.



Côtes-du-Rhône "Oratoire" rouge:
80% Grenache, 20% Syrah, 30 yrs old vines, 45HL/HA, maceration 6 days, aged in vats for 6 months, no filtration.

Cairanne Réserve des Seigneurs Rouge:
60% Grenache, 10% Syrah, 30%
Mourvèdre, 50 yrs old vines, 38HL/HA, maceration 12 days, aged for 9 months in vats, no fining, no filtration.

Cairanne Haut-Coustias rouge:
60% Mourvèdre, 20% Syrah, 20% Grenache, 65 yrs old vines, maceration 18 days, aged for 24 months in Burgundy oak barrels, no fining, no filtration.

Côtes-du-Rhône "Oratoire" blanc (NOT PICTURED):
50% Roussanne, 45% Clairette, 5% Viognier, 30 yrs old vines, 45HL/HA, direct pressing, vinified and aged in vats.