

Mas des Chimères

Interview

This interview with Guilhem Dardé took place at L'Herbe Rouge in February 2012.

Tell us about Mas des Chimères.

We're located in Octon, a small village bordering the Salagou lake. It's about 50 km from the Mediterranean, and we work with some very old soils. They're composed of compacted clay, and have a deep red color because of how rich they are in iron. These soils are 250 million years old, dating back to when the first vertebrae were coming out of the water! It's from here that our *Vin de Pays du Salagou* is made. Higher up, we are on a basaltic plateau that resulted from volcanic activity. This is where all the A.O.C *Terre du Larzac* comes from. We're a family estate started by my grandfather. When I was a kid it was in polyculture: we had vines but it was a very poor area so most people lived self sufficiently from their land.

Did your grandfather or father ever bottle independently?

It was very limited in my grandfather's days, mostly for friends and family. By the time my father had taken over, the farm became a monoculture of vines. Then the cave cooperative opened in 1943. My father joined it a year later and from then on we didn't make any wine at all. It was my decision to leave in 1993, the first year I vinified and bottled everything independently.

What led to that decision?

As with any important decision, a number of factors. I was 40 years old. I'd been working with the cave for 20 years and I began reevaluating myself and my work. At the cave, everyone was always talking about quality, but their words didn't match their actions! It was a time when I'd begun focusing on new varieties and smaller yields, and I was having a hard time selling them because the cave wanted them to be cheaper! It got so bad that I actually started selling my grapes at local markets. I also sold some fruits from our farm, and it helped me make ends meet...

But I also wanted to see things through with my work in the vines: when you work with a cave, you give them the grapes and they make the wine however they see fit. I wanted to know what my soils were truly capable of. It's funny because the grapes they paid me the most for at the cave ended up being the grapes I like with the least!

What's the work in the vines like?

Four of us work full time both in the vines and cellar (I work with my wife, daughter and one employee). During pruning season, we have two seasonal guys who help out. Everything is done by hand: our soils are particular and very hard to work because of all the basalt. These are some very hard volcanic rocks, so no mechanical work can be done (in fact it's restricted!). You need some serious equipment, because otherwise you'll always be bending and breaking it. I have to repair my stuff all the time! But the potential of these soils is incredible.

We're in a part of the Languedoc that is very isolated, so we're not sharing space in an intensive

monoculture. The vines coexist with the rest of nature, so we don't feel the pressure of fungal illness as much as some other regions. This is also because it's very dry here: there is no maritime climate whatsoever. So we don't really have any problems with mildew, and we don't have bug issues so no insecticides. Oidium is still a concern, so we stay vigilant.

Are you certified organic?

We've been working organically since the beginning but only got the certification in 2008. Certification wasn't really a concern for us because we've always made a point to meet the people we sell our wine to: they come visit the vines and the cellar, taste the wine, see how we do everything. Because they could see it with their own eyes, they didn't need the A.B on the label. In the last three years though, I've gotten an increased demand from our importers, most notably in Germany and Belgium, asking if we could add it because it makes the wine easier to sell. So as of 2011, I've added the a.b certification on the label.

What about the cellar?

We work with very little additives, and only use a little bit of SO₂ at bottling. Everything is made with native yeasts.

What's your take on "natural wine"?

There's one thing I really don't appreciate, and that's when people position their wines by comparing them to others. I don't like this attitude of opposition, and in my opinion, an "*organic wine*" or a "*natural wine*" isn't what should matter. The most important thing is the wine be good. It's a bit of a paradox in France right now, because there is actually a set of rules to follow in organic agriculture. Ideally it means that everything that goes into the vines and the wine should be healthy for the environment and for your health. This seems like common sense, but it's people like us that need to pay an association to confirm and validate our work!

Another big issue is sulfur. This last vintage, my daughter and I experimented, and it's the first vintage I've ever made some wine with no added sulfur. However, I used preselected yeasts for the fermentation, which led me to conclude that to make sulfur free wine, you need fermentation to happen quickly and to start immediately. But since I feel that indigenous yeasts are the true revealers of terroir, I want to keep using them. So the mentality now is that if everything goes great I won't add any sulfur, but if a problem occurs, there's no way I'm not going to use any and let my entire harvest go to the distillery.

What do you like to drink?

Like I said before, everything that's good! I love the wines of the Loire. What I have a hard time with are really oaky wines and really heavy wines. They might seem impressive at a tasting, but then you never end up drinking them. What really matters is if you want to drink more. My main criteria for liking a wine is if the bottle is empty on the table.