

Mas des Chimères

Visits

This visit to Mas des Chimères took place in July, 2012.



Words and photos by Jules Dressner.

Visiting the Dardés in Octon is always a pleasure. We've been working with them since Guilhem's first independently bottled vintage in 1993, and over the years they have become great friends. This summer we were able to catch up on life, do an extensive tour of the vineyards and taste upcoming releases from 2010 and 2011.

After freshening up and unloading our bags, we walked to the center of Octon to try some recently bottled wines in the official *Mas des Chimères Caveau*.



Because of a strong tourist presence year round, on premises sales are a huge part of the Dardé's business. Guilhem really likes selling wine this way: tasting and explaining each cuvée directly to the consumer, seeing their immediate reactions and knowing they are walking out happy is a very rewarding process for him.

After finishing up with a particularly chatty couple, Guilhem locked the doors and we began tasting.



2010 is a lighter, less austere vintage than 09, and the 11 *Oeillade* we tasted was playful and fruity. The 2010 *Caminarèm* had a beautiful nose, nice fruit and my tasting note says it was "*really cool*". The 10 white has great acidity, and a late harvest Muscat Petits Grains (don't ask for some, they barely make any) was a nice surprise.

As with most wines from the south of France, it's not uncommon to find alcohol percentages reaching 15%, particularly with the reds. The secret is making sure that this alcohol is balanced with acidity, fruit and structure as to not overpower the wine. Or as Guilhem puts it:

"Having fresh wines at 14,5 is not an art, it's a mystery!"

Mystery or not, the wines are indeed quite fresh. But unlike some of his neighbors who might be using winemaking techniques like carbonic maceration to lighten the tannic structure and alcohol, Guilhem's goal is simply to produce wines that reflect his terroir:

"We're evolving a little bit but I'm still trying to stay Languedoc. I want to drink my wines in 10-15 years."

We also talked about the great joys of working with the unknown:

"I think it's great how little we know about how our soils work. The best part of working organically is that it forces you to be attentive."

Lunch consisted of cheese pizzas, an ongoing joke on Guilhem's part. You see, as a kid I was a very picky eater, and on our first visit I refused to eat anything Palma had prepared. In such, they were forced to go grab me a pizza. In the last 20 years, I don't think I HAVEN'T eaten a cheese pizza on a visit to Octon. Anyway, after a DELICIOUS lunch, it was time for a long walk through the vines.



The landscape around the Salagou is defined by intensely red sand and clay (from all the iron and oxide in them).





The first site we saw were Cinsault vines. In this parcel, Guilhem has progressively been replanting in selection massale with picks from the last three years.





Guilhem pointed out problems he's having with these wild grasses growing between vines.



If you don't take care of these the competition becomes too much, and they are a pain in the ass.

Next were some Carignan vines which are rented.



Though they are in rows, this parcel was originally trained in gobelet. Unfortunately, the guy who was renting them prior cut the arms of the vines off to get in there with his tractor. Even then, the work was too hard for him so he gave them up.

"He worked these vines just long enough to mess them up!"

We continued our stroll over to some Grenache plantings.



Guilhem is completely discouraged by this particular area because he is surrounded by neighbors who are [going ham](#) with excessive chemical use. Here is a picture from a neighboring vine:



And another from a new planting:



"I might sell it one day; I'm sick of being surrounded by chemists."

Besides the lack of even a single blade of grass, you might have also noticed the irrigation tubes in both above pictures. While Guilhem has never irrigated, it is now the norm in the area. This surprised me since I hadn't noticed irrigation systems once in the Roussillon, but Guilhem explained that the vineyard's proximity to the Salagou lake means that most vigneronns are [goin' ham](#) with abusing all that available water. Many even irrigate the day before harvest!

"And if they had access to water like this in the Roussillon, they'd be doing it too!"

The final parcel we checked out were some Terret vines that had been worked chemically for years.



In the three years Guilhem's been converting them, this is the first time he's actually seen grass grow here.

After our long walk, we had a beer in Octon's center square. Zaggy was very tired from it all.



Later that night over dinner (no cheese pizzas!), the conversation was going strong. In a particularly quotable (and somewhat paraphrased) moment, Guilhem said something like:

"My son was 4 and had never been sick. His first year in elementary school, he was ill all the time. He was exposed to all types of germs and bacteria that he was never exposed to before. And if you're not full of antibiotics, you learn to adapt, to survive. Paul's been fine since. It's the same for the vines!"