Domaine de Majas

Vin de Pays des Côtes Catalanes from Domaine Majas.

Profile

Alain Carrère founded *Domaine de Majas* with his wife Agnès in 1992. Today, the estate represents 30 hectares, all in the commune of Caudiès-de-Fenouillèdes. The vineyards principally consist of Carignan grown on terroirs of schist, volcanic stone and mountainous limestone. Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Grenache, Syrah, Chenanson, Macabeu, Rolle and Chardonnay are also planted.

To this day, the vast majority of Côtes du Roussillon AOC is being mass produced by cave cooperatives. At some point in the early 80's, the cave's fees became so high that living solely off of viticulture became almost impossible, resulting in approximately 3/4 of the region's vines getting ripped out by their owners. As a way to "start fresh", those who continued growing grapes (like Alain's father) were then pressured by the caves -hoping to capitalize on the increasing demand for "Bordeaux style" wines- to widely replant Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc. While this strategy worked in the short term, it eventually backfired and furthered the AOC's bad reputation.

By the time Alain took over the the estate in the early 90's, he knew that selling his family's grapes to the cave was no longer an option. He started a small, independent estate (just 2 hectares), but very quickly inherited over 20 hectares of his father's vines. With a lot more wine to sell all of a sudden, it became increasingly difficult distributing locally.

After struggling to sell his entire stock for many years, a deal too good to be true came his way: a major french supermarket chain offered to buy the entirety of his production as an exclusive for their wine section. A contract was signed, and strict guidelines were set: the rosé had to taste like this, the white like that...

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Even worst, the bulk prices offered by the supermarket weren't paying the bills; in fact, the Carrère were actually losing money every year! Facing bankruptcy, Alain had to find a solution... Converting to organics briefly crossed his mind, but with no outside guidance or pre-existing market, he did not dare attempt it. But as fate would have it, a chance encounter with Tom Lubbe of Domaine Matassa would change everything.

After tasting the wines, Tom told Alain he would be willing to help them rebuild the estate from the ground up. The two verbally agreed on a partnership, and with Tom's guidance they immediately started converting all 30 hectares to organic viticulture, as well as eliminating all commercial yeasts, additives and excessive sulfur in the cellar. Tom also showed Alain the importance of highlighting different terroirs, a lesson that has produced great results.

Alain, completely reinvigorated, is grateful to have had this second chance. The wines being produced today are fresh, elegant and fun to drink. It's a pleasure working with them.

Interview

This interview with Alain Carrère took place in his cellar in July, 2012.

Tell us about Domaine de Majas.

I created Domaine de Majas in 1992. We started with 2 hectares, and today -through various purchases but also by reacquiring my parent's land- we find ourselves working 30 hectares. My wife Agnès and I run everything with the help of a part-time employee. Before I started working my father's vines, the grapes all went to the cave cooperative. I had no desire to continue in this path, preferring to see the whole process through. I wanted to master everything.

You grow a lot of different grapes, right?

For whites, we grow Macabeu, Rolle (Vermentino) and Chardonnay. For red, we have a majority of Carignan, produced from vines between 30 and 120 years old. But we also have Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Cabernet Sauvignon, Grenache, Syrah and a tiny bit Chenanson.

Many of these grapes are not part of the region's viticultural history. About 20 years ago, everything was being replanted with Bordeaux varieties. It's what was popular at the time, and because my family always worked on a large scale distribution, the mindset was to supply the increasing demand for "Bordeaux Style" wines. Today, almost no one makes 100% Cabernet Sauvignon anymore. Everything is blended.

Speaking to you earlier, it sounds like your whole area is caught in an on-going viticultural crisis... How has this affected you personally?

Up until the early 90's, the vast majority of the wine coming from our area was mass produced by cave cooperatives. Profit margins for the viticulturists were always low, but back then you could manage by bringing in very high yields. But the fees kept getting higher and higher, to the point were you weren't making enough money: if you sold an hectoliter for 40 euros, there would be 25 euros in fees. 15 Euros per hectoliter is just unlivable; as a result, a huge amount of vines were ripped out. About 3/4 of our viticultural potential. Gone! And now, it's almost like we are Astérix's village, the only ones resisting! We are down to 3 independent vignerons working 100 hectares...

Can we talk about your experience with a famous French supermarket?

Yes we can talk about it! When I was just getting started, we focused on selling our wines locally. But as quantities grew, we decided to sell to supermarkets. We did this for 4, 5 years, and every year, we were losing more and more money! It's basically an organized racket.

So of course, we started looking for a solution to dig ourselves out of this hole. That solution came around one bright day with the arrival of Tom Lubbe. He was interested in helping us, and we were interested in restarting from the ground up...

How did you meet Tom?

By coincidence. He had an employee at the time who was from our village. We knew the kid well, and one day we started talking about our interest in organic viticulture, the fear to move forward, etc So he talked to Tom, who came a first time to taste. After trying the wines, he immediately had

ideas on how to could work together. That very first day, we made a oral agreement to be partners, and the next day we we began the conversion to organic viticulture.

Prior to meeting Tom, had you already thought about making changes in your viticultural work?

Working organically had always been in the back of our minds, but with 30 hectares and no outside guidance, we didn't have the courage to give it a shot. Meeting Tom was the push we needed: he encouraged us to do it, and we decided to make it a reality.

Can we talk about the conversion and what's going on today? Tom said he's never seen better results!

It's important to note that while we definitely weren't working organically, we'd always limited pesticides to a minimum, and were already working the soil. So the change came, but it wasn't a complete 180. New techniques have been implemented, like letting grass grow for 6 months through the winter to let the soil rest.

The soil needed to restructure itself, but honestly we are lucky to be in a low rain region, where working organically is relatively easy. But things have changed, and one great example regards some of my very old vines, vines that had been worked conventionally for generations (25 years of herbicides). They were barely alive -it almost felt like they were on life support. Since we've converted to organics, it's like they've been freed! They are vibrant and productive again.

Why label your wines IGP des Côtes Catalanes instead of AOC Côtes du Roussillon?

You are right that we make a *Vin de Pays* even though our land is within the AOC. It's a choice we made because working under the AOC meant producing imposed blends with imposed varietals. We had a different vision, and by declassifying the wines, we can blend the way we want to.

What has changed in the cellar?

In the cellar, Tom showed us how to rethink everything, and we make wine almost exactly the way he taught us to. From the very start, Tom said: "*If we're going to do this, we're going to do this 100%. No yeasts, no manipulations and no excessive sulfur.*"

It's completely changed the wines. When we worked with the supermarket, we had strict directives: the rosé had to taste like candy, so we had a yeast for that. We had a Chardonnay yeast to extract that lemon citrus taste, etc.. There was no reflection of terroir, and the wines had zero personality. They were okay, but could have been coming from anywhere.

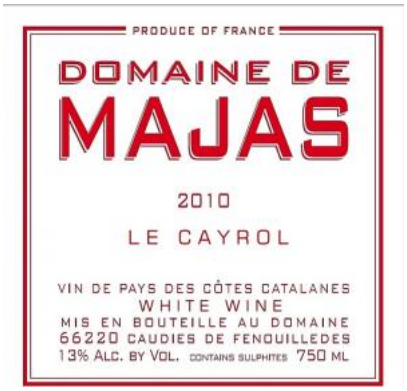
Fermenting with indigenous yeasts gave our wines a soul they never had before. They now have their OWN characteristics, and don't resemble any wine you'd find in a supermarket. It's also made us understand the merits of making parcel specific cuvées, like the *Clos de Ségas*. The fact that we can make such a quality wine exclusively from the grapes of this very, very old parcel, this brings me huge satisfaction and pride, because these were my great grandparent's vines!

What do you like to drink?

I like wines that talk to me, that want to tell me a story. Wines with character that are easy to drink. It's nice when you can taste a vigneron's hard work. Oh, and not too much wood!

Wines

Vdp "Blanc"



Vdp "Le Cayrol"