

Domaine Marcel Richaud

Côtes-du-Rhône from Domaine Marcel Richaud in Cairanne

Profile

Cairanne produces many of the best wines made in the vast Côtes-du-Rhône-Villages area due to a group of talented and dedicated winemakers and good terroir. Situated atop a range of low hills, with perfect exposure, looking east over the plain between the Aigues and Ouvèze rivers, the elevation ensures slightly cooler temperatures than on the Plan de Dieu, (as the plain below is known), where the summer heat is usually extreme.

Marie and Marcel Richaud run Domaine Marcel Richaud, with Marcel as winemaker and Marie as manager. Marcel tends 40 hectares of vines, his own or his neighbors', and vinifies the grapes of about half this surface. His estate is made up of plots inherited from his parents and of rented parcels, so some grapes are sold to the local coop or to négociants. There are less Grenache vines than on most estates of the area, just 25% of the varietals grown, and the same amount of Syrah and Mourvèdre. The remainder of the estate is 10% Cinsault and 15% various local varietals. This mix is one of the reasons why Richaud's wines have such great balance and finesse. Mourvèdre especially plays an important role in toning down the alcohol degree that Grenache easily reaches in a warm year: it requires more sun and later picking, and in Cairanne it is at the northern edge of its growing region. As is often the case, a varietal gives its best and most nuanced in such "border" territory, witness red Burgundies and red Touraines from Cabernet Franc.

The focus is on harvesting a healthy and ripe crop, and the wines are made in large capacity cement vats, each varietal vinified apart until a blend is done, about 8 months later. In 2000, a bottle and barrel cellar was built of yellow sandstone blocks (from the Pont du Gard quarry), and Marcel is taking great pleasure in experimenting with new and not so new casks on small cuvées.

The first cuvée is called Terres Aigues, from younger Grenache and Carignan vines growing on alluvial soil along the river Aigues. This wine is fresh and fruity, with lovely cherry notes. The Côtes-du-Rhône les Garrigues comes from a mix of plots and vines of Syrah and Grenache 10 to 40 years of age growing on red clay and round stones. It is spicy, ripe and peppery, with more structure. The cuvée of Cairanne aims to express the village's terroir, and is made from Grenache, Syrah and Mourvèdre from poor, stony clay-limestone mid-slope plots. It is rich, very peppery, with complex fruit and spices, licorice and cherries.

Interview

This interview with Marcel Richaud took place in Bordeaux in June 2011.

Tell us about your estate.

From a very young age I was passionate about viticulture and winemaking, and dropped out of high

school at 17 to study viticulture. I've always felt a very special energy in the vineyard, that my life was here in Cairanne, that wine from the region could be something special, and that I was destined to make it.

The estate was already in the family when I took over. When I first started I was working 14 hectares of my aunt's vines and I eventually inherited my father's land when he retired, an additional 15 hectares. This gave me a chance to save up a little money, and my first investment was to build a proper cellar. Once the cellar was finished, I then purchased some parcels with different terroirs than the parcels I already owned. One example would be L' Ebrescade, a clay terroir at the border of Rasteau. Over the years I've purchased about 20 hectares of vines, so I now find myself with around 55 hectares.

I own most of these but choose only to farm others. The vines I've inherited from father, for example, were also inherited by my three siblings, so I refuse to buy these because they are as much a part of them as they are a part of me. The same goes with my aunt's land that I started with. I prefer buying nice Cairanne terroirs that have no family tie so that I can carve out my own independence.

When you were first started, did you follow in your father's footsteps or use your own approach?

My father sold all of his grapes to a cave cooperative. The rules and politics of production meant high yields, mechanization and none of the work I do today: choosing to work with specific parcels and varieties, working organically and biodynamically, etc. So you could say that I fundamentally changed everything about the estate.

After deciding to break off from the cooperative, I was able to make my own wine that I could sell because of its high quality and production value. I also became heavily involved in what is now referred to as natural wine in France and abroad. As an advocate and member of the A.V.N (*Association des Vins Naturels*), I've believed for a long time that real wine is wine that sees no chemical treatment, no filtering, no commercial yeasts and no other technique that would specifically alter a wine.

I took over from my father at 20 and I've worked organically since day one. That was 37 years ago. At the time, I wasn't thinking about marketing or selling wine. What I was doing was accomplishing a childhood dream: to make a wine the way I wanted to make it with my name on the bottle.

In my early years, my father would often tell me: "You'll come back to selling to the cooperative when you're done having your fun." It took him a very long time to understand what I was doing and why I was doing it; for the first ten years, my family was very worried that I wasn't making wine like everyone else, that it was too much of a risk and that it could never work economically.

What's the work in the vines like?

We work organically so no chemicals, herbicides or pesticides. We work the soils. For me the vines are an entity that you cultivate, that you guide like you would a friend or fellow human being. Some people treat and heal others. My job is to treat and heal the earth and the vines. You need to take care of both because healthy soils lead to healthy vines.

And in the cellar?

The cellar is the accumulation and the payoff of what we've been doing all year in the vines. My

grandfather used to say something that I find very simple and beautiful: "The Earth only gives you what you make." He was right. You can't treat the earth like an entrepreneur. You have to work with it, to learn to love it.

In the 37 years of winemaking, I've tried everything. Pigeage, remontage, carbonic maceration, oak, cement, stainless steel[] you name it. And through years of constant experimentation, putting myself in question and trying new things, I've come to the conclusion that what really matters are the yields, the age of the vines and the terroir. If you want to make wines that express their terroir, wines that offer the customer a taste of a region, then you need to have excellent quality grapes, but you also need to make sure that the expression of those grapes that won't get altered with sophisticated vinification techniques.

How do you feel about the AOC system?

I am personally convinced that the AOC system is a very beautiful thing. The original idea of the AOC was a system that would highlight the culture and history of a region's agriculture, and I believe in its virtues. The problem is the way that most AOC's are run. The heads of the the AOCs are technicians that confuse the vigneron's work as a fitting within a category. In cases like mine, when you work with native yeasts, low sulfur and higher acidities you will often be penalized for deviating from a certain path, when in fact they should be encouraging us for making something you couldn't find anywhere else!

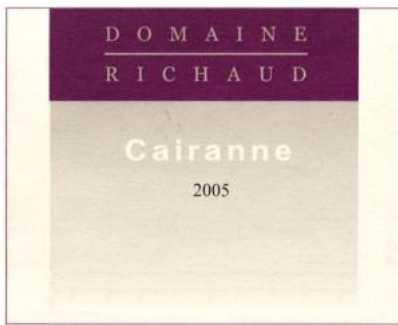
You mentioned earlier how you are part of the natural wine movement. As a vigneron who'd been making natural wine decades before there was even a term to describe it, how do you feel about the current climate of natural wine?

It's a movement I defend, but in no way am I a radical or an extremist. I acknowledge that nature does not always give us all the elements to respect the criteria to make a natural wine. On the other hand, the philosophy of working this way is a virtuous one worth defending. What we have with natural winemaking is artisanal winemaking as opposed to industrial winemaking. I think that customers are really starting to notice that compared to standard industrial wine, natural wines are original, rich and full of character.

I believe that in the future, we should be forced to put sulfur amounts on bottles. The customer has the right to know! And not just sulfur, but everything that goes into a bottle of wine. After all, we are obliged to list ingredients for every single nutritional product in the world. Wine is the only exception. This is no coincidence: a lot of people don't want you to know what goes into their bottle of wine.

If you use the legal limit of sulfur in my appellation, 190 mg per liter, you can make wine with rotten grapes. And why are we allowed to do this? Because this ensures that vignerons can continue to machine harvest, not worry about the quality of their grapes and keep big businesses running. So that's why I defend natural wine.

Wines



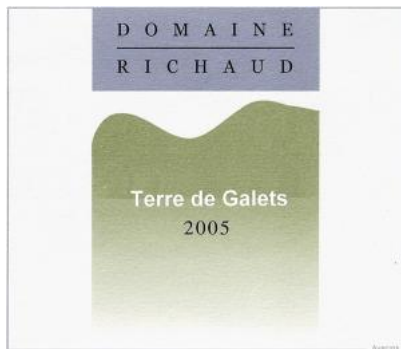
A.O.C Côtes du Rhône Villages Cairanne

Soil: Rocky surface on miocene

Grapes: 36% Grenache, 38% Mourvèdre, 18% Syrah, 8% Carignan

Vines: between 40 and 70 years old with yields of 30 to 35 hl/ha

Vinification: 80% is fermented and aged in concrete tanks, the other 20% in 600L barrels. Kept at stabilized temperatures in Richaud's underground cellar until bottling.

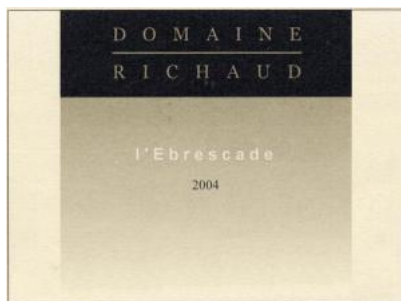


A.O.C Côtes du Rhône Villages Cairanne "Terre de Galets"

Soil: Red clay and small pebbles

Grapes: Grenache, Carignan, Mourvèdre

Vines: 30 years old with yields of 38-45 hl/ha



VdF "L'Ebrescade"

Soil: Sedimentary deposits from the Superior Tortonian (6.7 to 6.2 million years), dating back to the Miocene. These deposits came to be after the retreat of the sea. They are composed of rock formed by at least 50% of debris inferior to 2 mm in size and cement bound by silt and gravel from the massive Saint-Romain Rasteau.

Grapes: 37% Grenache, 28% Syrah, 35% Mourvèdre

Vines: 20 and 50 years old with yields between 20-35 hl/ha

Vinification: Fermented and aged in barrels and casks.