



UNUSUAL WINES

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Wine from non-grafted vines

A few own-root vines thrive in the rare *terroirs* free of phylloxera

Around 1860, an aphid-like insect attacked the roots of European grapevines (*Vitis vinifera* species), sapping their strength and killing them within two or three years. This parasite from America advanced at around 30 kilometres a year and destroyed the viticulture of entire regions: only sandy or volcanic soils were spared as they stop the insect settling around the roots of the vine.

As there was no question of replanting all the vineyards in sand or volcanic terrain and even the most aggressive chemical treatments had failed, a solution was found in 1870 with the introduction of biodiversity. The current debate between supporters of chemical and biological methods is nothing new ...

Scientists had observed that the rootstock of American vines (such as *Vitis labrusca*, *Vitis riparia* and *Vitis aestivalis*) was resistant to the parasite, but unfortunately their grapes proved disappointing to winemakers. There were two ways round this: crossing American and European vines to obtain "hybrid direct producers" with the qualities of both parents, or planting resistant American rootstock and grafting on a European variety.



A vine classified as a historic monument

A vineyard planted in Gers (France) around 1820

Uniquely, crops have now been listed on the French Inventory of Historic Monuments: this family garden at Sarragachies in Val d'Adour (Gers) was spared by phylloxera ... and from being uprooted.

"My grandmother's grandmother said they were already old vines," recounts René Pédebernade who, at 87 years of age, was still attaching the vines to stakes with wicker as his ancestors had always done. Each Sarragachies family used to have its own "vine garden" planted with different red and white local varieties and produced its own wine – "garage wine", as we'd say today.

This recently listed garden has several striking features. A quick glance reveals an ancient plantation in double rows, with the same stake supporting two plants, perhaps to save materials. The vines are arranged in 2 metre squares so that draft horses or oxen could pass by on all sides.

Experts from Sup Agro Montpellier, the Institut Français de la Vigne et du Vin (IFV) and the Institut National de la Recherche Agronomique (INRA) believe that the plantation dates from around 1820, and its sandy soil prevented the spread of phylloxera.

Finally, genetic analysis of these living relics reveals twenty different grape varieties, including seven that were completely unknown.



New Year's Eve harvests

Every 31 December, the growers of Plaimont Producteurs end the year with a festival and nocturnal harvests open to all

Viella (Gers, France). Over 500 visitors, young and old, are warming themselves over burning branches. At 7.30 in the evening they grab their secateurs and baskets for the final harvest of the year: a half-hour by candlelight before rejoining their respective celebrations. Members of the Plaimont Producteurs cooperative are proud to show off their craft and launch the New Year festivities.

The *Pacherenc de la Saint-Sylvestre* vintage was launched in 1991 when the viticulturists, caught out by an exceptional frost, decided to leave the grapes on the vine until 31 December.

Dried by the wind, exposed to the autumn sun and cold nights, the sugars concentrate in the grapes, preventing them from freezing. The skin thickens as they mature, so they keep longer on the vine. In other appellation zones, this *passerillage** is carried out in a barn or shed with the clusters hung on wires.

The vines of the *Pacherenc du Vic-Bihl* zone cover 250 hectares between Gers, the Pyrénées-Atlantiques and the Hautes-Pyrénées. The grape varieties are local – Petit and Gros Manseng. From October to December, in four or five passes (*tries*), the growers harvest the ripe grapes for different wines and the grape juice is fermented to medium-sweet (*moelleux*) depending on the batch. The October grape yields aromas of fresh fruits, citrus, grapefruit; the November grape (around St Albert's Day) evokes candied fruits, spices; the December grape is reminiscent of dried fruits – almonds, walnuts, honey ... Thanks to the acidity of these varieties and the cool climate, the wine remains balanced and not too sweet. A medium-sweet redolent with flavour and history.

*French term relating to grapes that have been dried ("raisined") on the vine, to concentrate the sugars.



Wine from very old vines

What exactly does the reference to *Vieilles vignes* mean on some labels?

Both vine and wine, from a plant with a longevity of tens or even hundreds of years, provide one of the rare contexts where the adjective “old” is a good thing. Of course, a plant may die of disease, be infested with parasites or deliberately uprooted for a subsidy or to comply with a ban, or simply be a victim of changing fashions.

Over the years the plant develops a root system several metres long, which draws nutrients from deep within the ground. With no irrigation or fertilisers, old vines are more resistant to drought than young plants. “We don’t feed it; it’ll fend for itself!” jokes Ales Kristančič of the Movia estate in Slovenia. Although the harvest is less abundant with age, the grapes and the wines from old vines are naturally richer in minerals drawn from the soil.

How do you recognise an “old vine”? This indication is of value on the label, but its use is up to the producer – some apply it to plants that are only twenty or thirty years old. Although the age of a rootstock can be estimated by the look of it, the growers, their parents or neighbours, generally know when their plots were planted. The winery’s records may also keep track. More remote or undocumented times leave matters open to interpretation – in Europe, an old non-grafted vine probably dates from before the phylloxera crisis of the 1860s.



Wooden labels

Why is *Le Faîte* sold with a pinewood label attached to a wax medallion?

For their best bottles, the ones they want to hand on to their descendants, Gascon winemakers had no faith in paper labels that could easily become damaged and unreadable. So after hermetically sealing the stopper with wax, they wired a carved wooden label to the neck, bearing the name and vintage of the wine. The bottles were then buried in sand or clay, at a more stable temperature than in a cellar. Old bottles with wooden labels were attached to AOC application files to demonstrate the antiquity of this practice.

Today, in its honour, Plaimont Producteurs (www.plaimont.com) make two special blends called *Le Faîte*, using three grape varieties for each: Tannat, Pinenc and Cabernet Sauvignon for red; Arrufiac, Gros Manseng and Petit Courbu for white. These characteristic local varieties (with the exception of Cabernet Sauvignon) are blended with the assistance of a wine expert, often one of the best in the world. A limited edition of a few thousand bottles is sealed with wax – red for red wine, yellow for white – and fitted with a label made from *pin des Landes* (maritime pine), which gives the mandatory legal information (name, year, strength, volume, warning for pregnant women). A wax medallion embossed with the Plaimont name attaches the label's brass wire to the bottle. This full-bodied, up-market wine is aimed at wine merchants, fine grocery stores and gourmet restaurants.

With a nod to the tradition of burying the bottles, the wooden label also highlights the importance of the subsoil in grape development: in south-west France where Plaimont is based, the clay and limestone around Plaisance are said to give the wines power and help them age well; the sandy soils of Aignan add finesse and elegance; the district around the village of Saint-Mont, with its clay soil and pebbles, brings strength, density and character.

