Food & Drink

"the astonishing wines of La Pèira"
"some of the greatest vineyard land in the south of France"

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I think the answer lies in the soil



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Wine

Back in 2000 and 2001, Aimé Guibert of Mas de Daumas Gassac and the Mondavi family famously battled over a few morsels of Languedoc hillside. The spat is now historical, though the dying embers of acrimony received a final glow when Jonathan Nossiter ventilated them in his 2004 documentary film *Mondovino*. It seemed to be a tale of local protectionism (Guibert) fending off, via beguiling rhetoric, a company bent on exploiting virgin native scrub for a global marketing opportunity (Mondavi). Neither side emerged bathed in glory.

The Mondavi claim was that unplanted hillside close to Mas de Daumas Gassac and its Vins de Pays rival Grange des Pères was the ideal spot in the Languedoc to grow Syrah. Viticultural experiments take decades to evaluate, and since Mondavi's desired parcels remain unplanted, that particular hypothesis seems unlikely to be confirmed or refuted.

What 2009 suggests, though, is that some of the greatest vineyard land in the south of France did indeed lie close to hand – but not exactly where the Mondavis thought it did. That land could, moreover, have been purchased by the Mondavis without any need to battle Guibert.

The name to look out for is Terrasses du Larzac. It was coined by Olivier Jullien of Mas Jullien, creator of some of the most harmonious and enduring Languedoc red wines of the modern era. Larzac is the limestone upland grazed by sheep whose milk is curdled, in damp caves, into salty, deliciously rank Roquefort. The vineyards of this particular *cru* within the overall Côteaux du Languedoc appellation lie on the slopes and benches to the south of this high country. Its definition (the parcels include land in 32 villages) is recent, dating from 2005.

Those intrigued by vineyard geologies and their effect on wine will find much to enjoy in the years ahead here. Many of the vineyards in this V-shaped morsel of northern Hérault are on the gravelly limestone rubble in which so many of France's vines feel comfortable. There are also rolled pebbles over sandy silt where the river Hérault formerly meandered, as well as an astonishingly savage, schist rockyard around St Jean de la Blaquière and a strange, blood-red volcanic earth beneath it known locally as *ruffe*. The red glacial soil vaunted by Aimé Guibert of Mas de Daumas Gassac and originally beatified by Bordeaux's Henri Enjalbert in the 1970s also lies in the Terrasses du Larzac, though the appellation isn't claimed by the Guiberts as their wine is principally made from the interloping Bordeaux variety Cabernet Sauvignon. (The blend of the red Grange des Pères is more Languedocien in style, as both Syrah and Mourvèdre play a leading role, but its Cabernet Sauvignon component also excludes it from the appellation.)

Other beneficial aspects of this unique spot vaunted by growers include the wind which, according to Pascal Fulla of Mas de l'Ecriture, makes it easy to grow vines without chemical sprays. Sébastien Fillon of Clos du Serres also points out that the proximity of the Larzac plateau means cool summer nights after hot days, with diurnal temperature variations of up to 20°C: as refreshing here as they are in Argentina's Mendoza or Australia's Adelaide Hills.

It's too soon yet to draw clear distinctions between these sub-regions within Terrasses du Larzac, though the results certainly vary. The most challengingly mineral flavours of all can be found in the wines of Domaine la Sauvageonne, sited in those schist rockyards; those of the Mas Plan de l'Om (in the volcanic red soils) are pure, smooth, light-fruited, tasty and balanced; while at 320m above sea level the limestones of Causse d'Arboras achieve a refinement and an elegance often said to elude Languedoc reds.

For palate completeness, however, head for the least geologically showy part of the appellation: the central benchlands of flat but well-drained limestone gravels. Balance, harmony and substance were always Mas Jullien hallmarks, and you can find the same qualities in the wines of Château de Jonquières, Mas de l'Ecriture and, especially, the astonishing wines of La Pèira.

Terrasses du Larzac

Established leaders
La Grange des Pères; Château de Jonquières; Mas de Daumas Gassac; Mas de l'Ecriture; Mas Jullien

The new generation
Causse d'Arboras; Le Clos du Serres; Mas Cal Demoura (now run by Vincent Goumard); Mas des Chimères; Mas Conscience; Mas de Plan de l'Om; Domaine de Montcalmès; La Pèira; La Réserve d'O; La Sauvageonne.

The wines of **La Pèira** are stocked by Berry Bros & Rudd in the UK. (tel: +44 (0)800-280 2440. www.bbr.com). as are the wines of Mas Conscience. Mas de Plan de l'Om and Mas de Daumas Gassac. For US stockists of La Pèira, contact Eric Solomon Selections. tel: +1 704 358 1565. www.europeancellars.com. A leading UK stockist of Languedoc wines including many of the above is Terroir Languedoc Wines. tel: +44 (0)1756-700 512. www.terroirlanguedoc.co.uk. Clos du Serres is stocked by Stone, Vine and Sun. tel: +44 (0)1962-712 351. www.stonevine.co.uk.

This small, 11.6ha domain is the creation of one of the most unlikely Languedoc proprietors I have ever met: Rob Dougan. He's a dishevelled musician and composer of alternative bent who seems to have effaced his Australian origins almost completely in more than 20 European years. Together with his partner, a lawyer of French-Mauritian origin called Karine Ahton, he has created (with winemaker Jérémie Depierre and consultant Claude Gros) a range of wines of striking depth and originality yet great truth to place, too.

La Pèira itself is a Syrah-Grenache of microscopic yields that contrives to summarise its entire region: it smells of evening on the hills and tastes like a liqueur of *garrigue*. Las Flors de la Pèira includes some Mourvèdre, too, and is chewier and earthier than La Pèira, though every bit as concentrated and head-turning. Les Obriers de la Pèira is a simpler, less multi-dimensioned Cinsault-Carignan blend, but wonderfully drinkable. There are also tiny quantities of a voluptuous white Viognier-Roussanne Vins de Pays. These were the finest new wines I tasted in 2008.

Evolution, of course, never ends in the wine world, and other parts of the Languedoc such as La Clape, Pic St Loup, St Chinian and Faugères routinely challenge Terrasses du Larzac for supremacy. That they do so underlines the fact that this is one of the most exciting regions of the world for wine quality. Even if the Mondavis missed out.

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Jancis Robinson is away