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WHY Wine

A great newborn from the Larzac

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By now almost everybody who has even a passing interest in wine knows that the once derided Languedoc Roussillon has become one of the most exciting wine regions in France.

There is much more respect for the various terroirs of these southern vineyards and a new generation of young and enthusiastic men and women are transforming what used to be the country of Gros Rouge and heavy wine used to fortify Bordeaux and Burgundies deficient in colour and alcohol. It was not exactly legal but it was done.

Today even the vins de pays from the south already have their cult wines, like Mas de Daumas Gassac, or Grange des Peres, who have joined the great, despite their modest origin. Here is another wine that is becoming the rage among a circle of dedicated amateurs: La Peira. It comes from the Terrasses du Larzac. Never heard of it?

In 2004 the Terrasses du Larzac were recognised as a separate denomination of the AOC Coteaux du Languedoc. With recognition came the imposition of land parcel boundaries, as well as specific production rules so as to guarantee top quality and reflect the terroir's unique character.

Like most of the south, the Terrasses du Larzac is not new to wine. It started with the Romans, but took off seriously under the influence of the Benedictine abbeys. More recent generations of wine producers made a decisive contribution to the quality revolution in the Languedoc.

The Larzac experiences wide temperature variations and because of its distance from the sea and proximity to the Causse - a group of limestone plateaus in the Massif Central - enjoys relatively cool summer nights. The grapes mature slowly and steadily, which is beneficial to their colour, whilst also encouraging the wines' aromatic qualities and fresh characteristics. The average altitude is between 80 and 150 metres rising to a maximum of 400 metres in the commune of Saint Privat.

Enter La Peira. Three people are behind this new and already famous domain: Rob Dougan (a writer of music with credits such as the Matrix, U2, Moby), Karine Ahton (a lawyer who grew up in Montpellier, her father working at the local co-operative while studying) and Jeremie Depierre (a young vigneron with stints at Chateau Margaux and Chateau Guiraud).

In 2004, according to Decanter, they started working "in a small stone barn little bigger than most connoisseurs closets and located halfway between Grange des Peres and Daumas Gassac - two reference names of the region."

They shared one conviction: the unique qualities of the Larzac, a plateau of savage beauty, could be expressed by great wines. The result is La Peira, and everybody seems to agree. The domain produces three reds and one white. Superb wines agree most critics. They are exported to the US and the UK and generally sell in no time.

A wine writer for the good British magazine Decanter, Andrew Jefford, noted recently: "I now have a theory, which I'm going to enjoy spending the rest of my life putting to the test. My theory is that Terrasses du Larzac is the greatest spot in the Languedoc."

La Peira reds are made of more than 60% Syrah, with Grenache, Mourvedre, Cinsault and Carignan. Here is what David Schildknecht writes in the June 2009 issue of The Wine Advocate: "Terrasses du Larzac La Peira adds violets and white truffle to the lilies present in the Las Flors, and the fruit shifts into a low register, with cassis, blackberry, and purple plum informing a thickly-rich, decadently sumptuous palate. Here, too, there is a hidden source of energy that conveys lift to the finish and keeps the wine from seeming at all over-ripe. Nor is there even a hint of heat in a finish of astonishing richness and sheer length, with floral perfume hanging in all the way to a reverberating, bitter-sweet, multifaceted finish.

This wine will ring changes on your palate for a decade, I predict, and will enter that select though rapidly expanding elite of Languedoc wines that need not fear comparison with any of the world's wine icons."

Now the bad news. It is not yet available in Thailand. I chose to write about La Peira to show that new and extraordinary wines are born every year. In the meantime if you want good wine from the south of France allow me once again to praise the wines from Alain Chabanon, the vins de pays as well as his AOC. They are superb, and can stand with the best of France. Less expensive but of constant quality are Turtle Creek and the solid Les Jamelles. You can't go wrong. These are family wines, made by people who stand by their product. And love what they do.

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