

Free Wine Friday - Domaine du Tariquet, Côtes de Gascogne, France



It doesn't happen all that often, but it does occasionally happen that some very nice people affiliated with a winery or a distributor will send me some free wine. The US representative for the Domaine du Tariquet in France recently reached out to me and offered to send me three wines from their portfolio. I let them know that of the three, really only one would fit with my Fringe Wine theme, but they sent me all three anyway. I figured since they were nice enough to send them all to me, I could bend my rules just a bit and start a new feature called Free Wine Friday where I'll profile whatever wines I've received for sample purposes, even if the wines don't fit all that neatly into my Fringe Wine paradigm. I don't expect that this will turn into a regular feature, but we'll see what happens. I do want to be sure to say that the only compensation that I have been given was a sample of the wines themselves and that my opinions expressed below are my honest impressions of the wines I tasted. This post has not been written or reviewed by anyone other than myself and I have no affiliation or commercial interest in Domaine du Tariquet or any of their business associates.

Domaine du Tariquet is located in the Gascony region of southwest France. The Gascony region is more or less the area between the Atlantic Ocean to the west and the Garonne River to the east, stretching south from Bordeaux to the Spanish border. The Domaine itself is located in the foothills of the Pyrenees mountains in a town called Éauze, which looks like the middle of nowhere on [Google maps](#). Éauze is situated within the Armagnac region, which is, of course, best known for the production of the brandy which carries the region's name. This area does not fall into any established AOC region, so table wines made here carry the Côtes de Gascogne *vin de pays* designation instead. The Côtes de Gascogne is responsible for producing more than 100 million bottles of wine per year and nearly all of it is for the export market. About 90% of that production is white wine, which is somewhat unusual if you look at all the red wines produced in the neighboring regions, but which makes more sense when you remember that the grapes used as the base for Armagnac production are all white grapes. As the demand for table wines has increased, many of the growers in the Armagnac region have opted to make table wines from their grapes rather than brandy, so since they have acres and acres of white grapes at hand, it certainly makes sense that they would ultimately make white wines.

Domaine du Tariquet follows that pattern as well, but before we get there, it's worth taking a look at the history of the estate and the family that has owned it for the past 100 years. Like so many great stories, this one starts out with a bear tamer and a dream. Artaud (whose first name I can't seem to find) was a bear tamer from the village of Ercé in the foothills of the Pyrenees where apparently bear taming was just something that you do. He had two (!) tamed bears that he took with him around the world in what I'm guessing was some sort of traveling act before he ultimately ended up in the US where he stayed for several years. Eventually homesickness got the better of him and he returned to France in 1912. He came across the Tariquet estate and fell in love with it, so with the financial assistance of his son Jean-Pierre, a bartender in New York, and Jean-Pierre's wife Pauline, he bought the estate whose lands had been thoroughly gutted by the Phylloxera epidemic which had left only seven hectares of land under vine and those vines in terrible shape. Artaud lived on the Tariquet estate while Jean-Pierre and his family remained in New York.



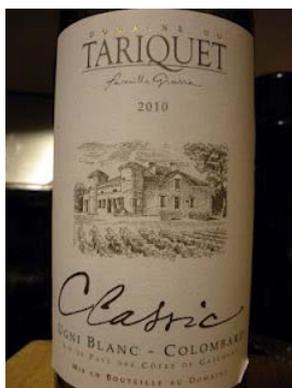
Tamed Bears. Seriously. Bears.

When World War I broke out in 1914, Jean-Pierre returned to France and enlisted in the army. He was injured by a bayonet wound during the war and the massive blood loss he suffered caused him to suffer from amnesia. He was hospitalized in France until 1922 when he was sent back to New York to his wife who had waited for him for over eight years. Jean-Pierre was much changed from his experiences, but Pauline stuck it out with him. The two of them soon returned to France and had a child they named Héléne.

Fast forward to the 1930's when a man named Pierre Grassa was working as a hairdresser in the town of Bordeaux after his tour of duty in the Joinville Battalion of the French army was finished. When WWII broke out in 1939, Pierre rejoined his old battalion, which was soon captured, making Pierre a German prisoner of war. Apparently Pierre wasn't much of a fan of being held prisoner so he escaped and fled to southwestern France where he joined the local resistance movement in the town of Éauze, which, it just so happens, is where Domaine du Tariquet is located. Pierre meets Héléne, they fall in love, and are soon married. They are still married to this day and their children, Maïté and Yves, are carrying on the family business, which has grown from the meager 7 hectares under vine in 1912 to more than 900 today, which makes them the largest family owned estate in France.

In 1972, the family decided to start their own company to produce brandy rather than just selling the grapes off to other brandy houses. In 1982, they decided to make table wines as well. Yves, who took over winemaking responsibilities 25 years ago, was the first grower in the region to plant Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc and Chenin Blanc grapes alongside the Armagnac stand-bys of Ugni Blanc (the Trebbiano Toscana of Italy) and [Colombard](#). It seems hard to believe that planting these grapes was ever a controversial thing to do, but at that time, it definitely was. Yves was rewarded for his risk in 1987 when one of his wines was selected as Wine of the Year in England. Today the third generation of the Grassa family, Remy and Armin, are in charge of the estate which is celebrating its 100th year under family ownership this year.

Domaine du Tariquet currently makes 10 different wines, 9 white and 1 rosé, and they sent me three of their offerings to try. The first was their 2010 "Classic" bottling which is 70% Ugni Blanc and 30% [Colombard](#). It looks like the blend for this wine may vary by vintage, as they winery currently has the 2011 info available on their [website](#) with a much different composition. MSRP on the 2010 is \$8.99. In the glass the wine is fairly pale silvery lemon color with some greenish tints to it. The nose was somewhat reserved with lemony citrus and peachy fruits with a touch of herbaceousness and a bit of leesy funk (which blows off pretty quickly after opening). On the palate the wine was on the lighter side of medium with fairly high acidity. There were zippy lemon, lime and grapefruit citrus fruits along with some ripe peach. The overall character was a bit tart, but the wine more than made it up for it with an incredible intensity that was very surprising. This wine overdelivers for the price in a big



The second wine I tried was the 2010 Chenin/Chardonnay which is 75% Chenin Blanc and 25% Chardonnay. MSRP for this bottle is \$10.99. In the glass the wine was a very pale silvery lemon color. The nose was moderately aromatic with a lot of ripe pear fruit and a touch of lemony citrus and white flowers. On the palate the wine was medium bodied with fairly high acidity. It tasted just off-dry to me, but Tariquet doesn't put any residual sugar information on their website for their wines. All of them are pretty low alcohol (around 11% each), so it wouldn't surprise me if there was a bit of sugar kicking around here. There were flavors of lemony citrus and green apple with a touch of lime, tart pineapple and ripe peaches. It was lean, sharp and zippy, so if there was any residual sugar in it, it was being balanced nicely by the racy acidity. I enjoyed this wine, but not nearly as much as the Classic. At \$11 a bottle, it does represent a very good value, though, especially for fans of South African Chenin Blanc or fans of unoaked Chardonnay. The email they sent me advises drinkers to "enjoy with pad thai, samosas, asian dumplings, and roast pork," which sounds about right to me.



way and is a really great value. I have a lot of trouble finding wines I enjoy drinking in the under \$10 range, but I would drink this absolutely any time.



The last wine that I tried was the 2010 Côté, which is a blend of 50% Chardonnay and 50% Sauvignon Blanc. MSRP for this wine is \$14.99. In the glass the wine was medium lemon gold color. The nose was very reserved with some grapefruit and green apple aromas, but it was mostly a total blank. It does open up a little bit with some air, but not much. On the palate the wine was medium bodied with fairly high acidity and, again, I thought it was probably just off-dry. There were flavors of pink grapefruit, ripe apple and peaches with a touch of honey and that Sauvignon trademark grassy herbaceousness. The wine had much more Sauvignon Blanc character than Chardonnay, which probably shouldn't be all that surprising. It had the nice balance between the lean, sharp acidity and the round, ripe, honeyed peach flavors that the Classic wine had, but again, I preferred the Classic bottling to this one. The email from the Tariquet representative suggests pairing this with "fish & chips, quail, or roast chicken."

Overall, I found these wines fairly enjoyable. They're all fairly affordable and represent good values for their respective prices. They seem like they would be versatile food wines with enough acid to stand up to a variety of foods and just enough residual sugar to be good for spicier Asian or Indian inspired dishes. The estate offers a late harvest Gros Manseng and another late harvest Petit Manseng that I'd be very excited to try if I ever come across them.