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A story that spans generations

It's one of those corporate histories that would make a good Hollywood film. The protagonists excel in terms of down-to-earthness and cosmopolitan savvy, chutzpah, a passion for their product, value-awareness and the courage to take fateful decisions.



Ultimately, a Krones line also plays a part, installed by the Domaine du Tariquet winery in the French province of Gascony (the subject of this article), for bottling its wines and Armagnacs. At the end of the 19th century, a bear-tamer from the Pyrenees called Artaud emigrated to America, returned to France in 1912, and discovered the Tariquet, a small château with a farm and seven hectares of vineyards. He wanted to buy it, but didn't have enough money. His son, who had stayed in New York and was working there as a bartender, put up some money, and they bought the winery together. Wounded in the First World War, the son lost his memory for many years, and convalesced in French hospitals until 1922. Then he fetched his wife from New York to France, and they were able to celebrate her return with the birth of their little daughter H el ene.

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One world war later, the young Pierre Grassa arrived in the south-west of France. He was born in France to Spanish parents, worked initially as a shepherd boy, and after escaping from a prisoner-of-war camp he joined the French résistance. He met Hélène, they married, had four children and breathed new life into Tariquet. Two of their children, Maité and Yves, were keen to continue the family tradition, and in 1972, together with their father Pierre, they set up a new company and developed a sales operation for the Bas-Armagnac produced at the château. In the meantime, they had around 40 hectares of their own vineyards available for this purpose.

Armagnac

Armagnac is often described as Cognac's younger brother, both of them being based on white wines, and is nowadays highly thought of among brandy connoisseurs, not least because it involves more artisanal work, more family firms, more "people" than Cognac. In regard to quality, there is a perennial debate as to whether Cognac or Armagnac is better. Armagnac, however, seemingly predestined to be a luxury product, by reason of its high quality, its artisanal production methods and its strict regulatory framework, plus the small quantities involved, struggled with serious prestige problems in the post-war years: back then, demand soared so steeply that the quality suffered, thus tarnishing the image. Pierre, Yves and Maité at Tariquet were also affected. In 1982, the market for Armagnac was faltering. But the family still had total faith in the upmarket brandy, produced more, and tried to market it. Soon enough, the lengthy period of storage emerged as a problem, necessitating some interim financing. So they, chief among them Yves, took a risky but crucial decision: from then on, white wines were to be produced as well as Armagnac. The debut wine was made for the first time from only the Ugni Blanc and Colombar grape varieties used for Armagnac. And Yves took an even bolder step: he broke all the rules of conventional white-winemaking, and ventured to plant varieties underappreciated in the region, like Chardonnay, Sauvignon or Chenin, and (even worse) he mixed the wines in the cuvée. He combined these varieties, and also Sémillon and the regional grape Gros Manseng to create unconventional wines that are well-nigh unsurpassed in terms of harmonious individuality. He was aiming for fruitiness, freshness, and refined elegance as the salient gustatory elements. Tariquet was at that juncture the first winery to be selling wine from Gascony in bottles. And indeed, it worked. Yves Grassa was voted the "Winemaker of the Year".

In 2007, the highly esteemed Gascon winemaker retired completely from the viticulture business at the age of 56, and emigrated to Romania to grow cereals. He handed over his portion of the winery (in which his sister Maité still owned a holding) to his two sons Armin (36 now) and Rémy (35) with the words: "Young trees don't flourish in the shadow of their elders. Go your own way."

Domaine du Tariquet

Today, Armin and Rémy Grassa are managing Tariquet in the fifth generation, together with their Aunt Maité. Armin looks after the winery itself, while Rémy handles the marketing, and Maité is the life and soul of the estate. Thanks to their Berlin-born mother, the two siblings speak not only French and English, but also perfect German. Following a series of acquisitions, the original 40 hectares of vineyards have meanwhile grown to 900 hectares, all of them within a distance of 25 kilometres. This means the Domaine du Tariquet is the biggest owner of vineyards on a single appellation, the protected designation of origin in France. In all, the winery produces eight million bottles of wine, including 300,000 bottles of rosé and 250,000

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bottles of red wine, plus 120,000 bottles of Armagnac.

The brothers, both of whom studied agronomy, majoring in oenology, attach paramount priority to top-quality cultivation of the vines and processing of their wines. "For the production operation, for freshness and aromatic intensity, we keep our vineyards at an age of 15 to 25 years", says Armin Grassa. Six harvesting machine automatically remove stalks and leaves, so that only grapes and juice arrive at the presses. "White wine needs as little movement and oxidation as possible", explains Armin Grassa. "That is why the grapes are already blanketed with CO2 to keep out the air while they are being transported from the field, and at the grape reception station are cooled down with cold water from about 25 degrees auf 15 degrees Celsius. This blanket of CO2 is continued in the eight presses, with which we can process the fruit from 40 hectares of vineyards on each day of the harvest, which corresponds to about 3,000 hectolitres. The mash remains macerating in the presses for eight to twelve hours. Through the force of gravity alone, it then passes to sedimentation tanks for 48 to 72 hours, and after that to the fermentation tanks, where it is subject to continual temperature monitoring. For sedimentation, the mash is cooled down from the optimum maceration temperature of 15 degrees Celsius to five degrees Celsius; fermentation begins at eight degrees Celsius, and over three to four weeks the temperature rises to as much as 18 degrees Celsius. Besides the avoidance of oxygen, the temperature is the second important factor for the aroma status of the white wine. We stop fermentation by lowering the temperature, not with sulphur, which means we can save a total of more than 30 per cent of the sulphur: nor do we use any SO2 for stabilisation, with concomitant benefits for the digestibility of the wines involved. We have installed very sizeable cooling capacities for this purpose, so as to lower the temperature from 18 to four degrees Celsius within eight hours." Freshness concept

The wines are clarified using natural bentonite, with which the yeast bonds and sinks to the bottom, whereupon the wine is clarified in a second sedimentation process. The tartrate is then precipitated and removed at minus four degrees Celsius in a diatomite filter. The wines are now ready for blending, and are stored in 1,500-hectolitre tanks at minus two to zero degrees Celsius. "Our freshness concept means the wines are intended to be drunk within 18 months. After harvesting, they are ready in February of the next year, on the market in March, and then should be got to the consumer as quickly as possible" is how Armin Grassa wants to see his wines handled. They are cold-stored at minus two degrees Celsius, and bottled the whole year round in response to actual orders, so as to preserve their freshness for as long as possible. We combine the idea of offering fresh, fruity wines featuring a relatively low alcohol content with an affordable price-performance ration, so that consumers will feel comfortable with opening a second bottle." In France, for example, the price for a bottle of Classic, a mixture of Ugni Blanc, Colombar, Sauvignon and Gros Manseng grapes, is around 4.20 euros.

In its homeland, Tariquet already ranks among the best-known wineries, while in Germany its wines are gaining steadily in popularity. At the 2010 Berlin Wine Trophy, the Domaine du Tariquet Chardonnay won a gold medal, while the Tariquet Classic took silver. At the 2010 Mundus Vini International Wine Prize, the Sauvignon and the Les 4 Réserve both won silver medals. Something rather special is the dessert wine Tariquet Les Dernières Grives, whose grapes every year have to be defended against the last thrushes, the "dernières grives" migrating to the south. A great wine of almost liqueur-like consistency, with aromas of black truffles, honey and ripe peaches, transposing into fragrant notes of vanilla.