

LA REVUE DU VIN DE FRANCE
TRADUCTION DE L'INTERVIEW D'YVES GRASSA (NOVEMBER 2013)
DOMAINE DU TARIQUET

YVES GRASSA

IN THIRTY YEARS, HE TRANSFORMED A SMALL ESTATE FROM GASCONY INTO AN INTERNATIONALLY RENOWNED WINERY: TARIQUET.

La Revue du vin de France –How did the adventure of Tariquet start ?

Yves Grassa: We started by producing some Armagnac and a little bit of white wine.

In 1982, we bottled our wine for the first time at Tariquet. My mother was our best sales person. Since, she was taking care of the Armagnac shipment; she would add a bottle of white wine to every order. The clients would call us back to order some. This is how we started selling our wines. The Armagnac opened the doors to the French market and the white wine the foreign markets. In two or three years, we reached 2 million bottles of wines sold on the UK market.

RVF: What triggered your success?

Y.G.: In the beginning, our white was 100% Ugniblanco. We presented this wine to a competition which was taking place in Montpellier and it came out first. Everyone then said: “*A wine from Gascony which reached first place: it's an accident!*” Then the accident happened over again for a few years. In 1987, in London, the Masters of Wines designated me as “Best Wine of the Year” among 4,000 wines from all over the world, even though it was just a table wine. The appellation of Côtes de Gascogne was born only in 1985. One day, Eddy Barclay called the estate. He had discovered our wine at Taillevent and ordered a few palettes for his villa in Deauville – we were delighted!

RVF: Tariquet has a very personal style. Where does this singularity come from?

Y.G.: In 1982, I was in touch with the professor Bertrand who was, with the Armagnac Bureau, leading a study of the eaux-de-vie from the region. At the time, there was an issue with the Armagnacs because of ethyl carbamate (a substance naturally present in fermented products which is considered as carcinogenic in high quantities). He came to the estate and told me: “*Your Armagnacs are unusual. They present a level of ethyl carbamate below 40 micrograms per litre, like cognacs!*” It was excellent news. Moreover, during the analysis of the Folle Blanche grape by capillary gas chromatography, there were extraordinary peaks, never seen in other eaux-de-vie! To learn more, he placed one of his assistants, Christine Picoulet, at the estate – she never left the winery. In the early 1980s, with her help, we improved the technique of the skin-contact maceration.

RVF: Please remind us, what is it?

Y.G.: Every winemaker applied it one day without knowing it. Take the example of a winemaker who owns an undersized press. He would not be able to press all the grapes at the same time. So, in the meantime, the grapes will have already begun to macerate. This is called skin-contact maceration. The mechanical harvest accentuated this phenomenon as it placed the juice in direct contact with the skin of the grape.

RVF: In what means it is dangerous for the wine?

Y.G.: Because of the oxygen. There is nothing worst for a cut up grape. To give you an example, take an apple. Slice it in two and taste the first half. The flesh offers delicious tastes of delicate aromas. Leave the other half out for 2 or 3 hours. It will become brown and will lose all its taste in the mouth. Why? Because of oxidation. In fact, I was the first to set up a process making it possible to protect the grapes from oxygen. We transport our grapes in vats while protecting them with dry ice (carbon monoxide frozen at -80°C). It is what we call "inerting". Once finalized, this method was then used in several vineyards.

RVF: In which ways did you improve your winemaking?

Y.G.: I did not want to use SO₂ as an antioxidant, at least not before the end of fermentation. We had come to realise that it gave some pharmaceutical flavours to the wine. Inspired by the New World, I started using ascorbic acid, which is commonly known as vitamin C.

RVF: Vitamin C in wine?

Y.G.: The ascorbic acid has antioxidant virtues. Besides, it was authorised in France, but only for wines which were ready, when bottling. To use it beforehand, I needed an official agreement. I went to explain to the Director of the Consumer Affairs and Fraud Control my technique to use low levels of sulphur. He answered: *"I understand but the French law forbids it! Let me make this clear, take in your harvest, put the ascorbic acid, but I do not want to know anything about it"*. He finally gave me an experimental authorisation. Then, I experimented, just full scale...

RVF: What about your primary aromas?

Y.G.: While conducting all these experiments, I realised that the skin of the grapes contains the primary aromas. And also, it is difficult to extract them during the press! To release them, you need enzymes (pectinase) which naturally develops on the grape. Let's sum up: during harvest, we practice an "inerting" solution, we do not use SO₂ but ascorbic acid, and finally we favour the production of enzymes which will make it possible to extract the aromas from the grapes' skin. Consequently: instead of extracting 15 to 20% of the aromatic potential, we will reach, depending on the maceration and temperature, an extraction of about 80%. This is how we surprised everyone with our Ugni blanc at a Bordeaux Sauvignon blanc tasting. The oenologist, Denis Dubourdieu, who was there, had written on his tasting sheet: very present Sauvignon. In fact, it was a 100% Ugni blanc, a so-called neutral grape.

RVF: The Bordeaux winemakers were inspired by your work?

Y.G.: They really have! Since Bordeaux knew a time during which their white wines were not selling well. Dry like sweet wines; their whites gave headaches as there were too many sulphites. And at that time, I was told that I had reconciled consumers with white wines. *"Mr Grassa, we can drink and even to excess our wines, we never have any headaches"* Americans would proudly say. We had obtained this result by reducing the amount of sulphur. A lot of winemakers in Bordeaux were inspired by this.

RVF: After having thought over and improved the harvesting of your grapes, you then got started on the critical phase of the vinification...

Y.G.: Yes. Everything rests upon observation. We had noticed that we obtained the fruitiest and best balanced wines when we managed to keep 7 to 8 grams of residual sugar. The problem is that the addition of yeast upsets the aromas as it only devours the sugar and only thinks about multiplying itself, without any concern of the substance. To tame these micro-organisms, there was only one solution: inhibit the yeast while lowering the temperatures during formation in order to slow down its consumption of sugar. Thus, we did everything to control the yeast and obtain a soft fermentation in order for the aromas to stay trapped in the juice.

RVF: Inevitably, you were often reproached to produce a technological wine...

Y.G.: A lot of people criticised us. Some even said that the cold produces aromas of pineapple, which is wrong. Moreover, the notion of low temperature remains very relative. You could ferment your grapes at 19°C or at 22°C. What matters is the volume of sugar transformed in alcohol per 24 hours slices. We keep a very close eye to this crucial step, with a minimum of 3 daily tastings, to avoid any risk of reduction.

RVF: Thus, you continue to leave a little bit of sugar in your wines?

Y.G.: At Tariquet, the sugar comes exclusively from the fruit. When we started making wine, we reached at the end of fermentation, a level of 3 to 8 grams of sugar. I wanted to restart the yeast which we controlled by low temperatures. So, we slightly warmed up while sowing once again the yeast so that it would eat the sugar. In reality, we lost all the freshness of the wine! Since then, we leave the tank to ferment, then we finalise during the blending phase.

RVF: You were also the first to plant some Chardonnay in Gascony.

Y.G.:For a long time, I wanted to experiment with Chardonnay.I spoke to the nurseryman, who reminded me that the grape was not authorised. However, he mentioned that a local grape, the GrosManseng, was quite similar...I then took the risk of planting the Chardonnay telling myself that, in case I was inspected, I could always say that it was a mistake during the delivery of the vines.But then, I was in a dead end. I could not mention the name of the grape of the label. Then again, I was lucky: the Vins de Pays Syndicate adopted the Chardonnay just before I could commercialise my wine. My Chardonnay was labelledwithout question!

RVF: Today, your sons took over the estate. How do they divide up the tasks?

Y.G.:Armin, the eldest, mainly takes care of the vines while Rémy takes care of the cellars and the administrative aspects of the winery. They both take care of the commercial supervision worldwide. It is the advantage of being two.In other times, this is what we did with my sister, Maité.

RVF: In your region, who are the competitors of Tariquet?

Y.G.:We don't really have regional competitors. At the beginning, a dynamic group of 5 winemakers, including Mathieu Béraut from Domaine de Pellehaut, contributed to the fame of wines from our region. Our real competitors, we find them on foreign markets with the producers from Languedoc, Italy, Germany and wines form the New Wolrd.

RVF: The production of Armagnac still remains a priority at the estate?

Y.G.: We never stopped producing Armagnac. I would even say that it is at the heart of our work. We keep 25 years of stock in our cellars. I would also add that the crisis of Armagnac was godsend for us. It gave us the opportunity of developing our vineyards while purchasing vines at reasonable prices. My sister Maité and I acquired a lot of vines. The estate went from 50 hectares to almost 1,000 hectares.

RVF: Is Armagnac still a popular eau-de-vie?

Y.G.: Yes, since we are Cognac's little brother.Cognac has created an appealing effect for the Armagnac market. The problem for Armagnacs is the lack of stock regularity. The producers distil less since wines sell better than Armagnac. In Gascony, there has been a culture of distillation during years where the production was in excess. At Tariquet, Armagnac represents 5 to 10% of our turnover for about 100,000 bottles versus 8 million bottles of wines.
