

Domaine du Tariquet tailored for pleasurable wines

Domaine du Tariquet, centenarian estate for a few years now, never ceases to amaze by its quality and diversity of its white wines. The discovery of an atypical estate in Gascony always in motion.

For a long time, Yves Grassa looked at the funny side of this.

Sometimes, consumers would stubbornly insist that Tariquet was in fact an authentic...appellation!

Refreshing and delicious, the white wines of this estate have conquered for quite some time many export markets as well as great restaurants and retail shops' shelves.

Beyond the undeniable commercial success, these winemakers, established on the same estate for five generations, have crafted a range essentially made of white wines. Their aromatic precursors highlight all the virtues of the grape varieties which grow in Gascony, a land of good life. The result of a surprising bet, this "pleasure wine" broke with conventions.

While the wine-producing department of the Gers in Gascony had lost its aura of the 19th century after the phylloxera crisis, the past three decades were marked by the rise of a wine production of good quality.

Some would say that you must be a little crazy, a philosopher or in love to light a large fire. Yves Grassa must've had all of it in him. And also maybe an incredible visionary gift.

Going against all theories that had put the white wines on the side, he managed to impose these wines we drink without any fuss and with great pleasure.

While the vineyards stabilized at around nine hundred hectares and the last cuvées made Tariquet achieve new recognitions, the captain of this adventure (with, of course, his sister Maïté) took another highly symbolic decision: that of giving the keys to the truck to his two sons, Armin and Rémy while they were not yet thirty years old!

A FIVE-YEAR PLAN

Symbol of the spirit that permanently fights resistance to change, this successful transmission found in the recent years its first achievements. Bringing new life and their mark to the history of the estate, the two brothers, always accompanied by their aunt Maïté, have overcome a five-year plan of major investments.

The vat rooms, cellars, warehouses, offices, bottling line, the tasting room or even the new high-performance materials for vineyard treatments: nothing was left to chance. Everything had been reviewed and corrected to take into hand the concern of oversizing, an essential key to the development of the best possible wines and to quickly face the climatic hazards.

Incidentally, the complementary duo did not hesitate to revisit the "best seller" of the house (the Classic), this famous long-time blend of the Ugni blanc and Colombard grape varieties.

A touch of Sauvignon and Gros Manseng later, here is the "Classic" which continues its story with additional freshness on the palate.

But if Tariquet will be for a long time associated with the quality of its white wines (no less than nine different wines including the superb "Premières Grives" and the elegant "Côté"), the two brothers' fundamental touch could one day play itself on the field of... red grapes through Domaine du Mage.

Already, two rosé wines (one is a rosé de pressée, the other is made with Marselan) have officially confirmed the know-how of these passionate winemakers through research and terroir. This is an open secret, for the past three years, Pinot Noir rows have been harvested and should give birth to a delicious blend ideally soft which would be closer to the spirit of fruity white wines.

Interview of one of the owners of Domaine du Tariquet

For the past 5 years, Tariquet has massively invested in its production facilities. What about in the vineyards?

Alongside these investments, we have relied on the purchase of land and also on new plantations. We gained about 150 ha, bringing the total to 1,060 ha of vines in production.

Is it the occasion to renew the plantations?

Every year, we systematically renew 50 to 60 ha. There are two reasons for this. First, we should regenerate the vineyards and then we must also adapt the grapes varieties. It was revitalized in view of the esca's impact which decimated some plots.

What kind of grapes are you replanting?

We continue to do some experimental plantations and do not necessarily replant the same variety in the same spot. Currently, there is lack of Gros Manseng and, to a lesser extent, of Petit Manseng and Sauvignon. But for all that, we still attach just as much importance to the two flagship grape varieties which are Ugni Blanc and Colombard. It is important to bring some evolution.

About experiments, what is the situation with the vineyards of Pinot Noir at Domaine du Mage?

This is just our third harvest. For now, it's a young vineyard. Pinot Noir mixes very well with Merlot and Syrah. With the balance we have on the freshest exposures, this variety looks very promising for future blends. For now, this wine is not yet on the market but we should be able start blending it within a year or two.

Are you already considering to produce a pure version of your Pinot Noir?

Only time will tell. Before ten years, we can't be sure of that. But for sure that with a blend made from Pinot Noir, we are looking into finding the little brother of white wine, a wine which would be delicious. Today, the tannins are still a bit sharp. It is why we are trying to this type of blend with some Merlot and Syrah. We want a result that is going to be delicate and light. With Pinot Noir, we will be able to reach this goal.

When there is over a thousand hectares of vines, there must be disparities between areas. How do you handle this?

We can easily identify three major areas. Towards the West, near the border of the Gers and the Landes, we are on a "tawny sands" soil where rainfall is significant. Over there are grown grapes used to produce Armagnac. In the center, that is to say around the estate and the town of Eauze, we have half of our vineyards. This area is a mix of "boulbènes" and "tawny sands". This is where our white grapes varieties produce delicate wines. Finally, further to the East, there is the Ténarèze, an area composed of boulbène gravels along clay and limestone soils with lesser rainfall and where the terroir is more suitable for red wines.

Does this make your vineyards' management more complex?

Depending on the years, there can be some surprises. As the crow flies, the more remote vineyards are located 20 km to the West and less than 15 km to the East. This stretch is also a kind of insurance against hail!

What are your working methods regarding the cultural route?

This year, we chose to change our method of treatment. We acquired in one go 25 new mist-sprayers and 7 additional tractors. And in fact, we also hired seven drivers.

What is so special about these spray-misters?

Before, we had triturbine classic spray-misters with their 8 treatment sides. When using them, the vines were receiving treatment and we could see a cloud forming itself around them. Now, with our new equipment, we have no more than 4 sides but each panel retrieves the droplets that form while letting the air go through. This way, we strongly reduce the dosage and the application quality is much better. We are going for treatments that will be smoother, smaller and more accurate.

What is your rate of treatment during the course of a year?

In a region like ours, marked by the oceanic climate, it is very variable. In good years, we only treat 8 or 10 times. During the difficult years, we can rise to 12 or 14 passages.

Was it necessary to acquire as many new spray-misters?

Yes, even if this investment is of course oversized. Once we decide to treat, it must be done in a single day, when the weather opening permits it. We also contributed to the design of these spray-misters with the manufacturer because we precisely wanted to reduce the residues' impact following the experiments that my brother, Armin, had conducted.

Can we say that sustainable growing methods are used?

Probably, but that's a long time since Tariquet undertook this approach. We started by observing the vineyards, setting insect traps and using oversized equipment. When treatment is needed; it cannot be spread over time. One of the actual keys to sustainable agriculture is, the oversizing and new technologies. We have always invested in sustainable methods even if it doesn't position us at the best prices. Furthermore, nothing is claiming as regards to this.

What is your position in relation to organic? Do you have organic plots?

Today, we experiment many things, including organic options. What we will not have one day is some of our vines which would be organic and others not. It is out of the question. It would mean what? That some of the vines are not as good as the others? For us, we try to be outside certain dogmas. We are advocates of a pragmatic evolution. All nutrient inputs are organic and we work our soil with plant covers which in harmony with the needs of the vine.

What do you mean?

All work related to the soil or inputs are issues that we anticipated a very long time ago. We are landmen, agronomists. The conservation of the soil is important to us. We have been working for a long time on leguminous plants which fix nitrogen. All our vineyards have a natural humus surface.

Is it not too much to handle on such a large surface?

We are lucky to be able to do what we want on all our vineyards as more than two thirds of the area belongs to us and that half the rents of the remaining third is family-owned.

Today Tariquet's offer consists of 9 white wines, 2 rosé wines and 2 red wines. Is there a fourteenth wine in preparation?

Yes, there are always ongoing improvements. Innovation is part of the estate's DNA.

What is the place of Armagnac at Tariquet?

It is essential! This is our origin and our future. Each year, we distill about a hundred hectares. Currently, we have about 23 years of stock available. Each grape variety and each vintage is in individual barrels. There is no less than 10,000 hectoliters of Armagnac in stock! Just like our wines, everything is produced exclusively from our vineyards.

What composes the range of Armagnacs?

We produce single grape varieties or some vintages but our core business remains the blends which make it possible to find the right balance.

With so many harvests distilled each year you could easily make a collection of vintages?

Vintages are always quite tricky. It's just a synergy of grape varieties from the same year. Some years are lighter, others have more structure. Over a period of 10 years, let's say that 3 or 4 years could be bottled as vintages.

Since we are talking about blends, do you plan of repeating the experience of L'Armagnac du Centenaire which gathered no less than four varieties?

We had indeed added the Plant de Graisse to the Baco, Ugni blanc and Folle Blanche. It was a wonderful experience which gave us some new ideas. Most likely, something will come out of this.

In the end, twenty three years of stock is as many years of fixed assets...

It is also 23 times the loss of the "angels' share"! Beyond the stock, there are also two full-time persons who are take care of the Armagnacs. What is amazing with a product like Armagnac, is that it is transgenerational. A generation distills for the next one.

KEY FACTS

- 1,060 hectares of vines
- 13 different wines
- 9 million bottles produced
- 23 years of stock of Armagnac
- 70% of the Armagnacs are exported
- 40% of the wines are exported
- The wines and Armagnacs from Domaine du Tariquet are distributed in about 50 countries, mainly North America and Northern Europe.

KEY DATES:

Comments written below pictures illustrate the investments made from 2010 to 2015

2010: Since 2009, the on-site work at Domaine du Tariquet started with the creation of a very modern warehouse where pallets would be stocked on sliding racks. The same year, the cellar was entirely redone.

2011: This might just be the most spectacular investment. The new bottling line is a gem of technology. During 3 months, the new and the old bottling lines cohabited in order to perfect the adjustment mechanisms. It is important to say that Tariquet only bottle its wines upon order to preserve all their freshness.

2012: Once dismantled, the old bottling line left its space to a new one entirely dedicated to the storage of raw materials and to the delivery of goods.

2013: A new extension, adjacent to the main building, made it possible to create new offices for the staff (administration and sales). At the same time, a new tasting room with a view on the vines and the bottling line and all the essential accessories for wine tasting was built.

2014: The restructuring work of the tanks was marked by the acquisition of isothermal stainless-steel vats, making it possible to improve the temperature control of the wines and energy savings. The old vats were replaced by double-wall stainless steel tanks.

2015: During this period dedicated to important investments, the Domaine du Tariquet also took up active investments in the property. No less than an additional 150 ha were purchased to develop the offer for instance of Gros Manseng and Sauvignon.