

Translation of the article published in March 2021

## **Viti LEADERS**

DOMAINE TARIQUET, GERS

### **"CSR IS AN OPPORTUNITY TO COMMUNICATE ON OUR VALUES"**

Domaine Tariquet, a pioneer in the diversification of Armagnac's vineyards towards the production of fresh and aromatic white wines that are now making Gascony's reputation, is, in many ways, atypical. The size, strategy, history, values and projects of Armin and Rémy Grassa make Domaine Tariquet a singular example of success. The recently formalized CSR approach creates a binder to what makes the identity of Domaine Tariquet for the two brothers.

Armin and Rémy Grassa run the Tariquet estate, a property of more than 1600 hectares, straddling the Gers and Landes departments. All the wines of the estate are made from the grapes produced on the 1,150 hectares of vines in production of the company and nearly 400 hectares of forests, hedges, thickets and bodies of water.

Wine lovers and anyone who has lived in the Southwest have heard of the wine Premières Grives and of Tariquet. Behind these names, which sound like successful trademarks, lies a reality that is very different from the image that most Tariquet consumers have in mind. Few know that Tariquet is in fact Domaine Tariquet, a family business of winegrowers ("propriétaire-récoltant") cultivating 1,150 hectares of vineyards straddling the Gers and Landes departments. Domaine Tariquet is also five generations of winemakers, now run by two brothers, Armin and Rémy Grassa, alongside their aunt Maïté Dubuc-Grassa. This lack of knowledge is not coincidental. When you look at the bottle packaging of the wines of the estate, current and past, what is obvious is "Tariquet". On closer inspection, however, the mention of the estate is there. So what should we say? "Tariquet" or "Domaine Tariquet"?

*"Domaine Tariquet," replies Rémy Grassa. "Our reputation has been built on Tariquet, but this sole name without the term "domaine" does not reflect who we are and the values we carry. Today, we believe it is important to better express our identity as a winemaker. To boost our white wines from Gascony, we have invested a lot in marketing in the traditional network in France and in the export market. We have devoted our energy to communicating with professionals. In the future, we also want to communicate with the general public. Our end-customers do not know who we are: winemakers, owners of their land, vinifying only our own grapes, Armagnac producers. »*

### **COMMUNICATING MORE WITH CONSUMERS**

Although Domaine Tariquet was a pioneer in the construction of the fruity white wines of the Gers, it is now challenged by many players, mostly traders (négociant).

*"A producer takes and carries all the risks of wine production: investments, climatic hazards, territorial constraints... Whatever the years, yields, or market conditions, fixed costs are the same and increase every year as growing methods and conditions of production change. Given the size of our company, we have neither the agility of a small family estate nor that of a trader (négociant) who can source from many operators and who buys on average 30% cheaper than the cost of production of our grapes. On the surface and in our identity, we are between two models. It is an accepted specificity. It is time to share it along with the values we attach to it. Our commitment to corporate social responsibility allows us, among other things, to model this issue more and thus to better explain it. To support our long-time approach, we need to communicate about who we are."*

Launched in 2019 with the support of Dycia, Domaine Tariquet's CSR work is expected to lead to an initial evaluation in 2021 based on the ISO 26 000 grid.

*"We are still at the beginning of the process. In order to cover all the trades of the estate, all departments are involved, ranging from the planting of the vine to the bottle, as well as the commercial and administrative functions. Our goal is to further formalize what we were already doing, to fill the gaps, and to go even further", says Rémy Grassa. "We do not know what this will bring us in terms of notoriety, but this approach has convinced us. It underlines the meaning of our corporate culture, historical culture, that are, ultimately, already very close to the modern values of CSR. The result, innovation, territorial integration by nature, the well-being of the teams, long-term vision, respect for the environment..."*

#### INTERNALIZATION: AN ATYPICAL LOGIC

Already well-imbued with the CSR philosophy, the Grassa brothers and the team of the estate prove what they are saying, starting with the importance of territorial integration in business strategy. To run the estate, the Grassa family employs 110 permanent workers and up to 150 seasonal workers. Located in the town of Eauze, 50 minutes from Auch, Domaine Tariquet is a major employer. Recruitment is a real issue in this rural, sparsely populated, and aging part of the Gers.

*"The majority of core businesses are internalized at Domaine Tariquet: from pruning to bottling to HR and commercial services. We use very few external viticultural suppliers. In our situation, employee consideration and retention is a major issue," claims Armin Grassa. "In the vineyards, it involves year-round work, training, as well as new, ergonomic and efficient equipment renewed every five years..."* But there are not enough permanent workers to do some of the seasonal work, for example for the relevage. Faced with the labour shortage in the Gers, Domaine Tariquet also recruits foreign workers.

*"They come back from one year to the next with a low turn-over. We employ them directly, with fixed-term contracts, under French labour law, providing them with free housing and collective means of locomotion and, if necessary, paying for the administrative procedures for those who do not come from the EU," says Armin Grassa. "Wanting to recruit and limit subcontracting, and assuming wine production from the vine to the bottle is quite atypical nowadays, especially for structures the size of Domaine Tariquet, but it allows to control everything. But if we are "autonomists", we are far from being "isolationists"! On the production side, we exchange a lot and keep searching for innovations at the service of the estate; two fundamentals of CSR."*

## REDUCING CARBON AND PHYTO FOOTPRINT

Very close partnerships are thus established with manufacturers. Frequent readers must remember the arrival of 25 Friuli drift recovery sprayers on the estate in 2015 (there are now 33). The aim was to improve the quality of spraying and reduce the quantities of phytosanitary products by two.

*"With seven years of hindsight, we're around - 40%. The estate's IFT is half that of the Occitanie region. The renewal of the first sprayers is underway, and we maintain our confidence in Friuli. But on other projects, we are even closer to suppliers. I am thinking, for example, of Ovlac, who thought up Reptill with us, a combined soil work tool that has saved 40% of working time compared to previous crop routes combining rotating spats and harrows to smooth the soil. Reducing the number of crossings is also an issue in terms of carbon footprint."*

This project, implemented in 2017, has enabled Armin Grassa to remobilize on phytosanitary protection with two objectives: to produce wines without detectable residue of phyto products and to work on disease detection within plots.

On the first point, the nature of the active ingredients has been revised. The classic anti-botrytis has given way to a natural solution made using bacteria, Sulphur, phosphonates are preferred, copper doses are reduced as the harvest approaches and only one "classic" systemic product is applied to support flowering.

*"In the two years we have been doing routine testing, there have been no residues detected. However, we want to make our results more reliable over several vintages: the crop itineraries vary according to the climatic conditions of each vintage. But we want to go further. On 10 hectares, we experiment with alternative routes incorporating even more biocontrol like herbal teas. The first tests are conclusive: the yield seems stabilized, to the naked eye it seems that photosynthesis is more active, and the fermentability of the musts is better."*

What about CSR in all of this?

*"There are many links. We act for our immediate environment, for the health of employees, we meet consumers expectations, and we broaden the reflection to carbon footprint and water use balance. Moreover, it is a question of anticipating regulation by finding solutions that are not counterproductive in terms of agronomy and that are also economically sustainable for the company."*

It is by arguing on this point that Armin Grassa explains why Domaine Tariquet did not continue the tests on weeding using Beloukha, sexual confusion, green manure seedlings or 100% mechanical weeding.

## OPPORTUNITIES AND FRAGILITIES REVEALED

*"Before we even started in CSR, I think we already had a lot of good practices in place," says Rémy Grassa. "We lacked follow-up indicators to prove it. We're building them. The CSR approach also requires us to affirm our values and the actions we take in front of us. In the*

*near future, we'll have to get started to talk about it. We have also done a lot of work on the risks that can compromise the estate's strength. In 2019, when we began our work on CSR, the global pandemic was not one of them. Like all areas that work with the on-trade market (restaurants and hotels), the situation in 2020 and 2021 is complicated to manage. Despite these difficulties, Domaine Tariquet maintains its long-term vision."*

## COMMERCIALIZATION

### THE BIB in development with the Covid-19 crisis

Each year, Domaine Tariquet produces the equivalent of 9.5 million bottles of wine, mostly in white. The Grassa family has built its commercial network by focusing on the traditional network, which was severely battered in 2020 by the Covid-19 pandemic.

*"In France, during the first lockdown, sales fell by 75%," says Rémy Grassa. "This withdrawal is mainly due to the first month, when the wine shops were not sure whether they could open or not. On the other hand, the end of lockdown was very active and we were able to offset some of the sales that had not taken place in the spring. The second lockdown also had a negative impact on sales. While the end of the year holiday season was good enough, December did not make up for November's losses."*

In export markets, which currently account for 40% of Tariquet's sales, the consequences vary widely from country to country.

*"In countries where we are well-known, our wines were part of the "safe haven" values of resellers who tended to tighten their ranges. Sales also continued in markets with State monopolies."*

Like all winemakers, the Grassa family has put in place measures to adapt to the situation as much as possible. The guideline of the estate, on the other hand, does not change: the traditional network remains the heart of their clientele.

*"We want to support our historical clients by offering them formats adapted to the context. We started selling the BIB of the Classic cuvée in France in 2019. In 2020, we have anticipated the expansion of the BIB range to our Chardonnay and Rosé de Pressée vintages, originally planned for 2022."*

These two new BIB are also available on the export markets.

*"The Covid-19 crisis reinforces our desire to diversify our export markets, and we have created an additional export sales manager position in 2020 to prepare for the future," says Rémy Grassa.*

Séverine Favre