

DOMAINE DE L'ORATOIRE ST-MARTIN

According to their family tree, the Alary family have been in or near Cairanne for ten generations. Frédéric, who runs their 25ha estate with his brother François and his father Bernard, says that his great-grandfather devoted most of his time to silk worms and "*garance*", the root from which the red dye was made for the French Army's trousers in World War One. This made the soldiers somewhat conspicuous, and the red dye market consequently collapsed. So the Alarys turned to wine.

Their output is 80% red and 20% white, in both Côtes du Rhône and Villages. In fact, all their vineyards are entitled to be Cairanne, Côtes du Rhône-Villages, but they like to sell the produce of younger vines with the lesser appellation. Three-quarters of the vines are in the steepest sector of Cairanne, the *quartier* St-Martin, where mechanical working is only possible with a caterpillar tractor. The soils are clay-limestone, mixed with stones and sand.

The red *encépagement* is 60% Grenache, 15% Mourvèdre and 20% Syrah. "We like Syrah and Mourvèdre, especially for ageing – although this is a bit anti-commercial because the Mourvèdre is very closed to begin with", explains Frédéric. The whites come from 30% each of Marsanne, Roussanne and Clairette, with 10% of Viognier. From these, two *cuvées* are produced. A fresh, attractive Côtes du Rhône has 70% Clairette and 30% Marsanne, plus a touch of Roussanne for *rondeur* and weight. This is overshadowed by the Cuvée Cairanne Haut-Coustias, a pure Marsanne, fermented and matured in a mixture of old and new casks, with

bâtonnage. This has noticeably more fat and substance than the straight Côtes du Rhône. The overall proportions of Marsanne and Clairette are diminishing as new plantings of Roussanne and Viognier come on stream.

Frédéric sees a good future for their whites, which account for one-fifth of production. The team are still toying with different grape blends until they find what they like. "We tasted much in the Northern Rhône and found that Roussanne there gives a lot of richness; also, we adore Hermitage and went to see Chave. We descended into the cellar at 10am and emerged at 1pm". Clearly, people of sound instincts... They are also experimenting with a wood-aged Cairanne Viognier from young vines producing just 15hl/ha, although in general Frédéric prefers Viognier as part of a blend in the South". The 1992 version is heavily marked by its sojourn in oak, but a decent varietal concentration is discernible underneath.

The most interesting of the domaine's several red *cuvées* is the Cairanne Haut Coustias assembled from 50% Mourvèdre, 30% Syrah and 20% Grenache. The high Mourvèdre and Syrah give a more deeply-coloured wine than either the Grenache-based Cuvée Prestige or the livelier, fruitier Réserve des Seigneurs.

The Alarys regard the Seigneurs as an experimental wine, to enable them to try out different casks and varietal mixes. Only 4,000 bottles are produced in any vintage. On the palate, the Haut Coustias

is characterised by strong mineral, earthy flavours which need time to integrate and evolve.

The domaine's red flagship is undoubtedly the Cuvée Prestige, a 60:40 Grenache-Mourvèdre blend from vines planted in 1905, yielding around 25hl/ha. This usually consists just of the press wine, which the Alarys consider more concentrated, tannic and powerful; it is *élevé* in *cuve* (in contrast to the Haut Coustias which is given 12 months in casks and 600-litre *demi-muids*).

The Alarys' carefully worked, steep-sloping vineyards are providing some *vins sérieux*. They have planted 500 Muscat à Petits Grains vines after tasting

VARIETY	APPELLATION	AREA
GRENACHE NOIR	CAIRANNE	12.00
MOURVEDRE	CAIRANNE	3.00
SYRAH	CAIRANNE	4.00
CINSAULT	CAIRANNE	1.00
MARSANNE	CAIRANNE	1.50
CLAIRETTE	CAIRANNE	1.50
ROUSSANNE	CAIRANNE	1.50
VOIGNIER	CAIRANNE	0.50
TOTAL (hectares):		25.00

Aimé Guibert's white Daumas Gassac (qv), which will be added to some Viognier when it matures. One can only admire the enthusiasm...and wait!