



## The Sampler – South West France Buying Report

### “Mille Cent Kilos, Oui Monsieur, Mille Cent. Pourquoi est-ce qu’il rigolé?”

Hello folks, and welcome to our little trip report following a recent marathon trip across the south west of France in search of wines of character and value. If that’s not what you were looking for, for instance a recipe for boiled asparagus, or how to fix a leaking roof, I’d check your typing and re-google.

Still here? Good, lets get stuck in.

#### The Planning

So why bother? Well, the wines of south west France are not that well known in the UK and so not that many agency businesses bother to stock many wines from the area. Those that do seem to have largely stuck with the same old names for many years (Montus in Madiran, Cedre and Clos Treguidina in Cahors), and though good, a lot of these wines have recently become extremely expensive. Once you move away from Madiran and Cahors, there is almost nothing available at all, yet there are a vast range of different terroirs and plenty of young vigneronns keen to make a name for themselves.

So we thought we would have a look and see if we could find something. Sebastien was on the phone for at least 3 months in the preparation, talking to winemakers, journalists, local experts, mates, random people, relatives, and dogs, and after a bit of to-ing and fro-ing we agreed a list of about 30 estates to visit. The hope was to find wines in one (or more) of three categories:

- Great value wines which over-deliver when compared to their more famous competitors. These will generally be made in relatively “normal” styles from grapes you will have heard of. From here on in, we will call these wines **V** for value.
- Superb wines which are shining examples of their appellations and have the potential to be well known and highly regarded worldwide in the future. From here on in, we will call these wines **EQ** for exceptional quality.
- Wines full of personality – perhaps made from unusual grapes or with unusual techniques, and which will not appeal to all. They will though appeal to a minority of more adventurous customers and will hopefully have the potential to enthrall them. From here on in, we will call these wines **P** for personality.

Goodness, I’m beginning to sound like a mission statement for an EU quango. Back to the trip:

The planning was ..... um, how to put this, horrendous. Start at Jurancon, then Madiran and Pacharenc, then Armagnac, then Cahors, across to Coteaux de Quercy, up to Marcillac, then Entraygues et du Fel, and then Gaillac, just for fun. In 5 days.

What follows is a brief summary of the estates and wines that we came across. We visited a load of other domaines and tasted hundreds of other wines but as we have decided not to buy those, we will leave those bits out to protect the innocent.

### **DAY 1 – Jurancon**

What a wonderful place to fly into from a dreary and cold London in October. The airport in Pau isn't exactly glamorous, but the setting is fabulous with the towering Pyrenees in the background set off by the verdant flush of the hills where the vines hide. Cool in the mornings, hot in the afternoons, sunshine throughout. Any fancy swapping a wine shop for a vineyard?



*Ah, Clapham in the rain.*

What was slightly less wonderful was the choice of transport for the week. If you were thinking the idea of a wine buying trip sounds like a relaxing way to lead your life, just try doing 1000 miles in 5 days in a bottom of the range, underpowered, and slightly knackered Ford Ka with no idea where you are and a sat-nav that doesn't have anything to hold it up. Where have all the cup holders gone in cars these days? Where are we going to put our café au laits each morning? So from then on, one of us drove, and the other held the sat nav up. Ah, the glamour.

No long lunch, no pottering around the back street of Pau, off to our first appointment.

## Camin Larredya, Jurancon



*It was Rugby World Cup Time – Seb looks like a hooker.*

This is a small domaine of about 10 hectares that has been in Jean Marc Grussaute's family for more than a century. After many years growing strawberries, the first vineyards were planted with Petit Manseng in 1970. Jean Marc took over in 1988 at the tender age of just 20.

Today the vineyard is farmed organically and planted with the traditional local white grapes – Petit Manseng, Gros Manseng and Petit Corbu.

- Jurancon Sec 2010, La Part Davan, £14.90 (halves £9.90) Organic. Made from a blend of the Mansengs, this is classic dry Jurancon – notes of honey, quite rich in style, a waxy lanolin quality. **V**
- Jurancon Moelleux 2010, Costat Darrer, £17.90. Here we have a later picking and more Petit Manseng in the blend which gives a bit more tang. Sweet but not cloying with 60g/l sugar. Honeyed and long. **V**

I think we were too lucky to visit when we did – the week after we placed our order, the estate won a coveted second star from the Revue des Vins France. That sort of thing never helps being able to get hold of any wine!

Time for lunch. Ah, nothing is open. I know, let's drive round and round in circles looking for a patisserie that can sell us cake. After a mere hour or so of wasting petrol, we finally found some. Good lord, that Millefeuille was rich – no need for any sustenance for the rest of the week.

After lunch, we visited another estate that didn't quite electrify us (though did have a nice dog), we found Michel Valton's place.

## Vignau La Juscle, Michel Valton, Jurancon



What a gorgeous, gorgeous house. Set in a valley overlooked by snowcapped mountains, surrounded by vines on each side, and even a swimming pool. Now frankly, I've always thought a swimming pool isn't a good sign when you visit a domaine – well it seems that my thinking was awry as usual – we found 2 during the week and loved both domaines. The wines here are a total knockout.

The domaine here is even smaller – just 4 hectares, and yields are ludicrously small. The vineyard is again farmed organically and was certified as such in 2005.

- Jurancon 2009 £44.90. Michel Valton only makes one Jurancon, and its not normal. Every year, whilst his neighbors pick in September, October and occasionally November, Michel waits. He then waits a bit more. Then its time for Christmas, so he relaxes a while. When it comes to January, months after most vineyards are bare, Michel picks. Some years rot means there is nothing worthwhile. Oh well, there is always the next year. But when it works, boy does it work. Yields by this stage are around 15hl/ha in a good year, so concentration is in the stratosphere. Honey, acacia, minerality, some more honey, and a bit of honey. This is momentous. It also rather understandably won the Coup de Coeur in the Guide Hachette last year. Sadly he doesn't have much, so volumes are very small and prices are quite high, but the wine is a true experience. **EQ, P**
- Vin de Table Rouge (2010 harvest) £14.90. Michel happens to have a plot in a warmer southerly exposed vineyard below the house, so for a bit of fun he has planted syrah with a sprinkling of merlot and petit verdot. He wants this wine to reflect its terroir as completely as possible and to be approachable very soon after bottling, so he uses no sulphur in the winemaking.

Who would have thought it – a natural wine made from Syrah in Jurancon? Anyway, its bloody lovely. Vibrant nose with loads of raspberry and white pepper. Soft tannins and really alive and moreish. Yum yum. **V, P**

That was all for the first day, so we popped into the trusty steed (aka that piece of s\*\*t that ford call a “Ka”) and drove to the surprisingly tiny hamlet of Madiran. We stayed in a slightly spooky ex monastery (we were the only people there of course), and then had to drive almost 20 miles to find a restaurant that was both open and sold wine that came in bottles rather than plastic bags. We had some nice duck based food and a pretty chunky Chateau Viella Cahors from 2000 that seemed to need another couple of decades before it should be broached again. We hope that the rest of Cahors is a little more forgiving in a couple of days time.

## Day 2 – Madiran



*Sadly we didn't buy from this estate. The winemaker was such a lovely man though that we thought we would share his picture with you.*

We had a very early start, but the morning was relatively unsuccessful. A lot of the domaines in Madiran seem to be a little, shall we say, masochistic. My teeth were black by 10 am, and I'm not really convinced that the look was very flattering.

Lunch was much better – a pot of foie gras spread on fresh bread and eaten with copious Orangina on top of a hill looking over the vines in the sunshine. Onwards and upwards though:

## Laffitte Teston, Madiran



*Laffitte Teston*

Another beautiful estate, but this time for different reasons. Jean-Marc Laffitte has put some serious money into his cellars here with the aim of making pretty serious wines that have both longevity and purity. We reckon he has done this rather well as we liked a lot of the wines:

- Madiran 2008, Cuvee Joris, £9.80. 60% Tannat, 20% Cabernet Sauvignon, 20% Cabernet Franc. An elegant wine with a great, vibrant dark fruited nose. There are tannins here but they melt away. Incredible value. **V**
- Madiran 2009, Vieilles Vignes £14.90. The estate's top Madiran made from old vines and aged in 100% new oak. The oak isn't at all dominant though, just softening the rich and dark wine. Really long and quite distinguished. **V**
- Pacharenc Sec Cuvee Ericka 2010 £13.50. This is unusual in being predominantly Petit Manseng rather than Gros Manseng which gives more precision and more freshness. Really tangy with loads of herbal notes and grapefruit. Brilliant quality and really concentrated. We will sell loads of this. **EQ, V**
- Pacharenc Doux La Reve d'Automne 2009 £14.90. 100% Petit Manseng and really quite sweet. Lovely concentration with stone fruits, hints of toffee, and really long. **V**
- Teston Madiran Vin Doux Naturel Rouge £17.90. Strange wine alert! This is made a bit like a port – alcohol is added to fermenting Tannat to stop the fermentation and leave the wine sweet. A bit more acidity than a Banyuls or Rivesaltes, but easier going than a vintage port. **P**

We then headed into the middle of nowhere, also known as Bas Armagnac.

## Guilhon d'Aze, Denis Tastet, Armagnac

Unlike many Armagnac's, Denis Tastet doesn't just buy grapes from the local farmers and then turn them into a spirit, neither does he send his grapes to the local distillation house. He is a bit like a grower in champagne – all the grapes are grown on the estate itself and the distillation is done in their own (rather complicated) still. This way they have total control over quality. They also don't use huge budgets on marketing their brandys and so are incredible value in comparison to the big Cognac and Armagnac houses. Again, we liked a lot of the things that we tried:



*"Don't do it, Jamie – don't climb in"*

- Floc de Gascogne Blanc. £13.40 Made in the same way as Pineau de Charentes, unfermented grape juice is mixed with unaged spirit to provide a fruity and sweet aperitif. **P**
- Armagnac 3 star £32, 70cl. Young and full throated, but smooth and satisfying. A great value introduction to the house. **V**
- XO £44.90, 70cl. Aged for 8 years before release. More bite, richness and complexity. **V, P**
- Hors'dAge £57.50, 70cl. Aged for 15 years before release. First hints of rancio and proper old Armagnac flavours. Really long and complex. **P, EQ**
- 1982 £75.00, 70cl. Much softer in style and with a gentle caressing style. **P, EQ**
- 1973 £59.90, 35cl. Full of character – toffee apples, coffee, earthy, orange rind. **P, EQ**

We then had a bit of trek in the car to get our resting place for the night in Villeneuve sur Lot. The highlight of this little town was definitely the steak tartare in a little restaurant on the western side of the town (we can't remember the name sadly). Prepared at the table itself it was totally gorgeous. If you want to find the restaurant, it will be easy – go during the low season (as we did), choose an evening in the early part of the week, and walk around a bit looking for the one restaurant that is completely packed with locals while the others are totally empty. That's the one.

### **DAY 3 – Cahors and Coteaux de Quercy**

Before we set off for the vineyard visits on this cold morning, we had absolutely no inkling of what we were going to experience, and it remains by far and away the most satisfying and surprising days tasting that we have had since we opened the Sampler. We usually have a hit-rate of about 1 in 3 when it comes to finding a wine or wines from an estate; and that's after all of the research that we put into it beforehand – it would be closer to 1 in 100 without it. Today we visited 5 estates, and we liked (and in some cases absolutely adored) wine from all of them.

#### **Chateau des Ardailloux, Vin de Pays du Lot**

I won't say too much about this domaine, as it looks a little like we won't be able to get any of their wines. I don't think its due to enormous international demand or anything, they just never answer the phone and don't respond to emails, so when we tried to order a pallet of their chardonnay, we have rather struggled to get any response. If you or anyone else knows them, do give them a prod on our behalf please!



*Freaky birdhouse*

Anyway, their chardonnay is very nice, quite elegantly made, and inexpensive (we think!). The domaine also has a rather strange stuffed bird museum – maybe we should have realized that the wine stuff was just a front for some B movie slasher film. Anyway, the flying ford whisked us away before we could be added to the collection.

## Le Clos d'un Jour, Cahors

Feeling slightly creeped out, we struggled through the early morning mists to a warm welcome from Stephane Azemar, his wife Veronique, and his loopy dog who tried to bite our Ka's tyres as we drove in (realistically, this is going to be a short-lived hobby for the dog I suspect)

The domaine got its name from the day when Stephane and Veronique realized that they were tired of their lives doing corporate jobs in Paris, and would much prefer to live more simply. So they both resigned that day and headed south – the Clos d'un Jour is the result.



*Spot Jockey Wilson.*

*Amphorae in Clos d'Un Jour*

The vineyard is just 6 hectares – small enough that the couple can manage it themselves rather than needing to employ anyone else. The viticulture isn't certified organic, but in effect is a pretty strict version of organic, using lots of plant extracts to replace chemical treatments in the vineyards. There are three wines, and we loved them all:

- Le Clos d'un Jour 2009 - 90% Malbec, 10% Merlot. The estate's core wine, aged in old oak. Real purity here and a very honest cahors. Quite modern in style with fruit to the fore yet great balance. Quite high tannins, but they are really ripe and moreish. £19.90 **V**
- Un Jour 2008 – 100% Malbec. 40% new oak with 60% 2<sup>nd</sup> year barrels. This is much bigger in style – deep and rich fruit, really zingy acidity and very tasty. Quite modern in style but exceptionally well balanced. £22.90 **EQ**
- Un Jour sur Terre 2009 – 100% Malbec. Strange wine alert! This wine was aged in clay amphorae rather than oak barrels - the idea here is to give the softening and slow oxidation process that oak barrel impart without giving any oak flavours to the wine. I must admit that I was completely bowled over by the result – this wine is simply wonderful and I honestly believe that it will make the domaine famous. Sheer focus, elegance, length, depth. This has it all. Amongst the finest young wines I have ever tasted (and bested only by Chateau Margaux 2009!) £29.80 **V, EQ, P: ding ding, a hat-trick.**

## Domaine d'Homs, Cahors

Welcome to traditional Cahors. This is another small domaine of just 10 hectares, worked by hand, and the wines are aged in cement tanks rather than oak barrels. This leads a certain rusticity of the wines and enables them to age and improve in bottle for a very long time after release. Its interesting how many top vigneronns are currently rediscovering the joys of using cement for both fermentation and ageing – we suspect that many others will follow. As well as excellent thermal stability, the lack of vanilla oak flavours suits some wines down to the ground. Sometimes traditions are there for a reason I suppose.

- Cahors Tradition 2009 80 % Malbec, 20% Merlot. Ripe fruit, loads of ripe tannin, a great food wine. Unbelievably good value. £8.90 **V**
- Les Chevaliers 2000 100% Malbec. The old vine cuvee which spent 2 years in cement vats before bottling. Bring it on, this is proper Cahors – gamey, dark fruits, black pepper, tannins softening with age. Great stuff. £16.90 **V, P**

## Mas del Perié, Cahors

Now before you read on, I have a slight warning – this section contains some bad language. Not gratuitously though, just because some of these wines are named a little eccentrically shall we say.

Fabien Jouves is with me on the beard growing strategy of life. If you look at the website, you see a young handsome man (ok, ok, so on this point we diverge a little). Meet him in person, and you can just about see his eyes past the bushy beard that surrounds his every movement. Really quite impressive – makes old photos of Didier Dagueneau in his prime look tame.



*Fabien doing the natural thang*

There are two different kinds of wines made in this estate – the Vins de Soif (basically drinking wines) and AOC Cahors. They are made in a different manner (one without sulphur and without barrel ageing, the other traditionally made and with differing levels of oak). They are both quite wonderful.

The Vins de Soif won't be in stock until the Spring, but already I can't wait. Fabien makes 5 different ones in total, by fermenting single varieties completely naturally in a small open top fermenters of about 500 litres (that's all there is of each wine by the way). I'm not convinced that we will be buying any of the Gamay as it had turned to vinegar during the fermentation, but such is the risk of natural winemaking. The successful wines this year are:

- Chenin Blanc Vin de Soif – will be about £15. Outrageous on the nose – peach, strawberries, hot wax. Blimey **V, P**
- Cabernet Franc – “Tu vin plus au soiree” – again will be about £15. Apparently this is some French joke about not taking your wife out for nights on the town anymore. Anyways, I didn't get the joke, but loved the wine – cool fruited, exuberant, balanced **V, P**
- Jurancon Noir “You Fuck My Wine” - £18ish. Brilliant. Apparently the Cahors AOC people told Fabien that he must remove the Jurancon Noir from his Cahors wine – they wanted him to pull it up. He loves the grape (for very good reason), and so bottled it by itself to stick his fingers up at the authorities. Macerated cherries with crushed stones underneath. A really good wine this. I'm not sure how this is going to look on the shelves though! **V, P**
- Malbec Vin de Soif £18ish. The region's traditional variety, and here it shows brilliantly. Most natural wines tend not to have any noticeable tannins, but here they still show though, adding structure and bite to the wine. **V, P**

And on to the more normal wines:

- Cahors Les Escures 2010 £13.90. 100% Malbec grown on the white limestone sections of the vineyards. Aged in old oak and very satisfying – modern but not OTT. **V**
- Cahors Les Acacias 2009 £24.90. 100% Malbec grown on the red limestone sections of the vineyards and aged in new oak. The wine hides its oak really well here – vibrant fruit, real depth, very complete. We liked this a lot. **EQ, V**
- Cahors La Piece 2008 £44.90. 100% Malbec grown on red limestone and aged in a single 500litre cask made specially by Francois Freres. Today the oak is really quite noticeable, but as its Francois Freres there is no harm in that – really toasty and very very tasty. I'd expect this to integrate more over time where the fruit can strut its stuff with more ease. Some customers are really going to love this wine – today in honesty I fear it might be overdone, but we'll give Fabien the benefit of the doubt and ship a small amount to see how it develops. **EQ?**

Jump in the car again, and grab some lunch before heading through the wilds to the Coteaux de Quercy



*Now that's what I call lunch – pasta and chips.*

### **Domaine du Merchien, Coteaux de Quercy**

Where, What? That bit between Montauban and Villefranche de Rouergue of course. Also known as the countryside.

Domaine du Merchien is the result of some dreaming and a brave leap by a couple of brits – David and Sarah Meakin. They moved to the southwest of France about 15 years ago to combine a farm and a vineyard. By their own admission, it took them some years of trial and error before they worked out what they wanted from their wines (and it sounds like the local syndicat who were there to help were close to useless!), but over the last few years the wines have come on leaps and bounds and now represent the best of the Appellation. Happily, they are also amongst the most characterful and good value wines in all of France.

All of the wines are handled extremely naturally and have very limited additions of sulphur.

- Coteaux de Quercy 2008 £9.70 – Cabernet Franc is the biggest component here with smaller amounts of Merlot, Gamay, Malbec and Tannat. Lovely purity of fruit here with quite a lot of structure and a meaty, earthy side. **V**
- JAS 2006 £12.50. Wait for it folks, because here you have the strangest blend we have ever come across:

- 33% Jurancon Noir (blimey, twice in the one day)
- 33% Abouriou (I thought that was a rice, but apparently not)
- 33% Syrah

The result is brilliant – fresh, pure, delicate yet concentrated. Really perfumed and the kind of wine I find myself drinking far too often. **V,P**

At the end of a long day, we still had a long drive ahead though some of the most amazing scenery and decidedly dangerous roads to reach our stop for the night in Marcillac.



*Dinner – yes, Sebastien ordered Foie Gras with his steak.*

#### **DAY 4 – Marcillac (and Entraygues)**

For those of you that haven't been to Marcillac (and I'd guess that's pretty much all of you), you need to cancel those flights to the Caribbean, postpone your Mauritius week off and abort the fortnight in Butlins. Marcillac is simply beautiful. Wine writers wax lyrical about the drama and views of the Mosel in Germany or the Upper Douro in Portugal, and those are indeed very beautiful places, but for me they are surpassed by the sheer glory that is Marcillac. The town is nestled at the base of a number of "hills" (believe me, in England these are undoubtedly mountains), and is almost completely untouched by tourists or even by exploring vigneron. The hillsides are dotted with abandoned vineyards harking back to when Marcillac was better known (there are only a handful left, and only 3 worth drinking), and the shockingly vibrant red clay that pokes through the terraces are spellbinding.



*Marcillac - minging*

Anyway, the wines are fascinating too:

#### **Domaine du Mioula, Marcillac**

Another stunningly beautiful domaine with the house in the middle of the (pretty tiny) vineyard. Also comes with the biggest dog I've ever seen – Ivy would have been both intrigued and petrified. A portion of the vines here are pre-phyloxera and so more than 120 years old, and growing on their own roots rather than grafted american rootstocks.

- Marcillac 2010 £13.20. Proper Marcillac – 100% Fer Savadou (called Mansois here, because Fer Savadou is sooo passée) made without oak. Fresh crisp red fruits with an animal side. Really well made and proper wine. **V,P**
- Terres Blanches 2010 £13.90. A white wine made from an unusual blend of 50% Chardonnay, 25% Muscadelle, and 25% Chenin Blanc. Slightly oily texture and full body, almond notes with perfume and freshness. **V**
- Terres d'Or 2008 £23.60. The same blend as above but oak aged, later picked and with some battonage. Honeysuckle and Apricots with lovely length and judicious oaking. Fascinating and very satisfying. **P, EQ**



*Domaine de Mioula, with enormous dog.*

We then drove down the wrong road for a few miles, and double-backed to Entraygues in the local highlands. We did find some wine that we quite liked, but in honesty not quite enough to want to ship it. We also weren't really convinced that a lorry could have made it to the vineyards to pick any wine up, so left it at that.

That left an afternoon off (oh la la), so we popped down to my Dad's house in Espalion and ate pizza.

#### **DAY 5 – Gaillac**

Continuing the theme of wine areas that many people haven't heard of never mind tasted from, we started the last full day in Gaillac. Here we found 3 completely different estates making wines that were more varied than in any other region. Before we got there though, we had an interesting run-in with a butcher.

Sebastien has occasionally been described as chatty. Possibly to the point of verbal dysentery. Well he met his match in the Leclerc on the outskirts of Gaillac. We were innocently pottering around looking for more duck based fillings for a lunchtime sandwich when we were verbally accosted by a man covered in blood standing behind the meat counter.

I could just about understand what was being said, and it ran along these lines:

*" Oh, you two shouldn't be here today, you should come back tomorrow instead"*

*"Sadly we aren't here tomorrow. Why do you say that?"*

*"I have just bought the biggest cow I've ever seen and its coming in tomorrow"*

*"Really?"*

*“Yes, 1,100 kilos. The biggest cow you could possibly imagine”*

*“Great”*

*“Yes, did I say how big it is? Its huge – 1,100 kilos”*

At this point I began to realize that we weren't going to escape easily, so began to play the stupid Brit (with great ease, I hear you say). So I started to inch away while giggling a little.

*“Whats he laughing about?”*

*“Who? – oh him, he's British”*

*“So why is he laughing? This cow is huge I tell you, and it isn't a laughing matter. 1,100 kilos. Enormous.”*

At this point, I was beginning to laugh nervously as his face began to match his blood spattered apron, so wandered off into the smelly cheese section.

Sebastien returned to the car, vowing to change our travel plans so that we could get back to the supermarket the next day. A minute later he was discussing quite how big that cow is. And who says that the French think with their stomach?

Anyway, back to the trip, and off to a different kind of domaine:

### **Domaine D'en Segur, Gaillac**

This was a complete change to the other places that we visited – it's a bit bigger and a bit more “professional”, and focuses on making really well constructed commercial wines at great prices. It's a shame that we can't all afford to drink the worlds great wines every day, but sometimes you just want something inexpensive and quite normal! We are taking 5 wines:

- Sauvignon Blanc 2010 £9.60 (£6.40 for a half) – nicely fresh sauvignon – almost between New Zealand and Loire in style. Very well made. **V**
- Chardonnay Cuvee Madeleine 2010 £13.60 – really good quality chardonnay, fermented and aged in oak. This has balance, texture and length. **V**
- Le Rouge 2009 £9.50 (£6.60 a half) – a bit more regionality here as it's a blend of Syrah, Braucon (Fer Savadou again) and Duras. Red fruits and cleanly fruited. **V**
- Cuvee Germain 2008 £14.70 (£7.90 for a half) – a blend of 60% Merlot and 40% Cabernet Sauvignon. Relatively international in style with new oak and plummy dark fruits. Again very well made and suprisingly long and satisfying. **V**

- Sauvignon d'Or 2010 £12.90 – finally a weird wine! This is a dessert sauvignon blanc with lovely grapefruity nose and medium-sweet palate. Perhaps this sounds a bit naff, but its actually really good and full of personality. **V, P**

We then hopped into the car, and drove back about 200 years:

### **Domaine des Salmes, Gaillac**

Truly in the middle of nowhere, this domaine was hilarious to taste at. We stayed for about 3 hours, during which the winemaker Jean-Paul Pezet literally showed us his family photos. We must have tasted 30 wines, and such was his passion (and inability to stop talking) that we almost had to ask his sons for assistance to get a word in. Anyway, this is Gaillac as it used to be – even the bottles look like they were last made in the 1950's. Totally traditional, full of personality and occasionally totally thrilling.



*Now that looks like a real winemaker.*

- Blanc Sec Perlé £9.90– at last a fizz! Except that it isn't really very sparkling, just the faintest hint of effervescence when you pop the cork. 100% Mauzac. Light, very refreshing, green and yellow apples with a touch of beeswax and a little residual sugar. Really good. **V, P**
- Methode Ancestrale Brut £14.90 – at last a fizz, and this one actually is! Again 100% Mauzac, but here its drier and certainly more fizzy. The Ancestrale method means that there is no dosage like in champagne – the wine is simply bottled before it has finished its fermentation, and then the yeast removed as the crown cap is replaced with a cork. Full of character – pears, lemon and a waxy savoury side. **V, P**
- Rouge Tradition 2009 £11.90 – another blend of Duras, Braucol and Syrah, but here we have what you might expect in Gaillac. A wonderful rusticity coupled with a fragrant and lifted nose. No oak, just red fruited energy. **V, P**

- Liquory 2008 £15.30 – 80% Braucol (Fer Savadou). Really nice wine this – again no oaking, but the wine is richer and deeper with a very natural tasting pizzaz. Full of character and a really good wine. **V, P, EQ ding ding, another hatrick!**

Lunch was a fabulous affair in what can only be described as a roadside café. One dish of the day (bavette), served after a brilliant soup course to seemingly every person living within a 10 mile radius of the restaurant. Cost approximately nothing. They did look a bit strangely at me though when I asked if I could charge my laptop up while we ate.

And finally, our journey was reaching its end. Happily we just had one more estate to meet, and what a meeting it turned out to be:

### **Domaine de la Ramaye, Michel Issaly, Gaillac**

Have you ever noticed this sign on a French wine label or capsule?



Well, its usually a pretty good sign. Les Vignerons Independant are almost like a trade body for smaller, quality focused growers in France (who, strangely for France, don't seem to exist just to organize strikes). Well, it turns out that Michel Issaly from Gaillac is the president of the organization, a very great honour indeed.



*In case you are lost, the entrance is one metre to your right.*

Anyway, it turns out that there is good reason for that honour. Despite having a pretty tiny domaine, Michel makes quite a few jaw-droppingly good wines, all made with very limited SO2:

- Les Cavailles Blanc 2009 £17.30. Made from the tediously familiar blend of 70% Mauzac, 20% L'en de Lel, and 10% Oundenc and fermented in cement. Bonkers. An incredibly unusual and characterful wine – this starts with incredibly intense fruit and then changes to a rich, savoury almost fat style. A real wine to contemplate over. Lonnngggggg. **P, EQ**
- La Combe d'Aves Rouge 2007 £19.60. Again, just your everyday blend of 50% Brauacol and 50% Duras. Very elegant in style – that lifted, natural nose and a red fruited and refreshing palate. Real quality again. **P, V**
- La Grande Tertre 2010 £28.20. Sticking with the international varieties again, this is 90% Prunelard and 10% Brauacol. A little deeper and richer than the Combes d'Aves. More structured, yet still that nervosity and elegance coursing through. Bloody good stuff. **P, EQ**
- Le Vin de l'Oubli 2000 £29. Strangest of strange wines alert. "The wine of the forgotten" is a 100% Mauzac Vin de Voile. Basically, a cask is topped up to about 90% full with recently fermented Mauzac and then left to mature in the partially open barrel. A layer of yeast grows on the surface of the wine, protecting it from oxygen, which over many years changes the character and flavours of the wine itself. The result here is a truly magnificent wine, utterly dry, really pungent and savoury nose. Incredibly intense notes of almonds, sherbet, comté and marmalade. Somewhere in between a Vin Jaune and a very intense Manzanilla Pasada in style. Not for the faint-hearted. **P, EQ**

And so, as with all proper holidays, we ended with a sherry.

All of the wines mentioned will be in stock from the second week of December 2011. I hope you enjoy them as much as we did!