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History in the making

Out of the shadow of Carcassonne's medieval turrets, Languedoc's vineyards are emerging into a brighter future

I first met Laurent Delaunay in 2008. The recession had started to bite in the UK and wine merchants were among the first to feel its teeth. As sales faltered, we wine buyers scrambled to offer keenly priced wines without sacrificing quality. Our customers were fans of southern French wines, so when value was required, all roads led us to Languedoc-Roussillon.

Originally from a family of Burgundy *négociant* winemakers, Laurent and his wife Catherine began making wine in the Languedoc in the mid-1990s. In 2005, they bought a winery called Abbots in the village of Marseillette, a few kilometres east of Carcassonne. Its previous owners were an Australian winemaking couple who had fallen on hard times, so when they sold their winery, Laurent and Catherine acquired a large cellar of fine vintages that stretched back to its establishment in 1996.

While he set about creating his own blends, Laurent was keen to sell existing stock: pallet-loads of bottled-aged Minervois, Faugères and Corbières, which buyers snapped up and offered to customers at low prices. Eventually the old stocks were exhausted and new samples – the wines made by Laurent and Catherine – began to arrive. I loved their bold, concentrated flavours, but in a reflection of the Languedoc's broader fortunes,

I knew that customers would hesitate to pay full price for wines they had become used to buying on discount.

So I felt a little sheepish, five years on, as I sipped rosé with Laurent on a sunny restaurant terrace in Carcassonne's medieval *cité*. I hoped that the wines had found their niche in the UK market and was glad to learn that the world had moved on since 2008. The new Abbots wines were selling well, Laurent reassured me, with a host of gold medals and trophies. "When we took over, we aimed for continuity of style, but we gradually moved towards our own, more traditional flavours," he explained. "By 2010, we had perfected the balance, so we changed the name to Abbots & Delaunay."

Carcassonne sits at a viticultural crossroads, between some of the Languedoc's most famous wine *appellations* – with Limoux to the south, Corbières to the south-east, Cabardès to the north, Minervois to the north-east and Malepère to the west – and we were joined by Laurent's new winemaker, Hilde Chevillot, for a visit to the nearby vineyards. We passed beneath the windswept slopes that produce Abbots' Nuages et Vents (clouds and winds) range of single-vineyard wines, before descending towards the winery in Marseillette.

Situated on the Canal du Midi, on the border between the Corbières mountains and the gentler

PHOTOGRAPHS: KONSTANTIN KALUSHKO/STOCKPHOTO; DOMINIC RIPPON





ABOVE: Laurent Delaunay (right) with vigneronne Hilde Chevillot and one of the estate's contracted growers; **LEFT:** Vineyards just outside Carcassonne's walls

Minervois hills to the north, Marseillette is a magnet for wine enthusiasts. "This is the only place in France," Laurent told me, "where the baker sells more wine than bread!" The village is home to a fashionable local radio station and even boasts its own culinary speciality, *riz rose de Marseillette*. This 'pink rice' is grown alongside grape vines and vegetables in the Étang de Marseillette, an ancient salt-water lake that was drained in the 19th century, when the flow of the River Aude was diverted to allow fresh-water irrigation for crops.

At the winery, Laurent uncorked a selection of sturdy bottles from the Nuages et Vents range, including the white Zéphyr Limoux 2012, a chardonnay which must be fermented and aged in oak to qualify for the Limoux *appellation*. Its flavours were deliciously mineral, reminding me of ripe white burgundy, but with the unmistakable soft fruits of southern France. Then we compared Cumulo Nimbus Minervois – a blend of syrah and carignan – with Alto Stratus 2011. Although the latter also comes from within the Minervois growing area, it is made with 100 per cent carignan grapes (Minervois wines must be blended), and is therefore simply labelled Vin de France. Cumulo Nimbus showed off its refined syrah character with blackberry, bramble and liquorice flavours, while Alto Stratus gave hints of sour cherry, wild herb, raspberry and rhubarb, with a pleasantly astringent tannic bite.

We returned to Carcassonne, where a feast awaited us at the Restaurant La Barbacane. I chatted to Laurent about how much the Languedoc's wines had improved over the past decade, as the area under vine had decreased and work had become concentrated on the better-quality vineyards. This revolution has been spearheaded by winemakers such as Laurent and Catherine Delaunay, and while the average price of their wines has increased to more sustainable levels, they remain some of the best-value bottles in France. 🍷

VISIT THE ESTATE:

Abbotts & Delaunay

32 Avenue du Languedoc, 11800 Marseillette
Tel: (Fr) 4 68 79 00 00, www.abbottsetdelaunay.com

Choice wine: Cumulo Nimbus Minervois 2011

Taste: Blackberry, bramble and liquorice flavours, with a ripe, silky finish

Drink with: Quails with violet and tarragon mustard (as served at Restaurant La Barbacane in Carcassonne)

Price at the estate: €17.90

Wines of the month

Master of Wine **Sally Easton** gives us her pick of the best wines on the market this month. Whether you are after a midweek tittle or something special, she can help you to make the right choice



SNAP IT UP

Taste the Difference, Muscadet Sèvre et Maine Sur Lie 2013

The time for a muscadet revival is surely overdue, especially with UK wine drinkers moving towards lighter, fresher wines with modest alcohol levels. Sainsbury's own-label wine, made by Domaine de la Fruitière, has flavours of melon and a salty, orange-peel tang to the mid-palate. It's citrus-pithy, with green apple notes, alongside elements of lemon zest and white pepper. The wine gives a gentle needlepoint effect of carbon dioxide retained by six months' maturation on the lees (*sur lie*).

Sainsbury's, £7
Tel: 0800 636 262
www.sainsburys.co.uk

WEEKEND TREAT

Domaine Jean-Jacques Girard, Savigny-lès-Beaune, 2011, Burgundy

This family *domaine*, founded in the 16th century, produces excellent wines in some of Burgundy's less celebrated *appellations*, which means they are good value too. This example has a florally aromatic

nose with bright, red, cherry fruit flavours, and a smooth, light-chalky tannin structure in an elegant and upliftingly juicy wine. It is nicely balanced on the fruit-acid tightrope that is so important for pinot noir.

Waitrose Cellar only, £16.99
(six-bottle minimum, can be mixed)
Tel: 0800 188 881
www.waitrosecellar.com

TIME TO CELEBRATE

Château Haut-Bages Averous 2006, Pauillac

Wine specialist Majestic does well at buying parcels of mature and maturing red Bordeaux, such as this second-label wine from the highly rated Château Lynch-Bages. Even in the variable 2006 vintage, it doesn't disappoint. Mid-weight claret with liquorice, new-leather, blackcurrant and baked blackberry flavours can be found amid fine-grain tannins that are beginning to round out while still retaining a youthful grip. The wine has just become ready to drink.

Majestic Wine, £30
Tel: 0845 605 6767
www.majestic.co.uk