

THE NEW

old world



French winemaker
Raphaël Graugnard
keeps a close eye
on the vineyards.

There are perhaps few roads in France quite as lovely as the one from Carcassonne to Saint-Paul de Fenouillet. With the turrets of the World Heritage Site's medieval Cité behind me, the landscape quickly relaxes into row after row of carefully tended vineyard. Forests fill the gaps between vines, and the River Aude winks merrily up at the road as it makes its way slowly from the Pyrenees to the Mediterranean.

About an hour away, the road winds down into the bucolic town of Limoux. Locals love to tell you that before migrating north to Champagne, Dom Pérignon perfected his technique for sparkling wine here, although historians are inclined to disagree.

Whatever the fact of the matter, it's a town that has been making sparkling wine since 1531 and is still justifiably famous for its blanquette, made in the Champagne style from Mauzac grapes.

Vineyards, grapes, blanquette and the Aude: driving through the dramatic gorge of Defile de la Pierre Lys says it all: limestone cliffs soaring above, and clear streams running below. A landscape little-changed for centuries. An old world, but equally a new frontier.

The mountains cut through by our road mark the boundary between the Languedoc and the Roussillon, two southern regions that are home to some of the most exciting vineyards in France. An appellation filled with old vines, but new possibilities.

Little wonder then that this is where Jeff Grier, the visionary winemaker behind much-loved Villiera, chose to plant his feet on French soil.

'Most of the varieties we work with at Villiera come from France, and I think a lot of winemakers dream of at least doing a season in France, but ideally to own a bit of vineyard,' says Jeff as the winter rains lash the Villiera tasting room, thousands of kilometres from the sunny, windswept vineyards of the Roussillon. 'But it's not easy to realise that dream and a lot of things have to fall into place to make it happen.'

Those things fell into place for the Grier family in 2006, when the planned purchase of an Elim – near Cape Agulhas – vineyard fell through. Wanting to hedge their bets against currency and climate change, they cast their gaze north.

Jean-Louis Denois – an old French friend who had helped them perfect the bubbly that's made Villiera famous – was making sparkling wine in Limoux, and kept his ears open for vineyards coming on the market.

Elim fell through, the stars aligned and in a matter of weeks the Grier family had a piece of France to call their own: a 22-hectare block in the Valley de l'Agly, a few kilometres from the village of Saint-Paul de Fenouillet.

WE ALL KNOW VILLIERA, WITH MANY A WELL-LOVED WINE FROM THIS WINERY, BUT FEW KNOW THE FARM IN FRANCE, OWNED BY THE GRIER FAMILY AND RECENTLY EXPLORED BY [RICHARD HOLMES](#).



Vineyards surround Saint-Paul de Fenouillet, a rustic farming town that can still do a darn good baguette.

But apart from a friend in the area, why the Roussillon? Why the poor cousin of French appellations? Why not the bright lights of Champagne, or the grand châteaux of Burgundy?

‘The Languedoc-Roussillon is the new world of France,’ explains Jeff. ‘The Roussillon in particular is largely untapped, and has some of the region’s best terroir. It’s also more profitable to make wine in the Roussillon than in northern France because the costs in the vineyard are lower, and you have fewer problems with rot and disease because of the terroir.’

‘The terroir of our vineyard is just stunning. It has patches of the black slate soil that the area is known for, along with lines of limestone and clay. And with 22 hectares in one block, we also have quite a big vineyard.’

As important as the size is the age: the vines are all over 30 years old, and cover the varieties that the Roussillon is most famous for: Grenache, Syrah, Carignan, Mourvèdre and Maccabeu.

And the Griers also inherited an able vineyard manager in Jean-Michel Pech, the previous owner, whose family have farmed here since the French Revolution. That was in 1789, in case your history’s a little rusty.

With the vineyard taken care of, the Griers bought the cellar in Saint-Paul that Jean-Michel had been renting. A small apartment next door followed suit, to accommodate Jeff and the

Villiera winemakers that would fly north each summer.

‘At first we’d send a team from Villiera for the harvest, but that became more and more of a problem with visas and work permits,’ says Jeff. ‘And to have a winemaker there for just two months was quite limiting. We couldn’t do post-maceration on some of the reds, and we had to press early to ensure the winemaker was able to leave in time to come back to South Africa.’

That was until 2009 when they connected with Raphaël Graugnard, an accomplished winemaker from Avignon who jumped at the chance to move from a large co-operative in a nearby village to the boutique cellar of Domaine Grier.

It’s Raphaël who has driven me from Carcassonne this windy summer day. As we drive into the Valley de l’Agly and turn into the Domaine Grier vineyards, the limestone hills give way to low forests, then vines laid out in neat rows on the valley floor. With quaint villages dotting the roadside, it’s a peaceful scene, and only the incessant wind and distant snow-capped Pyrenees remind me that there’s more to this landscape than meets the eye.

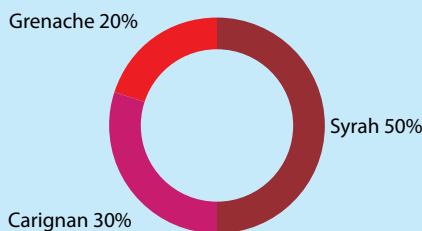
‘Wind is very important for the vineyards to help guard against fungus and disease,’ says Raphaël, running his hands along a vine of Lladoner Pelut, a hairy-leaved cousin of Grenache. ‘We have a lot of wind in the valley coming down from the Pyrenees and that helps to keep the leaves dry. The Grenache shoots grow very straight and



THE DOMAINE GRIER WINES

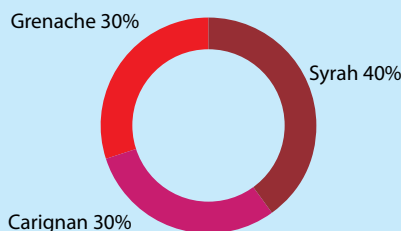
In addition to the Domaine Grier bubbly and mid-range ‘Vin de Pays’ wines, it’s the top-drawer Côtes du Roussillon selection that is most classic in style and best reflects the Domaine’s terroir.

ODYSSEA



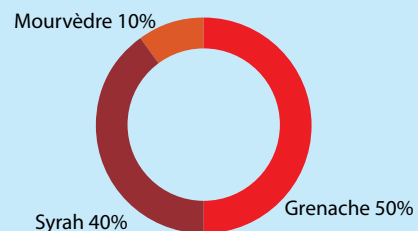
Created to reflect the terroir using only classic varieties of the region. Wines were vinified separately before blending. Judicious use of oak provides a fresh minerality supported by fruit and a hint of aniseed.

GALAMUS



The wine awarded a coup de coeur by Le Guide Hachette, the blend was barrel-aged for eight months to offer well-integrated oak with an exciting mix of berry fruit and touches of chocolate.

CRUSADE



A big, powerful wine with good structure and restrained oak; dark berry fruits dominate on the palate, with plenty of spice and a hint of liquorice.



Above: Dramatic scenery is a hallmark of the Vallée de l’Agly. Left: Domaine Grier’s maturation tanks in the Saint-Paul cellar.

strong, so they don’t need to be trellised.’

Raphaël seems as at home in the vineyard as the cellar, and it’s clear that the winemaking at Domaine Grier is a carefully choreographed team effort.

‘In the first few years we applied our recipes from Villiera over there, but since Raphaël’s come in we have changed our techniques slightly to suit the varieties and the terroir better,’ explains Jeff. ‘On the bubbly, white wine and rosé we go very much along the same lines as how we make wine here, but Raphaël’s strength is in red wine and that’s where he’s made some changes.’

The biggest change has been the shift to post-fermentation maceration, leaving the wine on the skins for around three weeks. Left to their own devices – for just the right amount of time – the tannins polymerise and soften.

‘With red wine, the skin is the most important aspect; it holds tannin, colour and aroma,’ Raphaël tells me over a glass of Odyssea in the tasting room. ‘The grapes must be ripe, and if you chew the skin of the grape in the vineyard, it must be fruity and soft.’

‘The usual thinking is that leaving the wine in contact with the skin for longer gives you more tannin and a drier wine, but it’s actually the opposite,’ adds Jeff. ‘We had actually tried it at Villiera before, but we’d never left it for long enough and ended up with hard tannins without getting the benefit of softness over time.’



Above: The dramatic road from Limoux to Saint-Paul. Right: Lladoner Pelut, a hairy-leaved cousin of Grenache. Far right: Jeff Grier.



See page 158 for the [Glossary](#) which gives more detail on the terms:

[AOC](#)

[Carignan](#)

[Grenache](#)

[Lladoner Pelut](#)

It's just one way in which making wine in France has been a learning curve for the team from Villiera. Alongside new techniques, the terroir of the Roussillon is markedly different from the hot, short summers of Stellenbosch.

'Our grapes there don't ripen in mid-summer; they ripen in September or October. That's equivalent to ripening in March or April in South Africa,' says Jeff. 'And the ripening is more gradual; you get more hang time, and you get phenolically ripe wines at 13.5 or 14% alcohol.'

As Raphaël and I stand between the rows of vines, the flower buds are a whole summer away from producing plump red grapes. Plenty of sun and water lie between now and harvest, but the water certainly won't be coming from the La Boulzane River that flows along the southern boundary of Domaine Grier's vineyard.

In South Africa you'd undoubtedly find pumps on the riverbank, pushing water from the valley to the vines... but not in France. For Domaine Grier's top-tier wines to be recognised as Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée (AOC) Roussillon, they have to abide by a strict set of rules. One of which is that no irrigation is allowed, and the planting of vines is carefully controlled.

'Your wines have to reflect your vineyard, and the vineyard has to reflect the Appellation Contrôlée. By controlling what you can plant obviously controls what goes into the wine too, so the blends are applicable to the region,' explains Jeff. 'There are also restrictions around using acid and sugar; you can use one, but you can't add both. And in France you can't use staves for an AOC wine.'

It's a tightrope of terroir and tick-boxes, but one that Domaine Grier seems to have navigated with ease. Apart from the 130 000-odd bottles a year that flow from the cellar to restaurants and vinophiles, the Domaine has been making waves in the prestigious wine bible, *Le Guide Hachette*.

Of the 100 000 wines submitted for review in the 2012 guide, the Domaine Grier Galamus was one of just 10 000 deemed worthy of a star rating. It scored three Stars, the highest possible.

'And more importantly,' adds Jeff, 'in the whole of Languedoc-Roussillon there were only two coup de coeur awards. And we were one of them.' It's an achievement made all the more impressive by the fact that Domaine Grier is yet to produce its best wine.

'It's only now that Raphaël has been there for two vintages that we are starting to talk about producing our flagship from the vineyard,' says Jeff.





Above: The Domaine Grier range is available from Villiera and most Woolworths outlets. With 22 hectares in a single block, the Domaine Grier vineyard is one of the largest in the area.

‘It’ll be a work in progress though... perhaps five to eight years as it’ll need to spend time in the barrel and the bottle.

‘I reckon it’ll have a lot of Carignan, with a little bit of Grenache. Roussillon is known for its Carignan-dominated wines. We want to make a wine that’ll last for 15 years.’

From both Jeff and Raphaël there’s the sense that they’re in no hurry. The vines have been here for over three decades; there’s no rush. And for the Grier family, their foray into Roussillon most certainly isn’t about turning a quick profit or getting carried away with the romance of a farm in France.

‘We’re not interested in building a big monument to ourselves. We’ll obviously fix up the cellar, improve the tasting room, but we’ve

produced a coup de coeur with our current set-up, and we’re happy with that,’ says Jeff. ‘We want to perfect what we do and develop our range of wines from our vineyard.

‘But over the next five or 10 years we want to double the number of cases we sell. So that would obviously mean buying in grapes and wine. This is a project for the next generation, so we’re doing it slowly over time.’

This is a valley once swept clean by glaciers, where vineyards have grown since the thwack of a guillotine changed the course of history in faraway Paris. In the windy valleys of the Roussillon, time is certainly never in short supply. ♦