

THE REMARKABLE STORY OF MAS DAUMAS GASSAC, IN ANIANE,
THAT CHANGED THE FACE OF LANGUEDOC WINES



Véronique and Aimé Guibert started from nothing in the 1970s. Exceptional wines in the region simply didn't exist. Here's the story of their epic journey, spanning 45 harvests.

The vineyard is so much a part of the landscape that you'd think it's been there since the dawn of time. In fact, Benoît d'Aniane was already producing wine in the Gassac Valley in AD 800.



Yet the Daumas Gassac estate, a major viticultural landmark in Languedoc, was only established less than 50 years ago... September 2023 is underway, and the time has come to kick off the forty-fifth harvest. Across 45 hectares.

1978 marked the beginning of a new era, one in which wine would be taken seriously.

"Nothing but a red plonk industry!"

Aimé Guibert used to say, "France had a field day with this," referring to the south of France, where producers made the vines piss to obtain great quantities causing wine aficionados to wet themselves with laughter when tasting the resulting plonk. Aimé and Véronique Guibert de la Vaissière were ready to start a revolution. Bordeaux had better watch out. As pioneers, the Guiberts started from scratch. In Languedoc, "There was nothing but a red plonk industry!" exclaimed the former glove maker with a frankness that didn't just win him friends.

It was not going to be a walk in the park. Aimé Guibert, heir to a line of glove and leather goods manufacturers from Millau, was left bankrupt as a result of the industry crisis at the end of the 1960s.

The Aveyron native bounced back on two counts, he got married and became a father of five, "He fell for a beautiful young ethnologist at the University of Montpellier", wrote the magazine Terre de vins in 2012. "She was not yet twenty: Aimé's second life began. "My father has an incredible ability to cut ties, to abandon the Titanic," commented one of his children."

They acquired Mas Daumas.

Looking for a property near Montpellier, they stumbled on an estate that didn't look like much. "There were five hectares of pretty much abandoned vines remaining," says Véronique Guibert today. "The horse of poor Daumas pulled him as much as it pushed him. He worked and lived as if in the 19th century. The Daumas family - two spinsters, Emilie and Léa, and an old man, Jean - handed over their traditional farmhouse to the Guiberts. The year was 1972.

"My husband thought like a typical native from Aveyron, he wanted to plant maize," recalls Véronique. "I was the one who wanted to produce wine or grow olive trees. So, I told him, 'We're going to build a winery here, there's no way we're going to the cooperative!' I had family memories of the Pérols area. For me, it was the ruin of the vineyards and wine."

A geographer from Aveyron, Henri Enjalbert, helped convince them further: their soil was truly remarkable! Aimé Guibert used to describe the soil as "chalky pebble dust, where the roots run deep, the key to making rare wines".

He also sang the praises of an ideal microclimate: the Gassac valley, the river, a basin, significant temperature ranges, "a stream of cold air flowing down from Larzac." **Enough to give assurances to winegrowers who settled around Aniane after them that they would benefit from a wealth of land and seduction.**

Aimé Guibert sent countless letters to the father of modern oenology, Émile Peynaud from Bordeaux. "We ended up going to see him in Bordeaux," recalls Véronique. He granted his imprimatur and oversaw the first two vinifications: "He said, 'I'm witnessing the birth of what could be a great wine.'"

Memories of the first harvests and Malagasy accents

The early years of the estate, during their childhood, left a lasting impression on the Guibert sons. Especially during the harvests, "the old-fashioned way, a real party, with different nationalities, loads of students, especially from Madagascar, guys singing in the vines, dancing and telling stories," recalls Roman. "Four years ago, we had the generation of children. It's a life of celebration and sharing. We continue to harvest like this today."

"These students from Madagascar brought their traditional culture along with them," adds Amélien. "I have memories of harvest celebrations around the fire. How many children were lucky enough to experience that? That's also what Daumas Gassac is about."

Véronique Guibert remembers the first grape harvests and job ads for pickers published in Midi Libre. "I wanted students to pick grapes, I wasn't asking for the moon. The first people to respond were Malagasy, with their pretty weird names."

Véronique Guibert's character

"Aimé had a knack for seeking advice and ultimately doing whatever he wanted," smiles his wife. A smooth talker and a devil of a salesman, he was as successful at selling his wine as he was his pelts to couture houses back in the day.

Today, Véronique, 75, still gets annoyed that her own role was downplayed. She doesn't have the soul of an invincible woman.

She was 24 when they settle down. He was 48, twice her age. But she assures us they formed "a real partnership" and she "kept him out of trouble." "I was an enthusiastic environmentalist, and I told him, 'No chemicals, no weed killers! He wanted to clear the whole garrigue to plant vines, even though it's a fantastic form of natural protection! As far as I was concerned, that was a resounding no."



Forty years on, the sons are pursuing this legacy: "We buy back plots of land that aren't cultivated and plant them with woodland, which helps overcome heatwaves," Basile tells us.

A bold move was to plant Cabernet Sauvignon, a popular variety in the Bordeaux region but unheard of in the Languedoc... Enough, incidentally, to deny Daumas Gassac any claim to regional appellations. And to have the luxury of being regarded as the most expensive table wine in the world. Some wines now carry the IGP Pays d'Hérault and Saint-Guilhem-le-Désert labels.

Opposition to Mondavi

In 2000, Aimé Guibert pulled off one last masterful publicity stunt: opposing American billionaire Robert Mondavi's plan to establish a winery in Aniane. The French winemaker versus the global magnate. David versus Goliath.

According to some, this was a strategic error, as it would have been fantastic publicity for Aniane. "The sun rises for everyone," insists Bernard Vaillée from the neighbouring Grange des Pères. "We have to defend our identity," argues Véronique Guibert. She marvels at how "Daumas Gassac's muscle", Manuel Diaz's new Communist municipality, and the huntsmen's battle lines forced Mondavi to bend.

A decade later, Aimé Guibert officially stepped down from the helm in 2010, even though two of his sons, Samuel and Roman, had been assisting him for several years already. He passed away aged 91, on 15 May 2016. He was buried in Ireland, in Kilcrohane, a fishing village where he spent his summers. Again, it was Véronique, a Celtic history buff, who inspired him...



With their sons, the epic turned into a saga

Aimé had five children from a first marriage, and had five more with his second wife Véronique. Four of the latter are now involved in the day-to-day running of the estate. Véronique Guibert says she "greatly admires" her children, "who don't just perpetuate, but continue to create."

Roman is the director for France. Samuel is in charge of wine making and exports, Gaël is responsible for finance and vineyard management, and Basile oversees Asia. Amélien, who was on the sidelines for a long time, is set to join the estate, following a spell working alongside Gaël in 2019.

Diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome late in life, he insists, "I gave them a hard time. If an autistic person is surrounded by people who don't understand that they are autistic, contact becomes an absolute nightmare." His life was "turned upside down" six years ago when he fell into a coma as the result of an epileptic seizure. He is ready to get stuck in now, "even if it's not with the same strength as my brothers."

"My children are all different, but they're all loyal and smart," their father told Midi Libre in 2010. "I can't pretend every day is perfect, but with five brothers, if you don't get along, you'll end up putting the key under the mat," insists their mother.

"We were born when the estate was born," sums up Roman. The eldest, Samuel, 50, was even born the same year the estate was purchased. From 2000, he was the first one to work on the mas. "I was under a lot of pressure. My father didn't explain things, but I managed to extract information. Either you succumb to

pressure, or you make the most of it. So, there was God the father, his wife and we were the disciples."

"So long as the creator is present, he's not likely to keep quiet," says Roman. "Neither were we," says Samuel... The strong Guibert characters...

After spending some time in San Francisco running exports, Samuel now works 100% on the estate. He restored a house in the hamlet overlooking the estate. His brother Roman has done the same.

"We didn't take Daumas Gassac by storm," explains Roman, who joined in 2002, "it was a gradual process", in 2007, before Aimé Guibert officially handed over the reins in 2010. "We had to dabble a bit at first" and "sparks flew" with their father and among the brothers, but Mas Daumas Gassac and its projects are on the right track today.

"For my parents, it was a blank page," sums up Roman. "There's no room for error. You do things that can't be compared to anything else. When you pursue a family project, you have to respect what your parents did."

"It's fantastic to be able to work as a family, we're feel blessed by the gods," explains Gaël. "We purged our inheritance ten years ago. We don't feel like heirs anymore. At first, you're humble, you mustn't do anything stupid. It's a bit like when you're handed a beautiful porcelain vase, you mustn't break it. Then, you get to work. The inheritance turns into something you want to bequeath too."

The stakes are huge, from renewing the grape varieties to climatic hazards. "Joys we wouldn't wish on anyone," says Gaël with a grin.

"Our parents never asked us to take over," he continues. "We all left saying we didn't want to work at Daumas Gassac and we all came back." For instance, Gaël worked as an IT consultant before running a cybercafe with video games.

Basile, the youngest, aged 38, was probably the first to want to come back home, after two years in England working for Liv-ex, a company specialising in fine wines. "I wanted to be back on the estate before I turned 30. Samuel recommended I broaden my horizons first. Not one of us could have achieved what our parents did. But what we're doing together today is an incredible feat."

Establishing a new estate and a new winery

Daumas Gassac will switch to organic viticulture next year. " We support forward thinking, and organic reassures people," explains Roman. And, especially, the business is expanding. After launching a wine for the trade (Moulin de Gassac) in 1992, a new wine will be produced at the end of this harvest or the next.

It will all depend on the quantity of grapes brought in. A new cellar and facilities are already in place. "We desperately needed a new winery," insists Samuel. Roman and Basile will be responsible for wine making. The name of the new estate has yet to be revealed.

Amélien Guibert: "I have Asperger's syndrome and my family didn't realise."

Amélien Guibert, one of the five sons, kept his distance from the estate for a long time. "Until six years ago, working with the family was completely out of the question. I have Asperger's syndrome and my family didn't realise. I'm 45 and I found out by myself about ten years ago. My family has always been protective



of me and has helped me tremendously, but they didn't understand and neither did I. This caused a very painful relationship reality for me. I reacted by either running off or yelling at them. I refused to speak to them on the phone for weeks on end." Montpellier-based Amélien Guibert chose to work in the restaurant industry on and off.

He suffered a ruptured aneurysm at the age of 20, "which resulted in countless epileptic seizures." Six years ago, one of these seizures was stronger than the others and put him in a coma. "Doctors told my mother that there was no hope, that I was going to die. Then they told her I was going to be a vegetable."

"While I was in this coma, I experienced what is known as near-death experiences, which radically changed my life and my understanding of autism. I love my family above all else. Without them, I'd be on the streets."

"In 2018, I had already started coming to work at the estate. Right now, I've come back for this harvest and then to work, perhaps alongside Gaël. I'm not planning to get involved with the same energy and strength as my brothers, who don't have health issues like me. My path is very different from that of my four brothers. They've constantly got their noses in wine. Me, I have my nose in alternative media and if you had to put a label on me, you'd say I'm what the mainstream media call a conspiracy theorist."

"I'm lucky to have spent my childhood here and not to have been shunted off like other autistic people." He recalls the "ongoing adventure" that was the story of the Daumas Gassac estate in its early days. He evokes his father, "a true upper-middle-class businessman", and "my mother, with her 1960s revolutionary streak, who helped my father understand that it was better to preserve nature, in a place that wasn't rotten with chemicals and concrete."