

Decanter

PASSIONATE ABOUT WINE SINCE 1975



Vintage Tuscany

Chianti Classico & Brunello new releases, plus the beauty of Siena

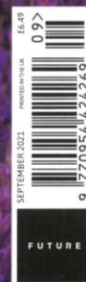
Grapes & gales

Exploring South Africa's southernmost wines

Relaxing reads

Hugh Johnson, Andrew Jefford, Summer cocktails, Wine wisdom

228
wines tasted
in this issue



the taste of **SUMMER**

Sunshine in a glass: Provence rosé, Albariño & Alvarinho,
Pouilly-Fuissé, Asti & Moscato d'Asti

Heroes of the Hérault

At Mas de Daumas Gassac, four brothers are carrying on the work of their father and estate founder Aimé Guibert, embracing innovation while maintaining the estate's reputation for producing a 'grand cru of the Languedoc'

STORY ANDREW JEFFORD

Mas de Daumas Gassac has been the most celebrated domaine in Languedoc over the past half-century. Its genesis can be dated back to a solitary walk around the property taken by Bordeaux geology professor Henri Enjalbert in July 1971. Returning to the *mas* [farmhouse], he declared to the astonished owners that they might produce 'a grand cru from this soil – though it may be 200 years before it is accepted as such'.

Those owners were former glovemaker Aimé Guibert and his wife, a university ethnologist called Véronique de la Vaissière; they had bought the property the previous year. Aimé Guibert seized on the words – and greatly accelerated the time frame.

Seven years later, the first vintage (1978) of the Cabernet Sauvignon-based Mas de Daumas Gassac was launched, made with a little sage consultative help from Bordeaux oenology professor Emile Peynaud. At first, silence. In 1981, though, the wine was declared to be 'a grand cru of the Languedoc' by *Figaro* journalist Michel Piot – and subsequently, by French restaurant guide *Gault et Millau* as 'Château Lafite du Languedoc'.

Further praise (from Hubrecht Duijker, Hugh Johnson, Robert Parker and Clive Coates MW, among others) secured the wine's fame. Aimé Guibert continued to produce the wine from the vineyards lauded by Enjalbert, and on the lines laid down by Peynaud, until his death in 2016. Four of his five sons – Samuel, Gaël, Roman and Basile – manage the estate today. ►



PRODUCER PROFILE

Samuel Guibert makes the wine on behalf of the family. 'When I took over between 2000 and 2010, my biggest challenge,' he says, 'was to make sure that no one said, "Wow, what a change!"'

Much work has gone into the estate, but it's designed to ensure that consistency and quality are maximised, while staying within existing style parameters. Cabernet, notably, is still king. 'We've had a chance to compare Cabernet with all the other varieties we grow here,' says Guibert. 'In 20 out of the last 21 vintages, Cabernet was the best variety – by far.' The Cabernet (70%–78%) is still blended with the fruit of up to 24 other varieties, including Pinot Noir, Tannat, Tempranillo, Baga, Nebbiolo and Saperavi.

These are picked in a state of mixed ripeness prior to the Cabernet. At the Daumas Gassac vineyard altitudes (250m–550m), this means fresh acidities and never more than 14% alcohol. The wine is steel-fermented and lightly oak-aged: 12–14 months and at most 15% new oak, with three or four Bordeaux-style rackings prior to bottling. It is never a hedonistic, lavishly fleshed, beefcake Cab; indeed, its classical reserve when young can surprise. But it ages effortlessly for two decades or more, and is invariably poised and digestible.

GREAT DEBATE

But is it a 'great Languedoc wine'? That's an interesting question. Mas de Daumas Gassac is a pure and now time-honoured expression of propitious Languedoc soils, much enjoyed by its drinkers and sold en primeur and on allocation in a way in which few – if any – other Languedoc wines are. So yes, it is one of very few market-tested, auction-traded 'great Languedoc reds'. Yet it is atypical of the present-day Languedoc in varietal and stylistic terms.

You could not, for example, find a starker contrast to Gérard Bertrand's notion of grand Languedoc wines (as exemplified either by his IGP Aude Hauterive Cigalus or his AP Minervois La Livinière Clos d'Ora). Were it not an IGP (St-Guilhem-le-Désert Cité d'Aniane), Mas de Daumas Gassac would potentially qualify as AP Terrasses du Larzac – yet it also contrasts with Terrasses du Larzac references such as Mas Jullien, Mas Cal Demoura or neighbouring Château Capion. Before jumping to conclusions, though, remember that Languedoc varietal choices aren't written in stone; styles never cease to evolve. In 50 years, we may come to find the Mas de Daumas Gassac 2020 more typical of its region than the Clos d'Ora 2020. Or we may not. Only time – and you, the drinkers – will tell.

There are also developments taking place at the estate itself. 'The biggest change,' says Guibert, 'is the renovation of the vineyard: my father never

had to do that. But esca [a grapevine trunk disease] is a big problem here, so every year we try to replace 3ha. We wait three years; we replant (with our own massal selections); we wait again.

'My top achievement for sure has been completing 18km of fencing to keep out the wild boar. We used to lose 10% of the crop to boar every year, so that fence saves us about €200,000 a year. We also don't have tractors in the vineyards any more – just quad bikes, with horse ploughing and sheep grazing. We've gone from five people to 12 in the vineyards.'

And the winery? 'We work by gravity now in the winery, and that has really helped in terms of elegance and finesse. It has also cut the use of SO₂ by 75%. Every time you pump you bring in oxygen, so you reduce oxygen 10 times by not pumping. The next project is to increase storage space, and in the long term we're also planning a new winery. We hope to make a Terrasses du Larzac, perhaps from new vineyards or partnerships – but we'll have to see; that's at least two years away.'

CREATIVE THINKING

I ask Guibert about the relationship between Mas de Daumas Gassac and the Moulin de Gassac wine range. 'My dad,' he explains, 'was an entrepreneur. He loved to create things. He saw there was a glut of fruit in the Languedoc in the 1980s, with incentives to uproot. Everyone around us was in the Aniane co-op – so he offered to set up a joint venture to select the best terroirs and vinify those ourselves. Aniane said no; they still regarded us as outsiders. But the co-op at Villeveyrac said yes, and Moulin de Gassac was a fabulous success.'

It still is: 1m–3m bottles every year, coming from 300ha of Villeveyrac vines but made and blended under Mas de Daumas Gassac supervision. Some of the wines are varietals, but the most interesting are blends, sold under brand names that Aimé Guibert rescued from his old leather business (Eraus and Faune whites, Elise and Albaran reds): 'Selections of a few parcels based on old vines and lower yields, handpicked up on the plateau where the tractors can't go.'

The co-op at Aniane, meanwhile, has closed.

Mas de Daumas Gassac: at a glance

Founded Land purchased 1971; first red vintage 1978, first white vintage 1986

Owned by The Guibert brothers: Samuel, Gaël, Roman, Basile and Amelien

Production 86,000 bottles (red 44,000; white 35,000)

Key wines Mas de Daumas Gassac Rouge; Cuvée Emile Peynaud (pure, single-vineyard Cabernet, in the best years only, including 2015, 2020); Blanc; Vin de Laurence (sweet wine based on early-picked Sercial refermented with late-picked Muscat à Petits Grains Blancs, best years only); Rosé Frizant sparkling



Jefford's highlights from the Mas de Daumas Gassac range

FOR THE CELLAR

Mas de Daumas Gassac Rouge, Aniane, Languedoc 2019 92

£26.50 (ib)-£42.50 **Averys, Berry Bros & Rudd, Christopher Piper, Farthinghoe Fine Wine, Les Caves de Pyrene, The Big Red Wine Co, Waud Wines** IGP St-Guilhem-le-Désert Cité d'Aniane. The 2019 vintage was very dry and hot, with record-breaking late June temperatures – but the 78% Cabernet Sauvignon component performed well in these relatively elevated, breezy vineyards. Lots of scented fruit lift – black cherry rather than blackcurrant this year. Strikingly concentrated on the palate, and long, with just a touch more grip than usual. The 14% alcohol is a record, too – but you won't notice it in this tightly sewn, acid-bright midweight. Give it a year or two if you can. **Drink** 2022-2032 **Alc** 14%

READY NOW

Mas de Daumas Gassac Rouge, Pays d'Hérault 2011 91

£43.33 (ib)-£81.50 **Berry Bros & Rudd, Honest** Grapes, **Les Caves de Pyrene, Waud Wines, Wine Raks** Mas de Daumas Gassac has a programme of historic releases, and the 2011 is the vintage on sale at present. This was a warm vintage, and the aromas of this dark red-black wine combine gentle currant fruits with menthol

and the scents of warm pine forests and sunlit stone paths. The palate is deep, intense, lithe – and those Languedoc forest complexities fall like sunbeams through the palate, too. The tannins are light and sustained; the acidity is rounded and glowing. Perfect maturity just now. **Drink** 2021-2025 **Alc** 13.5%

THE WHITE ALTERNATIVE

Mas de Daumas Gassac Blanc, Aniane, Languedoc 2019 93

£25 (ib)-£43 **AG Wines, Alastair MacBrayne, Berry Bros & Rudd, Buon Vino, Christopher Piper, Fine Wine Direct, Joseph Barnes, Les Caves de Pyrene, Noble Green, The Beckford Bottle Shop, The Big Red Wine Co, The Good Wine Shop, The Salisbury Winestore** IGP St-Guilhem-le-Désert Cité d'Aniane. Mas de Daumas Gassac white is a complex, unwooded blend of Viognier, Petit Manseng, Chardonnay and Chenin Blanc, plus smaller quantities of other varieties. Its emphasis lies on perfume (from extended skin maceration)

and balanced freshness, with the richness of ripe Viognier and Chardonnay being offset by the zest of Petit Manseng and early-picked Chenin Blanc. The low-yielding 2019 is light straw-gold in colour, with expressive nectarine, almond, pineapple, thyme flower and floral honey on the nose, and a bright, juicy yet structured and mouthfilling flavour. Look out for the cleansing, stony finish, too. **Drink** 2021-2031 **Alc** 14% **D**

MORE FROM THE MAS

For Andrew Jefford's notes and scores on 11 other wines from the Mas de Daumas Gassac stable, please go to [decanter.com/premium](https://www.decanter.com/premium)

