

Raise Your Glass: This winemaker's first step was soil

By WARREN JOHNSTON



Moulin de Gassac

Guilhem Red, 2017

France/Languedoc, \$10.99

Alcohol content: 13%

Moulin de Gassac Guilhem Red, a soft, delicate wine with flavors and aromas of berries and spice, is produced by one of the most celebrated family-owned wineries in France.

I wrote about Moulin de Gassac Guilhem white and rosé wines three years ago, but I hadn't tried the red wine until recently when it started showing up on the New England market. It's a remarkable wine at a super bargain price. I've found it on sale for \$8.99.

Red wine is how the winery made its reputation, and Moulin de Gassac Guilhem Red is a good representative of its more expensive wines.

For almost 50 years, the Famille Guibert has been making superior wines in a part of France that, prior to their arrival, had a reputation for bulk, flavorless plonk.

Shortly after they produced their first vintage in 1978, Aimé Guibert and his wife, Veronique, changed that perception and showed the world that the Languedoc area, in southeastern France, is capable of producing wines that rival Burgundy and Bordeaux.

After he graduated from college at the end of World War II, Aimé Guibert declared that he wanted to go into farming, but his father had other ideas. He needed to make his career working for the family tannery, Guibert Freres, an eight-generation business with 1,000 employees, and sell leather in the United States. Aimé complied, but when the leather business started to decline 20 years later, he followed his dream.

Newly married, Aime and Veronique, a professor of Irish studies, moved out of their flat in Montpellier into the farming community of Aniane about 25 miles away. They bought an old, tired farm from 80-year-old Jean Gassac, whose family had lived there for eight generations farming the traditional way — without pesticides, herbicides or machinery, their son Samuel Guibert said in a 2007 interview in the Crimson Aroma newsletter.

Initially, the Guiberts particularly liked the house and thought they might farm some of the land, planting olive trees, wheat and asparagus. Not too long after they purchased the property, geologist Henri Enjalbert visited his friends in their new home. Enjalbert specialized in the relationship between land and grape growing. While walking around the farm the first day of his visit, he discovered small ice age stones, scree that he compared to the best soil in Burgundy's Cote d'Or region.

Enjalbert persuaded the Guiberts that they could make a Grand Cru, a French designation for superior wine or for a vineyard that produces it. Enjalbert also cautioned that it would take 200 years to convince the world that such a fine wine had come from Languedoc.

The Guiberts took up the challenge, planting grapes that were not normally grown in the region, such as quality grafts of old vines of Cabernet Sauvignon from some of the finest estates in Bordeaux. After the first harvest, they built a winery using the ruins of a Gallo-Roman mill as the foundation. Cold water springs still run beneath the mill's floor as natural cooling for the wine cellar.

The Guiberts also got help from one of the top enologists in France, Emile Peynaud. He had advised many of the country's Grand Cru vineyards, but had never created one and wanted to be part of their effort.

The first vintage was bottled in 1980, and Peynaud was given half the bottles. The remainder of the 17,866 bottles were given to friends, family and associates because the reputation of Languedoc was so bad no one would buy them, according to a 2016 appreciation in Le Figaro Wine magazine of Aimé Guibert, who died on May 16, 2016 at 91.

The 1982 vintage received high acclaim, with one French wine magazine describing Moulin de Gassac as "a Chateau LaFite Rothschild of the Languedoc." Guibert also proved that a non-appellation wine, Vin de Pays, could fetch prices similar to Bordeaux.

Aimé Guibert was a staunch opponent of large commercial wineries, which he saw as a threat to the future of quality wine. He not only refused to sell his winery to Robert Mondavi, but also led an effort, along with environmentalists and others, to defeat the California winemaker's plans to destroy a 125-acre oak forest in Aniane and plant grapes on the land.

He also was the hero of the 2005 documentary Mondovino, passionately stating at the beginning of the film that "wine is dead," along with cheese and fruit, arguing against the industrialization of wine and food.

"Aimé Guibert, innovative, truculent, clever, knowing how to play with his blue-steel eyes, is the real father of the revival of Languedoc wine growing. He has disappeared at the age of 91," the tribute in Le Figaro says.

Moulin de Gassac is a deep, brilliant-red wine with a soft and fruity opening flavor and a long, smooth finish. It is a blend of 40% Syrah, 30% Grenache and 30% Carignan, the tasting notes say.

This is an excellent wine at very affordable price, and it is a strong tribute to its original winemaker.

Suggestions of wines in the \$10 range are always appreciated. Warren Johnston can be reached at raiseyourglassofwine@gmail.com. For past recommendations, go to raiseyourglassofwine.com.