

Domaine Bernard & Robert Plageoles

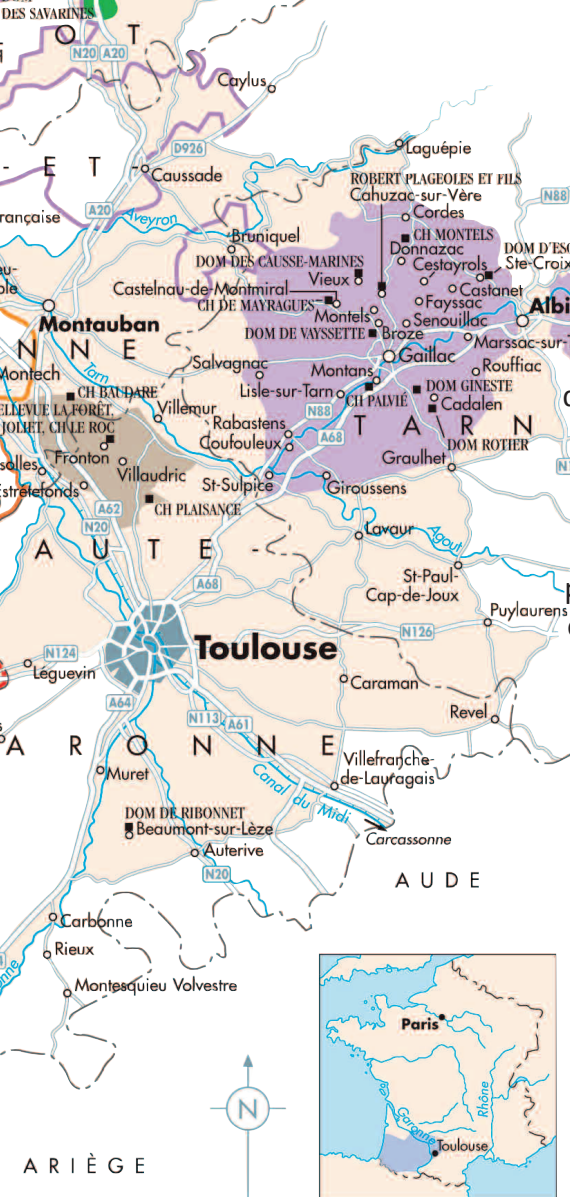
Heirloom Gaillac: The Road Less Travelled.....

“The wines of this unique Gaillac domaine... are a challenge; nothing quite like them is produced anywhere else in France... In many ways [the Plageoles wines] are untypical of Gaillac – yet Gaillaic is an AOC with so many personalities that they seem perversely typical, too.”
Andrew Jefford, The New France

“The Plageoles put Gaillac – and it’s local grapes – on the map.” *Jacqueline Friedrich, The Wine Of France*

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fter a night of wine revelry with Gilles Lapalus of Sutton Grange in his home town of Cluny (Burgundy), Rob’s twitter updates fell silent on the 10th of July. It wasn’t until 18 days later that he resurfaced with the following tweet: *“Getting out on Gaillac. Great wines from the Plageoles lads made with indigenous varieties most of us have never heard of. Definitely bringing these in because a: they’re delicious and great value b: we’ve got no Gaillac and c: that will make two wines with 'nature' on the label!”* Somewhere in those 18 days Rob had gone to ground, ventured off-piste and surfaced amongst the hidden vineyards of South West France.



Viticultural Gaillac is a horseshoe arc of land high above the river Tarn in South West France. Though relatively close to Bordeaux, few people outside of South Western France know this region's wines. It was the Phoenicians, then the Romans who first planted vines in the Gaillac region northeast of Toulouse. It predates Bordeaux, and like Cahors, Madiran and other wine regions in South Western France it might have achieved the same renown had it not been for a quirk of historical fate. If only those shifty Bordelaise on the Garonne River had not first expropriated their wine (by blending it with their own) and later taxed it to death before it went through their port. Then Phylloxera vastatrix came to town, which pretty much delivered the coup de grâce to Gaillac.

Robert & Bernard Plageoles

Today's Gaillac is many things to many people. To the wine buyers from British supermarkets it's simply a cheap, inoffensive refreshing, fruity white or rose from the local Mauzac Blanc or Gris. In France, outside Gaillac, it's a robust, aromatic red made from a blend of local and interloper varieties to wash down a simple plat de jour. To the esoteric sommelier, the source of some compelling regional oddities and yet for Robert Plageoles it's a fanatical, lifelong passion. Robert Plageoles also seems to be many things to many people. To wine lovers he is the most famous and widely admired grower in

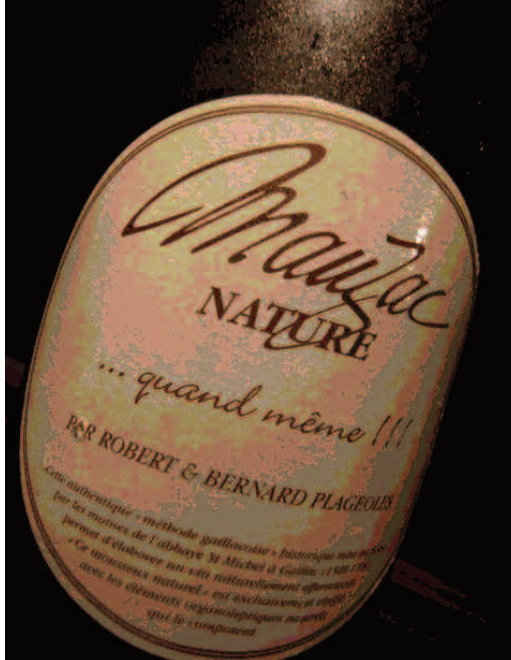
Gaillac, to the Gaillac faithful he is an iconoclastic ampelographer (an expert in the identification and classification of grapevines), who has indelibly linked this family to Gaillac wine and almost solely responsible for resuscitating Gaillac's indigenous, almost extinct grape varieties. To the Gaillac AOC committee he is probably viewed as a hopeless anachronism or wine outlaw.

The Plageoles have managed to recapture some of the historic recognition that Gaillac wines had in the past. They've also brought back from oblivion many of its distinctive grape varieties. Robert researched and replanted over a dozen varietals (five in the Mauzac family alone) indigenous to Gaillac that had all but vanished – for example grafting and growing Prunelart (for red wine), five variations of the Mauzac grape (Roux, Vert, Noir, Gris and Rose), and Verdanel and Ondenc (for whites), and in doing so is responsible for bringing these rare flavors into the 21st century. Bernard took over Domaine Plageoles around 10 years ago. He shares his father's love for Gaillac, its native grape varieties, organic viticulture, and low-tech, natural-yeast wine-making. Rather than blending their wines, they've chosen to bottle each wine as a single variety putting them at odds with the AOC, but also allowing them to market the distinctiveness of the Gaillac grape varieties. Most of the wines are therefore bottled under the Vin de Pays des Côtes Du Tarn AOC.



Mauzac Nature 2010

Having tasted the Plageoles Mauzac Nature from magnum with a group of vigneron in the Rhône valley, it was the fresh and frothy delights of this Plageoles specialty that set Rob on his merry way to Gaillac. This is old school fizz made using the méthode ancestrale (known locally as méthode Gaillacoise or méthode rurale). In simple



terms the wine is put into bottle before it has fermented dry and it is the continued fermentation that gives the wine its bubbles. There is no other additions and no need for dosage. It is the natural residual sugar that produces the bubbles. The resulting wine is a delicate yet textural, citrus oil noted, slightly cloudy, off dry sparkling with only a gentle bubble. It is an orchard in a glass and displays a beautiful natural acidity to balance the kiss of sweetness. It is important to note that this is a very important, historical wine. It is not a product of modern trends. This wine was produced in Gaillac in the 16th and 17th centuries – before Champagne had bubbles! The Plageoles make it using exactly the same methods that were used by the local monks almost 500 years ago. So not only are have the Plageoles resuscitated many local, indigenous varieties on the edge of extinction, they have also brought back to life one of the region's most fasci-

nating wines styles. It is something totally and deliciously unique of which Alice Fiering offers the evocative description in the box above right. Jaqueline Freidrich is clearly also a fan. The Plageoles now use only the exceptionally rare Mauzac Rose variety - from a parcel of 40 year old vines cropped at 25hl/ha - for their Mauzac Nature.

Jaqueline Freidrich “Drink their Mauzac Nature, a light, sparkling white, the minute it comes on to the market and you will swear it’s the freshest thing you have ever tasted.”

Alice Fiering: “The wine was like a wacky sandwich, earth on the attack, a flower shop in the middle and stone, cold, stone on the finish.”

Decanter: “Made from the local Mauzac grape; this is a very enjoyable sparkling wine. Very different to Champagne, it exhibits lots of fresh pear and fresh crushed apple characters. The palate is bone dry and displays a beautiful natural acidity with a purity and cleanness of fruits. Something different and unique for an aperitif.”

The Red Wines

2009 Prunelart

This is one of Plageoles indigenous Gaillac reds. Having been a bit of a goer in the 16th century, there are now only about 20 hectares left in France of the largely forgotten Prunelart and the Plageoles have played a key role in ‘saving’ the varietal. Today, when youth and newness seem to count for everything, the Plageoles are proud to admit they like ‘old things’ and this philosophy seems intractably woven onto this fascinating red. The Plageoles Prunelart vineyard is planted on clay and silica at a density of 5000 plants per ha (bush vines) and cropped at a very low 32-38 hl/ha. The fruit, as with all the Plageoles wines, is hand harvested and winemaking is reassuringly tech-free; the fermentations are spontaneous, the wine is aged in cement tank for 1 year before being bot-

tled without fining or filtration. The 2009 a rich, lifted, plummy nose leading to a silky smooth palate, with plum, soft liquorice and something cool and fresh too – green peppercorns, and then meat and earth come into subtle play with the bright fruit. Some gentle, fine, peppery, spicy tannins kick in, keeping the finish fresh. Clean, pure and fruit rich wine; thrillingly original tasting like the bastard child of a Cahors Malbec and a Jura red!

2009 Duras

If it wasn't for the Plageoles resuscitation of Plunelart or Mauzac Noir, Duras would certainly be the oldest vine variety still used in Gaillac today. No little thanks to Bernard Plageoles outspoken lobbying for the variety, it is the most commonly planted of all of Gaillac's traditional, dark-berried grape varieties. At its best, which is what we have

here, it's a lively wine, deep in colour and rich in body and one that eloquently demonstrates a marriage of cépage to terroir well worth defending. This comes from a parcel of old vines on limestone and clay. It's cropped very low by regional standards and the winemaking is almost identical to the Prunelart - the fruit is hand harvested and winemaking is reassuringly tech-free. The fermentations are spontaneous, the wine is aged in cement tank for 1 year before being bottled without fining or filtration. The nose is very unusual if intriguing; subtle liquorice and spice, a bit of crushed ant and sweet red things too. Then in the mouth it's quite bright and fresh with a core of almost fruitcakey (without being sweet), plummy fruit and then this wonderfully spicy, almost curry leaf-scented, powdery close. Very drinkable and sooooo different. Will challenge with its difference but then again, a totally uncommon variety should do just that. It remains a delicious drink which is the main thing.

2010 Syrah

Along with Duras and Fer, Syrah is regarded as a principal red wine variety in Gaillac and although growers are increasing their proportion of Fer and Duras, in the right areas Syrah is capable of delivering a wonderfully supple and sexy wine with complex mesh of red fruits, blackberry, spice and pepper. It has to be said that while the flavour profile of this red is more recognisable than the more obscure Prunelart and Duras, it remains Gaillac first and Syrah second. This is also from a clay limestone site and cropped very low by regional standards and the winemaking is almost identical to the Prunelart and Duras reds - the fruit is hand harvested and winemaking is reassuringly tech-free. The fermentations are spontaneous and the wine is aged in cement tank for 1 year before being bottled without fining or filtration. A beautiful, se-

ductive Syrah with silken texture and tannins and a very pretty dark cherry, blueberry, cinnamon spice and just a hint of fresh, spicy fennel. Absolutely gorgeous, pulpy wine, which will be a by-the-glass winner.

Gaillac Doux - The Sweeter wines

We couldn't go past this trio of luscious Gaillac Doux or moelleux (or sweet wines!): the **Muscadelle 2010**, which comes of a 40-60 years parcel on Schist and Clay and is cropped at a miserly 15hl/ha. The fruit is concentrated on the vine – passerillage – though in some years a proportion of botrytis further richens this nectar. It's a sweet wine dripping in floral and honey perfume, the palate is rich and succulent yet not at all cloying. This wine is vinified and aged in old oak demi muids. The **Loin de L'Œil 2010** (an ancient variety also spelt Len de l'el) is made with a similarly desirous yield and method as the Muscadelle. The name translates as 'far from the eye'. Why? From Google: "...the bunches are situated near the front of the branch, and have a long peduncle. As such, they are far from the eye (the bud) of both the branch and the bunch". It's an intense, sweet, peachy and citric wine and aromatically lifted in the Sauternes vein. Kernel and candied pineapple notes lend an exotic south west feel but overall the volatiles keep the wine beautifully pitched. The last wine is made from **Mauzac Roux 2010** (one of the six Mauzac varieties worked by the Plageoles family). Its yield is decimated by botrytis and surrenders just 25 hl/ha worth of fragrant golden, citrus-scented juice. Perhaps the least sweet in the range, it is nonetheless viscous in the mouth with all kinds of citrus oil, orange oil and red grapefruit in particular, apple cider and candied peel notes. Like most Plageoles wines, this is both fascinating and delicious.

