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Ignoring tradition, Languedoc-based Mas de Daumas Gassac estate planted Bordeaux varieties and proved to naysayers that you don't have to follow the rules to make great wine

WORDS LIN WEI WEN



Mas de Daumas Gassac is a curious case in Languedoc. In a region synonymous with Syrah, Grenache, Carignan and Mourvèdre, the estate—located in Hérault’s scenic Gassac valley—has instead chosen to concentrate on making Cabernet Sauvignon-dominant blends.

“When my father, Aimé Guibert, bought an abandoned 300-year-old farmhouse in Gassac in 1970, he was wondering if he should plant wheat or olive trees, but my mother, Véronique, convinced him it should be vines, and our estate was established,” says Basile Guibert, 33, the youngest of Aimé’s four sons. “Since my father loved Château Latour, he decided to make a good Cabernet Sauvignon-based wine.”

Guibert Senior’s indulgent idea didn’t sit well with the Languedoc folk then. In the 1970s, wines from Languedoc were largely plonk, with an emphasis on quantity over quality. “We were seen as the black sheep because we wanted to make not just good wines but wines with Cabernet Sauvignon,” recalls Basile. “We were going against the odds.”

The estate’s focus on Cabernet Sauvignon disqualified its quaffs from being stamped as AOC, but in 2011, an IGP status was specially granted to its wines as a recognition of quality. Today, Mas de Daumas Gassac is known for making some of the finest Bordeaux-style blends outside of Bordeaux. “People regard Mas de Daumas Gassac as

the most ‘Bordelaise’ Languedoc winery,” quips Basile, who apart from overseeing the Asian market, runs the estate as its co-owner alongside his older brothers Roman, Gael and Samuel. “Bordeaux locals dream of our kind of climate. Because of the region’s Mediterranean influence, we are warmer and have more sunshine, so the ripeness of our Cabernet Sauvignon is almost perfect every year.”

A NOD TO BORDEAUX

Aimé Guibert, who passed away in 2016, was never one to shy away from a challenge. Before winemaking came into his life, the Millau local was running his family’s tannery business, churning out leather gloves in Paris. When the industrial leather market sputtered in the late 1960s, Aimé shifted his attention to luxury leather, visiting leather factories in the Middle East and courting the likes of Roberto Cavalli and Pierre Cardin with his materials.

By then Aimé had more than three decades of experience in managing a business. The farmhouse in Gassac—formerly owned by the Daumas family—was the realisation of his dream to be a farmer; a yearning for a rustic life. When he and Véronique arrived in Languedoc, they were outsiders, which in Basile’s view, turned out to be an advantage. “They were not part of the agriculture community in Languedoc, so they didn’t have the weight of the region’s tradition on their backs,” says Basile. “They didn’t mind breaking the rules.”

Top The Guibert family: (front row) Roman, Véronique, Aimé, Gael; (back row) Samuel and Basile

Opposite Mas de Daumas Gassac Estate



Aimé's Cabernet mission was a meticulous one from the start. Instead of planting cloned vines, he obtained—with the help of Montpellier University—un-cloned, pre-phylloxera Cabernet Sauvignon vines from Bordeaux via Selection Massale. (Selection Massale is a viticulture practice whereby cuttings are selectively taken from old vines for propagation, ensuring that the new vines retain the genetic variety of the 'parent' plants.) In 1978, the estate released its first vintage: a blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Tannat and Malbec.

Today, the estate has over 52 small vineyards sitting among 3,000 hectares of protected forest, forming an undulating landscape of dense foliage punctuated by a patchwork of glades. Basile notes that it's "a nightmare for the tractors" as they have to navigate around the bushes and vines. He says, "But for us, that is a *better* nightmare to manage than, say, a massive vineyard with no surrounding forests."

Sustainable agroforestry principles drive Mas de Daumas Gassac's organic viticulture. The surrounding forest is home to bats, which feed on thousands of insects every night. Birds also help control the population of vineyard pests. Sheep roam the grounds between autumn and spring, feeding on wild grass. The animals' manure is also turned into compost for use in the vineyards. To suppress the growth of weeds, cover crops of grasses and leguminous plants such as triticale and clover are planted between vine rows.

BLENDING BOLDLY

The evolution of Mas de Daumas Gassac's signature red blend offers a look into the unique winemaking mind of Aimé: a four-variety component in the 1980s turned into a mix of more than a dozen grapes in the 1990s. In the 2000s, Aimé pushed the envelope

with a blend of more than 20 varieties. For example, the 2013 vintage—a luscious, rich swirl of dark fruit, dried leaves and mint—was composed of Cabernet Sauvignon, small amounts of Merlot, Tannat, Cabernet Franc, Malbec, Pinot Noir, and a small percentage of Italian and Georgian varieties like Nebbiolo, Barbera, Dolcetto, Saperavi and Tchkaveri.

"I don't have the definite answer of what was going on in my father's head," says Basile. "He wanted to have fun; he believed this kind of blend would make a complex wine. The Italian varieties bring some character and spice—some music from the south. For him, uniformity is the enemy of complexity. But no matter how many varieties we add [to the blend], its highlight will always be Cabernet Sauvignon because it is the king."

Basile says that if he were in his dad's shoes during the 80s, he would have started with Pinot Noir, given his love for the variety. But he admits it would have been an uphill task growing the finicky grape in the sweltering heat of Languedoc, even if their soil conditions were ideal. Henri Enjalbert, the late wine geologist, once surveyed Daumas Gassac and described the soil conditions—a mix of crushed limestone and clay—as similar to those in Burgundy's Côte d'Or.

"People always ask me, 'Why not make Pinot Noir?' But we have customers who have been following Mas de Daumas Gassac's wines for more than two decades. We don't want to change our style or wines just because we are a new generation. There's no need to paint the room in a new colour," muses Basile.

"My brothers and I are may be less intelligent than our parents, but we bring more energy to the table," he remarks. "We work weekends and late nights, and we share our roles. This way, we offer more control over every aspect of winemaking. Our goal is the same: to make pure wine." **WD**



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Mas de Daumas Gassac also makes a white from a blend of Petit Manseng, Viognier, Chardonnay and Chenin; and a rosé from Cabernet Sauvignon, Mourvèdre, Pinot Noir and Petit Manseng

From top

Horses ploughing the vineyards; Mas de Daumas Gassac's cellar

