

DOMAINE LO DOMENI (France, Cahors, Caillac)

BACKGROUND: Just up the hill from the charming commune of Caillac sits the small estate of Lo Domeni (7 hectares only), owned by Pierre Pradel a friendly, easy-going man who always seems to be smiling. After years of selling and promoting wines from other producers, Pierre returned to his family's vineyard in 2004 (at the time he was 39) taking care of business. Meanwhile the gorgeous Malbec vines have been meticulously



trained by his father who was the vineyard manager as well for the neighboring Château Lagrèzette. In the recent past 3 of the 7 hectares belonged to this Château owned by former Cartier tycoon Alain Dominique Perrin which has always a bit shadowed Lo Domeni brand awareness. Pradel's total production, aside from the bag in box business, is 25.000 bottles per year.

The town of Caillac is located at 11 km north west of Cahors (don't pronounce the "s"), in the department of Lot of the French region Midi-Pyrénées. Before Pierre took the helm of the property, the grapes had always been taken elsewhere and 2006 was the first time that they bottled wine on the property. How's Pierre style? It doesn't take long to answer this question according to our man. The wines of Lo Domeni are fresh and fruit forward, with little oak and soft tannins.

THE FORMER WINE TRADER: By promoting wines made by other growers, Pierre Pradel gained extensive experience: *"I had made my own palate. I had spent all my time to compare wines ad style, understanding the terroir and the vinification techniques adopted. I learned all the tricks of old generation of winemakers. Still now my method is to taste my wines every single day to understand their evolving side which attracts me like a magnet. This is pretty much an empirical method, but enology classes where definitely boring to me and technology in the cellar is not a relevant element in my wines equation"*.

In other words Pierre goal is to enhance the healthy Malbec fruit qualities at a very reasonable price. His hand in the cellar is soft: moderate tannins extractions allowing the fruit to express lively with no restrictions while keeping meantime a beautiful concentration. He doesn't seek to make a "big" wine to seduce a wine expert or buyer, but his purpose is to produce a "smiling wine", a bit resembling his down to earth attitude. Something nice to drink and to share.

In 2006 Pierre embarked himself in this beautiful winemaking experience marked by a

great dose of enthusiasm and instinct. Not much more, though. No cellar, no tanks, no money or clients, but excellent vineyards kept as a little gem by his father. He has been helped by some investors and friends with enough loans to buy equipment and build a proper cellar. More than ten years later the good news is that he has made enough money now to hire friends to help him during harvest time taking care of his best plots at the sound of an accordion. This is pretty poetical, right?

TERROIR AND CULTIVATION: The property sits on a limestone plateau (*causse* in French) above the River Lot where good rain level can favor water retention helping the vines to perform through the harvest. Obviously rain levels can get out of control just has happened in February 2013, for instance, when the Cahors appellation experienced the heaviest rains in the month for the past 100 years with the clay-limestone soils completely saturated.

Pradel uses what the French call *lutte raisonnée* to work his vines, meaning that he uses the minimum amount of herbicides and pesticides necessary and as of 2010 he took the step of moving towards fully organic cultivation. More specifically his wines will be organic certified in 2019.

He only plows between every-other vine row, and the vegetation on the un-worked rows is controlled with an *intercep*, a tractor-mounted rotating blade that removes the weeds next to the vines, which are between 25 and 45 years old. Almost 95% are of the Malbec variety, with the remainder being Merlot (Pierre uses it for blending his Rose).

LEARNING CAHORS TERROIR: The local river Lot here plays a relevant role. Sure we can go into detail on the geology, terrain and soil depth or type, but it's much better in this case boiling it down to an easy to understand concept - terraces. These layers of alluvial deposits are what make for such a variety of wines in the Cahors region which received AOC status in 1971 and since then has undergone a massive reorganization and



revitalization. Winemakers know how to best use the land and techniques to produce good to very good wines. Knowing about terraces is the key to understanding the different styles and ageing potential of local Malbec. Most of Cahors wines (two-thirds of vineyards) are from the four terraces that border the Lot river. Picture it this way: the first terrace is the closest to the river, the second is farther away with a slightly

higher elevation, and so on. The closer to the river, the more clay, gravel and nutrients in the soil. Generally, red wines from the first and second terraces are fruity, easy to drink and meant to be enjoyed young. Some winemakers will blend this Malbec with

Merlot or Tannat. The farther away from the river, the more limestone in the soil. For rich, intense and complex Malbec that benefits from time in the bottle look to the third and fourth terraces. Iron also influences the character of these wines.

Above the terraces is the plateau. Situated at an elevation of 300 meters), the limestone plateau has clay, marl, chalk and iron in the soil. It is less fertile than the valley terraces, and is less influenced by the river. The saying that better wine comes from vines that have to struggle is very much on display in Cahors. If you're searching for that standout wine that will wow you in years to come, look to the fourth terrace or plateau. And these wines are the most expensive on the other hand.

AN APPEALING APPELLATION: Rainfall here is significantly lower than on the Atlantic coast (700mm a year, compared with 950mm in Bordeaux). Consequently, the risk of



fungal issues in the Cahors vineyards is quite low, minimizing the amount of disease-preventive spraying required. Summer days are warmer and sunnier than in Bordeaux, making it easy for the local vignerons to achieve full phenolic ripeness in their grapes. This is important for Malbec and even more so for tannin-rich Tannat, which is offensively astringent if not properly ripened. The AOC Cahors can only be used for red wines and there must be a minimum of

70% Malbec in any wine called Cahors with the 30% balance Merlot and/or Tannat. The grape is known locally as Cot, Cot Noir or Auxerrois. The name Malbec can appear on the label if at least 85% of the blend is Malbec which only fully ripens at the beginning of October. This is the only AOC in Southwest France to prohibit the use of Cabernet Franc and Cabernet Sauvignon. Although many growers produce white and rose wines, they cannot have the Cahors appellation, which is solely for red wines. With an increasing number of high-quality estate wines, which go well with meats and stews, Cahors is at the cutting edge of the entire southwest's renaissance.

Few words about the last vintages: 2015 has been a very good and brilliant vintage really (and wines will be enjoyed in the coming years as they are usually pretty tight now). Crops were still healthy towards the end of September, with moderate sugar contents (13.5% vol. on an average) and gave balanced and mineral wines, full of promises. A vintage with great potential. 2015 followed after a pretty good 2014 and back to back inconsistent 2013 and 2012. The best golden vintages of the millennium are still 2000, 2005 and 2009 which will be unlikely beatable for a while.

PRADEL'S WINES: Pierre Pradel produces AOC Cahors using only the Malbec grape, and Vins IGP Côtes du Lot for his Rosè. These wines are of different types, going from supple, light and fruity reds, to powerful, rounded, generous reds, from a dry, fruity and fresh rosé with an attractive orangey colour, to ratafia, a local apéritif.

Steep Hill at the moment imports two wines, Les Clos and the mid level Vendemia. Labels aren't the fanciest on the market for sure, but what is in the bottle is genuine and well made. And that is more than enough.

Both Lo Domeni's wines show that young Cahors wines made from 100% Malbec can be something other than rustic, floor-board-hard tannic monsters that need years to evolve. These reasonably-priced, fruity and elegant wines point the way to a new generation of Cahors wine. Pradel, it appears, has a good reason to be smiling.

LE CLOS 2015 AOC CAHORS: Lo Domeni's AOC Cahors *Le Clos* is 100% Malbec coming from vines averaging 25 years and rich in clay and limestone and placed in the 3rd terrace on the right bank of the Lot river. After mechanical harvest, the maceration process is pretty short avoiding extractions and dark colored fruit. Then the wine is fermented and aged in stainless steel vats with soft pump-overs. This offering is a good example of the "Tender & Fruity" (the nomenclature developed by the appellation's marketing experts) entry-level Cahors. The 2015 vintage tastes very fruit-driven (red, ripe cherries and red currants) with a level of elegance that is unusual for a low-priced wine. *Le Clos* is somewhat light in weight (12,5% AbV), maybe resembling some Mencias made in Galicia. This is a classic everyday sip for nice drinking experience marked by a juicy mouth-feel.



This is the Wine Enthusiast review on the 2012 vintage written by Roger Voss (87 pts): *"Still young, this structured wine has a herbal edge that gives a green feel to the otherwise full black berry flavors. With acidity at the end, it's fruity and fresh"*.

VENDEMIÀ 2014 AOC CAHORS: Vendémia, the other 100% Malbec wine, originates from older vines (up to 45 years) meticulously hand harvested and located in the 3rd terrace on the right bank of the river Lot. Black fruit (blackcurrant, blackberry) and pine notes on the nose; on the palate this wine is spicy with a good warmth without being alcoholic. Coating tannins displaying here the classic iron fist in the velvet glove showing a full bodied wine, but not fat or neither wrapped by the oak ageing process. The minty freshness of the finish enhances the balanced alcohol level. The Vendémia cuvee vinification starts in big casks with manual pigeage and a month long fermentation, then is aged for one year in oak barrels that have been used on one or two previous *millésimes*. It has the necessary structure to balance the excellent fruit foundation. *Vendémia* fits into the mid-level, "Feisty & Powerful" Cahors marketing strategy.

This is the Wine Enthusiast review on 2012 vintage rated 89 points and written by Roger Voss: *"Wood-aged and ripe, this is a solid, tannic wine. With mint over black fruits and firm new wood flavors, it will need to age. It is powerful on the palate from all the wood tannins and dense structure. Drink from 2017"*.