

Laurent Miquel

Revolution in the Languedoc



Neasa, Sean and Laurent Miquel, with Henri and Christiane Miquel.

The Languedoc appellation of France, which runs along the Mediterranean coast from Provence to the Spanish border, has become one of Europe's most exciting and diverse wine areas, thanks to winemakers like Laurent Miquel, that have transformed the region.

When the Romans arrived in the Saint Chinian region in the south of France 2000 years ago, they started a historic revolution by planting vines and making the region's first wine. Today, the Miquel family whose Château Cazal Viel vineyards still boasts ruins left by those Roman settlers, is helping to kickstart a modern revolution of their own.

The Miquels established their estate in 1791, after the French revolution had driven out the monks of the Abbey de

Fontcaude, who had produced wine since 1202. But it wasn't until the 1970s, when Henri and Christiane Miquel took over, that the estate truly showed its potential.

Although he was fully employed as a bank manager, Henri Miquel, the seventh generation of his family to own the estate, loved Rhône wines and passionately believed in the possibility of making a similar style and quality in this region. Working in his spare time at night and weekends, he began to plant new Syrah vines and rejuvenated

old ones. Encouraged by the results, he went full time and produced his first vintage in 1980. Two years later, his efforts were rewarded by the official recognition of the Saint-Chinian AOC.

"We have observed a revolution in the past 30 years, both qualitatively and quantitatively," says Laurent, Henri's son, who joined the family business in 1996 and is now its head. "Major improvements in terms of quality production have led to the region gaining worldwide recognition for its structured and expressive wines."

It wasn't a given that Laurent Miquel would be a winemaker: At university, he studied engineering and then did post-graduate studies in quality assurance from the University of Leeds. "I worked in the automobile industry in England, far away from the family



Château les Auzines



vineyards.” But his heart was still in the region, so returned to France to study oenology in Montpellier. “In 1996, inspired and encouraged by my father, I created my first vintage – more than two centuries after my forefather!”

Understanding the precise combination of soils and microclimates enabled the Miquels in 1992 to choose ideal plots in which to plant Viognier vines. They now have more than 40 ha and are recognized as champions of the variety, having accumulated numerous international awards, including twice winning the International Wine Challenge trophy for Best French Viognier.

“Our understanding of the land and the unique wines it can produce has been handed down through the generations,” says Miquel, adding that his life is dedicated to elevating the region’s reputation to its rightful place among the great classic wine regions of France. “By concentrating on the noble varieties of Syrah and Viognier I, and my father before me, have been champions for a new revolution in the Languedoc, the drive towards exceptional quality. In the process we have produced wines of great depth and character, with a strong local accent.”

Their work with Viognier proved that the Languedoc can produce genuinely great aromatic white wines with the kind of acidity that gives great ageing potential. In 2009, the family acquired the Les Auzines estate in Corbières. Isolated on a rocky plateau at an altitude of 350 m, between the Alaric Mountains and the Alzou gorge, overlooking the village of Lagrasse, because it offers ideal conditions for aromatic whites. After careful soil studies, the Miquel family planted 32 ha of high altitude vineyards, 17 ha of which have been planted to the Spanish grape Albariño. Miquel says that the 2013 vintage, their first for the variety, has been a huge success. Which is not surprising, because the Albariño is perfect for the modern palate, being fresh, lively and food friendly, with excellent acidity.

Introducing varieties like the Albariño is where the revolutionary spirit of the Miquels and their region comes into play. Miquel says the winery is successful precisely because it doesn’t conform to expectations. “Languedoc and its inhabitants have always had a rebellious reputation amongst our fellow country-men,” he says. “I am adding to this by questioning

the establishment ‘rules’ and producing innovative, exciting and flavour-some new wines to delight the palate.” Miquel says he’s fortunate that he has the expertise of some of the great revolutionary winemakers of the region to draw upon, not least of whom is his father Henri. “They provide me with support and advice as well as information and knowledge gained from years of experience.”

Today, the entire Miquel family is involved in wine, with Henri and Laurent the vigneron, and Laurent’s Irish-born wife Neasa Miquel the sales and marketing director. Their three year old son, Sean, is already showing an interest.

Les Auzines is now home for the current generations of Miquels, No doubt it’s also the base from which future revolutions will almost certainly be born.

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