

A NOSE FOR IT

IN A HEAVYWEIGHT FRENCH WINE REGION, MAVERICK VINTNERS ARE FLIPPING THE SCRIPT WITH SUSTAINABLE PROCESSES LED BY THE LAND. ROOKSANA HOSSEALLY MEETS THE MAKERS

‘IF THERE’S NO HUMAN ASPECT IN A WINE, it’s dead to me,’ says Raphael Baissas de Chastenet of the domaine Nada Vandal Wines, set deep in the Languedoc-Roussillon countryside. For this baggy-jeans-wearing natural winemaker in his thirties, ‘winemaking is akin to being an artist and requires part brain and part love’.

The former Apple Store stock manager once dabbled in graffiti, and the logo for Nada is written like a tag. ‘Just like art, winemaking is a form of freedom – no one dictates how we should create it. That’s what I love about it.’ In fact, his illustrated labels are a far cry from the conventional cursive gold lettering: on one, a girl, eyes hidden by a dishevelled fringe, discreetly holds a gun by her side; another is splashed with colour as if it were an abstract painting.

In 2015, Baissas de Chastenet bought his first parcels of grapevines in the tiny, picture-perfect village of Calce and has never looked back despite numerous complications. ‘I farmed a parcel for five years and one day it all went up in flames because some kid lit a car on fire in a neighbouring field,’ he says. ‘You’re dealing with nature, including human nature, and all its elements. So you don’t get to decide how much wine you’ll make that year... But working with nature, actually being part of it, is what’s most exciting.’

The Languedoc-Roussillon is known as the birthplace of French organic wine and produces about a third of the country’s output. This surprisingly vast region, stretching from the Rhône Valley in the east to the Spanish border in the south-west, is slotted between the Mediterranean and the snow-capped Pyrenees. Drive through it southwards and just before Spain you reach the Pyrénées-Orientales *département*, centred around the city of Perpignan with its 13th-century Palace of the Kings of Majorca, the burnt-orange rooftops offset by blue skies year-round. Here, road names are written in two languages and French, Spanish and Catalan cultures clash in a blur, impossible to pull apart, so much so that local customs, accents and culinary traditions are the people’s own.

Natural wine – generally sustainably farmed low-intervention, organic or biodynamic bottles, from funky orange to fizzy *pét-nat* – has been the biggest movement in the wine industry in the past decade, with innovative lists at trailblazing restaurants such as Noma pushing these wild cards onto the world stage. And the Languedoc might be known for its natural-wine pioneers, including Jean-François Nicq of Les Foulards Rouge, but figureheads have always welcomed newcomers who bring a fresh revolutionary spirit.

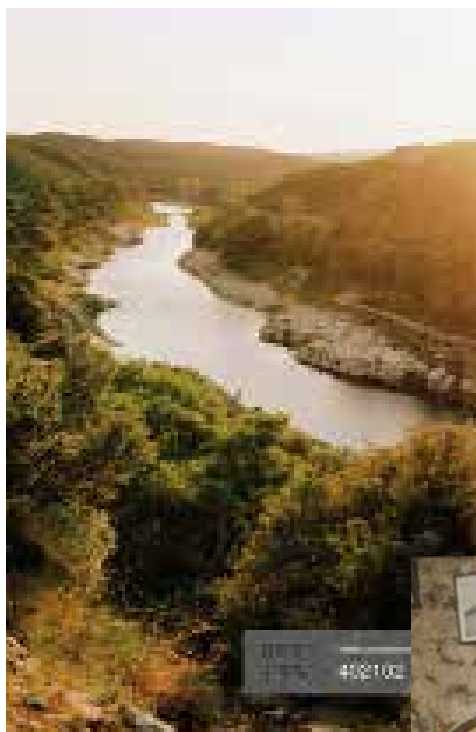
‘Farmers here have been producing their own natural varieties for centuries – it’s a *vin de table*, or *pif*, as we call that kind of wine that has vinegary undertones,’ says Alban Michel of Les Sabots



PHOTOGRAPHS: @LAYLALAY; MARTIN MORRELL; LORIC GONZALEZ



Clockwise from opposite top left: horses in the Camargue; vineyards in Ajac, Aude; harvesting at Les Arabesques; Domaine Yoyo bottle; vineyards at Château Les Carrasses domaine in the Languedoc; streetside in Sonnac-sur-l’Hers, Aude; Native restaurant; Domaine Yoyo owner Laurence Many Krief



are still affordable. ‘When I arrived 15 years ago, the farmers thought I was crazy because I had never done this before,’ says Michel. ‘I only had a couple of vats, no machinery and hardly any money... It’s a myth that you need anything more.’

For most, developing and drinking natural wine is more than a question of taste; it’s a movement, a political stance pushing back on the narrative dominated by hubs such as prim and proper Bordeaux, where armies of oenologists and *maîtres de chais* strive for stable cuvées that offer the same taste year in and year out. ‘They get all the limelight, the labels, the appellations,’ adds Michel. ‘But to ensure a steady supply, they have no choice but to use a load of chemicals and heavy equipment to work the ground.’ Here, winemaking ticks to the environment’s pace and nothing more. Grapes are cultivated organically and without chemicals, meaning the wine is living, full of naturally occurring microbiology. And methods also remain rustic, with most things done by hand.

A former textiles director, Laurence Manya Krief decided to leave Paris aged 35. ‘I had the typical city breakdown,’ she laughs. ‘Natural winemakers were so supportive, and there are no gender boundaries.’ Her impressive Domaine Yoyo is up in the hills of the Banyuls overlooking the sea. It’s impossible to use machinery here, so processes that should take two hours can take her three weeks by hand. But that hard graft pays off: her wines are sought after for their delicate quality that brings an airiness to the punch often packed by Roussillon bottles. ‘The trap is to assume that natural winemaking takes less skill because there are fewer rules, when in fact the lack of structure means it requires even greater know-how and intuition.’

‘I have the most fun pairing natural wines precisely because they are more unpredictable,’ says Saskia van der Horst. The 36-year-old headed to London as a photographer some years ago and returned home to France as a sommelier trained at restaurants helmed by Gordon Ramsay and Marcus Wareing. Witnessing the beginnings of the natural-wine movement in London is what led her to set up Les Arabesques in Montner.

One of the best places to sample natural varieties is among Perpignan’s narrow winding streets. Native, a restaurant known

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d’Hélène. His lanky frame flits between grapevines, his eyes bright from the golden afternoon light, and possibly from the wine we had at lunch. ‘The hardest thing isn’t making wine – it’s the drinking of it,’ he smiles.

Previously a fruit picker, Michel launched his vineyard in 2005 in Feuilla, a 45-minute drive from Perpignan, and develops against-the-grain bottles with names such as Masturbation Carbonique and Ni Dieu Ni Maître Ni Sulfite (neither god nor master nor sulphite). ‘I wouldn’t say I’m a winemaker; I make wine that I enjoy drinking. I’m a *pificulteur*,’ he says, using his own terminology for someone who makes *pif*, which is also the word for nose and having good instinct or luck – the key ingredients for producing natural wine.

In France, winemaking is usually akin to being accepted into a secret society where only those who have it in their lineage and master the strict rules and etiquette have the right to do it. But natural winemaking is the opposite. It’s about sharing and collaboration, open to people of all backgrounds and budgets – especially here, where the terroir is rich and the parcels of land, planted with varieties of Syrah, Grenache, Carignan and Macabeu,

for its fresh bistronomic fare, was opened by artist-and-curator duo Constance Barrère Dangleterre and Damien Teixidor. ‘There is a proximity with these makers that you don’t get with traditional wines,’ explains Teixidor as he rustles up bonito with cress, pear, pickled vegetables and rose on a sunflower-yellow-tiled counter.

After years spent living and travelling abroad, the pair, both in their early thirties, returned to their hometown, like many of the new generation launching restaurants and bars in the area. ‘We wanted to apply everything we’d learnt to highlight the wonderful products of our region,’ says Barrère Dangleterre.

‘At first, we planned to curate the goods, but I started to want to actually cook, even though I had no classical training. And serving natural wines became a part of that shift – of the freedom to be and create.’ Their initial selection of five bottles has since grown to no less than 125. ‘The tricky thing about conventional wine is all the codes that go with it – I never felt comfortable talking about it because I was made to feel as if I didn’t know anything,’ says Teixidor. ‘But with natural wine everyone’s allowed to voice their opinion, even those tasting it for the very first time.’

Above, clockwise from top left: the Gard river near Remoulins; grapes at Les Arabesques; Alban Michel of Les Sabots d’Hélène; Domaine Yoyo corks

PHOTOGRAPHS: PHILIP LEE HARVEY/OFFSET; MARC VAN KEMPEN