

Newsletter

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After returning from Asia in late July a trip was planned to southwest France to investigate and promote the sale of my travel companion Mike's property. He is the proud owner of a once dilapidated, now crumbling, hotel in the spa town of Eau Bonnes in the foothills of the Pyrenees. While efforts in procuring agents, repairmen etc. were only moderately successful the wine experience was altogether more rewarding.

I knew virtually nothing about the vineyards in the region so it was a pleasant surprise to taste several different bottlings over dinner in Pau.

The Jurançon is located southwest of Pau, famous as the birthplace of Henri IV. Framed by the Pyrenees to the south the landscape consists of gently rolling hills with vineyards interspersed with other crops.

Jurançon is produced primarily from the Gros Manseng and Petit Manseng grapes. Generally dry Jurançon is made with Gros Manseng with the Petit Manseng being reserved for the sweeter wine.

With generally warm autumns the grapes are left on the vine and due to their thick skins they do not rot (so no botrytis like Sauternes) gradually becoming sweeter but not losing their acidity. For the 'sweet' wines harvest can take place anytime from October to December.

We stayed one night near Monein at *La Benjamine*, a bed & breakfast establishment next door to Domaine Nigri. Cedric Herbiere and his wife, Dawn, had recently renovated a Bearnaise farmhouse to a very high standard and provide four luxurious bedrooms for guests. Even better Cedric, who worked as a chef in the UK for many years, offered a four-course dinner in the evenings with local wines. Dinner was superb and at 30 Euros a person fantastic value. The room rate was 100 Euros a night for two, including breakfast (La Benjamine, Quartier Candeloup, 64360 Monein. tel: +33 (0) 559 21 48 27, website: www.labenjamine.net).

Domaine Nigri

Prior to our arrival at La Benjamine Cedric had arranged with a neighbour for a tasting of his wines. The vineyards were immediately next door on a south-east facing hillside and looked in superb condition. I was not expecting much and indeed had no intention to purchase. However I was pleasantly surprised by what was presented not to mention Monsieur Lacoste's knowledge and passion. As usual when presented with temptation I cannot resist and resolved then and there to order the best examples of his range.

Jurançon Sec 2005

An unoaked version consisting of 80% Gros Manseng, 10% Camaralet and 10% Lauzet full of character and drinkability with notes of lemon and flowers. A great alternative to chardonnay and sauvignon blanc.

Jurançon Sec (Reserve) 2005

Made from 100% Gros Manseng this version was aged for a few months in three, four and five year old oak barrels. It had the patina of roundness that oak confers but still retained the acidity and freshness that is so important. I would be concerned in lesser years that the oak (any oak) might overpower the wine but for 2005 this was not an issue. Flavours of oranges were evident.

Jurançon Moelleux (Reserve) 2004

Made from 100% Petit Manseng (so called because of the size of the grapes is smaller than the Gros Manseng). This wine was fresh and elegant with beautifully defined flavours. Not at all cloying.

A barrel sample of the 2005 showed just how good this year will be for the sweet wines and I have reserved a good chunk of this stunning cuvee for importation next year.

Domaine Cauhapé

In one of those twists of fate that so often come up in the wine business I was not planning any further tastings but Cedric suggested that I should visit what he, and as I subsequently learned, most people believe is the best domaine in the Jurançon. So literally on the way to the airport we stopped off at Domaine Cauhapé and met with its owner Henri Ramonteu. It was clear right away that these were superior wines with terrific precision and length. Among the examples tasted (and all were good) were:

Jurançon Sec 'Chant des Vignes' 2005

Yet another example of the quality of the 2005 vintage for dry wines. The wine had lovely nose of fresh hay and lemon, which buttressed by good acidity made for a very elegant and focused wine. It is made from 100% Gros Manseng and is fermented and aged in stainless steel tanks.

Jurançon 'Symphonie de Novembre' 2003

From an excellent vintage for sweet wines the grapes for this wine were, as the name suggests, harvested in November. Due to the absence of botrytis the wines retain excellent acidity which allows for graceful aging. You can still taste the honey notes but there is no cloying sweetness. Rather there is an elegance that invites sipping either before dinner or with dessert or cheese.

Chateau de Viella

Although staying south of Pau I thought I would venture northwards to the Madiran region to taste some examples of this appellation. As it turned out I had grossly miscalculated how long it would take to drive there and no sooner had I reached the outskirts of the region that I had to turn around and head back for another appointment. I had, however, canvassed a number of the growers in the Jurançon on top producers and a name that cropped up on several occasions was Chateau de Viella. Indeed Monsieur Lacoste of Domaine Nigri had told me that Chateau de Viella's 2003 Prestige was the best Madiran that he had tasted. I subsequently contacted the owner and winemaker, Alain Bortolussi, and ordered forty cases. The cepage is 100% Tannat and the result is spectacular. However this is a wine that either needs to be laid down for 2-3 years or decanted several hours before drinking for optimum enjoyment. The tannins are big but ripe and the flavours are expansive and delicious, a sort of French version of top Zinfandel.

My conclusions were that the regions from Bergerac to the Pyrenees was deserving of more recognition, and indeed more exploration. I hope that you will try these wines to judge for yourself.

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