

## The tale of the other Joly

24 Mar 2011 by Tamlyn Currin

Standing on the slope of a stony Larzac terrace, hands jammed deep in pockets and hunched, wincing against a glacial wind, we dug our heels in against gnarled vines as Virgile Joly talked at great speed – worried frown playing tag with a disarmingly lovely smile. He points to a disconnected electric wire and tells us that this year they ran 6,000 volts round the vineyard to keep the wild boar out, and yet the wretched creatures still got through. It's a constant battle, he shrugs. He keeps apologising for his English, which he speaks very well (I suspect Virgile apologises for a lot of things that he does well; he's a man on a relentless search for perfection). A bit of a Languedoc celeb, having featured as the handsome young vigneron in Patrick Moon's beautifully written book *Virgile's Vineyard*, Monsieur Joly should probably be much more famous for his wines.

Virgile grew up in the Rhône and, perhaps partly inspired by his grandfather, who was a wine grower, partly by a university lecture, abandoned his two years of studying to become a science teacher and qualified with a degree in oenology instead. A smorgasbord of work experience after that included six months managing the co-op in St-Tropez, making wine at Santa Rita in Chile, then a period back to France as a flying winemaker in Châteauneuf, in Béziers for Domaines Virginie and with Mas Jullien in nearby Jonquières.

In 2000 aged 28, with just one hectare of leased vines, dreams of fine wine, ferocious energy and an elbow-nipping rented space in St-Saturnin furnished with cobbled-together winemaking kit [I remember that barn door...JR], he finally got to make his own wine: 3,564 bottles in total. Hand-bottled, mind, every single one of them filled by funnel. In 2001 he rented another four hectares and began farming organically (much of his work at that point was influenced heavily by Olivier Jullien). Production surged to 5,000 bottles.

Ten years on, the domaine comprises 15 ha of his own land, across the Terrasses du Larzac villages of Jonquières, St-Guiraud, St-Saturnin and Arboras. His team of one harassed winemaker (plus harvest volunteers of drafted-in friends, family and a stray Englishman) has increased to five: two vineyard workers, an office manager, Virgile and his wife. The tiny, beautiful Magdalena arrived from Poland with a friend and an atlas in 2000, and ended up picking grapes for Virgile. Two years later, she decided to stay, and they now have two children. I hear that the harvest team still includes a few motley foreigners aka English writers.

When Virgile started out, his wines tended to be Grenache-dominated. Now, with more than a third of his vineyards under Syrah vines (between 22 and 25 years old), the balance of his blends has changed over the years to become more Syrah-dominated. He's lucky enough to have 1.6 ha of beautiful old Carignan vines between 40 and 60 years old, and another 1.5 ha of 38-year-old Grenache Noir vines. The rest of his vineyards are planted with Cinsault, Grenache Blanc, Roussanne and some very young Viognier (planted in 2008, mainly to appease AOC regulations for white blends), Carignan and a tiny plot of Mourvèdre. Virgile is particularly excited about the Mourvèdre, as it is planted in a perfect site: a well-drained south-facing slope, with rare white oak trees along the edge of the vineyard - a telltale sign of good underground water.

The vines are densely planted for the region, at 6,500 vines/ha. Average yields are 25-35 hl/ha. I asked him what his biggest challenge of the past 10 years has been. Without hesitation his answer was, 'Transforming old vines used to producing large quantities for the co-operative into vines that produce small yields of a high quality. It requires very careful handling and a gentle approach.' The winery is Ecocert organic and Virgile does follow some biodynamic principles. Biodynamics is not cut and dried for him. His comment to me is, 'All the experts have their own opinion... I therefore decided to buy Steiner's *Lessons for farmers*. This proved to be a revelation, as the first thing he says is that the most important thing is common sense! For me, therefore, the priority was to produce good, healthy grapes and take my time to understand what biodynamics could bring me. I am still trying to decide, but I am starting to see more clearly.'

In 2009, thanks to a collaboration with [Christopher Johnson-Gilbert](#) (a London lawyer and one of our very own Purple pagers), he finally moved from his postage-stamp cellar to a shiny new 300-square-metre winery in Arboras. Christopher had sacrificed some of his carefully invested wine portfolio to buy 10 ha of vineyard in Montpeyroux and managed to persuade Virgile to help him to make his wine. This gave Virgile a chance to work with a new appellation as well as to try, for the first time, making rosé. The results of this first vintage 2009 can be seen in my tasting notes later this week. Virgile's eyes shine as he shows us round the new winery. 'It is like day and night! We now have lots of space, and equipment beyond my wildest dreams.'

As we wander round the new winery, still a little raw-looking from its recent construction, and mostly furnished with stainless steel and cement tanks, I ask about sulphur, which seems to be the burning (make that smoking?) issue for so many people nowadays. He told me that he did an interesting experiment in

which he had two tanks of exactly the same juice, one with added (minimal) sulphur and one without any sulphur at all. By the end of the fermentation, both wines had exactly the same level of sulphur dioxide. However, significantly, the tank to which SO<sub>2</sub> had been added during fermentation needed much less sulphur at the time of bottling.

With 75,000 bottles a year (plus another 30,000 for Christopher Johnson-Gilbert), bottling methods have had to change somewhat since 2000, and distribution is a little wider than the local brasserie. Half of production is exported to Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, the UK, Japan, China, Canada and Brazil. Interestingly, more than half of the exports go to Switzerland. Accolades, medals and awards have poured in: Guide Hachette, Gault et Millau, Solar Organic Wine Guide, Wine Report, Wine Europe and the IWC. A particular honour was winning the French Banque Populaire National Trophy for outstanding achievement and innovation in Agricultural Enterprise in 2007. His wines are taken seriously for food as well, listed in several Michelin-starred restaurants: Guy Savoy in Paris, Le Jardin de Sens in Montpellier and De Lauzun in Gignac.

Tasting notes to follow later this week. Virgile's vineyards below.

