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Reclaiming the Earthy Grapes of St.-Joseph

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Credit Eric Asinov



Nanda Gonzague for The New York Times

Raymond Trollat, right, more than anybody embodies the history of St.-Joseph. Mr. Trollat examines a vine with the Gonon brothers, Pierre, left, and Jean.

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LEMPS, France — If wine can be said to have a soul, you can feel it here in the heart of St.-Joseph. For centuries, farmers grew grapes on the impossibly steep granite hillsides of this appellation, just west of the Rhône. The vines were planted on terraces that clung precariously to the incline, supported by ancient stone walls.

Now, the terraces are abandoned, engulfed by the forest. The stones, once so carefully pieced together, have been pried apart by tree roots reasserting their primacy.

Like so many vineyards in Europe, these were victims of phylloxera in the middle of the 19th century. Then came World War I, followed swiftly by a depression, World War II and, finally, the promise of better living through industry and factory work. Many of the hillside vineyards were abandoned as farmers shifted to less labor-intensive land or forsook agriculture altogether.

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Among the farmers who left St.-Joseph, in the winding valleys of the Ardèche region, were the Chaves, who, the family says, had tended vineyards on these hillsides since 1481. Now they are famous as the first family of Hermitage, the great wine appellation just across the Rhône.

But Jean-Louis Chave, 44, the scion of the family, has long harbored the dream of resurrecting his family's lost vineyards here. He began high on this hillside in 1995, and little by little painstakingly rebuilt terraces and stone walls and planted syrah grapes on a slope so steep it can be worked only by hand.

It took 15 years to complete less than four acres.

This vineyard feels as ancient as the crumbling granite underneath, a place where earth, climate, altitude and exposition come together with faith, hope and the sweat of humanity past, present and future. What it says about history, heritage and culture represents much of what I love about wine, which has a story to tell, in a voice that invites both contemplation and pure pleasure.

St.-Joseph has many such stories, and Mr. Chave and other like-minded producers are trying to write new chapters. Yet they face a difficult challenge as consumers tend to focus more on the best than on the very good.

For years, St.-Joseph has been eclipsed in the northern Rhône Valley by Hermitage, Côte-Rôtie and, more recently, Cornas. Commercially, St.-Joseph has been outshone by Crozes-Hermitage, which, although its wines only occasionally reach the potential heights of good St.-Joseph, has capitalized on its name association with Hermitage.

St.-Joseph has so much to offer, beginning with its granite-laced hillsides, which can give the reds an earthy, elemental, mineral core, around which the syrah grape wraps its savory, spicy, intricate flavors. Most St.-Joseph producers make whites, too, of roussanne and marsanne. They can be extravagantly fruity at first, showing their lean core only after seven or so years. They are enjoyable, but for me it is the reds.

When the appellation was founded, relatively recently in 1956, it was meant to convey the distinctive qualities of these hillsides, in valleys clustered near six villages bound by similar traditions and terroirs: Lempis, Tournon, Mauves, Vion, Glun and St.-Jean-de-Muzols. Nobody can really say why the appellation was called St.-Joseph, as one vineyard section was known, beyond the notion that it avoided offending any of the villages by not elevating the name of any one of them.

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Wine was just part of an agricultural economy then. Farmers who tended vines also grew cherries, apricots, grains and vegetables.

“Back then, a kilogram of apricots was worth more than a kilogram of grapes,” Mr. Chave said, recalling the years when his father, Gérard Chave, was coming of age. “Even in the 1980s, almost no estates were bottling their own wine.”

Along with Mr. Chave, there are quite a few producers who, by dedicating themselves to the arduous production of wine by hand from the steep granite hillsides, are demonstrating that St.-Joseph can be both distinctive and superb. It may not exhibit the long-range magnificence of Hermitage, but offers superb middle-range beauty that is equally rare. These like-minded producers include Jean and Pierre Gonon, self-effacing brothers whose St.-Josephs, from grapes grown in the original zone and labeled with their father’s name, Pierre Gonon, are among the purest and most distinctive.

A little to the north, near the town of Arras, Etienne Bécheras makes gutsy, soulful St.-Josephs. At the northern end of the appellation, in Chavanay, young Lionel Faury at Domaine Faury makes wines with finesse and elegance, demonstrating that even the newer part of St.-Joseph has something to offer if the grapes come from granite soils. Other excellent St.-Josephs come from Dard & Ribo, Bernard Gripa, Domaine Monier, La Ferme des Sept Lunes, Bernard Faurie, Domaine Barou and many others, even some producers who are primarily associated with Crozes-Hermitage, like Alain Graillet and Natacha Chave (no relation).

As omnipresent as the looming hills, history seems to drive the best St.-Joseph producers. The Gonon brothers, who come from a long line of vigneron, cling to many of the old ways. They plow their slopes by horse or, if the incline is simply too steep, by treuil, a system in which the plow is pulled up the hill by a cable attached to a winch, guided by a human. Some hills are even too steep for the treuil. In the relentless sun of a summer day, plowing is not easy.

“All the old people were not plowing for happiness,” Jean Gonon said. “They plowed because they needed to. Our parents worked very hard, but they weren’t recognized for their work or financially. We are lucky. People are buying our wines.”

The Gonon St.-Josephs are complex, layered and structured, stern and austere when young but opening beautifully over 7 to 10 years. In good vintages, like 2007, they make a special cuvée from old vines that is denser and more structured, emphasizing the stony, mineral heart of the wines.

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They also have vines on the flatlands, but those grapes don't go into the St.-Joseph. Instead, those wines are labeled Vin de Pays d'Ardèche. The difference between the two wines is striking: the Vin de Pays is delicious but easygoing, without the density or complexity of the St.-Joseph; syrah, not terroir, as Jean Gonon puts it.

A lot of St.-Joseph is like that, too.

"St.-Joseph is quite comfortable," Jean Gonon said. "It sells well, and for some people that's enough. They aren't trying to make something distinctive."

One of the Gonons' vineyards, on a hill high above the village of St.-Jean-de-Muzols, was once worked by Raymond Trolat, who more than anybody embodies the history of St.-Joseph. The vineyard was planted by his grandfather almost a century ago and tended by his father. But Mr. Trolat retired in 2005 and, without an heir, sold some of his vines to the Gonons. Mr. Trolat, now 82 with hands gnarled by hard work and time, and wearing his ubiquitous bucket hat, is the legendary conscience of St.-Joseph.

Before the appellation was established, he sold his wine to the local bistros, where the coal miners in nearby St.-Étienne would fill up big jugs to take to work with them. "It was basically vinegar — we didn't have to change bottles for the salad," he said. "People made wine for their own consumption. We knew how to grow grapes, but we had to learn how to make wine that would last."

Progress came at a cost. "We learned to make wine but forgot how to cultivate," he said. "Mechanization and herbicides replaced hoeing, plowing and hand work." Mr. Trolat was not immune from the lure of progress. He used herbicides, although he never stopped working the land by hand. His wines were pure, rustic, soulful exemplars of St.-Joseph.

As for Mr. Chave, the vineyard near Lempis is only part of a grander plan, which his family's prosperity permits him to pursue. He is also resurrecting hillside vineyards near Mauves, and in 2009 bought a clos, an enclosed vineyard on the flats that he said was walled off because its gravel and granite soils were so unusual.

Some of these grapes go into his négociant St.-Joseph, a fine entry-level wine sold as Offerus under the J. L. Chave Selections label. The best parcels go into the domaine St.-Joseph, a savory, complex wine that is more flamboyant than the Gonons' St.-Joseph but equally pure.

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“I am the first generation with the resources to go back, to recover the family legacy,” he said. “But one generation is not enough.”

Eventually, he said, he would like to make several St.-Josephs, each expressing a different terroir within the appellation, but he believes he doesn't yet understand the terroirs well enough to separate the individual wines from the blend. When will that understanding come? Speaking of the wine from his vineyard near Lemps, Mr. Chave takes the long view.

“It took 15 years to get the vineyard planted, and that's a great accomplishment, but it's not the end,” he said. “It will take another 20 years before the vines will be old enough to show the terroir, and then you have to have the right vintage, and another 10 or 15 years to age the wine.”

By then, his father will no longer be around, and perhaps Mr. Chave won't be, either. But he and his wife, Erin, have a young son, Jean-Louis, and, as happens with wine, the 15th century eventually will speak with the 21st century.

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