

Les Wineries du Rhône

LePlan-Vermeersch



PORTRAIT —

THE CHEQUERED FLAG

The pedal is well and truly to the metal – having started out in 2000, it has taken the maverick Vermeersch family just 20 years to go from garage wine to selling 600,000 bottles. And that's how Dirk, a former Belgian rally car driver, likes it.

Dirk Vermeersch was a professional rally driver until a serious accident put paid to his career. He quickly recovered, and decided to stay in the automotive industry, acquiring a garage where he specialised in rally car preparation. He later became a Lancia, Maserati and Volvo dealer. In 1999, Mercedes bought the entire business, making Dirk an offer he couldn't refuse; and cheque in hand, he found himself looking for a new venture. He eventually bought a run-down old farmhouse in Tulette, in the lieu-dit of Le Plan, with a small plot of Carignan vines – and that was the start of his new life. He initially made wine in the garage, learning as he went along and quickly producing his first vintage, but soon realised this was the future he wanted for his family. He persuaded his daughter, Ann, to take a course in viticulture at the Agricultural High School in Orange.

One word in two

"It was hard going to start with. I'm from Antwerp, and I didn't speak very good French. Luckily, my maths, physics and chemistry were ok, and I enjoyed the course. The techniques, the formulae, the oenology itself – it all opened up a new world for me. I fell in love with it all, even though I only understood one word in two." Although she admits the vines

can still be a mystery to her, Ann loves travelling abroad, presenting her wine for tasting and talking to people about it. If she sees anything in her vineyards she's not sure of, she rings one of her old schoolfriends to ask whether it's normal and if they've experienced it too. Many of her friends' families have been winegrowers for generations. They've established a bond with the land and have an innate feeling for the wind and weather. They're happy to help their new Belgian friend out.

Ann's father was advised to pull up those first few hectares of Carignan, but he did the opposite – to prove that if you care for something and nurture it, it can produce beautiful results. Several purchases later (and having now sold the original farmhouse) the family own 21 hectares of vines. Starting small allowed them to develop at a pace that suited them, and gave them the confidence to invest in a winery in anticipation of future growth, although the 20 pallets they started out with made it feel cavernously empty. But the Vermeersch family have since filled it, and become an established winegrower/négociant business.

French wine, Belgian style

The family have become known for their single-varietal wines – 100% Carignan, 100% Viognier, 100% Grenache and 100% Syrah, although it has meant they don't get an AOP label, and are classified as Vin de France. Likewise, their négociant wines comprise a range of single varietals including Cabernet, Sauvignon, Gamay and Viognier, alongside Côtes du Rhône, Côtes du Rhône Villages Plan de Dieu and Suze la Rousse and crus such as Gigondas and Châteauneuf-du-Pape. They've chosen some very distinctive names: GT stands for Grand Terroir, GTS for Grand Terroir Syrah and GP, the entry-level, easy-drinking range, for Grand Prix or Good Party. And every label shows a chequered flag, to reinforce the branding, making it stand out and reminding customers of the family's history.

Ann Vermeersch and Sébastien Barbara in Suze-la-Rousse



Established:
January 2008
Employees: 4
2020 turnover: €1.14 million, of which 88% from export



"When you see a chequered flag on the label, you know it's one of ours."

"Appellations aren't our priority," explains Ann. "That would be the brand – although what's in the bottle is, of course, crucial." This is very much in line with what their market demands: 95% of their wines are exported, and their marketing is meticulously thought through, as are the wines. In 1995 Robert Parker awarded the first GT-1 Châteauneuf-du-Pape 95 points out of 100, while in 2011, an international panel in Japan declared GT-X, a blend of all the estate's varieties, the best French red wine. Just right for shifting the winery into high gear!

More women needed!

When her father moved back to Belgium in 2019 to take care of the commercial side of the business, Ann stayed in France with her husband to keep things going. She plays rugby, he plays hard rock – definitely signs of a new generation! When asked if women are better at multi-tasking than men, Ann answers that women have so much to think about in their family lives that at work it's just more of the same. She's pleased more women are coming into the industry, although there's still a long way to go. "At a recent UMVR dinner, only 2 out of the 20 guests were women," she says. "Our estates, cooperatives and négociants are all teeming with testosterone, and everyone thinks everyone else is going to kill them. Whereas I think we need one another to live. As women, we can pour oil on troubled waters, make things more pleasant for everyone, and lighten the atmosphere. Instead of getting angry, we talk."



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