

Les Wineries du Rhône

Les Vins de Vienne



TAKE THREE FRIENDS

Yves Cuilleron, François Villard and Pierre Gaillard are friends. Good friends and winegrowers, and have joined forces to raise up the all-but-forgotten terroir of Seyssuel from the ashes. Together, they have set up a new négociant venture named Vins de Vienne. Like any good musical trio, each player has their own score, but when playing together they contribute to the overall composition. Their wines are made with meticulous precision: after all, they are discussed, debated, and commented upon three times over before finally being approved! Three, they say, are better than two. With two people, a disagreement can quickly reach stalemate or become confrontational; meanwhile, while three people may bicker, or even lose their tempers, they always come to a carefully considered decision in the end. “When we were making our wine, we hardly agreed on anything. But our squabbles led us to experiment in ways we wouldn’t have otherwise, and now we can base our discussions on our real-life experiences rather than some sort of ready-made solution.”

A return to grace

The three, all 30-somethings, started their winegrowing adventures at the beginning of the 1980s, just as things were getting going again in the northern part of the Rhône Valley. It’s hard to believe now, but Côte-Rôtie and Condrieu once all but disappeared; in the 1960s there were only 30 hectares left of Côte-Rôtie vineyards, and 10 of Condrieu. The problem lay in the punishingly steep slopes which plunge down towards the Rhône, the narrow

terraces that needed to be maintained somehow, and also phylloxera, mildew and the huge loss of manpower caused by the Great War. All work had to be done by hand; there was no other option, and the sheer cost of production deterred many potential growers. When the three friends moved to the area, the land was worth next to nothing. Pierre bought his first plot in Côte-Rôtie for 1 franc per square metre – that’s less than 20 eurocents!

Growers and négociants

François initially joined Yves and Pierre on work placements. He spent a few harvest seasons with them, completed his wine training, and went on to set up on his own. So the three friends each had their own winegrowing businesses, but got together again in 1996 to create a new company, Les Vins de Vienne. Their aim were to develop a small, high-quality négociant firm which retained the feel of artisan winemaking, and to replant an ancient, all-but-forgotten vineyard. The vineyard in question was in Seyssuel, which both Plutarch and Pliny the Elder described in glowing terms.

Pierre had read about Seyssuel one day while digging around in the library in Beaune. He came across Théâtre d’agriculture et mesnage des champs, an agricultural work written in the 17th century by Olivier de Serres, which told of an ancient vineyard planted by Romans over 2,000 years ago on the steep, south-east facing slopes on the left bank of the Rhône facing Côte-Rôtie. Pierre told François about it, who then told Yves. “We were all pretty excited, thinking what it would feel like to replant this great terroir.”

An appellation reborn

But to get the venture off the ground, the friends needed money. The first two banks turned their loan requests down flat, but BNP came up trumps: they were in the throes of merging with Paribas, and were keen to expand their investment portfolio. The trio then set off for the land registry to study the relevant maps. They contacted various landowners, and managed to convince a couple

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Established 1996
12 employees
2019 turnover: €5 million, 30% of which from export.

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of them to rent out sections of their unused land. Today some 50 hectares of vineyard in Seyssuel have been replanted, by around 20 producers. Younger growers are also starting to get on board, so the vineyards are well and truly back. As Vins de Vienne, Pierre, Yves and François hold about 10 hectares; they also each have their own, individual small plot. They make three wines: one white, Taburnum, made

from Viognier grown in schist, and two reds, the age-worthy Sotanum, a blend from some of the best parcels, and the more generic, fruit-driven Heluicum.

Imminent recognition?

Seyssuel is currently part of the Collines Rhodaniennes IGP designation, and is in the process of joining the Côtes du Rhône, as a first step towards being granted cru status in its own right. Pierre, Yves and François have found evidence that the site has been surveyed in the past by the Isère, in an effort to have it classified first in the Côte-Rôtie appellation, then Saint Joseph. But as there were no vines left, the process eventually came to a full stop. “In wine history books, Seyssuel is always described as the gateway to the Rhône Valley. We used to joke that we’d have to move that gate. We took a gamble, and although we were confident that the terroir had potential, we had to start work from scratch. Not just in the vineyards; we needed to educate our customers as well. But we told ourselves that if all went well, we’d go down in history.”



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