TEXT PAUL HUGGETT

STEALING STHE SPOTLIGHT

Two famed producers of the Southern Rhône are determined to let the world know that wines from Châteauneuf-du-Pape are no comparison to their limestone-influenced Gigondas.

The appellation of Gigondas lies north-east of Châteauneuf-du-Pape in the lee of the Dentelles de Montmirail – a limestone escarpment that rises from the Rhône's river plains and cloisters the village of Gigondas. It is one of France's great wine settings and home to a clutch of its most distinctive wines. Here, grenache rules with mouvèdre and syrah supporting. It is the classic GSM blend, to use the Australian shorthand. Gigondas, at its best, is an intense wine: highly perfumed, rich and plummy, full of complex, savoury characters – dark chocolate, leather, wild flowers, herbs, hot stones, pepper and spice.

Unfortunately, Gigondas appears doomed to live in the shadow of nearby Châteauneuf-du-Pape to which it is constantly compared – despite making grenache-accented wines that speak their own language.

If Gigondas is to achieve recognition on its own terms, much rests on the shoulders of Louis Barruol of Château de Saint Cosme and Yves Gras of Domaine Santa Duc. Barruol and Gras are two of Gigondas' brightest stars, each with centuries of wine making in their families and a vision for what modern Gigondas can be.

Barruol, who makes Châteauneuf-du-Pape as part of his negotiant business, has run out of patience with those wishing to compare the two. "Please explain to the people: stop the comparison between Châteauneuf-du-Pape and Gigondas. This is another universe for grenache. It has never been and will never be Châteauneuf-du-Pape."

So what then is Gigondas? Barruol has clearly answered this one before: "The geology here is very special. This is where you get the largest amount of limestone in the Southern Rhône. It is everywhere – on the hills, the flats. The relationship here between grenache and limestone is one of finesse.

"It is also about climate and altitude. We are oriented north-north-west and at 300 metres. It makes for much more balanced grenache – there is expression, character, balance and freshness. Gigondas is a kind of El Dorado for grenache."

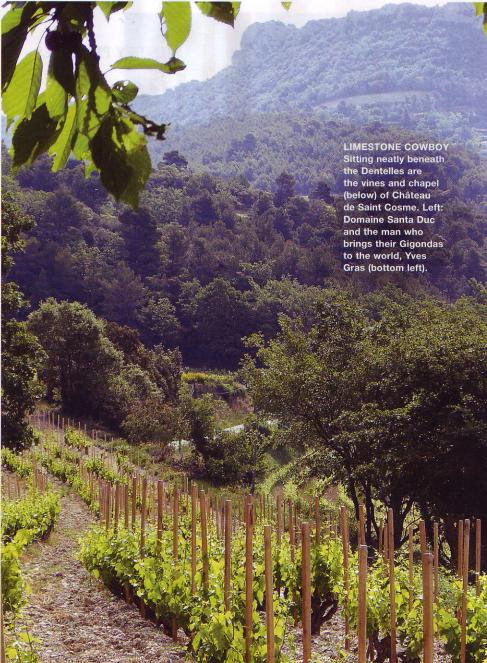
If anyone is entitled to speak for Gigondas, it is the intense, peripatetic and often combative Barruol. The Saint Cosme estate has belonged to the Barruol family since 1570, with wine made here since Gallo-Roman times using the underground tunnels that today house some of Barruol's best barrels.

Barruol is an inveterate explorer and is 17 years into "observing" the complex geology of the 15-hectare estate. This journey began in 1992 when he became the 15th generation of his family to grow and make wine at Saint Cosme. "I had strong targets. But you learn and learn and make your targets more precise. Our job is one of observation. It is a job where you shouldn't decide anything in advance. You need to remain humble and just accept that you can't know things in advance. It is too complicated even though we have five centuries of experience on this vineyard."

Despite the unknowns, Barruol's Gigondas wines do have a signature style, most evident in the estate wine (about 70 per cent grenache, 20 per cent syrah, eight per cent mourvèdre and two per cent cinsault) and the prestige Gigondas Valbelle (90 per cent grenache, 10 per cent syrah, some new oak). Each is highly perfumed and light on its feet – not the bruising, muscular wines commonly

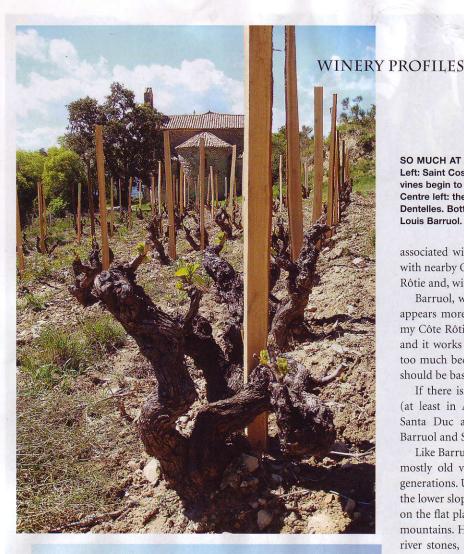












SO MUCH AT STAKE Left: Saint Cosme's vines begin to flourish. Centre left: the jagged Dentelles, Bottom: Louis Barruol.

associated with Gigondas. It is a style that invites comparisons not with nearby Châteauneuf-du-Pape but with the classic syrah's of Côte Rôtie and, with bottle age, Burgundy.

Barruol, who also produces Côte Rôtie in his negotiant business, appears more than comfortable with this comparison. "Yes, I make my Côte Rôtie pretty much like I make my Gigondas. We love syrah and it works marvellously in this microclimate. But I shouldn't use too much because it hides the real character of Gigondas. Gigondas should be based on grenache."

If there is a Gigondas story that inevitably leads to comparison (at least in Australia and New Zealand, where Saint Cosme and Santa Duc are Gigondas' most visible producers), it is that of Barruol and Santa Duc's Yves Gras.

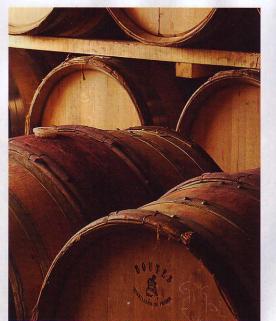
Like Barruol, Gras inherited a legacy in Santa Duc – 22 hectares of mostly old vines that have been in the family for a modest four generations. Unlike Saint Cosme, whose plantings are scattered across the lower slopes of the Dentelles, Santa Duc's vines lie predominantly on the flat plain that spreads towards the Rhône from the foot of the mountains. Here the soils are clay-rich limestone, with scatterings of river stones, a reminder of the influence the Rhône still has in its

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southern reaches. Gras also has three hectares of vines on sandy limestone in the lower contours of the hills.

Gras' Gigondas wines may appear as burly as their maker at first glance, but go on to display a core of elegance, finesse and stony minerality - what Gras calls "freshness". Make no mistake, these are concentrated wines that need time (Gras' marvellous 2001 Gigondas is only now nearing early maturity).





Santa Duc's estate wine is a blend of 75 per cent grenache, 10 per cent mourvèdre, 10 per cent syrah and five per cent cinsault. The prestige Hautes Garrigues cuvee is 80 per cent grenache and 15 per cent mourvèdre (from 80 and 40-year-old vines, respectively). Syrah and cinsault round out the blend.

"Here, the two great grapes are grenache and mourvèdre," Gras says. "I believe that grapes perform best at the climatic limits and this is the northern limit for grenache and mourvèdre. Syrah grows too fast."

If one achievement links Barruol and Gras (and there are many), it is their work with grenache, potentially "a reckless provider of alcohol in a blend", as one critic put it. Both men seem able to rein in the grape without stomping on its fruity opulence.

For Gras, grenache is an exercise in common sense. At Santa Duc it is dry grown,







which Gras believes helps achieve the balance between alcohol and complexity. "You need the concentration to keep the alcohol, but you shouldn't taste the alcohol," he says. Yields are low – 30 hectolitres per hectare. Gras also devotes winery time to lees work, critical in his view for creating the right balance of fruit and tannins, as well as helping prevent the oxidation to which mourvedre and grenache are prone.

Still, regardless of his facility with grenache and the benchmark quality of his wines, Gras is both irked by and resigned to the shadow cast over Gigondas by Châteauneuf-du-Pape and the American critics who lavishly praise the latter commune's wines. And this is in spite of being a long-time favourite, together with Barruol, of *The Wine Advocate* and its famed publisher, Robert Parker.

"The American critics love Châteauneuf-du-Pape," Gras says. "For them, it is the great Rhône wine. I can't say they don't like Gigondas – they just don't pay much attention to Gigondas."

Barruol puts it more bluntly: "Journalists and critics are not brave enough to speak the truth; to say that Gigondas is fantastic as well [as Châteauneuf-du-Pape]. It's a nonsense."

Meanwhile, Barruol and Gras are getting on with business in what Barruol calls "a cold climate in the hot sun, a cold corner of the South". For Barruol, this means translating his years of wanderings into three lieux dits (named or single-vineyard wines), each different expressions of pure grenache.

For Gras, it means further developing his supporting cast of local village wines – from Vacqueyras, Sablet, Séguret, Roaix and Rasteau – as well as his Gigondas cuvees. Gras has also made the leap into local cuisine with Bistro du'O (Rue du Château Haute-Ville) in the historic town of Vaison la Romaine, a stylish restaurant carved into the limestone below Vaison's crumbling citadel.

Barruol and Gras have the wonderful fortune to wake up each day and look up to the slowly eroding peaks of the jagged Dentelles, the only place on earth where they can make the wine of their ancestors. As Barruol puts it, "For millions of years these mountains have been our reserve of limestone. We have so much limestone. And that is the secret of Gigondas."

WINES TO TRY

2007 CHÂTEAU DE SAINT COSME CÔTES-DU-RHÔNE, A\$18/NZ\$20

This wine is 100 per cent syrah, rare for a Côtes. The style should be immediately familiar to Australian palates. Sweet, juicy fruit with mouthfilling plumminess. There is a velvety quality and supple tannins. A touch of graphite recalls the wine's rocky origins. Like all Saint Cosme wines, it gets better after a couple of hours open.

2006 CHÂTEAU DE SAINT COSME GIGONDAS, A\$45/NZ\$40 Saint Cosme's 2006 is the new release and still in its infancy. There's pepper, spice and hot stones on the nose, but it's a hint of what's to come. The palate is more revealing — a shell of firm tannins that gives way to a core of silky grenache and strong mineral flavours. Dark chocolate and black pepper add further interest. Just needs time.

2006 CHÂTEAU DE SAINT COSME GIGONDAS VALBELLE, A\$70/NZ\$70

Richly fruited wines were produced across the Southern Rhône in 2006, which is immediately apparent in the Valbelle. For a young Gigondas, it is remarkably approachable. Rich chocolate, anise, licorice and lavender are to the fore. The tannins are mouth coating rather than confronting. The oak handling is deft and a spine of hotstone minerality adds further depth and complexity.

2006 SANTA DUC CÔTES-DU-RHÔNE LES QUATRE TERRES, A\$34/NZ\$25

Les Quatre Terres refers to the communes of Vacqueras, Roaix, Seguret and Rasteau whose grenache and syrah makes up this much-lauded cuvee. It is round and fruity, with lots of chocolate and floral aromas. It is less earthy than in previous years with the accent on plummy fruit and mouth-coating tannins. Drink now or cellar.

2005 SANTA DUC GIGONDAS, A\$70/NZ\$60

Fresh, aromatic and concentrated, this is a big Gigondas from a warm year. The nose is all chocolate, garrigue and stone, with a body of round, savoury fruit. As the wine opens, chocolate, violet and herb flavours come to the fore backed by brisk tannins. This wine should add new layers of complexity and age more quickly than the sturdy '04.

2005 SANTA DUC GIGONDAS PRESTIGE DES HAUTES GARRIGUES, A\$105/NZ\$100

This blend of principally old-vine grenache and mourvèdre is a highly concentrated, ripe, stomach-warming wine. However, there is plenty of subtlety and finesse buried within (2005 was picked late after a slow ripening). Already there are pronounced mineral notes to complement the smoky, chocolatey fruit flavours. Power, elegance and uniquely Gigondas.

WINE DIRECTORY

Source all the wines in this issue with our guide to stockists and distributors.

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