

## Château Coupe Roses, Minervois



Françoise Le Calvez and her enologist husband Pascal Frissant (a.k.a. The Poet from the Loire) work their domaine with passion and acumen high in the Mediterranean hinterlands. Their vineyards are in Le Causse and Le Petit Causse, names referring to exposed rock and *garrigue* and designating the two highest zones in the Minervois appellation. At 750 to 1,350 feet above sea level, these zones have nights that are relatively cool and the growing season is the longest in the AOC (domains down on the plain often begin harvesting a full two weeks earlier). The wines from Coupe Roses have excellent acidity and freshness, which Françoise adores, without any plodding, overripe character, which she avoids like the plague.

Françoise's father hails from Brittany (Le Calvez turns out to be a common Breton name), but her mother's side of the family has been in La Caunette for at least twelve generations. The village essentially is a one-street village strung along a bench at the base of a tall limestone cliff that towers above the Cesse River. *Cesse* shares the root word of cease and cessation, because in summer this river stops running. La Caunette, for its etymological part, is Occitan, referring to small cave dwellings; in ancient times, the locals lived in caves burrowed into the cliff. Just upstream is the village of Minerve, which gives its name to the appellation of Minervois. It sits high on a pinnacle of limestone at the confluence of the Cesse and the Rieussec, hidden in a mountain valley behind the first range of mountains after the vast Mediterranean plain. It was here that the Cathars (*catharsis*--to purge!) had a stronghold, which held out for months before surrendering early in a twenty-year crusade launched by Pope Innocent III in 1209 that swept over the Languedoc and burned infidels wherever they could find them. They found a lot in Minerve.

Most of Coupe Roses' vineyards are on the plateau above the cliff, an arid, windswept place of scrub and rock-calcified limestone that microorganisms living in the threadbare soil eat into, creating pockets for water, soil and roots. Pascal is fond of taking visitors up to the plateau to show them vineyards that appear to be growing in pure rock. He points out the odd olive tree here and there, the remnants of an ancient Roman road, and the fiendish rabbits that eat his young vines. Then he tells everyone to hush and listen. There is nothing to listen to; the silence is overwhelming. If you want to go crazy, he says, this is the place to do it.

In 2008, Françoise and Pascal purchased six hectares of vineyards in Petit Causse that are part of the Minervois cru of La Livinière. These vines are high on the southern side of the Cesse Canyon, a rugged watershed that begins on the other side of Minerve and winds its way deep into the Black Mountain. The largest of these parcels grow a short distance from the edge of the canyon (where, if insanity took hold, one could leap into the abyss and dive hundreds of feet to end the grip).

That acquisition took their vineyard holdings to 40 hectares (nearly 100 acres). Save for the six hectares in Le Causse, all of their vineyards are a hodgepodge of small parcels planted around La Caunette, and these vineyards constitute the heart and soul of Coupe Roses. The winery itself is a large nondescript building on one side of the village, while the "château" is an old automobile service station Françoise's father operated decades ago on the other side of the village, and which now contains the office and bottle storage facility. At Coupe Roses, the sum total of high-tech wizardry is confined to the modern winery press and the narrow gauge Lamborghini vineyard tractor.

A cool bit of trivia is that since 1991 a friend and colleague of Françoise and Pascal, one François Serre, has been the consulting enologist at Coupe Roses. For an even longer period, Serre has been the consulting enologist at Château Rayas in Châteauneuf-du-Pape.

## The Wines

- *The Champ du Roy blanc*: Roughly equal parts Muscat and Viognier, with around 5% of Marsanne and 5% Grenache Blanc. It's classed VdP because Viognier isn't allowed in Minervois AOC wines. This is a hugely aromatic, dry white (a great "porch wine" as they say in the Carolinas).
- *Minervois Cuvée Bastide*: The first of four Minervois cuvées, Bastide is made of roughly equal parts Carignan and Grenache, with around 5% Syrah. The élevage is done in tank. A great buy for an eminently honest wine (that is, one made without modern cellar shenanigans and without any additives--has anyone ever told you that the hugely popular Aussie wine named after a yellow marsupial is not a healthy beverage?). In Bastide, you can often find high-toned blueberry notes underpinned by Carignan's tarry black fruits.
- *Minervois Cuvée Vignals*: This is the south, so pronounce that final "s." Vignals is based on Syrah (roughly 60%), and filled out with Grenache (30% +/-) and then Carignan. Made entirely in tank. Deliciously medium-weight, fresh, spicy, long, and infused with *garrigue*. You should buy some.
- *Minervois Cuvée Granaxa*: Granaxa is Occitan dialect for Grenache, and this is Coupe Rose's Grenache cuvée with 10% Syrah, raised in second and third-year oak barrels. Now we get into more weight and body, with distinctly earthy overtones in the red fruit.
- *Minervois Cuvée Orience*: This is the domaine's luxury cuvée based on Syrah with 10% Grenache, made in barrels, about one-third of which are new. The Syrah comes from their best clay/limestone parcels high up on the plateau above the village. Orience has blacker fruit, with spice, earth, and elegance in spades.

The reds are normally made with indigenous yeast, never fined, and these days bottled with a light filtration. Yields for all the cuvées are quite low, averaging in the 30 hectoliter par hectare range.

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