

Château Haut-Monplaisir

Cahors



There are things about Cahors that stick in one's memory. The first is that the appellation sits snug in the Haut-Pays, or high country, equidistant from the Atlantic Ocean, the Pyrenees, and the Mediterranean. Another is that autumn, particularly the crucial ripening month of September, is normally far drier in this region than in both Bordeaux and much of the Languedoc. Then there is the soil itself; it's red, based on limestone but flush with iron oxides. Iron was once smelted here, and this element, coupled with the intrinsic qualities of the native grape, accounts for the extraordinary minerality that anchors the region's best wines. The big thing about Cahors, however, is that it is the ancestral home of the black Malbec grape.

The heart of the appellation is the Lot Valley, and it brings Napa Valley to mind (without the fancy wineries). The Lot River snakes down a distinct valley with a wide alluvial floor, a pastoral landscape quilted with vineyards. The indigenous Malbec was cultivated here during Gallo-Roman times long before Bordeaux became established, and it made Cahors' reputation. Throughout the Middle Ages the wines of the Haut-Pays outranked Bordeaux in prestige, and those from Cahors in particular were often used to beef up the color and backbone of Bordeaux's garnet-colored wines. Bordeaux, despite taxes extorted by its control of river and port, was never able to exile its rival. It took phylloxera in the late 1800s to do that. Today Cahors is in the midst of a renaissance, but even so its vineyard acreage is only 15% of what it was in the mid-1800s.

Cathy and Daniel Fournié of Haut-Monplaisir farm 44.5 acres on what the locals call the third terrace of the valley floor. These terraces, or benches, are layered gravel deposits left by the river over the ages. There are three such terraces in the valley; the third is the highest, furthest from the Lot, and the best by virtue of its well-drained soils. Above the third terrace come the mountain vineyards, high on the oak-scrub hills.

Cathy took over the vineyards in 1998 from her father, who had sold the crop to négociants. She and Daniel had a keen interest in making their own wine but realized they needed help. They reached out to Pascal Verhaeghe, the dynamic proprietor of Château du Cèdre whose vineyards grow on the second terrace. Pascal immediately saw the potential of Haut Monplaisir's site. He could also see that if great wine were made here then Cahor's revival would be all the more successful, and that was far more important to him than possible competition between the two domaines. Thus was born the partnership between Pascal and Daniel, who together are responsible for the wines of Haut Monplaisir.

They make three cuvées with careful use of micro-oxygenation, all 100% non-filtered Malbec. The first is a straight Cahors, a dark, richly-fruited wine made in cement vats; the second is the smoky mineral-laden Cahors Prestige, a deliciously meaty wine made in new and old oak; then there is the luxury cuvée Pur Plaisir, which considering the labor that goes into the wine, is an astonishing buy. The wine is made in new 500-liter demi-muids (oversized barrels). At harvest the coopers come, stand the barrels on end, and knock out the other end. The fruit, from the domaine's best parcel, is crushed directly into the demi-muids to undergo alcoholic fermentation, an almost unheard of practice. Once the initial fermentation is complete, the wine is racked out of the demi-muids, the coopers are brought back in to re-install the ends, the barrels are laid on their sides, and the wine is poured back to undergo malolactic fermentation. This is an immense wine with succulent, spicy plum and prune fruit, wrapped in round tannins and long with its iron-infused terroir. Of the '01 Pur Plaisir, England's Andrew Jefford wrote, "Opaque. Wonderful scents of bonfires and raw meat. Ripe terroir mixture. Deep vivid palate built on a core of smoky fruit. Soft tannic mass integrated into finish. Brilliant oak integration. Excellent." Jefford, awarded the wine Best French Regional Red of 2004 in Decanter Magazine (October 2004).

All of the Haut-Monplaisir wines have terrific balance, with a brooding, high-toned quality of wild elegance.