

Domaine Labranche Laffont, Madiran



France's Southwest region of Madiran has made wine since Gallo-Roman times, and the wine was noted by the court of Edward the Black Prince of Aquitaine in the 14th century. Tannat's power and Madiran's microclimate combine to make one of France's truly big wines (it's worth noting that Irouléguay, the other Tannat appellation, is higher in the Pyrenean chain where the cooler, wetter weather makes for a more acid and angular rendition of wine). Madiran's viticulture fell into steep decline with phylloxera and continued to fall during the long, dreary aftermath. In 1953, plantings of Tannat here were down to six hectares of vines, or so the appellation records claim. Fortunately Madiran (unlike Cahors), managed to escape the frost of 1956. Its revival began in the 1970s. Today, Madiran has some 1,300 hectares of vines of various stripes, with the majority in Tannat.

Christine Dupuy took over her family's six-hectare wine estate in 1992 when her father died unexpectedly. She was 23 and by chance had just finished her degree in enology, but she had little practical experience. So she went to neighboring Château d'Aydie, Domaine Capmartin, and Domaine La Chapelle Lenclos (run by Patrick Ducournau, the inventor of micro-oxygenation), all of whom were among the most prestigious domaines in the appellation at the time. During that first year they helped this precocious young *vigneronne* get off on the right foot.

Christine has traveled well since, and today she farms 20.50 hectares (50.65 acres) of vines, all hand-harvested and tended as organically as possible (she does sometimes use fungicides, Madiran being a relatively wet viticultural area). Of those, 17.5 hectares are devoted to red varieties and the rest to dry and sweet whites. Insofar as she works to refine Tannat's inherently tannic grip, her red wines are modern in style, but she loses none of the textural density that made the grape famous. Her reds are rich, ripe, and round—and surprisingly elegant for wines of such scale. If you want soft sweet red fruit, look elsewhere; but if it's chewy deep dark density that you seek, go no further!

The Wines

- *Madiran*: Based on Tannat with 20% Cabernet Franc and 20% Cabernet Sauvignon. This is made mostly in concrete vats, with around a third raised in older barrel. It's a wine that responds well to air.
- *Madiran Vieilles Vignes*: This is 100% Tannat from several parcels that total three hectares, or 7.5 acres. One parcel of roughly two acres is of pre-phylloxera vines that are in the neighborhood of 150 years old; the other parcels support vines that are at least 50 years old. The grapes are de-stemmed, the wine undergoes micro-oxygenation, and it spends a year in barrel, one-fourth to one-third of which is new. This big boy tries to respond to air.
- *Pacherenc du Vic Bilh Sec*: This is Madiran's answer to Jurançon's dry whites, but again, as with Irouléguay, we're further down off the Pyrenees. Pacherencs, both sec and doux, tend to have more weight than Jurançons. The blend here is 70% Gros Manseng and 30% Petit Manseng. Made on the lees in older barrels, it's a fresh and full wine with a terrific nose.
- *Pacherenc du Vic Bilh Doux*: This wine comes from one hectare (2.5 acres) of vines and is a blend of 90% Petit Manseng and 10% Gros Manseng made in barrel, half of which is new.