

Domaine Alain Lalanne, Gascogne



The 50-hectare Domaine Alain Lalanne is in the village of Ramouzens in the eastern portion of Bas-Armagnac, a region of sloping green hills, an oceanic climate, and sandy soils. Alain Lalanne's father (and his grandfather and great-grandfather) only made wine in order to distill it into Armagnac, but his retirement and Alain's assumption of responsibilities in 1970 coincided with a progressive and lasting decline in the global market for Armagnac. Consequently, Alain and the other growers in the region faced the need to sell the region's white wine as white wine. To accomplish this, they imported a grape variety, the Gros Manseng, from the neighboring historic Appellation of Jurançon in order to balance the Ugni Blanc and Colombard traditionally grown in Gascogne.

Alain Lalanne was possibly the first one in his region to plant Gros Manseng, in 1978, and he has continued to expand his plantings since then. In his view, the wines of his region, and French wines in general, are *vins d'assemblage* that owe their balance and complexity to the blending of multiple cépages. In the case of his Côtes de Gascogne blanc that means: Ugni Blanc, traditional to the region, picked late, from strong or gravelly soils to produce pale wines with delicate aromas that marry well with Colombard; Colombard, the oldest and noblest variety in the region, which produces wines with aromatic power and a roundness that is nicely balanced by the freshness of Ugni Blanc; and Gros Manseng, a late ripener which does best in cooler and lighter soils and in humid, not too hot, summers. As Lalanne puts it, "Gros Manseng does not accommodate hot summers, the smallest hailstone ruins it, and nevertheless, what class! Powerful in alcohol, strong in acidity, long in the mouth and with persistent aromatics, it transcends the Côtes de Gascogne." Note that this variety balances the others by an addition of alcohol, length, power and fat.

Lalanne's grapes are machine-harvested, de-stemmed, pressed using an old-model continuous press set for an extremely slow speed of rotation that yields 70% clear juice (the *jus de presse* is not used— it is given to the government to fill the quota of wine destined for distillation for industrial purposes). The juice is cold-settled over 4-8 days; the fermentation lasts around 2 weeks. Besides the addition of Gros Manseng, there is one further trick of the trade that serves to compensate the wine's acidity: 6-7 grams/liter of residual sugar that usually remain in the finished wine.

Lalanne emphasizes that these are fragile wines that cannot be shipped in tanker-trucks. They are bottled at the property at low temperature and with great care. Given the residual sugar in the wine, and the presence of malic acid that will under the right conditions begin a second fermentation, the wine must be cold stabilized and sterile filtered if it is to remain stable and fresh. There is an interesting evolution in the successive bottlings: the later ones will have a bit more Gros Manseng, because its aromatics have more longevity and evolve more than the other varieties. Thus, the early bottling of a vintage will show extremely fresh, bright fruit. The last bottlings will show an evolution towards increased suppleness, dried flowers, ripe and dried fruits, with hazelnut and citrus notes. With time, the evolution of the fruit, says Lalanne, is often stunning and complex.

The Wines

- *Vin de Pays de Gascogne*: is a zesty and lively white wine with a nose of white fruits and a clean, crisp finish. The assemblage is mostly Colombard with Gros Manseng and a little Ugni Blanc added for freshness and delicacy.

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