

Mas des Dames, Côteaux du Languedoc (Terrasses de Béziers)



MAS · DES · DAMES
LA DAME

Mas des Dames translates as Farm of Ladies. It was christened by current owner Lidewij van Wilgen of Holland upon learning that her three young daughters were the third generation of daughters to be raised on the Mas in recent memory (the farm dates from 1750). Lidewij—Lee to us—abandoned a world of advertising in Amsterdam in favor of the French countryside in 2002. It was an idyllic dream, one she put into play.

The criteria were simple: a small farm with vineyards in walking distance. She found Mas des Dames tucked back on a flank of a hill outside of Murviel-lès-Béziers. Murviel is a forgotten medieval village with narrow, circular streets spreading concentrically outward, and it sits on a point of high ground in the hinterland behind the ancient Mediterranean city of Béziers. The Mas was perfect, and altogether traditional with small vineyard plots planted on contours as they had been since God-knows-when. The only problem was that the house was in shambles and the vineyards were farmed for maximum production. A period of renovation ensued while Lee went to enology school in Béziers. The schooling wasn't a cakewalk. In the first week, the professor openly mocked her as a ne'er-do-well foreigner who wouldn't last. In the end, only three students out of thirty graduated, and she was one of those three.

Today, the girls go to the local school, and Lee works the vineyards with one employee. Beginning with the 2008 harvest, she has worked organically. On her hillside she has 22 vineyard parcels surrounding the house, comprising 32 acres. She has taken yields down to around 35 hectoliters per hectare (AOC regulations permit 50 hl/ha for red and rosé, and 60hl/ha for white; Vin de Pays rules allow up to 80 hl/ha). She kept the old winery—an old stone barn—and invested in a state-of-the art press and sorting table, plus she bought a handful of new concrete tanks. She is serious about sorting, discarding a significant portion of grapes in the more problematic years. Lastly, she sells off nearly all of her press wine to négociants, not wanting to impart any bitter tannin into the wine she puts into bottle. This disregard for quantity has scandalized many a local farmer, but it is fundamentally why Mas des Dames has propelled itself into the top rank of Languedoc producers.

The Wines:

- *Vin de Pays d'Oc blanc*: A rare Grenache Blanc, ranked VdP because the appellation doesn't permit 100% varietals. The soils on the Mas' hillside are diverse, and these vines grow in a vein of chalky limestone soil that is full of crustacean fossils, much like in Chablis. If you want to see what kind of character Grenache Blanc is capable of, you would be hard-pressed to find a better example than this. Aromas of hay and almonds are underpinned by a streak of minerality that lingers on the palate with lip-smacking presence. The particular soil that nourishes this 2.5-acre parcel is integral to the wine, and permits the vines to retain a high level of natural acidity in its grapes despite full malolactic fermentation. Note that as of 2009 the full legal name for this category is *Indication Géographique Protégée (IPG) Pays d'Oc*.
- *Côteaux du Languedoc "La Dame" rouge*: Based on Grenache, with Syrah and Carignan, this is the domaine's flagship. It is a fresh, supple (what silky texture!), classy wine, one rich with Languedoc's thyme.
- *Côteaux du Languedoc "Ami des Dames" rouge*: A blend of Grenache, Syrah and Carignan, this is a micro-négociant project that Lee does with her neighbors, from whom she selects and buys this wine. It's vibrant, structured, darkly fruited and infused with Languedoc's telltale, delicious herbal berry notes.
- *Vin de Pays d'Oc "La Diva"*: Based on Syrah, with Grenache and then a dollop of Alicante Bouschet, Côte Rouge is a ripe wine brimming with a core of black fruit. It is broadly flavored, roundly textured, and finishes with garrigue spice. The old Alicante parcels grow in distinctly red soil a stone's throw from the Grenache Blanc parcel, but on another contour. Alicante Bouschet is a cross between Grenache and Petit Bouschet, propagated in the latter half of the 19th century. Petit Bouschet in turn is an earlier cross between Aramon and the red-pulped Teinturier, an ancient variety valued for its deeply colored juice. Alicante Bouschet certainly shares that characteristic, and it is the only Teinturier crossing that is classed *Vitis vinifera*. Mas des Dames has two old parcels (pre-WWII?) totaling two acres.
- *Côteaux du Languedoc "La Dame" rosé*: This is serious stuff, with texture and spice rarely found in rosé. The blend is roughly 40% old-vine Grenache, 40% Mourvèdre, and 20% Syrah, all hand-harvested and selected and a portion of the wine is made in three-year-old barrels. Production averages around 450 cases.

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