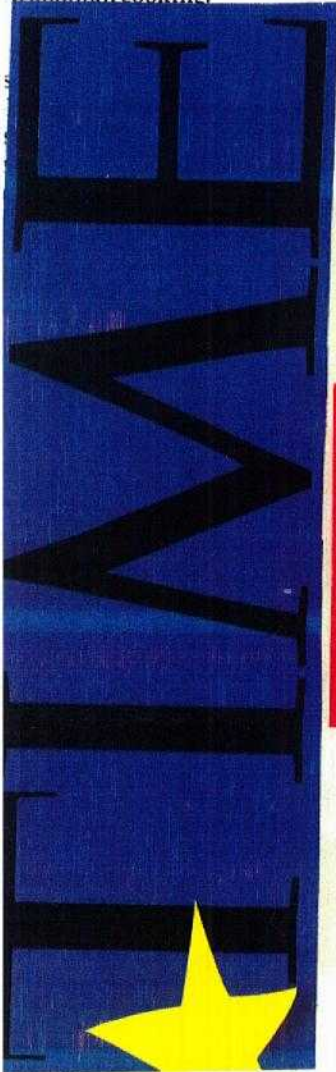


atonella, tel: (39-081) 416 541, 'a genovese (with veal and m baba testify to 35 years of Neapolitan cooking.



AUGUST 10, 2009

**GRAPEVINE**

## Growth Potential. The future of French wine may lie in its forgotten past

IT TOOK BUT A HANDFUL OF SMALL, yellow insects hitchhiking on an American grapevine imported around 1850 to change French wine forever. In the aftermath of the phylloxera blight, which devastated vineyards across the country, multitudes of native varietals were never replanted in favor of others more productive or disease-resistant. Since then, more still have been abandoned as French winemakers, like those the world over, began growing the likes of chardonnay and merlot to offer standardized global bouquets. Today, though, a few are seeking to rise above the glut, by bringing back the forgotten varietals of France's viticultural past—some of which have survived in institutional collections, others in obscure patches of remote vineyards.

Standing among his knotted, 160-year-old Romorantin vines on a recent summer day in Soings-en-Sologne, central France, winemaker Henry Marionnet recalled the words of the expert who authenticated the plot's age a decade ago: "You are in the presence of an eternal vine." The rare Loire varietal was introduced in 1519 under François I, and that this patch survived the phylloxera epidemic is as miraculous an anomaly as the nectar it produces. With blinding minerality and peach notes "it's a wine from another world," says Marionnet of his cuvée Provignage.

For winemaker and author Robert Plageoles, French heritage like this offers a new road when winemakers need to pull away from the herd in order to survive. "Today, we've taken to using



the same 30 or so varietals that can be grown in any viticultural region on the planet," says the historian of the Gaillac region's 2,000 years of ampelographic, or grape varietal, history. "If winemakers around the world keep competing with themselves, they will simply die off one after another." And why should they, he asks, when there are literally thousands of other options? "There are so many forgotten varietals of unimagined potential not used in the world."

That conviction drove Plageoles years ago to tear up his Gamay and sauvignon vines to replant ancient Gaillac varietals



**Old gold** Plageoles, far left, has revived the ancient Ondenc varietal, above, in his *Vin d'Autan*, left

with evocative names like Fer Servadou and Verdanel. The Ondenc grape, whose sweet wines once rivaled Sauternes, has today regained its prestige in Plageoles' widely lauded *Vin d'Autan*. Powerfully expressive varietals like Prunelart, of which Plageoles recovered the last remaining vines at an ampelographic conservatory in nearby Marseillan, are now cultivated around Gaillac by young winemakers like Patrice Lescarret of Domaine des Causses Marines.

Other winemakers are becoming intrigued. After Marionnet created a cuvée from the abandoned Gamay de Bouze,

young neighbor Julien Courtois of Clos de la Bruyère created his *Elément-Terre* of pure Gamay de Chaudenay. The two are undoubtedly the only cuvées of their kind. And using the traditional oxidative *vin de voile* method—in which casks are only partially filled, allowing yeast to grow on the wine's exposed surface—Courtois has transformed ancient Loire varietal Menu Pineau into an ethereal wine with a bouquet of hazelnut and mouth of caramelized apple.

Even in conservative Champagne, growers like Michel Drappier and brothers Pierre and Philippe Aubry have enlivened the conventional blends of Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Pinot Meunier, which make up more than 99% of Champagne's vines, by hunting down the last plots of the noble varietals of two centuries ago. Philippe Aubry's Blanc des Blancs, incorporating Chardonnay, Arbanne and Petit Meslier, yields startling notes of ginger, lime and bergamot, a profile "completely unknown today in the Champagne world," he says. "It's the taste of another time."

Creating a public for such esoteric wines isn't easy, especially when abandoned varietals, often unrecognized by labeling authorities, risk being classed as common *vin de table*. So Plageoles and company are fortunate to have impassioned advocates in wine merchants like Christophe Guitard, founder of Ochato.com, who impress on oenophiles how rare a privilege it is to taste a Savoie wine like Domaine Belluard's Les Alpes. It's made up entirely of Gringet, of which only 50 acres (22 hectares) exist. "If you are epicurean and curious, you want to taste this mysterious, extremely rare varietal, which moreover creates something unlike any classic wine, with notes of smoke and jasmine," says Guitard. "It's so atypical you easily lose yourself in it." In the process, though, you'll rediscover wine as it's meant to be: idiosyncratic, surprising and inimitable.

—BY JEFFREY T. IVERSON