



Jancis Robinson

24 Sep 2021

WINES OF THE WEEK

## Dom de Cébène, Ex Arena Pays d'Oc



*Wine made by a relatively old hand – and a new producer in Faugères.*

From €12.50, \$18.97, £16.95, 2,000 roubles, HK\$220, SG\$42

[Find this wine](#)

This is one of the most accessible of the brilliant wines of Brigitte Chevalier, pictured at the entrance to her vat room above. Ex Arena is grown 15 km (9 miles) from Faugères in the first vineyard she bought, so is very much part of the history of her Domaine de Cébène. Soils here are sandy (hence 'ex arena' from the Latin) rather than the characteristic schist of the Faugères appellation, and this Grenache-based blend has to be sold as a 'mere' IGP Pays d'Oc but, the product of particularly gentle extraction, it's certainly not second best. All the wines she makes are certified organic.

I recently tasted all the latest releases from Dom de Cébène, mostly 2019s plus the 2020 vintage of Chevalier's relatively new early-drinking À La Venvole.

Here's my note on the most recent vintage, 2020 bottled spring 2021, of Ex Arena, which gives some idea of this cuvée's likely longevity and its relatively moderate alcohol (13.5%) for a Grenache:

*This can't be sold as Faugères because it's grown not on schist but on Villafranchian soil (a 40-m deep bed of sea sediment and alluvial deposits of stone, pebbles, red sand and gravel – hence the name which means 'out of the sand'). 90% Grenache, 10% Mourvèdre. Tiny yields. 35-year-old vines. Certified organic.*

Transparent ruby. Gamey nose that's quite savoury and serious. Then delightfully, flirtatiously sweet on the palate yet structured and with excellent acidity. Brigitte Chevalier's wines just get better and better. This one has a seriously long finish, and is obviously made with such delicacy. Very fine tannins on the end. Probably best kept until next year but it would certainly not be painful to drink it now with food. 17 2022–28

All Chevalier's wines are red and generally blends of the Languedoc staples Syrah, Grenache and, a special favourite of hers, Mourvèdre with her cuvée Belle Lurette dominated by Carignan. You can read how she went from selling Jean-Luc Thunevin of St-Émilion's wines to establishing one of the most admired estates in Faugères in [Insisting on schist](#).



Her recuperated parcels of vines are all within easy reach of her home in the northern, higher sector of the appellation, many facing north, and she is keenly aware of this very special environment in the wilds of the Haut-Languedoc.

Now that she has her own underground wine cellar, beneath her house on a windy hill (pictured above), her wines do seem to be getting subtler and more satisfying with every vintage. Her UK importer is Vine Trail and in the US it is Eric Solomon of European Cellars. Each vintage sees a slightly different blend and she believes in giving the wines bottle age before releasing them – which is just as well as the recent US tariffs on French imports put paid to keeping up with the latest vintages in the US. And even in the UK, 2016 seems to be the most recent vintage of Ex Arena on Vine Trail’s website. James Nicholson of Northern Ireland seems to be able to offer more recent vintages.

Whichever vintage you can find, I feel confident on the basis of our many tasting notes in recommending any wine of Domaine de Cébène. Bancèls is based on Syrah and comes from the extraordinary old north-facing ‘escargot’ vineyard on schist. Felgaria is a rarity, dominated as it is by Mourvèdre grown on schist.



The prices are so extremely reasonable – possibly too reasonable, I argued in [Insisting on schist](#), to create American demand. Until that bubbles up, the rest of us can benefit from the value on offer here. According to Wine-Searcher.com, the average price of Ex Arena is just £14, less than \$20.

Wine-Searcher have listings of Ex Arena in the UK, US, France, Austria, Belgium, Ireland, Russia, Hong Kong and, just for Richard, Singapore. Vintages vary from 2015 to 2019, with one leftover 2007 in Austria selling for a song.

And I've just come across a new label in Faugères, Mas Lou, the creation of a young couple who are concentrating on Cinsault grown as high as 400 m (1,300 ft). Their [Jalka 2019](#) is a delightfully exuberant wine, full of fruit, and is

apparently poured by the glass at one of my favourite London restaurants, Chez Bruce. The UK importer, Gus Gluck of GB Wine Shippers, assures me it's available retail at Found Hope, Bottles 'N' Jars and Old Bridge Wine. According to Wine-Searcher it's available at Le Social in Manchester at £25 a bottle. The newcomers have a more ambitious pricing policy than Domaine de Cébène, it would seem.

*See our [87 tasting notes on Dom de Cébène wines](#).*

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24 sept.

I hugely recommend the wines of

[@DOMAINE\\_CEBENE](#)

in Faugères - so underpriced for the pleasure they offer, and not just in the short term

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