

**PDF Generated:** 2022-09-05 10:09

**Original URL:** <https://www.jancisrobinson.com/articles/old-vine-wines-part-5-languedoc>

Tamlyn Currin

5 Sep 2022

## Old-vine wines - part 5 Languedoc



*Last week's old-vine wines came from Iberia (see [part 4 of the series](#)). This week we're still in the sunny south, but move to the Languedoc in southern France, with the focus on two women winemakers who both came from the north and were captivated by lost vineyards.*

There are so many old vineyards and caretakers of old vineyards in the Languedoc that I was quite surprised that I wasn't able to gather a larger group of producers and wines for this article. However, the region faces two major challenges in this area: appellation regulations and market forces. Most of the AOP regulations stipulate (somewhat irrationally, in my personal opinion) blending percentages of varieties, which means that

many wonderful old-vine vineyards have to be blended with much younger vines. It's rare that a producer is able to produce a wine made solely from a single vineyard of old vines without being forced to label the wine as a Vin de France, and thereby potentially devaluing the market value (or perception) of the wine.

The second challenge is that the perception that the Languedoc produces cheap, simple wine persists, despite wine writers, merchants and importers working valiantly to correct that very skewed, naive belief. I'd love to see the numbers, but I'd go out on a limb to suggest that as a percentage of production, the Languedoc produces no more supermarket/commercial-level wines than any other major wine-producing region in the world. But the outcome of this is that labour-intensive, dry-farmed old bush vines are regularly grubbed up in favour of high-yielding vines, international (easy-sell) varieties, which can be sold to the trade at low prices and sold on in high volume through supermarkets.

## **Dom de Cébène, Faugères**

Brigitte Chevalier, with her ready wide smile, platinum hair, quiet and rather shy way of talking, enormous blue eyes and equally enormous black-framed spectacles (which go on and off nervously as we chat over Zoom), worked in Bordeaux, selling wine, until 2007. Then she upped sticks and bought a tiny parcel of Grenache in Faugères (see [Insisting on schist](#)). And her life changed.

Brigitte Chevalier in her vineyard

Brand-new to farming, knowing little about winemaking (although her husband, an oenologist, gave her guidance), she began from scratch. When she purchased her first vineyard, there was no domaine name, and all the grapes were going to the co-op. Was it tough, I asked her, going from the city-business world of wine where income is guaranteed and winters are not spent freezing your hands off on secateurs? She sits up straight, her eyes shining, confidence flooding her voice: 'I do not regret it for one moment! It's exciting! Such a vast world! It's botany, agriculture, economics, business, design, politics, community, culture, tasting, cooking, art, beauty. Expression! Smelling, writing...'. The words tumble out, and it's not just her eyes shining. 'I discovered it opens a door to a HUGE world in many different ways. Everything is REALLY interconnected, there are links! My awareness started when I purchased the Belle Lurette vines.'

Belle Lurette

Next door to her tiny Grenache parcel was a very old vineyard of (mostly) Carignan vines. Chevalier began to fall in love with this vineyard, always 'peering over the wall', hoping to bump into the elderly owner, saying a friendly hello, and as time went on, building a slow and steady friendship as the two of them worked side by side in their respective vineyards, through the cyclical rhythms of pruning, budding, tying, spraying, picking. 'We connected', she tells me simply. When the time came for him to retire, he trusted her enough to sell Belle Lurette to her.

Right from the start (and in all her vineyard parcels), Chevalier worked organically and biodynamically – investing intensive, manual labour in vineyards that needed a lot of tender loving care. 'I purchased tiny parcel after tiny parcel, little by little, step by step – it gave me time to build up my strategy, learn, the freedom to make my own errors ... I have always done spontaneous fermentation, right from beginning, and always separated each parcel, fermenting and vinifying parcel by parcel. Although I was aware, already of the microbial life of soils, it was after I purchased Belle Lurette than I began to understand that everything is in connection. Then I saw the different layers and different connections in the vineyard and in the community beyond that. And I thought, "I cannot keep all this for myself! I have to share!" My task is to embody the collective memory and to transmit and interpret – to help people in this specific place and time to understand what we can do, how we can fight, what can we bring to the tempest [of climate chaos]. We can *do* something [for the climate] while protecting old vineyards! We pull up vines after 20 years because they have been watered and have not adapted; they have no central root, so they can't function after 20 years. Old vines have resilience, a capacity for resistance, something to teach us about survival. I want to help people see the much bigger picture; to help people make that connection. It is a gift I can give – I have a link to give people between their disconnected world and a planet that needs attention. This link creates the first step, with agriculture and healthy ecosystem. With small steps we can do something for the environment.'

Old Carignan has a heart

Back in 2012, Chevalier started an '[adopt a vine](#)' scheme, to emotionally, mentally and physically engage wine drinkers with the living, interconnected world that their wines come from. She's now doing podcasts and encouraging wine lovers to come and walk her high-elevation, vineyards swept by the north wind with her, smell the soil, feel the vines.

A rhinoceros?

She tells me that, over the years, she's using less and less oak ('I don't want vegetal material to decide how much oxygen the wine gets'), more and more concrete and eggs. 'I want to get closer to the purity of the terroir and the expression of the old vines. My motto, my aim, my search since the beginning – but more and more now – is to get to the soul of the wine and get rid of any artifice in any way.'

Her magnificent wines and the indescribably rocky schist and old vines from which they come, bear testament to Chevalier's unwavering commitment to her ideals. You can follow Dom de Cébène on Instagram, [@domainedecebene](#). It is named after Cebenna, from which the name of the Cévennes derives; the Caroux mountains on the Cévennes' southern flank rise up behind the vineyards. Legend has it that the goddess Cebenna was condemned to death and when she died, she gave the shape of her body to the mountain.

Below is a vertical of Chevalier Belle Lurette wines, with links to a couple of tasting notes interspersed for old tasting notes on vintages I didn't taste this time around.

## **Dom de Cébène, Belle Lurette 2020 Faugères**

*Full bottle 1,336 g. Certified Ecocert organic and Demeter biodynamic. Mostly old Carignan bush vines (over 100 years old) planted on schist, with a little bit of Mourvèdre and Grenache. Very low yields (15–20 hl/ha), hand-picked, and fermented in small-parcel batches. Spontaneous fermentation in stainless steel.*

The purity of this wine is stunning. Soaring fruit. Limpid, jewelled; liquid rubies. This might be the best vintage of Belle Lurette so far. Deep. An obsidian core of minerality. But gentle. A whisper of dust. Somehow, Brigitte Chevalier has managed to coax satin-sheathed tannins out of those gnarly old vines. Hauntingly beautiful. Shibui in a glass. (TC)

13%  
Drink  
2022  
–  
2030  
18

## Dom de Cébène, Belle Lurette 2018 Faugères

## Dom de Cébène, Belle Lurette 2016 Faugères

*Full bottle 1,334 g. Certified Ecocert organic and Demeter biodynamic. Mostly old Carignan bush vines (over 100 years old) planted on schist, with a little bit of Mourvèdre and Grenache. Very low yields (15–20 hl/ha), hand-picked, and fermented in small-parcel batches. Spontaneous fermentation in stainless steel.*

This has certainly gentled since I tasted it more than two years ago. Red fruit has filled all the corners and interestingly, the very dark, meaty savouriness is less pronounced. Although dark and rocky at its core. Spicy and still fragrant with a wind-breath of dry lavender and sage, and the tannins a little more rugged and raspy (in a very attractive sense) than the 2020. (TC)

13.5%

Drink

2021

-

2026

17

## Dom de Cébène, Belle Lurette 2015 Faugères

*Full bottle 1,341 g. Certified Ecocert organic and Demeter biodynamic. Mostly old Carignan bush vines (over 100 years old) planted on schist, with a little bit of Mourvèdre and Grenache. Very low yields (15–20 hl/ha), hand-picked, and fermented in small-parcel batches. Spontaneous fermentation in stainless steel.*

Peppery, and beginning to turn malty-savoury and caramelised on the nose. The fruit, though, is still sweet and juicy, pure, with wild-plum freshness and that chiffon-like translucency that is the signature of Belle Lurette. The tannins have diffused into the fruit, giving the fruit itself a sense of worn-smooth-craggy texture and a spicy warmth. Garrigue fans out and fills the finish. Still fresh and with plenty of life ahead of it. (TC)

13%

Drink  
2019  
-  
2025  
17.5

## **Dom de Cébène, Belle Lurette 2014 Faugères**

*Full bottle 1,348 g. Certified Ecocert organic and Demeter biodynamic. Mostly old Carignan bush vines (over 100 years old) planted on schist, with a little bit of Mourvèdre and Grenache. Very low yields (15–20 hl/ha), hand-picked, and fermented in small-parcel batches. Spontaneous fermentation in stainless steel.*

Smells like the mouth-watering meatiness of those crispy dark bits on roast beef and shiitake mushrooms cooking in a pan. Cooked damsons, dried redcurrants and lots of thyme. Cold black tea and dried hibiscus petals. The tang of sumac spice. The tannins are slender but drying, giving the wine a graceful, sinewy structure. More evident evolution and senescence on this vintage than on the 2015 and the 2013. (TC)

13%  
Drink  
2016  
-  
2022  
16.5

## **Dom de Cébène, Belle Lurette 2013 Faugères**

*Full bottle 1,346 g. Organic viticulture. 100-year-old Carignan bush vines on schist, plus some Mourvèdre and Grenache. Hand-picked, spontaneous fermentation.*

Sappier and rounder; sweeter, even fresher fruit than the 2014. Still very alive, with a wonderful, evocative wet-cement-old-barrels-and-crushed-grape-skins smell that I associate with wineries. Menthol and spice. Folds and folds and folds of flavour. Tea leaves and roibos, and an incredible mountain-herbs freshness. The tannins have deliquesced into the soul of the wine, becoming fine pencil sketches on the fragile tissues of fruit. Just so delicious and finely structured and such a long, long reach. This seems to

have gained more and more finesse with age. (TC)

13%

Drink

2016

-

2024

17.5

### **Dom de Cébène, Belle Lurette 2012 Faugères**

## **Dom de Cébène, Belle Lurette 2011 Faugères**

*Full bottle 1,390 g. 70% Carignan, 20% Grenache, 10% Mourvèdre. Carignan vines from 80 to 100 years old. Brigitte Chevalier has worked organically and biodynamically from the start. Spontaneous fermentation.*

Gorgeous. Is this really an 11-year-old Languedoc wine? It smells of bresaola. One sip and my mouth fills, literally fills, with fine white pepper. The fruit is sweet and remarkably fresh for its age – earlier today I was wandering through our heat-hazed orchard, dry golden-brown hay grass up to my waist, and found some blackcurrants left on the bush that we'd neglected to pick. It's been a hot week, they were starting to wrinkle, and the paddock next door has just been baled, so the sweet seed-herb-wild dust of hay is in the air and settling on everything in a fine gold powder. I idly popped a few of those blackcurrants in my mouth. Hours later, I taste this wine and it tastes just like those blackcurrants. I keep coming back to it. This exquisitely beautiful wine that Jancis described in 2014 as 'Dense and more charming than many Carignan-dominated wines but not as refined as the Bancel's' but, to me, a decade later, has become exquisitely refined. A heart-breaker, in fact. This is a wine writing poetry in purple-blue ink into the corners of non time and non space where beauty trawls ever-finer tannins into a vault above your head and you know that these old vines are, one way or another, writing their memoirs. (TC)

14%

Drink

2015

-

2035

18

## **Dom de Cébène, Belle Lurette 2011 Faugères**

*Full bottle 1,338 g. Organically farmed century-old Carignan bush vines on schist, with a little bit of Mourvèdre and Grenache. Hand-picked. Spontaneous fermentation in small parcels.*

The autograph of this vineyard is there, clear as a bell: transparency, fluidity, chiffon-and-tree-bark texture, spine-tingling purity of fruit and the long core sheath of dark-rock minerality. This 11-year-old wine is, like every Belle Lurette, strikingly fresh. Despite the tertiary notes of cacao husks, truffle and the shuffle of red-gold-fox autumn leaves, the fruit still has a central role and is still holding the line. The tannins trace the finest of craquelure lines through the wine, adding dimension with the lightest of touch. We may well be underestimating the capacity of these Cébène Belle Lurette wines to age beautifully. (TC)

14%

Drink

2014

-

2024

18

## **Mas Gabinèle, Faugères**

Thierry Rodriguez bought his first plot of vines in Faugères in 1997. He now farms 20 ha (49 acres) of vineyards, many of them over 50 years old, surrounded by rich, natural biodiversity: holm oak forests, cork oaks, arbustus, cade, cistus, heather, broom, thyme. He farms under the Haute Valeur Environnementale (high environmental value) certificate and makes his wines in a smart, modern winery.



## **Mas Gabinèle, Vieilles Vignes Grenache Gris 2021** **IGP Pays d'Hérault**

*Full bottle 1,316 g. Certified HVE. From vines planted in 1958 on red and blue schist.*  
This wine made me chuckle. Few grape varieties can square the circle, in one mouthful, from lime jelly baby (elementary, childish, fermentation simples) to ancient-meadow hay (savoury, fey, complex, floral, dry, elusive). Grenache in all its guises is like pinning clouds to the sky. It defies categorisation; it often seems impossible to describe. This wine is no exception. Very cold, it seems to skip with the daisies and a lick of vanilla cream; sweet but a little innocuous. It warms, and the cream deepens; plump limbs limber into something leaner. A cleft of (still cream-textured) bitterness starts to develop. I keep coming back to it. Finding a new edge every time, but every time I find that edge I realise it's not new – it was there all along. (TC)

14%

Drink

2022

-

2027

16.5 +

## **Mas Gabinèle, Rarissime 2020 IGP Pays d'Hérault**

*Full bottle 1,425 g. Certified HVE. 100% Grenache Gris planted in 1958 on red and blue schist. Vinified and aged in new oak.*

Unromantic-tasting-note warning coming up, but this wine is but one thing for me: making unconventional hummus on a sunshiny lazy Saturday morning. It smells of the black Turkish coffee close to my right hand that I'm sipping on as we do silly dancing in the kitchen in slippers to uncool play lists. It smells of the enormous handful of rough, flat-leaf parsley I'm chopping, stalks and all. It smells of the lemon zest I've just grated into a bowl. It smells of the chickpeas, just finished cooking to softness on the stove. It smells of the sunshine falling broad on our water-stained wooden worktop. It smells of the cumin dry-warming in the pan on the cooker top. It tastes like that first taste of the first

blitz: chickpeas, chickpea water, salt, jarred butter beans, almond butter, tahini, lemon, parsley, cumin, coriander, white pepper. The sweetness. The herbs. The salt. The nuttiness. The buttery beaniness. The citrus. The bitters. The almost aniseedy spice. It tastes like our hummus tastes before we add home-pickled garlic. That creamy, plump, pillowy softness before the tang of the garlic gets its bite fangs in there. It's complex, profound, broad, powerful, but it's also slippers and chickpea cream and licking spoons and soft sun-soppy Saturday mornings and eighties music. (TC)

14.5%

Drink

2022

-

2030

17.5

## **Mas Gabinèle, Vieilles Vignes Carignan 2020 IGP Pays d'Hérault**

*Full bottle 1,202 g. Vines planted in 1956, on schist.*

Bit of carbonic maceration here? It's a swig of 'ninety-nine red balloons go by'. So, my answer is yes. Grandpa Carignan vines smelling of olbas oil and pipe tobacco and the gentle weathered wrinkle of parchment wrapped in and around raspberry kisses. A tiny wicked crackle of black pepper. So charming I wanted to stay and write its life story. (TC)

14%

Drink

2022

-

2026

17

## **Mas Gabinèle, Rarissime 2020 Faugères**

*Full bottle 1,435 g. Certified HVE. 70% Syrah, 25% Grenache, 5% Mourvèdre. 16 months in new French oak.*

Scots pine in the rain; rain-soaked gnarled-thick-grey tree bark. A thick splodge of bruised, oozing-ripe, broken-skin red fruit on a wet cement-and-old-stone wall; red-juice-stained green-grey lichen; the wind-irritated scratch of thick olive-green broad leaves on broken fruit and stained wall. Sage leaves soaked with crushed bilberries. It plays itself out like petulant, poignant, raw-ragged lines of poetry smoothed by wet fingers, or maybe tears. But those tannins come thick-wrapped in stoles of deep-red velvet. (TC)

14.5%

Drink

2022

-

2030

17

## **Domaine Jones and one other**

Katie Jones in her vineyard

English-born Katy Jones, like Brigitte Chevalier, is another long-time champion of old vines. She farms some spectacularly rugged, romantically gnarled, ancient bush vines in remote vineyards on both sides of the Languedoc/Roussillon border, making wines that have won our admiration since her first vintage in 2009. She was the subject of not one, but two WWC21 entries - Tuchan, by Charlotte Fenwick and La Roque, by Katie Jones herself.

Another 600 old vines live to tell their story (and make beautiful wine for us)

Although I've unfortunately had a chance to taste only one of Katie's wines this year, they are well worth seeking out - as is her brilliantly interactive and captivating Instagram account, @domainejones. Katie also offers vine lovers a chance to adopt an old vine. I am the proud parent of Mathilde.

## **Dom Jones, La Gare Old Vine Syrah 2020 Vin de France**

*Full bottle 1,367 g. Hand-picked from old bush vines in and around the region of Tuchan. Katie Jones makes the wines. Some of it is aged in oak barrels.*

We're drying batch after batch of Victoria plums this year, as our very, very old tree has decided it's a mast year. It must have dropped 100 kg of plums so far, and they're still coming (our resident squirrel is so fat he can barely run away when he sees us). This wine smells like our dining room when I walk into it every morning to check the dehydrator, and lift the lid, to gently move the hot wrinkled plums that are done. It also smells of the leaves and lichen-wrinkled branches of the tree that get caught in the plums, of the copper-dry angelica stems that I brush past every morning on my way to check the damsons and the sweet paper-dry rattle of the nigella pods. It has the warm heat of alcohol, a touch of Christmas cake and very slightly drying tea-leaf tannins. It's a gentle, warm-evening-curved wine that is already leaning towards autumn and fireside and a teaspoon of plum chutney alongside a gold-blond slice of cheese. (TC)

14.5%

Drink

2022

-

2026

£24.99 Naked Wines (£18.99 member price)

16

## **Sainte Rose, Simpsons of Servian Old Vine Syrah 2020 Vin de France**

*Full bottle 1,301. Certified HVE.*

An unusual wine with a profile that will probably divide people. It's tangtastic, nose and palate. If you love madeira, balsamic vinegar, kimchi, sauerkraut and umeboshi plums, you'll glug this up by the quaff-ful. It tastes like sweet-sour lacto-fermented raspberries. It's pomegranate molasses on salt-crusted pink grapefruit, brown sugar melted onto

poached plums, star anise and hot-cooked damsons smeared on bresaola and sprinkled with sumac. It's kick-ass and jujitsu but the tannins feel like roough-bark-rubbed cherry-blossom petals and the wine plays ripple riffs on witty, abbreviated beauty – little a little liquid haiku. **VGV** (TC)

13.5%

Drink

2022

-

2027

£12.99 Naked Wines (£10.99 member price)

17

*Photos from Dom de Cébène and Domaine Jones.*