

## The Vine Route – Tom Fiorina

Faugères flamboyant: Domaine de Cébène turns northward to make a uniquely southern wines

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in Faugères, Languedoc



Schist happens...to make very good terraces, and even better wines.

**The two adjacent Languedoc wine appellations of Faugères and St Chinian are similar in size, grape varieties, soil types and styles of wine. Both appellations were even created in the same year—1982. But Faugères has long lived in the shadow of St Chinian; mostly because of the greater notoriety of several St Chinian winemakers. That may be changing, as talented and innovative winemakers, like Brigitte Chevalier, exploit the promise and potential of the signature schist of Faugères.**

It normally takes years, sometimes generations, for a vineyard to have its wines recognized by wine critics and for it to be awarded wine medals. Brigitte Chevalier managed to achieve both critical and competitive acclaim for the very first vintage at her Domaine de Cébène vineyard in Faugères. Being a woman, in the *übermasculine* winemaking field, makes her exploit even more notable.

But this relatively neophyte winemaker has 20 years of commercial experience behind her, including having worked for 10 years as the export manager for the well-known Bordeaux *négociant* Jean-Luc Thunevin. Working to sell wine from the Château Valandraud, where Thunevin helped to launch the *garagiste* movement, got Chevalier interested in blending wine. She was originally from the Languedoc, so the idea of finding a property there to make her own wine came naturally. Her partner (as in life partner) came from Bédarieux, just north of

Faugères, so she began her search in 2006 in that part of the Languedoc.

She chose to start her vineyard on two completely different parcels of land. The first is a terraced mound in the extreme north of the Faugères appellation. At 300 meters it's also one of the highest points in Faugères. The site resembles a Mayan temple before the archeologists have peeled away the vegetation that covers it. Syrah and Grenache vines are planted on its northern and northeastern faces, while later-ripening Mourvèdre vines face due south, giving this late-ripening grape variety some additional time in the sun. She deliberately sought out such an orientation when she was looking for vines to purchase, explaining that this permits her to ensure that the sugar maturation in her grapes isn't ahead of the development of the phenolic compounds, the flavor elements that greatly affect the quality and taste of fruits. For example, if those Syrah and Grenache vines were on the opposite side of this mound, the hot sun would bring the sugar levels high enough for harvesting at the time of grape maturation, but the phenolic compounds might still be immature. If she waited for the sugar and phenolic relationship to be balanced, she'd end up with so much sugar in the grapes that her wine would have 14 or 15 percent alcohol.



Brigitte Chevalier of  
Domaine de Cébène.

Her judicious property choice, combined with the deep-rooted vines growing on these terraced balconies of schist, very low yields, optimal grape ripeness, and careful vinification give her wine a unique profile. In fact, when I first tasted it, I immediately thought of a really elegant

Châteauneuf. Not to take anything away from Faugères wine, which I truly appreciate, but the Domaine de Cébène *Les Bancèls* and *Felgaria* wines from this particular hillside possess the balanced underlying acidity, fine tannins, and an explosion of fruit that is more often found in high-quality southern Rhône valley wines.

The second parcel that she purchased is located in Corneilhan, just 20 km from the Mediterranean. It's planted with 25-year-old Grenache and Mourvèdre vines. She chose this location, she says, because of the 40-meter-deep bed of sea sediment and alluvial deposits of stone, pebbles, sand and gravel that underlie it. Besides offering her vines extraordinary drainage, this soil, she explains, is perfect for low-

DOMAINE DE  
**CÉBÈNE**

BRIGITTE CHEVALIER

vigor vines that yield small quantities of grapes with great concentration and complexity. The 85% Grenache that she uses in the *Ex Arena* red wine produced from this location forms a concentrated base of herbal sweetness and roundness that is, once again, reminiscent of a good Châteauneuf de Pape. The wine's 15% Mourvèdre lends a touch of that grape's traditional gamey, earthy flavor, at once softening and giving the Grenache some additional structure.

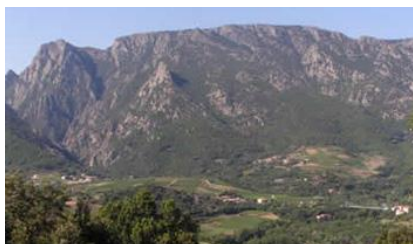
What's distinctive about Chevalier's wines is that the *Les Bancèls* and *Felgaria* from the northern part of Faugères have all of the classic schist aromas and minerality typical of the better wines from this appellation. The *Ex Arena* is round and finessed, but it also has a warmth to its character that signifies its Languedoc origins. All three are balanced, rich, soft and lovely wines, with abundant fruit and spiciness, complex structures, rich tannins and hints that they will continue to evolve over a number of years. And there's nothing fake or "international" about them; they could only come from Faugères terroir.

#### Words of praise

The *Ex Arena* from her 2007 inaugural vintage was awarded a Gold Medal at the *Féminalise* French wine competition, where wines are tasted by a professional, all-women jury. The Domaine de Cébène *Felgaria* 2008 earned another Gold Medal in Montpellier this January at the *Millésime Bio Challenge* competition that is part of the semi-annual international wine trade fair for wine made from organically farmed grapes.

And no less an authority than the English Master of Wine wine writer Jancis Robinson wrote that Chevalier's 2008 wines represented "an excellent quality/price ratio." She gave the 2008 *Les Bancèls* a note of 16 (out of 20) and both the 2007 *Ex Arena* and the 2008 *Felgaria* were given a 16.5 rating.

Chevalier's domaine was also selected to be included in the 2010 edition of *Bettane & Desseauve's Grand Guide des Vins de France*. Many winemakers labor for years and never achieve mention in this annual tome, which is viewed by many as the *Who's Who* of French winemaking.



Cébenna "alongée" in her mountain.

Chevalier's experience in marketing shows in the naming of her domain and her cuvées. *Les Cévennes*, the mountains that form the southern part of the *Massif Central*, the plateau that rises up in central France, were named for the Gallic goddess *Cébenna* (*Cébène* in French). *Cébenna*, legend has it, resides in the mountain of Caroux, just north of the beautiful village of Olargues, which loyal *Vine Route* readers may remember is not far from a vineyard run by another female winemaker, Iris Rutz-Rudel of [Domaine Lisson](#). And it doesn't take much imagination to see, in that mountain's silhouette, the form of a woman lying on her back.

It's understandable how Chevalier, who did her university studies in Literature, embraced this legend. Her love of history and literature also guided her choice of names for the domain's three wines. *Les Bancèls* is a local expression for the schist terraces, like the ones where many of the Domaine de Cébène vines reside. "These terraces not only limit erosion on the hillsides," she says, "but they also create a microclimate that is beneficial for the vines. We need to preserve and use these wonderful resources."

*Felgaria*, the name of another of her wines, is how the Romans referred to the Faugères region, and *Ex Arena* is Latin for "out of the sand," a nod to the unique sedimentary soil that produces this wine.

"I want to make "*vin du nord*" (wine from the north) in the "*sud*" (south)," she says. She has already achieved some of that objective of capturing the style and delicate flavor of cooler-appellation wines in the Languedoc, proving that her winemaking skills are equal to her commercial talent. She'd like to next make her vineyard biodynamic, she adds, and then—"Wouldn't it be wonderful," she asks to no one in particular, "to make a white wine like a [Didier Dagueneau](#) (the late, iconoclastic Loire Valley winemaker) Sancerre?"

I, for one, believe that she can do it, and I can't wait to taste that white wine.

**Tom Fiorina** is an American, living in Toulouse, who writes about French terroir-driven wine and the passionate winemakers who make it.