



Ventoux - the next hot thing

Ventoux must be one of the southern French appellations that has changed most in the past 20 years. The name has shortened for a start, from a tentative Côtes du Ventoux to the proud single word, one that has such resonance for cyclists and armchair followers of the Tour de France. You can see the testing cone that is Mont Ventoux from miles around and the local vignerons make much of the cooling influence of this landmark, by far the highest mountain in western Provence.

So cooling was it in the 1970s, when I spent a year in the Luberon, that the local wines were vapid liquids that only just qualified as reds. But in recent years, Ventoux rouge seems to have taken on almost as much colour and body as the Châteauneuf-du-Papes made downhill and west of here.

Such are the taste-able effects of climate change. When I arrived last June at Domaine de Fondrèche, one of the standard bearers of the appellation, Sebastien Vincenti acknowledged that since the mid-1990s: "Climate change has really done us good - but we don't want any more." The outside temperature was 37C. The cicadas had struck up their high-summer soundtrack two days before. He suggested we keep our pre-tasting tramp round the vines to a minimum, although he did point out that the temperature was likely to fall to 17C at night, thanks to the cool air that descends every evening from Mont Ventoux.

The big difference between Ventoux and the appellations to its immediate west, Gigondas and Beaufort-de-Venise, is not its varied mix of soil types but its climate - particularly the variation in temperature between day and night. The local town of Carpentras, for instance, is one of the hottest of the region by day but one of the coldest at night. This has the effect of slowing down the growing season so that Ventoux vines bud notably

later than those of, for instance, Châteauneuf-du-Pape. The harvest is much later too, well into October, so the grapes are much cooler when they are picked, and have benefited from an extended growing season.

Despite its obviously wind-derived name, Ventoux is less buffeted by the mistral that can sometimes plague the more open countryside of the famous wine appellations to the west.

'The temperature variation between day and night has the effect of slowing down the growing season'

The grapes grown are very similar. Increasingly fashionable Grenache is dominant, but Ventoux's cooler nights make it more suitable terrain for the Syrah of the northern Rhône, particularly on higher sites, than the southern Rhône's hottest appellations such as Châteauneuf. But Vincenti admits they are at the northern limit for the late-ripening Mourvèdre, the third member of the grape triumvirate in this part of the world. Cinsault can be a valued ingredient for rosés, which tend to be a little meatier here than the Provençal norm.

Marselan, the relatively recent crossing of Cabernet Sauvignon and Grenache, was added to the grape varieties allowed for Ventoux about 10 years ago and the Chaudière brothers at Château Pesquié, another standard bearer, profess enthusiasm for its ability to withstand fungal diseases.

But a touch of mildew is as nothing compared with what happened in April this year when temperatures fell to -5C in some vineyards that were, disastrously, two weeks ahead of usual in their growth because of the mild spring, and so succumbed to the worst frost in 50 years. "We like to brag that we're the coolest appellation in the southern Rhône," observed ▶

◀ Frédéric Chaudière, adding gloomily: "Now we have the proof."

Unlike Gigondas over the beautifully jagged Dentelles de Montmirail ridge, Ventoux wines come in all three colours, but the hotter summers have narrowed the range of suitable terroirs for white wine production. Grape varieties for whites are the usual suspects for this part of the world: Grenache Blanc, Roussanne, Viognier, Rolle (Vermentino) and Clairette.

As elsewhere, there was a fashion for oaky whites but now *barriques* are less used and Fondrèche, for instance, installed quirky concrete eggs seven years ago and now have Stockinger of Austria's fashionable large oak vats. Pesquié's brand-new top red, the delightfully tense 2015 Ascensio (98 per cent old Grenache, 20 per cent stems) is, after comparative tastings, deliberately aged in concrete vats.

Until now, anyway, Ventoux's top wines are less expensive than the most famous wines of better-known southern Rhône appellations. Fondrèche's Persia retails in the UK for well under £20 a bottle, and Pesquié's Quintessence for not much more.

Most local vine growers still take their grapes to one of the dozen or so *caves* co-operatives in the appellation, of which those of Bédoin and Cayron (which supplies raw material for the successful La Vieille Ferme range owned by the Perrin family of Châteauneuf-du-Pape) are the most quality-focused.

But no enterprise could be more determinedly focused on quality than Chêne Bleu in the far north-west of this distinctly heterogenous appellation, the most extensive one by far in the southern Rhône. The property, La Verrière, one of the highest in the appellation at up to 600m elevation, had been chosen by Xavier Rolet, head of the London Stock Exchange, to fulfil his wine dream in the mid-1990s, even before he courted his wife Nicole. Researching every

soil type and grape variety over 12 years, she has restructured it entirely. "It's the hardest thing I've ever done," says this refugee from the think-tank world.

She uses the Ventoux appellation for only some of the range, while for others she values the flexibility of the IGP designation, successor of Vins de Pays. She argues that La Verrière is too far from Mont Ventoux to be influenced by it - as the force of the northern wind on her tennis court, with its jaw-dropping view of the distant Alps, suggests.

The potential is becoming clear, Ventoux vineyard land prices have been rising, but are still only about €20,000 to €25,000 a hectare, less than a recognised cru in the Languedoc, a 10th as much as Gigondas and only a 20th of Châteauneuf land prices. If I were - perish the thought - setting up as a young vigneron, I would look carefully at one of the better sites in Ventoux. As Nicole Rolet says: "Fifteen years from now, Ventoux could be truly great." **FT**

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