



“Moi c’est toute ma vie.”
“...et pour vous ?”



The Brotherhood of the Wines of Buzet

In the beginning there was the darkness. It was night, before time. How long it lasted is unknown. Probably billions of years. More or less. Then there was a large «bang». Some say it was «big». Nothing can be proved. But that does not really concern us. What is of more interest is that in the cool dawn that followed the darkness of time there came a great geological upheaval. Terrible. Resounding. And as if one was not enough, there came several more. From the primary era to the quaternary, endless convulsions. Almost. Each time, with every gigantic barrow load, the architect of the Universe brought silt, rocks, gravel, schist, tars, ashes, fire and everything that was needed to make Gascony a land that was worthy of its name. Then with a tanker as gigantic as his barrow, he brought water.

At Buzet, at the very edge of the rolling Gascon countryside, he delivered so much water that there was only a sea. Immense. Enough to soak through the soils for thousands of years. Half way through the secondary era the architect realised that, in the long run, too much water is not a good thing. This is certainly true. Around here, we know this full well: water is excellent, but in winemaking it's better when things are dry. So, at the end of the secondary era the architect drew off the water. Actually, no-one can say for sure that it didn't drain off by itself from the great Aquitaine basin, just for the greater benefit of our souls and for the good of the wine. The Pyrenees had been waiting for a long time and so, taking advantage of the departure of the water, they reached up out of the earth. New upheavals. The earth folded, hollowed, twisted and turned and gave us a new river: the Baïse.

It was during this magnificent Miocene period that all these events took place. The Baïse had carried away all the rocks the mountains didn't want, the slag left over from the building of the Pyrenees, and the river decided to settle here, rolling the gravel along, especially the little gravel, known as gravette which is very special. This laborious transport lasted twenty million years. Just to give some idea that the terroir took its time to become what it is today: ideal soil, land fit for vines. One of the best there is.

The Time of Man

It took a very long time before men came out to play on the land that had been prepared for them by the great upheaval. Specialists tell us that it took 15 billion years between the big bang and the arrival of Cro-Magnon man in Gascony. This seemed a reasonable amount of time to think about how to use this bountiful land.

When he arrived in the Baïse valley 40,000 years ago, having left Africa 195,000 years earlier, our ancestor found plentiful game, delicious water, wild fruits to his heart's content and even a pretty little berry called vitis vinifera, the ancestor of the vine, which grew wild wherever it pleased. There is no doubt about the fact that he picked the grape and ate it. Grape pips have been found in prehistoric caves in the region. He must also have enjoyed the last fruits of the autumn, so full of sugar, which the quails and the doves love to feed on. Did he get tipsy on them? Why not?

Historians think that over seven thousand years BC man learned how to cultivate vitis vinifera on the shores of the Mediterranean. The Greeks, who were the first Europeans to make wine, were followed by the Romans who, apparently, brought wine making to Gaul. However, archaeological digs have proved beyond a doubt that wine was being made by Gauls in the south before the Romans reached the Narbonne area. A whittled vine branch was thrown into a well in Lectoure, in the Gers, a hundred years before the Romans came to Novempopulie, which would be known as Gascony in the future.

So it's logical, since the Gascon Gauls imported «Italian» wine in amphoras between 175 and 150 BC that they were capable of imitating this «juice». Making it themselves. Amphoras from this period have been found at Mézin, Sos, Aiguillon, Agen, etc...so, just down the road from Buzet. If the Gaulish people of the land that was to become Gascony



“Moi c’est toute ma vie.”
“...et pour vous ?”



(the Bituriges Vivisques, the Elusates, the Vasates, etc....) used to buy wine to drink it's logical to think that they also produced it.

Nevertheless, Gaul was covered by vineyards after the victories of Julius Caesar, and the map of French wines was soon included on the map of the Roman Empire. The Gauls, and particularly those in the south, turned out to be excellent winegrowers, «inventive» as it said in documents of the time.

The vineyard had its glory years throughout the Gallo-Roman period, later expanding during the great land clearances of the 7th and 8th centuries. The celebration of Holy Mass, with the blood of Christ, helped to popularise this drink which became the pride of the Baïse hillsides.

The Middle Ages

The region of Gascony has the eternal gift of retaining those who ride or travel over its land. As the power of Rome declined and the Pax Romana came to an end, the Middle Ages began with invasions and suffering. The new arrivals (such as the Visigoths) were to stay.

If it took four difficult eras to create the Gascon soil, then there are three factors to explain the amazing rise of Buzet wines between the High Middle Ages and the 12th century: the founding of the religious monasteries, pilgrimages to Compostella and the immoderate love that the 11th century middle classes had for winegrowing which laid down, in the memory of this» terroir», a unique wine destiny.

Abbeys and monasteries

Until the 13th century, during Holy Communion, each communicant received a morsel of bread and a sip of wine. This meant that wheat and wine were needed. The priory at Buzet and the abbeys at Damazan, Nérac and Aiguillon quickly planted good vines and began to produce good wine. Sheltered from the upheavals of the outside world in their abbeys, the monks, abbots and priors had plenty of time. They devoted themselves to studying and improving their cultivation and winemaking methods and the ways of blending different grape varieties. In churches the monks even gave thanks for wine and vines. The capitals on the pillars in the church at Damazan, for example, are decorated with bunches of grapes.

Compostella

We have tended to forget that pilgrimages to Compostella greatly helped to boost Buzet wines. From wherever one comes, in order to cross the Pyrenees and get to Roncesvalles you have to cross through Gascony. And the Buzet vineyards are crossed by an ancient road, the Tenareze, which in Gallo-Roman times, and even before then, ran from the Garonne to Spain. This country road had one great advantage: you could get to the Pyrenees without having to cross a river.

The old Tenareze road, with no bridge or ford, went through the vines. In the farmhouses, the pilgrims quenched their thirst with a glass of red or white wine. On the return trip the Jacquayres crossed back through the Buzet vineyards, drank the wine once more, taking their time this time no doubt, and took it away with them sometimes and praised it highly once they were back home.



“Moi c’est toute ma vie.”
“...et pour vous ?”



The «bourgeois» middle class

If the church was the dominant power between the 6th century and the middle of the 11th century, after the restoration of civil power, the middle classes, the bourgeois, had the idea that they would do as the monks did. Or even do better! So, in their turn, they took an interest in vines and wine. This is how the lords of Saint-Pierre de Buzet began to copy the Benedictine monks of Buzet and the monks of Damazan and Nérac. They became the largest landowners in the Gascon vineyards. And as they wanted to sell their production and sell it for a high price, they made sure that their wine was good. The Baise was the only navigable tributary river on this bank of the Garonne and so the wine could be carried downstream to Bordeaux. And to the rest of Europe. So the river helped the vineyards to develop.

In the Buzet-sur-Baïse town charter which lays down the customs of the town, the accent is clearly placed on wine. It is obvious that it occupied pride of place and represented the livelihood of many people. It just continued to grow. Techniques improved all the time. Quality too. All the great European cities wanted Buzet wine. It could be found on the tables of the middle classes in Bristol, Southampton, London, Boston, Amsterdam, Bruges, etc. sometimes it was even used to improve Bordeaux wine whose quality did not always come up to customers' expectations.

Phylloxera

Vines, like wine, are often at the heart of some struggle or fight. Or even war. The war that the people around the Baïse fought against phylloxera was pitiless. It left burns and scars, including in the landscape and place names. In the terroir, on the hillsides, at a turning on a country stroll, you frequently see the names of hamlets like Aux Vignaux or Vignesaltes which stir distant memories of the traces of an age-old way of life, of an ancient wound. Here, a long time ago, a century and a half, there were vines and suddenly there were no more. It was an American insect, *Dactylosphaera vitifoliae*, that killed everything. And even, for quite some time, it killed off hope. This destructive insect attacked the entire vineyard and everything had to be uprooted between 1868 and 1900. To relate the misery of that time is an impossible task.

However, after long labours or meticulous patience, in 1914, a large part of the vineyard was restored. The wine flowed straight and true. At the end of the war, in 1919, Buzet wine was separated from the wines of the Gironde by a decree regulating the appellations d'origine which meant that «Bordeaux» wine could proudly put their origin on their labels. It was thought that the wine from Buzet would find it difficult to make a mark.

Those who like to stand and observe soon noticed the ceaseless comings and goings of tankers, with Gironde registration plates and «Great wines of Bordeaux» proudly emblazoned on their sides, coming to fill up....with wine, in the farms around the region. But this trickery, which consisted of making Bordeaux wine with Buzet came to an end in 1952. That same year it was decided to go ahead and set up a Buzet winegrowers' cooperative. Two years earlier, a few feisty wine growers had obtained the VDQS appellation.

Creation

We Gascons, when we do something, we like to do it with a certain amount of style. And a banquet. Absolutely gigantic. And well washed down. With a speech. In fact, lots of speeches. Endless speeches. All saying nothing important! The General Assembly to set up the Buzet wine growers' cooperative was held on 25 September 1953. All the famous people from the area – real and otherwise - took part in the event. The speeches have not passed into history. Yet, it was not a small affair. To unite, the wine growers of the VSQS area had to bring along their wine harvest – which was the least of it– but also lots of lovely money to buy the equipment to vinify and to stock the grape harvest. They managed to



“Moi c’est toute ma vie.”
“...et pour vous ?”



do both and even succeeded in the unique feat of agreeing on who should have the immense responsibility of erecting the buildings, of keeping an eye on the construction, of supervising the winemaking and marketing the production, and this was no easy task. This Prometheus was called Jean Mermillord. It was he who set Buzet wines back on the path to glory. And that is where they still are.

The terroir and the climate

This area is set on the Baïse hillsides in Lot-et-Garonne, halfway between Bordeaux and Toulouse and a few miles from the Garonne, and the soil of the terroir is a harmony of alluvial silt and gravel, clay and limestone, and the highest outcrops rise to 150 metres. The average annual temperature is 13°C, there is some rain (average 730 mm per year) but above all, the sun does its very best with 1,936 hours of sunshine. Ideal for the vine.

The grape varieties

The Buzet grape variety is Cabernet Sauvignon which does not produce abundant wine but is fruity with powerful aromas. It is rich in tannins which lie behind the dazzling marriages made in the oak wine barrels. The nose evokes ripe fruits and violets.

Cabernet Franc gives a livelier wine than its cousin Sauvignon. But, over time it becomes lighter, finer, and more fragrant.

Merlot matures early and gives a very sugary must. Its wines are deep in colour, supple and mellow.

Cot, also known as Malbec, is not grown much in Buzet but where it is present it gives body to wines.

For the whites, the three reigning varieties are Sauvignon which confers aromas and liveliness to the wine, while Semillon and Muscadelle bring mellowness and body.

Viticulture

Here, the wine grower who works hard is well rewarded. And they all work hard. Because they love their work but also because they have adopted a system of differentiated payment. This means that the winegrower's pay is based on the quality of the grapes he brings in and not on the quantity; you harvest better when you are paid better!

Agriconfidence

According to an old Gascon saying, the Buzet winemaker does not work his land for himself, but so that his son and grandson may work it too. This respect for the future is why winegrowers on the hillsides of the Baïse enthusiastically agreed with the strict rules that come with the 'Agriconfidence – green warrant' certificate. Those few words sum it up: consumers can put their trust in the products of this kind of agriculture, and at Buzet the winemakers have a very high regard for the environment and for the widely respected 'green warrant'. Fertilizers here are not chemical, but vegetable, and therefore clean. This is promising for the quality of the grape and for the wine produced thanks to this fine natural fertilizer. Here economic efficiency, which is essential, goes hand in hand with social fairness and with environmental conservation.



“Moi c’est toute ma vie.”
“...et pour vous ?”



Sustainable Development

Long before the term became a marketing and advertising tool, and a way of seducing the consumer worried about the quality of what he was being sold, the Buzet winemakers have always had a high regard for rules which are now fashionable, as is shown by the ‘agriconfidence’ concept. On a daily basis they nurture their natural resources very carefully, strictly manage agricultural waste, and rigorously control the material they use. Thus they have complete control over their work, from the grape to the glass. There is nothing new in their being so exacting, but especially now, when everyone claims to be like this, it is worth recalling and pointing out that thanks to this rigour Buzet wines are certificated to the highest European standards (HACCP, ISO 9001 V200, IFS [International Food Standard] ISO 14001 Environmental Standard).

Some Figures

Buzet winemakers produce 95% of the wines in the appellation. 280 of them have decided to unite to produce ever better wines. They are doing this on 2,000 hectares of land, in 22 domaines and chateaux, and with two wine cooperatives and three winemaking plants. They produce about 100,000 hectolitres of wine, some 13,000,000 bottles. 150,000 people visit their cellars each year, and their great vats can take 246,000 hectolitres.

90 members of staff work on producing, delivering and marketing Buzet wines. To help them in this they have a production line that can handle 18,000 bottles an hour. The cooperative has an area for making and storing wine of 18,000 square metres, equal to three football or rugby pitches.

So it is for all these reasons that the Buzet cooperative is in volume terms the leading producer of rosé wine in the South West, and the third in turnover and volume for all wine.

45% of the wine is sold in supermarkets, 15% is exported, and 40% sold through traditional outlets, cafés, hotels, restaurants, and wine merchants. 77% of the wine sold is red, 18% rosé and 5% white. Buzet wine is widely appreciated: 44.5% of French people know of it, and 30.3% have already drunk it. 30.9% of them are in the Paris region, 25.8% in the North East, 20.6% in the South East, and 47.1% in the South West. (Source: Ipsos 2005)

The Shop

Buzet winemakers sell their wine throughout France and practically all over the world. And they also sell a lot of it in Buzet-sur-Baïse, the village that gave its name to their wine. In this small Gascon town, which whispers to the Baïse and seduces the riverboat men, the Shop is THE tourist centre in the department: people come here to taste the best Gascon wine, of course, to visit the cooperative, to touch the barrels where the precious vintages are maturing, to guess at the riddles which the winegrowers pose for them and to have a good time. This shop, which is as old as the wine of Buzet itself, has been newly renovated and was reopened at the beginning of 2009. As the tourist guides say, this wine shop is worth going out of your way to visit.

The Wines

2008 and 2009 are outstanding years for the Buzet winemakers: their wines get medals, stars and articles full of praise, in competitions and in the various guides. A third of the year’s production has been praised or promoted or commended in an article. The great wines - Baron d’Ardeuil, Château de



“Moi c’est toute ma vie.”
“...et pour vous ?”


BUZET
APPELLATION D'ORIGINE CONTRÔLÉE



Gueyze, Lys, Château de Padère, etc – to name only some of them, will enjoy a fine reputation from now on, and one that is fully deserved. Over the last few years there has been, basically, a real revolution in quality which began quietly on the banks of the Baïse, in the heart of the South West, where the Gascon winemakers cultivate their traditional varieties with true passion. The very last word in modernity is added to this ancestral tradition: a new winemaking procedure which treats the grapes with respect, but which ingeniously gets the best out of them. And this is why a third of the winemakers' production is of true top quality and on intimate terms with the very finest. So, the Buzet winemakers, who are already giving of their very best, 'the blood of their land' in the words of a Gascon writer, are even now working on the nectar of tomorrow. And this is the privilege, to put it in the right perspective, of those who know how to combine a respect for tradition with a heart open to the modern world.