

# John Livingstone-Learmonth

## The Domaine

### MAS ISABELLE - Lirac

LVT 2012 r 2011 rosé Isabelle Boulaire's family previously sent crop to the Cave Co-operative of Saint-Laurent. She is the 12th generation of vigneron. The first red in bottle (limited amount bottled) was 2009, with a rosé added in 2011. Good first wine, with greater finesse and precision coming through from 2011. A real hand-made feel here.

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### Vineyards

- Lirac

### Wines

- Lirac Grand Roc red
- Lirac Hommage à mon père rosé

## The Wines

The wines > Lirac > MAS ISABELLE > Lirac “ Grand Roc ” - red

60-75% Grenache (late 1920s, late 1960s), 20-30% Syrah (mid-1980s, 2003), 5% Carignan (1960s) from clay-limestone, deep & stony soils at the foot of Ste Baume hill, destemmed, 3 day pre-fermentation crop cooling, wild yeasts, 3 week vinification at up to 28°C, daily pumping over, cap punching, steel vat raised 6 months, then concrete vat raised 18 months, some new oak (2010), fined, filtered, 10,000 b

2012 ★★★★★

(malo, sugars completed) bright purple. Blackberry air that is ripe and accentuates the ripeness of the grapes - gives an air of blackberry coulis, blueberry jam. The palate offers savoury, tasty early fruit, has fine acidity and nice, crisp, enjoyable tannins which you can get your teeth into - they add energy to the wine. There is good grain in the centre of the wine, has real structure, and an aromatic, floral ending. Good variety to come, has a very terroir, lovely finish. 14.5°. Marked promise here. “2012 pleases me as much as 2011,” Isabelle Boulaire. From 2015. 2019-20 Dec 2012

## 2011 ★★★★★

(bottling Feb 2013) dark red; has a blackberry air, a good licorice extra spur - the nose is not overdone, has reserve, some laid back smokiness. The palate commences on light spice, gives blackberry fruit with cut, clarity. It ends on a squeeze of gras in its texture and a tannic sprinkle of grain and dust. Precise wine that feels hand made. I like its upright clarity, and the coolness of the fruit. Pretty ready to go, a wine of fine qualities. "It has matter, power, but remains en finesse," Isabelle Boulaire. 14.5°. To 2018. Dec 2012

## 2010 ★★★★★(★)

quite dark red, purple. Has a blackberry jam, prune air with a slight surround of game and licorice. Its smoky note is discreetly present and there is a gentle drift of rose. The palate is wrapped up, not fully open. This is another careful wine, a precise one with the glow of the vintage inside it. Drinkable, serene in style. It lengthens a little on its oak, so the finish is less tarred up. A little thyme and spice come through on the finish. This will show fruit purity around 2014. 14°. "This may show some wild boar notes because of their invasion of the vineyard this year! Raised 93% vat 24 months, 7% new oak 12 months, then 12 months vat. 10% bottled June 2012, 90% bottled end Nov 2012. 65 Gren 30 Syr, 5 Cari this year. €12 at the domaine. Some sold to Macau. To 2018 Dec 2012

## 2009 ★★★★★

dark red, legs. Sappy, full aroma of fat fruit, in a coulis-liqueur style. There are light game notes underneath. The palate has a violet-iris floral scenting, a suave black berry fruit, prune, stewed red cherries all together. Dense but not overdone. It is less interesting and more mainstream than 2010 and 2011, which are more accurate wines. It shows some late glow, heat, and its clutch of tannin at the end is absorbing. On the mark now. 14.5°. "The harvest was lightly overripe; it was my first year and I wanted good, ripe grapes. It was an experiment. I would drink this with a fondant au chocolate with a soaked black cherry inside it, also a civet of wild boar," Isabelle Boulaire. 2015-16. 6,000 b this year. Dec 2012 Previously July 2011 \*\*\*(\*) rather full robe; blackberry, mulberry fruit airs with some meatiness, also a ripe plum or prune aroma from the well-ripened crop. The palate offers juicy, forward black fruit, backed by live tannins that add dimension and drive. There are slight salty notes. Well suited to a variety of foods - pastas, mushroom dishes, saucisson, Italian country cooking with beans. 14.5°. To 2017. 75 Gren, 20 Syr, 5 Cari this year. July 2011

## The Wines

The wines > Lirac > MAS ISABELLE > Lirac « Hommage » à mon père - rosé

late 1940s 1 ha plot of mixed vines on L'Eyrolle at Lirac, planted by grandfather Marcel Vergier, clay-limestone, limestone residues, Grenache noir, rose, blanc, Clairette blanche, rose, Bourboulenc, Cinsault, 15 hour maceration, racked, pressed, 18 day steel vat vinification at 18°C, raised 4 months, malo completed, 3,000 b

## 2012 No Rating

NOT PRODUCED - "selling rosé is complicated," I.B.

## 2011 ★★★★★(★)

red-tinted robe; red cherry, nougat, redcurrant air, joli wild strawberry fruit. The palate has well-founded depth, a nicely solid middle. Its heart renders it suited to foods over the aperitif - it is a feet on the ground rosé. The attack is clear, and it lengthens well, has character, the length genuine. Licorice and fennel combine on the finish. An STGT, quite steely wine that will grow and expand as it breathes. €7 at the domaine. Grilled rougets - red mullet I would like, Isabelle would prepare them with cumin, also a carpaccio of scallops. 13.5°. To 2015. Bottled end Jan 2012. Dec 2012

## MAS ISABELLE - the delights of a small domaine, its hand crafted wines and a proper, courteous reception



As if to push back the dreadful news of rampant development in the countryside, wasteful government spending, large international companies avoiding paying tax and the fact that David Beckham gets his picture on the front page of broadsheets when signing a 5 month (month, not year) contract at the arriviste Paris St Germain (so they are well suited, literally), a visit to a small domaine brings back the joys of wine writing, and stirs memories of long ago, when people treated one another with patience and full attention.

I always try to include small or new names when making my vineyard visits. Some domaines such as Guigal, Jean-Louis Chave, Clape and Château de Beaucastel have to be visited with the regularity of a Swiss clock. This is no hardship, obviously. But if I “went missing” on them, readers would naturally be fed up. So the schedule is already quite largely written each year.

When I started out, in the era of nul signposts, barking and/or biting dogs and suspicious locals, there was always that exhilaration when you found wines that you thoroughly liked. Louis Reynaud, grandfather of Emmanuel of Château Rayas delivered the immortal comment to me as a gangling and underfed 23-year old one day, having served me his 1955 liquoreux white, which transported me to the celestial skies and back, “Ah oui, Monsieur Livingstone, il y a des jolies choses dans la vie, vous savez.” You bet I savvied, Monsieur Louis, merci ten thousand times.

In December 2012, amidst a plethora of sit-down tastings where the grunt factor is high - hundreds of wines are lined up, sock-covered for anonymity - I fixed up a visit to a couple of small domaines in the Gard where I knew the wine but not the grower. One, the **DOMAINE DE L’AURE**, had impressed me with skilful handling of their 2011 CÔTES DU RHÔNE TRADITION WHITE made from Roussanne, while the other, **MAS ISABELLE**, had shown promise on its LIRAC GRAND ROC RED 2009.

### **DOMAINE DE L’AURE**

Domaine de l’Aure is a father-mother and son estate that has expanded from 15 hectares in 1980 to 45 hectares now, under the determination of the motivated son **VIVIAN CRUZEL**. This represents the Co-opérateur - St Hilaire d’Ozilhan in this instance - moving on to vinify his own wine after years of purely vineyard work. The wines are good - drinkable and consistent, and it is a name I would suggest trying. Local English resident Paul Sutton has been working to sell them to Britain, while of the 10% exported at the moment, the leading country reflects where the family have friends and contacts - New Caledonia, followed by NL and Belgium.

## MAS ISABELLE

However, the Mas Isabelle is just such a lovely story that I am going to concentrate on that in this article, since the way the visit was conducted and the path it took was a wonderful flashback to Rhône Valley life in the 1970s.

**ISABELLE BOULAIRE** is the 12<sup>th</sup> generation of her family working vineyards. She lives in the village of Lirac, on the main road opposite the small Place, with her mother Yvette and father Roger, a man in his 70s. Yvette, maiden name Vergier, inherited the main part of the vineyard on her side of the family, while Roger bought plots here and there to supplement that. In total, the family has 11 hectares of Lirac and six hectares of vin de pays.



The Vergier crop is delivered in part to the CAVE DE ROQUEMAURE ROCCA MAURA (improving) to contribute to one of their Lirac reds and to their vin de pays, while Isabelle follows a popular format these days - she works three hectares of red Lirac and one hectare of rosé. This mirrors GILLES CHINIEU at another promising Gardois DOMAINE LA ROMANCE at nearby CHUSCLAN, where the crop from three of the 14 hectares is bottled, the rest going to the CAVE DE CHUSCLAN LAUDUN, also improving.

Isabelle started at the domaine in 2003, and in 2009 vinified her first wine, in the cellars of the Château de Manissy at Tavel, where I used to visit the legendary Frère Roger in the days when Manissy's rosé wine was literally aged for a year in underground casks. It would emerge orange coloured, a definite acquired taste. The estate was owned by the Sainte Famille, an order founded in Holland at the end of the nineteenth century, for people of late vocation.

The owner today is the young, keen and go-ahead Florian André, and the wines are successful, style and subtle depth being their hallmark. As Isabelle observes: "if I vinified all the 17 hectares, I would need to build a cellar. I work alone on the domaine, after all."

The vineyard is Isabelle's first reference point, as it should be. Her approach is lutte raisonnée - a reasoned struggle - which is one level short of organic; the soils are worked, and her most recent extra curricular obligation beyond already a lot to do was the fencing of the vineyard on Sainte Baume against the ravages of wild boars.

## WILD BOAR INTERVENTION

The Wild Boar Saga at Lirac is the stuff of sad local legend now. Two friends went out on la chasse (shooting) one day about three years ago, and by the end of the afternoon one of them was dead, the father of the Lirac village mason, a mason himself. The surviving chasseur was indicted for murder amid much mystery, and the whole area was sealed off - no more hunting or chasse allowed. As things can travel very slowly in French justice, and did in this case, there was not a shot fired in anger across the vineyards, which are often fringed by thick woods.

Thus the deer and wild boars set to, and had a free run at the grapes come August and September. Yields were seriously hit and growers told me of their concerns over two years ago. The neighbouring vineyard of Brice Beaumont lost most of its Marselan crop to deer in the summer of 2011, so Isabelle took action.

“I put in one kilometre of electric fencing,” she told me, “but it was complicated having to recharge the battery, and keep vegetation away from the fencing, so finally I put up permanent fencing in the spring of 2012. That immediately gave me 30% extra Syrah and saved my Grenache blanc, meaning that I had crop for a white Lirac this year as a result - I sent the crop to the Cave de Roquemaure, but will make it as Mas Isabelle blanc from 2013.”

“My 2010 Lirac red was hurt by the deer and wild boar,” she continued; “wild boar particularly like Syrah, and I was scared of losing the whole lot, so ended up harvesting it one week early. It lacked a bit of gras and sucrosity, so I used oak to try to compensate for that - there was 7% new oak in the 2010.”

Therefore the 2009 first tentative go was succeeded by the 2010 vintage second go with wild boars snapping at her heels; this meant that 2011 was the first year where Isabelle felt she had a good run at the wine from vineyard to bottle. However, each vintage has its annual personality, which is entirely the point of wine if it is to be authentic in any shape or form.

“I harvest in two to three days, all the varieties at the same time,” she says, and in 2011 her main challenge was to end the fermentations. She works with natural, wild yeasts, allowing a three week vinification to reach a maximum of 28-30°C, using daily pumping overs as well as cap punching.

Her GRAND ROC LIRAC comes from the foot of the Sainte Baume sheer rocky hill, which has a little seventeenth century chapel, Notre Dame de Consolation (Our Lady of Solace) at its top. On a bright summer's day, walkers come in semi-pilgrimage to climb up to the chapel. However, on an austere winter's day, low cloud hanging in the air, a sense of compression of skies and land nibbling away at one's state of mind, this is a moody vineyard. It is a vital kilometre or two west of the main open Rhône Valley, the vineyards closely lined by trees and thickets, the sense of being away from mainstream life prominent.

The 60-75% Grenache here dates from the 1930s to the 1980s, while for the Syrah 20-30% is part from the late-1980s, part planted by Isabelle in 2003; the remaining 5% Carignan was planted in the 1960s. Apart from the slight 2010 oaking, the red is raised for six months in steel, then a further 18 months in concrete vats, fined and filtered. From 6,000 bottles in 2009, Isabelle moved to 10,000 bottles per annum since then.

So, having been greeted by her Ma and Pa, I sit down in the room opposite to ask Isabelle questions, questions, always questions. We get through some essentials, and move to the first wine, her rosé. Outside the rain falls, and the day darkens. I have a further two visits, but am beginning to ignore clocks and watches.

The LIRAC ROSÉ HOMMAGE À MON PÈRE is real rosé, STGT wine, hey presto! Things are looking good. It is a homage to her grandfather Marcel Vergier, a one hectare planted by him in the late 1940s on a spot just outside the village called L'Eyrolle. In the manner of co-plantation, which the authorities are now implicitly suppressing, via pressure not to use many traditional but so-called minor varieties such as Grenache gris, Clairette rose, Terret Noir, this wine is made from a mix of red and white grapes, namely Grenache in noir, blanc and rose form, Clairette blanche and rose, Bourboulenc and Cinsault.

It is very rare to have a specific single vineyard destined to produce rosé, and Isabelle does her grandfather proud. The vines are on a gentle slope of mixed clay and limestone with chiselled limestone cuttings or stones lying on the surface. The crop is left to macerate for one night or 15 hours, raked, pressed and fermented in steel at 18°C, the juice then raised until the end of January, the malo completed.

## **DISHES FOR THE ROSÉ**

As a good, southern, warm lands rosé, it is suited to a wide variety of dishes. Isabelle spoke of brandade de morue (cod brandade, a typical Provençal recipe), Asiatic cuisine, a North African chicken in tajine, Marseille bouillabaisse (no potatoes), Toulon bouillabaisse (potatoes, sacrilege, never trust a sailor in the kitchen), a sashimi of daurade (sea bream), and tagliatelle with wild mushrooms, cèpes, from Mont Ventoux, and St Jacques or scallop carpaccio. I would have loved grilled red mullet (rouget) with herbs, while Isabelle would have cooked said red mullet in cumin.

The rosé expanded as it breathed, its length thorough and genuine. Notes of fennel brought a local splash. It is priced at €7 at the cellars, but sells so slowly that there is no 2012.

The GRAND ROC RED shows what Lirac can achieve, a contention always underlined by the Châteauneuf-du-Pape growers who have bought vineyards there over the past ten-plus years. The late JEAN-JACQUES SABON of DOMAINE ROGER SABON was a pioneer, but recently the GIRAUD family, the USSEGLIOs - the Pierre Usseglio branch - the ARMENIER sisters at DOMAINE DE MARCOUX, the JAUME family at GRAND VENEUR, the FABRE and ABEILLES at CHÂTEAU MONT-REDON have all invested, along with the BRUNELs of CHÂTEAU DE LA GARDINE, owners of the excellent, old quality vineyards that used to be in the hands of the Pied Noir family VERDA at CHÂTEAU SAINT ROCH.

The point here is that the Châteauneuf-du-Pape vinifications of Lirac are efficient, the wines also efficiently produced. They are not the number one priority for their makers, however, and while they represent a good, solid step-up on what has been available across much of Lirac, they just lack that Tender Loving Care angle of the artisan domaine - perhaps a few more hesitations in the wine, a loud and clear expression of local vineyard influences, wines that are not too spotless and talk about an annual, first-hand story.

The series of Grand Rocs showed the gradual increase in confidence in winemaking and outlook for Mas Isabelle. The 2011 and the young 2012 most impressed me, the former having reserves on the nose, and cool, precise fruit on the palate. The 2012 pursues the thread of crisp fruit, with tannins that you can get your teeth into. The 2010, with its smattering of oak, was drinkable, with pure notions in its flavour, the glow of the vintage at its heart. It lacked a touch of the poised tinkle of the 2011 and 2012, both of which gave access to the vines and their vineyards. The 2009, cropped slightly overripe, reflected stewed red cherries and was more mainstream than the 2010 and 2011. All the reds cost €12 at the cellars.

## **ON TO PAIRING THE LIRAC GRAND ROC RED WITH DISHES**

Having taken time to study the reds and the rosé, we then moved on to food and wine pairing, as Isabelle produced a series of little platters whose contents had been made by fellow artisans who were either friends or had been met at Wine and Food fairs on neighbouring stands: true word of mouth, not internet highway, activity.

The day continued in its gloomy way outside the net curtained window, while a confit of dried tomatoes in fennel was brought forth. This was called a velours de tomates and - here I will use the net - was made in the Bouches-du-Rhône (13) further south at Rognac by [www.produits-souslesoleil.com](http://www.produits-souslesoleil.com) tel +33(0)6 63 26 87 06. 70% tomato content was very adroitly supplemented by 30% fig - the makers have a field of fig trees.

By now, Slow Food instincts were kicking in well. The baton passed very well between tomato-rosé-tomato, the tomato having a strong, slightly saline note; the pairing expanded the rosé on the finish, with the tomatoes having the last say.

Another good companion for the rosé was the rabbit in chestnuts paté, which lifted the fruit of the red 2011. The supplier of that also made a paté of rabbit in cèpes, by the way.



#### **DA ME CHOCOLATE, PAGA LO QUE DEBE (OLD VENEZUELAN CHANSON)**

We moved on to chocolate. This was made by Gilles Guinet at Brioude, in the Haute Loire (43), not far from Clermont Ferrand. His chocolat aux épices was 70% dark chocolate, the spices a mixture of nutmeg (muscade), ginger (gingembre), cloves (clou de girofle), cinnamon (cannelle) and pepper (poivre). The 2009 and 2012 were selected for this. The 2009 Grand Roc - the year of sun and density - drew spices from the chocolate, with the taste ending more on spice than the soaked red cherry fruit side of the wine, and furnished the nose with date and black raisin airs.

The youngster 2012 held its young aromas better than the 2009; the wine remained on top of operations until a late glow of pepper and spice came through. It was less mineralised than the 2009, and shows that 2012 contains good matter, its tannins very well inset. This was a true test for a young wine, and it passed well. The 2012 vintage in the Southern Rhône has definite promise, perhaps a tad superior to 2011 thanks to a better tannic structure, and a drop more density in the late palates of the wines.

The 2010 and 2011 were tried with the chocolat aux cèpes - 71% dark chocolate, with 4% grated cèpes, wild mushrooms. The 2010 held a steady aroma, while the palate passed by gently, ending on a light chocolate depth with an aromatic fungal note on the finish, which was very fine. The pairing was a shade neutral, domesticated.

The 2011 accomplished a more active link with the chocolate, the fruit ending on the up. There was more life and more fruit in this pairing, indeed it rendered the fruit more primary and brilliant, as if just out of the vat. The chocolate undressed the wine here - the duo settled on less of an equal footing than the 2011 pairing.



## VINEYARD VISITATION

The next step had to be a visit of Isabelle's vineyards. Out into the gloomy, near squally afternoon we went. The vineyards on this west side of Lirac near the Tour des Chênes are a series of around one hectare plots amidst woods and rocky escarpments, the trees close to the vines. The soils are draining, and have some sand in them.

This is a side of the Lirac appellation in considerable contrast to the wide spaces of the Roquemaure plateau, the galet stone clay-limestone area that first attracted the Pied Noir, ex-Algerian wine estate growers in the 1960s, followed by the wave of Châteauneuf-du-Pape investors from the 1990s onwards - the zone often considered to be the heart of Lirac, with its views across to the vineyards of Châteauneuf-du-Pape along the line of where Hannibal, one of my two great historical heroes (the other is Simón Bolívar) crossed the Rhône with his elephants en route to giving the Romans a hard time.

Below the Saint Baume ledge is the fenced vineyard of Grand Roc, which holds Grenache blanc planted in the 1950s and old Syrah as well, with Grenache further on. It is subject to bundles of Mistral wind, rating it a cool, late ripening spot. The precision of the fruit in the 2011 and 2012 is testament to that environment, with Isabelle practising *laissez-faire*, low intervention methods in the cellar - a lesson to all young thrusters exiting their Wine Schools determined to do as bidden by their professors - get as much out of their crop as possible. Montpellier, Rosemount etc - pay attention.

Conditions were gritty, the wind and driven rain giving the day an added dimension of uncertainty, the sky's grey jowls closing down any extended views. As we rumbled back to the Place de Lirac, I remembered the many such visits that I made in the 1970s, when I was received with kindness, patience and dedication, the ticking of the timepiece an irrelevance.