

stirring the lees with james molesworth

Day 6: At the End of the Rhône, Starting Something New

Checking out the 2010s Château de Nages in Costières de Nîmes and tasting some of Philippe Cambie's Halos de Jupiter line

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After five days of tasting 2010 Châteauneuf-du-Papes at some of the Southern Rhône's top domaines, I ventured to Costières de Nîmes for something new. On the surface, Costières de Nîmes looks uniform—a mildly undulating plateau covered with the classic rolled-stone, or galets terroir, that is the archetype image of Châteauneuf-du-Pape. But if you look a little closer, there are differences.

Costières de Nîmes was formed not from just the alluvial soils left by the Rhône river, but also by those from the Durance, which left the southern portion of the appellation littered with more variegated stones, smaller and angular in size. The northern side of the appellation has the larger, rounded stones typical of the Rhône.

Château de Nages

Similarly, on the surface, Michel Gassier looks the part of any Southern Rhône vigneron, a lightly weathered 51-year-old with purple-stained fingers. But look a little closer and the story isn't quite the same. His perfect English is thanks to a 10-year stint living in America, where he met his wife. France itself isn't Gassier's birthplace, having been born in Algeria, before moving to southern France as a child.

Born into a farming family, Gassier eventually inherited the fruit and vineyard business that his great-grandfather started in the 1940s, when Joseph Torres sensed France might lose its grip on its North African colonies. Today, Château de Nages still has its orchard business, run by Gassier's brother, Bertrand. The vineyards though, are Michel's passion, and he's taken a new approach to winemaking since he connected with consultant Philippe Cambie in 2006.

"I came back here in '93 at age 33, with two kids and a third on the way, because I wanted to make wine," said Gassier. "But after a while, I had to be honest with myself. I didn't like the wines I was making. Since meeting Philippe, my passion for wine took another leap forward. Philippe is a coach. Some things he teaches you, other things he lets you work through himself. But more than anything else, he helps you find the wines you really want to make."

Today, Gassier's operation produces 50,000 cases annually, with a hefty one-third going to the U.S. Gassier has been working organically since 2007. Here, at the end of the Rhône Valley, Gassier is making something new. Costières de Nîmes is a large AOC totaling 25,000 hectares of land, but only 5,000 hectares are currently in production. That number has slipped in recent years as growers who have been unable to survive slowly give up grapegrowing, but it's still larger than Châteauneuf-du-Pape itself. For years, it wavered in a public relations and legal limbo between the Languedoc and the Rhône Valley, until recently it was finally decided it would be considered part of the latter, which makes easy enough sense when you see the vineyards.

Today, Gassier sees the downward spiral of low prices for the wine turning into cutting corners in the vineyard, which results in low quality and a slow, steady decline. He's determined to avoid the trap, and he's on a bit of a buying spree, having recently added a 50-hectare parcel that includes some old-vine Grenache. Those soils left by the Durance produce a brighter, fresher wine, while the bigger stones in the northern end from the Rhône deliver flesh and power (see the accompanying video as Michel Gassier guides us through the two different sides of Costières).



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As we toured his vineyards, Gassier ran down his checklist for acquiring new parcels. "I'm looking for vineyards that contain some limestone, which is less common than you might think here. It's an old sea bed, but the limestone can be rather deep. I'm also looking for some slope. We're not Côte-Rôtie obviously, but any degree of slope is beneficial for when the rains come at the end of the season. And I'm looking for northern exposure, which helps to mitigate the hot sun we have."

Gassier produces 25 percent white wine, a noticeable commitment in an area known for its reds.

"But if you can keep the freshness, you can make some really special white here," he said. The **2010 Costières de Nîmes Château de Nages Vieilles Vignes White** is mostly Grenache Blanc with smaller amounts of Roussanne, Viognier and Bourboulenc, with a small amount vinified in older barrels. It shows a plump core of pineapple and star fruit, with fresher plantain and floral notes along the edges.

The **2010 Costières de Nîmes Château de Nages JT White** now carries the initials of Joseph Torres, Gassier's great-grandfather who initially bought the estate (the cuvée had been labeled Joseph Torres previously). The 50/30/20 blend of Roussanne, Viognier and Grenache Blanc is selected from Gassier's oldest vines, with the Roussanne portion barrel-fermented. It's quite lush, with lots of almond, creamed melon and peach notes, along with flashes of apricot and heather, but it stays defined and fresh through the full-bodied finish.

While the wines for the Château de Nages lineup are sourced from the 50 hectares of vineyards that comprise the original estate, Gassier's other wines are sourced from the 70 hectares of additional vineyards that he has been purchasing in recent years. The **2010 Costières de Nîmes Notre País White** combines 90 percent Grenache Blanc with 5 percent each Roussanne and Viognier. It's made in a fresh, pure style, with lovely heather, blanched almond and green plum notes, backed by a lingering yellow apple fruit finish.

The **2010 Costières de Nîmes Lou Coucardié White** is mostly Roussanne with some Viognier and Grenache Blanc, sourced from the more acidity-driven sites Gassier has. All the Roussanne is barrel-fermented with some new oak. "I want to make a big, rich wine that doesn't tire you. It's hedonistic but should make you want another sip. We are on Rhône soil, but we have more of a coastal influence, so we can make big wines that maintain freshness," he said. It's lush, but very pure, with an almost brisk blanched almond note along with a range of white peach, quinine and jicama notes and a touch of salted butter filling in on the finish.

I've noticed in recent vintages that Gassier's whites have taken on a purer, fresher edge here, and Gassier explained that when he started the barrel fermentation program, he had to buy all new barrels and that marked the wine. "Plus I was afraid of too much new oak, so I was pulling the wine out of barrel quickly, which isn't good because then you don't get integration either. But now I have the mix of new and used barrels I want so I can leave the wine in oak for 10 months and get the integration. I get the right amount of new oak influence and yet still have a freshly styled wine," he said.

The **2010 Costières de Nîmes Château de Nages Vieilles Vignes Red** shows its Rhône soul in its blend of 70 percent Grenache, with Carignane, Mourvèdre and Syrah. It's very fleshy, with lots of plum and black currant fruit laced nicely with hints of pastis, lavender and graphite. At 6,000 cases, this is the largest single cuvée in the lineup, and usually hits retail shelves in the U.S. at around \$15, making it a hard to beat value.

The **2010 Costières de Nîmes Château de Nages JT Red** blends 95 percent Syrah and 5 percent Mourvèdre. "So this is the more standard approach to Costières, but I do try to avoid the overripe, slightly sweet Syrah that typifies Syrahs from Costières and the southern Rhône," said Gassier. The wine cuts a broad swath, with dark anise, plum cake and steeped black currant fruit but the finish is inlaid with graphite and smoky tobacco for definition. It's big, but balanced, with solid potential for mid-term aging.

In contrast, the **2010 Costières de Nîmes Notre País Red** is a blend of Carignane and Grenache with smaller amounts of Syrah, Mourvèdre and Cinsault. It starts with dark fruit, but this is more finesse in the end, with a supple mouthfeel and suave crushed plum, blackberry and black cherry



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notes woven with perfumy spice and graphite. There's a long, lingering iron edge on the finish. "For the Nostre País, I want a terroir wine, so I mix in all the allowed varieties and don't let any one dominate," said Gassier. "That way it's a vineyard-driven wine rather than a varietal-driven wine. It's atypical for Costières, because most are Syrah-dominated, but for me it couldn't be more true to Costières."

The **2010 Costières de Nîmes Lou Coucardié Red** is predominantly Mourvèdre, "so yet another direction," said Gassier. "Mourvèdre is not a varietal that provides an entry-level wine. But for a wine with aging potential, Mourvèdre is a serious varietal and we have the conditions to do it here." Made from a blend of two-thirds Mourvèdre with 30 percent Grenache and the rest Syrah, the wine delivers a dense beam of espresso, mesquite, dark mint and cocoa backed by very fleshy currant paste and plum sauce notes. The finish is muscular and long and should settle in nicely with several years of cellaring.

"In 2010, I began experimenting with the idea that low yields and overripeness is overkill," said Gassier. "The heavier the crop load, the more you need to push for ripeness to get proper tannin ripeness. So when you drop crop low, there's no need to go hog wild in ripeness, or you lose the freshness. So we aim to pick on the earlier side—we'll still get good tannin ripeness, which is key, but we'll keep that freshness for balance."

It seems like Gassier has a second wind since hooking up with Cambie, and he noted how much his approach has changed in recent years. "The wines have changed a lot in recent years, in terms of vineyards, varietal makeup and winemaking. It's all a work in progress. But since '06, I finally feel like I'm making the wines I want to make. I feel like the idea of what I want to do is clearer, and that correlates in the wine. The wines themselves are telling me where to go as I look for new vineyards, and I can build from there."

"There is a general reference point for us here in Costières, if we look outside—the Rhône Valley. But in terms of inside Costières, we have no benchmarks, no reference. So we can find our way and do our own thing."

Halos de Jupiter

I also tasted through a small selection of Philippe Cambie's own Halos de Jupiter line. For background on this project, you can reference my previous blog notes. Now in its third vintage, all the Halos de Jupiter wines are bottled at the Gassier facility, with some of them blended and aged there as well. As usual, the wines are all predominantly if not entirely Grenache, Cambie's favorite grape.

The **2010 Côtes du Rhône Halos de Jupiter** is sourced from from Côtes du Rhône-Villages level fruit and combines 85 percent Grenache with Syrah. There are 4,000 cases of the wine, which delivers lush fig and blueberry fruit backed by bramble, spice and cobbler notes, with a lovely toasted anise edge cutting through the finish.

The **2010 Gigondas Halos de Jupiter** is aged in demi-muid; the wine is very fleshy, with lots of black tea, black trumpet mushroom and blackberry pâté de fruit notes and a long, smoldering finish that has power, but stays light on its feet.

The **2010 Châteauneuf-du-Pape Halos de Jupiter** is sourced primarily from the Cabrières sector of the appellation. It's lush, but driven, with very fleshy blueberry, blackberry and black cherry fruit that stays intense from start to finish, where singed apple wood and charcoal notes take over. This will need some time to round into form, but clearly shows outstanding potential.

It's a great contrast to the **2010 Châteauneuf-du-Pape Halos de Jupiter Adastrée**, which is sourced from the La Crau sector, but made in exactly the same way as the other Châteauneuf-du-Pape bottling. This takes on an even darker profile, with more licorice snap, pastis, violet and graphite notes backed by a packed yet racy finish that lets the fruit hang on wonderfully while plenty of tar and espresso lurk in the background.