

Out of Tunisia via Australia

22 Nov 2004 by JR

This is probably not the perfect time to be launching a Tunisian wine on the international wine market but behind Thapsus Carignan 2002 Domaine Hannon is a fascinating story.

Contrary to expectations, it is the produce of two women, Dina Bel Ali, niece of the Tunisian president, who has taken over one of the state-owned wine farms within sight of the sea near the tourist resort of Hammamet, and her Australian winemaker Linda Domas, the only female oenologist to have worked in Tunisia.

Not that the Tunisian wine industry is one of the world's most dynamic. There are about 20 wineries in the entire country of which a good three-quarters still belong to the government body UCCV - which has only just officially recognised the existence of Linda Domas, despite the fact that she has been working there for three years.

Her winemaking career began in 1994 with Andrew Garrett Wines, moved to Coonawarra and then relocated to Maglieri Wines in McLaren Vale with Fosters-owned Mildara Blass. By 2000 she felt ready for some overseas experience but the first thing offered was apparently in Algeria which sounded a bit too adventurous. Oh no, wrong country, the offer turned out to be a Tunisian winemaking operation overseen by Australian winemaker Brian Fletcher based at the large Calatrasi family wine operation in Sicily.

The deal with this first attempt at capturing old Carignan vine fruit grown in Tunisia was for Domas to oversee what happened in Calatrasi's fermentation tanks installed in Tunisia before the wine was shipped to be oaked and bottled in Sicily.

'All the Tunisian cellar hands spoke Arabic, which I don't,' remembers Domas. 'So I just had to draw diagrams in the sand, but that worked fine. I had far more issues with the Sicilians than the Tunisians, I can tell you.' She lived in Sicily and commuted across the Mediterranean to Tunisia for much of the first three years of the millennium, even importing her children from Australia for a while. 'I didn't want to stop Tunisia because it's got so much going for it.'

The Australian blonde's success in mastering Tunisia's viticultural assets led to her being offered a job by Dina Ben Ali when the Calatrasi deal fell apart. With a young viticulturist partner Steve Brunato (ex Wirra Wirra winery in McLaren Vale), she has formed Our World Winemaking, a 'soils to shelf' winemaking consultancy working mainly in South Australia but a bit in Slovenia and Sicily as well as Tunisia.

The lure of Tunisia is the age of the vines - about 50 years, much more than most French *vieilles vignes* - and the low yields, a pitiful ton per hectare, a fraction of what is normally considered viable. There is no irrigation and the vines are often so stressed that they struggle to ripen. 'It's an extreme situation,' she says with relish. 'Last year we were the only winery to manage a potential alcohol of more than 12 per cent.'

In fact Thapsus, the Roman city name chosen for the first, 2002, release, notches up almost 14 per cent alcohol and an impressively ripe, broad, nose as opulent as any Carignan can manage. There's an admirable velvetiness to the wine which is rare with this usually tart grape variety, a textural nod to the supple reds of McLaren Vale in fact. If Dina Ben Ali had invited a Bordeaux winemaker to oversee this enterprise, I have a feeling that this wine would have turned out to be tough as old boots.

It is currently available at £6.99 from Bibendum Fine Wine in London NW1 although half the 4500 cases produced in 2002 are to be sold within Tunisia. Next year, when a new, technologically more advanced winery will be ready, they are obliged to export 70 per cent of production and have their eyes on Belgium, France and possibly Japan. 'It is not an easy sell in the US,' says Domas. 'Attracting attention generally to the Tunisian wines has been difficult. Traditionally people are afraid.'

'I guess our real goal is to set up a small Carignan project in McLaren Vale. It will be small volume stuff, but we believe we can make it work. Our time in Tunisian has made us fall in love with the variety and it would be nice to do it true justice on our own turf.'

There are plans to experiment with the somewhat uninspiring clones of Carignan available in Australia and forced into workhorse mode in the irrigated Riverland but they want eventually to import the more interesting, presumably originally French, plant material from Tunisia.