

Le Clos de Tue-Boeuf, La Guerrerie 2006 Vin de Table Rouge

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One marked trend I've noticed on wine lists in Paris recently is an increase in the number of Vins de Table offered. The very limited list at the hugely popular Châteaubriand in the 11th arrondissement, for example, is made up of about a third of the things, not priced by any means as though they come from the bottom rung of the French wine quality ladder (below Vins de Pays and full Appellation Contrôlée wines). This is surely a sign that French vigneronns are bristling under the yoke of their demanding regulations and increasingly making wines that flaunt the rules - a bit like Italy's *Vino da Tavola* phenomenon of the 1980s.

But because all of France's wine lake is also labelled Vin de Table, it takes careful selection to sort out the wheat from the chaff in this category, which is presumably why they appeal to restaurateurs who can guarantee that they have done the hard work. At retail level, such bottles presumably have to be hand sold. It may be some time before we see Tesco asking nearly £12 for a bottle of French table wine.

It was not surprising therefore that I found one of the most interesting examples of this sort, **Le Clos de Tue-Boeuf, La Guerrerie 2006 Vin de Table Rouge**, being offered by UK merchant Les Caves de Pyrène, which has a deliberate policy of picking out some of the quirkiest bottles in Europe. This red wine is quite unlike anything I have tasted in a long while, not least because, unlike virtually every other wine on the market, it contains hardly any sulfur at all. (Sulfur has been used to stop fruit and drinks oxidising and going bad since at least Roman times, but asthmatics in particular can react badly to it, and even I am finding that I feel a tickle in the back of my throat if I taste a lot of sweet German wine that needs quite a bit of sulfur to stop it refermenting.)

Le Clos du Tue-Boeuf is an old vineyard in the village of Les Montils in the Loire Valley's Cheverny appellation that belongs to the Puzelat brothers, who are much better known in the US, being imported by Louis Dressner there. They also rent vineyards in a nearby village from which they make Touraine wines under the Thierry Puzelat label. Douglas Wregg of Les Caves describes these wines as "extraordinary" so they must be very extraordinary indeed. I have not tasted them but they have won Thierry Puzelat the title of Pope of Unsulfured Wines in France.

"Jean-Marie (the older brother by 10 years)," he explains, "was joined on the estate by Thierry in the early 1990s and they began converting their vines to organic viticulture. When the Cheverny appellation was created with the 1993 vintage some varieties became outlawed from the blends, and the brothers started a yearly struggle to get their wines accepted under their appellation. Now, when a wine is rejected, they sell it under a Vin de Pays or Vin de Table label. Their customers know and trust their work and methods. As far as I know Cot/Gamay is not an authorised Cheverny Rouge AOC blend (that would be Pinot Noir and Gamay)".

La Guerrerie, a blend of 70% Cot (Malbec) and 30% Gamay, is presumably so called because of the war (*guerre*) that the Puzelat brothers feel they are waging on the authorities. It's certainly by far the most exciting Malbec-dominated wine I have tasted from the Loire, benefiting from the lush, ripe, slightly rustic fruit that variety can provide, but also from the freshness of Gamay. It's only 12.5% alcohol and has no obvious oak influence at all – just pure, unadulterated fruit fermented to dryness. I enjoyed it both with and without food for it is relatively soft. It's not cheap but it does provide a

counterpoint to the great mass of wine made today that can taste like a cocktail of oak and sugar.

Americans as usual can find it cheaper than us Brits can, and I'm sure you can run it to ground in France for a relative song. In the UK the only stockist is Les Caves de Pyrène near Guildford who sell it at £11.75 a bottle. Wregg recommends chilling the wine for at least half an hour and then decanting twice. I managed to enjoy the wine thoroughly without following this complicated advice.

If you want to try a much more typical, and very delicious, Cheverny, head for the smoky, super-refreshing dry white **Domaine du Salvard, Le Vieux Clos 2006 Cheverny** which can be found for just £5.99 a bottle from Majestic if two bottles are bought. (Similar cuvées are on sale at the Wine Society in the UK as well as in the US and France.) It's mainly really racy, pure Sauvignon Blanc with a bit of Chardonnay for ballast – much better value than the average Sancerre. Any wine carrying the appellation Cour Cheverny is made from the local white wine grape Romorantin.

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