Right weirdness from Les Caves

4 May 2009 by Jancis Robinson/FT

During the London tasting season, I probably go to an average of about five professional wine tastings a week. Those designed to show off the wares of a single merchant tend to follow a pattern and, while they undoubtedly help to educate me and my palate, they are rarely worth devoting an article to. But last week's two-day showcase of the wines imported into the UK by Les Caves de Pyrène was sufficiently remarkable for me to feel moved to bring this unusual outfit to your attention.

One small, and mildly disgusting, distinguishing mark. Normally after tasting dozens of young red wines my teeth are a horrible shade of dark blueish black. I happened to notice that even after spending several hours at the Porchester Hall in Bayswater, tasting my way from producer to producer at Caves de Pyrène's tasting, my teeth were reasonably respectable-looking. Here was one small physical sign of the distinctiveness that the company aims for in its wine selection.

The policy of 'Les Caves', as they call themselves, is to ferret out wines that are 'never brands; they are not available in supermarkets; they are not mass-produced in wine factories. They are, instead, largely artisan products, because we believe that quality derives from attentive and caring farming methods. Great terroir and selection of vineyard location, harvesting by hand, manual selection, low yields, minimal chemical intervention and observation of the natural rhythms helps to create the quality of raw ingredients necessary to make great wine - at every price level'.

Tasting a fair cross section of the liquids on offer from more than 90 producers last week really did feel like a very different experience from the usual wine tasting. About 50 producers had made the trek to London to show off their wares directly to the (generally youngish) restaurant staff that comprise the majority of Les Caves' customers, and a thoroughly characterful bunch these artisan drinks producers were too. At my first port of call, the Bressan of Friuli table, I was taken metaphorically into the kitchen to discuss what might best go with their mature 2004 honeyed white Verduzzo. 'I say it's a red wine with a white dress because it's so rich in tannin', I was assured by Fulvio Bressan, who advised me to drink it with cheese or salami. As for their even older Pinot Noir, its six-year old venerability was explained thus: 'it needs to be cooked slowly for a long time, like a soup.' And I was corrected on this delicate gem that it is 'not light, but elegant. And elegance is what you have in your soul.'

On Les Caves' website www.lescaves.co.uk there is much ragging of the ex-restaurant trade sales and marketing director Douglas Wregg who is responsible for one of the wine trade's wordier and more lyrical wine lists. But who can blame him when he has material like this to work with?

At the Domaine d'Aupilhac table I was able to discuss Languedoc politics with Sylvain Fadat before moving on to talk screwcaps with Jacky Barthelme of Albert Mann from Alsace . On the other side of the room I benefited from Eric Bordelet's advice on what to drink with his wonderful 7% alcohol cider, Château de Hauteville, Sydre Brut 2006 - yellow cheeses.

It was probably no accident that I found myself much more often than usual at a wine tasting seeking ideal food matches for these wines. About three-quarters of Les Caves de Pyrène's sales are to restaurants, as far north as Scarista House on Harris and the Three Chimneys on the Isle of Skye. They also sell to private customers from their shop in Artington just south of Guildford, Surrey (tel 01483 554750 and shop@lescaves.co.uk). And now, with partners, they have opened a wine bar and restaurant themselves. At Terroirs between Trafalgar Square and Charing Cross in London it is possible to eat extremely well while trying a range of their distinctive wines by the glass. I even chose to celebrate my birthday there recently.

Some of these Caves wines are very much more successful than others. In fact some of them are just too 'natural' by half for me. Le Pech Abusé 2004 is aptly named in my view. And my notes on Pierre Frick's sulphur-free Alsace range include such words as 'beery', 'byre', and the telling abbreviation 'RW', 'right weird' being a tasting note I seem to use exclusively when tasting wines chosen by Les Caves.

The company was born in 1988 when Eric Narioo, an engaging bald ex- French rugby player (pictured) who once worked in a branch of Peter Dominic, started to import wines, weird and otherwise, direct from vignerons in his native south west

France. Since that time he and his colleagues have traversed the rest of France and many a byway in Italy in search of 'wines of terroir and typicity; delicious, tasty, unmediated wines; diversity of style and indigenous grape varieties'. They have steadily built up credibility and a bemused customer base, and now pride themselves on offering wines made from a total of more than 150 different grape varieties. Eric is threatening to attack Spain similarly, and Les Caves already have subsidiaries in each of Spain and Italy, La Cava España and Caves Italia respectively, with offices and warehouses in each country. Like the UK parent company, they sell the range to regional retailers.

What I particularly value about Les Caves range is that the wines are so authentically French. Like the staff at Terroirs, they provide a direct line to the latest developments in France rather than peddling the same old list: Sancerre, Chablis, Bordeaux… The new wave of Vins de Table, for instance, wines of serious quality that don't happen to abide by the Appellation Contrôlée laws and are now to be found on so many wine lists in Paris. I have listed some of my favourites from last week, with approximate retail prices. Authenticity is rarely cheap alas.

WHITES
Olivier Pithon, Cuvée Lais 2007 Cotes du Roussillon £20
Albert Mann, Muscat Tradition 2007 Alsace £13.80
Didier Barral 2007 Vin de Pays de l'Hérault Blanc £18.25
Belluard, Gringet Le Feu 2006 Savoie £18
Ch de Hauteville, Poire Granit 2008 (3% perry) £13.35
Fabrizio Niccolaini, Massa Vecchia 2006 Bianco Maremma Toscana £26
Framingham, Classic Riesling 2007 Marlborough £10.50

REDS
Montrieux, Petillant Naturel Boisson Rouge (Gamay) 2008 Coteaux du Vendomois £12
Gramenon, Poignée de Raisins 2007 Côtes du Rhône Rouge £13
Emmanuel Houillon 2004 Arbois Pupillin Rouge £17
Le Due Terre, Sacrisassi 2004 Friuli £24

See full tasting notes on dozens of Caves de Pyrene wines.
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