

EATING & DRINKING

ON WINE: WILL LYONS



Is This the World's First Super Rhône?

IN THE EARLY 1970S, the world was first introduced to the concept of Super Tuscan wines. The catchy name was given to a group of Italian wines made by producers who didn't like the restrictive Chianti DOC laws governing the grapes they could use in the blends of their wine. To bypass this, estates such as Marchesi Antinori and Sassicaia simply labeled their bottles *vino da tavola*, or table wine. Anyone who had the good fortune to taste them knew they were anything but, and they sold at high prices. Today they fetch around £100 a bottle.

Two decades later, Bordeaux experienced its own mutiny when several winemakers on the Merlot-dominated Right Bank produced a softer, fruitier style of wine that caught the attention of the international market. Like their counterparts in Tuscany, they had a nickname—*garagistes*—and wines such as Le Pin and Le Dôme commanded very high prices. In the case of Le Pin, up to £1,800 a bottle.

The latter part of the 20th century is peppered with similar examples. In 1971, Parisian

to this group of overachievers.

The latest estate to join the club is Chêne Bleu, a 30-hectare property on the slopes of the Dentelles de Montmirail near the southern Rhône village of Gigondas. Owners Xavier Rolet, the present chief executive of the London Stock Exchange, and his wife, Nicole, bought the property in 1994. Like the Super Tuscan producers, they decided to step out of the appellation system and, like Mas de Daumas Gassac, they hired world-class experts to advise them.

Microbiologists Claude and Lydia Bourguignon, who consult for some of the world's most exclusive wineries, pointed out that the Rolets' soil contained unusual mineral properties that lent it to the production of very good wine. Combined with a southerly latitude that gives the property plenty of sun and an altitude above 500 meters, which means cool nights and a long hang time for the grapes, it has resulted in wines of stunning grace and freshness.

Since the first vintage in 2006, Chêne Bleu has won a slew of plaudits—not least from France's premier wine critic, Michel Bettane, who described it in *L'Express* last year as "the birth of a grand cru." Even so Chêne Bleu has, a little like Domaine de Trévallon (at least in the early days), kept under the radar.

The range consists of two reds (all Grenache-Syrah blends), two whites and a rosé. All contain the same clipped, mineral style, but the rosé is simply outstanding, combining power and concentration with luscious fruit. Pricing their reds at nearly £60 is a bold move, when the local appellation's wines sell for a lot less. But then these aren't icon wines that are heavily extracted. Far from it; this is a long-term project run by serious people. I suspect one is going to be hearing a lot more about Chêne Bleu—it could be the world's first Super Rhône.

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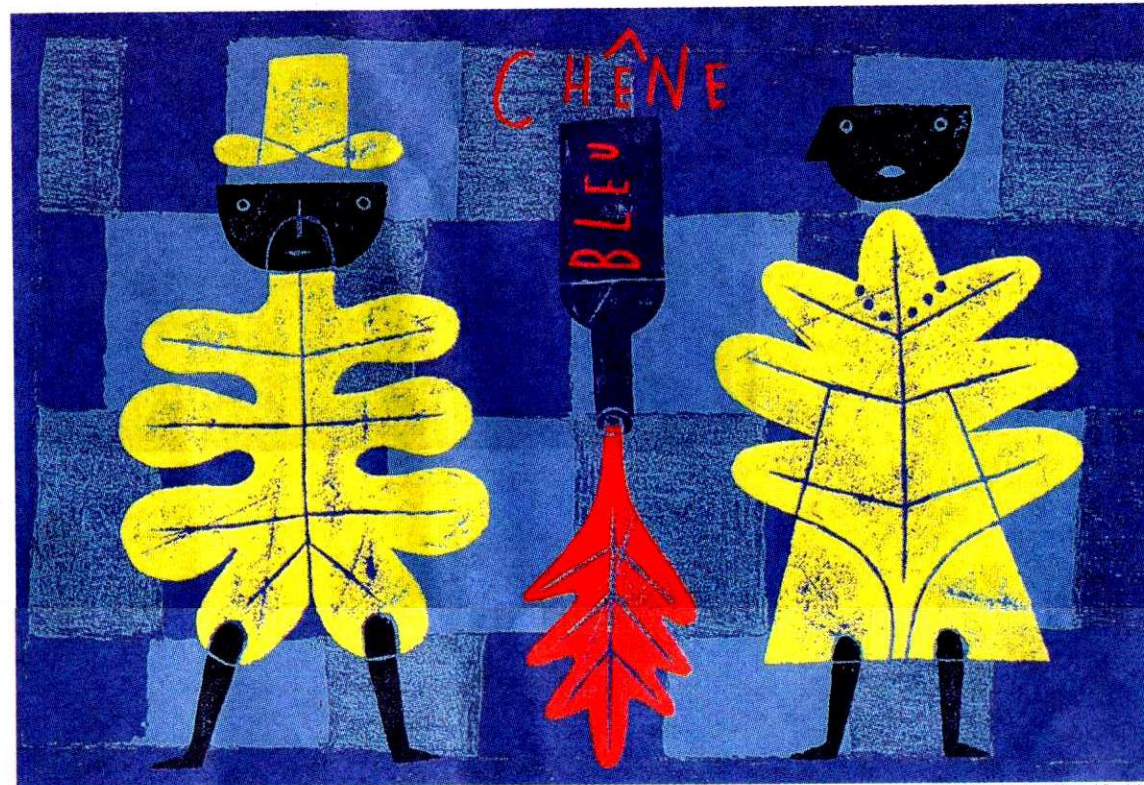


Illustration by Jean-Manuel Duvivier

Since the first vintage in 2006, Chêne Bleu has won a slew of plaudits

glovemaker Aimé Guibert purchased a remote farmhouse near Montpellier in France's Languedoc. In a radical move, he planted Bordeaux grape varieties such as Cabernet Sauvignon and hired the best oenologist he could find, Bordeaux's Emile Peynaud. The first vintage of Mas de Daumas Gassac in 1978 was well-received and though it's never quite reached the heights of the Tuscan or Bordeaux wines, it's still selling at a premium £30 a bottle today.

I would also add Provence's Domaine de Trévallon, a Cabernet Sauvignon-Syrah blend labeled as an Indication Géographique Protégée, or IGP (a latter-day equivalent of Vin de Pays, or country wine),

DRINKING NOW: TWO CHÊNE BLEU WINES



2007 Héloïse
Alcohol: 14.5%
Price: £58 or €63
Seductive and ripe berry fruit immediately emerges from this Syrah, Grenache and Viognier blend. Once sipped, it has a spicy, gamy, cherry flavor but is smooth and rich. The after-taste is fresh and mouth-filling. This will pair superbly with game birds and red meat.



2007 Abélard
Alcohol: 14.5%
Price: £58 or €63
Big and brooding with the same ripe, dark fruit character of the Héloïse, this wine shows its 90% Grenache, 10% Syrah blend as the ripe sweetness of the Grenache grape variety shines through. Rich, spicy and concentrated, it will benefit from decanting. Serve with hearty winter stews.

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