



Guigal: The Birth of a Star in Châteauneuf-du-Pape

By Michael Apstein

It's rare for a winery to go from nothing to the top in its category quickly. Bordeaux's premier châteaux, such as Château Lafite-Rothschild, Château Latour, and Château Haut-Brion, to name just three, were founded centuries ago. Similarly, in Burgundy, leading producers such as Maison Louis Jadot, Maison Louis Latour, and Maison Joseph Drouhin, date back to the 19th century. Compare that to the rocket-like trajectory of E. Guigal in Côte Rôtie, an appellation in France's northern Rhône Valley, where they are the undisputed star of the entire appellation and beyond.

Etienne Guigal left Vidal-Fleury, where he had worked for many years, in 1946 to establish his own eponymous estate, E. Guigal. He was either crazy or a visionary. Starting a new winery anywhere in France immediately after World War II was a risky business. It was especially so in the Côte Rôtie, whose steep slopes and terraced-vineyards made it a labor-intensive (read, expensive) place to grow grapes and make wine. Moreover, Etienne's goal was to make high-quality wines instead of the "quantity" wines Côte Rôtie was known for at that time.

Etienne's reported abrupt blindness in 1961 brought Marcel, his son, home from university shortly after he had started, to assume control of the business when he was just 17 years old. Even at his young age and long before "terroir" became a buzz-word in the wine world, Marcel Guigal knew that the vineyard site was critical and the single most important factor in determining the wine's character and distinctiveness. Five years later, in 1966, under Marcel's leadership, Guigal released their first site-specific Côte Rôtie from their 2.5-acre vineyard, La Mouline, a field blend of Syrah (90%) and the white grape, Viognier. Wines from the 5.8-acre La Landonne (100% Syrah) and 2.1-acre La Turque vineyards (a blend of 93% Syrah and Viognier) followed in 1978 and 1985, respectively. Barely two decades later, in 2007, when the 2003 vintage of the "La La's," as they are now known, hit the retail market, they set the record for most expensive Rhône wines ever released, according to *The Wine Spectator*. (La Mouline sold for \$17 a bottle in the early 1970s.)

Guigal, both as grower and as a négociant, continues to expand his reach. In the mid-1980s, in what must have been an extremely self-satisfying acquisition, Marcel purchased Vidal-Fleury, his father's former employer. Then in 2001, Guigal expanded as a grower from his base in Côte Rôtie to other Northern Rhône appellations, Hermitage, Crozes-Hermitage, and St. Joseph, when they purchased the two estates, Jean-Louis Grippat and Vallouit. Unsurprisingly, they soon started producing site-specified wines in Hermitage called Ex-Voto, and in St. Joseph, Vignes de L'Hospice.

Although Guigal has had an enormous presence in the southern Rhône as a négociant, producing more than 2 million cases annually of their value-packed Côtes du Rhône, red, white, and rosé, as well as Gigondas, and Châteauneuf-du-Pape, they did not own vineyards there until 2017. Philippe Guigal, Marcel's son and current General Manager and winemaker, relates that they had been looking to buy in Châteauneuf-du-Pape for years. He remarked that they had been making Châteauneuf-du-Pape and selling it via their négociant business since the 1940s. As a result, they had a close relationship with scores of growers. They knew the appellation well and knew what they wanted. More importantly, he added, "We knew what we didn't want." He added that it probably

would have been easier to buy there if they did not have so much experience in the appellation, “if we were outsiders just looking to focus on the famous name, Châteauneuf-du-Pape.” But, as in the northern Rhône, they were fixated on site.

Over the years, they had been offered many opportunities, but something was always wrong. Philippe admitted that they were “fussy.” It was especially difficult to find a large enough property, 75+ acres, to support an independent team and winery. The person in charge of the southern France division of Groupama, the insurance giant that insures 90 percent of France’s agricultural land, asked Marcel to be an independent appraiser for one of their properties, Château de Nalys in Châteauneuf-du-Pape, because he knew that Marcel was an expert on terroir and wineries. Philippe relates that he was reluctant to visit, but his father urged him to accompany him because otherwise it would be rude. They met the president of Groupama at Nalys, who, according to Philippe, immediately announced, “Nalys is not for sale. It is the jewel in our crown.” Philippe responded, “Good because we have no intention of buying it.” It’s not hard to guess the rest. The appraisal complete, a little discussion back and forth, and, voilà, the deal was done. Château de Nalys was theirs. Philippe exclaims with a broad smile, “It was a dream come true.”

Philippe described it with almost a child-like enthusiasm as a “top, top terroir.” What he couldn’t understand was how Château de Nalys had made such unremarkable wine from such well-endowed sites. The property is comprised of historic cellars that date from the 17th century and about 125 acres of contiguous vineyards divided among three equally-sized blocks or lieux-dits in Châteauneuf-du-Pape, La Crau, Bois Sénéchal, and Grand Pierre, also known as Nalys. All 13 grape varieties permitted in the blend of red Châteauneuf-du-Pape are planted on all three plots. They vinify them separately. Philippe insists that “none should be forgotten, especially with climate change.”

The piece of La Crau that is a part of Château de Nalys, in the northern section, was not favored 30 years ago. But, as Philippe explains, with climate change, it has become preferable because grapes there now reach phenolic or physiologic ripeness (the tannins are ripe) at a sugar level that corresponds to 14.5% alcohol instead of 16%, resulting in more balanced wines. Philippe explains that the grapes from La Crau contribute structure and power to the finished blend. The mix of sand and clay in the Grand Pierre or Nalys lieu-dit, in contrast, provides grapes that lend elegance to the wine. Philippe believes that big stones sitting atop clay subsoil in the Bois Sénéchal *lieu-dit* acts as a great water reservoir, imparting freshness to the wines.

Guigal quickly made substantial changes to Château de Nalys’s cellar and vineyards. In the cellar, they extended the time the wines spend in barrel and adjusted the size and age of the barrels. In essence, they fine-tuned barrel aging, adjusting it to the grape variety. Importantly, they made a severe selection creating a true second red wine. In 2017 and 2018, both great vintages in Philippe’s experience, they plan on still using only about half of their production for the Grand Vin. There’s lots of work still to be done in the vineyard. Guigal started by increasing the vineyard crew from two to 12 workers and hiring a vineyard manager to work with the winemaker.

While Guigal vinified and had total control over the 2017s, the previous owners vinified the 2016s. Luckily, Guigal finalized the purchase before the component wines had been blended, so they left their mark on the wines by blending and aging them. There are no white grapes included in the 2016 reds, but Guigal did incorporate them in the blends of the 2017 and 2018 reds.

Château de Nalys currently produces four wines, two whites and two reds. Both colors carry the same names and prices, Saintes Pierres de Nalys (\$50) and Château de Nalys (\$100). Each, in its own way, is delicious, as you’d expect from this star producer. Whether the market will support the prices remains to be seen.

Château de Nalys produces three times as much white wine as their neighbors--18 percent of their production versus an appellation-wide average of 6 percent. The 2017 Saintes Pierres de Nalys Châteauneuf-du-Pape Blanc (93 pts) is bright, floral and mineral-y with a hint of spice. It's freshness and bite may be out of character for a white Châteauneuf, but it's a delight to drink now. Philippe attributes its energy to hefty amount of Clairette in the blend. It's hard to call this white a second wine because its character is so different from the *Grand Vin*.

The 2017 Château de Nalys, Châteauneuf-du-Pape Blanc (92 pts) is entirely different--weightier, with a more viscous texture and more extract. Indeed, it's a more typical white Châteauneuf-du-Pape, showing power, depth and even a hint of bitterness in the finish. The grapes come from all of the three lieux-dits, with Roussanne comprising the largest component (43%), followed by Grenache Blanc (33%), Clairette (15%), Bourboulenc (6%) and Picquepoul.

The 2016 Saintes Pierres de Nalys Châteauneuf-du-Pape Rouge (91 pts) conveys freshness and raciness, much like its white counterpart. Fruity and forward, with a touch of minerality, it represents a more modern style of Châteauneuf-du-Pape. Balanced, with suave tannins, it would be a good choice for current consumption.

The 2016 Château de Nalys, Châteauneuf-du-Pape Rouge (94 pts) is dense and powerful, yet also elegant and fresh, without a trace of heaviness. There's an appealing, subtle tarry aspect. Tightly wound, with substantial structure, it needs years to blossom. If Guigal's hand is evident only with the blending and aging of this wine, I can't wait to try the 2017 and 2018, which they vinified. Philippe believes that a parcel of Grenache planted at the beginning of the 20th century helps explain the wine's power.

Whether Guigal will make single wines from the individual *lieux-dits* at Château de Nalys remains to be seen. My guess is that they won't. I suspect they will continue to blend the wines from the various parcels, emulating the approach they took with their Château d'Ampuis, a consistently superb Côte Rôtie that falls qualitatively and in price between the La La's and their Côte Rôtie labeled "Brune et Blonde," that they introduced with the 1995 vintage. Château d'Ampuis is made from grapes grown in what Guigal believes are six exceptionally well-suited vineyards, three each in the Côte Brune and Côte Blonde, the two subdivisions of Côte Rôtie. If Château de Nalys turns out wines of the stature of Château d'Ampuis, it will be another shining star in the Guigal constellation.

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E-mail me your thoughts about Guigal, Châteauneuf-du-Pape or the Rhône in general at Michael.Apstein1@gmail.com and follow me on Twitter @MichaelApstein

April 24, 2019