



Sense of place

Winemaking in the shadow of Mont Ventoux has proved to be a great adventure for Domaine Vintur's owner Graham and winemaker James, who have both fallen in love with the area's majestic scenery and endless possibilities, writes **Andrea Ratuski**

"It was pure folly," said Graham Shore as he took us for a grand tour of Domaine Vintur, admiring the vista. He was speaking about his decision to buy this winery in Vaucluse in 2010. "It was not a rational decision," he said, laughing. "I love wine, I've been living in Provence for part of the year for many years, I used to come here and buy wine. I love Mediterranean culture, which is very tied up with food and wine and fruit."

Pointing out three mountain ranges, Graham explained that he fell in love with this particular property because of

its beautiful location in a basin - the imposing Mont Ventoux lies just to the north (the most famous ascent of the Tour de France cycling race), the lacy Dentelles de Montmirail are to the west and the Luberon to the south.

The picturesque hilltop village of Le Barroux with its enchanting castle is just a stone's throw away, and it's 40 minutes to Avignon. In addition, the property is near a roundabout, which might not appear to be an immediate advantage but it means it's easily visible and accessible to visitors.

The 15 hectares of vines are laid out over two sides of a river. The domaine is one of the oldest in the Ventoux, if not the oldest created specifically as a winery, with some vines planted 65 to 70 years ago. Although the domaine's reputation was very good, it had been declining in the 1980s. "The vines are predominantly old and they have character," Graham continued. "That appealed to me too."

PERFECT BLEND

As we stepped into the winery itself, James Wood, Vintur's

winemaker, was at work blending rosé wines with the passion of a mad scientist - he's known as a *phénomène* in these parts. Each beaker had a distinct colour. "It's a rosé project," he said, looking up. "I had great success last year with our first organic rosé. This year I'm pushing the boundaries a bit more."

James learned from his father to appreciate wine while growing up in Yorkshire, sharing glasses with him at Sunday lunch. His first job was working in a wine shop. Nearing the age of 40, after travelling the world, working in

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the wine industry and catering, and following his passions for rugby and skiing, he wanted to find something more permanent in the wine world which he loved so much. He enrolled in Plumpton College near Brighton to earn his winemaking qualifications. At the same time, a friend bought a winery in Le Barroux, so he came down to help.

"Within an hour and a half, I fell in love with Le Barroux, with the whole region," he said. "I was at university in Brighton but spent every free moment down here working on his winery with him. The Ventoux is a really peaceful place. I felt comfortable here."

Then in 2012 he met Graham, also a veteran of Plumpton. "I started a conversation with him and here I am still, and loving every minute of it."

OLD AND NEW

There was a lot of work to be done at Vintur in the beginning. They had to extend the original house and replace the ramshackle winery, which had no lights and contained enormous concrete tanks used for making the wine. They tried to incorporate as many of the old elements into the buildings as possible, exposing the old stone and turning part of it



Graham loves the character of the old vines

into a showroom. Outside, some oak barrels and old equipment now liven up the garden for summer soirées.

James lived in the house for a few years, but has now bought a place in a neighbouring town with his companion, Carmen. He remains on site year round, making the wine and maintaining the vines. Graham balances a life working in finance in London and managing Vintur, where he stays when he's here. He also owns a home in Alpes-de-Haute-Provence.

Graham is in daily contact with James and is on site for important moments, like tasting the grapes and

blending. He is also busy acquiring more parcels of land, planting new varietals, as well as more olive trees with the goal of making olive oil, and fruit trees, to add to the appeal of a visit to the winery. A picnic area is also planned.

The vineyards needed a lot of work at the start. Some parcels had to be completely replanted, and the ground needed rejuvenation. Indeed, when Graham and James arrived, the soil was like concrete. It was dead, explained James. "I'll never forget that first harvest in 2012. We had a huge storm and for 10 days I couldn't get onto the vineyard because it was too dangerous. Everything slid and

ABOVE: The mighty Mont Ventoux looms above the vineyards

RIGHT: The Vintur premises and vineyards have been brought up to date

Did you know?

The name Mont Ventoux means 'windy mountain' – it's also known as the Giant of Provence



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the water sat on the top.” Despite the challenging harvest, James’ 2012 white wine won the trophy as the best white wine of the *appellation*. Now, he says, the soil has come back to life; it’s full of earthworms, birds and animals have returned.

“It’s all about creating that balance between soil, nature and the fruit. What we get from the earth goes into the fruit, and when it comes off the fruit to me, I feel this wonderful thing called ‘sense of place.’”

James soon realised that winemaking in Ventoux was going to be an incredible adventure. “I knew how much I loved Grenache, but I didn’t really know exactly what the potential was here at the time. I’ve made wine around the world, but here there’s a possibility, there’s no real fixed direction. Here you can do something different, something new. The potential is almost limitless.”

LIVING IN HARMONY

The magnificent Mont Ventoux offers more than a great view. It helps create ideal conditions for making wine. “To have the coolness of the nights and the freshness that we get from the mountain, yet still have all the sunshine and days of dryness, the long beautiful autumns – it’s pretty unique,” said James.

Then there’s that fierce wind, the Mistral that blows down from the north, helping to dry the grapes and prevent disease.

Vintur is a mixed domain, making reds, whites and rosé. The red wines have improved exponentially through changes in viticulture between 2012 and 2018, but the winery is particularly known for its whites, firstly because they come to market sooner. The main parcel of white, Grenache Blanc, proved to be exceptional for the style of wine James and Graham wanted to produce.

“We used fairly modern techniques, cold fermentations, we didn’t manipulate the fruit on the vineyards at all, just controlled it in the cellar and used new wood. We’ve probably done more experimentation with the white grapes, purely because it’s been possible to do it.”

“I’ve made wine around the world but here there’s a possibility to do something different, something new”



Tour the vineyards and sample the vintages in the tasting room



Domaine Vintur has 15 hectares of vineyards



Graham and James share a passion for French wine

WHAT'S IN A NAME

All of Vintur’s wines have humorous and creative names: “I have a thing for gods and goddesses,” said Graham.

Belenos, Vintur’s high-end red wine, is named for the Celtic god of the sun and fire and music. Vintur itself is the name that the local Gauls gave to Belenos. Séléné is the Greek goddess of the moon. A new white wine has been named for Ariadne, who was the daughter of King Minos and became the wife of Dionysos, the god of wine.

Le Minot (the entry-level red) in French is slang for ‘the kid’. It’s also short for minotaur: the label features the image of a man-bull to describe the beefiness of the wine. Then it only made sense to call the rosé La Minette.

There’s a story too behind Graham naming his flagship wine Le Gentleman. In 2012, Bradley Wiggins was the first British cyclist to win the Tour de France in decades, despite stopping part way up Mont Ventoux to support a competitor with a puncture, earning him the title Le Gentleman in the French press.

Graham chose the name for his wine because of the connection to Mont Ventoux “and the fact that we are Brits making wine in France”.





The stunning village and château of Le Barroux



Grenache Noir grapes ripe and ready to be turned into wine



The old winery needed lots of work to bring it up to date

Graham added: “We learned New World wine techniques when we were in Plumpton and we’ve both travelled around the world and seen New World winemaking. But in France you have to have a respect for history and for the French culture of food and wine.

“It’s possible here to combine a little bit of the ideas of New World winemaking with a very strong culture of wine. You can do that in the Ventoux, in a way that perhaps you couldn’t do so easily if you were in Gigondas or certainly in Châteauneuf-du-Pape,” referring to two historic wine regions nearby.

The two men have invested much time and effort in the

vineyard, turning the winery organic and acquiring new oak barrels. “We can’t sit still,” said James. “I’ve been able to be expressive and creative. It gets stronger and stronger each year. The more natural you become, the more enjoyable it becomes. It’s really exciting.”

“It’s difficult, but it’s a lifestyle,” he continued. “And that’s one of the main reasons why I do it, the lifestyle. Nature doesn’t control me, I don’t control it, we have to work together.”

Domaine Vintur has received many distinctions and awards. Customers appreciate Vintur wines because they’re elegant and approachable; they’re

substantial, expressive and very fresh, even if they are five or seven years old. They’re also very affordable.

As our conversation wound down, Graham brought out, for us to sample, a 2017 reserve white Séléné that had not yet been released. It is their first high-end reserve wine, fully 100% organic. James was excited to see where it has ended up, thinking back to the image that he had in his head from the start.

“The oak is very important for aging, the acidity is very good, it’s completely natural. To me it’s perfectly balanced, everything is full and long in the mouth,” he declared

with satisfaction. That wine went on to win a gold medal in the Challenge Millésime Bio, the largest international organic wine competition. Both Graham and James hope for wider recognition for their wines. James’ goal is “to see a general elevation of the image of Ventoux, with Vintur as one of the domains leading the way, is really where I see the next 10 years going.”

“And we put a lot of love and care into it,” added Graham.

It appears the ascent of Domaine Vintur will match the Tour de France’s race to the top of Mont Ventoux. ■

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